



(10)

full length
novels

falling for the forbidden



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DARK NOTES

By
Pam Godwin

IVORY

Poverty.

It used to be easier.

Maybe because I don't remember it much as a child.
Because I was happy.

Now all that's left is grief and yelling and unpaid bills.

At seventeen, I don't know a lot about the world, but I find that being unwanted and unhappy is harder to endure than having nothing to eat.

The knot in my stomach tightens. Maybe if I puke before I leave the house, it will loosen my nerves and clear my head. Except I can't afford to lose the calories.

A deep breath confirms the buttons on my nicest shirt are holding together, my considerable cleavage still conservatively hidden. The knee-length skirt fits better this morning than it did in the thrift store, and the ballet flats... Forget it. There's nothing I can do about the cracked soles and rips in the toes. They're the only shoes I own.

I step out of the bathroom and tiptoe through the kitchen, combing shaky fingers through my hair. The wet strands fall against my back and soak my shirt. Shit, is my bra showing through the damp fabric? I should've worn my hair up or dried it, but I'm out of time, which further hardens my stomach.

Jesus, I shouldn't be this anxious. It's only the first day of school. I've done this numerous times.

But it's my senior year.

The year that will determine the rest of my life.

One mistake, a less-than-perfect GPA, a violation of dress code, the tiniest infraction will steer the spotlight away from my talent and shine it on *the poor girl from Treme*. Every step I take in the judgmental, marble halls of Le Moyne Academy is an endeavor to prove I'm more than just that girl.

Le Moyne is one of the most recognized, elite, and expensive performing arts high schools in the nation. It's intimidating. Fucking terrifying. Doesn't matter if I'm the best pianist in New Orleans. Since my freshman year, the academy has been looking for a reason to expel me, to fill my competitive spot with a student who brings talent *and* financial endowments.

The stench of stale smoke roots me in the reality of my life. I flick the kitchen wall switch, illuminating piles of crushed beer cans and empty pizza boxes. Crusty dishes fill the sink, cigarette butts litter the floor, and what the hell is that? I lean over the counter and squint at the burnt residue in the bowl of a spoon.

Motherfucker. My brother used our best utensils to cook coke? I toss it in the trash with a surge of anger.

Shane claims he can't pay the bills, but the jobless bastard always has money to party. Not only that, the kitchen was spotless when I fell asleep, notwithstanding the mold blooming on the walls and the laminate flaking away from the countertops. This is our *home*, goddammit. The only thing we have left. He and Mom have no idea what I've endured to keep us current on the mortgage payments. For their sake, I hope they never find out.

Soft fur brushes my ankle, drawing my attention to the floor. Huge golden eyes stare up out of an orange tabby face, and my shoulders loosen instantly.

Schubert tilts his scruffy chin and rubs his whiskers against my leg, his tail twitching in the air. He always knows when I

need affection. Sometimes I think he's the only love left in this house.

"I have to go, sweet boy," I whisper, stretching down to scratch his ears. "Be a good kitty, okay?"

I remove the last slice of banana bread from its hiding spot in the back of the pantry, relieved Shane hadn't found it. I wrap it in a paper towel and attempt to make a quiet-as-possible escape to the front door.

Our crumbling house is one room wide and five rooms long. No hallways. With the rooms set up one in front of the other and all the doors lined up, I could stand on the back stoop, shoot a shotgun at the front door, and not hit any walls.

But I could hit Shane. Deliberately. Because he's a fucking burden and a waste of life. He's also nine-years older, a hundred-and-fifty-pounds bigger, and the only sibling I have.

The hundred-year-old wood planks groan beneath my feet, and I suck in a breath, waiting for Shane's drunken roar.

Silence. *Thank you, Jesus.*

Holding the wrapped bread against my chest, I pass through Mom's room first. I walked through thirty minutes ago, half-asleep and shuffling for the bathroom in the dark. But with the kitchen light shining through the doorway, the lump in her bed looks unmistakably human.

I stumble with surprise, trying to remember the last time I saw her. Two...three weeks ago?

A flutter stirs behind my breastbone. Maybe she came home to wish me luck on my first day?

Three quiet strides carry me to the bed. The rectangular rooms are cramped and narrow, but the ceilings soar twelve feet or taller. Daddy used to say the pitched roof and long front-to-back layout was a ventilation design to ensure all his love could flow through.

But Daddy's gone, and all that's left circulating through the house is the musty, sputtering coughs from the window units.

I bend over the mattress, straining to see Mom's cropped hair in the shadows. Instead, I'm met with the bitter stink of beer and weed. *Of course*. Well, at least she's alone. I have no interest in meeting the man-of-the-month she's been shacking up with.

Should I wake her? Instinct tells me not to, but dammit, I ache to feel her arms around me.

"Mom?" I whisper.

The lump shifts, and a deep groan rumbles from the blankets. A man's groan, one I know with horrifying intimacy.

A chill grips my spine as I scramble backward. Why is my brother's best friend in Mom's bed?

Lorenzo's thick arm swings up, and his hand catches the back of my neck, pulling me toward him.

I drop the bread in my attempt to push away, but he's stronger, meaner, and never responds to *No*.

"No," I say anyway, fear amplifying my voice, my pulse roaring past my ears. "Stop it!"

He wrestles me to the bed, shoving me face-down beneath his sweaty body. Hot beer breath smothers me. Then his weight, his hands...oh God, his erection. He jabs my ass with it, rucking up my skirt, his heavy panting scraping my ears.

"Get off me!" I thrash wildly, my fingers clawing at the blankets, taking me nowhere. "I don't want this. Please, don't ___"

His palm slaps over my mouth, shutting me up as his strength confines my movements.

My body grows cold, numb, collapsing like a dead thing, separating from my headspace. I let myself slip away, my concentration on the safety in what I know, what I love, as I wrap my entire being with dark atmosphere, light strokes of piano keys, atonal rhythm. Scriabin's Sonata No.9. I see my fingers walking through the piano piece, hear the haunting melody, and feel each quivering note pulling me further into

the black mass. Away from the bedroom. Away from my body. Away from Lorenzo.

A hand snakes under my chest, squeezing my breast, pulling on my shirt, but I'm lost in the dissonant notes, recreating them with care, distracting my thoughts. He can't hurt me. Not here with my music. Never again.

He shifts, shoving his hand between my butt cheeks, inside my panties, probing roughly at the hole in back that he always makes bleed.

The sonata shatters in my mind, and I try to reassemble the chords. But his fingers are relentless, forcing me to endure his touch, his palm muffling my scream. I gasp for air and frantically kick my legs near the bedside table. My foot collides with the lamp and sends it crashing to the floor.

Lorenzo freezes, his hand tightening on my mouth.

Loud banging vibrates the wall by my head, a fist pounding in Shane's room. My blood runs cold.

"Ivory!" Shane's voice booms through the wall. "Fucking woke me up, you worthless fucking cunt!"

Lorenzo leaps off me and backs into the beam of light from the kitchen doorway. Tribal tattoos blacken his chest, and baggy sweatpants hang from his narrow hips. An unassuming person might consider his beefed-up physique and strong Latino features attractive. But appearances are just the skin of the soul, and his soul is rotten.

I roll off the bed, shove down my skirt, and grab the wrapped bread from the floor. To reach the front door, I have to pass through Shane's room then the parlor. Maybe he hasn't crawled out of bed yet.

With a trembling pulse, I dart into the pitch-black cavern of Shane's room and— *Oomph!* I slam into his bare chest.

Expecting his reaction, I swerve out of the path of his first swing, only to expose my cheek to the hard slap of his other hand. The impact sends me back into Mom's room, and he stays with me, his eyes drooping in a haze of alcohol and drugs.

To think, he used to look like Daddy. But that was before... Every day, Shane's blond hairline recedes farther, his cheeks sink deeper into his pasty face, and his belly hangs lower over those ridiculous workout shorts.

He hasn't worked out since he went AWOL from the Marines four years ago. The year our lives went to shit.

"Why. The. *Fuck*..." Shane says, shoving his face in mine, "are you waking up the goddamn house at five in the fucking morning?"

Technically, it's almost six o'clock, and I have a quick stop to make before the forty-five-minute commute.

"I have school, dickhead." I straighten my spine, standing taller, despite the awful fear souring my stomach. "What you should be asking is why Lorenzo is sleeping in Mom's bed, why he puts his hands on me, and why I was screaming for him to stop."

I follow Shane's focus to his friend. Faded ink scrawls up the sides of Lorenzo's face, indiscernible beneath the dark shadow of his sideburns. But the fresh tattoo on his throat burns as bold and black as his eyes. *Destroy*, it says. The way he's glaring at me, it's a promise.

"She came onto me again." Lorenzo's gaze stays on mine, his expression an open canvas of malice. "You know how she is."

"Bullshit!" I turn back to Shane, my voice pleading. "He won't leave me alone. Every time you turn your back, he's pulling off my clothes and—"

Shane grabs my neck and throws me face-first into the door jamb. I try to dodge it, jerking against the force of his rage, but my mouth connects with the sharp corner.

Pain bursts through my lip. When I taste blood, I jut my chin out to keep the mess off my clothes.

He releases me, his eyes dull and heavy-lidded, but his hate stabs through me sharper than ever. "If you flash your tits at my friends again, I'll cut them the fuck off. You hear me?"

My hand flies to my chest, and my heart sinks as my palm slips through the gaping *V* of my shirt. At least two buttons gone. Shit! The academy will write me up, or worse, kick me out. I desperately scan the bed and floor, searching for little plastic dots in the sea of scattered clothes. I'll never find them, and if I don't leave now, there will be more blood and missing buttons.

I turn and run through Shane's room, his furious shouts propelling me faster. In the parlor, I grab my satchel from the couch where I sleep, and I'm out the door in the next breath, exhaling my relief into gray sky. The sun won't be up for another hour, and all is quiet on the vacant street.

As I take a step off the front lawn, I try to shed the past ten minutes from my mind by compartmentalizing it into baggage. The old-style kind, bound in brown leather with those little tan buckles. Then I picture the baggage sitting on the porch. It stays here, because I can only carry so much.

A short jog takes me toward the 91 line. If I hurry, I still have time to check on Stogie before the next bus.

Veering around the potholes that dimple the stately tree-lined streets, I pass rows of cottages and shotgun houses, each vibrantly painted in every color and adorned with the trademarks of the deep south. Wrought iron railings, gas lamps, guillotine windows, and gables etched with ornate scrollwork, it's all there if one can look past the sagging porches, graffiti, and rotting garbage. Empty, overgrown lots pockmark the streetscape, as if we need reminders of the last hurricane. But the resonance of Treme thrives in the fertile soil, in the cultural history, and in the weathered smiles of the people who call the back of town their home.

People like Stogie.

I reach the heavily-barred door of his music store and find the handle unlocked. Despite the dearth of customers, he opens the store the moment he wakes. This is his livelihood, after all.

The bell overhead jingles as I enter, and my attention compulsively darts to the old Steinway in the corner. I've spent every summer since I can remember pounding the keys

on that piano until my back ached and my fingers lost feeling. Eventually, those visits turned into employment. I handle his customers, bookkeeping, inventory, whatever he needs. But only in the summers when I don't have the means to earn my *other* income.

"Ivory?" Stogie's raspy baritone warbles through the small store.

I set the banana bread on the glass counter and holler toward the back. "Just dropping off breakfast."

The shuffling sound of his loafers signals his approach, and his hunched frame emerges from his living quarters in the back room. Ninety-years-old and the man can still move fast, crossing the store like his frail body isn't wracked with arthritis.

The cloudy glaze in his dark eyes denotes his poor eyesight, but as he nears, his gaze instantly finds the missing buttons on my shirt and the swollen cut on my lip. The wrinkles beneath the rim of his baseball cap deepen. He's seen Shane's handiwork before, and I'm so grateful he doesn't ask or offer pity. I might be the only white girl in this neighborhood, and I'm definitely the only kid with a private school education, but the differences end there. My baggage is as common in Treme as tossed beads on Bourbon Street.

As he takes me in from head to toe, he scratches his whiskers, the little white hairs stark against his coal-black complexion. Visible tremors skate across his arms, and he squares his shoulders, no doubt an attempt to disguise his pain. I've been watching his health decline for months, and I'm helpless to stop it. I don't know how to support him or ease his suffering, and it's slowly killing me inside.

I've seen his finances. He can't afford medication or doctor's visits or even basic things, like food. He certainly can't afford an employee, which made my last summer on his payroll bittersweet. When I graduate from Le Moyne in the spring, I'll leave Treme, and Stogie will no longer feel obligated to take care of me.

But who will take care of him?

He tugs a hankie from his shirt pocket, his hand trembling as he lifts it to my lip.

“You look mighty smart this morning.” His shrewd eyes bore into mine. “And nervous.”

I close my eyes while he blots the blood away. He already knows my strongest ally at the academy resigned from her position as the head music instructor. My relationship with Mrs. McCracken was three years in the making. She was the only person at Le Moyne who had my back. Losing her endorsement for a scholarship is like starting over.

“I only have one year.” I open my eyes, locking onto Stogie’s. “*One year* to impress a new instructor.”

“And all you need is a moment. Just make sure you’re there for it.”

I’ll catch the 91 line a few blocks away. The bus ride lasts twenty-five minutes. Then a ten-minute walk to the campus. I check my watch. I’ll be there, missing buttons, lip busted, but my fingers still work. I’ll make every moment count.

I run my tongue over the cut and cringe at the fatness around the broken skin. “Is it noticeable?”

“Yes.” He slides me a narrowed glance. “But not nearly as noticeable as your smile.”

Unbidden, my lips curl up, which I’m sure was his intention. “You’re such a charmer.”

“Only when she’s worth it.” He opens the clutter drawer at his hip and digs a quivering hand through the guitar picks, reeds, nails... What is he looking for?

Oh! I snatch the safety pin beside his probing finger and search for another. “Do you have any more?”

“Just the one.”

After a few strategic adjustments, I manage to pin the front of my shirt together and give him a grateful smile.

With a soft pat on my head, he makes a shooing motion. “Go on. Get up outta here.”

What he's really saying is, go to school so I can get out of that house. Out of Treme. Out of this life.

"I plan on it." I slide the bread across the counter.

"Oh no, now. You take it."

"They'll feed me at school."

I know he hears the lie but accepts it anyway.

As I turn to leave, he grabs my wrist with more strength than I thought he was capable.

"They're lucky to have you." His dark eyes flash. "Damn lucky sons-a-bitches. Don't you let them forget it."

He's right. Just because my family can't offer wealthy donations or powerful connections doesn't make me a charity case. My four-year tuition was paid in full when I was ten-years-old, and I passed the required auditions when I was fourteen, just like my peers. As long as I continue to outshine the others in coursework, recitals, essays, and behavior, the academy might not be so hard-pressed to drop me.

With a kiss on Stogie's wrinkled cheek, I head toward the bus stop, unable to stop the dread from returning to my stomach. What if my new music instructor hates me, refuses to mentor me or support me in the matriculation process for college? Daddy would be devastated. God, that's my greatest ache. Is Daddy watching me? Has he seen the things I've done to make ends meet? The things I'll have to do again, as soon as tonight? Does he miss me as much as I miss him?

Sometimes the terrible hole he left behind hurts so badly I can't bear it. Sometimes I want to give into the pain and join him, wherever he is.

Which is why I'm moving my biggest challenge to the top of my task list.

Today, I'm going to smile.

EMERIC

As the early morning faculty meeting adjourns, my shiny new colleagues file out of the library in a monochrome of starched suits and clicking heels. I remain seated at the table, waiting for the herd to disperse while watching Beverly Rivard out of the corner of my eye.

She hasn't shifted her authoritative stance from the head of the table, hasn't given me so much as a glance since she introduced me at the beginning of the meeting. But she will, as soon as the room clears. No doubt she has one more agenda item to discuss. Privately.

"Mr. Marceaux." Her eyes cut to mine as she glides across the marble floors, surprisingly quiet in her pretentious pumps, and closes the doors behind the last staff member. "A quick word before you go."

It'll be more than a word, but I won't use semantics to unbalance the position she thinks she holds over me. There are more inventive ways to put her on her knees.

Folding my hands in my lap, I recline in the leather chair, an elbow on the table and an ankle on my knee. I give her the full force of my gaze, because she's the kind of woman who wants something from everyone, something powerful she can manipulate according to her own will and vision. For now, all she's getting from me is my attention.

Beverly strolls around the long table, her modest skirt-suit tailored to fit her slender frame. Twenty years my senior, she carries her age with remarkable elegance. High, pronounced

cheekbones. Narrow, aristocratic features. Barely a wrinkle in her pale complexion.

Hard to tell if her hair is gray or blonde where it gathers at her nape. I bet she never wears it down. Attracting attention from men isn't her especial vanity. No, her ferocious pride lies in her sense of superiority in giving orders, and watching subordinates scramble to kiss her ass.

Our first and only face-to-face meeting over the summer exposed some of her nature. The rest I deduced. She didn't become the dean of Le Moyne through the goodness of her heart or by shrinking from competition.

I know firsthand what it takes to oversee a prep school like this one.

I also know how easy it is to lose that position.

As she saunters toward me, her sharp eyes pass over the nooks between the mahogany bookcases, the empty librarian desk, and the vacant couches at the far end. *Yes, Beverly. We're alone.*

She lowers into the chair beside me, legs crossing at the knees, and regards me with a calculated smile. "All settled in your new house?"

"Let's not pretend you care."

"Fine." She drags trimmed fingernails over her skirt. "Barb McCracken's attorney contacted me. As it turns out, she decided not to leave quietly."

Not my problem. I shrug a shoulder. "You said you'd handle it."

Perhaps Beverly isn't as competent as I assumed.

She hums, holding on to her smile, but it's tighter now. "I handled it."

"You threw more money at it?"

Her smile slips. "More than was warranted, the greedy bit —" Her lips thin as she leans back in the chair and stares across the room. "Anyway. It's finished."

I relax my mouth in half-smile, a deliberate signal of amusement. “Second guessing our arrangement already?”

She flicks her gaze back to me. “You’re a risk, Mr. Marceaux.” Her eyes taper into frosty slivers as she swivels her chair to face me. “How many job offers have you had since your fiasco in Shreveport? Hmm?”

Her taunting awakens a torrent of anger and betrayal that kicks up my pulse. My throat burns to lash out, but all I give her is an arched eyebrow.

“Right. Well.” She sniffs with insolence. Or uncertainty. Probably both. “Le Moyne has an inimitable reputation, one I’m responsible for upholding. McCracken’s departure and my willingness to hire you as her replacement have stirred unwanted suspicion.”

While Shreveport destroyed my professional reputation, the reason for my resignation was never made public. Nevertheless, people talk. I suspect most of Le Moyne’s faculty and student families will hear the whispers. I’d rather air the truth than subject myself to judgments based on twisted rumors. But Beverly’s terms for the job offer require my silence.

“Remember our agreement.” Her elbows press against her sides, her eyes overly bright, almost glassy. “Keep your mouth shut and let me herd the sheep and their frivolous chatter.”

She says this as if I should be impressed by her unethical business practices. But what she’s inadvertently done is shown her hand. Her fear is palpable. She wrongfully fired a tenure-track teacher and paid the woman to shut up, all to bring me here for her personal gain. If she truly had control of the situation, she wouldn’t have felt the need to initiate this conversation. She’s cold-blooded enough to destroy people’s lives, but that doesn’t mean she’s prepared to play this game. *My game.*

I rub a thumb over my bottom lip, delighting in the way her eyes reluctantly follow the movement.

The skin above her buttoned collar flushes. “It’s paramount that we keep the attention on your achievements as an educator.” She lifts her chin. “I expect you to set a professional example in the classroom—”

“Do *not* tell me how to do my job.” I was a well-respected instructor before I climbed the administrative ranks. Fuck her and her self-righteous audacity.

“Like most teachers, you seem to have a problem with *learning*. So try to pay attention.” She angles forward, her tone low and clipped. “I will not have your perversions darkening the corners of my school. If your misconduct at Shreveport is repeated here, the deal is off.”

The reminder of what I lost sparks a fire in my chest. “That’s the second time you’ve mentioned Shreveport. Why? Are you curious?” I level a challenging look at her. “Go ahead, Beverly. Ask your burning questions.”

She breaks eye contact, her neck stiffening. “One does not hire a whore to hear about his exploits.”

“Oh, I’m a whore now? Are you changing the terms of our deal?”

“No, Mr. Marceaux. You know why I hired you.” Her voice raises an octave. “With the explicit stipulation that there would be no indiscretions.” She lowers her tone. “I don’t want to hear another word about it.”

I’ve allowed her the upper hand since the moment she contacted me. It’s time to see how she navigates through a little humiliation.

Angling forward, I grip the armrests of her chair and cage her in. “You’re lying, Beverly. I think you want to hear all the dirty details of my *indiscretions*. Shall I describe the positions that were used, the sounds she made, the size of my cock—?”

“Stop!” She sucks in a breath, a hand trembling against her chest before clenching her fist and plastering on the dignified expression she shows the world. “You’re disgusting.”

I chuckle and rest back in the chair.

She jumps to her feet, glaring down at me. “Stay away from my faculty, specifically the women in my employ.”

“I checked out the offerings in this morning’s meeting. You should really update the scenery.”

There were a few tight-bodied teachers, plenty of interested glances my way, but I’m not here for that. I have dozens of women ready to bend over at my call, and my mistake at Shreveport... My jaw stiffens. It’s one I won’t make again.

“You, on the other hand...” I let my gaze travel over her rigid posture. “You look like you could use a good hard fuck.”

“You’re out of line.” Her warning tone loses its effect with the wobble of her heels as she backs away.

She turns and flees toward the head of the table. The farther she moves away from me, the stronger her gait becomes. A few more steps and she glances over her shoulder as if expecting to catch my eyes on her flat ass. I shudder. The arrogant bitch actually thinks I’m interested.

I stand, slide a hand in the pocket of my slacks, and stroll toward her. “Is Mr. Rivard not meeting your demands in the bedroom?”

She reaches the end of the table and gathers her papers, refusing to meet my eyes. “Continue this behavior, and I’ll make sure you never see the inside of a classroom again.”

Her illusion of control makes it damn hard to keep my proverbial teeth sheathed.

I step into her space, crowding her. “Threaten me again, and you’ll regret the outcome.”

“Move back.”

Leaning in, I let my breath brush her ear. “Everyone has secrets.”

“I don’t—”

“Is Mr. Rivard warming another bed?”

It's just a guess, but the slight tremor in her hand tells me I'm onto something.

Her nostrils flare. "Outrageous."

"What about your perfect son? What has he done to put you in this precarious position?"

"He's done nothing wrong!"

I wouldn't be here if that were true. "You're trembling, Beverly."

"This conversation is over." She steps around me, eyes on the door, and trips.

Her balance teeters, papers tumble from her hands, and she falls to her knees at my feet. *Perfect.*

She casts me a startled look, and as she realizes I made no move to catch her, her upturned face deepens into a self-effacing shade of red.

Snapping her eyes to the floor, she collects her things with angry movements. "Hiring you was a mistake."

I step onto the page she's reaching for and glare down at the top of her head. "Then fire me."

"I..." She stares at the snakeskin-embossed leather on my Doc Martens, her voice hushed, dejected. "Just use your connections."

To get her undeserving son into Leopold, the highest ranked music college in the country. That was the deal.

She gave me a teaching job when no one else would, and I'll hold up my end of the bargain. But I will *not* bend or cower like her subordinates. She has no idea who she's dealing with. But she'll learn.

I toe the paper toward her fingers and hold it down with my shoe. "I think we're clear on the terms"—I lift my foot, allowing her to snatch it—"as well as our positions in this arrangement."

She stiffens, her head hanging lower.

Humiliation complete.

I turn and amble out of the library.

IVORY

“I heard she stuffs her bra.”

“What a slut.”

“Didn’t she wear those shoes last year?”

The murmurs ripple through the crowded hall, spoken behind manicured hands yet intended to reach my ears. After three years, how have these girls not come up with new material?

As I pass their whispering cluster of brand names, limited edition iPhones, and black American Express cards, I reinforce my smile with the reminder that, despite our differences, I deserve to be here.

“I wonder whose bed she crawled out of this morning.”

“Seriously, I can smell her from here.”

The comments don’t bother me. They’re just words. Unimaginative, immature, hollow words.

Who am I kidding? Some of those jabs are true enough, and hearing them voiced so hatefully sucks the wind from my lungs. But I’ve learned that tearful reactions only encourage them.

“Prescott said he had to take three showers after slumming with her.”

I stop in the center of the corridor. The flow of traffic parts around me as I pull in a deep breath and walk back toward their huddle.

When they see me coming, several of the girls scatter. Ann and Heather remain, watching me approach with the same morbid curiosity tourists give my homeless neighbors. Unblinking eyes, backs straight, their dancer's legs motionless beneath knee-length skirts.

"Hey." I lounge against the lockers beside them, smiling as they exchange glances. "I'll tell you something, but you have to keep it to yourselves."

Their eyes narrow, but there's interest there. They love gossip.

"The truth is..." I gesture at my boobs. "I hate these things. It's hard to find shirts that fit"—*let alone afford them*—"and when I do, look at this." I poke at the safety pin. "Popped buttons." I give their flat chests a once-over, and while I feel a pinch of envy for their coltish figures, I hide it beneath a sarcastic tone. "Must be nice to not have to worry about that."

The taller girl, Ann, gives an indignant huff. All lean and graceful and full of confidence, she's the highest-ranked dancer at Le Moyne. She's also intimidatingly beautiful, with her appraising eyes and full lips set in a dark brown complexion sharpened with cool, midnight undertones.

If Le Moyne had formal dances, she would be the prom queen. And for some reason, she has always hated me. She never even gave it a chance to be any other way.

Then there's her sidekick. I'm certain Heather made the shoe comment, but she's coyer than Ann, much too squeamish to be cruel to my face.

I lift a foot, twisting it so they can see the holes in the plastic. "I wore these last year. And the year before that. And the year before that. In fact, these are the only shoes you've ever seen me wear."

Heather fingers her long, brown braid and stares at my beat-up flats with a furrowed brow. "What size do you wear? I could give you—"

"I don't want your hand-me-downs."

I do want them, but there's no way I'm admitting that. It's hard enough to stand up for myself in these halls. I'm sure as hell not going to do it in borrowed shoes.

Since day one, I've confronted their barbs with directness and honesty. That's what Daddy would've done. Yet here we are, a brand new year, and they're already mocking me with enough venom to burn through my skin.

So I decide to try a different tactic, a harmless lie to shut them up. "These were my grandmother's shoes, the only things she owned when she immigrated to the States. She handed them down to my mother, who passed them to me as a symbol of strength and resilience."

I don't have a grandmother, but Heather's guilty expression tells me I may have finally burst her precious golden bubble.

Triumph spirals its way up my spine. "Next time you open your patronizing mouth, consider the fact that you don't know shit."

Heather sucks in a breath, as if *I* offended *her*.

"Moving on." I stoop toward them. "Here's the thing about Prescott Rivard..." I glance around the crowded hall, like I give a shit who can hear me. "He has a sex problem. All guys do. They want it, and if you don't give it, they *take* it, you know?"

Ann and Heather stare at me blankly. Clueless. How do they not know this?

I adjust the strap of the satchel on my shoulder, my skin itching with the truths I'm leaving out. "Someone has to step up and make the guys happy. I'm just doing my part to keep sexual violence out of our school. You should thank me."

I made that sound a lot more charitable than it actually is. I do what I do to survive. Fuck everyone else.

Ann glares down her scrunched nose at me. "You are such a slut."

A label I've worn since my freshman year here. I've never discouraged their presumptions about me. Sexual misconduct requires proof. As long as it doesn't happen on school grounds and I don't show up pregnant, I won't get kicked out. Of course, the rumors tarnish my already loathsome reputation, but they also distract from the real reason I spend time with the guys at Le Moyne. *That* truth would get me expelled in a heartbeat.

"A slut?" I lower my voice in a conspiratorial whisper. "I haven't had sex in a while. I mean, it's been like forty-eight hours." I turn away, wait for their gasps, and spin back, grinning at Ann. "But your dad promised he'd make up for his lapse tonight."

"Oh my God." Ann doubles over, gripping her midsection and cupping her gaping mouth. "Gross!"

Her father? I wouldn't know, but sex in general *is* gross. Horrible. Unbearable.

And expected.

I leave them in shocked silence and slip through the first half of the day without losing my smile. Mornings at Le Moyne are a breeze, comprised of all the easy A/B block classes, such as English and History, Science and Math, and World Languages. As midday approaches, we disperse for an hour to eat lunch and work out before switching gears and heading to our specialized classes.

Daily exercise and food are required as part of the *balanced musical diet*, but eating is an inconvenience, seeing how I don't have food or money.

As I stand at my locker in Campus Center, the empty ache in my stomach awakens with a groan. Layered on top of the hunger is a tight bundle of dread. Or excitement.

No, definitely dread.

I stare down at the printout of my afternoon schedule.

Music Theory

Piano Seminar

Performance Master Class

Private Lessons

The last half of my day is in Crescent Hall. Room 1A. All taught by Marceaux.

During English Lit, I overheard some of the girls blabbing about the hotness that is *Mister* Marceaux, but I haven't worked up the nerve to wander over to Crescent Hall.

My insides coil tighter as I mutter aloud, "Why does he have to be a *he*?"

The locker door beside me swings shut, and Ellie angles around my arm, glancing at my schedule. "He's really pretty, Ivory."

I whirl toward her. "You saw him?"

"A glimpse." She wiggles her little mousy nose. "Why does the *he* part matter?"

Because I'm more comfortable around women. Because they don't overpower me with muscle and size. Because men are takers. They take my courage, my strength, my confidence. Because they're only interested in one thing, and it's not my ability to play the last bars of Transcendental Étude No.2.

But I can't share all this with Ellie, my sweet, sheltered, reared-in-a-strict-Chinese-home friend. I think I can call her a friend. We've never really established that, but she's always nice to me.

I stuff the schedule in my satchel. "I guess I was hoping for someone like Mrs. McCracken."

Maybe Mr. Marceaux is different. Maybe he's gentle and safe like Daddy and Stogie.

About a head shorter than me, Ellie smooths a hand over the cowlicks of her inky-black hairline and does this bouncy thing on her toes. I think she's trying to stretch her height, but

mostly it just looks like she needs to pee. She's so tiny and adorable I want to tug on her ponytail. So I do.

She bats my hand away, smiling with me, and drops back to her heels. "Don't worry about Marceaux. It'll be fine. You'll see."

Easy for her to say. She's already locked in a cellist spot at Boston Conservatory next year. Her future doesn't hinge upon whether or not Marceaux likes her.

"I'm headed to the gym." She lugs a backpack half her size over her shoulder. "You coming?"

Instead of an organized PE class, Le Moyne provides a full fitness center, personal trainers, and a myriad of conditioning classes like yoga and kickboxing.

I'd rather cut off my 5-4-3 fingers than jump around in a mirrored room with disapproving girls. "Nah. I'm going to run the track outside."

We say our goodbyes, but my curiosity about Marceaux has me calling after her.

"Ellie? *How* pretty exactly?"

She turns around, walking backwards. "*Shockingly* pretty. It was just a glimpse, but I'm telling you, I felt it right here." She pats her stomach and widens her angular eyes. "Maybe a little lower."

My chest tightens. The prettiest ones have the ugliest insides.

But I'm pretty, aren't I? I'm told I am, less so by people I trust and more often by people I don't.

Maybe my insides are ugly, too.

As Ellie bounces away and flashes her pretty smile at me over her shoulder, I stand corrected in my generalizations. There's nothing ugly about Ellie.

In the locker room, I change into shorts and a tank top then head outside to the track that encircles the twenty-acre campus.

The humidity deters most of the three-hundred students from venturing out of the A/C this time of year, but a few laze on the park benches, laughing and eating their lunches. A couple dancers practice their synchronized warm-ups beneath the imposing steeples of the Campus Center building.

As I stretch my legs under the shade of a large oak tree, I stare out over the lush green grounds and rubberized walking trails. The same trails I walked with Daddy when my head barely reached his hip. I can still feel his big hand swallowing mine as he led me along. His smile was so full of sunshine when he pointed out the old cathedral-like stonework of Crescent Hall and speculated on the grandeur of the classrooms within.

Le Moyne was his dream, one his parents couldn't afford. He never seemed sad about that. Because he wasn't a taker, not even when he dreamed. Instead, he gave his dream to me.

Bending at the waist, I reach for my toes and let the stretch heat my hamstrings as the memories warm my blood. I look like Mom with my dark hair and dark eyes, but I have Daddy's smile. I wish he could see me now, standing here on the campus, living his dream, and wearing his smile.

I grin wider, because his dream, his smile...they're mine, too.

“Holy mother of God, I missed that ass.”

I snap straight, smile gone and my body too stiff to turn toward the voice that makes my shoulders hike around my ears. “What do you want, Prescott?”

“You. Naked. Wrapped around my dick.”

My stomach caves in, and a bead of sweat trickles down my temple. I straighten my spine. “I have a better idea. How about you tuck your dick between your legs, dance like Buffalo Bill, and go fuck yourself.”

“You're so nasty,” Prescott says with a smile in his voice as he prowls into my line of sight.

He stops an appropriate distance away, but not far enough. I step back.

His long hair stops at his jawline, the blond strands bleached by the Caribbean sun or wherever he spends his summers. If his tie and button-up are stifling him in this heat, he doesn't show it as he takes his time unnerving me with his wandering gaze.

I don't understand why the girls at Le Moyne fight over him. His nose is too long, his front tooth is crooked, and his tongue squirms like a worm whenever he shoves it in my mouth.

"Jesus, Ivory." His focus zeroes in on my chest, burning my skin beneath the top. "Your tits grew another cup size over the summer."

I fight my shoulders into a relaxed position. "If you're asking for my help this year, try again."

His eyes remain locked on my chest, his long fingers tightening around his sack lunch. "I want you."

"You want me *to do your homework*."

"That, too."

The huskiness in his voice makes me shiver. I wrap my arms around my chest, hating how noticeable my boobs are, hating the way he flagrantly stares at them, hating that I depend on him.

His gaze finally lifts, landing on my mouth. "What happened to your lip? Catch it on a cock ring?"

I shrug. "It was a really big...ring."

His expression darkens with jealousy, and I hate that, too.

"You should get one." I tilt my head at the forced sound of his laughter. "Why not? It increases the pleasure." I don't know anything about piercings, but I can't pass up the dig. "If you had one, you might actually make a girl come."

His strained laugh cuts off with a cough. "Wait, what?" His eyes harden. "I make you come."

Sex with him is a lot like removing a tampon. A quick tug that leads to a repulsive mess, one I discard from my mind

until it has to be done again. I don't bother telling him this. He can see it all in my glare.

"That's bullshit." He charges forward, crossing the boundary of what onlookers would consider friendly conversation.

When he reaches for my arm, I glance up at the Campus Center building and find the empty window of the dean's office. "Your mom's watching."

"You're a lying bitch." He doesn't look up, but his hand drops.

"If you want my help, I'm going to need an advance."

He barks out a disgusted laugh. "Hells no."

"Suit yourself." I take off at a sprint, keeping to the grass along the track where it doesn't burn my bare feet.

It only takes a couple seconds for Prescott's long legs to catch up. "Hang on, Ivory." Sweat forms on his face as he jogs beside me in his collared shirt. "Will you just stop for a minute?"

I slow my strides, anchor my fists on my hips, and wait for him to catch his breath.

"Look, I don't have any cash on me right now." He pulls at the pockets of his slacks. "But I'll pay you tonight."

Tonight. My stomach buckles, but I smile through it and pluck the sack lunch out of his hand. "This will do until then."

Lunch is the only advance I needed anyway. He has an unlimited balance in the cafeteria, so it's not like he'll go hungry.

He looks at my bare feet, at the paper bag in my hand, and pauses on my busted lip. For a guy who struggles with algebra, he's not stupid. More like disinterested. Disinterested in my problems. Disinterested in the curriculum.

None of us are here to study quadratic equations or cell biology. We came for the arts program, to dance, to sing, to play our instruments, and to get accepted at the music

conservatory of our choosing. Prescott would rather devote his time to fucking and playing classical guitar, not writing a history report *en Français*. Lucky for him, he doesn't have to bother with academic coursework. Not when he can pay me to do it for him.

He isn't the only entitled prick at Le Moyne, but I limit my services to those with the biggest wallets and the most to lose. We all know the risks. If one of us goes down, we all go down. Unfortunately, my little circle of cheaters is largely made up of Prescott and his friends.

And sometimes they take more than they pay for.

I peer into the lunch sack, salivating at the sight of roast beef on crusty bread, grapes, and chocolate cookies. "Tonight where?"

"The usual."

Which involves picking me up ten blocks from school, parking his car in a vacant lot, and doing a lot more than homework. But I'm the one who established the rules. No swapping homework assignments on school property or public places. It's too risky, especially with the way the dean watches her son.

"See you in class." He strides away, his attention locked on the dean's window and the shadowed silhouette within.

He swears she doesn't suspect anything, but she's been gunning against me since she stepped in as *Mother Superior* my sophomore year. Maybe it's my slutty reputation or lack of wealth. Or maybe it's my choice of college.

Leopold Conservatory of New York is the most selective university in the country and only accepts one Le Moyne musician each year. That is, if they accept any of us at all. Dozens of my peers have applied, including Prescott, but Mrs. McCracken said I'm the best. I'm the one she was going to recommend. Which makes me Prescott's biggest competitor. At least, I *was*. Without her referral, I may very well be back to square one.

Curled up beneath a tree, I devour Prescott's lunch and convince myself not to worry about him. Marceaux will like me. He'll see that I deserve the spot. And tonight... Tonight, I won't get in Prescott's car. We can go over his assignments on the sidewalk, and if he has a problem with that, I'll leave. Let him fail his coursework and drop out of the running for Leopold. I'll find another slacker to make up for the loss in income.

As I run the three-mile track that winds around the tree-covered property, I strengthen my mind and body with the solidity of that plan.

When the five-minute warning bell rings through the buildings, I'm showered, dressed, and weaving through the crowds in Crescent Hall, my stomach lurching into a roil.

All you need is a moment.

Stogie's confidence in me lightens my steps, but it's the memory of Daddy's energy that lifts my lips. If he were in my shoes, walking the halls he dreamed about, he would've been humming with unrestrained enthusiasm and gratefulness. I can feel it, his infectious dynamism, pumping my blood and hurrying my strides as I enter Room 1A, the same music room I was in last year.

An impressive display of brass, string, and percussion instruments line the far wall. Six or so of my fellow musicians gather around the desks at the center of the huge L-shaped space. If I walked around the corner, I would see the Bösendorfer grand piano in the alcove. But my attention snags on the man in the front of the room.

Perched on the edge of the desk, arms crossed over his chest, he watches the congregation of students with a brooding, irritated expression. Thank God he hasn't noticed me yet, because I can't seem to unglue my feet from the floor or look away.

He's unexpectedly young, not student young but perhaps my brother's age. His profile is ruggedly sculpted, his jaw cleanly shaved, yet so dark I suspect the sharpest razor doesn't scrape away the shadow.

The longer I stare, the more I realize it's not his face that looks youthful. It's his style, so unlike other teachers with their conservative suits and modest demeanors.

It's the way his black hair is arranged, short on the sides, long and messy on top, like a shove of his fingers left it falling across his brow in perfect chaos. His long legs appear to be encased in dark jeans, but closer scrutiny confirms he's wearing slacks that are cut like jeans. The sleeves of his plaid button-up roll up to the elbows, and his tie has a different plaid design, which doesn't match but somehow totally works. His brown fitted waistcoat is the kind a man wears beneath a suit jacket. Except there is no jacket.

His overall look is casual cosmopolitan, professional with personality, challenging the dress code without violating it.

"Take a seat." His booming voice reverberates through the room, jarring my insides, but it's not directed at me.

I exhale a moment of relief before he swivels toward me. His blue eyes move first, followed by his whole body. His hands grip the edge of the desk as his face comes into full view. Sweet merciful fuck, words like *shockingly pretty* dilute the effect of his image. Yeah, the first glimpse is a shock, but it's not just his attractiveness. It's his presence, his projection of self-assurance and command that makes me feel disoriented, breathless, and really fucking weird deep in my core.

He stares at me for an eternal second, expressionless, and his dark eyebrows pull into a *V*.

"Are you...?" He glances at the hall behind me and returns to my face. "You weren't at the staff meeting this morning."

"Staff meeting?" Realization punches me in the gut.

He thinks I'm a teacher, and now he's looking at me like guys do, his gaze dragging over my body and arousing a twisted sickness in my belly. It reminds me how different I look than other girls my age and how much I hate those differences.

I pull my satchel over my chest, hiding my most noticeable parts. “I’m not...” I clear my throat and force my feet toward the nearest desk. “I’m a student. Piano.”

“Of course.” He stands, hands slipping into his pockets, voice gruff. “Sit down.”

His stark, icy eyes follow me, and goddammit, I don’t want to be intimidated by them. I attempt to fortify my swift steps with the confidence I felt walking in, but my legs are wobbly.

As I lower the satchel beside a vacant desk, his impatience thunders louder, sharper. “Hurry up!”

I drop into the chair, hands trembling and my heartbeat a heavy hammer in my head. If I were stronger, more confident, I wouldn’t care that his gaze is drilling into mine and tripping my pulse.

If I were stronger, I’d be able to look away.

EMERIC

Blindsided. That's the best explanation for the stern volume of my voice and tightness in my usually-composed expression. I wasn't prepared for this. Not for a tall, voluptuous, sexy-beyond-all-reason woman to walk into my classroom. My first thought? Beverly Rivard found the hottest music teacher in the country to place in my employ. To test me.

But she's not a teacher.

I relax my fingers on the edge of the desk. Christ, that would've been a terrible inconvenience.

Except this is worse.

Distrust steels the girl's gaze as she studies me from the front row. Sitting stiffly in the chair, she tugs the hem of her skirt over her knees and keeps her legs closed. Not the reaction I'm used to from women—or high school girls, for that matter.

I pride myself on being a strict, respectable educator. I know how female students look at me, and I'm immune to the bubbly-hearted infatuation in their innocent eyes. But there isn't a hint of naïve adoration in the deep mahogany eyes staring at me now. In my six years of teaching, I've never encountered a student who regards me as if she's summed me up in a glance and disapproves of my intentions.

Maybe this girl heard about the mistakes I made with Joanne, the *debauchery* that led to her taking my job. Well, fuck that job. Only my parents know the depth of what I lost in Shreveport and the nature of my intentions.

Whatever this girl thinks she knows, I'm not beyond using intimidation or a show of power to demand her focus in the classroom.

I hold her incisive gaze as I speak to the class. "Find a seat and put your phones away."

Several more students trickle in, and a quick count of eleven girls and nine boys confirms everyone is present.

As the bell rings, the latecomers choose their seats. I recognize Beverly's son from the pictures displayed in her office. Prescott Rivard is cockier in person, wearing a smirk instead of a photogenic smile. He settles next to the brown-eyed beauty and leans over her desk to twist a finger through her hair.

She jerks away. "Stop it."

The hipster boy on her other side angles toward her, his skinny body squeezed into tight pants, a checkered shirt, and a plaid bow tie. He stares at her mouth through black-framed glasses and whispers something too low for me to hear.

Her lips thin into a line, and the dark expression on her face seems to come from a place much deeper than simple irritation.

I need to know what he's saying to her. It's a weird sort of curiosity, pulsing in my chest, as I level a look at the whispering boy. "What's your name?"

He reclines, flippantly slouching with his legs stretched out beneath the desk. "Sebastian Roth."

I walk toward him and give the toe of his shoe a warning kick that propels him to sit straight. "What did you say to her, Mr. Roth?"

He leers at the girl, rubbing his mouth to hide his grin. "I was just commenting on how big her...uh..." He looks at her chest and lifts his gaze to her mouth. "Her lip. How big her lip is."

Prescott bursts into laughter, followed by several boys sitting around him.

That's when I notice the segregation in seating. Girls on one side. Boys on the other. With the exception of the girl who looks like a woman. Whether she chose her seat out of urgency or to deliberately sit where hard-dicked boys could flock around her, I intend to find out.

With the tips of my fingers in my pockets, thumbs out, I shift to stand before her. "Your name?"

Her bottom lip is, indeed, cut and swollen. She sucks it between her teeth as her shoulders make a slow decent to self-assurance. Then she raises her chin and meets my eyes. "Ivory Westbrook."

Ivory. That conjures an image of paleness with hard, worn edges like piano keys or teeth. Doesn't fit her at all. She's a dark portrait of soft curves and chestnut hair with deep golden skin that seems to absorb shadows in the room I hadn't noticed until now.

Fuck, I'm definitely going out and getting laid tonight.

"Miss Westbrook, find a seat with fewer distractions." I point toward the girls.

Ivory's enormous doe eyes stare up at me, as if caught in the glare of stage lights. She blinks, glances at the girls, and looks down at her desk when they cast her uninviting sneers. That answers my question about her seating choice.

"I'm not here to indulge in your sensibilities." I slam a hand on her desk, making her jump. "Move."

With a ragged inhale, she grabs her satchel and walks toward the snickering girls, her gait leaden yet determined.

Every male in the room watches her stride along the front row of desks, and I don't have to follow suit to know what they see. Stripper-pole legs, tits almighty, and a high, round ass that flexes with each step.

The primitive, hungry part of me wants to join in their appreciation while the protective part wants to cover her with an over-sized coat. Instead, the disciplinarian takes over and lands an admonishing smack on the back of the closest juvenile head.

Sebastian flinches and casts me a startled look. “What was that for?”

I pluck his phone from his hand and toss it in the vicinity of my desk. It overshoots, slides off the other side, and hits the floor.

The rest of the room erupts in a flurry, shoving phones into pockets and bags. Everyone except Ivory. Hands folded together on the desk and no phone in sight, she watches me with a guarded expression.

Sebastian plays with a clump of his over-oiled hair. “If you broke my phone...”

I arch my eyebrow, my tone hard. “Go on.”

He shrugs. “My dad will buy me a new one.”

Of course, and it would be hypocritical of me to condemn this kid for being an entitled prick. I was no different at his age, with wealthy parents and an inflated sense of self-importance. Hell, I’m still a prick, only now I’m held accountable for my actions.

I move to the front of the room, hands clasped behind my back. “Welcome to twelfth-grade Music Theory. I’m Mr. Marceaux, and I’ll be your music director for your last year here at Le Moyne Academy. After this class, you’ll head to your master classes in specific disciplines. Piano students will remain with me. Before we begin, what do you want to know about me?”

The Asian girl who Ivory chose to sit by raises her hand.

I gesture toward her. “Introduce yourself, please.”

She stands beside her desk. “Ellie Lai. Cello.” She bounces on her toes. “What’s your background?”

I give her a nod and wait until she settles in her seat. “I hold a Master of Music from Leopol Conservatory of New York. I’m a member of the Louisiana Symphony Orchestra. And my most recent employment was Head of School at Shreveport Preparatory, where I also directed the music program.”

Prescott makes a show of stretching and smiling. Then he nonchalantly tosses an arm in the air and speaks without my prompt. “What are you, like...twenty-seven? Twenty-eight?” His voice drawls with antagonism. “How did you get a master’s, do the teaching thing and become dean, all in such a short amount time? What’s up with that, Mr. M?”

I worked my fucking ass off, you lazy little cocksucker.

And to think, in one hasty slide of a zipper, I lost it all, including something I never set out to have, which ended up being the only thing that mattered.

The very thought of Joanne sitting behind my desk in Shreveport makes my rib cage vibrate with rage. But imagining her continuing her life without me evokes a toxic fume of poison so invasive I can smell the betrayal with every choking breath.

I slowly roll my neck, clearing my thoughts and reining myself in. “I received my undergrad early and taught high school in Manhattan while I worked on my master’s. Any other questions?”

Ivory raises her hand.

“Yes?”

She remains seated, doesn’t fidget, and her dark gaze hones directly into mine. “You play piano? I mean, of course you do, since you’ll be my tutor. But you play piano in the Symphony Orchestra?”

Christ, her voice... It’s not lazy and high-pitched like girls her age. It’s complex and entrancing, like raindrops at midnight.

“Yes, I play piano in the Orchestra.”

Her smile is a slow-building nocturne, a tranquil expansion from her mouth to her eyes. “Solo?”

“Sometimes.”

“Wow.”

Not only am I shocked by her line of questioning, but the reverent way she's looking at me makes my goddamn skin hum. I don't like it. I'm proud of my achievements, but not when that lofty feeling distracts me from my hard-earned bitterness.

I dismiss the remaining raised hands with a sharp tone. "Open your Music Theory books to chapter three. We're going to jump right into..." My attention snags on Ivory as the entire room follows my directive except her. "Do you need a hearing aid, Miss Westbrook?"

"No." She drops her hands in her lap and meets my gaze head-on. "My other teachers gave me the week to buy my books."

"Do I look like your other teachers?"

"No, Mr. Marceaux." A female voice pipes up in the back. "You definitely do not."

A chorus of giggles follows, and irritation curls my fingers.

I swipe my text book from my bag and drop it on her desk. "Chapter three." I lean in, putting my face in hers. "Try to keep up."

She blinks rapidly. "Yes, sir."

Her whispered response strums at a pulsating, destructive, very adult hunger deep inside me. My skin heats, and my palms slick with sweat.

Jesus, I'm going to need a screaming-hard fuck tonight. Leather, rope, and chafing strokes. No safe words. No clingy aftercare. Chloe or Deb will do. Maybe both.

Focus, Emeric.

"Take out your tablets and open a browser to my website." With my back to the class, I continue talking while scrawling the url on the whiteboard. "You'll find all my lectures here. I expect you to follow along."

When I face the room, Ivory hasn't moved to follow my directions.

I feel a vein throbbing in my forehead and anchor my fists on my hips. “Let me guess. No tablet?”

“She can sit here,” Prescott says, patting his lap, “and share mine.”

She clenches her jaw and flips him off.

I waver between wanting to punch Prescott’s face and whip Ivory’s perfect ass. Neither is a lawful option, and the latter boils my blood just for thinking it.

My focus dips to her lips for a breath too long before I address the class. “Read the chapter and answer the questions at the end of the lecture.”

I curl a finger at Ivory in a follow-me gesture. “I’ll see you in the hall.”

IVORY

I follow Mr. Marceaux out of the classroom, my mouth dry and hands damp. As the door clicks shut behind him, my insides writhe under the barrage of a thousand fists.

He's not a huge man, but he seems gigantic in the empty hall, a towering pissed-off mountain of repercussion.

If my future depends on his first impression of me, I've fucked my life to hell.

He rubs a hand down his face, over his mouth, and glares at me for an eternity. "You come to my class unprepared and ___"

"I cleared the text book issue with the front office. They always give me the first week to—"

"Do *not* interrupt me," he says harshly and leans in, bracing a hand on the wall beside my head.

A rush of blood heats my cheeks beneath the intimidating blue of his gaze. His mouth is so close I can smell the lingering scent of cinnamon gum on his breath, and my stomach turns with unease.

"Are you deliberately trying to waste my time?" His jaw hardens. "No sniveling excuses or lies. You have five words to explain why you don't have your supplies."

Five words? Is this guy serious? He can eat a dick, because I'm only giving him four.

"I live in Treme."

“Treme,” he echoes, deadpanned.

I hate how stiff and uncomfortable I feel in the confines of his glare. I want him to look away, because I hate his eyes, hate the vivid facets of sapphire and the way the icy specks sharpen under the fluorescent lights. Nothing could ever be gentle or safe in that gaze.

His throat moves in the deep pocket of shadow above his tie. “Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why do you live in Treme?”

He doesn’t just ask the question. He snaps it like a whip. Like a punishment I didn’t earn.

I’m only inches away from him, my back against the wall, and I feel defensive, cornered, my hackles bristling with vindication. “Oh, right. I forgot you have a big fancy degree, so I’ll dumb it down for you.”

“Watch your fucking tone.”

It’s barely a whisper, caught and held in the small space between us, but I feel it vibrate through me like a thunderous roar.

He said no sniveling excuses or lies? Fine.

I wipe the attitude from my voice and give him raw, unpolished honesty. “I live in Treme because my family can’t afford a mansion in the Garden District, Mr. Marceaux. I can’t afford a cell phone or *any* kind of phone. I can’t afford running shoes or food for my cat. And those...those electronic bracelets all my classmates wear when they work out? I don’t know what they do, but I can’t afford one of those, either. And right now, I don’t have the money for school supplies. But I will. I’ll have it by the end of the week.”

Straightening, he steps back and lowers his head. Is that a fucking smile he’s hiding? I swear to God I glimpsed one. Is he actually enjoying the pathetic appraisal of my life? What a horrible fucking person! *This* is the teacher I’m supposed to

look up to? The one who will make me or break me? My lungs heave and slam together.

When he lifts his head, his mouth is a flat line, and the frigid depths of his eyes seem to manipulate his entire expression, twisting it into a collage of other faces that haunt me when I sleep. “Am I supposed to feel sorry for you?”

“Never,” I seethe through grinding teeth. “I never want that.”

“No? Then what? Seems you expect me to make exceptions for you?”

“No. Just—” I’ve never met a more callous, self-righteous dick. “Just write me up or whatever you’re going to do.”

I know something isn’t right the moment he looks down the hall and checks to make sure we’re alone. I know this entire confrontation is inappropriate when he bends toward me and places his hands on the wall, trapping me in. And I know there isn’t a goddamn thing I can do about it as he whispers through the pounding in my ears.

“Don’t worry about your punishment.” His attention falls to my lips, returns to my eyes. “I’ll take care of that later.”

Just like that, my strength, my bravery, all the things I wish I had right now abandon me in the heavy arms of fear. I’ve been in this position countless times. This is a first with a teacher, but he’s no different than the other takers. I could report him, but who are they going to believe? The girl with a slutty reputation or the former dean of Shreveport? And while I can’t overpower him, I know I’ll survive it. I might even master my emotions while it’s happening, like a Chopin nocturne in D-flat major.

I’m startled when his hand lifts, not to grab my breast but to pinch my chin so he can see my lip. “You need to go to the nurse and have her put something on this cut.”

It’s not until he releases me and slides his hands into his pockets that I realize I’m shaking. He steps back, elbows wide, shoulders loose. A heavy chill diffuses through my body.

He watches me with those arctic blue eyes, and I'm not sure if I'm supposed to head toward the nurse's office or wait to be dismissed. For some reason, it matters. Like he's testing me. So I wait.

He's a mercurial, heartless asshole, but he also surprised me. He didn't force his mouth against mine, didn't dig his fingers between my legs. He...stepped back?

Maybe I still have a chance to prove I'm not just a poor girl or a five-minute grope in a hallway.

A recurrent of sharp clicking sounds fills the silence between us. I follow the noise with my gaze, trailing over his tie and waistcoat, visually tracing along the dark dusting of hair on his exposed forearm, and pause on the mechanical watch on his wrist.

Moving wheels with tooth-like points whirl inside the enormous face, ticking, measuring the rhythm of time, like a metronome. Will each ticking moment I spend with him be an irreversible succession into the future? Or will he hold me here, stuck in the present, in this life?

“Miss Westbrook.”

I snap my attention to his face, the angled lines of his jaw, the darker shades of his cheeks where stubble will grow in, and the curve of lips that haven't been injured by circumstance. He seems untouchable. Maybe his fists are as brutal as his beauty. Just looking at him feels like I'm inhaling a lungful of fire.

Because he's dangerous, and he seems to know this, too, as he thrusts an impatient finger in the direction of the nurse's office, his voice fueled with urgency. “Go.”

I turn and hurry down the hall with the weight of his gaze pressing against my back.

EMERIC

As Ivory darts down the hall, she doesn't look back, doesn't dare meet my eyes. But the frantic rush of her steps tells me enough. I affect her. Not my professional bearing, but my masculine presence. I terrify her.

A wide grin stretches my mouth.

Separated by the length of the corridor, I still feel the *what-ifs* firing between us. I know she imagined us together when I corralled her against the wall. I'm certain she felt the power exchange, maybe even detested it, as it stuttered her inhales and dilated her pupils. And still, she waited for my permission to leave.

Knowing that, watching her run away, the sight of her curvaceous body swaying innocently, all of it ignites a predatory need inside me. The need to chase.

But I won't. Not here. Not ever. I release a breath and wait for my hard-on to receive the message.

The moment she vanishes around the corner, I slouch against the wall.

She's exactly the kind of woman I'm drawn to. A woman who flees when hunted and comes alive when she's caught. A woman who bends beneath punishments and seeks acceptance in her humiliation. A woman who bites at a heavy hand, only to melt around the unforgiving grip when it cuts her air.

I demanded her honesty—*no sniveling excuses or lies*—and expected her to recoil, disobey, or tell me to fuck off. But

she didn't, *couldn't*. It was the moment I realized it's her nature to give me what I want. When she exposed the embarrassing details of her poverty, offering up her vulnerabilities for me to mock at, heaven help me, it was beautiful and tragic and seductive—a trinity of temptation.

A greedy throb tightens the front of my pants, but the reaction means fuckall. It's simple, really. I want sex. Filthy, kinky sex. Nothing more. As raw and enraged as I am about my last mistake, I'm unwilling to move on, unable to let go of Joanne. But I'm also vicious in my resentment and vindictive enough to fuck as many women as possible with the brutal dominance Joanne craves and can no longer have. Maybe she'll choke on her poisonous jealousy.

Which makes Ivory a tantalizing tease. I can give her exactly what she needs. I can train her, objectify her, and defile her, and she'd let me, because surrender is the very fabric of her sexuality.

But I could also lose myself in her, because she's the kind of woman I make mistakes for.

Except she's not a woman.

As a senior, she's at least seventeen, the legal age of consent. But she's still a child, ten years my junior, and sexual conduct between teacher and student is punishable by imprisonment, regardless of age.

The notion is sobering, deflating my dick and making it a hell of a lot easier to keep my hands to myself.

Back in the classroom, the students bombard me with questions about the chromatic scale and the circle of fifths. Slowly, my fixation with Ivory slips into the recesses of my mind.

Until the door opens, and her dark eyes instantly find mine.

I continue the lecture as she slides behind her desk, her bottom lip glazed in a sheen of ointment. I don't give her more than a half-second glance. I'm the adult here, the one in control of our interactions. Ignoring my fascination with her,

pretending I don't want to devour her with my gaze, sets appropriate boundaries. I'm here to teach her, and that doesn't include instructions on how to properly suck my cock.

To be honest, despite my disgraceful end as Head of School in Shreveport, I'm excited to be back in the classroom. Nothing fills me with a sense of belonging like standing before a rapt audience and commanding attention with the sound of my voice. This isn't a job. It's a creditable use of my need to influence and dominate, a place where I can discipline weaknesses, mold trustful minds, and inspire students with my passion for music.

My veins thrum with energy as I listen to the class discuss the application of an invariant hexachord. I straddle a chair at the front of the room, nodding in encouragement and interjecting only when they stray off topic. They look to me for knowledge, shiver beneath my directives, and I get off on it.

This is why I didn't fight to keep my job in Shreveport. I need this...this freedom to leave all the administrative bullshit behind and focus on my love of teaching.

The class discussion grows in volume, voices clashing, as a debate arises about the use of tone rows. I'm seconds from putting an end to it when Ivory jumps in.

"You guys, ordinary relations of tones *are* stereotypical." She furrows her brow. "But you can still obtain an emotional thrill from the music." She quickly backs up her points with valid examples in Schoenberg's Concerto for Violin.

Not once does she reference the textbook. Not even as she cites ornamental compositions by opus number. The classroom listens quietly, and by the time the bell rings, she's brilliantly persuaded the debate.

I find myself...impressed. She knows the material, almost as well as I do. If she plays piano with the same aptitude, I'll have to punish her just for making me so goddamn enamored.

Her eyes catch mine as the classroom thins out. Five students remain, but I'm too focused on one to make note of

the others. There's something recognizable in her gaze. Distrust? Accusation? *Abuse*. Whatever she's exposing is both offensive and haunting.

I harden my eyes, a silent reprimand. She looks away, her emollient-lathered lips rubbing together, as she surveys her peers.

Three boys and two girls make up the senior pianists at Le Moyne, including the hipster fuck, Sebastian Roth. He moved seats between classes, sitting closer to Ivory while leaving a row between them. I'll let it go as long as he doesn't look at her, not one fucking glance.

Since the student files didn't land on my desk until lunchtime, I haven't had a chance to read them. But I knew the final classes in my schedule would be an intimate group. The perquisites of forking out an expensive tuition are many, all illustrated in Le Moyne's glossy brochure with an entire page dedicated to its 1:5 teacher-student ratio.

"So this is what Le Moyne's top pianists look like?" I pitch my voice with doubt, making it clear they'll have to prove themselves. "You think you have what it takes to become piano virtuosos, composers, professors...something other than privileged, snot-nosed brats?"

Except Ivory. Her tattered clothes and shoes, her inability to buy textbooks, nothing about her reeks of privilege. How does a girl from a poor neighborhood land a spot here? It's bizarre. And distracting.

Forcing her out of my mind, I stroll along the rows, hands folded behind my back, and study each of the five students without registering individual features. I don't give a shit what they look like. I'm searching for straight spines, parted lips, and alert gazes.

Five pairs of eyes lock on me, their bodies angled to follow my movements, breaths hitching, waiting, as I pass each desk. I have their attention.

"We'll be spending three hours a day together, every day, for the rest of the year. Music Theory, Piano Seminar,

Performance Master Class, and for some of you, private lessons... This is what Mommy and Daddy shelled out the big bucks for.” My leisurely walk ends at the front of the room, and I turn to face them. “Don’t waste my time, and I won’t waste your parents’ money. Don’t take me seriously, and I will seriously fuck up your prospective futures. Are we clear?”

I can almost smell the mix of trepidation and startled respect in the silence that follows.

“I’m not going to lecture or put you on a piano bench today.” I glance at the student files on my desk. “I’m going to use the next few hours in one-on-one conferences with each of you. Don’t think of it as an interview. Just a brief meeting to help me become acquainted with your backgrounds and academic goals.”

Unbidden, my thoughts dart to Ivory and all the ways I *can’t* become acquainted with her. I push a hand through my hair, avoiding the prick of her gaze. I’m itching to talk to her again, to learn how a girl from Treme affords one of the most expensive tuitions in the country.

Maybe I don’t want to know.

But I do know I need a moment to gather some damn self-control. “Mr. Roth, I’ll start with you.”

I’ll save the temptation for last.

IVORY

I twirl a pencil between my fingers and try not to chew a hole in my lip. Sitting on the floor in the back corner of the *L*-shaped room, I watch Mr. Marceaux through the maze of chair legs while he conducts private meetings at his desk.

A huge space separates us, the length of two normal classrooms filled with desks and instruments. But when he glances my way, which he does unnervingly often, I can see him. I can also shift ever-so-slightly and obstruct the eye contact.

Sometimes I don't move, my gaze paralyzed under the force of his. Why? It's the strangest thing, this preoccupation I have with him. I want to learn more about him—what he eats, the music he listens to, and where he goes when he's not here. I want to study his calculated movements, watch the path of his fingers along his jaw, stare at the hard angles of his face, and memorize the way his slacks outline the shape of him. He's enchanting, distracting, and positively terrifying.

Why can't I just focus on something else? This has nothing to do with my ambitions for college and his role in it. Good lord, I haven't even thought of that. I just want... What? For him to look at me? I hate his eyes, yet I watch them, wait for them to shift my way. That's so fucked up.

He told us we could use the free block of time to study, but I can't concentrate. I can't think about anything except the enigma in the front of the room.

Two of the students, Sebastian and Lester, left after their meetings. Sarah chose to hang out after hers, and Chris is up there now, perched stiffly on the edge of his chair, nodding at whatever Mr. Marceaux is saying.

That leaves me, and the wait for my turn is flaying my insides.

“Psst. Ivory.”

I turn toward Sarah, who mirrors my cross-legged position—our loose skirts stretched over knees for modesty—at the other end of the back wall.

“C’mere,” she whispers.

I shake my head, unwillingly to give up my view.

With a sigh, she sets her textbook down and crawls toward me.

This should be interesting. I think she’s talked to me twice in the last three years. I gave up trying to be friends with her when she said the hamburger I was eating was made of greed, lies, and murder. I don’t have the luxury to choose food that saves farm animals and boycotts political agendas.

Her brown, stick-straight hair is so long it drags along the floor as she edges toward me on hands and knees. She has an old-school hippie look about her, with ropes of multi-colored beads dangling from her neck, a long flowing dress that she hitches up her thighs, and a mischievous twinkle in her eyes. I’m pretty sure she’s not wearing a bra, but she has the kind of svelte build that doesn’t require one.

She tumbles into a sprawl beside me, all arms and legs and smiles. What is she up to?

In a volume too low to be heard beyond our huddle, she asks, “What do you think of him?”

Kill me now. I’m not going there with her. “He’s stern.”

She glances at Mr. Marceaux, and lines form in her forehead. “Not *him*. I mean, yeah, he’s stern and sexy and... hello? Didn’t you hear about his *other* uses for his belt?”

His belt? I shake my head. “What do you mean?”

“It’s just hearsay. I want to talk about Chris Stevens.”

I don’t have an opinion on Chris, other than he tried to sleep with me sophomore year, and I’ve been avoiding him since. “What about him?”

“Have you fucked him?”

My cheeks burn. “What!”

Mr. Marceaux cuts his splintery eyes at me.

Shit. I lower my voice, clipping the words. “I haven’t done anything with him.”

“Sorry, sorry. It’s just....” She separates a lock of her hair and proceeds to plait it into a skinny braid. “I know you’ve been with Prescott and Sebastian and...others. They don’t shut up about it, and well, never mind. It was rude to assume.” She drops the braid and flashes me a pair of dimples. “Are we gravy?”

“Yeah, we’re good.” I guess?

“Cool, because I need some advice.” She lowers her chin, whispering, “*On sex*. And since you’re...um...”

A slut? A tramp? A dirty whore? I fight my shoulders into a relaxed position. “I’m what?”

“Experienced.”

I grit my teeth.

She doesn’t seem to notice. “Chris and I are kind of a thing. Like, we’ve made out and stuff, and I’ve been...I don’t know, saving my *V*-card for something special, you know?”

No, I don’t know. I can’t imagine anyone or anything being special enough to go through that for.

She puts her face so close to mine all I see is freckles. “What’s it like?”

I tilt back, growing increasingly uncomfortable by the second. “What? Sex?”

“Yeah.” She licks her lips. “That.”

Just the thought of sex makes my stomach swarm with a thousand bees. Enduring it is worse than licking an oozing cold sore covered in dead skin and pus. But I don't know if it's like that for everyone—people act like girls are supposed to like it—so I shrug.

She cocks her head. “Does it hurt? The first time?”

“Yeah.” My voice cracks, and I clear it. “It hurts.” It never stops hurting.

“How old were you?”

I don't want to talk about this, but at the same time, my chest aches with an overwhelming need to share. No one has ever asked me about my sexual experiences. Definitely not my mom, and I've never had a close friend. Isn't this what I've always wanted? Girl talk without judgment?

I search her face for signs of cruelty and find only bright-eyed curiosity. It produces a warm sensation deep in my core. She's interested, maybe even envious. Because I have something she doesn't. *Experience*.

Stretching my legs out, I rest my head against the wall. “I was thirteen.”

“Wow.” Her face glows with wonderment. “Who? How? Tell me everything.”

The words come easily, pouring from a memory that's tattooed on every cell of my body. “My brother had just come home after serving time in the Marine Corps, and he brought one of the guys from his squad with him. His best friend.”

I was so taken with Lorenzo then, so giddy over his good looks, battle-honed muscles, and rugged charm. And he looked at me like I was the most beautiful girl he'd ever seen.

He still looks at me, and I dread it down to the marrow of my bones.

Sarah covers her mouth, her smile escaping around her fingers. “You gave your virginity to your brother's best friend?”

Prickles race up my spine. “He was staying with us until he could get his own place. I woke one night, couldn’t fall back asleep, so I stepped outside to sit on the back deck.”

Daddy had only been gone a month, and the loss was still so very painful, a constant constriction in my chest. He used to say, *Nothing is inconceivable, and everything is possible. The proof is in the magic of music.* So there I was, humming his favorite Herbie Hancock song, wishing for the inconceivable, and willing him to come back.

Sarah crowds in, her expression radiating far more enthusiasm than the reality of that night deserves. “What happened?”

“My brother’s friend came outside and pinned me on the stairs. He was so big. Big *everywhere*. And strong. He knew what he wanted, and I couldn’t stop him from taking it.”

Couldn’t stop the concrete steps from scraping my chest and legs as he took me from behind. The hand on my mouth muffling my screams. The ripping sound of my nightie. The smell of his breath rotting the air. And the hurt between my legs...the tearing, the blood, the soreness for days after when he took me again and again.

“Dude.” Sarah slouches against the wall. “That sounds so hot.”

It does?

“You’re so lucky.” She plays with the ends of her hair. “You have boobs and experience and guys like that falling all over you. I want that. I guess I’ve been scared, but I’m definitely ready to...you know...with Chris.”

There must be something wrong with me, because boobs and sex and everything she just said makes me want to puke my guts out. “Sarah, don’t—”

“Between you and me, the girls around here are only mean to you because they’re jealous. I mean, look at you. Guys want that.” She waves a hand to indicate my body. “No wonder you’ve slept with half the school.”

Bile hits the back of my throat, and I swallow repeatedly to keep it down.

“Oh, look. He’s done.” Sarah jumps to her feet, grabs her books, and rushes through the room, making a beeline for Chris.

Part of me wants to tackle her to the floor and beg her to stay away from him. But the other part, the selfish part, craves her acceptance. If she has sex with Chris, she’ll be just like me. Maybe she’ll talk to me more, confide in me. Maybe I can share other things, scarier things, about men and their needs.

“Miss Westbrook.” Mr. Marceaux stands from his chair, fists on his hips and a chill in his eyes. “Don’t keep me waiting.”

EMERIC

I attempt to read through her student file, but the words run together. I'm too distracted, my every thought funneling toward the girl on the other side of my desk. I sent the other students home, and now it's just Ivory and me and this inconvenient attraction.

Her slender fingers fold together in her lap, her back straight and dark hair falling around the graceful lines of her neck. A smile anchors her lips, an expression that seems to come naturally to her, but this one is smaller than its predecessors. Shaker. The kind of smile little girls wear when they're scared.

I drop the file on the desk and lean forward, breaching her invisible bubble of tension. "What are you worried about?"

I know the answer, but I want to hear what it sounds like on her lips.

"Nothing." She brushes a finger against her nose. A tiny, telling gesture. She's lying.

I slam a fist down on the desk, hard enough to make her gasp.

"That was the last time you will ever lie to me." I'll whip the godforsaken truth out of her if I have to. "Tell me you understand."

A vein bulges and flutters in her throat. "Yes, I understand."

“Good.” My gaze dips to the *V* of her shirt, the deep line of cleavage, and the safety pin precariously holding it all together. Just as quick, I avert my eyes, training them on her face. “Now answer the question.”

She rubs her palms on her thighs and holds my gaze. “You, Mr. Marceaux. *You* worry me.”

Ahh, much better. I want her to spoon-feed her honesty to me, breath by trembling breath. “Explain what you mean.”

She nods to herself, as if summoning her courage. “You’re smart and strict like other teachers, but you have the approach and temperament of a barbaric di—” She clamps her lips together.

“Language is permissible in my classroom, Miss Westbrook.” I narrow my eyes. “As long as it’s used in a constructive manner.”

She narrows her eyes right back. “I was going to say dickhead, but I’m not sure that’s constructive.”

At least she’s thinking about a dick.

“Give me an example of my alleged behavior, and I’ll decide how constructive it is.”

Her mouth falls open, as if flabbergasted by my response. “How about when we were out in the hall? When I told you my financial situation, and you...you *smiled?*”

Fuck, she saw that?

I can’t tell her I smiled because her vulnerability made me high on lust and hard as a fucking rock. But I can give her sincerity.

“You’re right. I was wrong, and I apologize.” I pick up the file and flip through the printouts. “Let’s talk about your circumstances.”

I scan the bio page and confirm her Treme address. Skipping over the summary of her exceptional GPA and SAT scores, I latch onto the facts I care most about.

Date of birth?

She'll be eighteen in the spring.

Parents?

William Westbrook. Deceased.

Lisa Westbrook. Unemployed.

That explains her shortage of funds, but not how she pays for private school. Wait...

I jump back to her father's name. "William Westbrook?"

Her eyes drift closed. I look back at the page, trying to connect the details. Westbrook, dead, from Treme, daughter plays piano...

Jesus, I can't believe I didn't place her name earlier. "You're Willy Westbrook's daughter?"

Her eyes flash open, bright and hopeful like her smile. "You've heard of him?"

"I grew up in New Orleans, sweetheart. Everyone around here's heard of Willy's Piano Bar."

Her gaze turns inward, her smile softening. "I hear it's a cool place. Tourists love it."

She says this as though she's never been, which contradicts the image I have of her sitting behind Willy's famous piano after-hours and dreaming of filling his talented shoes.

I rest my elbows on the desk, angling closer. "Don't you live down the street from there? You've never been?"

She raised her eyebrows. "It's an eighteen-and-over bar. I can't get in."

My brain chugs through a cloud of confusion. "You don't go there when it's closed to help run the business? It's still in your family, right?"

Except her file says her mother's unemployed?

Her stare falls to her lap. "Daddy sold the bar when I was ten."

I hate when I can't see her eyes. "Look at me when you're talking."

She snaps her head up, her voice quiet, flat. “The new owner kept the name and let Daddy continue to play piano there until...”

Until a fight broke out in the bar, shots were fired, and Willy caught one in the chest while trying to subdue the brawlers.

My familiarity with the story must be written on my face, because she says, “You know what happened then.”

“It was all over the news.”

She nods, swallows.

Willy’s death garnered a shitload of attention. Not only was he a white jazz pianist in a black neighborhood, he was also adored and respected by the community. His bar brings a great deal of tourist dollars into Treme, and from what I hear, its popularity has kept the surrounding businesses afloat for years.

I specifically remember watching the televised reports of his murder while visiting New Orleans—that particular visit back home had been a pivotal point in my life. It was...four years ago? I’d just received my master’s from Leopold and was waffling on whether to keep my teaching job in New York City or look for work closer to my hometown.

That same week, I accepted a job offer at Shreveport Preparatory. And met Joanne.

I was twenty-three then, which means Ivory was thirteen when her father was murdered.

She sits across from me, watchful and quiet. As the silence stretches, a subtle transformation works its way into her posture, curling her body into itself and making her appear smaller. She picks at a thread on her sleeve, bringing my attention to the stitching in her shirt and all the places the seams are unraveling. Her clothes are cheaply made, old, or worn from use. Probably all of the above.

There’s not a smudge of makeup on her tan face. No rings, bracelets, or jewelry of any kind. Not a whiff of perfume, either. She certainly doesn’t need enhancements to make her

pretty. Her bare beauty outshines every woman I've ever laid eyes on. But that's not why she goes without.

I won't pretend to understand what it's like to live in poverty, let alone to lose a parent the way she did. My father's a successful physician, and my mother retired as Provost and Dean of Leopold. When I returned to Louisiana after college, they moved back with me to remain close to their only child. Their love and support for me is as dependable as their fortune, and to say they're wealthy is an understatement. The Marceaux family holds the patent on the wooden bracings used in pianos. I'm set for life, as are my children, and their children, and so on, as long as pianos are in production.

Old money is rife among Le Moyne families. Except Ivory's. So why did Willy Westbrook sell his booming business only to continue working there as an entertainer, earning the kind of menial salary that left his daughter destitute?

I leaf through her file, searching for the payment schedule of her tuition. A small notation on the last page indicates all four years were paid in full seven years ago.

Daddy sold the bar when I was ten.

I meet her eyes. "He sold his business to send you here?"

She shifts in the chair, back hunching, but she doesn't look away. "He received an offer that was just enough to cover the four-year program, so he..." She closes her eyes, opens them. "Yeah. He sold everything to secure my position here."

And three years later, he died, leaving her so goddamn broke she can't afford textbooks.

I don't bother hiding the contempt in my voice. "That was extremely stupid."

Twin flames ignite her eyes as she jerks forward, her hands clutching the lip of the desk. "Daddy looked at me and saw something worth believing in, long before I believed in myself. There's nothing stupid about that."

She glares at me like she's expecting me to jump on the bandwagon and believe in her, too. But really she just looks

like a defensive, angry little girl. It's unbecoming.

"You're not thirteen anymore. Grow up and stop calling him *Daddy*."

"Don't tell me what I can and can't call him!" Her face reddens in a lovely shade of vehemence. "He's *my* father, *my* life, and it has nothing to do with you!"

Christ, this girl has baggage, and given the cut on her lip, it goes beyond Daddy issues. Physical abuse is easy to detect. Sexual trauma, however, is a huge leap. But I'm suspicious by nature and far too curious about her. Despite those bold sparks in her eyes, her posture has a tendency to curl inward in self-defense, evidence that someone in her past or present hurts her.

I want to dig around inside her, carve out the useful facets of her misery, and obliterate the rest. "He *was* your father, and you have your own life. Move on."

A twitch bounces in her cheek. "I hate you."

And I hate how badly I want to punish her mouth by shoving my cock in it. "You've succeeded in showing your immaturity, Miss Westbrook. If you want to remain a student under my tutelage, you will stop bellyaching like a schoolgirl and start behaving like an adult."

She sniffs, shoulders squaring. "You don't have a very high opinion of me." She stares across the room, her gaze roaming the wall of instruments. "I've really screwed this up."

"Look at me."

She does, instantly.

The cloying perfume of her obedience licks along my skin. I want to bathe in it, taste it, and test it. "Why are you here? Because your father decided when you were ten that you would become a pianist?"

Her brows pull together. "No, this is my dream, too, and I'm obliged to be industrious."

She can quote Bach. Good for her.

“What is your dream, exactly?” I open the file to the college acceptance section. “According to this, you have no goals, no ambitions. What are you going to do after high school?”

“What?” Outrage screeches through her voice. She launches across the desk and rips the page from my hand, her gaze flying over the empty columns. “Why is this blank? There must be some mistake. I’ve...I’ve... God! I’ve been adamant about—”

“Sit down!”

“Mr. Marceaux, this isn’t right. You have to listen...” Her voice weakens, trailing to frightened silence under the force of my gaze.

She lowers into the chair, face flushing and quivering hands rustling the paper.

I steeple my fingers against my chin. “Now tell me, in a calm voice, what you expected to see on that page.”

“I’m going to Leopold.”

Not a chance in hell.

Except the unwavering strength in her glare argues she has the determination to make it happen, and the lift of her chin challenges me to claim otherwise.

I accept that challenge. “You realize only three percent of the applicants are accepted each year? Dozens of your peers have applied, even though Leopold hasn’t accepted a Le Moyne student in three years. Maybe, just *maybe*, one of you will make it in next year.”

There’s no *maybe* about it. My mother still holds a seat on Leopold’s Board of Trustees and has the means to push one of my referrals through. I’m confident she’ll do it. For me.

However. While slipping *one* student application past the stringent acceptance process won’t raise suspicion, *two* would most definitely sound alarms and put my mother’s integrity in question. I would never ask that of her.

I lean back in the chair, flipping through the printouts to make sure I didn't overlook notes on Ivory's college goals. "You should've applied for the matriculation process by now. There's nothing here indicating you have an interest in pursuing such an impossible venture."

"Everything is possible, Mr. Marceaux." She tosses the blank page on my desk. "And I did apply. *Three years ago*. In fact, Mrs. McCracken intended to refer me as the leading applicant."

That explains why Beverly forced Barb McCracken into retirement and brought me here as her replacement. When I accepted the deal, I knew there would be students more worthy of my referral than Beverly's son. But I didn't expect to feel this much guilt tangling in my gut.

Ivory Westbrook poses a moral dilemma, and I haven't even heard her play. Maybe her talent is mediocre, and I can shove this conflict of interest aside.

She stares at my tie, a fugue of thoughts flickering in her eyes. Long seconds pass. Somewhere down the hall, a clarinet plays in perfect key.

Finally, she meets my gaze. "My presence isn't exactly wanted around here. I don't wear the right clothes, drive the right car." She laughs. "I don't even have a car. And I certainly don't bring endowments or glamorous connections. The only thing I have to offer is my talent. It should be enough. It should be the only thing that matters. Yet this school has been against me since day one."

Nothing she said surprises me. She's a little lost lamb among a pack of cutthroat wolves. So why doesn't she aim a little lower? Try for an easier college and remove herself from the cross-hairs? Why Leopold?

I hold my expression impassive, deferring my questions until she's finished.

She touches the blank page and scoots it toward me. "Someone deleted my proposition for Leopold, along with all the prep work I've done to support my eligibility. Mrs.

McCracken told me she put it all in my file. I don't want to point fingers, but someone in this school doesn't like me, and that someone has a son who is competing for my spot."

Beverly Rivard wiped her file, a conclusion I'd already come to. "Why Leopold?"

"It's the best conservatory in the country."

"So?"

"So?" Her eyes light up. "The rigorous education students receive there is unparalleled. They have an elite faculty, top-notch facilities, and the best track record in propelling students into musical careers." Ticking off names on her fingers, she lists notable alumni, such as world-renowned composers, conductors, and pianists, then adds, "And you, Mr. Marceaux. I mean, you're in the Louisiana Symphony Orchestra."

I'm about to call her out for being a brown-noser, but then she surprises me.

"I don't just want to perform." She clasps her hands together, her gaze losing focus. "I want to occupy a principal chair in a major symphony and sit beside the best of the best, in a sold-out venue, shivering under the stage lights. I want to be there, part of it all, when the music begins."

This isn't a pitch she prepared in advance. The passion in her voice is a thousand decibels of intensity, her entire body vibrating with the prospect of her words.

She lowers her hands and meets my eyes. "Also, as you already know, every single student accepted into Leopold receives a full-tuition scholarship. Doesn't matter who you are or what your background is..."

We share a look, and in that space of understanding, I mentally finish her sentence. Leopold has enough prestige and wealth that it doesn't concern itself with student bank accounts. The school evaluates its applicants on talent alone.

"Very well." I rub the back of my neck and hope to hell she's a terrible pianist. "I'll update your file, and we'll go from there."

Under normal circumstances, being best in her class would get her into Leopold. But Beverly hired me to ensure that wouldn't happen. Leopold will accept Prescott Rivard because I'll make it happen. Everyone else from Le Moyne will be overlooked. That sucks for Ivory, but life's a bitch.

"Thank you." She smiles, her posture loosening.

"We have one more matter to discuss."

I tuck the file away, rise from the chair, and walk around the desk to sit on the ledge beside her, facing her.

With her legs pinched together, she stacks her feet—one bare foot atop the other—against the leg of my desk. I scan the floor and spot her beat-up shoes beneath her chair. I suspect the torn plastic edges irritate her skin after wearing them all day.

When she looks up, I place a finger beneath her chin, holding the position of her head. "What happened to your lip?"

As expected, she tries to lower her chin. An evasive response. Every instinct in my body tells me someone hurt her.

I apply a small yet unmistakable pressure against her soft skin. "Stand up."

Her breaths quicken as she lifts from the chair, guided by my touch beneath her jaw.

When she reaches her full height, I drop my hand. "I asked you a question, and before you answer, remember what I said about lies."

She presses her lips together.

I try another tactic. "As your teacher, I'm a mandated reporter. Do you know what that means?"

Her eyes, like liquid ebony, blink. She's distressingly beautiful, and I'm so fucked.

I unfold from my perch on the desk. Standing over her, I'm a head taller and a lot bigger. "It means I'm required to report suspected child maltreatment to protective services."

“No!” Her fingers fly to the cut on her lip. “You don’t need to do that. My brother...he and I got into it this morning, like siblings do. It’s totally normal.”

Normal? I don’t think so. “How old is he?”

She leans a hip against the edge of the desk, a casual pose, but she’s not fooling me. “He’s twenty-six.”

Twenty-six is ten years past knowing better. If the fucker hit her, I won’t report him. I’ll find him and break his fucking face. “Did he hit you?”

“He...uh, well, we were arguing and uh...” She picks her words carefully, forehead pinched in concentration, no doubt trying to avoid a lie. “I ended up eating the frame of a door.”

“Did. He. Hit you?”

She releases a breath. “He backhanded me. This”—she points at her lip—“was the door frame.”

A raging fire erupts inside me, rushing to the surface and searing across my skin. “How often?”

She hugs her midsection, eyes on the floor, further enraging me.

“Answer me!”

“Don’t do this. I can’t...I have enough problems to deal with right now.”

“Lift your shirt.” What am I doing? Fuck, this is a bad idea, but I have to know. “Show me your ribs.”

She peers around me, her eyes locked on the hall.

“If someone walks by, they can’t see around my body.” I bend my knees, putting my face in hers. “I’m required to hotline you, Miss Westbrook. Prove to me you’re not covered in bruises, and I won’t make a report.”

I’ll beat the shit out of her brother instead.

Her fingers grip the hem of her shirt, her expression tight, eyes squeezed shut. She’s so still I’m not sure she’s breathing.

“This is just an examination, for your own good. Nothing inappropriate.” It’s illegal as fuck, but I can’t stop myself. “I’m waiting.”

She directs her gaze on the buttons of my waistcoat, up to the knot of my tie, lingering there, before she drags her focus upward in a painfully slow trip over my mouth. When she connects with my eyes, a sharp hum rattles in the back of her throat.

Then she raises her shirt.

IVORY

He's a teacher. He won't hurt me.

Slowly, shakily, I gather the hem of the shirt above my navel.

He's just doing his job.

Goosebumps shiver across my skin from the unwavering press of his glare, the rush of my heartbeat, and the chilly air as I inch the cotton higher, baring my ribs.

He promised nothing inappropriate.

So why does this feel so wrong?

It is wrong.

I shove the shirt down and turn to collect my belongings. His hand catches my upper arm, fingers digging in as he swings me back into position. "Show me or I'll report the injury."

His voice ricochets through my skull, sharp and uncompromising. If he reports me, I could lose my home, my education, and my cat. And Shane... God, my brother would strike back with a wrath of pain.

My stomach quivers as I lift the shirt. He releases my arm as I hold the fabric beneath the weight of my breasts and meet his eyes.

All I see is blue ice, an endless arctic landscape, like I'm staring into an unknown world.

His nostrils flare, and the muscles in his face harden with emotions I don't understand. I'm not hiding anything. Nothing under my shirt anyway. Other than the cut on my lip, Shane hasn't left a scratch on me since the night I walked in on him fucking some poor girl on the couch—on *my* bed. Failing to knock on my own front door earned me a nasty bruise on my stomach. But Mr. Marceaux won't find that. The discoloration faded last week.

He lowers into a squat, his glacial gaze traveling over my torso, the low waistband of my skirt, then dropping to the knee-length hem. "Now raise your skirt."

I snap my attention toward the doorway and the empty hall beyond. His bent position puts him eye-level with my pelvis, his body no longer shielding me from hallway traffic. The final bell rang an hour ago, but lots of kids stay after for private lessons. Even now, the legato of a clarinet sings down the hall.

Anyone can walk by and assume the worst. Here I am, the resident slut, flashing my body for the teacher.

The cold floor beneath my bare feet makes me feel even more naked. I wish I hadn't slipped my shoes off during our meeting. "There's no privacy. Someone might see me."

"That's for me to worry about." His arms drape over his bent knees, his strong hands flexing in the *V* of his thighs. "I won't give the order again."

I shove the blouse down and cover my stomach. Now the skirt? Holy smokes, what should I do? Physically, he's in an unusual position for a man, lower than me, his face below my waist. More vulnerable, right? Yet he's still trying to take in a way. I could knee him in the nose and run. But I'm not sure I need to. Or want to.

Shit. I curl my fingers around the front of the skirt, bunching and lifting until my legs are exposed to mid-thigh.

"Higher."

I raise the hem another inch. Surely he can see my legs shaking? How high does he want me to go?

“Higher.”

His voice whispers roughly into the foot of space separating his face and my thighs. His hands are right there, too, dangling between us, close enough to grab me between the legs if that’s his plan. A slight tremble twitches through his fingers, and my muscles tighten.

But he’s a teacher. He’s not allowed to touch me.

As his student, I’m supposed to trust him and do what he tells me.

I wad the loose material of the skirt against the crotch of my panties and cup my hand there, giving him a full view of my legs without revealing too much. “What are you looking for?”

“Widen your stance.”

I slide my feet out, wobbling with the effort.

“Just like that,” he breathes. “Good girl.”

His praise wraps around me like a warm hug. I can’t remember the last time someone embraced me without hurting me, but if Mr. Marceaux spends the next nine months calling me a good girl, I might never need a hug again.

He dips his head, angling closer. “I’m looking for marks on your inner thighs.”

Lorenzo has left marks there, along with numerous other guys. The mean ones always do, grinding and bucking and lasting too long. But Mr. Marceaux doesn’t know about those other guys.

“My brother would never—”

“I’m not suggesting *he* would.”

My throat closes up. Has he already heard about my reputation? Is he checking for evidence of my behavior?

“You have a fairly dark complexion.” He looks up, studying my expression, too steadily, too deeply. “Easier to hide bruises.”

I choke on a nervous laugh. “My mom tells me I’m too pale. Hell, she complains *she’s* too pale, and she’s half-Black.”

“Lower your skirt.” He stands, hands anchored on his hips. “Tell me about your mother.”

I straighten the fabric around my legs. “Everyone says she looks like Halle Berry but—”

“I don’t care what she looks like. What does she *do*?”

Drugs. Men. When she doesn’t have both of those, she sits in her room and cries.

If I share that with him, he’ll probably smile at my misfortune. “She’s between jobs.”

“What was her position on your father selling his business for you?”

She hates me for it, so much so her lip curls whenever she looks at me.

“They argued about it.” I adjust the pin and buttons on my shirt. “She’s not happy about losing that fight, so don’t expect her to show up for parent-teacher conferences.”

“Human beings are miserable disasters. They make mistakes. Do the wrong things.” He rubs the back of his head. “If she doesn’t come around, that’s on her.”

Wow, that was...unexpected. Surprisingly thoughtful and really quite profound. Though now I wonder what kind of mistakes *he* makes. Hopefully none that will affect my goals.

He lowers his hand and makes a swirling motion. “Turn around and show me your back.”

My pulse spikes. More examinations? Only this time, I won’t be able to see his hands.

I open my mouth to argue, but the hard look in his eyes changes my mind.

With a deep inhale, I give him my back, hook shaky fingers under the shirt, and drag it from hips to armpits.

The creak of his leather shoes, the whisper of his breaths, the heat of his body, everything about him feels like a violation of privacy. I wish I could see his expression, because he's likely abandoned his search of bruises to stare at the tattoo on my back. The faded scrollwork wraps from one side of my waist, up my spine, and curls around the opposite shoulder.

I brace myself for one of his sharp-voiced reprimands. *I'm too young. Tats are too trashy.* But I don't care what his opinion is about this. The tattoo is personal and treasured and mine.

Without warning, his hands land on my back, not on my skin but on the folds of my shirt. He yanks the material from my grasp and shoves it to my waist.

Startled, I spin around. "What's wrong?"

He's farther away than I expected, several feet between us, with his hands clasped behind his back and his attention on the doorway.

I follow his gaze just as Ms. Augustin walks in.

She pauses on the threshold, clutching the strap of her purse against her shoulder. "Oh, I didn't realize you were with a student." She flicks furtive glances between Mr. Marceaux and me, back and forth, up and down, and stops on me. "Hi, Ivory. Did you have a good summer?"

I curl my toes against the marble, longing for my damn shoes. "Sure."

"Awesome." She returns her attention to my teacher, her hand lifting to trail up her neck, sweeping up and combing through a tendril of blonde hair. "Mr. Marceaux, will you be... uh... heading out soon?"

She stares at him the way my mom looks at her boyfriends, with over-bright eyes filled with adoration and stupidity.

Of all the music teachers, Ms. Augustin is the youngest and prettiest. She's also annoyingly nosy, but Ellie raves about her, so I guess she's a good strings teacher.

Mr. Marceaux cocks his head. “Miss Westbrook has private lessons until seven every night.”

I do?

A sudden lightness lifts my chest. Mrs. McCracken kept late hours to tutor me, but I hadn’t worked up the courage to ask him for extra time.

He stands so tall and confident beside me, feet planted wide, every inch of his posture sculpted with authority as he studies Ms. Augustin. “I won’t be heading home soon. Tonight or any other night.”

“Oh.” Her face falls, and her whole body seems to deflate. “Okay. Well...”

The only thing she moves is a long slender leg as she drags the toe of her high-heel backward and rocks it on the floor behind her, lingering. Waiting for him to say something else?

Finally, she straightens. “I’m headed home.” She points down the hallway, laughing softly, smiling, and acting really fucking weird. “So, I guess, have a good evening?”

The question in her voice bugs the piss out of me. He already told her he’s staying for my private lesson. She should go.

But then I would be alone with him again. How is it possible that I feel both possessive and terrified of him?

He ends her embarrassing shuffle with a firm, “Good night, Ms. Augustin.”

As she vanishes into the hallway, I replay their conversation with subtext. “She just asked you out, didn’t she?”

He turns toward me with an irritated frown on his face. “That’s none of your business.”

Probably so, but I feel wonderfully dizzy about the whole exchange. I mean, he told her *no*. Not tonight or any night. Because he would be with me, helping me.

Maybe I didn't screw things up as badly as I thought. "We're doing piano lessons tonight?"

Cords twang in his neck. "No."

"But you just said—"

"Here's tonight's lesson." He erases the distance between us and leans into my space. "Don't question me. Don't lie to me. And never look away from me." He straightens. "Sit down."

Those are ridiculous demands, but I find myself falling into the chair and locking my eyes on his.

He scratches a finger down his whiskered throat and yanks on the collar behind his tie. Giving up on his attempt to loosen it, he crouches before me. "When did you get the ink?"

There's no way I can answer his questions about it without lying, but I can give him this. "I was thirteen."

Something flickers in his eyes. Comprehension? He knows how old I was when I lost Daddy— My dad. My *father*. God, even in my thoughts, I'm trying to please Mr. Marceaux. But maybe he's right about my immaturity. If my dad were alive today, would I still be calling him *Daddy*?

Instead of asking questions about the tattoo, Mr. Marceaux reaches under my chair and drags my shoes toward his feet. His bend puts his face inches from my lap, but he keeps his eyes on mine as his arms move around my calves.

With his knees on either side of my legs, I don't feel trapped, but my stomach squirms all the same. I don't understand why he's holding my beaten up ballet flat, why he's examining the inside, or what he has planned for me next.

With my shoe in one hand, he reaches for my foot. The moment his fingers graze the back of my ankle, I jump in the seat.

He pins me with a flinty glare, his scowl at odds with the tender stroke of his hand. Unhurried, he caresses along my ankle, traces the bony knobs on the sides, and cups the heel of my foot, lifting it.

I'm tongue-tied, confused by the gentleness, lost in the sensation. The entire world narrows to the warmth of his palm, the careful way he slides my toes into the shoe, and the absolute concentration he gives the task.

He lowers my foot to the floor, and I exhale a chestful of air. Then he shifts toward my other leg.

Why is he doing this? What does he get out of it? Will he expect me to show him my boobs? Give him a blow job? Sex?

I jerk my foot out of his reach. "I can do this."

He fists his hands on his legs and imprisons me with those frigid cobalt eyes. "What's tonight's lesson?"

"Don't question you?"

Maybe this is a small thing to him, but it's not to me. Men don't touch me unless they want something, and his touch is freaking me out. It's too nice. Too intimate. Way too intimate for a student and teacher.

He holds his palm out, waiting. I want to ask him what he wants from me, but that would be failing the lesson.

I move my foot toward his hand, and he gives it the same attention as before. Fragile strokes. Fingers like velvet wrapping around my breakable bones. Taking? Giving? I don't know what this is. Every brush of his fingertips shoots tingles up my legs, making my heart flutter and my whole body hyper-aware. It scares me. *He* scares me.

When he slides the other shoe on, I tuck my feet beneath the chair, knees pinched together, dreading what he'll demand next.

He rises, his expression dark beneath black brows and his breathing noisier than it should be. I know that needful look, that hungry sound. My blood runs cold.

Now is the time to run, but my feet aren't moving. Why? I need his permission, I think.

I *want* his permission.

Turning toward the desk, he presses his hands against the surface. “Go home, Miss Westbrook.”

Relief shimmies down my spine, but it gets cut off by my next thought.

I can take any one of the exits out of Crescent Hall, race through the parking lot or the park, zigzag along the streets to the bus stop. Doesn't matter which way I go. Prescott will catch up. He'll find me. He always does.

Then home. Where Lorenzo might be waiting. Where Shane might be fucking on my bed.

Which is scarier? Prescott? Lorenzo? Shane?

Mr. Marceaux.

I grab my satchel and hightail it toward the hall.

IVORY

The muggy air clings to my skin as I make the ten-minute walk from Le Moyne to the 91 line. Oh man, it feels good to get a breather from that classroom. I don't know if it's Mr. Marceaux or the frightening sensations he inflames in me, but I couldn't run from there fast enough.

He's aggressive and powerfully built like other men. More so. But he had numerous opportunities to take and didn't.

Because he's a teacher? Or because he's not like other men?

I'm not ready to trust those thoughts or the way they make me feel.

The crescent moon hangs high in the sky, painting a dim glow over the antebellum mansions that fringe Coliseum Street. The brick sidewalk is paved in a herringbone pattern and bordered on one side by wrought iron fences, gas lamps, and blooming vegetation that infuses the air with the fragrance of summer.

The foundations of the towering homes butt right up against those fences, and illuminated windows give me a peek of interiors twinkling with chandeliers, grand staircases, and rich woodwork. Luxury cars line the narrow street and pristine gardens adorn the side-yards. Everywhere I look boasts generational wealth, the kind that came from sugar, cotton, and shipping.

Does Mr. Marceaux live in one of these mansions? Maybe his family is old money? Le Moyne attracts a lot of residents

in the Garden District, including Beverly Rivard.

I don't know which house is Prescott Rivard's, but he knows which paths I take home. There are only so many options between school and the bus routes. My legs itch to walk faster, to put him off for another day. But the longer I delay touching base with him, the harder it will be to cover this month's bills.

Halfway to the bus stop, the familiar rumble of a motorcycle interrupts the quiet street. It approaches from behind, growing louder, faster.

The tiny hairs on my nape stand on end. I peer over my shoulder and glimpse a black helmet, black jacket, and obnoxious orange fairings. My heartbeat slams into overdrive, and I pick up my pace. If the rider lifted his chin, I would see *Destroy* inked across his throat.

Every step hammers vibrations through my thin soles. I should've known Lorenzo would come looking for me. He often does when he grows tired of waiting. It's been two weeks since the last time he took from me, and I bled from my butt for hours after.

My stomach cramps as my mind spins through my options. The next cross-street is a thirty-second sprint down the road. Maybe I can lose him.

I quicken my gait, scanning for a cut-through between the mansions. I won't find one. Fences encircle the generous plots, equipped with security cameras and alarms. Wrought iron and brick brackets the street on both sides. I have nowhere to go as he motors up beside me.

"Get on the bike." Even muffled by the helmet, his shout is hard and unkind.

"I'm taking the bus." I walk faster, hunching my shoulders with my satchel banging against my leg.

He revs the engine, rolling the bike alongside me. My legs shake, and the toe of my shoe catches on a chipped brick. Momentum whirls me forward. I maintain my balance but... goddammit, I lose the shoe.

I spin back, my pulse thrashing in my throat, and shove my foot inside the cracked vinyl.

A pair of headlights emerge on the road behind Lorenzo's crotch rocket. I stare blindly into the beams of light, waiting, hoping. For what?

Black hair, blue eyes, commanding presence...

As if.

Lorenzo stops beside me, just out of arm's reach, his helmet tipping in my direction. "Not gonna tell you again. Get your ass on the bike."

The approaching car slows, veering around Lorenzo. Wide front grill, metallic silver paint, fat tires, the Cadillac CTS Sedan makes the perfect toy for rich juvenile idiots to cruise around in.

Idiots like Prescott.

He pulls to a stop in front of Lorenzo, bends across the front seat, and swings open the passenger door.

Lorenzo's helmet swivels toward the car. "Who the fuck is that?"

That is a diversion. Thank God. I won't be able to evade Lorenzo forever, and I certainly don't relish climbing into Prescott's car. But right now, I'll take Prescott over Lorenzo. Prescott never forces himself from behind and in my ass.

I lurch forward, running a wide circuit around the bike, and slide into the front seat of the Cadillac. "Go."

The motorcycle's engine sputters as it jerks forward. I slam the door shut on the noise.

Prescott leans over the console, twisting his neck to glare at Lorenzo. "Who is that guy?"

"Just some creep. Let's go."

He hits the gas, and the burst of propulsion presses my body into the leather seat. My anxiety and fear tumbles behind us in a fume of exhaust. I relax, a small degree anyway. Now I'm stuck with Prescott.

His long body sprawls in the leather seat, his finger punching through various glowing gadgets in the dashboard. I can't begin to guess how much this car costs. His parents certainly have to make bank for them to be able to buy it for him. Is it a badass car? Absolutely. Am I jealous he has it?

I prefer not to be jealous of anyone, especially Prescott. I peek over at him, taking in the sharp angle of his jaw, the tuck of blond hair behind his ear, and the long, straight profile of his nose. He's skinnier than Mr. Marceaux. Less developed muscle. Smaller hands. Smaller dick. Not that I've seen Marceaux's dick, but I bet it's bigger.

That's not a good thing.

My heart skips. Why the hell am I thinking about that? Why am I even comparing them?

Prescott shifts gears then reaches over to hook a finger beneath the hem of my skirt. "I'm going to make you come tonight."

I smack his hand away. Jesus, I never should've baited him with that comment about piercings. Stupid, stupid, stupid! "Where's your homework?"

He downshifts around a curve and thrusts a thumb over his shoulder. The seat belt indicator screams as I kneel backward through the gap in the front seats.

I gather his binders from the floorboard, and a single headlight fills my view through the back window. "He's following us."

Prescott throws the car into high speed. Mansions blur by. Stop signs and intersections come and go. Guess he's not worried about breaking the law. Thankfully, Lorenzo doesn't share his recklessness. The motorcycle maintains the speed limit and stops at every stop sign. Maybe Lorenzo has drugs on him or outstanding warrants. Whatever the reason, he falls behind and eventually out of sight.

Releasing a heavy breath, I collect the rest of Prescott's folders. "You lost him."

Prescott yanks my skirt up to my hip and pinches my pussy through the crotch of my panties. “Baby, I’m gonna fuck you so hard tonight.”

I spin back toward the front, falling into the seat, and try to control my breathing.

My hand shakes as I buckle the seat belt. “No, you’re not.”

There’s a heavy dose of conviction in my response. And maybe a tiny smidgen of doubt. I’ve escaped Prescott’s advances before, but I can count those times on one hand.

He laughs. “We’ll see.”

When he turns onto Jackson Avenue and heads away from the river, I don’t have to ask where he’s going. During the six-minute drive to our usual spot, I use one of the overhead lights to skim through his assignments and notes. He’s pretty organized for a guy who’s not interested in homework, his tasks outlined in neat penmanship and notated with due dates. Everything he’s detailed is doable, easy enough to work in with my own assignments.

He pulls into an empty lot, hemmed in by a jungle of weeds and boarded-up homes that didn’t survive the last hurricane.

Shutting off the engine, he turns to me. “I have a proposition.”

A tremor shivers through my insides. Anything he has to offer comes with a painful price.

He bends toward me, his face inches away and cast in darkness. “I know you’re *doing homework* for a lot of my friends and who knows how many others.”

I haven’t had a chance to talk to the other guys about schedules and assignments. Another dreaded task on my to-do list.

His hand snakes over my thigh, making its way to the gap between my knees. I jerk away, and my legs collide with the door.

With a grunt, he faces forward, posture stiff, his fingers curled around the steering wheel. Fingers I don't want anywhere near me.

He tips his head against the headrest. "I don't want to share you."

"Too bad."

"Fuck, Ivory! You're so—" He rubs his hairless cheek and softens his tone. "I got an increase in my allowance. I'll pay you more, enough to cover what you're making from everyone else, if you stop seeing them. Give me a price."

He can't afford it. I mentally sum up the monthly utilities, mortgage, groceries, and tack on a little extra for school supplies. Shit, that's a lot of money. Pulling in a deep breath, I give him the number.

"Done."

What? His fucking allowance covers the sum of all my bills?

I wrap my arms around my midsection. "All I have to do is stop helping other people?"

"*That*. And stop fighting me on *this*." His fingers wrap around my knee, pulling my leg toward him.

"I—I..." My breathing quickens as I try to pry his grip away. "I can't." My chest heaves, my fight against his hand useless. "Let go."

"I'm going to get this anyway. Stop making it so damn difficult." He releases me and holds his hands up. "What's it gonna be?"

I sway against the door and cover my face with my hand. Fuck, what choice do I have?

I can walk away from Prescott, forget his money, and try to make up the loss with all the other guys who want the same things he wants.

Or I can tell them all to fuck off and let the mortgage default. I'm not eighteen yet. I can go to social services and

explain my situation. Maybe they'll step in and put me in foster care. But there's a good chance a new home would be too far away to commute to Le Moyne. Can I put my future in the hands of some grown-up who decides where I go to school? And what about Schubert? A temporary family may not let me bring him. My heart pinches just thinking about that. He's not just a cat. Schubert is the last gift my dad gave me before he died. He's the only living form of love I have left to wrap my arms around.

Or I can accept Prescott's offer, endure just *one* high-school dick, and keep my house, my school, and my cat.

The pressure of tears burns the backs of my eyes as I force my lips around my answer. "Okay."

"Okay?" He sits up, his entire body shifting to face me. "Okay...uh..." He twists around, scrutinizing the emptiness of the overgrown lot, and pauses when his gaze lands on the back seat. "Get out."

With trembling hands, I put the binders on the floorboard, open the door, and step into a tangle of vines.

He's out of the car and around to my side in a flash. A huge grin contorts his face as he opens the door to the back seat. "In there. On your back."

No, no, no. My lungs labor for air, and every muscle in my body locks up.

"Ivoryyyyyy," he growls. "That's not how this works. I'm not paying until I get my dick wet."

Oh God, he already has a condom in his hand.

Tall grass itches my ankles. The chirrup of nighttime insects creeps from the shadows of broken concrete. Somewhere in the distance, a dog barks. Another joins in. But it's the godawful sound of a zipper that screeches past my ears.

He holds his dick in his hand, the bulbous thing swollen to fullness and pointed right at me as he rolls on the condom. Nausea simmers, and saliva rushes into my mouth.

When he meets my eyes, his determined expression looks ghostly and sinister in the moonlight. “We doing this the easy way or the hard way? One of those earns you more money.”

A sheen of tears blurs my vision. I made this deal, knowing what came next. *Suck it up and eat it, Ivory.*

I turn toward the waiting door, press the heels of my hands against my eyes, and slide into the back seat.

My brain is already reaching for the dark notes of Scriabin’s Sonata No.9. The melody plays in my head as the weight of his body presses my back against the bench seat. I envision the complicated key strokes as he wrenches my panties to the side and shoves inside me, grunting, thrusting. So dry, so fucking painful, the fire between my legs coaxes more tears from my eyes. I focus inward, blocking him out. I’m nearly lost in the discordant music of my mind when a ring tone chirps from Prescott’s pocket.

“Fuck.” He fumbles around his legs and pulls his phone from the folds of his trousers. “Goddammit!”

“Get off me.”

“No. And I have to answer this, so keep your mouth shut.”

I shove at his chest, but he doesn’t budge. His hips thrust harder as hatred leaks in huge drops from my eyes.

“It’s my mom.” He sets the phone on the seat above my head, the cheery ring tone bleeding into my ears. “If she hears you, the most I’ll get is a loss in allowance. But you...” His finger hovers over the screen as his hips drive against mine. “You’ll get kicked out of school.”

Before I can tell him he’s a fucking moron, he taps the screen and puts it on speaker phone.

“What’s up, Mom?” He lifts his pelvis and slams back against me, the hunger on his face illuminated by the glow of the screen.

“Where are you?” The dean’s severe voice barks through the phone.

“Avery’s house.”

Who is Avery? I squirm beneath him, aching for this to be over with.

“You sound out of breath,” she says.

He cups my breast and squeezes. “Lifting weights. She has a sweet workout room.”

“Oh? Well, tell her mother I said *hi*. We need to do tea soon.”

“Yep.”

“Keep your hands to yourself, son. I don’t want any problems with her parents.”

I bite down on my lip to keep from crying out. His movements quicken, growing erratic. Thank God, he’s getting close, but how can he do this while holding a conversation with his mother? He’s so disgusting my skin recoils everywhere his heat penetrates my clothes.

“I saw you talking to that Westbrook girl at lunch,” the dean says.

My pulse skyrockets, but Prescott’s in a whole other dimension. His mouth hangs open in a silent shout as his body flails and jerks through his release. The moment he’s finished, I shove him off me.

“Prescott?” The dean exhales through the phone. “Are you listening?”

“Yeah. Ivory’s nice.” He stares at me and mouths, *A nice fuck*. Without looking away, he says aloud, “I don’t know why you have a problem with her.”

“She’s trying to steal your Leopold spot, Prescott. Not only that, she has a reputation with the boys at school. Stay away from her.”

He drags a finger over his eyebrow. “Yeah, okay. Gotta go.”

“Prescott—”

He hangs up and tosses the phone in the front seat. “Did you come?”

I angle away from him, covertly wiping away the tears as I growl, “Of course, I didn’t come, you idiot.”

He seriously thinks I enjoyed that? I’ve never had an orgasm, at least not that I know of. But if I’m capable of having one, it wouldn’t be with him.

I fix my panties and yank my skirt down. “Who’s Avery?”

He pulls off the condom and adjusts his slacks. “My girlfriend.”

“Girlfriend?” A thick lump forms in my throat. “Why are you cheating on her?”

“She’s a prude. But you’re not, are you?” He reaches for the *V* in my shirt.

I knock his hand away and grab my satchel from the front seat.

“Bet you’ve fucked more guys than there are keys on a piano.”

Eighty-eight guys? Heat tingles my face as I open the door and jump out. Truth is, I’m not sure of the number. Maybe half that? Maybe more.

He climbs out the other side and meets my eyes over the roof of the car. “Fifty-two white guys at Le Moyne and thirty-six black guys in Treme. Am I right?”

Fifty-two white keys, thirty-six black keys.

He thinks he’s clever with his sick analogy, but he has no idea how hurtful his comments are. Yes, I’ve had a lot of sex with a lot of different guys. Not all of my experiences have been like this one. Sometimes I’m too weak and don’t have the physical strength or size to stop it. Other times, I feel tricked, bribed, trapped...sweet-talked. When I was younger, I let guys touch me in my stupid desperation for affection, but I eventually learned there isn’t anything affectionate about a swollen penis. Still, there are moments when I wonder, *Will this time be different? Maybe this one will hold me close and love me. Maybe it will feel good,* and I fall back into the trap.

But after Prescott's hateful remarks, I don't even want his fucking money. I stride away, hooking the strap of the satchel over my shoulder. The projects of Central City stretch out around me, but I know the way, having walked this road every time Prescott fucked me in that lot. Five blocks from here, I can catch a bus home.

The Cadillac's engine starts, and a moment later, it rolls up beside me.

He extends an arm out the window, his hand filled with a wad of bills.

I stare at it, needing it, hating myself. "How often do I have to do this?"

"As often as I want." A strand of blond hair falls over his eyes. "My first assignment is due on Monday, so we'll meet again this week. Next time, I'll make you come."

A surge of anger scorches through my veins. I hate him. But I need him.

I swallow my pride and snatch the money from his hand.

He flashes me a sated smile and drives off, leaving me standing on the side of the road like the whore that I am.

EMERIC

With the address from Ivory's file mapped on my phone, I turn my old GTO onto her street. This doesn't feel stalkery, but it doesn't seem completely sane, either. What can I say? I've never needed an excuse to beat someone's ass. I just didn't imagine the ass I'd be beating tonight would belong to her brother. Yet here I am.

I don't have a plan, only that Ivory can't know I'm here. I should've reported her swollen lip. I damn sure shouldn't have searched her body for bruises. But this? Showing up at her house? Definitely crossing into *what-the-fuck-am-I-doing* territory.

Dusk grays out the horizon, and there aren't any street lamps. Maybe I can coax her brother outside without her seeing me and punch his lights out before he has a chance to memorize my face. Of course, if she glimpses my car, she'll know. The 1970 Pontiac GTO is too recognizable. If she didn't see it in the school parking lot tonight, she will before the year's over.

I should've taken a cab, but I wasn't exactly thinking when I left the classroom and drove straight here.

Following the GPS, I sneak along a row of sagging houses. No, not sneaking. The American muscle under the hood is a 455 V8, and its thundering dirty rumble has residents leaning forward on their porches. Pedestrians stop walking and gawk. It occurs to me that I won't be able to leave the car on her street. It would be jacked within minutes.

Just a couple blocks north of the French Quarter, Tremé is the place tourists are warned not to go, not in daylight and definitely not at night. I haven't visited this area since I was a rebellious teen. I forgot about all the graffiti, boarded-up windows, and huddles of men on the street corners looking around like they're hiding something. How does she live here and not get mugged every day?

She has nothing of value to steal.

Except her innocence. Though I'm certain that was stolen long ago. The niggling question is, how much damage was done? I understand her reactions to me, the looks of both fear and desire to please. They're her natural reflexes to a dominant man. But layers of obscurity lie beneath her expressions, experiences that strengthened her and tolls that warped her. Not just an abusive brother or a dead father, but something else. Something traumatically sexual.

Anger plunges through my veins, spurring me toward her house and the unknowns that wait there.

I spot her street number on the weathered siding of a narrow shotgun building. The peeling white paint gives way to rotten wood, and the drooping roof over the porch doesn't look safe enough to stand beneath. The houses are too crammed together to accommodate driveways, and there are no cars parked out front. No lights on inside. No movement in the windows. Unless she's sitting in the dark, she's not home.

On my way here, I envisioned the worst. But one could argue the house next to hers is much worse, the exterior veneered in scraps of plywood and the entire structure slanting on its foundation. Someone even spray-painted on the neighbor's door: *Home is a fleeting feeling I'm trying to fix.*

As I idle in front of her house, imagining the dilapidated conditions within, a knot of unease forms in my gut. Maybe she doesn't have electricity? If her mother's unemployed, who pays the bills? Her brother?

I don't linger, afraid Ivory will come home and notice my car. A few blocks away, I pull into a crowded parking lot, operating on a hunch and a perverse sense of curiosity.

The bluesy notes of a solo trumpeter vibrate through me as I amble into Willy's Piano Bar. I've never been here, but it's not unlike the other seedy New Orleans bars I've frequented over the years. Grungy and cave-like, the scarce lighting and exposed brick walls give it a basement tavern feel. The kind of tavern men get shot in.

Where did her father die? Near the piano? Or over by high-top tables? Or right here, where I hover between the door and the bar?

This place sees its share of nosy tourists, so I'm not surprised no one spares me a glance. I scan the low-key crowd and zero in on the only other white guy. It's too dark to make out details, but he appears to be close to my age with blond hair and a pale complexion. Matches the Google image I found of a young Willy Westbrook on my way to Ivory's house. Can I be this lucky?

Adjusting the curled brim of my favorite fedora lower on my head, I stroll toward the bar and wave down the bartender. "Is that Willy's son?"

She lifts her eyes to follow the direction of my nod, her white hair forming an ethereal glow around her dark complexion.

"Mm hmm." She returns her attention to the drink she's preparing. "That's him, sugar."

"Thanks." Hooking my thumbs in my front pockets, I wander over to the half-circle booth and tower over his table.

A girl on each arm, he drags his gaze up my relaxed posture and locks on my face. "Do I know you?"

The shadowed corner of the booth obscures his expression, but his delayed movements and slurred speech are hard to miss. High or drunk, he's probably too blitzed to remember me tomorrow.

"Are you Willy's kid?"

"Yyyup." He reaches for his beer, sloshing it on the table. "What of it?"

I want to tell him the reason I'm here, that *I* am what happens when he hurts his sister. But if I mention Ivory, he might retaliate against her.

Keeping my face angled away from the dim light, I bend over the table and slam my fist into his nose.

The girls fly apart and shoot out of the booth as his head falls back and lolls on his shoulders. The whites of his eyes roll and disappear behind his lids as his body slides down in the seat.

The blood from his nostrils forms twin rivers over his lip and splatters on his shirt. His intoxication probably has more to do with the knock-out than my nonexistent boxing skills. I hoped to see him writhe in agony but take pleasure in knowing he'll wake to the throbbing pain of a broken nose.

The crowd doesn't seem to have any allegiance to Willy's son, because no one makes a move to defend him as I stride toward the door. I know this is a rough neighborhood, but damn, they don't even look my way when I slip out as inconspicuously as I entered.

A couple of minutes later, I find myself parked down the street from Ivory's house with the engine off and my attention glued to her front door. She should've come home by now, but all is dark beyond the front and side windows. Where the fuck is she?

I consider leaving when an orange sportbike pulls up to her curb. The rider removes the helmet, revealing black hair and a dark complexion. Black or Latino? He's too young to be dating Lisa Westbrook. He fucking better not be Ivory's boyfriend.

I pitch forward against the steering wheel, craning my neck as he strolls to the porch and peers in the window. He doesn't knock on the door and instead meanders into the narrow alley between the houses and disappears around back.

My nerves tighten. Is he a family friend? A cousin? A fucking burglar? I type the bike's license plate number in my phone, and a moment later, he emerges from the alley, puffing

on a cigarette. A leg goes over the bike, helmet on, engine roars, and he's gone without a glance in my direction.

That was weird.

I should go. I have no business here.

Thirty minutes later, I'm still telling myself that.

With each hoodlum that walks by, with every car that cruises down the street, my impatience multiplies, twisting through me with spastic fits and starts. Eleven o'clock on a school night, and she's out there somewhere doing God knows what. I want to tie her to her bed and belt her for being so reckless. Where the hell is her mother?

This isn't my problem. I reach for the ignition just as my phone beeps with a text message.

Deb: We still on for tonight?

When I messaged her between meetings while staring at Ivory's tight body, I was raring to go. But now?

Me: Another time

Deb: I've been such a bad girl today. Spank me!

My cock doesn't even twitch.

Deb: I can pretend to be her again.

By her, she means Joanne. Only Joanne isn't the *her* that's fucking with my head.

Me: You sound needy. The opposite of sexy.

*Deb: *pouts**

Me: Also not sexy

Deb: I'm sorry, sir.

Me: You can make it up to me by moving forward on that favor I requested.

Deb: The GM guy?

Beverly Rivard's husband, Howard, owns a chain of GM dealerships. I hear his business practices are as sleazy as his

wife's, but I've yet to confirm if he cheats on her. If anyone can seduce him, Deb can.

Me: Yes. Use discretion and pay attention to lighting. His face needs to be clear on the video.

Deb: Yes, sir.

Deb: I can't change your mind about tonight?

Me: Good night, Deb.

What am I doing? Why am I here? To make sure she arrives home safely?

Fuck me, I just want to see her again. Just a glimpse before I face the emptiness of my house.

Ten minutes later, my wish materializes on the sidewalk up ahead. Even in the faint moonlight, the curve of her breasts, the dip of her waist, and the flare of her hips are distinguishable. Erotic. So goddamn captivating.

With my car tucked behind a truck, my whole body cants against the door panel to keep her within my sight.

Her long legs carry her toward her house, slowly, leisurely, her chin held high and shoulders relaxed. She's not afraid here, not like she is in my classroom. How ironic given the dangerous neighborhood.

In the depraved innards of my soul, I thrill at being the thing she fears. I want to claim her apprehension, dread, and uncertainty. I want to take ownership of all of her emotions and be the sole reason she trembles and cries.

In that moment, I pretend I'm not her teacher. With my hand curled around the steering wheel and my shoulder pressed against the door, I watch a beautiful woman walk toward me. She's strikingly exotic with her enormous eyes and long dark hair, so impossibly stunning I wouldn't be able to stop myself from approaching her. I would pause a few feet away, hold her gaze, and let the malleable silence enfold us in an intimate cocoon. I wouldn't need words, just her awareness of my body, my intent, and my confidence to give her what she craves.

She may not know it but she needs clearly-defined boundaries, discipline, and a man she can trust to push her beyond her comfort zone. She may not yet recognize me as that man, but she will. Then what?

Parked five houses away, I can't focus on anything but her. What happens tomorrow when I sit beside her on the piano bench, breathing in the scent of her skin? How the fuck will I focus then?

With the engine off, the lack of air is stifling. My shirt is soaked through with sweat, the tie long-ago discarded. I'm burning up, antsy, aching for her. Horny as fuck.

She stops at the front door and unlocks it with a key from her satchel. Reaching in to flick on the interior lights, she doesn't make it over the threshold before an orange cat races out. As it prances around her feet, throwing its body against her ankles, her words come back to me.

I can't afford running shoes or food for my cat.

A heavy pressure sinks into my muscles, urging me to storm into her life and fix her problems. I have the money, determination, and desire to improve her situation. As her teacher, she's my responsibility. To nurture. To protect.

All of which is appropriate as long as I don't imagine the grip of her cunt around my cock.

She scoops up the cat and nuzzles it against her neck as she carries it inside. The door closes, and the curtains fall across the window, shutting me out. Time to go.

On the drive back to the Garden District, I resolve to maintain professionalism around Miss Westbrook. If I manage to finish the year without burying myself between her legs, I might find a rather satisfying future at Le Moyne. Of course, keeping my hands off her also means my future won't include a jail cell.

As I walk into my house, I'm greeted with stacks of packed boxes, bare walls, and a total lack of warmth despite the humidity. I moved in three months ago, but haven't really *moved in*. Unpacking feels a lot like acceptance.

Acceptance of a life without Joanne.

I drift through the spacious living room, hearth room, and kitchen, every corner and archway adorned with custom moldings and deep earthy tones. Maybe tomorrow I'll begin filling the rooms with furniture and personal belongings. But tonight, all I need is the brilliant piece of craftsmanship that sits down the hall.

I make my way there, veering into my favorite room, the reason I bought this overpriced estate. The pristine hardwoods shine beneath the chandelier, and the Gothic arched fireplace at the far end conjures images of distant lands and mystical cultures. But the room's centerpiece demands my full attention.

Approaching my grandfather's Fazioli concert grand piano, I run a finger along the curved body. Rare and extremely valuable, it took three years to make, crafted with superb materials, down to the gold-plated hinges and screws. The heart of the piano is carved from the same red spruce trees Stradivari used for his famous violins. But that's not why I cherish this sexy beast.

I take my position behind the keys and let my mood decide the melody. Inhaling deeply, I finger through the slow-building intro of "Toxicity" by System Of A Down. As the metal song changes tempo, growing heavier, more aggressive, every muscle in my body engages. My fingers grab at the notes, my torso sways, and my head rocks in time with the staccato beats, my entire being captured and controlled by the acoustics.

The majestic projection propels me to the top note as I bang my hands along the keys, wrestling every molecule of power the piano offers. The crystalline clarity enchants me, consumes me, and I fall in love with this instrument all over again. I depend on this experience. I've dedicated my entire life to mastering it, and I need it now to carry me through the days and months without Joanne.

Maybe I've reached the pinnacle of my success in the music world. Maybe I'm destined to be a lonely, bitter old

man.

Or maybe I haven't found my place yet, my part in it all, and maybe—as Ivory so passionately put it—I'll be there when the music begins.

EMERIC

It's universally known that the more forbidden something is, the more desirable it becomes. I feel this truth like a fist around my balls as I enter my classroom after lunch and find the forbidden object of my desire waiting for me.

Ivory stands beside my desk, alone and watching me with huge dark eyes. With her arms crossed beneath her breasts and her raised chin radiating attitude, she has no idea how badly I want to restrain her, whip her, and fuck her.

Her black dress hangs like a tarp on her small frame, which only glorifies my memory of her bare body, giving power to the secret we share. Is she thinking about yesterday, when I memorized all the skin she's hiding? The mole on the rib just under her right breast, the delicate patch of freckles on her toned thigh, the decorative ink scrolling across her back—all of it belongs to me now. I crave another peek, more skin, more Ivory.

She straightens her spine, inadvertently pushing out her ample chest, and glares at me as if she's reading my mind and deems it appalling.

I could no more stop my heart from being ripped from my chest—*thank you for that, Joanne*—than I can control the primal way my body reacts to Ivory Westbrook.

Heat floods my muscles as I erase the space between us. My mouth dries as her eyes track my movements around the desk. Gnawing pressure builds behind my abs as I take in the

sensual shape of her lips, the vein bulging in her throat, and the wariness in her gaze.

I clasp my hands behind my back, stifling the urge to yank at the strangling tie around my neck.

“Miss Westbrook.” I force my attention above her mouth. “You’re here early.”

She stabs a finger at textbooks stacked on the desk between us. “I found these in my locker.”

I glance at the supplies I purchased from the school bookstore this morning. “You’re welcome.”

“So it *was* you.” She closes her eyes, inhales deeply, and her glare returns. “I won’t take—”

“You will.”

“This?” She snatches the unopened tablet from the stack of books and holds it out to me. “I can’t accept this.”

“You can.” I turn away and begin writing next period’s discussion topics on the whiteboard.

Her footsteps approach, pausing beside me. I don’t look at her, but I feel her proximity like an electric hum. A cacophony of emotions pulse from her quickening breaths and grinding teeth. She may as well just tell me she’s an anxious mess.

Instead, she says, “I don’t take handouts, Mr. Marceaux.”

Damn her pride. I prefer to not belabor this simple thing, but nothing is easy when it comes to this girl.

I move the marker over the board, the felt tip squeaking through the silence. “You presume too much, Miss Westbrook. You *will* pay me back.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.”

She mumbles it so quietly I’m not sure I hear her correctly.

I cap the marker and glower down at her. “Repeat that.”

“I’m...” She holds her arms at her sides, as if forcing herself not to fidget. “What kind of payment?”

My pulse takes off as alarms blare in my head. She has a wealth of assets most warm-blooded men would value more than money. Whether or not she's aware of her seductive beauty, her question isn't birthed from naivety. Experience has shown her what men want from her, and the thought boils my blood.

"Cash. Personal check." My voice whips through the room, brash and angry. "Something along *those* lines." I soften my tone. "What kind of payment were you expecting I'd want?"

"Oh, I..." She swallows and stares toward the doorway. "I don't know."

The distant din of voices trickle in from the hall, a reminder class will resume in a few minutes.

"The truth, Miss Westbrook."

Her eyes dip to my groin and dart away.

Fuck. I won't make her say it out loud. At this point, I can't bear to hear it.

She's aware of my inappropriate interest in her, and now she knows I know she's aware. But she's misjudged the way I operate. I would *never* coerce a woman into sex, let alone a student. While that infuriates me to a level that has my hands shaking, the ease at which she jumped to sex as a method of payment makes me want to kill someone.

Maybe I'm paranoid. Maybe I've lost my mind, but goddammit, I'm convinced she's been sexually abused. Someone from her past? Is it happening right now? Who the fuck is hurting her?

I fist my hands on my hips and glare down at her as everything inside me simmers to blow up. "Has another teacher asked for inappropriate favors?"

"No!"

A small relief, but it leaves me with nothing. "Who then?"

She steps back just as several students mill into the classroom, laughing and oblivious. The conversation will have

to be postponed, but there's something else that can't wait. I join her at my desk as she gathers the stack of textbooks.

Under the guise of powering up my laptop, I watch her out of the corner of my eye and lower my voice for her ears alone. "I trust your brother didn't touch you last night."

Her grin is reluctant, dimpling the corner of her mouth and crawling across her lips. "Shane stumbled in with a broken nose, whining about a headache until he passed out. Guess that's karma, huh?"

"Yes." My mouth twitches. "Karma."

Arms loaded with books, she turns toward the room full of students, pauses, then pivots back to me.

"Thank you." She stares at my tie, her chin pinning the tablet atop the tower of books in her arms. "I'll reimburse you as soon as I can."

Nodding, I return to the whiteboard.

Maybe I made things more difficult for her. Whatever she does to earn money, she has to do *more* of it to pay me back. But school supplies are a requirement. Besides, I don't intend to accept her reimbursement.

While I know her sense of self-worth arises from paying her own way, from not *taking hand-outs*, I spend the next three hours obsessing over how I can beat that idea out of her without crossing the line.

If her mother's unemployed, how will she pay me back? Performing arts students can't work regular jobs. They don't have time for anything outside of school and practice. Hell, students are required to practice their instruments at least four hours a day, every day, for *years*. If they don't, they fall behind, lose their competitive edge and any hope for a musical career.

Questions about her financial situation marinate in the back of my mind for the next few hours. A beautiful young girl like her, from a neighborhood like Treme, has a slew of undesirable methods to earn fast money. Drugs and

prostitution fall on the top of that list, but I refuse to imagine her degrading herself in that way. It's too appalling.

When the final bell rings, the piano students exit the classroom, except Ivory, who sets her belongings on a desk by the door and looks at me expectantly. "Don't the others have private lessons?"

"Sebastian Roth and Lester Thierry have their own tutors at home."

"I know." Her forehead pinches. "But Chris and Sarah always take advantage of the lessons here."

"They opted to study under Mrs. Romero's tutelage."

I planted the suggestion in my meetings with Chris and Sarah yesterday, hinting that the other piano instructor had some openings after school, and her softer approach may be a good match for them. It's partially true. Mrs. Romero teaches the younger grades and already has her hands full. But she works for me, and therefore, I determine her schedule.

Ivory's lips part as she considers the news. "Does that mean I'll have you all to myself from three to seven every day?"

Fuck me, but I love the sound of that.

Her eyes widen. "Oh damn, I didn't mean—"

"I know what you meant, and yes, I'll be mentoring you."

As a general rule, I prefer to groom only one or two students at a time. Though my intentions with Ivory have little to do with her personal development. When it comes to torturing myself, I'm the dean of effort, hell-bent on enduring the entire school year with aching sore blue balls.

I close the door and make my way around the corner of the L-shaped room. Leaning a hip against the Bösendorfer grand piano, I wait for her to join me then rap my knuckles on the sleek black surface. "Four hours every day."

An enormous grin overwhelms her beautiful mouth. "I won't waste your time."

“No, you won’t.” I could stare at her twenty-four hours a day and feel like the most productive pervert in the world. But if I don’t eradicate those thoughts from my head, our time together will be over before it begins. “Did you practice last night?”

“Of course.”

She doesn’t tense up, change her breathing, or convey vulnerability in any way. She’s telling the truth, which might explain her whereabouts last night.

“Where did you practice?” Realizing that implies I know she wasn’t home, I rephrase the question. “You own a piano?”

“Not anymore.” Her dark brown hair escapes the curve of her ear and falls over her shoulder. She gathers it at the bend of her neck and twists it into a rope down her chest. “My mom sold my dad’s piano after he died.”

My dad’s, not Daddy’s. I bite the inside of my cheek to hide my satisfaction.

“There’s a music store down the street from my house.” Facing me, she braces an elbow on the edge of the piano and mirrors my position. “The owner lets me practice on his Steinway until eleven every night.”

Which coincides with the time she came home. So why can’t I shake the feeling she’s leaving something out?

Because she’s not looking at me. She’s toying with the ends of her hair, and wherever her thoughts just drifted, she’s distracted to silence.

I touch a finger to her chin, lifting it to recapture her attention. “Time to finish our earlier conversation.”

Her lips thin.

“Who asked you for an inappropriate favor?”

She turns away and lowers onto the piano bench. “No lies?”

“I don’t mentor liars, Miss Westbrook.”

She nods, her expression grim. “The truth is, I need your help.” Her hands run over the keys without depressing them. “With *this*. Mastering the piano.” She stretches her fingers. “I’m the best pianist in this school, you know.”

“Is that right?”

She peers up at me through her lashes. “I may even be better than you.”

My stomach swoops in the presence of her tantalizing smile. “Let’s not get carried away.”

“You’re right.” She studies her fingers on the keys. “I have a lot to learn. But with the right teacher and enough focus, I’ll be out of here at the end of the year. Out of Treme. This is the most honesty I can give you, Mr. Marceaux.” She pulls her hands into her lap and stares up at me with pleading eyes. “If you focus on the other stuff in my life, the things not related to my talent, it will hurt my future. And if you involve social services, every opportunity I have here will be taken away.”

She’s all but admitting I won’t like what I find when I poke around in her affairs. I have no intention of involving social services, and she doesn’t need to know the extent to which I’m capable of investigating a person.

But I prefer to hear it from her. “Answer the question.”

“I can’t. *Please*.”

That’s all it takes. The seductive sound of her begging in one breathy syllable and she owns every nerve in my body. I want to hear that sound as she kneels to me, releases me from my pants, and guides me toward her mouth.

Get a grip, asshole.

It’s clear she won’t tell me who’s taking advantage of her, but I’ll find out.

“All right.” I flick a hand toward the piano. “Play for me.”

She adjusts the bench, slides off her tattered shoes, and positions her toes on the pedals. With her palms on her knees, she gives me her attention. “Baroque? Classical? Jazz?”

“Surprise me.”

Eyes on the keyboard, she steadies her breathing. A current of serenity seems to float through her as her posture loosens and her face softens. Then her hands lift, her head bows over the keys, and fucking hell, her fingers fly. The concerto she chose is pure insanity, a high tempo complexity of too many notes. Balakirev’s *Islamey* is one of the most challenging cadenzas in the whole classical piano repertoire, and she plays it like an expert.

She’s a tornado of whipping wrists, violent fingers, and rocking hips. Her chin sways, head jerking on the hard-hitting beats, her expression a picture of intense focus. But my critical ear doesn’t miss the slips when she hits the chords with too much force, speeds up too fast, and plays all the sixteenth notes like eighth note triplets.

This is why I don’t play the piece. I mastered it in college, but it’s a goddamn nightmare. The difficulty and awkwardness in positioning the fingers, the left hand hopping over the right, and at the end of eight minutes, it leaves me drenched in sweat. Besides, I’m not a fan of classical interpretation, which is ironic since I hold a seat in the Louisiana Symphony Orchestra.

Despite Ivory’s minimal mistakes, she brilliantly manipulates the rhythmic flexibility within the measures while following the rubrics with her own artistic convictions. I find myself exhaling with her at the end of every phrase and bending closer as she falls on strong beats, completely mesmerized by the leap of her hands. She breathes life into the notes, beams, and bar lines, making it the best performance I’ve heard on this piece.

She finishes with a sweep of her arms and releases a silent sigh. Perspiration dots along her hairline, and her hands tremble in her lap.

A long moment passes before she drags her gaze to mine and clears her throat. “Well?”

“You hit the notes too hard. Your rubato is rough, too fast. Way too many mistakes.”

She nods, her shoulders slumping.

“This is an instrument, Miss Westbrook, not a gun. You’re making music, not shooting notes at the audience.”

“I know,” she says quietly. “Projection is an art, one I’m still...trying to...” Her chin quivers, and tears sheen her eyes before she looks away and whispers under her breath, “Shit.”

If she requires an instructor who gives praise just to balance the criticism, she has the wrong guy. I’m a dick, and like I told her yesterday, I respect constructive feedback. I’m also not finished with my appraisal.

I approach the piano bench and move to sit, forcing her to make room. She scoots to the edge, the seat barely holding the two of us. Our shoulders, hips, and thighs touch, and it’s not accidental. I want her to feel every contact point and learn to trust it. To trust me.

“What did I say about sniveling?”

Her shoulders snap back, and she stares straight ahead, her voice reedy. “I’m sorry. I don’t know why I...I got a little overwhelmed there. I guess I wanted you to—”

“Stop talking.”

She presses her lips together.

I shift to face her, and the position pushes the length of my thigh against hers. The heat from her leg seeps into mine, and I fold my hands together in my lap to keep from reaching out and inching up the hem of her dress. “I didn’t develop the skill to even attempt Islamey until college, and I couldn’t play it all the way through until my final year of graduate school.”

Her eyes flash to mine, huge and round and brimmed with moisture.

I cup the delicate curve of her jaw and swipe my thumb to catch a tear. “Very few people can play that piece. In fact, Balakirev admitted there were passages in his composition even *he* couldn’t manage.”

She leans into my hand, seemingly unaware she’s doing it as she clings to my words.

“Your interpretation is extraordinarily passionate and stunning.” *Just like you.* “I’m moved.”

Her breaths come faster, heaving her chest. “Oh Jesus, for real? I’m—” More tears fall from her eyes, and she pulls away to wipe her face. “Dammit, I’m not sniveling. I swear.”

“Why did you choose it?”

“Islamey?”

“Yes.”

She gazes up at me with a relieved smile. “The owner of the music store I told you about, the one where I practice? His name is Stogie and—”

“What do you give him in exchange for practicing there?”

Her smile falls as she realizes what I’m implying. “Nothing! He’s the kindest man I know.” She winces. “No offense.”

“We both know I’m not a kind man. Continue.”

She bites her lip, but her grin reappears, tugging at the corners. “He’s also very old and stubborn and refuses to take his medicine. So he made me a deal. If I learned Islamey, he would take his pills without my nagging.” She shrugs. “It took me all summer. All day, every day.”

“Dedication.”

Her smile lingers. “My hands *still* hurt.”

“Get used to it. While you played that piece beautifully, it wasn’t perfect. Let’s start with Chopin’s Etude Op 10 No.5 to get you more comfortable with the appropriate amount of pressure on those black keys.”

As she pulls out the music sheet and dives into the etude, I don’t move, don’t give her space. I’m reluctant to give her any leeway at all.

I sat with Prescott Rivard this morning in an impromptu session with his guitar tutor. Then I made the rounds with other top musicians at Le Moyne. The talent is impressive, but none are as proficient or driven as Ivory Westbrook.

I intend to cultivate, polish, and discipline her, while deriving every twisted ounce of pleasure I can from it. But I can't give her the one thing she desires. I want this job, which means there will be no Leopold in her future.

IVORY

“I’m going to Leopold.” I pause the marker mid-scrawl, the tip pressed against the whiteboard, as the creak of Mr. Marceaux’s shoes approaches from behind.

The sheer height of him casts a shadow over my back as his breaths stir my hair, his whisper like a satin ribbon trailing over my shoulder. “Less talking, more writing.”

It’s only the fifth day of school, and I’m already plotting all the ways to murder him.

I want to poison his coffee for beginning today’s private lesson with a punishment. While I forgot all about disrupting his class on the first day, he was happy to remind me by shoving a marker in my hand and leading me to the wall-length whiteboard.

I want to strangle him with his obnoxious yellow-flowered tie for making me write an endless loop of *I will not waste Mr. Marceaux’s time*.

With large, angry lines, I scribble another sentence and say, “I’m seventeen, not seven.”

Whack.

A sharp sting burns across my bicep, and my hand flies up to rub the hurt.

I want to rip that conductor baton from his fingers and impale it in his throat. Because seriously, where is the orchestra? There isn’t one, yet he’s twirling the damn thing

like Pherekydes of Patrae and slapping it against my arms like a ruler-wielding nun.

“This is wasting time for both of us,” I mumble, scrawling another sentence that states the opposite.

Whack.

A snap of heat blooms on my back, right above my tailbone. Motherfucker, that hurts. But it’s not the worst pain, either. If anyone else raised a baton at me—Lorenzo or Prescott, for example—I’d snarl and throw punches. But this is my mentor, and I want to please him. *While plotting his death.*

I want the teacher back from three days ago. The one who touched my face so tenderly and said my performance moved him. Where did that guy go?

Maybe it’s my fault. I’ve been off-kilter, dreading tonight all week. I can’t put off Prescott any longer. His homework is done, and I’m a twisted-up bundle of nerves and anger. And with the weekend starting tomorrow, I’ll have two days at home. Two days with Lorenzo and his outrage at not being able to track me down all week.

“What did I say about questioning me?” Mr. Marceaux’s footsteps pace behind me, his icy eyes shivering the hairs on my nape.

If I didn’t know him better, which I don’t, I’d think he’s enjoying this. “Telling a student not to question her teacher is the worst rule in the history of rules.”

I tense for another swat, but it doesn’t come.

He leans a shoulder against the unwritten section of the board beside me, his hands behind his back and a smirk on his too-pretty face. “I’ll rephrase. Don’t question my methods.” His sharp gaze moves to the board. “Erase the last five sentences, and try again with penmanship befitting a seventeen-year-old.”

I thrust the eraser over the board with belligerent swipes and begin again. “I can write and talk at the same time, and I want to talk about Leopold.”

“You’re not good enough for Leopold.”

I whirl toward him as the crescendo of my heart crashes past my ears. “You said my interpretation of Islamey was extraordinarily passionate and stunning.”

Standing a couple of feet away, he watches me with hooded eyes—*Bored? Sleepy?*—and shrugs half-heartedly. “Those are meaningless superlatives, which I now regret using.”

My muscles quiver as a rush of fury slams into me. My hands ball into fists, and before my brain catches up, I rear back the marker and hurl it. Right at his forehead.

It bounces off his scowl lines and rolls across the floor beside his Doc Martens. He glares at it, shocked to terrifying stillness, before flinging the conductor baton across his desk and leveling me with glacial eyes.

Ohshitohshitohshit. My face catches fire as I stumble backward. My shoulder hits the whiteboard, but I keep going, sliding along the wall and toward the door. What the hell is wrong with me? I never lose my temper. Holy fuck, I *never* throw markers at my teachers!

He reaches up, wipes his forehead, and glowers at his fingers. *Yes, Mr. Marceaux, the fat black dot of my shame is now smeared across your furiously creased brow.*

“I’m sorry.” I glance at the closed door, wishing I were on the other side, down the hall, and far away from whatever comes next.

Without removing his eyes from mine, he lifts his chin and loosens the knot of his tie. Fuck, that can’t be good.

As his hands slide over the silk, I recall another rumor I heard this morning about the depraved ways he uses his ties, belts, and other miscellaneous accessories. I don’t believe gossip, but as I stare into those cruel eyes, I plummet into the chasm of whispered images with a sinking stomach.

With the knot hanging loosely beneath his collar, he crooks his finger. “Come with me.”

Three words, spoken without effort, yet they have the power to devastate my future. Fear jolts through my stomach. If he takes me to the dean's office, will it be a suspension? Or is hurling objects at my teacher grounds for expulsion?

But he doesn't walk toward the exit. He strides deeper into the back of the room and around the corner, out of sight. I look through the small window in the door, into the empty hallway, and tremble with indecision.

Running will only make this worse.

I push myself forward on wobbly legs and weave through the rows of desks. Every inch of my body is strung-out, running on a live wire that connects the path of my feet to whatever awaits me around that corner. By the time I reach the piano and find him sitting sideways on the end of the bench, my pulse is a reedy, struggling vibration in my veins.

He points at the floor beneath the space of his spread thighs and flicks his wrist, as if adjusting the position of his heavy watch.

The sleeves of his gray and white pinstriped shirt gather around his elbows. He's wearing another one of those waistcoat-vest things, this one black with little gray buttons. My attention shifts from the yellow tie to the dark shadow of his jaw, the flat line of his lips, and as I fall into the chilling trap of his eyes, I realize with renewed panic that I'm making him wait.

I hurry forward and stand where he indicated, swaying unsteadily between his spread feet.

There's that crooking finger again, gesturing me closer, closer, and lord help me, when I'm finally in the position he wants, my boobs are right in his face. I curve my spine, attempting to rein them in, but dammit, they're there and there's nothing I can do about it.

Heat tingles across my cheeks as he blatantly stares down the scoop of my shirt. It makes me feel gross, cheap, and really fucking angry.

I grab the neckline to yank it up.

His hand catches my wrist, pulling my arm back to my side. “Stop fidgeting and straighten your back.”

I do as he says, even as I’m about to implode with anxiety over the position of our bodies and his silence on the marker incident. “Are you going to report me to the dean?”

“I administer my own punishments.” He gestures at his forehead. “Fix this.”

“Fix it?” A swallow sticks in my throat. “Like rub it off?”

He glares up at me like I’m the dumbest girl in the world. Yes, well, only a dumb girl puts herself in this situation.

With a trembling hand, I press the pad of my thumb against the ink above his eyebrow. I don’t know what I expected—*cold, reptilian scales?*—but his skin is smooth and warm and *human*. As I press harder, my free hand catches the back of his head, and my fingers slide through soft black strands. It feels so...personal, affectionate, *abnormal*.

His face hovers inches beneath mine, the muscles in his cheeks relaxed, lips slightly parted and thick lashes fanning downward. He really is handsome, even if everything about him is potently male. From the woodsy scent of his shampoo and the boxy shape of his jaw to his tapered waist and the way his muscular legs stretch the lean cut of his black slacks, it’s all there to remind me my future hinges on the whims of a man.

A man with ink on his forehead.

I rub harder. “It’s not coming off.”

“Use spit.”

My internal ick-meter swivels toward *Eww*, but I’m already up to my tits in trouble, so I lick my thumb and resume scrubbing. “What’s my punishment?”

“Is it coming off?”

“Yeah. I’m really sorry, Mr. Marceaux.” I wipe away the final traces and drop my arms. “It’s gone.”

“Put your hands back where they were.”

Why would he want my hands in his hair? On his face? It feels so...foreign. Improper. But he asked. No, he ordered. Dammit, why is it so hard to disobey him?

I return my hands exactly where they were, and for some reason, it's easier this time, less awkward. He stares up at me, and the multi-shades of blues in his eyes glimmer beneath the fluorescents. His mouth is kind of pouty, not in a displeasing way. His full lips make him appear softer somehow. I think they're my favorite attribute.

The fact that I have a favorite attribute on any man gives me pause, but I don't remember ever seeing someone as attractive as Mr. Marceaux. Not on TV or in magazines or in person. Certainly, not this close up. I'm acutely aware of the press of his thighs against the outsides of my legs, the crotch of his slacks brushing my knees, and the warmth of his breath whispering across my collarbone. But it's his head in my hands that makes me want to push him away and pull him closer at the same time.

I've never touched a man in this way. The tickle of his hair between my fingers, the brawny lines of his face beneath my palm, the scratch of his barely-there stubble, every sensation beneath my fingertips fills me with fear and excitement and all the chaos in between.

I wonder again about the rumor, about why he left Shreveport. Can the same thing happen here, with me? My fingers clench against his head.

He licks his lips. "Tell me what you're thinking."

I want to yank my hands away, but I don't dare. "I overheard a couple girls whispering about you in first hour."

"Go on."

"They said your first name is Emeric."

"Hardly enough to whisper about." His wrists rest on his thighs, his fingers dangling behind me, and the proximity causes them to graze my legs. "What else?"

"Shreveport."

“Ah.” His fingers brush the backs of my knees, and this time I’m certain he’s doing it deliberately. “Miss Westbrook, don’t make me drag every detail from you.”

“They said you were fired.” My palm feels too clammy against his cheek, so I drop my hands to the crisp collar of his shirt. “Because someone walked into a classroom and found you with a woman.”

He arches a brow. “Is that all?”

“No.” I clear my throat. “Supposedly, her mouth was gagged with your tie.”

“And?”

“Her wrists were bound by your belt.” I rush forward with the rest. “Her body was bent over the desk while you had sex with her from behind. That’s the extent of what I’ve heard.”

His hands close around the backs of my knees. “Wow.”

Wow is right. The crazy things people say...

A smirk slithers across his lips. “That is surprisingly accurate.”

“What?” My chest heaves as I push against his shoulders.

But he anticipates me, his arms hooking around my legs then shifting upward to circle my waist as he stands. He kicks the bench out of the way and spins us toward the closest wall.

My back presses against the bricks with his chest flush with mine, pinning me there. “Deep breaths, Ivory.”

Ivory. The most intimate word I’ve heard from his mouth. My skin shivers with bizarre delight.

He touches his lips to my neck. “You’re not breathing.”

I fill my lungs, but it doesn’t help. I feel so small and insubstantial in his strong arms, fastened against his huge body. His chest, biceps, stomach, thighs...my God, he’s hard everywhere I’m soft. And hot. Too hot. I think I’m running a fever. I’m definitely going to puke if he removes his tie and belt.

With my hands clenched on his shoulders, I try to shove at the unmovable muscle. “Please don’t do those things to me.”

He sighs, stroking his nose along my jaw. “It was consensual. Do you know what that means?”

I shake my head, not sure, but maybe I do know. “Like an agreement?”

“Yes. Only she didn’t just agree. She *begged*.”

“Why? Why would she want that?”

“Joanne is...” He looks away and stretches his neck to rub his chin against his shoulder. His brows pull in, and his entire demeanor seems suddenly and strangely subdued. When his gaze returns, so does his intensity, and his arms tighten around my waist. “She’s like you.”

“Me?” I squirm against him. “I don’t want those things. You don’t even know me.”

“Tell me what you feel right now.”

“Scared. You’re scaring me.”

His lips hover a kiss away, the hint of cinnamon gum scenting his breath. “Yes, but there’s something else. Describe it.”

“My heart’s pounding. I’m burning up, and my stomach feels like an ice block.”

“Your heart and stomach. Where else? Describe the feeling in your nipples.”

A flash of heat sweeps across my neck, through my chest, and builds between my legs. I squeeze my thighs together, humiliated by the reaction, confused by the flush of weird emotions, but I latch onto the feeling I understand. “This is wrong.”

“Not *wrong*. It’s inappropriate. But we went way past inappropriate the first day. Tell me how your nipples feel. I won’t criticize your answer as long as it’s the truth.”

I suck in a shaky breath and give him what he wants. “Itchy and tight.”

“Good girl.”

The tingle between my legs grows stronger, heavier, more demanding.

He pushes his hips against mine to stop my squirming, and the hardest part of him, the part I hate most, jabs against my stomach. “Now put a name to all those feelings.”

“I don’t know.” I can’t breathe. I can’t think. “I can’t.”

“Dig deep, Ivory.”

My throat closes up.

“What do you feel when you haven’t eaten.”

“Hungry.”

His hard eyes are too close, too unsafe. “How about when you see a beautiful piano?”

“Want.”

“And when I gave you praise after your performance of Islamey?”

“Desire for more.”

“Hunger. Want. Desire. Is that what you’re feeling as I hold you against the wall?”

Is it? The aching hunger for something between my legs, my out-of-control heartbeat, and the burning need to express it, talk about it? My head is too mixed-up. Yes, he’s a beautiful man, and I hear all the girls talk about wanting to do him. And yes, I crave his appreciation for my talent and his *good-girls* and his warm hand on my face, but this? The length of his body against mine? Holding me immobile?

He’s just holding me. Not grabbing my boobs or thrusting between my legs. He’s giving me attention. Asking me about my feelings. Without taking.

Jesus, I do want this, from someone I can trust, from my teacher, and I shouldn’t. “I think it’s desire. And shame.”
Humiliation.

He presses his lips against my forehead. “Mmm. There’s my girl.”

“I don’t want to be gagged and tied and—”

His finger falls across my mouth then returns to my back. “Not now. But you’ll think about it. The idea will consume you. Then we’ll talk about it again.”

“But you’re my teacher!”

“I said we’ll *talk* about it.” He leans back and rests his hands on my hips. “Where will you get the money to pay me back?”

The subject change gives me whiplash. “I’ll have it by Monday, I promise.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

I close my eyes, blocking out his perceptive gaze. He knows my mom is unemployed. I’m here till seven every night and practicing at Stogie’s till eleven, so he knows I can’t work. There’s no way I can tell him I’m doing Prescott’s homework and essentially whoring myself out to pay the bills. And I don’t know why, but lying to him scares me more than him discovering the truth.

Opening my eyes, I do the only thing I can. I shake my head.

His expression hardens, and his scowl overtakes my entire world. “Let’s talk about the punishment for throwing shit at your teacher.”

He’s only inches from my face, with a frightening glare and a body twice my size. Isn’t that punishment enough?

“You have a choice. Tell me where you get your money. Or bare your ass for a spanking.”

All the blood drains from my face to my feet. There is no choice.

EMERIC

I flex my hands against Ivory's waist, my entire body strumming with the thought of reddening her tight ass. But my brain screams for her to make the other choice, to tell me her secrets and steer me away from this dangerous temptation.

With the wall at her back and her gorgeous tits rising and falling against my chest, she lifts her brown eyes and whispers, "The spanking."

Her breathy response hits me in the gut and tunnels to my groin, wrenching a guttural sound from my throat and propelling my hips into a hungry grind against hers. She gasps when she feels me. Fuck, how could she not feel me? I've never been this hard in my life.

This is a mistake. It's Shreveport and Joanne and a goddamn slippery slope to ruination all over again.

I hold my body stock-still against hers, my fingers digging into her waist.

She's not Joanne. This isn't love or attachment. It's not even sex. I'm in control, and her punishment is due.

Releasing her, I step back and calm my breaths.

I gave her the choice, and I'm a man of my word. "Turn around. Hands on the wall."

Her face is a sheet of white as she pivots slowly and follows my order. The slim brown skirt cuts an erotic outline around her pert ass—much better than the black tarp thing she wore a few days ago. The swells of her cheeks are neither too

big nor too small, proportioned with her narrow waist and perfect for my hands.

But the frayed hems and roughly faded material of her clothes are reminders that this isn't just about what's under her skirt. Beyond my hunger for discipline and pleasure, I feel this deep aching desire to provide for her in all ways.

“Don't move.”

I back up and adjust the bulge behind my zipper. Stepping out of the alcove and into the main part of the classroom, I glance at the door. It's still closed. There's no lock, but the hinges will creak if it opens, giving me about five seconds before an intruder makes it through the room and around the corner.

As I head back to Ivory, my phone vibrates in my pocket. Irritated at the interruption, I consider ignoring it, but maybe it'll distract me away from the mistake I'm about to make. I glance at the screen.

Joanne: I'm in town this weekend. I need to see you.

The hollow space around my heart clenches tightly. I pull a stick of gum from my pocket and gnash it between my molars.

The phone buzzes again.

Joanne: Need your address.

She's persistent enough to find it, but she won't get it from me.

And now I'm more worked up than I was thirty seconds ago.

I power the phone off, toss it on the closest desk, and return my attention to Ivory.

Hands flat against the wall and gaze on the floor, she hasn't moved. Except her feet. They're closer together, and her knees visibly shake below the hem of her skirt.

She knows this is improper, that we're doing something we shouldn't be doing. But I doubt she's aware that the thrill in that risk, the chance of getting caught, is currently increasing

her brain's transmission of dopamine and heightening the excitement spiraling through her body.

The possibility of getting away with something so wickedly forbidden only feeds my beast and makes me hungrier.

I prowl closer. "Widen your stance."

She slides her feet apart and tilts her head, as if listening for me. I soften my steps, forcing her to concentrate harder to track my approach.

When I reach her, I invade, pressing my arousal against her backside. Not grinding. Just letting her feel how well we fit together as I hold her against me with my hands on her hips. Her shoulders tighten around her ears, and her inhale catches in her throat.

I brush her hair to the side, trailing a finger across her nape, as I slide my cheek along hers. "Last chance to change your mind."

Don't change your mind.

Her words rush out on a shredded breath. "Just get it over with."

My heart races as I shift to the right and slam my dominant hand against her ass. It's just a warm-up strike, but she flies up on her toes and lets out a sexy squeak.

My cock swells, pulsing and trapped against my leg. My fingers tingle to touch her, to stroke and welt her flawless body. "Open your mouth."

Her profile pinches. Then her lips part, hesitantly, her chin quivering with apprehension. So damn beautiful.

I remove the softened gum from my mouth and place it inside hers. She jerks back, but I hold her head and set the cinnamon adhesive between her molars with a swipe of my finger.

"Bite down." I stroke her jaw as it flexes. "Good girl. Now hold it there. No screaming."

I glide my hands down her thighs, stretching to reach bare skin. Her breathing quickens as I gather the skirt in my fists, inching it higher, higher, above her gorgeous butt and around her waist.

Goosebumps prickle beneath my hands as I caress the backs of her legs, the crease between her thigh and ass, and the trim of panties where they cut high on her cheeks. Hooking my fingers under the bottoms of the lacy edges, I drag the material upward, pulling the tiny scrap along her crack to expose more flesh.

Her glutes flex and twitch in my hands, and my pulse revs. She's so soft and firm, shivery and warm. So goddamn responsive.

I want to rip her panties off for this, but a glimpse of her pussy would make it impossible to keep my dick in my pants.

Listening for the door, I step back. The sight of her ass trimmed with lace and the pull of the cotton cupping the titillating shape of her cunt threatens to buckle my knees.

"Four strikes," I say gruffly and strengthen my voice. "Two on each cheek."

She stares at the wall, her fingers curling against the bricks as a series of twitches ripples across her buttocks.

With a deep breath, I let my hand fly, applying more force this time, but I still hold back. The slap echoes through the room, and her body responds like a guitar string, stretching, vibrating, her vocal chords humming exquisitely. Then she settles, becoming stable and still.

A pink hand print blooms across her flesh. I massage the heated skin, and she wriggles her ass, only slightly, but it speaks volumes. She's scared, probably terrified, but she's not running or screaming or pushing me away. She's rubbing her ass against my touch, ready for me to take her where I want her to go.

Stepping to the side, I fire off the next three smacks in rapid succession, each one harder than the last while

alternating cheeks. She whimpers softly, bows her back, rocks her hips, raises up on her toes. And never lets go of the wall.

She likes it rough, wants to be humiliated, needs to be dominated. If she's aware of this, she would never admit it. Probably because she's never experienced it in the right environment with the right person.

In a classroom with her teacher...still not right. Yet here she is, hanging onto that wall, with her feet spread and ass out, because I gave her an order.

She's made for me, to be instructed and punished and enjoyed. I want inside her with such agonizing intensity my body quakes. I want in her mouth, her cunt, and her soul. I want to rip her apart with my shaft, piece her back together, and do it all over again. Fuck, I need this girl.

And I can't have her.

Her forehead rests against the wall, and with a heavy sigh, the tension drains from her muscles.

I crouch behind her and straighten her panties, gently rubbing the pink skin and thrilling at the way her legs tremble with each of my strokes. I adjust the skirt with the same care, kneading my fingers across her ass and thighs in a soothing motion. When I return to a standing position, I turn her to face me, my hands on her hips to steady her.

She blinks up at me, eyes unfocused, and grooves crease her forehead.

“Where did you go, gorgeous girl?”

“Somewhere deep.”

Endorphins, adrenaline, fear, and arousal make a heady cocktail, and she looks absolutely breathtaking in her discovery.

I grip her chin, lifting it higher. “The gum.”

She covers her mouth and whispers behind her fingers, “I just swallowed it.”

Next time I'll remind her to keep it so she can pass it back to me while my tongue is between her lips.

I scoop her up, hooking arms behind her knees and back. She appears so sturdy and solid with her height, curves, and full tits, but with her cradled against my chest, she's feather-light, barely a buck ten.

Sitting on the piano bench, I hold her sideways on my thighs and drag a finger down her arm.

She shivers and squirms in my lap, wreaking havoc on my throbbing erection. But she doesn't scoot away from it and instead shifts to face me.

"That thing you just did with your finger?" With one arm trapped between us, she glances at the other, where it bends in her lap. "Will you do that again?"

A touch? That's what she wants?

She wants affection.

I move my mouth an inch away from hers and steel my gaze. "Beg."

Her chin drops, jaw clenching, but she doesn't look away. After a heartbeat, two, three, her face relaxes, and her lips part. "Please."

A wave of warmth circulates through me. I'm a slave to that word on her breath.

Touching my fingers to her shoulder, I trail them over her short-sleeves, down the satiny skin of her slender arm, and linger on the knuckles of her hand. When she stretches her fingers, I trace the length of them, marveling at how such fragile bones can move so ferociously over piano keys.

Her lashes flutter down, and her nostrils flare with long, deep inhaled. She loves this, my hand on hers, giving her pleasure.

When her eyes open, enlarged pupils saturate the brown hues. "What else do you do?"

Christ, this girl is killing me. Her innocence, curiosity, precious submission, it's all putty, begging to be shaped. But it's not just that. Her authenticity and lack of privilege pinches something inside me. It makes me feel protective. Possessive. Maybe even...wishful?

"I can do many things, Ivory." I touch the side of her face and push my hand through her thick hair, dragging fingers over her ear and cupping the back of her head. "But this situation...it's delicate." Sinful. Hazardous. Criminal.

I want to show you anyway.

I lean closer, so close our breaths meld.

I'll show you while I'm buried deep in your throat.

So close our lips brush together, separate, and hover in anticipation to touch again.

I'll show you while I'm coming against the walls of your cunt.

Her thighs clench against mine, and my heart races.

I'll show you while I'm marking you. Owning you. Cherishing you.

I want to kiss her. I have to. Just a taste.

Tightening my hand within the tangle of her hair, I draw her to my mouth—

And stop.

Did something stir around the corner? I jerk forward and register the creaking hinges a few seconds too slow.

The petite blonde teacher from the strings department emerges around the corner just as I drop Ivory onto the bench beside me. A bitter tang floods my mouth. Did Ms. Augustin see her in my lap? She definitely saw us pulling apart.

Her beady eyes narrow, ticking back and forth between me and the student I just erotically spanked. I hold my breath.

Here's the thing about erections. They don't deflate just because the rest of the body is freaking the fuck out. The

school could be on fire, and the damn thing will stand tall and proud like a flagpole, drawing attention at the worst possible moment.

Thankfully, the piano sits between my flag-waving boner and Ms. Augustin.

“Am I interrupting something?” Suspicion clips her tone. “It’s after seven, and I thought...”

She thought she could follow up on all those heated looks she’s been giving me in the hall, teacher’s lounge, and staff meetings all week. She thought she could swing by on a Friday night and talk her way into my bed.

“No problem,” I say casually. Andrea Augustin *is* a problem, one I’m prepared to resolve. “Miss Westbrook was just leaving.”

Ivory slips off the bench and walks away without looking at me. No, her attention centers on the other teacher. I can’t see her face, but she gives Ms. Augustin a wide berth, her strides stiffening as she vanishes around the corner.

“Have a good weekend, Ivory,” Andrea calls after her.

The door to the hall closes with a despondent click.

Every muscle in my body tenses to run after her, but I have to deal with this problem first.

Andrea turns back to me, hands on her hips, her tone shifting from pleasant to snarly. “What were you doing with her?”

In the faculty hierarchy, she’s technically beneath me. I’m the Director of Keyboard Studies, and she’s just a teacher. I want to use that to my advantage, but she saw what she saw. Enough to report my behavior. Enough to get me fired. Or arrested.

With Ivory, I want nothing between us but the naked truth. But Andrea? All I’ll give her is the best-dressed lie. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

Her arms lower to her sides, and she blinks. “You were?” Her eyes return to slits. “Why was Ivory Westbrook on your

lap?”

I sigh for effect, and now that my cock has finally calmed down, I stand. “I need to gather my things. Follow me, and I’ll explain.”

As we walk to the front of the classroom, I shift close to her, closer than socially acceptable, with my arm brushing hers and my neck craned to give her the full impact of my gaze. “You know her father died? He was killed a few years back?”

“Yes. Everyone knows that.”

“Well, I didn’t.” At my desk, I pretend to shut down my laptop, and instead pull up a program and angle the back cover toward her. “She just told me about it, got a little weepy, and I comforted her.”

“In your lap?” She crosses her arms.

It’s an absurd lie, even on the fly. I’ll have to fix this the hard way.

I stalk around the desk, hands behind my back, and let my gaze roam over her body. “I know what you want, Andrea.”

She steps back, bumping into the student desk behind her, and her fingers reach up to toy with her earring. “What do you mean?”

“Don’t be coy. I’ve seen you watching me, your flirty smiles, the way you play with your hair and jewelry when *I’m* watching *you*.”

Her hand drops, and she breathes, “Emeric...”

In three strides, I close the distance, crowding her against the desk without touching her. I loosen my tie the rest of the way and slide it from my neck. If Ivory’s heard the Shreveport details, it’s likely Andrea heard as well and is thinking of it now. I wager those rumors are the reason she’s here, face blushing and hooded eyes tracking the trail of silk as I wrap it around my hand.

I put my mouth next to her ear. “You want me to tie you up.”

She sits back, her ass perching on the desk behind her. Her knees part then spread some more, welcoming the nudge of my hips.

“You want me to feed you my cock.” I roughen my voice and quicken my breaths, insinuating I want that, too.

Unfortunately, my unresponsive dick refuses to participate in the ploy, so I maintain a sliver of space between me and the apex of her thighs, where she’s covered by the loose material of her skirt.

She grips my biceps and pushes out her tiny tits, but her attention shifts toward the closed door.

I hover my mouth over her neck, exhaling a steam of feigned desire. “Everyone’s gone home for the weekend, right?”

“Yes.”

“Besides, no one can see us from the window.” I recline back. “I’ll give you one chance, Andrea. Tell me exactly what you want.”

Her gaze lowers to the tie around my hand, and her fingers follow, tracing the silk in my grip. “I—I...want what you said. But we can’t. Not here.”

She looks back at the door, licking her lips.

“No, not here.” I move away and return to the desk, leaning on the edge beside the laptop. “Before I decide to take you home, you have to show me how badly you want me.”

Excitement brightens her face. Then her eyebrows dig in. “H—how?”

“Show me how wet you are. Go ahead. No one will see.”

Her expression contorts as uncertainty battles desire. I know which will win, but she drags out the silence, working herself into a heaving, flushed jumble of anxiety.

Finally, her breathing quiets, and her hands fumble with the folds of her skirt.

“Spread your legs, Andrea.”

She does, eyes on the door as she feels around the satin crotch. “How do I—”

“Under the panties. There you go.”

She tosses her head and makes some noise.

I’m not really paying attention, but I let her rub around in there for a while. “Now hold up your hand.”

She lifts her arm and smiles at her fingers. I don’t give a shit if they’re wet or not. I have what I need.

I hit a key on the laptop and question the wisdom in telling her what I did.

It’s better to be proactive than reactive.

Gripping the screen, I flip the laptop toward her and back up the silent video to the juicy part.

Shock comes first, paling her complexion and paralyzing her body. Then outrage.

“Wha—” She shoves her skirt into place, fists her hands at her sides, and rushes toward me. “What are you—? Oh my God, you recorded that!”

With the camera on the back of the laptop, I caught it all while remaining out of the frame during the incriminating segment.

I snap the lid shut. “Don’t fuck with me, Ms. Augustin.”

She jerks back, arms wrapping around her mid-section, and stares at me in horror. “Why would you—?” Deep red inflames her cheeks. “Oh God, what are you going to do with it? Is this about Ivory?” She covers her face with her hands, and a sob garbles her words. “I need...job. I can’t lose...you can’t do this.”

“I’ve done nothing with Ivory. But *you* just masturbated in my classroom.” I store the laptop and tie in my bag then turn toward her, wearing an expression that matches my most intimidating tone. “Stay out of my classroom, *out of my business*, and no one will see this video.”

She stares back at me, defeated. Betrayed. Yeah, I know the feeling too well. Only I'm not trying to steal Andrea's job. I simply want to keep the one I have.

Hatred soaks her eyes. "What they say about you is true then."

"You don't know the half of it." I shoulder the bag, flash her a charming smile, and stride into the hall. "Good night, Ms. Augustin."

IVORY

Prescott tangles his hand in my hair, holding my face against his lap.

His penis stabs the back of my throat, and I gag.

Yellow-flowered tie. Cinnamon gum.

The buckle of his belt clanks with his thrusts. The console between the front seats digs into my chest.

Chilling blue eyes. The heat of his palm on my backside.

A bass-heavy song thumps from the car radio, and I can't find my safe place. I'm not numb enough, not far enough away. I'm trying, trying... I can't gather the notes for Scriabin's Sonata No.9.

The tick of a mechanical watch. The gentle stroke of his breaths.

Tears well in my eyes and cling to my lashes. I can't focus. Can't escape.

All I can think about is the spanking and how I wouldn't mind another if it ends with an almost-kiss from Mr. Marceaux.

EMERIC

Wedge between *Hook 'Em Up* deli and a vintage jewelry shop called *Pawn of the Dead* resides the only music store in Treme. At least, I think this is a music store. Standing on the broken sidewalk, I hang my sunglasses on the collar of my t-shirt and squint against the glare of the sun.

Security bars crisscross the glass front. There's no open sign or any kind of advertisement, and the grime on the windows obscures my view of the dark interior. Since it's Saturday, the store might not be open. Finding Ivory inside is even less likely.

But I'm not here for her. I couldn't sleep last night thinking about where she gets her money and who put those unsettling shadows in her eyes. This Stogie guy might be an avenue to answers, and hopefully, this visit will soothe my nagging need to meet the man she spends her time with.

I check my phone, confirm the address, and try the door.

The jingling bell overhead announces me as I step into a cluttered room of instruments. Voices whisper from the back, guiding my feet through the maze of shelves, drum sets, and miscellaneous junk.

"You need to eat more."

I can't see her around the rows of display racks, but her sexy lilt speeds my strides and buzzes my body with excitement.

Coming here to meet a man named after a cigar, I expected to walk into a stale cloud of leather and smoke, but instead, the air is remarkably fresh, especially for such an old building.

“Stop nagging,” a deep voice says, “and let an old man nap.”

“But you have a customer.” Her sigh drifts from behind a tall shelf filled with books.

I step into view and find her sitting on the floor, back to the wall, and bare legs stretched out before her. My hands flex as I silently thank the fashion Gods for short-shorts. She’s a half-naked fantasy of bronzed skin and devious curves. An *illegal* fantasy.

Lids lifting, her eyes collide with mine and widen. The textbook in her hands tumbles to the floor to join the dozen others surrounding her. “Mr. Marceaux?”

“Miss Westbrook.” I’m struck with the wild urge to grin like a jackass, but I manage to maintain a stoic mask.

Her gaze sweeps from my disheveled hair and t-shirt to my dark jeans and Doc Martens. I wish I could read her thoughts as she takes me in for the first time without the pageantry of waistcoats and ties. She makes another head-to-toe pass, nibbling her lip and stirring a torrent of sensations inside me.

The old man beside her sits taller on the metal chair. A frayed baseball cap perches high on his bald head, and horizontal wrinkles crease the broad bridge of his nose, deepening into more lines on his dark-skinned brow. His closed-mouth smile is the kind men wear when they’re toothless and...eighty? Ninety? I don’t know, but this guy is ancient.

His arm trembles as he reaches for the wall in an attempt to stand.

“Don’t get up.” I step toward him, offering my hand to shake his. “I’m Emeric. You must be—”

“Stogie.” He clasps my hand with a surprisingly strong grip and sits back.

Ivory bends to stand, and her tiny tank top flashes me a sinful view of her full tits. Jesus, fuck, if she doesn't adjust that shirt, I'll be swinging from six to midnight with no way to hide it.

Clutching the low neckline in a subtle tug, she studies me with a bewildered expression. "What are you doing here?"

I meet Stogie's watchful gaze and let him see the questions in mine. *Do you know who I am? How well do you know Ivory?*

He hooks his thumbs under the elastic of his red suspenders and blatantly stares me up and down. His smile fades, and his skeletal frame locks up. Apparently, his cloudy eyes see a lot more than they let on. "Ivory, why don't you go on in the back and warm up one of them frozen meals?"

She crosses her arms, eyes narrowed. "Oh, *now* you want to eat?"

"I'd love a fresh pot of coffee and some of that cobbler you made, too." He grips the seat of the chair and scoots forward. "Don't keep an old man waiting."

She huffs and steps out of the pile of books, pointing a finger at him. "Be nice."

Then she looks at me, her expression vulnerable and hesitant, as if begging me to do the same.

The moment she disappears in the back room, he makes a painfully-slow attempt to climb to his feet while holding my gaze. "I know your kind."

My hackles go up, but the manners my mother ingrained in me has me reaching out to help him stand.

He glares at my hand, scoffs at it, and rises on wobbly legs.

I swallow down my irritation. "Enlighten me on *my kind*."

His hunched frame shuffles past me and toward the front of the store. I follow, glad to be moving out of Ivory's range of hearing.

He circles behind the front counter and settles on a tall stool. Unhurried, he examines my expensive watch, fit physique, wide-stance, and raised chin. I know what he sees. A wealthy, cocksure man in his sexual prime standing in a run-down neighborhood for one reason.

He'd be right.

Finally, he stoops forward and rests weathered forearms on the counter. "That girl has had a rough go of it, and you're the kind of man that'll make it worse."

There's a treasure-trove of answers beneath his words, and I need to discover every one of them. "Explain."

"You're the kind of man that sets his sights on something and doesn't let go till he possesses it."

He's far too shrewd for pretense, so I don't bother playing dumb. "Doesn't matter what I've set my sights on. I'm her teacher."

"Yes." Judgment creases his eyes. "You are."

I measure my breaths, expressionless. "She talks to you. About me."

"She's said nothing incriminating, but she doesn't have to. She's mentioned you more in the past week than all her other teachers combined in three years." He drums gnarled knuckles on the glass counter. "Whatever you're doing with her, she wants to trust you." His hand quiets, eyes unblinking. "The kind of trust she gives *no one*. But once you have what you want and discard her like your kind do, her distrust in men will be irreparable."

An ice-cold wave of dizziness overtakes me as my mind jumps to sickening images of older men, brutal men, raping her.

I place my palms calmly on the counter and lean in. "Tell me what happened to her."

He looks away, his attention on the back room. "She doesn't talk about the bad things. I'm not sure she even distinguishes between the bad and the not-so bad. What

happens to her is *life*. It's all she knows." His overcast eyes return to mine. "She's not just financially poor. She's short of love, affection, and protection. She needs a good example in her life, someone with a *selfless* interest in her."

"You're not that example?"

"I'm just a broke old man with one foot in the grave. I can't buy her textbooks and fancy gadgets. I don't hold her dream of attending a music college in my hands. And I don't have the power to steal her heart."

An overwhelming swell of respect rises in my chest. I can't begrudge this man for caring about her enough to say that shit to my face. I can't even argue with him, because in some ways, he's right. I have nothing to offer her except heartache and disappointment.

"But you give her a place to practice." Glancing behind me, I spot the only piano in the store and thrust my chin toward the old Steinway. "Is it for sale?"

The strained look in his eyes says *no*, but the splintered floorboards, rickety display racks, and overall dilapidated appearance of the shop tells me he needs the revenue. Desperately.

"She doesn't know I get offers for it." His hands clench on the counter. "I won't sell her piano."

But someday, maybe soon, he'll be forced to accept one of those offers because it's the most valuable merchandise in his inventory.

I pull the wallet from my back pocket and place my credit card on the counter. "Charge it to my card, as well as the cost to have it delivered to her house."

He glares at the black American Express then lifts his glassy eyes to me. "She doesn't want a piano at her house. She's *here* because she doesn't want to be *there*."

My stomach sinks with dread. "Fine. Keep it here. Put the receipt in her name, and don't tell her she owns it or who bought it unless she asks." I slide the card toward his trembling hands and wait for him to look at me. "What is she

avoiding at her house? You know her well enough to have a damn good guess.”

He picks up the card and swivels to the cash register. “What do you get out of this?” He nods at the piano.

“Peace of mind. Answer my question.”

He rings up the purchase, lips pinched between his gums, refusing to talk.

Ivory emerges from the back room with a tray of food and sets a disposable dish of noodles and some kind of bastardized pastry on the counter.

“I...um...” She stares at the charred edges of crust. “Burnt it? Or maybe...” She pokes a finger in the doughy center, and the whole thing caves in. Her cheeks flush. “I should stick with what I’m good at.”

Like receiving spankings and playing piano? Or even better, playing piano *while* I spank her.

She looks at Stogie, the card in his hand, and meets my gaze. “What did you buy?”

I harden my eyes in a silent *None of your business*. “Have you eaten lunch?”

She shakes her head.

“Gather your things and join me.”

“Oh, I...” At my impatient expression, she rubs the back of her neck. “Okay.”

As soon as she walks out of earshot, I turn back to Stogie. “How do her living expenses get paid?”

“I believe she covers the bulk of it.” He watches me warily. “I employ her in the summer to help with some of that.”

“And when she’s in school?”

He sets the receipt and a pen on the counter and scratches his whiskered cheek. “I don’t know.”

The conflict in his dark eyes affirms she doesn't share these details, but... "She may not tell you, but you *know*."

He offers my card back. I grip it, but he doesn't release it, his focus on the square plastic connecting our hands. Then he lets go and looks up. "You know, too."

Admirers. Stalkers. Creepers. Men with money and needs and the immorality to trap a beautiful young girl?

I feel the muscles pulling and tightening in my neck as anger burns in my throat. "I didn't buy that piano to—"

"I know. Which is why I sold it to you, and why I will never tell her you bought it, even if she asks." He bends closer, hands braced on the counter. "She owes you *nothing*."

"Whether or not you trust me, I *am* concerned about her well-being, specifically pertaining to her home life." I sign the receipt and scribble my phone number at the top. "Call me if anything suspicious, *anything at all*, arises with her."

Ivory returns to the front with an overstuffed satchel bundled in her arms. I move to take the heavy weight from her, but she shakes her head.

"I'll be back tonight." She stores it behind the front counter and says her goodbyes to Stogie.

Holding the door for her, I glance at the old man. "Nice to meet you."

He nods, his mouth pulling down at the corners.

Yeah, he has every right to not trust me. I don't trust me, either.

IVORY

“Is the deli next door any good?” Mr. Marceaux holds the door as I follow him out of Stogie’s shop.

“Only the best sandwiches in New Orleans.” My stomach flutters with butterflies. Because I’m hungry. For food. Not because I’ll be eating food with Mr. Marceaux.

Instead of turning toward the deli, he steps to the curb and unlocks the passenger door of a shiny black muscle car. “Stay here while I grab lunch.”

I take in the GTO badge on the door panel, the 70’s-style woodgrain dash, and the black vinyl interior, wondering why he drives such an old ride. “We’re not eating there?”

He removes the aviators from the neck of his t-shirt and slides them on. “No.”

Everything inside me melts. From the heat of the blinding sun? Definitely the sun.

I lower into the bucket seat and give him my order while he starts the engine and turns on the A/C.

As he walks with long fluid strides toward the deli, I can’t *not* stare at him, because sweet Jesus, I never imagined him in anything except a tie, waistcoat, and buttoned shirt with rolled-up sleeves. But he wears blue jeans like a second skin. The denim was made for his body, cupping his ass and stretching across his thighs as he lengthens his gait. The thin gray t-shirt clings to ridges of muscle in his back and shoulders, the

sleeves straining around the bulges of his biceps, just like those models in fitness magazines.

I like the fancy clothes better. They're safer, like a professional barrier to remind me he's my teacher.

When he disappears inside the deli, I shift my attention to his car. The loud rumble of the engine and burnt-oil fume of the exhaust. The scent of warm cinnamon wafting from the pack of gum that bakes in the sun on the dash. The stiff seat beneath me, vibrating with the strength of the motor. The silver knobs of the old radio and Axl Rose crooning through the speakers. It's all so distinctive and different, fascinating and masculine. Like him.

It feels surreal, sitting here. In his personal space. Willingly.

It's just lunch.

With my teacher. On a Saturday.

I wipe clammy palms on my thighs, wishing I wore something nicer. And less revealing.

Why is he here? In my neighborhood? No one from Le Moyne ventures into my world, as if the poverty might stain their expensive shoes or something. Yet here he is. What does he want?

By the time he returns, my nerves are twisted to nauseous levels.

"Where are we going?" I ask.

"Down the street." He grips the steering wheel with a strong hand and merges into traffic, slowly, confidently, like this is his road and he has all the time in the world.

A minute later, he pulls into Louis Armstrong Park and sets his sunglasses in the cup holder. A short walk takes us to a shaded park bench, where we sit side-by-side and dig into our *Hook 'Em Up* sandwiches. The thick bread is piled high with meats and cheeses, requiring two hands to hold it.

Halfway through the sandwich, my stomach aches. I wrap up the leftovers, wipe my mouth with a napkin, and stare out

over the green-tinged duck pond. “What did you and Stogie talk about?”

“You.”

Maybe I should be surprised by his honesty, but I’m not. He’s always been direct with me, a trait I’ve come to depend on. If only I could do the same. I want to tell him everything. But he would report me. How could he not?

He takes another bite, and I covertly study his jaw flexing and throat moving as he chews. It’s strange watching a man eat. I’ve never done that. Not consciously. I feel like I’m invading his privacy.

When he goes for another bite, I realize he’s not going to elaborate.

“What about me?”

He swallows, grins. “This is really good.” Another bite. Then another.

Two young black men walk along the opposite side of the pond, but the park is otherwise empty, the sun too high and hot for a lazy stroll.

“Mr. Marceaux...”

He continues to ignore me as he finishes his lunch between long draws on his bottled water. Then he sets my uneaten portion aside, throws the trash away, and lounges against the back of the bench beside me, hands relaxed on his thighs. “I asked him how your living expenses get paid.”

Jesus, he’s like a dog with a bone. I twist and untwist the lid on my water. What would Stogie think of me if he knew what I’m doing? And Mr. Marceaux? He’d probably spank me then expel me. My heart gives a heavy thump.

“What else did you talk about?”

He turns to face me. “Tell me why I’m here.”

To finish that almost-kiss? Do I want that? My hands shake. “I don’t know.”

“You do know, and I want to hear you say it.”

I look away, eyes on the pond, but every inch of my body focuses on him. On the shift in his breathing, the tick of his watch, the lift of his arm as he touches my chin and forces my head to turn back.

His eyes reflect all the luminous shades of the sky, but they're colder, so terrifying this close up. I refocus on something safer, the ducks on the pond. But his gaze fills my view, his face staying with me, his whole body moving, anticipating my moves. He won't let me escape him. I want to run.

And I want him to catch me.

The fight in my muscles evaporates as he pulls me into his lap. My pulse kicks up when he arranges my legs to straddle him. His thighs are columns of stone beneath me, powerful and supportive.

Sitting on him, against him, isn't a bad feeling. It's much safer than being beneath him, which has been my only experience with other men. But I don't know where to put my hands. After an awkward moment, I let my fingers gravitate to his t-shirt.

His chest twitches against my palms, the ridges and indentations of muscle like bricks in my hands, so unlike anything I've ever felt.

I muster the courage to look up, absorbing the dark shadow on his jawline and the defined curves of his cheekbones. The blue hues in his meteoric eyes fire a voltage of warmth way down deep, below my waist, between my legs. The sensation makes me want to reach up and trace the shape of his lips. But I'm too nervous, too unsure.

It feels like there are invisible strands between us and they're winding tighter, pulling, shrinking, and strumming with tension.

I sway closer. "Is this why you're here?"

He meets me halfway, dipping his head, and his mouth drags a sigh across my neck.

I shiver and heat up. My fingers tighten on his shirt, my hips relax in his lap, and a strife of emotions frantically flap in my brain. The position puts my pussy right up against him, flush with the long rigid evidence of his hunger. It should be enough to make me recoil, to pull away, but I can't. I don't want to.

"Ivory," he breathes along my jaw. His hands clench against my back, pulling my chest to his as he nibbles a trail of pleasure to the corner of my lips. "Yes."

His mouth slides over mine, lips brushing, warm and soft and *nice*. Strong hands move up my neck, cup my jaw, and angle my head. He presses his lips harder, parting them, opening mine, and the first touch of his tongue shoots a thrill of electricity down my back.

My whole body should be shrinking, cringing with disgust, yet the rub of his tongue, the flavor of his mouth, and the pressure of his fingers against my head liquefies my insides into a needy simmer. Instead of jerking away from the strokes of his tongue, I lean in, stretching my mouth and deepening the connection.

A groan vibrates in his chest, and my own moan claws out as his lips move deliciously, firmly, against mine, touching me in a way I've never wanted or enjoyed. Over the past four years, I've been fed pools of drool and gagged by countless probing tongues. But I've never been kissed. Not like this. And I've never kissed back. Never experienced this kind of intimacy with a man while thinking, *Don't stop*.

The hands on my head guide me closer, demanding I stay with him. How crazy is it that I don't want to be anywhere else? I can't even close my eyes for fear he'll disappear.

Thickets of black lashes splay over his cheekbones. The muscles in his face contract with the urgency of his swirling tongue.

"You're so fucking beautiful," he whispers against my lips then attacks my mouth with renewed hunger.

His chest and hips rock against mine. My inhales sharpen, and his exhales pull grunts of satisfaction from his throat.

“I can’t stay away.” Another drugging kiss. “I want you.” He nibbles my lower lip, licks just inside the seam, then rests his forehead against mine. “You make me want things I can’t have.”

I angle forward to refasten our mouths, but his grip on my jaw holds me still.

“We have to stop.” His fingers curl in my hair as his face draws away, leaving a tingling chill on my cheeks.

I flatten my palms on his sweat-damp chest. “I didn’t kiss you to help my chances for Leopold.”

“Oh, Ivory.” His hands tremble as they glide around my neck, over my shoulders, and down my arms. “So young and straightforward.” He grips my thighs, just below the hem of the shorts, and rolls his hips beneath my ass. “So perfect.”

The hard length of him pulses against the crotch of my shorts. Why isn’t that triggering my gag reflex? Why aren’t I curling up and reaching for the safe place in my head?

Why do I want to unzip his jeans and gaze upon that mysterious part of him? Why do I want to hold it in my hands and make his body flex in pleasure?

“This ends now.” He clutches my waist and sets me on the bench beside him.

My chest tightens, rejecting those words. No more touches? No more kisses? “What? Why?”

“It’s reckless. Dangerous.” He bows forward and braces elbows on his spread knees, staring out across the park.

“Because of Ms. Augustin?”

“She’s not a concern, but there’ll be others.” His eyes cut to mine, flinty and unmoving. “There’s always someone watching, waiting to ruin the prosperity of a life they don’t have.”

No one wants my life, and people don't concern themselves with what happens in Treme. "You can come here and kiss me whenever—"

"I'm not a school boy, Ivory. This isn't an innocent make-out session behind the bleachers." In a blur of movement, he's on me, chest against mine and strong fingers wrapped around my neck. "The things I want to do to you would give you nightmares."

He's trying to scare me, but he's not cutting my air. He administers his own punishments, but the sickness inside me craves more of his spankings. He doesn't give me nightmares. He makes me float through the air in a dream.

He releases my neck and perches on the edge of the bench, putting two feet of turmoil between us. My hands shake to reach for him, my entire body aching to climb back in his lap and return to the safety of his arms. For the first time in my life, I want a man to touch me, and he's...casting me away?

"I don't want this to end," I whisper, the backs of my eyes burning.

"I didn't ask for your opinion."

His rejection lands in my stomach like a hot coal, stealing my breath and filling my tear ducts with moisture.

"Shit." He glares at my wet eyes, his expression paling beneath a sheen of sweat. "You *cannot* fall in love with me."

"Cannot...what?" I jerk back, inhaling sharply and swiping at a runaway tear. "Oh my God, of all the cocky, arrogant things to say! I would never."

"I'm offended." He laughs, but it's strained. "High school girls have a way of falling fast and ignorantly in love."

"Well, I'm offended you think I'm that ignorant." I tug at the hem of my shorts. "No worries, Mr. Marceaux. Thoughts of love haven't even crossed my mind."

He stares at the pond. "I know you're not ignorant, Ivory. It's just..."

With a hand resting against his mouth, he bends against his knees and watches the ducks preen and splash in the water. But he's not really watching, not with his gaze turned inward and his expression morphing with whatever he's thinking about.

Why would he even mention love? If his mind went there, does that mean he's feeling something? It was a good kiss. For the love of God, it was a kiss I'll remember for the rest of my life, one I'll compare all future kisses against. But love? What does he even know about that?

I glance over at him, and something clicks painfully in my mind. "You loved her, didn't you? That teacher in Shreveport? Joanne?"

Please say no.

He drops his hands, holding them between his knees, forearms braced on his thighs, as he stares at the ground.

"I still love her." He meets my eyes. "As much as I hate her."

Jealousy fires ignorantly through my insides, surging like bile in my throat. I would love to be loved, even if it comes with hatred. It's better than nothing at all. "Will you tell me what happened?"

He reclines and rests an arm along the back of the bench. "I value the honesty between us." His hand sifts through the ends of my hair. "I don't want that to end."

My heart squeezes at the thought of anything ending between us, but I'll never lie to him. At least, not about the stuff that won't get me expelled.

"We were together four years." His fingers move through my hair, softly, hypnotically. "With Shreveport's non-fraternization policy, our relationship was a secret. We owned separate houses, but lived together in one. Drove separately to school. Kept our interactions professional at work. Until..."

He doesn't have to finish that sentence. I'm consumed with images of her mouth gagged with his tie, wrists bound by his belt, and her body bent as he fucked her on a desk. Is she a

better musician than me? Smarter? Prettier? Did he tell her she's *so fucking beautiful*, too? I ball my hands into fists. The sexual positions don't affect me nearly as much as the idea of him doing those things with someone else.

With one hand in my hair, he scoots closer and places the other over my fists, prying them open. "We were just playing out a fantasy. Having a little fun after hours."

"Then what happened? How did you lose—? Shit, did she set you up?"

His fingers twitch against mine. "No. But getting caught like that put her in a precarious position. She could admit she violated the non-fraternization policy, that she was willingly tied up, and lose her job in a shroud of shame that would follow her everywhere. Or she could call it what it looked like. Bound and gagged and raped. Either way, I was getting fired."

Rape. I turn that word over in my head, examining it from all angles. I think I experience it sometimes, but I never know what to do about it. A girl can say she was forced. A man can claim she wanted it. The police decide who's telling the truth, and if they side with the man? He *will* retaliate against the girl.

But it doesn't sound like Mr. Marceaux struck back.

A crazy surge of protectiveness—*for him*—buzzes through me. "You could've defended yourself. Told them about your relationship. Proved you were living together. At the very least, she would've lost her job and you wouldn't have been charged with forcing her."

"The rape charges didn't stick. The stigma did, but I don't give a shit about that. There are a million things I could've done to ruin her job. Things I can still do."

"But you love her." Oh God, why does my heart hurt so badly?

His expression darkens with a deep scowl. "And she loves her career." He pulls his hands away and sits forward on the bench, his profile etched in pain. "She's Head of School at Shreveport now."

What a bitch. “I’m sorry, but she sounds awful. How can you possibly love her?”

He pinches the bridge of his nose and closes his eyes. “Sometimes you love people you shouldn’t, and in the endless space of that love, nothing else matters.” When he lifts his head, his entire demeanor changes. The man in the waistcoat and tie returns with a fortified jaw and hard eyes as he rises and clasps his hands behind his back. “No more touching and kissing, Miss Westbrook. I’m your teacher, your mentor, and nothing more.”

I jump to my feet. “I would never do that to you. I can’t even fathom ruining your career.”

He laughs, but it sounds more like a snarl. “If we were caught doing something inappropriate, you would have to choose between my career and your education, between a man you’ve known for a week and a dream you’ve chased for three years. What choice would you make?”

Leopold shoves itself into my mind, but I fight it back, refusing to admit it. “We’ll be careful.”

“Exactly. Go home.” He thrusts his finger in the direction of my house.

I glance over my shoulder. If it weren’t for the trees, I’d be able to see my house from here. How does he know where I live? The address in my file?

When I look back, he’s walking away, hands tucked in his front pockets and head down. A bleeding, miserable kind of longing cleaves through my chest. He’s done.

I grab the uneaten sandwich from the bench and trudge along the track toward my house, each step heavier and harder to take. Maybe I don’t have to obey him this time? Maybe this is one of those rules that are meant to be broken?

Spinning around, I race after him. He pauses at the clapping sound of my ballet flats, his broad shoulders tightening the t-shirt. But he doesn’t turn.

I circle the towering pillar of his body, and holy hell, he’s so tall and dark and beautiful. And angry. Deep lines fan from

the corners of his icy eyes, his lips a slash of displeasure, and the cords in his neck stretched beneath whiskered skin.

Bolstering my spine, I step up to him and wrap my arms around his waist. Every solid inch I touch flexes with muscle.

He holds his hands in his pockets, his chest lifting with a deep breath. “You’re disobeying me.”

I press my cheek against the ledge of his pecs. “I won’t hurt you. I promise.”

“*I will hurt you.*”

“Okay.”

His hands grip my shoulders, forcing me back a step, but he doesn’t let go. He bends his knees, putting his eyes at the same level as mine. “Tell me who hurt you, and I’ll give you anything you want.”

My pulse hammers, and my molars crash together. Did he plan this? Did he touch and kiss me until my head spun, only to take it all back so he could dangle it as an incentive to talk?

I back up, shifting out of arm’s reach and shaking my head.

His face tightens, and my stomach caves in. I hate disappointing him.

With a hand on his hip and the other pointing toward my house, he stares at the ground.

Good, because I hate his eyes. And I adore them, too. Especially when he touches me and tells me I’m beautiful. And now, he’s punishing me by refusing to look at me.

In a fog of shame, I hug the sandwich to my chest and drag my feet home. As I walk, I sneak peeks over my shoulder. He doesn’t move. I can’t see his eyes, but I know they’re following me, watching me, protecting me.

Whatever this is, however inappropriate and risky, he doesn’t want it to end. Spending four private hours a day together for the rest of the year, it’s only going to become *more*. More punishments, more music, more Mr. Marceaux. I don’t care what he says. This isn’t over.

EMERIC

“It’s over.” I slam the beer bottle down harder than I intended and cringe at the cracking sound on Mom’s glass table. Shit. I rub a finger over the chip and glance at her apologetically. “Sorry, Mom.”

“I don’t care about the damn table. I’m concerned about *you*.” She corks a wine bottle on the back counter and crosses the kitchen to sit beside me, a glass of red cupped in her hand. Setting it on the table, she twists the stem and gathers her words. “I know you’ve been unhappy for a while, but this is different. You’ve been a hot-tempered, sulky pain-in-the-ass for the past few weeks.”

Five weeks, to be exact.

Five weeks since I kissed Ivory. Since I felt her skin beneath my hands. Since I punished her the way we both need. Five agonizing weeks since I sent her home in the park with regret overrunning my nervous system.

“Honey.” She places her hand on my forearm and gives it a firm squeeze. “Does Joanne know it’s over?”

Joanne is still texting me, but her messages go unanswered. I know what she wants, she knows what I want, and neither of us is willing to compromise.

“She still stubbornly refuses to accept my terms.” I shove a hand through the overlong strands touching my forehead. Christ, I need a haircut. “This has nothing to do with her.”

“Oh.” Mom’s persistent blue eyes roam my face, searching for answers. “This isn’t about your car, is it?”

“No, I got the car back yesterday.”

Though that put me in one helluva mood. After watching Ivory walk away, I made my way back to the parking lot, and the GTO was gone. Stolen. Fucking jacked. I had to call Deb to take me to the police station. When she dropped me off at home, I stood on the doorstep, vibrating with turmoil as I told her, *No, I’m not going to fuck you*. I should’ve been nicer to her for helping me—with the ride and with Beverly Rivard’s husband—but I was too fucking distraught to let her in.

The GTO wasn’t the only thing I lost in the park that day.

The cops recovered my car, the interior gutted and body stripped. It took weeks to bring it back to mint condition.

But Ivory... My hand clenches around the bottle. I’m making every effort I can to ensure the thing between us isn’t recovered. The attraction remains, stronger than ever, burning like a red-hot ember. It sizzles to be stoked when I sit beside her on the piano bench, hisses with sparks when I slap her wrists for missing a note, and crackles and pops every damn time our eyes connect.

Our first week together moved so fucking fast my nerves are still running wild with hunger. If I hadn’t pulled back, she would be in my bed right now, her seventeen-year-old body bowing and flushing beneath my belt and her huge adoring eyes begging me for things I’m unable to give her. Leopold. An open, lawful relationship. My heart...

She’s too young to separate sex and love, and I’ve lost interest in anything beyond physical pleasure.

Once you have what you want, her distrust in men will be irreparable.

Mom watches me in that intuitive way she does, her soft expression framed by black hair that curls above her shoulders. She reaches up to pinch the ends of a loose lock, brushing the tuft back and forth along her jaw as she studies me. I chug the beer and pretend to ignore her.

She drops her hand and tilts her head. “You met someone.”

Here we go. “No, I—”

“Emeric Michael Marceaux, don’t you lie to your mother.”

I stand and move to the counter, leaning against it and balancing the bottle on the ledge. “Not talking about this with you, Mom.”

I want to, but voicing it makes it real.

Footsteps approach the kitchen doorway.

“Not talking about what?” Dad wanders in, reading glasses perched on the end of his nose, his face buried in his phone.

“Emeric met someone.” She smiles over the rim of her wine glass, eyes locked on me.

Without looking up from his phone, he walks past her and glides his fingers along the back of her neck. “Let’s hope she’s better than the last one.”

Better? Joanne is reality. Ivory’s an intoxicating dream, the kind that visits a man at night, veiled by the darkness of dusk and safely pursued in the secret corners of the mind. But in daylight, she’s a dangerous fantasy, tempting a man to do things with his eyes wide open.

“Who is she?” Mom sips her wine.

“She’s off-limits,” I say quickly and turn to Dad. “How’s that new physician you hired at the clinic?”

“He’s...fine.” Reservation deepens his voice.

Of course, he knows I’m evading.

He pockets the phone and lowers into the chair across the round table from Mom. “Is this woman married?”

I shake my head and direct my eyes to my Doc Martens.

It’s Saturday night. I’m supposed to be in a French Quarter hotel room, trussing up Chloe’s huge tits, flogging Deb’s ass, and reeking of sex. But the moment I climbed into the GTO, my mind drifted to Ivory. My subconscious took hold of the

wheel and a few minutes later, I was sitting in the driveway of my parents' estate in the Garden District.

Because I *need* to talk about this. If there's anyone in this world I trust enough with this conversation, they're in this room. They know about the deal I made with Beverly, as well as every dirty detail of my relationship with Joanne. Not once have they judged me. Hell, they hired the team of lawyers that convinced Joanne to drop the rape charge.

"Is she...?" The question in Mom's tone pitches with alarm. And realization. "Oh no, Emeric."

Before Mom climbed the ranks to Provost of Leopold, she was a high school teacher. When I was younger, Mrs. Laura Marceaux was too pretty for my comfort, with her gaggle of teenage admirers, including the guys I ran around with. Even in her fifties, she still turns heads with her youthful face, warm smile, and gentle eyes.

Those eyes bore into me now, wide and unblinking, because she knows exactly what I'm not saying.

I pivot toward the counter and brace my arms on the granite surface, my shoulders slumping with the weight of my words. "It's over."

"What, *exactly*, is over?" Her voice floats behind me, full of concern.

"Sit down," Dad says with less tenderness.

I finish my beer, grab another, and sit in the chair between them. "She's a senior at Le Moyne." I let that settle on the table before continuing. "When she walked into my classroom on the first day...swear to God, I thought she was a teacher." I rub a hand down my face and swallow another swig of hops. "She doesn't look like a high school student."

Mom reaches across the table and rests her hand on my wrist.

They don't interrupt as I explain Ivory's financial situation, musical talent, my suspicions of abuse, my visit with Stogie, and her desire to attend Leopold. They share anxious looks when I mention the kiss in the park and the past five weeks of

hell. I even admit to driving the streets after her private lessons, trying to track her path to the bus stop. But she never takes the same route, and most often, I don't spot her at all.

I wrestle with the urge to leave out the most implicating part, but my need for full disclosure wins. "I spanked her. In the classroom."

Their faces pale, but neither asks if it was consensual. Their trust in me is infinite, which makes the final piece easier to spit out.

"I was caught with her in my lap afterward. By a colleague." *Fucking Shreveport all over again.* "I blackmailed the teacher."

Mom reaches for her wine and finishes it off.

When I meet Dad's eyes, he sits back, removes his glasses, and cleans them with the folds of his shirt. "Blackmail how?"

"You don't want to know."

"Well." Mom stands and walks to the counter to refill her glass. "You certainly know how to test the limits of social acceptance, but I know where you get it from." She returns to the table, her eyes glimmering at Dad. "Your father loves to spank—"

"Mom," I groan. "Don't make this more awkward."

She lowers into the chair, her expression sobering. "You said she's a gifted pianist? Is she more deserving of Leopold than the one you want me to push through?"

Though retired, Mom still flies out to New York once a month for board meetings. Even after everything I told her, I know she'll guarantee a placement for one of my referrals.

The deal with Beverly has been plaguing me for weeks. Ivory belongs at Leopold. Not because she's beautiful and genuine and in desperate need of saving. She's all those things, but I owe her my referral because she's the best goddamn musician at Le Moyne.

"Without a doubt, she deserves that spot." My chest lifts with passion in my voice. "She's incredible."

“You’re in a tough position.” Mom’s hand finds mine, squeezing my fingers. “I don’t envy you, but honey, if you pursue a relationship with her, it won’t turn out like Shreveport.”

Because I didn’t commit a crime with Joanne. Our relationship was consensual, not illegal. But Ivory? Student-teacher misconduct doesn’t just get swept under the carpet. It makes headline news. The best lawyers in the world couldn’t save me from the charges that would follow if I were caught with her.

“You need to cut your losses, son.” Dad sets his glasses on his nose and folds his arms on the table, leaning in. “Quit that damn job, end things once and for all with Joanne, and move out of state if you have to. The shit at Shreveport can only follow you so far.”

Mom shakes her head. “Frank, don’t tell him that. Our family is finally back together in New Orleans and—”

“No, Mom. He’s right.” I shove away from the table and empty my unfinished beer in the sink.

I’m already deliriously drunk on Ivory Westbrook, and I don’t know how much longer I’ll last without giving in.

I can keep the job, try to ignore this forbidden attraction, ultimately fail, and risk going to jail. Or I can quit Le Moyne, remove the temptation from my life, and fuck me, never see her again.

My chest hurts with the agonizing truth. I know... God help me, I know what I need to do.

IVORY

“This is all your fault!”

My mom’s tear-drenched screech cuts through me, but it’s the hatred in her dark eyes that makes my insides bleed.

I don’t even know what I’m being blamed for. It’s the middle of the night, and she stormed in here, flicking on the lights and waking me with her crazy wailing.

Lying on the couch where I sleep, I pull my legs closer to my body, curling smaller on my side and holding Schubert to my chest. “H-how? How is *what* my fault?”

She came home a month ago, crying about the boyfriend who broke up with her. She hasn’t stopped crying.

“If it wasn’t for your...your...” She paces through the parlor and trips over her own feet, yanking on the cropped strands of her hair. “Fucking selfish bullshit!”

She was pretty once, soft and curvy with contentment glinting in her eyes. But drugs and grief have withered her to bones and rancor. Dad would be as heartbroken as I am.

If I don’t get accepted into Leopold, if I never find a way out of Treme, will I end up like that? Whenever my mind flashes forward, I see myself forever chained to Lorenzo and his violent needs. How could I not turn to drugs as an escape from the torment of his touch? That future terrifies me, but it also hardens me. I’ll make it out of here, no matter the cost.

My mom stumbles through the room, clawing at her sunken face as if trying to remove imagined objects. She must

be coming down from whatever she poisoned herself with, her entire body tweaking with unhappiness.

She blames me for that. Her unhappiness. I'm the reason she uses, the reason she's poor, the reason she can't find a job or keep a boyfriend.

I suppose, in a way, I *am* responsible for her misery. My chest aches to go to her, to hug and comfort her. But she doesn't tolerate those things from me.

Multiple footsteps advance from the back of the house. I bury my nose in the comforting kitty smell of Schubert's hair and steady my breathing.

Lorenzo and Shane push into the parlor, both dressed in jeans and t-shirts. On their way out or just coming home? I glance at my watch on the side table. *3:15 AM*. I rub my eyes. I have to get ready for school in two hours.

Lorenzo gives my mom a wide berth as Shane goes to her, pulling her hands from her face.

"Mom, stop. You're hurting yourself." He adjusts the straps of her nightie on her bony shoulders and glares at me. "Why are you letting her do this?"

Seriously? I sit up, holding Schubert in my lap. "I'm not the one feeding her drugs."

Lorenzo reclines on the opposite end of the couch, watching my mom with amusement. I run a trembling hand through Schubert's fur. *Lorenzo won't try anything. He probably won't even look at me.*

My mom brings a whirlwind of drama when she comes home, but there's safety in her presence. She and Shane don't believe my accusations about Lorenzo hurting me, but Lorenzo is always on his best behavior when they're in the room. I've evaded the rumble of his motorcycle on my walks to and from school, and he hasn't so much as touched me since my mom came home. Even so, the impatience thrumming from him is palpable.

My mom stares up at Shane, her gaze softening for a calm moment before it slashes through the room and lands on me.

“You took everything from me.”

My throat tightens and burns.

She steps toward me, scratching at her scrawny arm. “I wish you were never born.”

Tears prick my eyes. *It’s just the drugs talking.*

Another step, this one stronger, more sober, her eyes hard and clear. “I hate you, you selfish little bitch.”

Moisture blurs my vision, and even though she’s told me those words a thousand times, I still try. “I love you, Mom.”

She launches toward me, screaming, but Shane catches her with the hook of his arm around her waist.

“I hate you. I hate you.” She bucks in his hold, trying to get to me, her boobs bouncing and falling out of her flimsy nightie. “You ruined my life!”

“I know, Mom.” Shane drags her out of the room. “I’ll get you what you need.”

She doesn’t need the drugs he’s about to pump into her. She needs a job, a passion, and a goddamn backbone.

I curl up with Schubert and focus on the tongue and groove ceiling, trying to stop the tears from escaping. Maybe I need a backbone, too.

Her screams echo through the house and eventually ebb into sobs. “He loved her more. He took from us, Shane, and gave it all to her.”

My heart shrivels in my chest, and the tears fall, hard and fast. I wait for the couch to bounce beside me, and when it does, Schubert scrambles from my arms.

Lorenzo’s hip bumps my feet with his movements. He leans over and forces me on my back, the sinews in his neck rippling the *Destroy* tattoo. “You think you can avoid me forever?”

“That’s the plan.” I push against his chest as a renewed stream of tears tickle my ears.

His black eyes grow impossibly darker. “So fucking pretty.”

He shoves a hand between my legs, but the cocoon of blankets protects me. For a fleeting moment, I imagine the front door opening and Mr. Marceaux standing on the threshold with his terrifying eyes. I bet Lorenzo would be scared of him, maybe enough to leave me alone.

But Mr. Marceaux won't be returning to Treme. Not tonight. Not ever.

In a surge of anger, I kick and shove, hitting Lorenzo's ribs and trying to free the blankets in my attempt to escape. He grabs my knees and holds them immobile. I scratch at his arms, my lungs panting with the race of my pulse.

The heavy thump of Shane's tread sounds his approach, and we both freeze.

Lorenzo removes his hands and faces forward just as Shane enters the room.

“Sitting too close, dickhead.” Shane smacks the side of Lorenzo's head. “Move.”

I exhale a huge breath and adjust the covers around me.

“I'm heading home anyway.” Lorenzo stands and exchanges a palm-slapping, knuckle-tapping handshake with Shane.

When the door closes behind Lorenzo, Shane plops down on the couch beside me and pulls a pack of cigarettes from his pocket.

Adrenaline lingers in my veins, strumming my nerves. “I don't want him here.”

“Shut the fuck up, Ivory.” He lights the cigarette and lounges against the back of the couch.

I decide to try out a new word. “He *rapes* me, Shane.”

His face reddens then turns darker as he stabs the cigarette in the direction of the door. “That guy saved my life in Iraq.” His volume grows louder, his arms shaking. “I wouldn't be

here, *breathing*, if it weren't for him. So while you're prancing around in your little shorts and teasing him with your fucking tits, remember that. Remember that guy is the reason I'm alive."

I've heard the story, but saving someone's life doesn't give him the right to have sex with their sister. And aren't brothers supposed to defend their sisters? Maybe he doesn't think I'm worthy of that kind of love.

I pull the blankets tighter around me and say quietly, uselessly. "I don't *prance*, and I don't have a lot of clothes. They're Mom's shorts."

"Yet another thing you take from her."

Maybe he'll hit me, and maybe Mr. Marceaux will report the new bruise, but dammit, I can't let this go. "I pay the bills. Not you. Not her. She hasn't once asked me about school or where I get the money. But I'm out there, working my ass off to make sure we don't lose this house."

He takes a drag on the cigarette, his expression tight. "Yeah, I bet you're working your ass. Where *do* you get the money?" He casts me a sidelong glare. "You fucking whoring?"

Shame piles up in my throat. I shake my head. God, if he knew? I don't want to find out what he'd do.

"Fuck this." He stands and flicks his ashes on the floor. "And fuck you." He strides to the front door, opens it, and glances at me over his shoulder. "Mom's right, you know. Dad sold our future to buy yours. He did love you more."

The door slams behind him, jarring more tears from my eyes.

I get it. I do. Their resentment of me runs two-hundred-thousand-dollars deep.

As I flick off the lights and return to the couch, Schubert joins me, purring and nuzzling against my chest in the dark. Sometimes I think Schubert's love is an extension of Dad's. Dad picked him out, surprised me with him, and died the next day. It's like he knew what was coming and wanted to make

sure part of his heart was left behind, to console me when I need him most.

But I don't think Dad loved me more than them. He was just trying to do a good thing with my education. I can imagine, though, how they must feel. I can hardly breathe after Mr. Marceaux's rejection, and that wasn't even close to love.

At least, Marceaux didn't take away the private lessons. I should be glad for that, but the last five weeks have only made me angry. Fuming fucking mad. His strictly professional interactions and cold demeanor are daily reminders that I'm not good enough.

Not good enough for Leopold.

Not good enough to risk being with me.

EMERIC

Despite my misgivings about Ivory's future, I focus on my own. I spend the remainder of the weekend putting out feelers for teaching jobs. By Sunday night, I've applied for a few mid-year openings out of state.

I loathe the idea of leaving Louisiana without resolving one last thing with Joanne. But I have options, and maybe with a little self-control, I'll keep things professional with Ivory until those options pan out.

But it doesn't lessen the intoxicated feeling in my body. As I cross the campus parking lot the next morning, my anticipation in seeing her has me whistling "Patience" with Axl Rose's contagious buoyancy. My blood pumps hotter and my muscles flex tighter with each step toward Crescent Hall.

The mind works in funny ways, making me rationalize all kinds of shit as I enter the building. *If I'm leaving, it won't hurt to touch her today. Just once. Another taste of her lips. That's all. Man, why am I considering quitting? I can't abandon her. How will I fucking breathe? This is bullshit.*

My strides turn away from my classroom and veer toward Campus Center for reasons that can only be described as obsessive.

I run a hand through my hair and slow my gait. I don't remember feeling this wild and out-of-control with Joanne. But I didn't pursue her, either. Not in the beginning and certainly not after. I've never chased a woman. Never had to. That alone is enough to make me question why I'm craning

my neck and scanning the crowd of students, hoping to catch a glimpse of long dark hair. Ivory Westbrook is fucking with my head.

A few halls later, I spot her leaning against a wall of lockers and smiling at Ellie Lai.

The sight of her sends a shot of warm satisfaction through me, locking my legs and paralyzing me twenty feet away. My infatuation might be ridiculous, but it's no less real. I'm completely and thoroughly hypnotized by her.

She stands out among everyone in this school. Not because of the drab style of her white button-up and tattered black skirt, but because she shines above her financial limitations, radiating the kind of beauty that can't be bought. Everything looks lackluster in comparison to the glow of her skin, the brightness of her eyes, and the potency of her aura. I'm so fucking drawn to her I can't see straight.

The flow of students streams between us, but it only takes a moment for her to sense me. When her eyes find mine, her smile slips. Her lips separate, and her hand forms a fist at her side.

She resents me for putting space between us, but she understands why I did it. Even so, we both know that space hasn't accomplished anything. With every passing day, it becomes tauter, thinner, straining to seal up and fall away. Like now.

Her gaze holds mine, piercing me with a vulnerable plea. *Take the risk. Find a way. I need you.* Maybe those are just reflections of my own thoughts, but I want to grab her wrist, pry her fingers open, and wrap them around mine, while promising to give her anything she wants.

Ellie pokes Ivory's arm, and just like that, Ivory looks away, the trance broken.

I blink and suck in a frustrated breath as Ellie's attention bounces between Ivory and me. *Fuck.*

Relaxing my shoulders, I give them a small chin nod and turn down the hall. Thank Christ, none of the other students

seem to have noticed my frozen fixation. I swipe a hand down my face and fight the burning urge to glance back at Ivory.

By the time I reach Crescent Hall, my mind is a mess of disjointed arguments. I can give us both what we want. But can I keep her safe from the fallout? Is she safe now? Without her at my side every damn second, I have no idea who or what is threatening her. I fucking hate it.

I approach an empty intersection in the corridor and pause at the sound of a familiar voice around the corner.

“I don’t care what she agreed to do.” Sebastian Roth’s high-pitched whine grates across my skin.

She who? I hover at the bend and remain out of sight.

“Dude, let go of me.”

I’d recognize Prescott Rivard’s nasally voice anywhere. These two pencil dicks are inseparable friends, which piques my curiosity about their argument.

“I’ve had an arrangement with her for-fucking-ever,” Sebastian whispers, angrily. “She doesn’t belong to you.”

Paranoia punches behind my ribcage. There’s only one girl in this school I would fight over, and I know exactly how they look at her in class every day. I hope, for their sakes, they’re arguing about someone else.

Their heavy grunts echo through the hall, followed by the squeak of their shoes. If they fall around the corner, they’ll see me, and I’ll interrogate. But I wait, listening to them struggle while holding my breath. *Say the girl’s name. Say her fucking name.*

“Stop! You’re wrinkling my shirt,” Prescott says. “We can’t do this here. If my mom hears us—”

“I don’t give a shit!” Sebastian shouts.

Down the hall, a few girls round the corner and freeze mid-stride. I give them a stern point in the opposite direction, and they turn and rush away.

“You’re the one that’ll get in trouble.” Sebastian lowers his voice, his breaths rushed. “Seeing how you’re the only one fucking her anymore. Maybe I’ll pay a visit to dear ol’ Mom and let her know how you’re spending your allowance.”

My hands clench and my vision clouds as I connect the motivations of horny rich boys to that of a beautiful girl with an unknown source of income.

Adrenaline shakes my body and shortens my breaths. I want to hit something. My fingers dig into my palms. I want to fucking kill them.

“You wouldn’t,” Prescott says, his tone venomous.

“Try me,” Sebastian growls.

The sound of knuckles smacking flesh reaches my ears right before Sebastian falls into view. He lands at my feet, his plastic-framed glasses hanging lopsided on his forehead.

Cupping his mouth, the scrawny hipster groans and rolls to his side. “You fucking psycho!”

Prescott pounces from around the corner. Neither of them notices me as Prescott crouches over Sebastian and rears back his fist—

“Stand up!”

They freeze at the whip of my voice and lift their eyes, their faces blanching into colorless hues of *Oh shit*.

Sebastian recovers first, scrambling out from beneath Prescott and jumping to his feet. He adjusts his glasses and points at the dean’s son. “He hit me. You saw that, right?”

The little pussy isn’t even bleeding.

Prescott smirks, taking his time straightening his tie without standing. Refusing to acknowledge me. *I can change that*.

I grab his necktie and yank him up. He staggers as I whirl him around. I slam his back against the wall and wrap my hand around his throat. “Her name.”

Blond hair falls over his eyes, his lips pulling away from his overbite. “What?”

So help me God, if he stuck his dick in my girl...

Don't go there, Emeric.

I put my face in his and let him feel the fury of my breaths. “The girl you're *fucking*. Give me her name.”

His throat bobs against the compress of my hand. We're the same height, but I have at least thirty adult pounds on him. Because I *am* the adult, the authority figure who's supposed to be breaking up hallway fights, not engaging in them.

I loosen my grip, but refuse to let go. I want to crush his gangly throat just for infecting my head with images of him with Ivory. “Sexual misconduct will get you expelled, Mr. Rivard. Who's the girl?”

“Avery,” he chokes out. “But just to be clear...we're n-not...having sex.”

Avery, not Ivory. The names are too similar, like he was thinking *Ivory* and spit out something else.

I glare at Sebastian. “Who's Avery?”

He stares daggers at Prescott. “Avery Perrault is his girlfriend. She goes to St. Catherine's.”

Is he lying? I'm wound too tight to pick up on hints. “Tell me about the arrangement *you* have with her.”

Sebastian's eyes flash behind his glasses, his tone low and pungent. “She used to hang out with me, but not anymore.”

If *hang out* isn't a euphemism for sex, I don't know what is. And if this is about Ivory, why would they lie? So she can't contradict their story? Is there more to it? Paying her for sex goes beyond expulsion. If caught, all three would be charged as consenting adults for violating prostitution laws. My chest constricts at the thought of Ivory arrested.

I return my attention to the imbecile wheezing in my grip. “How are you spending your allowance?”

“I-I...b-buy Avery things.” He paws at my hand. “Because she’s my *girlfriend*.”

Every inch of my body twitches with edginess. I release him and hold out my palm. “Unlock your phones and give them to me. Both of you.”

They bandy hostile looks and do as I say. A quick scroll through the logs confirms they both communicate with a contact named Avery. Neither phone has Ivory stored in the lists.

Because she doesn’t own a phone.

I return their devices and scrutinize their tense postures and indignant expressions, searching for a glimmer of untruth. I want to say Ivory’s name, bring her into the conversation somehow, just to study their reactions. But I can’t do that without making my own interests glaringly obvious.

However, I *can* write them up for fighting.

Twenty minutes later, I stand beside Beverly Rivard’s desk with my hands behind my back. I don’t say a word as the boys explain their dispute over Avery Perrault, how it’s all just a misunderstanding, and everyone’s virtues are still intact, blah, blah, fucking blah.

Prescott cants forward in the chair with his arm waving in my direction. “Then he tried to strangle me!”

The dean shifts her slivered eyes to me. “Mr. Marceaux, are you aware of the no touching policy?”

“Yes.” I tilt my head. “Are you aware your son is an asshole?”

“See what I mean?” Prescott throws his hands in the air and slumps in the seat. “He’s fucking nuts.”

Beverly walks around the desk, stops at the wall of windows, and stares out over the manicured lawns. “Mr. Rivard and Mr. Roth, you’ll be written up for language and fighting.” She turns, arms folded beneath her chest, and calmly takes in their outraged expressions. “Wait in the hall while I have a word with Mr. Marceaux.”

A turbulence of emotions storms through me, and leading the onslaught is a heavy, foreboding kind of urgency. If they're lying about the girlfriend, I won't find the truth in this office. Nor in this school. I need to perform my own investigation of their after-school activities.

When the door shuts behind them, Beverly drops her arms and stands taller, stiffer, her sharp gaze leaping toward mine. "If you ever lay a hand on my son again—"

"*That* is the protégé you want me to send to Leopold?" I thrust a finger at the door. "That little douchebag won't last a month there."

Her head quivers with the force of her shout. "Enough!"

She touches the collar of her blouse and closes her eyes, inhaling deeply.

I amble toward her and stop inches away. Towering over her, I wait for her to look at me.

My insides burn with anxious rage, but I keep my timbre rich, my voice mellow, and my eyes cool. "When he does something I disapprove of, I'll handle it however the fuck I want. If you don't like that, our deal is off."

As I stride toward the door, she says, "I'll fire you."

"No, you won't." No need to tell her I'm considering quitting. "I'm his only way into Leopold."

IVORY

Something's off today. I feel a weird sort of flux in the air the instant I step into Room 1A. Prescott and Sebastian sit on opposite sides of the classroom. *Odd*. Almost as odd as the hard and resentful way they're staring at me. Mr. Marceaux stands behind his desk, also watching me in a hard way. But there's something else in his expression.

Something I haven't glimpsed in five weeks.

He looks at me like he's visualizing spanking me. It's a subtle smolder contained in his eyes, flickering as if it's been building for a while, growing and strengthening behind his thick eyelashes, and now, perhaps it's become too big, too hungry to suppress.

Maybe I'm imagining it, but the dark and heavy bass-type feeling thumping through my insides is most definitely real.

I study him closely as I find my seat, as he begins the lecture, and as he guides the class through the next hour of discussions. In those countless moments when he meets my eyes, there's a resonance radiating back from his, like he's experiencing something he's aching to share with me.

He holds my gaze. "Every minute you're not in school, you should be practicing your instrument."

Now that it's October, we have a number of events to prepare for, the biggest one being the Holiday Chamber Music Celebration. As he brushes over the performance calendar, I'm reminded that he hasn't chosen the piano soloist. I know I'm the best, but I don't know if he agrees. His assessment of my

skills is so rude and degrading. Even so, his feedback spurs me to try harder, to be better, to please him.

He continues to watch me as he speaks. It's always me who looks away first, his intensity too potent to take in for long and making me feel dizzy. But when I return to him—*and I always do*—I notice his fingers trembling or his tongue wetting his bottom lip, validations that I'm not the only one feeling this deeper presence, this vibe, between us.

What changed? How does a man go from spanking and kissing me to five weeks of rejection to *vibe-fucking* me?

By the time the last bell blares and the classroom empties, I've become so sensitive to the flashes of fire in his eyes he doesn't have to tell me to remain seated. The moment we're alone, he paralyzes me with a single glance. A silent command. *Don't move.*

With strong, measured strides, he approaches my desk, grips the outer edges, and bends over the short distance, invading my space in that predatory way he does.

He looks at me, I look at him, and a woozy tingle sweeps through my limbs.

“Mr. Marceaux?” Jesus, my heart is going to beat right out of my chest. “What are you doing?”

“Tell me about Prescott Rivard.”

My heart stops in its tracks. “Sorry?”

He slams a fist on the desk, and the echo bangs in tune with the low *D* of his timbre. “Answer me!”

My shoulders curl forward, and my throat seals shut. Did he find out? I'm supposed to meet Prescott again tonight. What if that fucking prick told on me? But why would he? Prescott would be just as screwed as me.

Play it cool. Mr. Marceaux doesn't know anything.

“Prescott's my biggest competitor for Leopold. But I'm better—”

“Not that.” His voice evens into a calm tessitura. “Tell me about your relationship with him outside of school.”

I open my mouth to form a lie, but the words don’t come. I can’t be dishonest with him. I don’t know why. So I settle on the simple truth. “I hate him.”

“Why?”

“He drives around in his fancy car, wearing his too-good-for-everyone smile and being his tampon-ish self.”

He lifts an eyebrow. “Tampon-ish?”

“Yes. Like a tampon. A used, gross, sticky...*tampon*.”

He rubs a hand over his mouth, staring at me like I’m speaking another language. Dropping his hand on the desk, he narrows his eyes. “Explain what you mean.”

“You really want me to—? Okay, fine. A tampon is repulsive. It bulges and expands with blood. It drips all over the place and smells bad and—”

“Stop. Why is Prescott repulsive?”

“You have to ask?”

He straightens, tucks his fingers in his front pockets, and for the first time in weeks, gives me a half-smile. “No, I guess I don’t.”

Silence wraps around us, but it’s not quiet. The air is so charged and full of heartbeats I get lost in the music that thrums between us. The look in his eyes... My God, it’s overwhelmingly sexual. Not in an I-want-to-fuck-you way. He’s probably thinking that, but his gaze exudes the kind of sensuality that promises more, like if we spent the rest of eternity just sharing eye contact, it would be intimate and mind-blowing and perfect, with or without sex.

It’s a concept I struggle to comprehend. Just thinking about sex with him twists me up in a conflicted heap. But I don’t need to understand or analyze it. I *feel* it.

The cadence of our breaths plays a soft song of want and hunger and desire in the background, and while those sexual

undertones aren't necessary in our silent communication, they add rhythm and flavor to the heart of our music.

"Mr. Marceaux?" I rub my palms on my thighs, holding his gaze, and whisper, "You're sharing your notes."

Lines form on his forehead as he grips the back of his neck. "What?"

"I feel your notes. Here." I touch my breastbone, my voice shaking. "They're dark and hypnotic, like your breaths and your heartbeats."

He takes a step back, then another step, and another. Distance doesn't matter. I still hear him. Still feel him. He's inside me.

Turning away, he wanders through the front of the room, zigzagging, switching directions, as if he doesn't know where he's going. He ends up at his desk, fumbling with his laptop.

"You're working on Prokofiev's Concerto No.2 today," he says with his back to me. "Go get warmed up."

Damn. That's such an intense piece that requires an incredible amount of focus. Is that why he chose it? To distract me?

Disappointment burrows into my chest as I stand from the desk and follow his order.

For the next four hours, I endure his swatting hands and harsh criticism of my piano performance, all the while regretting telling him about the way he makes me feel. I should've focused first on preparing and nurturing those words before chucking them out, half-formed, into the winds of his volatility, with the ridiculous hope it would snag and hold his affection for me.

He sends me home at seven o'clock, not a minute after, with an immutable and heart-breaking, "Good night, Miss Westbrook."

Only I can't go home. Thirty-minutes later, I'm sitting in the vacant lot in the projects in the back seat of Prescott's

Cadillac, watching him roll on a condom for the seventh time since school started.

I can do this. As long as he doesn't fuck my ass—something he's never attempted—I'll endure. I always do.

"I'm not supposed to be here." He reaches under my skirt.

My body is numb, but not numb enough. I feel his fingers yanking down my panties. I smell the greed he exhales onto my face.

"I got grounded today." He drags the underwear down my legs and off my feet. "For two months."

Nothingness rings in my ears. Everything is too quiet, too lifeless in the absence of Mr. Marceaux.

"But I'll find a way to meet up with you." He pushes me onto my back.

I can't do this again. Can't endure his hands, his thrusts, the sounds of his pleasure. This thing he does with me, it's not rape, but it still feels forced, unwanted, dreaded. If I tell him *no*, he will force it. Maybe I can fight him off this time, but what happens to my bills? My future?

He pries my knees apart, and I jerk them back together.

"What are you doing?" Kneeling over me, he shoves his trousers down his thighs.

The outcomes of my choices are so illogical. If I keep my legs closed, I might lose my house and turn into a crack whore like my mom. If I let Prescott do what he wants, I have a chance at something great. How messed up is that?

I push my hands against him, holding him away. "I don't want this."

But I do. I want *this* in a non-grabby, non-needy, give-and-take way. I want to connect with a man the way I want my music to connect with an audience. Emotionally. Profoundly. Innately.

I want this with someone who cares.

He forces his hips between my legs and wrestles my swinging arms. “What’s wrong with you?”

“This.” I ram my forearms against his chest. “You.”

The throaty rumble of an engine sounds in the distance, growing louder, closer, vibrating my body.

The hairs lift on my arms, and I strain my eyes through the darkness of the back seat, unable to see.

“Is that...?” I grab Prescott’s shoulders as he mounts me. I try to push him off, a wasted effort. “Is that a GTO?”

“Fuck if I know.” He grips his dick, poking it around my opening. “Hold still.”

The rumbling car is close. Close enough to stop on the street. Close enough that Prescott lifts his head to look out the back window.

“Shit,” he whispers. “Someone’s here.”

Ice fills my veins. *He’s looking for me?* I gulp for air and shove against Prescott’s frozen chest.

He can’t see me like this. He can’t. He can’t.

I kick and buck, trying to straighten my skirt, unable to move Prescott’s weight.

“Move!” Oh God, I can’t close my legs.

The door behind him swings open, and the sudden overhead light hurts my eyes. An arm reaches in, and in a blink, Prescott is jerked from the car and flying backward, vanishing in the pitch-black of night.

The sounds of pained grunts harmonize with the purr of the idling GTO. I grapple with the skirt, yank it down my legs, my eyes wide and locked on the open door.

Footsteps close in, the crunch of boots on gravel. Black slacks, a waistcoat, then a tie fills the door frame. He bends down, and when his face lowers into view, all I see is murderous blue.

I can't move. Can't breathe. This is it. He might as well kill me, because my life ends now.

No Le Moyne. No Leopold. No future.

No more music with Mr. Marceaux.

He stabs a finger in the direction of the street and bellows, "Get your fucking ass in my car!"

EMERIC

The fucker is going to die.

I leave Ivory to collect her things from the car as I storm back to the moaning piece of shit on the ground. Despite my cloud of rage, I managed to contain all the punches to Prescott's ribs when I ripped him from the back seat. But as he stares up at me now, arms wrapped around his mid-section, my hands clench to shatter every bone in his contorted face.

The shadows of Central City's projects blanket the empty lot. The decrepit walls of apartment buildings are poorly lit, and the groves of overgrowth and garbage stink of abandonment. Thickly-leaved vines climb light poles and crumbling foundations, forming a protective veil in the absence of moonlight.

Prescott sprawls on his back with his pants bunched around his thighs. One glance at the condom still hanging from his flaccid dick, and my control disintegrates. Madness like I've never known explodes hot and thick inside me, constricting my chest and burning my muscles.

This is the perfect place to kill someone. No one will see. No one will care.

I crouch over him and wrap my fingers around his throat. "You're dead."

He claws at my hand, sucking for air. "N-not just me. She's a whore and f...f...fucks everyone."

Primal rage smothers me, blinding my vision and fogging my mind. I move on instinct, rearing back and driving my knuckles, hard and fast, into his chest.

A scream coughs from his lungs. “Oh God, please, please...”

“You will never...” I connect with his stomach. “Touch her.” Another hit, high on his ribs. “Again.”

Then I attack. The sounds of his cries, the pain in my hands, the exertion of my breaths, all of it fades away as I bring the wrath of hell upon him. His arms shoot up, warding me off, but I pummel through it, hitting every exposed inch of his torso.

“Mr. Marceaux!” Ivory’s shout comes from behind me.

My insides seethe at her defiance. “Get in the goddamn car!”

Prescott tries to roll away, and I jerk him back, pounding my fists against his chest.

“Mr. Marceaux, stop!” She screams, closer now, inches away.

I’m in a zone, my tunnel vision consumed with blood and vengeance and broken bones. With each smack of my fists, her pleas and shouts no longer register...until her mouth moves so close, her breath brushes my ear.

“Emeric.”

I freeze mid-swing, my veins on fire to finish this.

Bending behind me, she snakes her arms over my shoulders, her chest against my back and her fingers digging into my shirt. With her face alongside mine, she whispers, “You won’t just lose your job. You’ll go to jail. He’s not worth it.”

I reach up and grip her hand against my heaving chest. “But you are. You’re worth it.”

She whimpers and squeezes my fingers. “I’m so sorry. I never meant—” She tries to pull me back. “Please. Take me

home.”

Please. King of hell, that word on her lips.

I launch to my feet, knocking her backward with the surge of my body. With a hand on her arm to balance her, I thrust the other in the direction of my car. “I won’t tell you again.”

Eyes wide and glassy, she hugs the strap of the satchel against her shoulder and drags her feet to the GTO.

The sound of retching draws me back to Prescott. With his pants in place, he rocks on hands and knees and empties his stomach into a snarl of weeds, sobbing between each heave.

As I wait for him to finish, I pull in deep breaths and try to summon some semblance of control. I’m not a murderer. Hell, before Ivory, I hadn’t swung my fists since I was a testosterone-fueled teenager.

I glance at her, taking in her defeated posture and horrified expression as she lowers into my car. I shift my attention to my swollen hands, shocked to find them violently shaking. She’s turned me into a homicidal animal.

She’ll pay for letting this asshole into her body. But the bruises that’ll cover his torso for the next couple weeks? That’s on me.

“Get up.” I grab his hair, relishing his wailing cries as I haul him toward the Cadillac and shove him into the driver’s seat.

Tremors twitch along his skinny arms, his face pale and tear-soaked as he stares straight ahead. There’s no visible blood or swelling on any part of his exposed skin. If it weren’t for his pained expression and dirt-smearred clothes, no one would know I just beat the shit out of him.

With an arm braced on the top of the door, I lean in. “Look at me.”

He cowers, and his hands fly up to block his head. “Don’t hit me.”

My fists flex to strike, to feel his body giving beneath the force of my anguish, but I bury it, saving it. For Ivory.

Once he realizes I'm neither swinging nor going anywhere, he drags bloodshot eyes to mine.

"You have two choices." I enunciate each word, softly, deliberately. "One. Tell no one what happened. Not a word about what you've been doing with Miss Westbrook. Let those bruises heal without revealing them to anyone, and that'll be your only punishment for paying a girl for sex."

His eyes narrow into a scathing glare.

I match his glare with one that makes him wither. "Two. Limp around like a fucking pussy. Tell the dean what you did to earn those injuries, and say goodbye to Leopold. Doesn't matter how powerful my connections, there isn't a conservatory in the world that will accept an applicant facing charges for buying sexual services."

His eyes bulge. "I'm only seventeen!"

"That's old enough to be charged as an adult and young enough to be the belle of the ball in state prison."

"Oh God, oh God, this can't be happening." He wraps an arm around his stomach and gives me a pleading look. "You won't tell my mom?"

I should've broken him. Should've left him in a bloody pile for the vultures to feed on. "This is between you and me. Keep your mouth shut, stay the fuck away from Miss Westbrook...and when I say stay away, I mean don't think about her. Don't talk to or look at her. Erase her from your fucking mind. Do that, and the dean won't hear of your crime."

"Okay." He grips the steering wheel, nodding, swallowing. "I can do that."

I'm not convinced. If he's half as addicted to Ivory as I am, he won't be able to stay away. But for now, scaring the shit out of him is the best option I have.

I slam the door and stalk toward the GTO.

Did she enjoy fucking him? Will she hate me for breaking them up?

No way. She compared him to a bloody tampon.

But what about other boys? Other *customers*?

Deep in my gut, I know she didn't want to be here. She didn't even understand the concept of sexual desire until she met me. But finding her with someone else is a crushing hit to my pride. Christ, I can't even bring myself to look at another woman, yet here she is...with him.

Jealous rage claws its way through my chest, stealing my air and speeding up my gait.

She should've come to me, confided in me, asked me to help her. Instead, she chose this. *Him*.

Flashbacks of the back seat crash through my mind, tormenting me with images of her spread legs, his bare ass, the condom.

My legs tense to turn around, my fists tingling to pulverize his throat until he stops breathing. But I keep walking, focused on her, on what I intend to do.

Of all my passions, disciplining a woman is the most exhilarating. The most arousing. The reason I work and fuck and breathe. I can do this without destroying her. If I keep my temper in check, I'll be able to open something inside her she has no idea exists. Pain and pleasure. Fear and arousal. Give and take. Once she understands how these things work together, it will change her, strengthen her, and tie her to me irrevocably.

The rational part of my brain demands I take her home, quit my job, and end this dangerous infatuation. But I've reached the point of no return.

It's no longer a matter of *if* or *when*.

Tonight, she'll bend for my punishment, tremble for my touch, and I'll risk it all to show her exactly what she means to me.

EMERIC

The tension in the GTO is as stifling and disorienting as my anger. I welcome Ivory's silence, but the secrecy of her thoughts winds me tighter and tighter with each passing street.

When I speed past the turn off for Treme, she twists in the seat and points.

"My house is..." Her gaze flies to mine. "You're not taking me home?"

Pulling up to a stop light, I turn toward her. "Will anyone notice if you don't return home tonight? Your mother? Brother?"

I thought her eyes were dark before, but now they're the color of nightmares. Even in the passing headlights, they coax me in and chill me to the bone.

She looks at her lap, shakes her head, her voice a soft shivering pianissimo. "What are you going to do to me?"

She's thinking the worst. I hear it in the serrated gusts of her breaths, and it infuriates me. But I can't blame her. She watched me lose my shit with Prescott, and as sure as I can feel her fear, she can sense my vibrating need for atonement.

I reach over and grip the hand in her lap. "Listen very carefully, Ivory." I squeeze her trembling fingers. "I would never hit you in anger. When I welt your ass, you'll love it as much as you hate it. Tell me you understand."

Her breath catches, and a sob hangs on the edge of her voice. "You won't hurt me in anger." She touches the broken

skin on my knuckles. “How did you find me?”

“Sebastian Roth was all too willing to give up his friend’s favorite parking spot.” A torrent of animosity invades my throat, and I’m unable to stop it. “You’re fucking him and Prescott? How many others?”

She attempts to pull her hand away, but I hold tight. Her fingers fall limp while mine continue to shake from the lingering adrenaline.

It’s probably best that she doesn’t answer while I’m driving. Seconds from detonating, I’m liable to jerk the damn car off a bridge.

Lasalle Street, fifteen blocks, two turns, and a high-security gate later, here I am, sitting in my driveway, about to make the biggest mistake of my life.

A nearby gas lamp illuminates the interior of the car, but we’re parked around back, shrouded by massive oaks and hidden from the street.

When I turn in the seat to face her, she’s not staring at my enormous estate with envy in her eyes. She’s not surveying the million-dollar landscape with parted lips. She’s looking at me. Like I’m the only thing that exists in the world. Like I’m more important than all the wealth surrounding her.

I fall helplessly into her gaze, lost in the shadows of tragedy and fear and neglect. But there’s a glint of light in the dark depths. As she sways closer, seeking, my heart kicks with realization. That tiny glimmer in her eyes is trust.

That’s when I hear it.

The tempo of our breaths. The drum of our heartbeats. The crackle in the air.

The exquisite cadence pulses through me, awakening sensations I’ve never felt, composing a melody I’ve never heard.

Our hypnotic, dark notes.

This is so much more than punishment or forbidden pleasure.

She could never be a mistake.

“Are we going to...” She tilts her head and searches my face. “Do the vibe thing all night? I’m okay with that, but not knowing what comes next has me...um, a little jumpy.”

I trail a finger across her cheek and along her bottom lip. “Tell me you trust me.”

She nibbles the corner of her mouth. “You’ve given me every reason not to.”

I drop my hand, but she catches it and lifts it back to her face.

“You’ve also shown me every reason I should.” She holds our hands tightly against her cheek. “Thank you for finding me.” Her fingers trace the cuts on my knuckles, and her eyes shimmer with tears. “For protecting me.”

Christ, this girl... She’s my music, my place in this life, my part in it all.

I move in and touch my lips to hers. “You’re going to follow me inside.” I slide a hand into her thick hair. “You’re going to tell me everything I want to know.” I tighten my grip and yank her head back. “Then I’m going to test the depth of your trust. Say *yes*.”

Her eyes flicker with vulnerability and desperation. Then she blinks, breathes, and relaxes in my hold. “Yes, Mr. Marceaux.”

IVORY

I follow Mr. Marceaux through the wide, echoing passages of his monstrosity of a mansion. Between the questions I'll have to answer and whatever punishment that will follow, my legs threaten to buckle with each step.

He touches my lower back and steers me forward. Oddly, the tremors in his hand give me strength. Like maybe he's as freaked out as I am.

His fingers have been shaking since he climbed into the GTO, his breaths fluctuating in volume and tempo all the way here. I'm well-acquainted with the indicators of a man in need, but this feels different, safer somehow. Maybe it's because he's not attacking me like the other men I've encountered. Or perhaps it's because the hand on my back is *guiding* me, not forcing me.

We pass a living room filled with plush leather furniture, a hearth room with more couches, and a massive kitchen gleaming with stainless steel. Compared to the gloomy Victorian Gothic exterior of stone and steeples, the inside is warm and bright, flaunting the kind of luxuries I'm not sure a teacher's salary can afford.

Wrought iron chandeliers, long heavy draperies, shiny wood floors, black damask wallpaper, it's all so old-world-ish yet modern at the same time. Such a profound reflection of his personality. He seems like such an old noble soul in the sense that he loves knowledge and truth—those pursuits interest him far more than the latest gossip or high-tech car. But after two

months of lectures, I've learned he also appreciates the transience of life, the fleeting trends, and the way people and music change over time.

After countless rooms, a spiraling staircase that wraps around the atrium, and a maze of corridors, I've lost my bearings. Why would a single man need so much space?

I really don't care how much money he has or where it comes from. I'm more interested in the man himself, what he has planned, and where he's taking me.

"Mr. Marceaux?"

"It's Emeric." He stops, turns me to face him, and strokes the pad of his thumb across my cheek. "I'm Mr. Marceaux when I'm your teacher."

His touch races a shiver across my skin and electrifies my heart. "If you're not my teacher right now, what are you?"

The mechanisms in his watch tick beside my ear as he slides his fingers through my hair and holds my head in the frame of his hands. "I don't think you're ready to hear that."

Maybe not, but I think he's showing me. As I stare into the stormy blue of his gaze, the wall sconces, arched doorways, and dark woods in the hallway all melt into oblivion. He's wearing his dead serious face, the one that says *I want to fuck you* and so much more.

That look in his eyes turns my insides upside down, pulling my breaths through a diaphanous haze of happiness and confusion. He doesn't temper the hunger in his expression, but doesn't act on it, either. It's as if he's letting it build naturally while keeping it contained. As if he's enjoying the way it makes him feel without thrusting it against me.

I could stand here and stare at him all night, at his model-perfect features, the barely-there stubble on his sculpted jaw, and the heat dancing in his eyes. My fingertips tingle to run through his hair again. Softly, though, unlike the way he stabs his hands through the black strands when he's angry.

He's just...so...damn gorgeous. Way too hot to be a teacher. But it's his self-control I'm attracted to the most.

Funny that, since he showed zero restraint with Prescott. Or maybe he did? Prescott *is* still breathing.

When it comes to me, though, his control is evident in his tight expression and even tighter breaths. He wants, but he doesn't take. That alone makes me feel more drawn to him.

I grip the gathered sleeves at his elbows and glide my fingers along his sinewy forearms. "Can I bandage your hands?"

"Later." His face moves an inch closer.

"I don't get you, Mr. Mar— *Emeric*. You went from spankings to five weeks of nothing to swinging fists to..." I hesitantly reach up and touch his warm, chiseled cheek. "To looking at me like this. Why?"

"Well, something happened recently." He gives me a half-smile. "About ten minutes ago." He turns his face toward my hand and presses his lips to my wrist. "I had an epiphany."

In the car? My heart rate jumps. "What do you mean?"

"I realized I've been in denial since..." His gaze lowers to my mouth momentarily then returns to my eyes. "For a while."

"Denial about what?"

He steps closer, strokes his hands through my hair, and holds my cheek against his chest. "Let's not give it a name yet."

Love pops into my mind, unbidden, quickly followed by *hug*. Instinctively, my arms wrap around his torso. My hands grip the back of his wool waistcoat, and muscle by muscle, I relax against him. His fingers trail down my spine, shooting shivers from my head to my toes. The circle of his arms tightens, and every molecule inside me becomes hyper-aware of every inch of his body.

His towering height and hard physique feels intimidating and protective, immovable and warm, strange and wonderfully right.

My dad used to hug me, and I miss that love with excruciating heartache. Stogie loves me in a non-huggy,

protective-uncle way. But that's the extent of my experience with the concept.

Exploring something like love with Emeric is terrifyingly reckless. He's too volatile, unpredictable, and insanely intense. Would he give it one day and take it back the next? Would he taunt me with it, make me beg for it, and use it against me?

Even so, I'd rather receive it in rations than never have it at all.

Except he's my teacher. He specifically told me I cannot fall in love with him. And he loves another woman.

What exactly am I to him? My stomach boils with jealousy and trepidation, but it doesn't hurt as much with his arms holding me close and his mouth resting on the top of my head.

Whatever this is...this thing he's been in denial about, it seems to be making his heart race. Or maybe it's the hug causing those heavy beats against my ear. Maybe it's all the same.

I tilt my head and look up at him. "Are you afraid?"

He releases me and steps back, his focus on his hand as he smooths down the black and white striped tie.

I grit my teeth. Dammit, I want him to own his feelings, not pull them back and brush them away. I open my mouth to say just that, but his eyes ensnare mine, and I forget to breathe.

That moment...my God, it feels like a lifetime in the making. His hands curl around my neck, wrenching me into a kiss so consuming it touches me everywhere. Seconds pass like hours. The caress of his mouth robs the strength from my knees. The instant he offers his tongue, a chill of electricity runs wild across my skin. His soft groan vibrates against my lips, eliciting a warm throb between my legs. And his answer...

"Yes." His hands collar my throat, snugly, possessively, as he kisses a shivery path to my ear and rasps, "I'm afraid."

My fingers find his hair and pull his mouth back to mine. "Afraid of?"

“Getting caught.” He turns us, presses my back against the wall, and whispers between drugging licks along my lips. “Going to jail.”

I want to argue, but I have no voice, no breath, only his sinful mouth and the support of his strong chest against mine.

He angles his head, twining our tongues, deeper, faster, and I float on the thermal currents writhing between us. The crotch of my panties feels wet, my body temperature dialed to feverish levels. The cotton of my shirt and the elastic of my bra itch and squeeze my skin. I want them off.

“I’m afraid of hurting you.” He tilts his head in the opposite direction, a new angle, eating at my mouth as if he can’t reach deep enough. “But I’m not stopping, Ivory.” Another hungry kiss. “You’re mine.”

A sense of belonging swells in my chest. It feels so big and full and too good to be true. I don’t know if I can trust it. As I waver, his heat and strength vanish, leaving me swaying against the wall.

He grips my wrist and yanks me ahead of him in the hall, steering me forward. I attempt a wobbly step, but he’s behind me, his strong fingers sliding from my waist, over my hips, and curling around my thighs.

His mouth traces the line of my shoulder and nibbles along my neck. He pauses at my ear, his tone husky. “Last room on the right.”

With a staggering inhale, I walk ahead. His footfalls trail a few steps behind, and I can’t help but crane my neck to hold his heated gaze. When I reach the doorway, I pivot and back in, my attention paralyzed by all the unnamed emotions hardening his fierce expression.

I should be anxious. I should be fucking terrified. But he’s not Lorenzo or Prescott or the countless others who make me want to die. Emeric has made me feel more alive tonight than I have in seventeen years.

The periphery of my vision catches a bed, some furniture, lots of grays and blacks. His bedroom? I don’t glance around,

don't avert my eyes from the man who is jeopardizing his career, his freedom, to be with me.

He prowls closer, his overwhelming proximity chasing me backward, slowly, breathlessly, deeper into the room. Will he ask his questions now? Will the truth disgust him to the point of hatred? There have been so few people in my life who believe in me. I can't bear the thought of losing that protective look on his face.

He catches my waist and pulls me against him, his voice low and guttural. "You have no idea what that does to me."

"What?"

"The way you stare at me like I'm worth more to you than"—he glances around the room—"a big fancy house."

A burning flush sweeps across my cheeks. What is he saying? That because I'm poor, I should be star-struck and gaping at his stuff? I care more about him than all the money in the world. But maybe I shouldn't. Maybe he thinks I'm a lovesick high school girl.

I narrow my eyes. "The molding in this place... It's everywhere. Scalloped designs on the living room ceiling, square panels on the walls, chair rails run the length of the hall. I could peel it all off and hock it while you're—"

"Brat." His beautiful face splits into a smile as he shuffles me backward and sets me on the edge of the mattress.

He leaves me there and strides to the dresser. As he empties his pockets, I'm hit with a heavy dose of reality. I'm in Mr. Marceaux's bedroom. Sitting on his bed. Watching him do things, personal things in his private space, that no one else at school has witnessed.

With his back to me, he places his wallet and keys in a wooden dish. His phone and mechanical watch go next. His waistcoat falls over the back of a stiff leather chair. His necktie follows.

When his hands fall to his belt, my breath catches.

He shifts to face me, his fingers slowly unclasping the buckle. “It’s time to address the issue we’ve been avoiding.”

My stomach sinks, and a wave of vertigo shivers through me.

He slides the belt free, winds it into a coil, and sets it on the nightstand beside the bed.

“No lies.” He clasps his hands behind his back, squared shoulders stretch the white button-up across his chest, and his glare hardens. “Omitting is the same as lying.”

Shit! I squeeze my eyes shut. Shit, fucking shit.

“Ivory.”

I open my eyes and find him studying me. Of course, he is. Always watching. Always seeing too much. I bite my lip. This isn’t going to end well.

“I’m probably going to lose my cool again.” He glances at his shoes, smirking to himself. “Since I can’t seem to control my temper where you’re concerned.” He looks up beneath a veil of thick lashes. “Remember what I said about that.”

My eyebrows pull in as I think back. “You never hit a woman in anger?”

“Good girl.”

My lungs expand, inhaling those words.

He kneels before me, his chest touching my closed knees and his hands on my hips. “I know you need money. I’ve deduced that Prescott and Sebastian pay you.” His eyes spark with anger. “Tell me how and when the arrangement began.”

I want to caress his face, but the angles of his bone structure suddenly appear too sharp, too untouchable. So I place my palm on the warm skin of his forearm, where it rests alongside my thigh. “I’ll tell you. I promise. But what will happen to my education and Leo—?”

“Leopold is neither here nor there. This isn’t a student-teacher conference.” He shifts, grips the hem of my skirt, and shoves it up my thighs until it sits just below my panties.

I keep my knees together, but I don't fight him.

"This is you and me, Ivory." His fingers slide beneath the gathered fabric, tracing the hidden bend between my legs and hips. "We're just a man and a woman, sharing an intimate moment of honesty."

I like the sound of that almost as much as the soothing touch of his fingers. A silent caesura stretches between us, during which time isn't counted or weighed. Eventually, his caresses calm me enough to speak.

"Freshman year, I was desperate for friends, desperate to fit in, and offered to help some of the kids with their homework." Sweat slicks my hands, and I clasp them over the crease of my clenched bare thighs. "Only the boys took me up on the help. Prescott and his friends. At some point in that first year, my tutoring turned into me doing their homework for them."

"And what I saw in the car?"

"They touched and kissed and took things I didn't want to give."

Emeric rises, his hands raking through his hair as a violent symphony clashes and vibrates in his eyes.

"They *took* things..." He drops his arms and flexes his fists at his sides. "Explain that."

I tell him how I threatened to stop helping them, how they offered to pay me if I continued, and how badly I needed the income to keep my house. By the time I get to the part about them taking more than the homework, Emeric is pacing a furious track through the room.

If he's going to burn off steam, he has the space to do it. I mean, it's the biggest bedroom I've ever seen, with nothing on the floor to trip him up. For a guy, he's surprisingly tidy.

And for a girl who's in a cage with a pacing lion, I feel strangely detached. Liberated even.

Finally voicing these things is freeing, and he absorbs every word like he's living it, feeling it. Yes, he's angry, but he

hasn't once directed it at me. He cares enough to be angry *for* me.

He stops before me, his face as red as his swollen knuckles. "You told them *no*?"

Directing my eyes to his Doc Martens, I nod. "For a while."

"Define *a while*."

"The first couple of years."

"They raped you. For *years*." His scathing voice rolls into bellow. "Look at me!"

My gaze jumps to his. The horror etching his face makes my heart pound so hard it hurts.

How do I explain these embarrassing things when I'm not even sure about any of it? "I don't know."

"There's no *I-don't-know*'s about it, Ivory." He grips the back of his neck with both hands and paces in a tight circle. "You were either willing or you weren't. Which is it?"

"Sometimes, I feel trapped by circumstance. Sometimes, I'm held down. Other times, I just let it happen."

"You just let it happen," he echoes with venom. "Bullshit!"

The roar of his shout hitches my shoulders. He spins and slams his fist into the wall, wrenching a gasp from my throat.

I leap from the bed, shoving my skirt down as I cautiously approach his back. "Emeric."

He punches another hole, and another, his arms flexing and contracting with the impact as dust and sheet rock explode around him.

"Emeric, stop!"

Breathing heavily, he braces a forearm on the wall, rests his brow on his arm, and angles his head to look at me. "Which one of those fuckers took your virginity?"

"No one at Le Moyne." I step closer, within arm's reach. "I was already..." *Used. Ruined.*

He reaches out and drags me against him, pinning me between his heaving chest and the wall.

Blood and dust cover the knuckles of the hand he lifts to gently caress my cheek. "There's more you haven't told me."

More men who take. More truth to share. I'll tell him everything, because he hasn't pushed me away, hasn't once looked at me with repulsion.

He drops his forehead to mine, fingers resting against my cheek, and says quietly, "I want to whip you for being so damn uninformed about rape."

But I'm learning the differences, as well as who to trust and when to ask for help. I always thought the safest place to go was in my head, that no one could hurt me there. But standing between a busted wall and the fuming man who destroyed it, I've never felt safer.

I hold his hand against my face and meet his passionate gaze. "I trust you."

All my disgusting secrets have finally caught up with me. But for the first time in my life, I don't have to face them alone.

EMERIC

My self-control is a goddamn joke, and the unflappable part of my brain is lost beneath chilling images of Ivory cornered, hurt, and alone. My hands shake as I teeter on the verge of manic brutality, consumed with the kind of throbbing headache that can only be comforted by bloodshed.

I knew there was sexual abuse, but part of me believed it was in the past, like it had been a single horrifying moment in her life. I never envisioned years of rape.

How many motherfuckers will I have to kill? And while I'm murdering my way through her nightmares, how will I stop myself from becoming the worst of them all?

Ivory's view of sex is most likely damaged all to hell. How will she respond to sex with me? Will she freeze up? Am I pushing her too fast? What the fuck do I do now, if anything, regarding our relationship?

My heart thunders louder, faster, my muscles expanding with the direction of my thoughts.

"Hey." She holds my sore hand against her cheek. "You're getting all tense again."

I think she may be crazier than I am. She doesn't cringe or try to put a safe distance between us. Instead, she gives me a gentle smile and stares up at me with huge brown eyes full of trust.

Yes, I brought her home to keep her safe, but she has no idea how close I am to snapping. My entire body shakes to

bend her over and fuck her so hard all she remembers is me. And that will destroy her.

I step back and stab a shaky finger toward the bed. "Sit."

She smooths down her skirt and follows my order, glancing nervously at the belt on the nightstand.

My palm feels hot and achy, my arm tensing to swing that strap. Less because of anger and more because I'm desperate to put all this shit behind us and spend the rest of the night welting her into orgasmic bliss.

But it's not like I can just go at her with a belt in hand. That would sabotage her trust. I have to teach her that there's a better, more meaningful kind of pain than what she's experienced. The *willing* kind.

To do that, I have to pull myself together.

With measured breaths, I take a moment to indulge in her beauty, absorbing her perfect turned-up nose, tawny complexion, and dark shiny hair. But it's the boldness in her eyes, the strength in her smile, and the potency of her aura that calms me. It's impossible not to gravitate toward her, to not be captivated by the grace and tenacity she emanates.

As I stare at her, I realize with startling clarity she doesn't need me to slay her past. She's already lived it and came out the other side with more fortitude than any person I know.

But she does need me to listen, to support her without losing my head, and most of all, to protect her from future harm.

With a steadier pulse and the headache subsiding, I join her on the edge of the bed, my feet beside hers on the floor. Bending over her lap, I reach for her ankles. I've despised her glued-together shoes since the first day when I slid them onto her feet. They're not good enough for her, and watching her walk around in them week after week makes me want to give her every penny I have.

I push the little black flats off her heels and let them drop to the floor. If she only knew how many size-seven replacements I've bought her. The whole damn closet behind

me is filled, not just with shoes, but clothes and bags and... Jesus, I sound like a psychopath, even in my head.

I'm not even a shopper. Fucking hate it. But for the past five weeks, it was the most benign way I found to channel my inappropriate obsession with her.

Gathering her sideways in my lap, I scoot up the mattress and recline against the headboard.

With my arms wrapped around her delicate frame, I caress her back. "Tell me about your first time. How old were you?"

She rests her cheek on my shoulder, her voice tentative. "You go first."

An outraged *Answer me* builds in my throat, but I swallow it, reminding myself that honesty goes both ways.

I kiss her temple. "I was sixteen. So was she. A summer girlfriend. It was..." *Sweet. Awkward. Vanilla.* "Uneventful. We broke up shortly after."

She fidgets with my shirt button beneath her chin. "Is it crazy that I want to hunt her down and scratch her eyes out for getting that *uneventful* first with you?"

A laugh bursts from my chest as I flex my swollen hand in her lap. "If that's crazy, I should probably be committed." *For being uncontrollably, insanely, violently protective of this girl.*

She chuckles softly, her fingers tracing circles around the pulpy mess on my knuckles. "I want to clean your hands."

"When we're finished."

In her sideways position on my lap, she leans against my chest and hooks an arm around my lower back, pressing her face in my neck, as if to keep me close.

I'm not going anywhere.

"I was thirteen my first time."

I close my eyes and remember to breathe.

"My brother's friend did it, behind my house, on the stairs."

I seethe. Goddammit, I seethe from every pore in my body. Her brother is nine-years older than her. If the friend is the same age, that sick filthy molester was twenty-two when he fucked her thirteen-year-old body.

It's all I can do to just sit there, hold her against me, and not blow up in a roaring, ballistic fit of fury. "His age?"

She shifts up my chest and loops her arms around my shoulders, resting her forehead against the side of mine. "Same age as you."

I know I'm squeezing her too hard when she squeaks and digs her nails into my neck. Questions pile up amid the growling vibrations in my throat, but there's no way I can form sophisticated sounds right now, let alone words.

She pets my shoulder like she's comforting a damn rabid dog. "I told him *no*, fought him, *hated* it. I know what that means now, but I didn't understand it then."

"Ivory—"

"Just let me finish." She tilts away from my chest, staring at the doorway to the master bathroom as her fingers toy with the buttons on my shirt. "After it happened, I was pretty screwed up in my head. I let anyone and everyone have sex with me, like I was trying to prove to myself that I wasn't weak. I didn't want to cry through it. I wanted to own it, like 'I've got this. *I am doing it.*' And him and him and—"

"How many?" I ground out through clenched teeth.

She blinks and shakes her head. When she blinks again, her eyes shine with tears. "It didn't work out the way I wanted."

"Stop sniveling and tell me how many *him*'s there have been."

Her jaw sets, and she levels me with a tear-sodden glare. "I don't know, okay? Sixty? Eighty? More? I don't keep track because I don't want to know!"

My stomach hardens. Fuck me, I'm ten years older than her, and sixty is twice as many partners as I've had. And that's

her low number.

Her attention returns to the bathroom. “Go ahead and say it. I’m a slut. A disgusting whore.”

I capture her chin in a hard grip and jerk her face to mine, my tone coarse. “Don’t ever put words in my mouth.”

When I let go, she pulls her knees up between our chests, her firm ass digging into my thighs where she sits sideways on my lap. Her legs twitch to close impossibly tighter as she stares at the bathroom again. My first thought is she needs to pee. But given the conversation, I know there’s something else going on.

I tuck her hair behind her ear and trail my fingers down her neck. “Did Prescott...touch you or have sex with you before I arrived tonight?”

She hugs her knees, her expression darkening. “No.”

I didn’t think so, but being caught in that position is probably doing a number on her head. “Tell me why you’re staring at the bathroom.”

Her lashes sweep down. “I would really like to...to take a shower.”

“Because?”

“I’m dirty,” she whispers.

My teeth clench. It’s going to take a fuckton of time and patience to repair her dignity, and I’m starting right fucking now.

“You know what happened the moment I ripped Prescott out of that car? I asserted ownership over you. I know you don’t understand the significance of that, so I’ll make it simple.” I grip her throat and hold her gaze. “You’re mine. That means every inch of your gorgeous body, every thought in your head, and every word out of your mouth impacts me. Calling yourself dirty or any other offensive adjective is an insult to *my* girl, something I will not tolerate. Tell me you understand.”

Her throat relaxes against my palm, her eyes round and searching. “I understand.”

Fucking beautiful.

I release her neck and touch the juncture of her closed knees. “Part your legs.”

The slim fit of the skirt won’t allow for much, but I only need enough space for my hand.

She stares at my fingers, and her wide eyes flash to mine. Whatever she sees in my face smooths the worry lines on hers. Her arms fall to her sides, and breath by breath, she opens her knees.

Fucking hell, I ache to strip her bare and taste every glorious curve and dip of her body. We’re going to be so fucking wild together, grappling and reckless, messy and drunk on pleasure. I feel the promise of that churning in the air between us, shaking my legs beneath her ass, and slicking my palm as I glide my fingers along the inside of her thigh.

The deeper I reach beneath her skirt, the warmer and damper her skin. I watch her expression for signs of panic and inch closer to her pussy.

An inch from my target, I caress her thigh, teasing her. “I’m not going to erase your self-hating comment with flowery words like *You’re pretty and sexy and perfect*, because I suspect you’ve heard it all, most likely uttered on heavy breaths that haunt you when you sleep.”

Her bottom lip quivers, the rest of her stock-still and rigid.

“Instead, I’m going to show you exactly how *not dirty* you are.” I touch the crotch of her panties.

Damp satin meets my fingers, and my cock jerks against her hip. Christ, I want her. It’s this swelling, constricting feeling at the base of my spine, making my thighs clench and my balls tighten. I don’t know how I’ll stop myself from taking her like every other barbaric asshole once I remove the barriers between us.

Her eyes lock on mine as she grips my forearm, not pushing me away but sliding her fingers along the muscle as if feeling the way it moves.

I twist my wrist and hook a finger beneath the edge of satin between her leg and pussy. With a long, slow stroke, I slide my touch from her opening to her clit, parting her flesh and relishing the feel of soft short hairs. As I make another sweep, and another, she's grows wetter and wetter. Her pussy swells, her legs tremble, and I fucking thrill at the idea of giving her pleasure in a way no one has before.

She plants her feet on the mattress, clinging to my arm with both hands. Her full tits rise and fall as the alluring sound of her breaths chases the silence from the room.

Her parted lips, the flex of her ass against my quads, and the feel of her arousal coating my fingers turn me on in ways I've never known. This reaches so much deeper than the rigid pressure between my legs. She's in my veins, fiery and weightless. She's in my head, like a whisper of promises. She's in my heart, softening it, mending it, and making it pump again.

I remove my hand and lift it to my mouth. Holding her gaze, I suck each finger clean, slowly, deliberately. "You taste dirty, Ivory. In the most agreeable, delicious, addictive sense of the word."

Her jaw drops in a soundless gasp. She closes her mouth, opens it again, but I cut her off with a kiss. My hands slip over her face and hair, holding her to me as I hunt down her tongue, catch it, and tangle it with mine. She follows me, hands on my head, moaning into my mouth and licking her taste from my lips.

Need coils low and tight in my body. The bed frame creaks as I kiss her deeper, pull her closer, pursuing her with fingers and teeth, silently demanding she take everything I give her, because it's all hers. I'm hers.

She moves her lips over mine, her voice husky. "Damn, you...you really know how to kiss."

Her sultry exhale carves a space in my lungs, and with each of her little breaths, that space grows fuller and fuller. When she clears her throat, I hear her question in the inhale that follows. *What now?*

I have my own questions, more than there are minutes left in the night. But she hasn't eaten, exhaustion weighs heavily on her eyelids, and we're not leaving this room until she's learned a crucial lesson.

With great reluctance, I shift her off my lap and settle her on the bed. Her gaze instantly falls to the tent in my slacks. She may as well get used to that.

I stand and grab my rigid length, forcing it sideways in my pants. "Many weeks ago, you said you didn't want to be gagged, tied, and whatever else you think accompanies those things." I reach for the belt and loop it in half, holding tight to the ends. "But you've thought about it."

She stares at the leather strap and rubs her hands over her lap. "I...I didn't mind the spanking."

"That's a half-truth. Try again."

Frustration crinkles her brow. "Okay, I liked it. But that doesn't even make sense. It was humiliating and painful."

"Define the pain."

"It was...I don't know. It should've scared me. Instead, it just made me feel warm and fuzzy all over. Maybe because *you* don't scare me. Because I...I like..." She drops her gaze to her hands.

"Look at me."

She does, her teeth sawing along her lip. "I like you. You make me want things I've never..." She looks away and quickly returns to me. "I want your spankings and kisses and...*more*."

"Good girl." Standing over her bent position, I cup her chin with my free hand and kiss her mouth.

The moment our tongues connect, I'm lost to the aimless, sensual slide of our lips. She's fantasias in the flesh, unbound to

convention, vibrating beneath my hands and begging to be directed.

I straighten and step back. “The pain you experienced with other men... That was unacceptable, Ivory, because it was non-consensual.” I punctuate each syllable with a stern tone. “You are not at fault. You will never blame yourself. Say *yes* if you understand.”

She sits taller, her chin lifting higher. “Yes.”

That glimmer of confidence in her posture does wonders for my ego. We’re making progress, and damn if that doesn’t harden me like a rock.

I widen my stance, the looped belt hanging at my side. “Just like the spanking, I’m going to show you good pain. The kind of pain *you* control. You’ll have all the power here, because the moment you say *no*—”

Her shoulders tighten, a reminder that in her experience that word is a useless son of a bitch.

A renewed blaze of anger hits my blood. I spear a hand through my hair and draw a deep breath. “Scratch that. Give me a word you would naturally use in place of *no*. Something that—”

“Scriabin.”

The speed in which she spits that out shocks me. And why a Russian composer? As I stare into the shadows of her muddy brown eyes, I decide that Scriabin is rather fitting given the conflicted, dissonant quality of his music.

I flex my hand, my heart pumping wildly. “When you say *Scriabin*, I stop.”

She scans my face, my shoulders, and the belt in my hand. A frown pulls on her mouth.

“I need your trust, Ivory.”

She looks up, her lips parting. “You have it.”

“Show me.” The ache in my cock magnifies. “Feet on the floor and chest on the mattress.”

When she obeys, the tightness inside my ribs loosens.

I step behind her and trail the loop of leather up her leg and over her round ass. My hands continue upward, holding on to the belt as I extend her arms above her head. “Tell me why you’re being punished.”

With her fingers curling into the quilt, she rests her cheek against the bed and meets my eyes. “For selling my body.”

“That’s not—” I feel the tremor of my outrage all the way to my feet. “Listen to me. You were in a desperate situation, and those fuckers took more than you offered. I’m punishing you because you put yourself in that car instead of coming to me.”

She starts to rise, but I hold her down with my weight, my chest on her back and my hungry cock against her ass.

“But you’re my teacher,” she says, quietly. “I didn’t know what you would—”

“You also had Stogie. And the police, social services... You had options.”

Her muscles deflate beneath me. “You’re right.”

“Right and pissed. You refused my help with the textbooks, yet you accepted money from those assholes. You didn’t trust me enough to confide in me, but you trusted those boys with a dangerous arrangement.”

She nods, her mouth soft in agreement. But I know her mind must be racing into the future, searching for new solutions to lingering problems.

I trace my lips across her jaw. “You’re mine, Ivory. That means your problems are mine. Your bills, your worries, your safety...” I kiss the corner of her mouth. “All of it belongs to me.”

She releases a heavy sigh.

Shifting downward, I roam my hands over her clothes. Her slender shoulder, the curvature of her spine, the rise of her ass, there’s so much femininity to touch, devour, and welt.

I crouch behind her, my muscles buzzing with excitement. With the belt in my hand, I let her feel the scrape of leather as I slide the skirt to her waist. Toned thighs and freckles, pert ass and creamy skin, goosebumps and pink satin...it's all mine. But the panties have to go.

As I yank them to her feet and step back, everything inside me narrows to one basic instinct. Jesus, fuck, I want inside her with blinding ferocity, but I manage to keep my feet on the floor and my hand off my dick. "What's your safe word?"

"Scriabin," she breathes, clutching the quilt.

The sight of her bent over for me has my cock jerking painfully in my slacks, damn near tearing through the zipper. Does she touch herself when she's alone? Has a man ever pleased her? I doubt it, but I need confirmation, even if it tempts me to strap her down and fuck her until I break her.

"One more question." I stroke a finger up her thigh and slide it through the soft, wet flesh between her legs. "Have you ever had an orgasm?"

IVORY

I press my face into the manly scent of Emeric's bedding and force my trembling legs to keep me from sliding to the floor. Cool air brushes against my bare backside, and his fingers... Holy hell, his fingers slide back and forth between my thighs, producing the strangest, most invigorating kind of warmth down there.

I can't focus on anything but the path of his strokes, my entire body singing for him to keep doing that...that...exactly what he's doing. Please, don't stop, don't—

He stops, cupping me in his huge palm. "I won't repeat the question."

I press my teeth into my lip, hating his gruff, impatient tone. Or maybe I love it.

"I don't know. I...I touch myself sometimes." I've tried to create the toe-curling *Oh yeah, right there!* the women in my neighborhood go on about, but it never feels as good as they claim. "Can it happen when I don't enjoy it?"

His hand flexes against my pussy. "All those motherfuckers, and not one of them got you off." He relaxes his fingers, caressing lazily. "It'll be different from now on."

The next stroke curls all the way inside, thrusting me into a whole new world of different. Air shoots from my lungs, and my body clenches around the invasion. Oh my God, it's so... painless. Not dry or searing or too tight.

With slippery drives of his finger, he plunges again and again. A molten, coma-inducing pleasure courses through my body. My nipples tighten, and my pulse goes crazy. I dig my toes into the carpet as the slurping sounds of his rhythm saturate the room.

Heat rushes to my face. I know this is desire, and he's found that mysterious trigger to release my natural lubrication, to show me how to want this. But I'm leaking all over his hand. Is it normal to be *this* messy?

He crouches, burying his finger inside me as his other hand drags the belt along my thigh. The leather shakes against me, like his exhales. And his voice. "So fucking wet."

"I'm sorry. I don't know why—"

"Don't," he growls, dipping his finger in and out, massaging and rubbing with so much control. "This is what it feels like to be taken care of, to receive pleasure from someone who wants to give it desperately." His lips graze my inner thigh. "I know how to touch my girl."

He knows how to be both languorous and *male* and how to coax my surrender with only the strength of his words. I've never been with someone so powerful and confident, who can also remain calm enough to touch me like this.

His fingers leave my body, and his heat slips away. I turn my neck and catch a glimpse of deep navy eyes as he straightens and swipes his wet hand over his mouth.

That's the second time he's tasted me. It's obscene yet fascinating at the same time.

He steps to the side. "Don't move your hands."

I twist my fingers in the bedding above my head just as the air whistles behind me. A fiery thwack lands across my ass, and I can't stop my hand from jerking back to rub the pain.

But his mouth is already there, sealed over the stabbing heat, sucking and licking. He grabs my wrist, pinning it to the mattress as his lips transform the hurt into something else completely. The sweep of his tongue chases away the sting, leaving a drugging kind of tingle across my skin.

Maybe it's because he spent so much time touching me first, suspending me in a state of over-stimulation, but I don't cower as he stands to swing again. My body is already buzzing like an addict. I want more.

Except he doesn't strike. He moves away from the bed with determined strides and disappears within the closet. What the hell?

A second later, he emerges with a black duffel bag and unzips it on the bed beside my head. Leather cuffs drop on the mattress, followed by nylon straps.

My heart bangs so loudly it could drown out an orchestra. "Wh—what is that for?"

He unwinds the straps, squatting as he attaches them to the bed frame. "If you had moved your hand a second sooner, the belt would've sliced your fingers. Maybe even broken them. We're going to do this without endangering your piano career."

Says the man who punches walls.

I lift up on elbows and point at his damaged knuckles. "When is your next symphony performance?"

"Two weeks." He stretches his swollen hand then pats the edge of the bed. "Arms here."

"You're going to tie me down?"

"I'm going to protect you." He opens the first leather cuff. "This or your safe word. Make a decision."

I imagine myself in those restraints, trapped and unable to escape as he belts my ass, kisses it better, and makes me the center of his universe. He's not forcing me. He's empowering me with a choice, an offer to take me somewhere exciting when no one else has ever bothered to care.

I rest my cheek against the mattress and extend my arms above my head.

"Your trust is intoxicating." His hands are suddenly on my face, angling my head as his mouth crashes against mine.

I melt beneath the demand of his lips. This kiss is harder than its predecessors, more hungry and lethal, his tongue looping with mine and his strong jaw scratching my skin in a delicious burn.

He breaks the kiss and returns to the cuffs, connecting them to the straps and locking them around my wrists. His fingers move expertly over the buckles and latches.

How many times has he done this? With how many women?

With my history, I'm in no position to be jealous, but it doesn't stop the clawing ache in my gut.

The touch of his hands pulls me from my thoughts. He's here with *me*, trailing goosebumps across my arms as he secures them in the restraints.

That done, he moves to stand behind me, hands on my hips and tugging my ass against his thighs. The straps strain with the movement, the manacles holding my arms above my head.

But I don't feel trapped or held down. I feel anchored. To him.

The folded belt swings in my periphery right before a new sting inflames the underside of my ass. He teases the welt with feathery touches, and his lips join in, kissing and soothing the lingering pain. Then he swings again.

Thwack, massage, kiss. I don't know how many times he repeats those steps. At some point, I slip into a blissful trance, lost in some floaty place where there's only him and me and the harmony of our breaths.

This is what it's supposed to feel like when two people come together, willingly, wantonly. What would sex be like with him? I can't even fathom it. The emotional connection alone might explode my brain.

He covers my heated backside in caresses and kisses, kindling such a big feeling inside me. The swollen throb between my legs rallies and flares, energizing my nerve-endings and expanding into parts of my body I didn't know existed. Something's coming, something wonderful, but before

the sensation reaches a breaking point, he steps back to swing again.

Over and over, he brings me closer to the edge, burning me hotter with need, and teasing me one stroke at a time.

When the hot lashes and affectionate touches stop completely, I moan into the quilt. “You’re done?”

His groaning laughter follows him around the bed where he bends to release the cuffs. I’m too limp and weightless to move. But my pussy pulsates with emptiness, clenching and soaked beyond embarrassment.

I don’t care. I need...need... “Please.”

Climbing onto the bed, he rolls me to my back and straddles my hips. His erection is right there, trying to stab a hole through his pants. But he doesn’t free it or look at it.

He weighs enough to crush me, but his quads contract at my sides, bearing his bulk. His gaze lowers to my button-up, and he grips the collar, ripping it open. My nicest blouse. But the look on his face makes me forget why I care.

His lips separate with the force of his breaths, and his eyes drift over me like a vast ocean, heavy and deep, drowning me in wonder.

Men have sat on me like this before, but only during a struggle when my arms are swinging and my hips are bucking. No one has ever straddled me in such a vulnerable position without thrusting and taking. *With his pants still on.*

He takes in the white satin of my mom’s bra, the material too small to fully cover my chest. With a groan, he tugs the cups beneath my breasts, exposing them. “If you knew how many times I’ve imagined these the past couple months, what they would feel like, taste like, how they would look trussed up in rope...”

“I’ve imagined you, too.” I lift my hand to reach for the hard length straining his slacks.

He catches my wrist and lunges forward, his chest on mine and his voice guttural. “If you touch me, it’s all over. I’m

barely hanging on.”

Part of me wants to see what he looks like when he lets go. But I'd rather give in to my curiosity about where he's taking this and let him lead.

With a shaky hand, he traces the outer edge of my breast. His other hand tangles in my hair as he leans in and tastes my lips.

I love the cinnamon flavor of his tongue. It's so unique to him, just one of the thousand things that separates him from all the others. When I'm with him, the bruises inside me tuck themselves away. Or maybe they fade. I can't feel them or the fear they ignite. Why? Because he's viciously protective? Because he's achingly tender even when he's punishing me?

He's a deep well of discovery, and I hope he gives me the time and permission to learn everything about him.

He slides off my hips to lie against my side, facing me. The hand in my hair clenches tighter, and his lips stay with mine, each bite and roll of his tongue delivering an electric shudder up my spine.

His free hand travels down my throat, trails a path between my breasts, over my stomach, and dives between my legs. I gasp against his mouth, my fingers grasping at his shoulder.

The placement of his thumb stuns me, and my clit throbs against the diabolical pressure he rubs against it. He sinks one then two fingers inside me, and I writhe against his hand, my skin hot and exposed beneath his gaze.

I must look ridiculous with my skirt bunched around my waist, and my too-small bra shoved beneath my boobs. But he doesn't seem to care.

He steals glances at my bared breasts, even as his mouth feasts on my lips. I despise my chest, but I love how he stares at me like he appreciates what he sees, like he's never wanted another woman the way he wants me. My body pleases him. *I* please him.

The length of his frame trembles against mine, all sharp edges and contracting muscles. I don't know when he slipped

off his shoes, but his socked feet brush against my toes. The shirt and slacks he's still wearing doesn't diminish the heat seeping from him. His intensity smothers me, and his gravelly noises shiver my skin. He's a starving, growly man in need, and I want to feed him.

His hand grips my hair, holding my lips against his as our tongues lap and twine together, hot and wet, ravenous and unguarded. His erection grinds against my thigh in maddening circles, and a combustion of sensations lick across my skin, hardening my nipples into painful points.

He tears his mouth away to devour my breasts with a hot tongue. Sucking and laving, he pulls a bud deeper into his mouth as his fingers and thumb continue their wicked assault.

I'm going to explode. I feel it simmering deep in my core, rising faster, hotter, robbing my air. When his lips return to mine, he swallows my moans. His kiss, his scent, the feel of his strength surrounding me... My muscles shake with the overwhelming pleasure of it all.

A tremor skips down his arm, spurring his fingers faster and his hips harder.

"Come, Ivory," he pants against my lips. "Come all over my hand."

My mouth slackens, my chin tilting upward as I reach for it. I fall into his smoldering gaze and feel the expanding pressure, right there, like a brewing storm inside me, collecting and strengthening. But I don't know how to make it happen. "I—I'm trying. I don't know..."

"Get out of your head." He rotates his thumb and trails his tongue across my pliable lips. "Let it all go."

My earlier confessions had been shockingly freeing. It should've relaxed me enough to do this with him. And I *am* relaxed, but also nervous about what's happening and what it all means.

He shakes with the urgency of his arousal, rubbing himself wildly against my thigh as he fingers me into insanity. With each circle of his thumb and pump of his hand, my release

hovers on the ledge, galvanized with determination yet teetering with uncertainty.

“Stop thinking, dammit, and feel me.” He drives his cock against my leg, his breath catching in his throat. “Feel how much I want you. How much I want you with me. I’m not finishing without you.”

An invisible wall crashes down inside me, and an outpour of quivering, overwhelming heat spills from my spine, detonates through my womb, and shatters every neuron in my body. The shock of it steals my breath, my back bowing against the force of so many new and frenzied sensations.

“Ah God, there you go. So beautiful,” he rasps. “So fucking mine.” His fingers, hips, and breathy groans work in tandem, shoving me deeper into tingling bliss and shredding his voice. “Fuck, I’m gonna—”

He comes with a strangled shout, his body jerking as he rolls halfway on top of me and captures my mouth in a breathless kiss. His weight slouches against me, and the rocking of his hips ebbs into a lazy roll. His hand slips from between my legs, his chest heaving hard against mine. But his movements are slow, reverently gentle as he cups my jaw and kisses me into a languid, dreamy cosmos.

I died somewhere between my release and his. And now I know how it feels to be alive.

I can’t seem to move the muscles in my face to kiss him back. My skin is hot and slippery with perspiration, but who cares? Every inch of me is luxuriously numb, listless, and happy.

He holds my gaze, his eyes wide and mesmerizing as he chokes a jagged sound against my lips. “Now I know why you’re illegal.”

EMERIC

I lift Ivory's beautifully exhausted limbs, molding my hands around her flexuous curves and touching more than required to slip the shirt off her arms. "Still with me, sleepy girl?"

Her hooded brown eyes make a sluggish climb over my mouth before meeting my gaze. "Mm."

My smile is so deep, I feel it in my lungs like a nourishing breath. There's no limit to what I would do to put that look on her face every night. But what are *her* limits? What is she willing to gamble? Her education? Her future?

If she's caught in my house, I'm the one at risk. I'm the adult, taking advantage of a student, a victim. While I might end up fighting a legal battle, she would be safe from all blame.

When I pull my head together, I'll figure out a plan. But right now, her safety far outweighs the consequences I might endure.

I remove the rest of her clothes. When I toss the final scrap to the floor, I'm left with a view so fucking tantalizing I couldn't have dreamed it—and hell knows I tried for weeks.

Sprawled in my bed, her nude hourglass figure beckons every masculine nerve, organ, and connective tissue in my body. From her wet mouth and the slackness in her muscles to her abundant chest and flushed clit, she draws me in and holds me in mindless fascination.

She hasn't said a word since she came on my fingers. She seems to be in shock. Or soaring in bliss. Definitely in awe, given the widening of her eyes as she slides a hand between her legs and feels the swollen flesh of her pussy.

Christ almighty, she's innocence wrapped in sin.

The innocent part rattles me the most. Not only have I crossed the line as her teacher, there's a ten-year age difference between us. Add to that her abusive past and the ruthless dominating way I fuck, and we're navigating a land mine. If I move too fast or make the wrong step, the consequences will be devastating.

I run my fingers over hers, brushing the dark curls on her cunt. "Don't shave this."

She glances at our hands and returns to my face. "Why not?"

"I don't want to feel like I'm—" *Touching a little girl.* "You're young, Ivory. I don't need any more reminders."

"I've been with a lot of guys older than you." Her cheeks bloom with heat, and she pulls her hand away. "I shouldn't have said that."

The impulse to demand she never mention other men burns in my throat, but I bite it back. "If you need to talk about it, about *them*, I want to be the person you turn to." I kiss her lips and trail my finger over her pussy. "Okay?"

"Okay." She grips my wrist and squeezes. "Thank you."

I slip off the bed and swat her thigh. "Up."

Ten minutes later, steam drenches the bathroom, fogging my reflection in the mirror as well as the shower door behind me. The splash of water against tiles broadcasts her movements as the woodsy scent of my shampoo infuses my inhaled air. There's something deeply satisfying about her using my things, smelling like me, and making herself at home in my space.

While she showers, I wash my dick at the sink, both appalled and riveted by the fact that I jizzed in my briefs. I

haven't done that since high school. But it shouldn't surprise me. I've been jacking off like a fucking fiend for weeks.

It takes every ounce of restraint I have left to not join her in the shower. I want to fuck her thoroughly, completely, and in every way imaginable, but I have to prove to her I'm not like the others. Every step with her is a risk, and there are still so many unanswered questions.

I clean my knuckles and lather them in antibiotic cream from the supplies beneath the sink. "Are you on birth control?"

Her misty silhouette freezes behind the shower door. "No."

I turn to face her, straining to make out the shape of her body in the curl of steam. "Do you use condoms?"

She presses a palm against the glass door, as if to steady herself. "When I can."

My fist clenches, but the next thing I punch should be my own stupid mouth. Could I be anymore heartless? Of course, she doesn't always use condoms. If a man doesn't stop at *no*, he's certainly not pausing to wrap up.

I manage to hold my temper in, but the rapid-fire of my pulse and the rage scorching up my spine propels me out of the bathroom.

"I'll set out something for you to wear," I shout from the bedroom. "Meet me in the kitchen."

Tossing one of my t-shirts on the bed for her, I strip my clothes and drag on a pair of flannel pants.

On my way out, I grab my phone and make a call to my dad's clinic. As expected, it goes to voice mail. My bare feet pad down the carpeted stairs and into the kitchen as I tell the recorder who I am and what I require.

I could've called my dad to schedule her appointment, but I don't want to field his questions tonight. Not when I still don't have all the answers.

By the time she emerges in the kitchen doorway, I have two plates of heated linguine carbonara set out on the island.

She hovers on the threshold, her deep brown eyes darting between the food and my bare chest. Her expression creases with every emotion in existence before softening with a smile. “You cooked?”

“My catering service did.” I grab two glasses and a pitcher of sweet tea. “The oven warmed it up.”

She approaches the island, tugging the mid-thigh shirt down her tanned legs. Her long wet hair soaks the white cotton against her chest, revealing taut nipples and delicate shoulders. I find it impossible to look away. It’s as if every fiber of my being is tied to hers, and every movement she makes moves me, pulling me closer, deeper.

I never stood a chance.

“Thank you.” She sits on the bar stool, tucking the hem of the shirt between her legs. “This smells incredible.”

I settle on the stool beside her, twisting to face her, and stab a fork into the noodles.

Her eyes return to my chest.

I arch a brow. “What?”

She holds a finger in front of me, tapping the air as her concentration travels from my shoulders to my waist.

Is she counting?

Fuck me, my pecs bounce. All she has to do is look at me and my body reacts.

She drops her hand and turns to her dinner, mumbling, “Twelve indentations and ten muscly bumps.”

I glance down, trying to make sense of her numbers. I spend two hours a day, seven days a week in my home gym, honing my physique into tiptop shape for the same reason every other guy works out. To get laid. But now I want to hit the weights just to watch her count my muscles again.

She sucks a noodle off her fork, grinning. “You don’t look like a teacher.”

“You don’t look like a student.”

Her smile disintegrates.

I wipe a hand down my face, wishing I could call back those words. How many times have her looks attracted the wrong kind of attention? *She attracted me.*

She waves her fork up and down the length of my body. “You’d make more money modeling than teaching.”

“Do I look like I need money?”

“Good point.” She scans the kitchen, taking in the high-end appliances that never get used. She doesn’t ask about the source of my wealth, but I know she’s wondering.

I swallow a buttery bite of pasta and twirl more noodles around my fork. “My family holds the patent on the wooden bracings in pianos.”

“Wow. Really?”

“Really. So money is not my incentive for working.”

“Why work at all? You could live on a yacht, drink rum, and grow a smelly beard.” Her eyebrows lift. “Like a pirate.”

“A pirate.” My lips twitch. “As appealing as that sounds, boredom doesn’t suit me.” I would lose my fucking mind. “I need challenge and self-earned success, and I find those things playing piano, teaching...” I give her a narrowed look. “And disciplining.”

Her eyes flicker. “You’re very good at that last one.”

“But not the others?”

A sly grin pulls at the corner of her mouth. “I’ve never heard you play.”

“I play every night.” Except I won’t be able to tonight.

I glance at my throbbing hand with no regrets.

She scrapes a forkful of linguine. “I know this is a big place, but I haven’t seen a piano.”

“I’ll give you a tour another time. Finish your dinner.”

She inhales the remainder of the pasta and follows it with gulps of sweet tea.

I finish mine soon after and slide the dish away. “I made a doctor’s appointment for you.”

Her fork clanks against the plate, her voice quiet. “I don’t have insurance or the money to pay for that.”

My hand flexes. I want to hurt her mother and every other person who’s never been there for her. “It’s covered.”

“I can’t—”

I slam my fist against the counter, rattling the china. “You will go to that appointment and get a full examination, for the sake of your health and for my peace of fucking mind.”

Jaw clenched, she pitches me a stubborn glare.

She can scowl all she wants. I’m not finished. “From this point forward, the words *I can’t* are no longer in your vocabulary.” I angle forward until all she can see is my eyes. “Do I make myself clear?”

“Oh, you’re clear.” She holds my gaze. “And abrasive and surly. You have a terrible temper.”

A playful kind of youth twinkles in her eyes, but there’s something else there, too. Her lips separate to allow for the climb in her breaths, and she’s not blinking, like she’s forcing a mask of toughness and bravery.

Deep down, she’s scared. To stand up to me? To disappoint me? To put faith in what’s happening between us?

I close the inches between us and kiss her mercilessly on the mouth. Cupping her head in both hands, I work my tongue against hers, fusing us together, licking and biting and flooding her with every last drop of fervor I feel for her. I love her strength in the face of fear, her determination despite all her roadblocks, and fuck me, I love her mouth. The way the hot, wet suction of her lips wraps around my tongue and hardens my cock.

She tips back in the frame of my hands and searches my eyes. We stare at each other, chests heaving, suspended in the energy pulsing between us.

After an endless stretch of heartbeats, she blinks. “I have the money to pay you for the textbooks...but...I can see...” She cringes at the heat rising in my face. “Now is a bad time to bring that up.”

I stack the dishes and carry them to the sink. “By tomorrow night, I want a list of your bills and all the things you need.” I throw her a hard look over my shoulder. “Things I won’t know to buy.”

She joins me at the sink, her expression pinched in frustration.

I rinse a plate and hand it to her. “I know you’re strong enough and brave enough to stand on your own. Hell, you’ve been doing it for years.” I brush my fingers over her stiff jaw. “But now you have help. I’m here to make your hardships a little less hard. You *will* lean on me.”

She stares at the rack in the dishwasher, sets the plate in the wrong way, studies it for a moment, then turns it. “Like this?”

I nod. The realization that she’s never loaded a dishwasher makes me appreciate a lot of things in life, putting her at the top of that list.

With a stoic expression, she helps me finish the dishes in silence. I give her the time to think, to weigh her pride against mine. When the cleanup is completed and the counters are wiped down, I turn to her.

She stands just out of arm’s reach, her small frame swallowed by the t-shirt as she stares at her bare feet. “The thing I value most doesn’t cost a dime, yet it seems to be the hardest for people to give.”

Friendship? Protection? Love? My head swims, searching for the answer. “Name it, and it’s yours.”

Her eyes find mine, and she steps forward. Another step, and her arms encircle my waist. She presses her cheek against my chest, skin-to-skin, and releases a heavy sigh.

A hug. That’s the thing she values most.

My ribs tighten as I embrace her, crushing her as close as possible without bruising her soft skin. She's a head shorter, too short to feel her heart pounding against mine. So I catch her beneath her knees and back, swoop her up, and hoist her against my chest.

I flick the light switch with my elbow and head for the stairs.

She snuggles against me, hands snaking over my shoulders and sliding into my hair. Her entire body relaxes in my arms as she nuzzles her face against my cheek, touching, breathing, feeling me. "I should tell you to put me down, but I like this too much."

Good thing, because I'm not letting go.

As we reach the bedroom, she murmurs against my neck. "I need to go home in the morning to get clothes and feed Schubert."

I bite down on my smile. "Do you feed him brains?"

"What?" Her startled expression eases into a glimmering smile. "Not the dead Schubert. My cat."

"We'll swing by your house before school, but you don't need clothes."

I enter the closet and set her on her feet. Stepping back, I lounge against the door jamb and block her exit. When she realizes just how fucking crazy I am, there's no telling how fast she'll run.

She circles the island in the center, rubbing the back of her neck. "Your closet is bigger than my house."

I slide my hands in the pockets of my flannel pants and wait.

Her gaze snags on the far wall, and her hesitant strides carry her toward it. She trails a hand over the long shelf of high-heels, flats, sandals, and tennis shoes. Tilting her head, she stares up at the racks of dresses, shirts, and trousers. The entire wall is hers.

Her shoulder blades tighten, her hands falling to her sides as she speaks with her back to me. “Do you have an alternative lifestyle I don’t know about? A fetish with women’s clothing?”

“Something like that.”

She snatches a beige Louboutin pump from the shelf and checks the size. “How did you—” She sighs, returning it carefully to its place. “The first day, when you slid my shoes back on.”

My blood pumps thick and hot in my veins. Separated by the island and the length of the room, I watch her peruse the clothes, anticipating her next words.

“I ca—” She whirls toward me, her eyes shimmering with unshed tears. “I know. No *I can’t*s. No sniveling. No questioning your methods.” She hooks an arm around her waist and presses a fist to her mouth, staring at me from beneath her lashes. “It’s a lot to take in, but I’m trying.” She stands straighter, glancing at the clothes behind her. “It’s just...this is all too much, too fast, and—”

“Come here.” I remove my hands from my pockets, my posture open, welcoming.

She crosses the room in a vision of dark skin, thin cotton, and allure.

When she reaches me, I lift her and carry her to the bed. “What’s mine is yours, Ivory. The sooner you accept that, the easier this will be.”

Shifting under the blankets, she stares up at me. “If I don’t accept it?”

I slip in beside her, pull her to my chest, and entwine our legs together. “Then you get to endure more of my... What did you call it?” I lean in and kiss her bottom lip. “Abrasive and surly temper.”

“There’s medication for that.”

“You’re the only drug I need.” Reaching back, I switch off the light and rest my head on her pillow, our faces inches

apart.

The illumination of gas lamps and moonlight filters in through the nearby window, blanketing us in pale silence. Her eyes glisten with wonder, worry, and unspoken words, reflecting all the emotions I openly express in mine.

I brush her hair behind her ear. “I don’t share. That means no more high school or neighborhood boys. You’re in my bed and no one else’s.”

She opens her mouth.

I tap it with a finger then trace the soft curve of her lips. “I’ll protect you from those who don’t respond to *no*.”

“What about you?” Her leg twitches in the bend of mine, her tone low and suspicious. “Are there other women?”

“You’re the only one.”

I’ve turned down every goddamn woman since I met her. First time in my adult life I’ve gone this long without sex.

Vertical lines form between her brows. “What about your love-hate thing with Joanne?”

“She’s complicated. But I haven’t seen her in six months.”

I haven’t told Ivory everything, but I need to make a decision about that mess before I expose her to it. And there’s a second secret I’ve kept from her, a more urgent one that I need to address now. “I have something to tell you about Prescott Rivard.”

Her gaze shatters into rippling pools of brown. “Will he get you fired? Or press charges?”

“I scared him enough to keep him silent for a while, but that fear will eventually sour and grow resentful. Then...I don’t know.”

“I’ll go to the cops and explain what happened.”

“No, you will not.” I hook an arm around her back, preparing for her to jerk away. “I promised his mother a spot for him at Leopold.”

A frozen moment passes before she tenses against my hold. “How? Why?”

“She gave me a career at Le Moyne in exchange for my connections. To get Prescott into Leopold.”

“Connections? Leopold admits their students on talent alone.”

“My mother holds a seat on the Board of Trustees. She’ll slide him through without a formal audition.”

She studies my expression, curling her hand against her chest between us. “This affects my chances, doesn’t it?”

“If I refer you, their recruiters will come. They’ll attend a school-wide performance and...”

Her breath hiccups in her throat. “They’ll see Prescott play and potentially reject his application.”

“And accept yours instead.” I comb a hand through her hair and rest my lips against her forehead. “You have more talent than anyone at Le Moyne, but if I ask my mother to sneak two applications through—”

“No way.” She yanks her head back. “*When* I’m accepted into Leopold, it will be on merit and talent alone.”

I cuddle her against me as pain pounds behind my breastbone. I can’t bear the thought of fucking her over. “I’ll make this right.”

“How? You took that deal for a reason, right? Because of Shreveport?”

“Yes, but I can get an out-of-state job.” I tilt her chin up and kiss her, smiling against her lips. “Or I can become a pirate.”

After the shit with Prescott tonight, however, my resignation brings new complications for Ivory.

She caresses my jaw. “The dean will just replace you with another deal. She hired you under wrongful terms and wiped Mrs. McCracken’s recommendations from my file, so clearly,

she's on a devil's mission. Why does she want her son to go there so badly?"

"It's the best school with the wealthiest endowments. Prescott's admittance is her shoe in to elevate Le Moyne's power and status. Or who knows? Maybe she aspires to sit on the board there someday."

She nods, her face furrowed in contemplation. "If you quit, Prescott won't have enough incentive to keep his mouth shut about me. After tonight, he can give his mother all the leverage she needs to get rid of me."

Exactly where my head is at. Just like that, I know with absolute certainty I won't leave Le Moyne or Ivory. I'm smarter and meaner than Beverly Rivard, and I have a few months to decide the method and level of cruelty I'll use to beat her.

"I understand why you did it. Why you took that deal." Ivory trails her fingers across my chest, watching the movement. "Even after what Joanne did, it's hard to let go. To move away."

My breath catches at the accuracy of her statement. She's right, but she doesn't know the real problem, the one I'm working to resolve with Joanne. And my feelings for Joanne? Those have dulled enough that they no longer drive my actions.

Ivory's eyelids flutter heavily, her limbs slackening around me, as she mutters under her breath, "Everything is possible."

"Such as?"

"I'm going to Leopold."

Her stubbornness is inconvenient. And painfully admirable. Unfortunately, I have no idea what I'm going to do about it.

I hate to postpone her sleep, but there's one more thing I need to know. "Where is your brother's friend?"

Her eyes flash open, and her voice catches in her throat. "What?"

“Did he disappear after he raped you? Or is he still around?”

Her complexion turns bloodless in the dim light, her cheekbones pressing against her tightening skin.

Everything inside me goes still, strangling my throat and thickening my voice. “Tell me.”

She throws back the covers, rolls on top of me, and rests her forehead against mine. “No more punching tonight.”

I grip her firm ass beneath the shirt and try to focus my energy on her body and not what’s been done to her body. “When was the last time he touched you?”

She drops her knees to my sides, straddling me, as she holds my face in her hands. “He hasn’t raped me since August.”

August? I jackknife to a sitting position, my vision blurred by red fog. “This *past* August, as in two months ago?”

She clings to my chest, holding on to my head as she mashes her mouth against mine. The moment her tongue seeks entry, I kiss her back, angrily, possessively, tangling my hand in her hair and yanking her hips against mine.

I bite her lip. “His name.”

She rocks her pussy against my cock, thrusting her tongue and, goddammit, distracting me.

I rip my mouth away. “His name.”

She slumps, her whisper hollow. “Lorenzo Gandara.”

Latino? The same motherfucker lurking around her house that night?

“Does he ride an orange sportbike?”

Her fingernails dig into the back of my neck. “How do you know that?”

IVORY

“Go to sleep.”

That’s the only response Emeric gives to my endless questions about Lorenzo. Eventually, my worries dissolve beneath the weight of fatigue.

I tuck close against the rigid wall of his chest, sheltered by the bulk of his arm around my back, and guarded by his vigilant gaze. I fall fast into sleep, lost in a great timeless space where forever isn’t long enough.

I’ve never felt this weightless, like a strange airy sensation has replaced my bones and skin, and there’s nothing left but my breath. Soft, floaty breaths of ether. Each exhale forms a cloud that joins the others drifting around me in a vast blue sky.

I’m dreaming. I try to hold onto the enchantment. It’s so safe and gentle here I don’t want to leave. *Don’t wake up.*

I blink against flashes of sapphire haloed by lamp light.

“Good morning.” Emeric’s blue eyes fill my horizon, so deep and majestic, glimmering with all the colors and stars of heaven.

I stretch my arms over my head, delighting in the softness of his bed. “I’m dreaming.”

He stands over me, biceps bunching as he plants his hands on the edge of the mattress. “Still dreaming?”

“Well...I was in heaven.” I reach up and caress the day-old scruff on his jaw. “Until the devil showed up.”

His lips crook up in a territorial grin, his complexion rosier than usual. His skin is damp beneath my fingers, his hair dark and drippy against his forehead.

“You already showered?” I drag my focus from his face, down his wet t-shirt, and pause on the gym shorts. “Oh. You worked out. What time is it?”

I shift to my side and find the clock on the nightstand. *5:15 AM*. School doesn't start for two hours.

He straightens, rolling his shoulders. “How long do you need to get ready?”

I sit up, the room wobbling around me as I recall the conversation we didn't finish last night. “Depends. You haven't told me how you know Lorenzo.”

“He's no longer your concern.” He turns toward the bathroom.

“You can't just go beat him up.” I slide off the bed and adjust the shirt over my thighs. “He's an ex-Marine, a thug, maybe even a criminal. And you're a—”

He shoots me a scalding glare that shrivels the rest of my words in my throat. His fist opens and closes at his side, his lacerated knuckles glowing red. Okay, maybe he could get a few punches in, but...

“It's too risky.” I slump on the edge of the mattress, trembling against the idea of him fighting another one of my monsters.

Lorenzo rarely comes to my house without Shane, so it would be them against my teacher. Nothing good would come from that.

I meet his eyes. “The cops might get called. You could go to jail. Or worse, if you keep hitting stuff, you could break your hands and lose your ability to play piano.”

He strides back to me, his expression marbled with shadowy lines of intensity. “Despite what you've seen, I

usually don't confront problems with my fists." He raises one of those fists and strokes it across my jaw. "I prefer subtle and deceptive planning. Lorenzo Gandara won't see me coming."

Okaaay. So he's going to...what? Go ninja on his ass?

He returns to the bathroom, his voice rumbling over his shoulder. "I'm taking a shower. Then the bathroom is yours."

The door shuts behind him, followed by the hollow click of the lock.

I flop back on the bed, the shirt lifting to my waist and exposing me to the cool air. I don't know what he did with my panties. I don't even care. He's seen me naked and put his fingers inside me. Yet all he's let me see is his bare chest.

Why did he lock the door? What is he hiding? My pulse elevates as ridiculous theories fill my head. Is his dick malformed? Or maybe he doesn't want me near it until the doctor checks me for diseases?

My emotions overflow, but the sharpest feeling is the one deep in my core. Just thinking about him naked sends a quiver up my thighs and a jolt between my legs.

Sensations that have never been there before surge like a fever. I feel so damn hot and needy. *For my teacher.*

It's wrong. Being here is wrong. Sliding my hand over my pussy feels wrong, too, but I do it anyway, stroking the way he stroked, dipping and circling exactly how he did it. My fingers are his fingers, caressing, giving, and building that wonderful energy inside me.

Soon, my body takes over, my hand moving the way *I* want it to move, coaxing shivers across my skin and producing an unimaginable amount of wet heat beneath my touch.

My legs fall open, and my head tips back, my neck stretching as I rub my clit and sink two fingers inside, out and up, down and back in.

He's right behind that door, lathering soap along his shaft, stroking it, caring for it. God bless it, I want to do that. I bet his nude body is a legendary sight to behold.

The pressure inside me snaps, cutting my air as pleasure rolls over me in warm electric waves. I shudder and jerk, gasping with throaty groans. Holy hell, maybe I can do that again. After I catch my breath. How many of those can I have back-to-back?

I glide my fingers into my slick opening. Maybe just one more before he—

It's too quiet. Is the shower off?

The bathroom door swings open, and he steps out in a fog of steam.

I yank my hand away and shove the shirt down.

He grips the towel at his waist as his arctic eyes lock on mine.

Neither of us breathes. Or moves.

He knows.

“You touched yourself.”

My face heats to nuclear levels.

He clutches the door frame, squeezing so hard the wood creaks. His eyes cloud with pain, harden with resolve, then he jerks backward and slams the door between us.

I groan, embarrassed beyond belief.

A thump hits the wood on the other side. The lock clicks, followed by the sound of the shower turning back on.

What the hell just happened? What should I do? As soon as he comes out, I'll have to face him.

Dammit, I refuse to be ashamed about this.

Darting across the room, I knock on the door. “Emeric?”

“Five minutes!” His muffled shout sounds too close to be in the shower.

“Are you mad?”

“No, Ivory,” he grunts.

“Then what?”

He makes a deep growly noise. “Fuck, you’re killing me here.”

I back away from the door and sit on the bed. He hasn’t tried to have sex with me, but all his kissing and touching and staring tells me he wants to. Given my unsavory sex life, I can guess why he won’t.

One thing I can depend on, though, is his directness. So rather than making myself sick over assumptions, I wander toward the lunacy that’s in his closet.

Clothes and shoes line a wall that’s three times longer than my height. The quality of the fabrics and seams is unlike anything I’ve ever touched. I open the built-in drawers along the side and find heaps of lace, satin, and oh my God, leather lingerie. The tags have been removed, but everything looks new and exactly my size. I mold the cups of a red lacy bra around my boobs. Perfect fit. How the hell does he know my bra size?

Five minutes later, the bathroom door opens. I slip out of the closet, still wearing his t-shirt, and return to the bed to sit on the edge.

His black hair is partially dry, and the earlier tension in his muscles is gone. My attention falls to the bulge beneath his towel. It’s not tenting. I bet he touched himself, but why behind a closed door with the shower running? Emeric Marceaux does not get embarrassed.

He sits beside me on the bed, drops his bruised hand in my lap, and loops our fingers together. “To clarify my earlier reaction... I do not, in any way, object to you masturbating.”

Just hearing him say that naughty word sparks a firestorm inside me. “That’s good, because I’m definitely doing it again.” I lift a daring brow. “Whether you approve or not.”

“Killing me,” he mutters beneath his breath.

“Why?” Why not just touch me instead?

He pulls our laced hands between his spread knees and braces our elbows on the towel covering his thighs. “I love

that you want to pleasure yourself.” He slides me a sexy grin. “I love it a little too much.”

“I hear a *but* coming.”

“But...” He flashes me another heart-racing smile. “I won’t show you how much I *really* love it until you’re ready.”

“You won’t show me your erection, you mean?”

He closes his eyes. “I’m not a gentle lover, Ivory.” He looks up, and his gaze lands on my lips. “I’m confident that, with time, you’ll discover you don’t want gentle. Until then, I’ll wait.”

“Behind a locked door?”

He nods.

I nibble my lip. “With an erection?”

The corner of his mouth bounces.

I glance at the outline of his cock beneath the towel. “You made yourself come?”

The potency of his stare riles my nerves as he rubs a hand over his jaw, rubbing, glaring hard, rubbing harder.

I really shouldn’t poke the beast, but... *Deep breath. Strong voice.* “Next time you jerk off, I want to watch.”

His inhale cuts off right before he launches. His chest collides with mine, hurdling me backward against the mattress. An *oomph* escapes my lips, but his mouth is there, devouring my voice, my air, and my sanity.

The weight of his body sinks mine into the bedding, his strength contracting around me as his hand slides up my ribs, taking the shirt with it. My fingers latch onto his hair, curling through the damp strands as he kisses me with firm lips and a devastatingly urgent tongue.

Held down by his size, my mouth controlled by his, I close my eyes and simply enjoy his feral affection. He catches my nipple and gives it a painful tug. When I gasp, he groans. I rock my hips, and he grinds his, pinning me to the bed and

pressing his hard length against my core. A little more of that and his towel will fall off. Maybe I could help it along?

I reach behind him and glide a hand down the flexing ridges of his back. When my fingers bump the towel, I slip beneath it and meet the rise of hard firm muscle. My God, how can a man's ass be so irresistible? I want to feel it with both hands, but his body's too long to get a good grasp. I stretch my arms, reaching—

He grabs my throat and squeezes. The force of his grip shoves my chin up, and my hands lose precious inches on his backside.

The angle of my mouth gives him deeper access, his tongue curling around mine and his wet exhales heating my face. "I'm a raging fucking animal around you."

I want to tell him to use me in whatever manner feeds his hunger, but as his fingers clench tighter around my throat, it's too much. My lungs burn for oxygen, and black spots invade my vision. Panic rises, my jaw working against his. Not kissing. *Fighting.*

I can't breathe. My hands flail against his back, my body bucking to escape. *Let go. Let go.*

The fist around my throat disappears, followed by his weight. I clutch my neck and wheeze for air as fear ices my veins and tears blur my eyes.

He stands beside the bed, righting the towel over the hard, jutting length I've yet to see.

Raking a hand through his hair, he glares down at me. "You're not ready."

I let go of my aching throat and sit up, shaking against a full-body tremor. "Ready for what? Sex?"

"For me!" He strides to the dresser and pulls out checkered socks and black briefs. "Keep that in mind the next time you ask to watch me jack off."

My stomach sinks. "I don't understand. Why did you strangle me? To scare me?"

If so, it worked. My heart is still pounding.

“To show you.” He crosses the room, stops at the foot of the bed, and scowls at his erection beneath the towel. Then his gaze bores into mine. “I get off on watching your body bow in anguish, on knowing I put those tears in your eyes. But only when you give me that pleasure freely and with absolute trust.”

Did I give it freely? Did I even have a choice? “If you care about me, why can’t we do this without...tears?”

His ruffled black hair and thick eyelashes give him a softer look, but the sharpness in his blue eyes reminds me that if there’s any gentleness inside him, it’s easily choked by his meteoric temper.

He glances at the clock and looks back at me. “I have a deep sexual need to push a woman beyond her comfort zone. When you’re ready to let me take you there, you’ll fight every instinct in your body, but I promise...the result is far more fulfilling than an orgasm.”

What could be better than an orgasm? Is it something deeper, like that warm feeling that fills my chest when I know he’s enjoying me? Giving him pleasure heightens mine to euphoric levels. So yeah, maybe there’s more to intimacy than just lying on my back while he ruts on top of me. But I have no idea what it could be.

I swallow. I don’t know how I feel about the choking. Does it go beyond my comfort zone? What will he try next? “Why do you want to push me like that?”

“It’s the ultimate trust, and the power in that is unparalleled.”

Despite the unease gurgling inside me, I manage to keep my voice steady. “I don’t want anyone to have power over—”

“No, Ivory. You’re the one with the power. *You* set the limits and decide when it stops.” He frowns down at me as a twitch skates across his hairless chest. “You didn’t use your safe word.”

Fuck, I forgot. “I couldn’t talk with your hand—”

“Bullshit. You didn’t try.”

I adjust the shirt over my thighs. “That’s the lesson, isn’t it?”

“Yes.” Without another word, he steps inside the closet, leaving me in a flushed heap of turmoil.

A few minutes later, he emerges fully clothed and tells me to come to the kitchen when I’m ready to go.

The purpose of his lesson consumes me as I shower, brush my hair and teeth, and dress alone in his bedroom. I know my perceptions of sex and men are jaded, but the pressure of his hand on my throat was nothing compared to the past four years of pain and fear. Doesn’t make his methods acceptable, but the shockingly harsh way he does things might actually be effective.

The next time he makes me uncomfortable, I’m positive I’ll be thinking about that safe word. And he’ll heed it. Since I’ve known him, he hasn’t taken a single thing I wasn’t willing to give. My God, there *is* power in that. Knowing he’ll stop when I say the word makes me feel taller, steadier...lighter.

I tread down the stairs in the soft leather of new shoes. The adorable flats have little silver spikes and black mesh around the toes. They add a trendy touch to the red woven dress. The three-quarter sleeves will keep me warm in the autumn evenings. The straight hem goes past my knees, and the bodice has this cool sash that crisscrosses from back to front and ties at my waist.

The whole outfit makes me feel elegant and...cherished. A niggling voice in my head reminds me that I didn’t earn these clothes. Except Emeric gave them to me under the very clear understanding that I belong to him and, in turn, everything he possesses is mine. Hard to wrap my mind around that. But for now, I’ll wear the clothes because his gift means more to me than my damnable pride.

I find him sitting at the island in the kitchen, picking through a plate of pastries topped with eggs, cheese, and bacon. His attention jumps to me, and he freezes. Only his

eyes move, heating beneath dark brows as he makes an unhurried tour up and down my body.

It's obvious he bought these clothes because my current wardrobe is lacking. But when he continues his head-to-toe perusal, I realize he went shopping because he was thinking about me, maybe imagining how I would look dressed in the things he likes.

On the final pass, his rock-hard facial features soften with satisfaction. Something inside me catches and holds. I put that look on his face by accepting his gift. I don't know what it is, but knowing I please him meshes so well with all the new feelings he stirs in me.

He meets my eyes. "Luckiest dress on the planet."

My heart trundles into a cadenza of heavy beats. "Can't believe how well it fits."

He glances at my lips. "Sit down and eat."

His brown paisley necktie, off-white button-up, and brown slacks would look old-fashioned on another man. But on him, it's a statement in designer metro-sexy. Hell, he could wear a popped collar and bedazzled cutoffs, and women would drop their panties as he walks by.

The robust scent of coffee swirls around me as I sit beside him. "No waistcoat today?"

"Jacket weather."

I glance at the brown suede jacket draped over the back of his seat. The long sleeves might help hide the cuts on his knuckles.

He loads up my plate, pours my juice, and rests a hand on my thigh. I haven't been cared for this way since my dad was alive. Sitting here in nice clothes, putting food in my belly, I study him as a fatherless girl would her protector, as a student with her teacher, but more than that, I look at him as a woman opening her heart to a man.

He fills so many voids in my life, and my desire for him only knits me closer, tighter to a world I've only dreamed

about. A world where I interact with a man because I want to, because he cares about me as much as I care about him.

Except he says I'm not ready.

Before I met him, gentleness was all I wanted, but now?

When I began formal musical studies, I gained an acute appreciation for Bach's kickass usage of counterpoint. Those who don't know how to listen to his music only hear a mess of noisy lines. But what he composed was multiple melodies, with each hand playing a different version of the same song.

Emeric applies counterpoint in everything he does. With one hand, he taps with tenderness and self-control while his other bangs with intensity and dominance. His methods may be contradictory, but he executes them in perfect harmony.

I set down the fork and grip his fingers on my thigh. "How will I know when I'm ready?"

He lifts my hand and presses a kiss on my palm. "*I will know.*"

I search his face, lingering on his sculptured lips, freshly-shaved jaw, and ultramarine eyes. "Then what?"

Promises dance like sinister notes in his gaze. "Then you'll be grateful for that safe word."

A shiver licks my spine, and an ache flares between my legs. I want what he's offering as much as I don't want it. Or maybe I want to *not* want it.

I rub the back of my neck then dig into breakfast.

He scrapes his plate clean and pushes it away. "When you're not at school or here, you won't leave my side."

I choke, mumbling around the cheesy bite. "How does that work?"

"Don't talk with your mouth full."

Chewing quickly, I swallow. "When I go home—"

"You live with me now."

I stiffen as his words penetrate my eardrums. I hear them, but their meaning isn't syncing with my brain.

He sips his coffee, glances at his phone, and looks up at me like he told me to come for dinner, not fucking *move in*.

I stare at him with my mouth hanging open. "You're fucking with me."

Lifting his mug to his lips, he stares right back, not a hint of a smile in his eyes.

He's serious.

Did I miss an entire conversation where he asked me to move in? Oh wait. He doesn't *ask* for anything.

I slouch against the back of the stool. "This is because of Lorenzo."

"It's a convenient reason." He refills his mug with the carafe on the island and returns to his phone.

Damn his anti-*I can't* rule, because I want to scream those words repeatedly. "It's against the law. You're my teacher!"

"You're my girl." He lazily swipes the screen on his phone. "That's the only law you need to worry about."

What? My head hammers. "You're insane."

"You're mine."

"What if someone finds out?"

He scrolls through his email, not a care in the world. "My problem."

"But Schubert—"

He drops the phone and crashes his lips against mine with a kiss that says *Shut up and trust me*. Then he leans back and returns to his email. "We're picking up the cat after school."

EMERIC

Three lots away from Ivory's house, I idle the GTO on the street while she feeds the cat. The orange motorcycle isn't here, but I don't know if anyone else is home.

If I had a legal explanation for arriving with her at six-thirty in the morning, I'd be in that house with her right now. Instead, I'm forced to monitor her from afar, through the connection between our phones, ready to do whatever is needed to be her anchor point of protection.

The first light of dawn illuminates the patchy shingles on the surrounding homes. I hold my phone in a tight grip, hating that I can't see her moving around inside. But I hear her through the speaker. Every rasp of her breath through the ear piece draws my own.

Before we left my house, I gave her the phone I bought for her weeks ago. She cradled it in her hands as if it were the priceless Vieuxtemps violin, her pale expression suffused with reluctant acceptance. I look forward to her reaction when I give her a car.

"Is your mom or brother there?" I ask through the phone.

"Both," she whispers. "Asleep."

If I hear a gasp or a single troubling sound, I'll be on that doorstep in under ten seconds.

I flex my hand on the steering wheel, the bruised knuckles peering out from beneath the overlong sleeve. Ivory probably knows the real reason I'm wearing the jacket is to hide the

cuts. I don't want her worrying about what people assume or don't assume. That's *my* job.

As I focus on the rustle of her movements through the phone, my mind wanders back to the bedroom this morning and the erotic way her neck felt in the collar of my grip. She trusts me, yet she panicked, fighting with her body and begging me with her eyes, just as she would with any other man. That's unacceptable.

Asphyxiation, whipping, deriving pleasure from any kind of pain and humiliation isn't for the faint of heart. If I had any doubt about what arouses her, my approach would be different. If she were too timid to hold my gaze, she probably wouldn't have caught my eye in the first place.

If she was anyone else, I wouldn't be sitting here, one-hundred-percent invested and risking my neck to be with her.

Ivory Westbrook isn't fragile. She's built for my brand of protection and appetite for dominance. Treating her with kid gloves would do a great disservice to her.

Her emotional strength is one of the many reasons I'm so wildly attracted to her. Yes, she's the most beautiful creature I've ever seen, but I'm spellbound by the entire package. She stands up to me when she thinks I'm wrong, yet grows wet beneath the force of my voice and the heat of my belt. I bet my grandfather's Fazioli that normal monotonous sex with an unassertive man would stifle her.

Whether those qualities stem from her submissive nature or her abusive past, it's my responsibility as her first real sexual partner to make her aware of the many facets of pleasure. Sex doesn't have to conform to society's standards to be sane. It doesn't have to be slow and tender to be safe. And it doesn't have to be free of leather cuffs to be consensual.

She's learning, but how aware is aware enough? This is the hard part.

I want her, and that need is an endless throbbing beat inside me, like an unwritten song banging against my ribcage to get out. Moving her into my home and sleeping beside her

while *not* fucking her is pure torture. But I know she's aware of my restraint, and I also know how much she appreciates and respects it.

The fact that I ache to truss her up, sink my teeth into her tits, and strangle her gasps isn't the issue. The very circumstance of her abuse combined with my role as her teacher makes even the gentlest intimacy with her tricky. I could coax her legs open with eloquent words, fuck her sweetly, and she'd let it happen because it's the only way she knows how to respond to a man.

Well, fuck that. Before I enter her body, she'll be with me mentally and emotionally, on her terms, making a conscious choice between stopping me or surrendering to me. Unlike this morning when my hand was around her throat. She neither yielded nor used her safe word. Because she doesn't yet understand what it really means to be willing.

A few minutes later, she returns to the car and latches the seat belt.

I hit the gas, taking in her relaxed posture in the edge of my periphery. "They didn't wake up?"

"Nope." A soft smile touches her lips. "Schubert misses me." She turns in the seat to face me. "Emeric, we need to talk ___"

"If this is about moving in, it's non-negotiable."

"I have a say in where I live."

"Not when it comes to your safety." I veer onto Rampart Street and head toward Le Moyne. "With Shane and Lorenzo in that house, I don't need to tell you how un-fucking-safe it is to live there."

She purses her lips into a frown.

I rest my hand on her thigh. "Stop fighting this."

"I'm your student. If someone figures out I'm living with ___"

"*I* will be arrested, and you will be free and clear of any consequences."

“Exactly. I don’t want that!”

“The risk is *mine*.” I infuse my voice with authority, a tone that reminds her I’m the solution for her situation simply because I’m in charge, in control, and it is my purpose, above all else, to keep her safe. “This is *my* decision, and you will not question me about it again.”

As I slow at a stoplight, she unlatches her seat belt and leans over the console.

Her hand makes a familiar sweep through my hair, her eyes smiling up at me. “You’re sort of charming when you get all serious and bossy.” She lowers her chin and deepens her voice. “Like *I’m the man, laying down the law, and this is how it’s going to be*.”

Cute. I shake my head, fighting back a grin.

She tightens her fingers against my scalp and moves her mouth a hair’s width away. “But I have my own mind and voice, and you’re going to hear it whenever and however *I* want.”

I stare at her lips, amused and aroused. “I expect nothing less, Miss Westbrook.”

Just as she expects me to shut her down when she questions me.

“Good.” A glimmer flickers in her gaze. “You should also expect that I won’t be giving up on Leopold.”

Of course, she won’t, which means I need to figure out how to make it work.

She slides her fingers to my jaw, cupping my face as she kisses me. No one from Le Moyne would venture into this part of town, so passing motorists can gawk all they want.

I lick her lips and press forward to join our tongues. Just a nuzzling stroke, a suggestive movement, but that’s all it takes. She moans, angling her head for a deeper connection, her chest shifting closer, heaving for air. Christ, her desire is as staggering as my own.

The traffic light is going to change any second. I don't give a shit. I take over the kiss, gripping her hips and wrenching us together against the console. With my foot firmly pressed on the brake, I give her a thorough teasing with my tongue, stabbing and lashing between her lips, as my hand shifts lower to grab her ass in a bruising grip.

A honk sounds behind us. We pull apart, laughing through heavy breaths like school kids.

I propel the car forward, my attention darting between her and the road. "Every time I see you today, I'm going to think about that kiss."

She tucks her hair behind her ear and gives me a sultry look. "Me, too."

As blocks of buildings blur by, we settle into a vibrating nexus, a wordless bond strengthened with an exchange of lingering glances and smiles. It's such a comfortable thing, this energy between us, like we're in our own private world, where past mistakes, college dreams, and student-teacher laws don't exist. Here, in this secluded suspension of time and space, nothing can break us apart.

I weave our fingers together in her lap. "Tell me what you're thinking."

She rolls her tongue against the inside of her cheek. "It's weird sitting in your car, dressed in nice clothes, feeling stuffed from a huge breakfast. My stomach's happy." She closes her eyes then opens them, locking on mine. "I'm happy. And scared. I guess I'm scared a lot, but happiness... That doesn't come around very often, and I'm so afraid to lose it."

She's probably thinking of her father and the security she lost when he died.

I want to command her to leave all the worrying to me, but it doesn't work that way, so I offer her a different perspective. "When we're together, Ivory, when it's just you and me like this, happiness can only be limited by us. We make the rules and decide how this is going to go. *Our* world is as boundless and real as our feelings for each other."

She lifts my hand and places a kiss on my fingers. “Thank you.”

“For?”

“For always knowing what to say.” She holds my hand beneath her chin. “For feeding me. For letting me feed Schubert. For the phone, the clothes, and—”

“You’re welcome.”

I swear her heart is wrapped around mine, stretching and purring and rubbing against the walls of my chest. It’s exhilarating and terrifying, the way she sneaked inside me so swiftly.

A few blocks from school, I pull over on a quiet side street. “I’m not happy about this.”

She opens the door and tosses me an easy smile. “I walk to school every day.”

“I don’t like the secrecy.”

Been there, did this dance with Joanne. Ivory deserves better.

But if I’m caught, she goes back to Treme, Lorenzo Gandara, and financial desperation. I’m the one responsible for protecting her *everything*.

I grip the back of her neck and pull her in for a kiss. “It won’t always be this way.”

When she graduates, I won’t be her teacher. Our relationship will be legal and... She’ll go to college, wherever that may be. Then what? Will I follow her? Will she want me to? She won’t have a fucking choice.

She rests her forehead against mine. “Don’t make promises you can’t keep.”

My face inflames as conviction hardens my gut. “I’ll do whatever—”

She presses her soft lips against mine and instantly abates my rising temper, kissing me until my dick swells.

Too soon, she pulls back. “We can discuss the future after I absorb everything that’s happening right now.”

With that, she slips out of the car, her killer body, fuckable ass, and long legs all back lit by the sun. Fucking stunning.

Shouldering her new satchel, she bends down to poke her head in. The neckline of her red dress drops open, giving me an unholy view of her firm young tits heaving against the red silk bra.

She catches me staring and raises an eyebrow.

How can I not look? It’s genetic programming, and Ivory has great fucking tits.

One corner of her mouth lifts in a seductive smirk. “See you in class, Mr. Marceaux.”

She walks away, leaving me with no fucking oxygen in the car. I roll down the window and rev the engine a few times to get her attention.

Glancing over her shoulder, she tucks her grin between nibbling teeth. “Are you trying to race me or impress me?”

I just wanted to see her smile one more time. Now I can breathe again.

EMERIC

I spend the day listening for whispers and paying close attention to subtle expressions. Beverly Rivard greets me in the faculty lounge wearing a tight-lipped scowl of disdain. Nothing new there. Andrea Augustin watches me from a distance, wary and bruised. She'll get over it. Prescott stays out of my way in the halls and slinks in his seat during class. He's the one who concerns me the most. I humiliated him in front of Ivory last night, a horrendous blow to his boy ego. But if he opens his mouth, he has more to lose than his dignity.

In the classroom, Ivory maintains her demeanor as a student. She doesn't hold my gaze too long. Doesn't flirt or show affection. But the sexual tension between us hovers like an electric storm. If someone knew what to look for, they'd pick up on it. Prescott should have some inkling after the way I defended her, but he doesn't dare look at her or me. For now, all I can do is keep him under my scrutinizing watch.

After Ivory's private lessons, we return to her house. The starless sky and absence of light casts her street in a smudge of shadows.

Tucking the GTO into the same spot I used this morning, I take in the blackness beyond her windows. "No one's home."

"Guess not." She opens the car door. "I'll be quick."

I turn off the engine and join her on the street.

She shakes her head and points back at the car. "Stay here. Someone might come home."

It's risky, but she's not going into a dark house alone at night. Nor is she going to carry out a cat and all her belongings by herself. But in case her brother shows up, I need to prepare her for an unpleasant reintroduction.

I grab her hand and lead her to the front porch. "I met Shane a while back."

"What?" She stops on the sidewalk and stares up at me with wide eyes. "When?"

I pull on her squeezing fingers, forcing her feet to follow me up the stairs. "He doesn't know who I am, and sadly, he doesn't know why I broke his nose."

She gasps, her steps faltering, but I keep her moving.

"That was you?" Her brow draws down as she unlocks the door. A sigh billows past her lips. "Because of the cut on my lip."

"No one hurts my girl."

"I love when you say that," she whispers softly.

With gentle hands, she straightens my tie, her fingers drifting down the silk before she turns away.

When she opens the door, the scent of stale cigarette smoke floods my nose.

A second later, an orange tabby races out of the dark depths and slows at her feet, purring like a motor and rubbing against her ankles.

She scoops him up, nuzzling his round head against her neck like he's the most vital thing in the world.

I tuck my hands in my pockets and try to restrain my jealousy over a damn cat. "Are you going to let me in sometime tonight?"

"So impatient." She flicks the wall switch and floods the small room with light. Then she holds the cat out to me and drops him in my arms, forcing me to take him. "I just need to grab his stuff."

As she races through the line of doorways toward the back of the house, the fur ball in my hands sheds no less than a thousand orange hairs all over my suede jacket.

I step inside, glaring down at him. “Are you going to piss on my rugs?”

Round gold eyes blink lazily. Then he drags his hairy cheek across my chest, burrowing in.

I’ve never lived with a pet, but he seems friendly enough. The shedding, though...

“Can we shave this thing?” I shout toward the back room.

The creak of her footsteps pauses. “I thought you didn’t like shaved pussies.”

A grin stretches my face. *Touché, my beautiful girl.*

I carry Schubert through a tidy living room. It’s clean because there’s not a damn thing here but a cardboard box of clothes in the corner, a small end table, and a couch with sagging cushions. Continuing toward the back, I pass a bedroom, then another bedroom, both barely big enough to accommodate the mattresses on the floor and the mess of laundry and ashtrays.

Neither bedroom offers a hint of the girl I know. Ivory is organized, her clothes are simple and few, and she doesn’t smoke. Realization tightens my chest and quickens my steps.

I reach the last room, the kitchen, and find her lifting a pan of litter by the back door. “Where do you sleep?”

She grabs a few cans of cat food from the cluttered counter and walks past me into the closest bedroom. “This is my mom’s room.”

I trail behind her, stroking the cat and stirring up more loose hairs. My heart slams against my chest as I absorb the impoverished conditions she’s lived in. When she reaches the second bedroom, I know what she’s going to say, and I don’t want to hear it.

“Shane’s room.” She stares blankly at the piles of dirty clothes. “It used to be mine, but when my dad died, Shane

moved back in. So...”

She continues forward, returning to the front room. My stomach caves in as I glare at the droopy sofa with new eyes.

“This is where I sleep.” She looks up at me expectedly. “Ready to go?”

I swallow down my anger with the reminder that she will never sleep on a goddamn couch again.

“That’s all you’re bringing?” I nod at the litter pan and cans of chow in her arms.

Her eyes lower to the cat purring against my chest, and she smiles warmly. “He’s all I have left here.”

As I drive out of her neighborhood, the tension in my muscles loosens with each block I put between her and that house. I’ve never felt more right about a decision than I do about this one.

With the cat crouched and mewling in the back seat, there’s only one thing left that will bring her back to Treme.

I make an unplanned stop, pulling up to the curb along the barred windows of the store.

She twists in the seat and searches my face. “What are we doing here?”

“The old man hasn’t seen you in a couple days. Go in there, give him your phone number, and tell him you’re safe.”

That wins me a huge smile before she leaps out and dashes inside.

An hour later, while dining in my kitchen over a spread of catered quesadillas, Ivory gives me her written list of bills. Just like I specified, it includes items she needs to buy, such as miscellaneous school supplies, deodorant, and tampons. I grin when I see birth control on the list.

She tries to tell me what I will and won’t do with her bills, but I shut her up with my lips fused to hers and my fingers in her cunt. Her back bows over the kitchen island, our empty plates rattling with the thrust of my hand. Two orgasms later,

she stumbles into the living room to work on her homework, argument forgotten.

My bruised knuckles are still too tender to play piano, so I run on my treadmill, shower, and jack off to memories of her head tilted back, throat exposed, legs spread, writhing and vulnerable in my arms. Vulnerable to all the dirty, depraved things I fantasize about doing to every hole in her body. Christ, if she only knew what I have planned for her.

Before exiting the shower, I rub out another orgasm because fucking hell, I'll be sleeping beside her tonight.

I tell myself she's not ready for the kinky, savage way I fuck, but in the back of my mind, there's an expiration date on my self-control. A date that's attached to her doctor's appointment on Saturday—only four days away. I have this strong coiling need to be with her without anything between us, including condoms. Once her test results confirm I can do that, all bets are off.

She moves to the bedroom to finish her homework with Schubert curled up beside her. I slip into my office and set up the payments to cover her family's measly expenses. I consider paying off their mortgage. It would be easier, but fuck them. I'll fund their bills until Ivory graduates, only because I don't want to give them a reason to go looking for her. After that, they can sleep under a fucking bridge.

I reach out to my catering service and have them add Stogie to their daily route. He might refuse the food. Or maybe he'll see it for what it is: my gratitude for offering Ivory a safe place to go all these years.

With that finished, I place a few more phone calls, find a reliable PI, and make contact. Ending the conversation, the investigator has very little to go on. A name. A license plate number. But he ensures me it's enough.

By the end of the week, the PI proves his worth by providing everything I need to move forward.

I know exactly how I'll deal with Lorenzo Gandara.

IVORY

Friday afternoon, I head toward my locker in Campus Center. Ellie hurries alongside me, going on about how I have a fast skip in my step. Rather than pointing out that her legs are shorter than mine, I slow my gait and playfully hip-check her.

“You seem different.” She smiles up at me, blinking angular brown eyes. “That’s all I’m saying.”

She hasn’t mentioned my new clothes. No, she’s too busy trying to find hidden meaning in the way I walk.

“You’re...lighter. You know, like easy breezy.” She springs ahead of me and bounces backward toward our lockers, her black ponytail whipping around her neck. “You have a boyfriend, don’t you?”

I don’t know what Emeric is, but it definitely doesn’t begin with *boy*. “So you think a guy is some magical remedy for weight loss? Or maybe you’re saying I’m gassy?”

She laughs and spins around to dial in her combination. “You’re so weird.”

I open my locker and find a small folded paper on top of the textbooks. With a huge smile, I reach in and touch it. Stroke it.

Emeric’s been leaving me notes all week. Just imagining him scrawling each one in his eloquent script and walking out of his way to slip it through the vent on my locker door sends a flutter through my chest.

Ellie stands a few feet away, distracted by her phone.

I hold the note inside the locker and unfold it.

I want you.

I wait for you.

You have me.

He makes my soul ache. I read it again, and my whole body aches. When I close my eyes, I hear his deep voice, feel his bruising touch, and taste the cinnamon on his breath. He's with me, always surrounding me, lifting me. Damn, maybe I am more light-footed.

The click of heels approaches behind me. I wad up the note in my fist and glance over my shoulder.

Ann leans against the locker between Ellie and me and gives me a once-over. "The girls have been talking."

Uh huh. She's here, on behalf of the female population, to remind me that she's prettier, smarter, and more popular.

I slide my hand into the satchel and drop the balled-up note. Then I shift to face her head-on, wearing the smile my dad always said was my greatest weapon.

Her sneer warps her smooth black skin and perfect features. "That's a Dolce & Gabbana dress."

I glance down at the yellow and white daisy print, loving how the A-line silhouette fits my body. "Okay."

"Yesterday you wore Valentino. Day before that was Oscar de la Renta. For reals, Ivory. You're a shoplifter now?"

Why couldn't Emeric have just picked up some clothes from Wal-Mart? I wouldn't have known the damn difference.

Because he doesn't do anything unless it's over-the-top.

Ellie steps beside me, hitching her humongous backpack over her shoulder. "Leave her alone, Ann."

“It’s fine.” I nod in the direction of Crescent Hall. “I’ll catch up with you, okay?”

She gives me a sympathetic smile and heads toward our next class.

I turn back to Ann and contemplate a repulsive response, because it’s so much fun watching her squirm. I could tell her I fucked the store manager at Neiman Marcus. Is that where people go to buy these clothes? I don’t know, but that suggestion hits too close to my prior arrangements. Oh, I know... “I started selling my eggs.”

Her brown eyes bulge. “Your...what?”

“Eggs.” I shrug. “Who knew ovulation could be so lucrative? With my good looks and excellent SAT scores, the fertility center pays me double the going rate.”

She makes a gagging noise. “That’s disgusting.”

“So is your attitude.” I shut the locker and step around her. “But I’m deeply touched by how closely you pay attention to me. Brings new light on our friendship. Maybe we can go shopping and have sleepovers.” I’d rather be crushed by a twelve-hundred-pound piano. “We could get BFF necklaces —”

“You’re such a bitch.”

“—or not.” I pat her bony shoulder as I pass. “Thanks for keeping it real.”

Several hours later, I’m sitting behind the Steinway on the campus theater stage. Emeric moved my private lessons here a few days ago to get me comfortable with the acoustics. The Holiday Chamber Music Celebration is only a couple months away. As one of Le Moyne’s biggest performances, the ballet is open to the public and showcases the academy’s top musicians and dancers.

Piano is only a small piece of the production, but I would love to finally be part of it. Emeric still hasn’t announced who will fill that seat. He takes his job so seriously he’s not giving me any advantages just because we’re together. I have to earn it, and there isn’t an ounce of me that begrudges him that.

Even so, he has a frustrating way of making me wait for things.

When he joined me in the kitchen this morning, he told me it's beautiful to see me waiting.

I will gladly go to exhaustion waiting for him. Waiting for his discipline. Waiting for his affection. Waiting for the unknown.

"Begin again." His voice booms from the shadows of the tiered seats.

We have the theater to ourselves. He's somewhere in the front row, but I can't see him beyond the blinding stage lights.

Bending over the keyboard, I dive into Tchaikovsky's Nutcracker suite. My hands fly through the bursting tremolos, wrists snapping over the quickly-changing keys. I've played this piece so many times I know it by rote, my fingers moving of their own volition, seamlessly adapted with the notes.

As the dial on my watch reaches seven o'clock, perspiration licks my skin, and spasms twinge the joints in my shoulders and hands. Emeric has only interrupted me a few times to point out slip-ups. Hell, he's been so quiet for the last hour I wonder if he left.

I pivot on the piano bench and squint against the lights. "Did you fall asleep out there?"

"No." He clears his throat. "That was exquisite, Miss Westbrook." His dark, deep-toned voice echoes through the theater. "This stage isn't big enough for you."

Tendrils of warmth unfurl inside me, spiraling along my arms, between my breasts, and around my spine.

"How about the stage at Leopold?" I tilt my head, blinking against the lights. "You know, since that's where I'm going."

"Leopold is just an idea stuck in your head. Think bigger. Better."

Better than the best conservatory? I purse my lips. "Like what?"

“There’s not an audience in the world big enough to contain you. But you need one passionate enough to hold you.”

Wow. I’ve never thought of it like that before.

“Come here.”

It’s a command he would give to any of his students, like *sit down, stop talking, answer the question*. But to me, it holds a deeper meaning, one that doesn’t belong within the walls of a school.

My thighs quake as I stand from the bench. My breaths tighten as I move toward him, down the stage steps and into the darkness of the empty seats.

He sits off to the side in the front row, just beyond the edge of light. With an ankle propped on his knee and forearms draped over the arm rests, he’s a picture of calm self-possession. But his eyes are steely and focused, drilling into mine.

I stop within arm’s reach, and my attention drops to the long, hard length rising in his slacks.

“Ivory.” His sultry tone snaps my head up.

I rub the back of my neck. “You’re...um, hard. Because of my performance?”

“Everything you do turns me on,” he whispers. “Especially the feminine motion of your body when you play. I want you naked, sitting at my piano and rolling your hips like you’re fucking the notes.”

A thunderbolt of heat shoots between my legs, lighting up every inch of me. I want to free him from his pants and feel the weight of his cock in my hands. In my mouth.

He strokes a finger over his bottom lip. “The soloist position in the ballet is yours.”

A sigh of happiness tingles through my limbs. “Thank you.”

“I love when you’re grateful.” He licks his bottom lip. “But you earned this, Ivory. You’re going to steal the show.”

His words commend my talent, but the smoldering flicker in his eyes appreciates all of me as his gaze traces the lines of my body and probes beneath my skin. He knows me on a deeper level, better than anyone, and he likes what he sees inside me.

A sudden and very specific need resonates through my chest, sparked from the marrow of my being. A need to satisfy him, to feel the power in giving him that gift.

I tug at the foot propped on his knee until he lowers it to the floor. He shifts to stand, but I stop him with my hands on his rock-hard thighs. Then I kneel between his spread legs.

He grabs my hair, his tone stern with warning. “Ivory.”

With a surge of bravery, I grip his cock through the trousers, touching him for the first time. “I want to taste this.”

“Fuck.” His exhale ricochets through the vast room. The hand in my hair pulls, pinching pain across my scalp. “Not here.”

If we go back to his house, I’ll lose my nerve on the way. I’ve loathed the feeling of a man in my mouth since the first time Lorenzo took me there. The gagging, loss of air, and utter humiliation of something so vile squirting across my tongue...

I want it to be different with Emeric. I need him to show me how to do this willingly.

Surrounded by the stiff muscle groups of his chest and legs, I stroke my hand over the pulsing swell of his erection. “I will crawl to you. Bow to you. Whatever you want, I want. Just...give me this.”

A thick, hoarse noise escapes his lips. “Christ in hell. How the fuck do I say *no* to that?”

He wraps my hair around his fist, his gaze cutting through the theater and pausing on the closed doors.

Is he thinking about Joanne and the time they were caught?

It's after seven on a Friday night. We're probably the only two people in Crescent Hall, and no one comes into the theater after school hours. But if those doors open, I'll be on my feet before we're spotted. Besides, only my back is illuminated by the dim edge of the lights. No one can see him in the shadows.

I know he considers all of this before he whispers gruffly, "Take me out."

Excitement shivers through me as I loosen his belt and slide down his zipper. My hands shake, and my mouth floods with moisture.

The fist in my hair clamps down as tension ripples from his body. He lifts his hips, ripping at the trousers with his free hand. As the zipper shifts below his heavy sac, my gut quivers with anticipation to touch him.

In the dim space between us, the largeness of him juts up, long and beautiful and throbbing with veins. My hands gravitate toward it, fingers curling around the thick base.

He wrenches me backward by my hair and studies my face, his blue eyes a faint glow in the darkness. "The moment you want this to stop, raise your hand in the air."

Because I won't be able to use my voice? Fear trickles in, but I shove it away. I have the strength to be vulnerable with him. "I will."

He releases my hair and grips the arm rests with both hands. "Now suck me."

Kneeling to him, with my fingers trembling against the dark short hairs on his groin, I lower my head and slide my cheek along his shaft, nuzzling, kissing, and savoring the feel of steel sheathed in silky flesh.

His entire body melts into the seat.

I drag my nose along his length, inhaling the scent of a man I trust, pulling his woody musk deep into my lungs.

A groan notches his breaths, and his legs widen, stretching the seams around his fly. "Stop playing with it, and suck it."

Smiling, I swirl my tongue around the tip, shredding a gasp from his throat. The sight of his blanching fists around the arm rests produces a throb between my legs. The jerk of his cock against my lips rushes wet heat to my core. His pleasure is my pleasure.

As I suckle and lick the crown, I reach into his briefs to tease his balls with kneading fingers. Then I close my eyes and draw him into my mouth.

“Ah fuck.” He grunts. “That’s it. Deeper. Flatten your tongue. There you go.” His legs shake. “Jesus, Ivory. Just like that.”

I thrill at his praise and bob my head faster, tightening the suction of my mouth. When he’s not turning his neck to glance at the door, I know he’s watching me, absorbing the contentment on my face as I give and give. Imagining the desire hooding his eyes charges me up, almost as much as the way he bosses me every step of the way. *Spit on it. Lick under the head. Twist your wrist. Take it deep.*

Holy hell, this man. He can’t just sit there and enjoy a blow job. His harsh whispers demand I do it the way he likes it, ordering the exact motions to make. *Suck faster. Stroke harder. Make it wet.*

He’s a control freak through and through, but I knew he’d respond exactly this way. I love him like this. His filthy fucking mouth and the coarseness of his timbre makes my lips tingle and my nipples harden.

When he loses the last of his restraint, there’s no warning. In a blur, he grabs my hair and slams my head down. I gag, slobbering atrociously and sucking for air. A pained moan escapes him as he bucks his hips and drives harder, deeper. I choke so violently my eyes water against the pressure, and my fingers scramble for purchase in the folds of his slacks.

Both hands tangle in my hair as he holds my face against his groin, his cock digging against my throat, his voice hoarse. “Raise your hand, dammit, and I’ll stop.”

My hands are free. I can lift them anytime. Then he'll release me, and the discomfort will end. The power in that breaks something open inside me.

I want this. I feel it at gut level, this need for him to fuck my mouth savagely, carelessly, and without thought. Maybe because he's held back for so long, restraining himself *for me*, and I ache to give this back to him. Or maybe because I want his hurt so hard and deep inside me that he's all I feel.

With the broad head pounding the back of my throat and taunting my airway, it already hurts. My tonsils feel like painful masses of swollen tissue. He's doing this because he wants to, and I love that, crave it, like no decent woman ever would.

I've never been decent. I'm dirty—Emeric's kind of dirty that leaves a claiming painful pleasure in my throat. He tries to fuck me as deeply as he can because he's my master, the man I hunger for in the darkest, most terribly beautiful way possible.

“Raise...your...fucking...hand.” He punctuates each word with jabbing strokes in my mouth.

I bury my nails into his thighs, a silent plea. *Don't stop.*

He stabs his hips and pulls my hair, legs shaking, and breaths wheezing out of control. Just when I think I can't take any more, the balance shifts. He goes quiet, slowing his thrusts, stroking my hair, and filling my mouth with his release.

My name reverberates through the theater as his body convulses and sighs.

The power is mine. I bask in it. His hands tremble, and I grab them, hold them, our fingers intertwined. I have him.

IVORY

The next morning, I shield my eyes against the glaring sun and step toward an unfamiliar car in Emeric's driveway. "What is that?"

He follows me out of the house and walks ahead of me. "A Porsche Cayenne."

"Okaaay. Why is it here?" I thought he was driving me to my doctor's appointment in his muscle car. "Where did it come from?"

His strong legs carry him toward the white sporty SUV, his gorgeous ass flexing in low-waist jeans. With the chirp of a key fob, he unlocks and opens the driver's door then faces me with a wide stance, arms crossed over his chest.

The t-shirt stretches around defined biceps and formidable shoulders, and creases of denim outline the impressive bulge between his legs. I stare without apology, a smile hitching my lips as I recall the way his swollen length pounded against my throat last night.

"Look at me." Censure hardens his tone. When I lift my gaze, he says, "I had it delivered this morning."

I grit my teeth. This car better not be for me. "I thought you preferred loud American gas guzzlers."

The blue in his eyes glows magnetically in the sunlight. "True. But this is one of the safest SUVs on the market."

Yep, it's for me, dammit. Another gift I don't need. Now I know why he asked me earlier in the week if I had a driver's

license. “Thank you, but no—”

“We’re not arguing about this.”

“Uh, yeah, we are. It’s hard enough explaining my wardrobe at school. But a car? No way.” I anchor my hands on my hips. “Return it.”

“No.” He tosses the fob in my direction.

I let it thunk to the driveway at my feet and give him my best glare.

His mouth sets in a thin, severe line.

Oh shit. My pulse trips.

He clasps his hands behind his back and prowls toward me, slowly, methodically, his eyes boring into mine.

Double shit. I lower my arms to my sides and scan the yard. We’re behind the estate, hidden from the street. The towering oaks form a living wall of privacy between the lots. Not that I’m afraid to be alone with him when he’s like this. Or maybe I am, but any fear I have is smothered by the heady mix of give and take that melds us together so beautifully.

Doesn’t mean I have to accept a car, though. I glare down at the key fob.

“Eyes on me!”

My focus flies to the sculpted lines of his face and the pulsing vein in his brow. It’s been a few days since I riled him up, but I know that look. As he circles me, I’m both dancing and cringing inside, anticipating a strangling hand on my throat or a hard smack on the ass. Maybe he’ll finally have sex with me, right here in broad daylight. I’d welcome any or all of it. I’ve been in such a heightened state of arousal since I moved in, I might just strip off my clothes and make the decision for him.

He stops behind me, not touching, but close enough to stir my hair with his breaths. “I’ve had my fingers in your cunt, my cock in your mouth, and your taste on my lips. I’m the only person on the planet who knows how beautiful you look when you come. All those freckles on your thighs, the sounds

you make when you sleep, the passion you evoke with a piano, everything about you is priceless and irreplaceable. So I'm going to wrap you in nice things and protect you in a safe car. And you are going to thank me with those gorgeous lips around my dick when you get home."

My heart rises and dips with each word, my breaths stuttering noisily.

"This is who I am, Ivory, and you are the essential and most important part of me." He steps back. "Now bend over."

My knees wobble at his words. I reach for the black Chucks on my feet, and the fancy designer denim cuts into my thighs. The downside of low-rise jeans? He's getting an ungodly view of my butt cleavage right about now.

His palm slams against my ass with a force that steals my breath and topples me forward. But his arm catches me around the waist, and the hand on my back keeps me in a doubled-over position. Sweet Jesus, my butt cheek is on fire. The heat fans outward, circulating through my blood and gathering between my legs.

He rubs the sore spot, limited by the heavily-stitched pocket of my jeans. "Pick up the keyring."

Hanging over the brace of his arm, I snatch the fob from the brick pavestones.

He grips my bicep and walks me toward the car. "I would redden your fucking ass if you weren't about to show it to the doctor." He stops at the driver's door. "Hands on the roof."

Shit. What now? I drop the fob on the seat and place my palms on the shiny white top, smudging the pristine paint job with sweat.

His fingers slide around my hips and release the button of my jeans. My heart kicks into a feverish crescendo. He unzips the fly and, in one shove, yanks everything to my feet.

Standing outside in the daylight, nude from the waist down... This is a first for me. I can't decide if I'm shaking from the thrill of someone seeing, from the fear of inevitable

pain, or from the burning anticipation of him touching me again. Probably all of the above.

“Bend down and grip the seat.”

As I follow his command, a sense of peace washes over me. Whatever he does next will make me feel a little less lost. Every time he takes me in hand, he opens another door that shows me more about myself. The person he reveals isn't ashamed or weak. I'm finally figuring out what I want.

His Doc Martens scuff against the bricks as he lowers behind me. His hands wrap around my thighs, and in the next heartbeat, he buries his nose in my pussy.

A slap of embarrassment flushes my face. But it quickly transforms into a torrent of desire as his exhale brushes against my flesh. A deep inhale follows, and his fingers tighten against my legs.

He's smelling me. Down there. Deeply and repeatedly. I never would've imagined being so wildly turned on by this, but I'm shaking and panting against the strange and incredible sensation. He's shaking, too, and... Oh fuck, he's licking me, kissing my pussy the way he kisses my mouth. Another—*holy fucking shit*—first.

I bite my lip to silence my cry as he stabs his tongue between my legs. He laves my folds, brutally bites sensitive skin, and scratches me with his stubble. It's pain and pleasure, soprano and bass, and every octave in between. I'm going to come. I feel the pull, and I reach for that wondrous place, grinding my pussy against his face and digging my fingers into the leather seat. Almost there. Almost—

He steps back.

I straighten and twist around to grab him, but he's right there, catching me in the tangle of my jeans with his hands on my hips and his tongue in my mouth. He slides his lips over mine in slippery strokes, spreading the tangy taste of my arousal between us.

He breaks the kiss and drags my panties up my trembling legs.

My insides throb, aching to finish what he started. “I didn’t come.”

“I know.” He pulls up my jeans and fastens them. Then he grabs my hand and presses it against the erection behind his zipper. “I’ll wait for you.”

“You’re not going to the appointment with me?”

Regret etches his face, and he releases my hand.

Of course, he can’t go. Someone might see us together. I mentally slap myself. “That’s why you gave me the car.”

He cups my face and kisses me.

“I’m sorry.” I lean back and peer up at him through my lashes. “I was kind of a brat about it.”

“The brattiest.”

“Why didn’t you just tell me?”

A smile stretches his gorgeous face. “Where would the fun be in that?”

He likes me to act out so he can discipline me for it? Today’s lesson: the worst punishment is a denied orgasm.

When I’m settled in the driver’s seat, he leans into the open window and gives me a flinty glare. “Don’t argue with the doctor.”

“I won’t.”

“Get the blood work.”

“I will.”

“And the birth control he prescribes.”

My pulse leaps. “Of course.”

Those hard eyes soften into a look I’ve never seen on him before. “Come back to me.”

I reach up and stroke his shadowed jaw. “Count on it.”

IVORY

Unease buzzes through me as I turn out of Emeric's driveway. Maybe because I'm wearing designer clothes, driving an expensive car, and obsessing about a man with no idea where I'm headed. I know my way to the clinic, but after that? Months down the road? After I graduate? Where am I going and how will I get there?

I know Emeric intends to keep me around. That both delights me and troubles me. Part of the reason I want to go to Leopold is to get out of Treme. Well, I did, and here I am with an address even Ann would envy. But I yearn to continue practicing piano, and not just under any instructor. The very best instructors Leopold has to offer. How could I throw away my dream for a man and forgive myself? How could Emeric respect me if I did that?

He wouldn't. Of all the lessons he's taught me in and out of the classroom, the most profound is how to recognize my own strength and go after what I want.

Amid my churning thoughts, I wonder about Mom and Shane. Do they question where I am? Emeric keeps the bills current, so maybe they don't care. Or maybe they're too strung out to even notice my absence. I try not to dwell on that. The things I want from them, their interest and concern, died with my dad. My family is broken, a harrowing truth I accepted a long time ago.

A couple of minutes from his house, I park the Porsche in front of Southern Family Health. Tucking the phone in my

back pocket, I head inside the modern one-story building.

A few people fill the waiting room, but none of them look up from their phones when I enter. I check in, fill out the forms, and return them to the middle-aged woman behind the counter.

“Take a seat.” She brushes her frizzy brown hair behind her ear. “Dr. Marceaux will see you shortly.”

I stiffen, my attention darting over the rack of pamphlets, searching for something to validate what I just heard. “Did you say Marceaux?”

“Is that not...” She glances at the computer monitor. “Says here you requested Marceaux.”

My veins turn to ice. Emeric mentioned his father’s a physician, but I assumed the man worked at a fancy hospital or something. For fuck’s sake, why would he send me to his dad to have my vagina examined? Maybe this doctor is a different Marceaux? Is it a common last name?

“Does he...” Is it too risky to ask this? Fuck it. “Does Dr. Marceaux have a son? A teacher?”

“Oh, yes.” The woman cracks a huge smile and leans back in the chair, regarding me. “From the look on your face, I’m guessing he’s got you under his spell, too.”

“No. I...” My cheeks burn. “What do you mean?”

“Every time that fine-looking man comes in here, he gets all the girls in a tizzy.” She laughs. “Take a number, honey. There’s a long line of women waiting for a piece of that.”

Did she seriously just say that? Grinding my teeth, I find a seat and pull out the phone. I have two names in my contact list. Stogie and LordandMaster. The latter was Emeric’s attempt at humor when he set up the phone. I haven’t had the heart to change it.

I launch a text window.

Me: U sent me to ur dad??? To get birth control? R u crazy?

The front door opens, and a very pregnant woman sashays toward the counter. She's all belly. Skinny and petite everywhere else. How the hell does she walk so gracefully in those sky-high heels?

The vibration of an incoming text draws my attention back to the phone.

LordandMaster: He'll do everything but the Pap test. Don't question me.

But he'll see me in a thin gown and check me for STDs? I feel sick.

Me: Does he know about us?

LordandMaster: Yes

Yes? That's all he's going to say?

I pinch the bridge of my nose, debating the wisdom in storming out.

"I need to see him right now." The pregnant woman's rising voice brings my eyes up.

She gathers her long blonde hair and holds it away from her pale complexion, her tense posture screaming with frustration.

"Ma'am," the receptionist says sternly, "if you give me your information, I'll set up—"

"Go back there and tell him Joanne is here."

My stomach drops as my entire world narrows to her belly. She can't be his Joanne. This...this woman is pregnant. *A lot* pregnant. Like easily seven or eight months along.

Emeric said he hasn't seen her in six months.

My chest clenches. *No. No, no, no.* Emeric would've told me.

The receptionist stands. "Is Dr. Marceaux expecting you?"

"I'm expecting his grandson." She points at her stomach. "VIP pass. I need to see him. Now."

Nausea barrels through my gut, doubling me over. *It's not true. I must've misheard.*

The receptionist widens her eyes then slips down the hall toward the back.

Relaxing against the counter, Joanne rests her phone on the ledge of her baby belly. *Emeric's baby.*

My insides roil with bile. I scan the waiting room for a bathroom, and my gaze catches and locks on hers. She gives me a tight smile and moves on, taking in the people sitting near me.

Her small nose, smooth flat features, and close-set eyes give her a tiny pixie look, one that works well for her. Really well. She's painfully beautiful, like a perfect mix of Kristen Bell and Keira Knightley.

No wonder he loves her.

The mother of his child.

I ball my hands to stop the trembling. Why didn't he tell me? Is he trying to resolve things with her? So they can be a happy family?

Tears sneak up, burning my eyes, and a horrible ache seals my throat. I spring from the seat and walk as calmly as I can into the single-person bathroom. As soon as the door shuts, I drag in loud, ragged breaths and hit the last call dialed on my phone.

Emeric's gravelly voice scrapes against my eardrum. "Ivory."

"Your *pregnant* girlfriend is here."

Please tell me I'm mistaken. My chest hurts so badly I can't breathe.

The line goes silent for a weighted moment. Then a flurry of sounds rushes through. His exhales, the slam of a door, the roar of a motor. "I'll be there in three minutes."

So it's true. The gravity of that steals the strength from my legs. I slide down the door, drop to the floor, and try to keep

the tears from wobbling my voice. “You lied to me.”

“Bull—”

“Omitting is the same as lying.” I squeeze the phone. “Your words.”

His heavy breaths rasp through the receiver. “Tell me you didn’t talk to her.”

“Why?” My chin quivers. “Because I’m your dirty secret? Your side piece while you work on your relationship—”

“So help me God...” His voice is so cold it lifts the hairs on my neck. “I’m going to break my fucking belt on your ass.”

I lower the phone, take a huge calming breath, then lift it back to my ear. “You’re a bastard.”

“Keep going, Ivory. You’re not going to walk for a week.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

A loud thump vibrates through the phone, at odds with the silkiness in his tone. “This is my problem, one that’s going to go away very soon.”

“What?” Outrage pitches my volume. “You don’t just make a baby go away!”

“Lower your fucking voice. Where are you?”

“In hell.”

“Melodrama doesn’t suit you.”

I punch a pathetic fist against the tiled wall. “Fuck you.”

“Fuck *you* for making assumptions about shit you know nothing about!” he roars.

“Is the baby yours?”

“I asked you a question!” he shouts then reins in his tone. “You’re making me wait.”

“Good.” Sitting against the door on the bathroom floor, I kick my legs out in front me. “You can go fuck yourself while you wait.”

“I’m outside.” The grating of his breaths strains the silence, followed by the bang of a car door. “Listen closely. I know you’re hurt, and I caused that. But you’re going to get the fuck over it and trust me.”

He can’t be serious. I don’t bother responding.

“I’ll deal with Joanne,” he says, “and you will get that fucking check-up.”

He ends the call, and I stare at the screen in disbelief. I remain on the floor, grinding my molars and cursing the creation of the opposite sex.

Men who praise and promise are the ones who hurt the most. They coerce and bribe and fuck with my head. Then they fuck my body and leave the kind of scarring fear that no one can see.

I thought he was different. Now I’m not sure.

But I do know he’s not the type to get a woman pregnant and bail. He’s too controlling and obsessive to not be fully invested in his child’s life.

That’s why he took the deal with the dean rather than moving out-of-state.

I love that about him. But I hate it, too. Because I’m jealous and selfish. I hug the pain twisting in my mid-section. God, this fucking hurts.

A fist knocks on the door. “Ivory Westbrook?”

The unfamiliar voice is deeply masculine. Probably the nurse or Emeric’s dad. So what do I do? I dread seeing Emeric with Joanne, but I can’t stay in here forever.

I climb to my feet, wipe away stray tears, and open the door.

The man on the other side stands a foot taller than me. *Frank Marceaux, M.D.* is embroidered on his white coat, but there’s nothing familiar in his handsome features. Wrinkles line his brow, though not many. He’s probably in his fifties? Reddish-brown hair combs back from a severe widow’s peak.

Thick eyebrows curve over green eyes, and a small gold ring cuffs his earlobe.

But it's his presence that denotes the family resemblance. Hands behind his back, feet planted in a wide stance, he studies me with too much focus. A shiver trills up my spine.

He raises an auburn brow. "Are you ready?"

No, definitely not. I slide the phone in my back pocket. "Yeah."

As I follow him through the waiting room, my gaze locks on the wall of windows and the scene playing out in the parking lot. My shoes stick to the floor, and every cell in my body zeroes in on Emeric.

He paces a circle around Joanne. His mouth moves, his eyes blaze, but his overall posture conveys calm confidence.

She stares at her hands where they rub her belly, head lowered, and lips in a thin line. Probably the way I look when he's teaching me a lesson.

Jealousy burns hot and fierce in my chest.

"Ivory," Dr. Marceaux says.

I step forward to follow then pause.

Emeric stops just behind Joanne, breathing down her neck. With his fists on his hips, no part of him touches her, but he's so close. The kind of closeness two people share when they've spent a lot of time together. When they're familiar and intimate.

My heart squeezes and shrivels. She knows him better than I do. He's been inside her, put a baby in her, and I'm... I don't know what I am to him. We haven't even had sex.

"Ivory." Dr. Marceaux steps in front of me, blocking my view. "Follow me."

I can't seem to make my feet move, but my eyes work just fine, burning images of Emeric and Joanne into my brain and leaking tears all over my damn face.

Dr. Marceaux gently grips my elbow and leads me to an exam room. The moment he shuts the door, he stabs a finger toward the exam table. “Sit.”

I jump at the command in his voice and hurry to the table, crinkling the paper against the vinyl as I hop up.

He sets a box of tissues beside my hip, which makes me feel like an emotional little girl. I grab one anyway and wipe my face.

Lowering onto the stool, he rolls it across the floor until he’s sitting right in front of me. “He didn’t tell you about her?”

I wad the tissue in my fist and square my shoulders. “Not about the pregnancy.”

A muscle tics in his jaw, and his hard eyes crease, fanning wrinkles from the corners.

“Is it his?” I ask.

“He doesn’t know.”

My breath hitches. “He doesn’t...? She was with someone else? Did she cheat on him?”

“He has no proof of that.”

“Oh.” My chest deflates. “She told the receptionist she’s carrying your grandson.”

He swivels toward the drawers behind him and removes equipment and supplies, giving me a momentary reprieve from his stony gaze.

“I know you’re living with him.” He rips open packages of instruments. “I’m not going to lecture you on the risks you and he are taking. I gave him my opinion on the phone last night.” He turns back to me, his expression pensive. “Emeric is hardheaded and unstoppable when his passion is provoked.”

I disagree with the unstoppable part. At least when it comes to my limits. Where his passion is concerned, I’ve been on the receiving end of that for two months. I guess that’s why this secret he’s kept from me feels like a blade in my chest.

Dr. Marceaux slides on reading glasses and grabs the blood pressure monitor. Without asking me to change clothes, he begins an above-the-waist exam. For the next ten minutes, he pokes, prods, and draws blood while I answer his medical questions, including the embarrassing ones about my sexual history and mishaps with protection.

He maintains a professional demeanor, but I wonder if he thinks I'm just a money-grubbing whore.

While he makes notations on his tablet, the door opens.

Emeric slips in, shuts the door, and his frosty eyes find and imprison mine.

Chills sweep over me, and I find it difficult to look away.

Dr. Marceaux stands, his voice clipped. "What are you doing in here?"

Emeric doesn't break eye contact with me. There are so many emotions seeping from him, I don't know how to sort them. Anger is the easiest to recognize, locking his jaw and engorging the veins in his tense forearms. But there's an undercurrent of something more vulnerable. His fingers twitch at his sides, and tendons stand out in his neck. Is he scared? Afraid I'll leave? Or is that my wishful thinking?

Dr. Marceaux moves toward the door, his voice low and harsh. "Emeric, there are five nurses here today, watching your every move. I won't be able to contain the gossip."

Emeric holds my eyes as he speaks to his dad. "After the scene Joanne just made, they'll think I came in here to talk to you."

"Is she still here?" I relax my hands in my lap and try to look brave and mature. "What did you talk about?"

"You can discuss it at home." Dr. Marceaux pulls a gown from the drawer and sets it beside me. "Dr. Hill will be in any second to do the pelvic exam."

"I'm staying." Emeric leans against the counter, hands in his pockets, settling in.

“No, you’re not.” I grab the gown, turning it every which way to make sense of it. “This is awkward enough. Besides, I’m pissed at you.”

He snatches the smock from my hands and holds it open. “It goes on like this.”

Dr. Marceaux grips the doorknob. “Let’s go, son.”

In a flash, Emeric closes the distance between us, grips the hair at my scalp, and puts his mouth at my ear. “We’re not finished.”

Then he follows his dad out of the room, leaving me breathless and even more confused than I was before.

In a daze, I pee in a cup in the bathroom and change into the weird gown in the exam room. The elderly Dr. Hill arrives with news that I’m not pregnant. Then he hands me a package of birth control pills, does a breast exam, and sticks his hand and other invasive things in my vagina.

By the time I climb into the Porsche, my head is pounding with a barrage of questions. Where do I go? What should I do?

I grip the steering wheel and search my gut for the right decision. Going to his house doesn’t mean I’m desperate or needy. I can always go back home and return to the way things were before.

But I’ve never been the girl who runs from an argument. I need answers, and there’s only one place to find them.

A few minutes later, I punch in my code at the security gate, a code Emeric let me come up with on my own. Then I park beside the GTO and enter the house through the unlocked back door.

Schubert greets me in the mud room with a purring leg rub. As I scoop him up, I’m distracted by the muffled melody of a piano. He’s playing?

I give the kitty a nuzzle, set him down, and follow the notes through the winding corridors.

I’ve peeked into his music room several times, admired his Fazioli from afar, but I’ve never gone in. I had this idea that he

would lead me there when his hands were healed. Then he would sit behind the keyboard and play something crazy amazing, like Ravel's Gaspard de la Nuit.

As I draw closer, I don't hear Ravel or Brhams or Liszt. He's playing *Metallica*.

I freeze in the doorway, held in paralyzing captivation as the familiar tune of "Nothing Else Matters" wraps around me. Twenty feet away, he rocks on the bench, eyes closed, profile relaxed, and forearms flexing as he hammers the keys.

He's conservatory trained but plays metal on the piano? Without a music sheet. Only virtuosos can so smoothly replicate pieces they've heard. I'm completely and totally awe-struck.

When I remember to breathe, my lungs expand, inhaling the sight of him, the poignant arrangement of notes, and the energy in the air.

Head down, black hair hanging over his brow, he sways his jaw side-to-side in a slow tempo with the music. The melody is a desperate plea infused with longing, and he opens it up with expert strokes, tapping his bare foot softly, his posture a powerhouse of contracting muscle beneath the white t-shirt.

The face of his watch glints in the light as he leaps between octaves. With each snap of his wrist, I imagine that hand whipping across my skin. The spread and flex of his fingers makes me wish they were curled around my throat with the same passion and intensity. His hips roll, and I tremble to straddle his lap and ride the wave of his body as he plays.

In the right hands, the piano can steal the soul. Clearly, his hands are made for the keys, because I don't just feel the notes inside me. They devour me like a dark, voracious flame.

He's so sexy and talented I don't know what to do with the dangerous feelings he stirs in me. I'm supposed to be mad at him and demanding answers. I should feel lost, uncertain.

Instead, I feel claimed, as if he's caressing each key with me on his mind. *We're not finished.* He wants me here, even though he hasn't acknowledged my presence.

It takes me several seconds to realize the lid is closed on the Fazioli. Did he forget to open it? Looking closer, I see something that doesn't belong.

Familiar black straps hook underneath the piano, stretch across the black top, and attach to leather cuffs near the keyboard.

My pulse skyrockets, and my gaze flicks back to his face.

His eyes are still closed. I could slip into the hall and... What then? I'm not going anywhere until I talk to him.

Am I afraid of what he has planned for me? Well, my lips are numb, and my heartbeat is raging out of control. But I'm certain those cuffs will lead to answers about Joanne as well as myself. If the truth is too painful, he'll release me with one word.

I stand taller, but not quite confident enough to step into the room.

The song winds to a close, and he rests his hands in his lap.

Lifting his head, he turns his glacial eyes on me. "Leave all of your clothes at the door."

EMERIC

“Metallica.” Ivory tucks her hands in the back pockets of her jeans and gives me a tentative smile. “That was good.”

I was trained by the best, graduated from Leopold, and hold a seat in the Louisiana Symphony Orchestra. Not once in my musical career have I cared what anyone thinks of my talent.

Until now.

She’s been frozen in the doorway for five minutes, and *good* is the only compliment her gorgeous lips utter?

When we met, I was afraid the balance between us would be heavily tipped, that I would overpower her and take advantage of her. I weigh almost twice what she does. I’m twenty-seven, and she’s seventeen. I’m a Dominant, and she’s my high school student. Christ, I had so many doubts.

But no more.

As I sit here, aching for her brilliant pianist’s mind to spout poetry about my music, I realize she doesn’t just hold the power in the bedroom. She commands my emotions, tests my confidence, and haunts my every thought. She could destroy me, not just my livelihood, but the very fiber of who I am, and she doesn’t even know it.

It’s my responsibility to balance the harmony between us and manage our roles. Right now, she’s disobeying, and I’m going to remind her what it means to be mine.

“Your clothes. Now.”

Flinching at my hard tone, she glances at the restraints on the Fazioli. Her chest heaves once, twice. Then she closes her eyes and lifts the t-shirt over her head, dropping the material to the floor.

Her tits swell over lacy pink cups, her toned abs encased in dark golden skin. Those sexy legs... I clench my hands. She's making me wait, her fingers frozen on the button of her jeans.

I rise from the piano bench, the Dom in me taking over. I straighten my spine, roll back my shoulders, and even my breaths. She watches me with hooded eyes, parted lips, her hands dropping to curl against her thighs.

Knowing her trust in me was fractured at the clinic, it's incredibly satisfying to see her standing here, let alone considering my order. But for us to work, it's vital I push her to the edge, to that place where she both fears and respects me, but not so far that she can't breathe.

I force myself to ease back a notch, to use less growl and more finesse.

Approaching her slowly, I hold her gaze with assertive focus. As I crowd her space, her chin lowers, breath hitching, but those huge brown eyes stay with me, refusing to look away. So brave. So fucking intoxicating.

I lower into a crouch and, with painfully slow movements, unzip the fly of her jeans. Hovering my lips an inch from her panties, I drag the denim down her legs. She trembles as I gaze up at her and take my time kissing the skin around the pink satin.

With my fingers on the backs of her calves, I trail them up her legs, speaking softly yet firmly. "Remove your shoes."

As she toes them off, her swift obedience builds a hungry pressure in my groin. My hands trace the rise of her ass, and my lips follow the dip of her naval. She gasps and rolls her hips, her fingers plunging into my hair, clinging to me for balance.

Fuck, I want her on my cock, clenching and spasming and giving herself to me in every way.

I kick the sneakers to the side and guide her feet out of the jeans and socks. With featherlight touches, I tickle the serpentine line of her spine and toy with the clasp of her bra while rising up her body and kissing a sensual path between her breasts.

Her head falls back, and her slender frame rocks in my arms. She smells like jasmine soap, sultry with arousal, and exquisitely Ivory.

My cock jerks in my jeans, trapped and demanding. *Not yet.*

I tease the clasp of the bra, my mouth gliding across her delicate collar bone. Moving higher, I kiss the slender column of her neck and nibble along her jaw.

Our foreheads touch as I unlatch the bra and flatten my palm against her spine. Our breaths rush out, melding together, our lips gravitating closer, closer. When our mouths finally connect, she melts against me.

My hands lift to her face, thumbs stroking her cheekbones as I devour her seductive moans. I kiss her aggressively, ordering her without words to trust me. I whip my tongue against hers, a promise of impending pain and ecstasy. Her mouth parts in acceptance, and her hands clutch my waist, pulling me against her.

I break the kiss and let my fingers linger on the straps on her shoulders. My eyes never leaving hers, I gently slip the bra down her arms. Her nipples are so hard the lace catches on them. I slowly ease the material away, exposing her delicious flesh. She exhales sharply as the bra falls to the floor.

Jesus, she's perfection. I need to bury myself inside her and struggle to think past my raging hard-on.

Taking a step back, I let my gaze roam her long, lean body, worshiping every flexure, twitch, and fragile bone as she regards me with round eyes. Full perky tits rise with her breaths, narrow hips shift with anxiousness, and a wet spot darkens the satin of her pink panties.

Her body loves my touch, but her mind hasn't forgiven me. If I don't let her take the next step on her own, she'll only feel worse afterward.

I nod at the panties. "Take them off or say your word."

Biting her lip, she hooks her thumbs under the satin, glides it down her legs, and kicks it away. Her gaze never leaves my face, watching me with wariness, curiosity, and undeniable desire.

I prowl around her, reveling in her stunning nudity and the way her breaths stop and start with each of my steps. My finger traces the scrollwork pattern inked from her waist to the opposite shoulder.

She shudders against the sensation, panting and craning her neck to see me.

I press my chest flush with her back, fingers teasing her hipbones. "You're going to tell me about that tattoo. Not now." I rest my mouth in the juncture between her neck and shoulder and lick. "Maybe not today or this week." Sliding my hands around her pelvis, I dip between her legs and slip through her wet folds. "But you'll tell me soon."

She releases a heavy sigh and arches her neck, tipping her head to the side to give me easier access.

I set my teeth on her shoulder and bite down. She whimpers and writhes against me, her arms lifting and fingers seeking my hair.

Kissing the hurt, I step back. "Follow me." I lead her to the Fazioli and point to the ledge above the keyboard. "Sit on the edge. Legs spread. Right foot on the lowest keys, left foot on the highest."

Her expression pinches with uncertainty, but she climbs into position, filling the silence with random notes.

Nylon straps snake from beneath the piano and over the lid, two on each side and all four connected to leather cuffs. I attach two to her wrists and cinch them behind her with a hard yank. She gasps.

With her arms restrained at her back, her eyes track my movements, lips separated and shoulders lifting. She seems to be fighting her posture, battling the fear that's pulling her body in on itself.

As I cross in front of her, I caress the backs of my fingers along the inside of her outstretched leg. "What is the word that makes this stop?"

"Scriabin," she breathes, watching me cautiously.

"Will you use it?"

She nods with a flutter of fear in her eyes. "If I need to."

"Good girl."

With the other two cuffs, I lock her ankles against the molding that brackets the keyboard. Then I stand back and absorb the erotic view before me.

Perched on the edge of the lid, thighs spread wide enough to hold the entire keyboard between her feet, and arms restrained behind her, she's a picture of lust and torment, strength and trust. Her pussy is open, pink and drenched, begging for my cock. Her tongue peeks out and touches the underside of her bottom lip.

I've never wanted anyone the way I want her. Not just her body. I want her everything. *She* is the strongest emotion I've ever felt.

I adjust the throbbing ache in my jeans. "I'm so fucking aroused I want to roll over and die."

"Dead is one way to get rid of that erection."

The playful glint in her eyes makes me impossibly harder.

"Or." She bites her lip. "There's...you know, the other way."

I hold her in a suspended moment of eye contact as my hand strokes along my trapped cock. "Is that what you want, Ivory? Your cunt is soaked and ready for me. I could slide right in and fuck you so hard you'll feel me for days."

She averts her gaze, nostrils flaring and muscles straining in the shackles. She might've been ready to surrender this morning, but not now. Not after seeing my ex.

“Look at me.” I wait for her eyes then reach for my belt. “You get two strikes for referring to anyone but yourself as my girlfriend.”

“But Jo—”

“Don't say her fucking name.” Heat courses through my veins. “We'll get to that, but right here, right now, this is *us*. You and me and no one else.”

Grooves form in her forehead then smooth away. “Fine. Two strikes.” The corner of her mouth lifts. “Do your worst.”

She's smiling now, completely clueless about *where* I'll be doing my worst.

I cock my head. “As for the attitude you gave me on the phone...” I yank the belt free from my jeans and fold it in half. “Six orgasms for your six bratty comments.”

“Orgasms, huh?” She laughs, relaxing in her restraints. “Gee, that sounds like torture.”

My lips twitch. *Oh, it will be.*

IVORY

The edge of the piano lid digs into my ass, and the muscles in my inner thighs strain in the locked and spread position. But it's the heated blue gaze tracing every line of my body that holds me captive. I straighten as tall as possible, my heart banging and body aching for Emeric's hurt and affection.

Since I'm sitting on his usual target, where will he hit me? My thighs? My back? I look down the expanse of my torso, and a chill tingles across my neck. With my legs extended wide and arms bound behind me, my tits and pussy are front and center. Surely, that's not...

My gaze flies up, but he's not looking at my eyes. His attention is glued to my chest, his fist clenched around the ends of the belt. *No, he wouldn't. Not somewhere so vulnerable.* My nipples throb at the thought.

Stalking toward me on silent feet, he slides the bench to the side and puts his face in mine, studying my expression, watching me breathe, peering into the darkest, most depraved parts of me.

I swallow. "Where are you going to—"

He crashes his mouth against mine, licking and sucking and spinning my brain off its axis. Gliding his lips along my neck, up and down, slowly, achingly, he covers my throat in whispers of pleasure. My head drops back on a gasp. His mouth is so gentle and safe it's like he's kissing my soul. *Please, don't stop.*

His hand joins in, lightly stroking up my side and over my breast. Those four fingers, four tiny points of contact, charge my veins with electricity and strum my body through multiple arpeggios in a matter of seconds.

“I need you.” The words rush past my lips, breathy and unbidden.

“You have me,” he says softly, lowers his head, and bites my nipple.

I yelp, consumed with pain, jerking against the manacles and going nowhere.

He laughs and bites again, pulling on the nub with his teeth until it throbs and stretches out of shape.

When he moves to the other one, I hold my breath and shake my head.

His lips graze my nipple, teasing, and his eyes flicker to mine with so much need swirling in the deep blue depths. “Breathe.”

The moment I do, he sinks his teeth. I shriek in agony and buck my hips, slipping off the edge. He catches me, sliding my ass back in place as his teeth tear into my sensitive flesh, sucking hard and setting me on fire.

“Stop!” I sob, twisting my wrists in the shackles. “Please, stop.”

Rolling his tongue, he licks the godawful burn, his voice a razored rasp. “I don’t hear your word.”

Tears flood my eyes, and my entire body quivers like a harp string.

He leans into my face and bares his teeth. “Say it.”

I suck on my bottom lip and look down. Fucking hell, it feels like he sliced my nipples off, but they’re still there, huge, hard, and angry red. Not a drop of blood.

He steps to the side and taps the folded belt against his leg. “Where’s the cocky little brat from just a moment ago?”

“You bit my boobs!”

“You just increased your orgasm count to seven. Are you finished?”

If he’s trying to provoke me to say the word, he’ll have to try harder.

I twist my wrist behind my back and flip him off. *Too bad he can’t see it.* “I’m good.”

He raises the belt and touches the loop of leather to my nipple. A torrent of tremors ripple through me.

His eyes meet mine, lower to my chest, then return to my face.

I harden my expression and lift my chin.

Time stands still as his head tilts, and his mouth opens slightly. Then he swings.

Leather whips across my swollen nipple in a fiery flash. A gasp lodges in my throat, and tears blind my vision. He doesn’t give me a second to regroup before he strikes the other breast.

My back bows, and I swallow my scream as my mind scrambles to make sense of the pain. How did I get here? Why am I letting this happen? What in the holy fuck am I doing?

The belt hits the floor, making me jump. He reaches behind his neck and drags the t-shirt over his head. Denim hangs low on his tapered waist, his bare chest flexing and bunching with dips and ridges.

In the next breath, he’s on me, hands in my hair and lips chasing the tracks of tears across my cheeks.

“So beautiful when you cry for me.” He sprinkles kisses across my eyes, nose, and mouth as his fingers stroke my hair. “Oh, Ivory. You have no idea what you do to me.”

The rumble of his voice and the tenderness of his touch soothes the fire in my nipples and stokes a new flame deep in my core.

“Tell me,” I say, my voice reedy.

He drops his forehead to mine. “I’ll show you.”

Dragging the piano bench closer, he sits. The position puts his mouth inches from my pussy. Fingers spread over the keys, he dives into a raucously violent song. Another metal cover, but I can't place it. I'm lost in the banging notes, shivering against the pain in my breasts, and wondering if those seven orgasms will be his or mine.

I test the bindings on my ankles, my legs twinging in the extended stretch. "What song is this?"

His eyes dart between my lips and my pussy, his hands pounding the keys. "'Symphony Of Destruction.' Megadeth."

Never heard of it, but sweet hell, it sounds ominous.

He leans forward and presses his mouth against my inner thigh. My entire body stills in anticipation as he slides his lips toward my center. His hands move manically over the keys, and when he reaches the crease in my thigh, he changes direction without a slip in the melody. He licks a path to my knee, nibbling and sucking my skin, then shifts back once again toward my cunt.

With his lips hovering above my clit, the song changes to one I immediately recognize.

I burst into groaning laughter. "You've got to be kidding me."

He flashes me a grin before he buries his face between my legs. As he curves his tongue through my folds, the piano vibrates to the tune of "Smells Like Teen Spirit" by Nirvana.

The swarming sensations beneath his lips plunge me into a panting mess of desire. He probes deeply with stabbing strokes, and when he finds my clit, it doesn't take long. I'm already primed with all the touching and kissing, and hell, even the whips on my breasts made me wet.

I come with a loud, gasping moan, rocking my hips against his relentless mouth as my limbs jerk in the restraints.

His hands fumble over the keys, losing the rhythm before picking it back up again.

"That's one," he says in a husky voice.

I meet his eyes, panting and shaking. “There’s no way. I ___”

Can’t say *I can’t*. But seriously? Six more? He’s way too diabolical with his punishments. I’m going to die.

He presses a kiss to my clit then attacks it with lips and teeth. I scream through orgasms two and three. After that, I no longer hear the music or feel the vibrations through my limbs or see the room around me. Every sense narrows on the tongue inside me and the deluge of climbing and falling sensations attacking my body.

After the fourth release, I reach a strange floaty kind of catatonic state. My pussy tingles with over-stimulation, the nerve-endings in my clit stinging against the lightest stroke of his tongue. But he doesn’t stop. Not when I tell him to go to hell or call him a sadistic bastard.

He silences me by clamping his teeth around my bundle of nerves.

He’s not playing the piano anymore, because those talented fingers are inside me, banging me into a torturous hell of pleasure.

“You have to stop.” I sway in the restraints, my spread legs shaking with exhaustion. “Please. I’m done.”

His soaking wet lips burrow in, kissing and licking, his groan thrumming a different kind of song through my core. A moment later, he curls three fingers inside me and wrings another agonizing orgasm from my body.

“Six.” He leans back and wipes his mouth on the back of his hand. “The last one will be with me.”

“No more.” My head is so heavy my chin drops against my chest as I suck for air. “Please.”

He lifts my chin with his finger, his gaze burning against my lips, his voice a ragged whisper. “I love when you beg.”

He stands, and with a few flicks of his wrists, he releases my hands and legs from the straps.

I slump against him, my muscles like water, pouring out and falling over. But he has me, my limp body held in strong arms and supported against a damn fine chest.

The heat of his forearms disappears from my back, replaced with the hard surface of the piano lid. He lays me face up, feet pointing away from the keyboard, shoulders on the edge where I'd been sitting. My head dangles upside-down, bumping against the keys.

My already hypersensitive skin flushes hotter, and blood rushes to my brain with the pull of gravity. "What are you doing?"

He circles the piano, inspecting my body as if memorizing every inch. His fingers tickle along my skin as he moves, starting at my throat, gliding along my sternum, veering around my belly button, and lingering between my legs.

My pelvis lifts toward his touch, straining to maintain that point of contact. Despite the fact he just finished biting and wetting my breasts and torturing me with orgasms, I want more. He must have short-wired my brain.

Locking the cuffs around my ankles and wrists, he effectively pins me like an *X* on his Fazioli. When he returns to my head, he gives me an upside-down view of the steel rod pushing against his zipper.

He opens his fly. "You know how hard to suck." Shoving down his jeans, he releases his sizeable cock, the pink skin taut over the wide girth. "You know how fast or slow to move that wicked tongue."

Heat pools and throbs between my thighs with every word.

Touching the crown to my inverted mouth, he fists his length and smears salty pre-come across my lips. "Tap your right hand against the piano if you want this to stop. Tell me you understand."

"I—" My pussy clenches, empty and needy. Such a foreign feeling to experience. "I'll tap if I need to."

He wraps a hand beneath my dangling head, his fingers serving as a buffer between my skull and the wood casing.

With his eyes half-mast and steadily watching mine, he grips his erection, rubs the shaft across my cheeks, and thumps the tip against my lips.

I open my mouth, instinctively, eagerly. *Do it already.*

His gaze flicks down the length of my body as he presses himself against my tongue. His exhale shudders out, and he thrusts.

He doesn't ease in. He ruthlessly and repeatedly plows. Over and over, he stabs his cock past my lips, fucking my mouth as if he were plunging between my legs.

His thighs flex against my forehead as he clamps his fingers against my scalp, tangling in my hair, and holding my head immovable. I can only lie there, hands and legs tied down, throat relaxed, and jaw stretched for his pleasure.

Bending over my chest, he squeezes my breast with his free hand, pinching the nipple and tormenting it with his hot mouth.

I surrender in drugged wonderment as his length drives deeper against my throat, his hips grinding and rolling with his urgency. This is what he would look like if he was filling my pussy. The strain of his muscles, flex of his ass, and ram of his cock compose a seductive dance of intensity. He gives as much as he takes, his hunger spreading over my skin, garbling my moans around his pounding length, overtaking me.

Holding my head against his thrusts, he slides the other hand over my stomach and hooks two fingers inside me, sparking a needy clench through my inner muscles.

“Not gonna last long.” His sharp breaths husk the air. “We’re doing this together.”

He shifts his touch to my tender clit and applies a solid, rolling pressure. My hips reach for it, grinding and rocking against his fingers. *Right there, right there.*

A spasm of tingling heat explodes beneath his diabolical caress.

He jerks against my tongue, his forehead falling against my chest as he strokes us into a moaning, trembling orgasmic duet.

I greedily swallow his release, panting beneath the wave of my own. His cock twitches against my lips, and my inner thighs quiver through the remnant aftershocks of orgasm number seven.

He tucks himself away and frees the shackles, lifting and moving me, limb by melted limb. I hang like a rag doll in his arms as he carries me to the piano bench and arranges my legs in a straddling position around his waist.

I slump against him, chest to chest, skin on skin, and hug his broad shoulders. “That was the worst torture ever.”

Chuckling, he kisses my cheek and reaches behind me, fingers on the keyboard. With a deep breath, he envelops us in a gentle song, tranquilizing my hammering heart with Pink Floyd’s “Comfortably Numb.”

I curl up against him, soaking in the flex and sway of his body as he plays. The tempo of his breaths synchronizes with the melody, pacing my own. His skin, so soft and warm, smells woody and masculine and safe. I bury my nose against his neck and fill my lungs.

With my arms and legs hooked around him, I cling to the pillar of his torso. This brutal man is my home. His hell is my heaven.

I’m his Ivory, and he’s my darkest note.

No matter what happens, I will never resent this. I’ll never regret *him*.

He closes the song on a low, deep key and slides his strong hands across my back, massaging my spine.

Hugging me tighter against his chest, he lowers his lips to my shoulder, his tone quiet, gentle. “I didn’t know she was pregnant until after...”

After Shreveport. After her betrayal.

I kiss his neck and run my fingers through his hair as bitterness flares inside me.

“She’s seven months along.” He breathes in, out. “The baby could be mine. Or not.”

I lift my head and find his stark eyes. “Do you think...?”

He blinks, his expression conflicted. “I don’t know. There was never an indication of cheating, and I’m pretty fucking observant.”

Hard to argue that. “Then why do you question it?”

He tucks my hair behind my ear, his fingers lingering on my jaw. “I never thought she would betray me the way she did. If she can do that...”

“She could cheat.”

He lowers his hand to stroke my hip, his eyes following the movement. “When I took over Shreveport, I worked long hours. Day and night. I was rarely home.”

She could’ve been doing anything during that time. With anyone. Maybe he wasn’t so observant back then?

I swallow around the ache in my throat. “Why was she at the clinic today?”

His gaze lifts to mine. “I’ve been ignoring her messages. Only way she knows how to find me is through my dad.”

“What does she want?” My voice shakes with fragile nerves. “To reunite with you? Pick up where you left off?”

“Yes.” He grips the back of my neck when I start to pull away. “She wants my money, Ivory.”

I find that hard to believe. Anyone with half a brain must know that any love this man offers is more valuable than all the wealth in the world.

Leaning forward, I comb my fingers over the short hairs on the back of his head. “How much money are we talking?”

“Half of my inheritance. Millions. I would gladly give it if I knew the child was mine.” He folds his arms around my

back, holding me against him. “I gave blood months ago in my demand for a paternity test. She’s yet to provide the results.”

“That doesn’t bode well for her. I mean, if the child is yours...”

“This would be a done deal, and she would be a very wealthy woman.” He looks down at me, his eyes swirling in thought. “She knows my terms. I want those test results. If the baby isn’t mine, she doesn’t get a penny, and I’ll never have to see her or think about her again. If it is mine, I’ll be a father in every sense of the word.”

And Joanne will be fully embedded in his life. My heart stutters and breaks.

He cups my neck, searching my face. “There is no *Joanne and me*. I’m yours. Tell me you understand.”

I close my eyes against the intensity in his. “You said you love her.”

“I also said I hate her.” With a deep sigh, he lowers his forehead to mine. “Then I found something more meaningful than love and hate.”

I stop breathing, my eyes fluttering open. “What?”

“You.”

My pulse jolts with the rapid rush of my breaths. How can he shred my trust and stitch it back up so thoroughly in the span of such a short time?

“I’m sorry, Ivory. I should’ve told you.” He rubs my back. “You have enough to worry about, and I just... I trust my instinct, and it tells me she’s lying.”

“I forgive you.” Deeply. Endlessly. I rest my head on his shoulder. “What happens now?”

“I never wanted to threaten her career. I don’t get off on leaving her jobless with a baby. But I *need* to know if that child is mine.” The muscles beneath me harden with tension, and his tone sharpens. “She has until next weekend to prove paternity. If she doesn’t meet the deadline, the Shreveport

Board will receive damning photos of their dirty, deceitful
Head of School.”

EMERIC

The following week passes in a blur of restlessness. With Lorenzo Gandara still on the loose and my constant paranoia about my living situation with Ivory, I'm on edge, irritable, and fucking exhausted. Adding to my stress is my orchestra performance this weekend.

Between nightly meetings and dress rehearsals for the symphony and Ivory's private lessons and homework, there's little down time. We spend half of our waking hours together, but we're focused on school, piano practice, and the necessary chores of everyday life.

The few times I've been able to pin her down with my fingers in her cunt, we're either rushed or exhausted. Not fucking her is torment worse than death, but the timing and my focus needs to be perfect.

I want to *date* her, and I'm frustrated by my inability to do that. She's never been treated to a romantic dinner or spun across a dance floor, all dressed up for a night out and appreciated by a man who simply enjoys her company. I ache to give her those things, without the expectation of sex. But venturing out in public with her has to wait.

The reminder that she's only seventeen tempers some of my impatience. She has an entire life yet to experience, and I intend to be a part of it.

In the meantime, I cherish our brief moments before sleep, those small spaces of time when she curls her body around mine. With the shedding fur ball nestled between our feet, we

share stories about our lives, random pieces of ourselves, until she drifts into dreamland. Without fail, I lie awake for long hours after, holding her tightly as the looming news of three pivotal things monopolize my mind.

One, it's Thursday, and I still haven't heard from Joanne. Not a call or a text. Logic tells me if the baby is mine, she would've provided the evidence months ago. But she gets off on mind games and making me wait as a means to control me.

Two, my dad expedited the blood work from Ivory's exam, and the results are due any day. Once I have her clean bill of health, I won't be able to stop myself from fucking her into next week. I know she thinks she's ready, but she's yet to use her safe word. When I fuck her, will she lie beneath me—like she's done for every other dickhead—and silently will me to stop? Or will she be with me, making a conscious choice to surrender completely?

I need to find at least one of her hard limits and force her to confront it. Then I'll know.

The final thing occupying my mind is Lorenzo Gandara. After implementing my plan to remove him as a threat to Ivory, I'm stuck in a holding pattern, burning to see it come to fruition. The wait is maddening, making me question the sagacity in my approach. Maybe I should've handled him more directly, legal risks be damned.

Doesn't help that Ivory asks about him every fucking day. I've been honest with her about the current proceedings, but if it doesn't pan out, I haven't enlightened her on my intent to straight-up murder that motherfucker.

I doubt she would care as long as it doesn't interfere with her dream. Ivory's nothing if not ambitious. She lives by the motto, *Everything is possible*, and her everything is the ivory tower of Leopold. I'm not in a hurry to upset the tenuous balance between her and me and the dean, but when the time comes, Ivory and I will have some decisions to make.

On a positive note, Prescott Rivard appears to be cooperating. I assigned his activity to my PI, his phone calls

and movements all monitored discreetly and reported back to me. There's been no indication of retaliation.

On Friday, everything changes.

The afternoon arrives in a rapid succession of phone calls and messages. The explosion of disruptions makes it impossible to lecture so I give the students some busy work and bury my head in my phone. Ivory watches me curiously from her desk, her brow lifting in a *What the hell are you up to?* arch of suspicion.

I give her a hard glare, but on the inside, I'm barely holding myself together. By the time the final bell rings, I'm unable to keep my rabid fucking emotions at bay.

When the last student exits the classroom, I slam the door shut, yank Ivory from her desk, and crash her against the nearest wall.

She yelps, stretching her toes to reach the floor. "What are you—?"

I attack her mouth and devour her lips, starving and possessed, my hands flying over every inch of her I can reach, stroking, grabbing, holding. My cock hardens, and my pulse detonates. No more waiting. I fucking need her.

"Someone...will...see," she pants between kisses, both pushing and pulling against my chest, her attention straining toward the window in the door.

I bite her lips, thrilling in the soft feel of her body along the length of mine. "No lessons tonight. Go home. I'll meet you there."

With a stupendous amount of will power, I release her and storm toward my desk.

"What happened?" She stares at me, eyes wide and frozen where I left her. "Is this about—?"

"I gave you an order," I say quietly, harshly.

Turning my back on her, I stuff my belongings in the satchel, my blood roaring with heavy, urgent need. If she

doesn't leave right this second, I'm going to fuck her against the whiteboard.

The instant her footfalls fade down the hall, I straighten my swelling cock, making it less visible with the tip pinned beneath my belt. Then I trail behind her at an unassuming distance. Outside, I watch from the main entrance as she crosses the parking lot and safely climbs inside the Porsche. Same thing I do every night. Except tonight is different.

Tonight, the wait is over.

The three-minute drive feels like three hours. I race through the house and find her in the kitchen with Schubert burrowed against her neck.

She nibbles her bottom lip, her huge brown eyes round and watchful. "You got the test results?"

The paternity test? Her blood work? Whichever one she means, I'm too worked up to draw this out.

Separated by the length of the kitchen, I take a step toward her. "The baby isn't mine."

She buries her expression against Schubert's furry head.

"Don't do that." I inch closer, ten feet away, and take in her quickening breaths. "Never hide from me."

Setting the cat on the floor, she gives him a pat on the rump. Then she straightens and faces me head-on. Her lips thin, but the smile in her eyes is blinding. "Are you...happy about it? Or did you want..." Her gaze dims, her voice barely a whisper. "That baby?"

Two months ago, I would've been devastated by the proof that Joanne so callously cheated and pissed away our life together. But now? I'm floating on a cloud of liberated emotions, and the chief of those is gratitude. I want to thank her for being a traitorous cunt. If she hadn't betrayed me, I would still be with her, completely oblivious that the deepest, strongest love shines from brown eyes and a selfless, seventeen-year-old heart.

Another couple of steps, and I stop. Six feet away. I need to tell Ivory the rest before she's within arm's reach. Before I lose the grip on my control. "I want a child. Several, in fact. Someday. In the very distant future. With you."

She touches her parted lips as a ragged inhale shakes her chest.

I take another step toward her and tap anxious fingers on the island. "Lorenzo has been detained."

She gasps and places her hands on the back counter, breathing deeply.

With a rap sheet a mile long, he's wanted on suspicion of robbery, drug possession, and assault with a deadly weapon. My PI identified his routine and hangouts, turned the information over to NOPD, and leaned hard on the police sergeant until priorities were adjusted and the arrest was made.

Tears well up in Ivory's eyes, her hands shaking against the granite surface. "How long?"

"He's looking at years for multiple offenses. The bail is set at two-hundred-thousand."

She nods as a trembling smile unfolds across her lips. "Thank you."

When she moves to come closer, I stop her with a strained expression. I want her. Too much.

She tilts her head and licks her lips. "You believed me when my own family called me a whore and a liar. I've been running from him for four years, and in one week, you removed him from my life." She stares at me in awe. "Emeric, you've done something no one has done for me in a really long time."

She doesn't clarify what that is, but I can fill in the blanks. I've made her feel safe.

"I wish it was more." I flex my hand on the island, holding her gaze. "I want him punished for rape, Ivory. If you change your mind about pressing charges, I'll be with you every step of the way."

“No.” Her jaw sets. “I want to move on.”

She’s worried he’ll come after her, and frankly, I am, too. I don’t want her connected to his demise in any way. He won’t be locked up forever, and I’ll have to deal with his inevitable freedom when that day comes. But there’s less risk for Ivory if he’s not blaming her for the next however many years he’s rotting in a cell.

As for the best piece of news I received this afternoon... I close the final few feet between us and prowl around her, lightly gliding my knuckles up her arm.

She shivers, turning her neck to maintain eye contact.

I pause behind her and grip her wrists. With her body facing the counter, I flatten her palms on the cabinet door above her head. “Don’t move your hands.”

She smiles at me over her shoulder. “If I do?”

Brat. I slam a hand against her gorgeous ass.

She flies up on tiptoes, head dropping back with a squeak of surprise. But her hands remain where I put them.

“Such a good girl,” I whisper at her ear, causing her entire body to tremble.

Her responsiveness is such a fucking turn on. I’ve been hard since the day I met her, but I’m finally, *finally*, going to slacken this long-suffering ache between us.

Unless she uses her word.

I cover her hands with mine, pressing them against the cabinet, a silent reminder. Then I move down her bare arms, fingers stroking skin, then shifting to caress around the outer curves of her breasts.

She holds still for me, but there’s a subtle sway in her posture as she lifts and leans toward my touch, her head tipping and eyes alert, following my every movement.

I roam my hands over the stiff material of her black dress, tracing the outline of her muscles and hipbones beneath. When

I reach the hem at her knees, I gather the dress up her thighs, over her supple ass, and let it cling around her waist.

With her eyes turned to watch me, her lashes lower as I slide my mouth down the back of her dress. She sighs, bowing against the counter and dropping her head between her raised arms.

Crouching behind her, I fill my hands with her high round cheeks. The black lace panties look so damn sinful on her. Too bad this is the last time she'll wear them.

I grip the tiny straps around her hips and yank.

The sound of ripping lace brings her head around. "I liked those."

"I'll buy you a hundred more and rip every fucking one of them off your gorgeous ass."

As I stand, I reach around the front of her legs and drag the tips of my fingers up her inner thighs. Her trembling limbs and husky moans scorch heat through my cock, engorging it to painful steel.

When my hand encounters the soft hair on her pussy, I tug hard on the short strands. She bites down on her lip, muffling a gasp.

My heart pumps faster, harder. I press my chest against her back, kick her feet apart, and slide my finger along her slit.

Her head falls back on my shoulder, and her mouth chases mine. I dodge her, tickling my lips along her jaw, down her neck, blanketing her skin with my breaths.

"God, Emeric. I've never felt like this."

"Shhh." I nibble on her shoulder, let her feel my teeth, my tongue, and the heat burning me up inside.

Her head rolls, exposing her neck to my kisses. I suck on her ear lobe, circling my tongue as I plunge my fingers into her slippery cunt. Fuck, she's so warm and wet and tight.

She whimpers and rubs her ass against my cock, propelling my teasing touches into a panting, grinding imperative. Our

bodies roll together, fucking without penetration. My cock is lined up, but my slacks are in the way.

I thrust my fingers in her soaking pussy, savoring the clench of her inner walls. “You’re clean, Ivory.”

Her hands twitch against the cabinet door. “Clean?”

“Your test results.” I slide my touch toward her anal rim. “We’re both clean.”

She clenches her ass. “Are we going to—?” Her glutes squeeze against my probing finger. “No! Not there.” She pants. “What are you doing?”

“I’m going to fuck you, Ivory. Tonight. Right now.” I grind against her hip, rubbing my finger between her crack, teasing that tight ring of muscle. I ache to take her there, to fuck every hole in her body.

Holding her hip in a bruising grip, I reach deeper between her legs, pressing my finger against the tiny pucker of skin.

A pained keening noise tears from her throat, and her hands fall from the cabinet. “Scriabin.”

I jolt backward, my pulse racing and hands in the air. “Ivory?”

Fucking hell, she used her word. She used her fucking word.

She shakes against a full-body tremor, torso curved over the counter, thighs clenched together, and arms wrapped around her chest. “I c-c-can’t.”

Frustration pummels through me, angry and vicious. *And irrational.* I force it back, breathing tightly, then deeply, desperate to understand.

Relaxing my arms at my sides, I try to soften my voice. “Be specific.”

“Not my...” She shoves her dress down her legs and turns toward me, eyes glassy and terrified. “Not back there.”

“Have you ever been touched there?”

Her face falls, and she curls in on herself.

Molten rage pours through my veins like lava. I haven't examined her closely enough to see scarring, but it's obvious someone sodomized her. Possibly several someones.

Horrific images cleave through my brain, kicking my heartbeat into a macabre orchestra of violence.

"No anal." I clench my shaking hands and take a cautious step forward. "That's your limit?"

"I can't, Emeric." She backs up and bumps against the counter, her expression pinched in torment. "Please, don't do this."

My stomach drops. She thinks I'd force her?

"Ivory." Another step, my voice gravelly with heartache. "I won't touch you there. I promise."

She stares at the doorway, chin quivering and knees twitching. She looks like she's going to run.

"Eyes on me," I say gently and wait for her to obey. "Is that your only limit?"

Please say yes. I thought for sure she was willing to have sex. How the fuck did I misjudge this?

"I-I don't know."

My lungs tighten, laboring for air. I stand just out of arm's reach, respecting her safe zone. But I'm not ready to back down. I'm sure as fuck not giving up.

She has all the power here, and goddammit, I'll do whatever is needed to make sure she knows it.

I keep my voice level but firm. "You have two choices. One. Walk down the hall, sit behind the piano, and wait for me to begin your lesson. Two. Head upstairs to the bedroom, remove your clothes, and wait for me to fuck you." I steel my gaze. "No anal, Ivory. You have my word."

Arms wrapped around her chest, she rubs her biceps, still not looking at me.

I infuse my tone with conviction. “Whatever you choose, there will be no disappointment or shame. Not from me *or* you. Understand?”

“Yes.” A shaky whisper.

“Go.”

The second she’s out of sight, I spin toward the counter and grind my fist against the granite. *Fuck, fuck, fuck.* I should’ve known she didn’t want to be touched there. I shouldn’t have pushed her.

No, that’s bullshit. If I could just think past my aching cock for a goddamn minute... *Deep breath.*

We just made a huge fucking step forward. She used her word and showed me one of her limits. Now I can trust her to use it again. I’ll wait for her for an eternity if I have to.

The pad of tiny feet draws my attention to the floor. Schubert prances around me and leans his body against my leg, covering my black slacks in orange hair.

I reach down and scoop him up.

“She’s going to shut down on me, isn’t she?” I press my lips against his head, holding him against my chest. “Fuck, I want to kill every fucking prick that’s ever touched her.”

He purrs like a motor and arches his neck for a scratch. Curling my fingers beneath his chin, I oblige. Soon, my pulse evens out, and my muscles loosen.

“Let’s go find our girl.”

I place him on the floor and follow him out of the kitchen, through the hearth room, and into the living room. He veers off toward the couches and stretches out on one of the cushions.

Straight ahead and down the hall is the music room. To the left and toward the—

A delicate black shoe sits on the rug in the foyer. My pulse jumps.

I head toward it, loosening the tie around my neck as I gaze up the staircase. The second shoe perches on the curve in the steps.

She chose the bedroom.

My cock twitches, and my breaths speed up. I launch forward, racing up the stairs and around the corner.

The sight of her black dress on the floor in the hallway spurs me faster, building a hungry pressure at the base of my spine. When I reach the bedroom door, I find it shut, the handle adorned with her black lacy bra.

Christ, she's turning me inside out. I adjust the rigid ache in my slacks and drag in several calming breaths. Then I open the door.

IVORY

The bedroom door swings open, and I release a sigh of relief.

I perch on the side of the bed, nude and vulnerable, as we stare at one another. Seeing him framed in the doorway and watching me with those stony eyes sweeps my breath away.

I'm so damn conflicted about why I used my word. How did I let one paralyzing moment of terror override every ounce of trust I have in him?

Not only did Emeric stop, he didn't explode into a fit of anger. His patient reaction and dependable control proves my fear of him was unwarranted and weak. Am I so dysfunctional that I can't have an intimate relationship with a man who would rather die than endanger me?

His light blue button-up hangs open at the collar, the cobalt tie unknotted and dangling around his neck. The waistcoat is a multi-colored plaid of blue, gray, and black. It would look drab on a clothes rack, but with his sapphire eyes, chiseled jaw, and grungy mess of black hair, he sells it like a trend-setting catalog model.

Jesus, he's painfully handsome. But it's the synergy of his commanding aura and unwavering devotion that makes him particularly effective in stealing my heart.

Instead of forcing himself in my ass or kicking me out of his life, he gave me a choice. There wasn't a millisecond of debate in my mind. I won't ever willingly accept anal sex, but he will *never* force me. My faith in that made it easy to leave him a trail of clothes.

Now that he's here, I don't know what to say or how to steer us back to the way things were. But I don't have to do anything.

He crosses the room with effortless strides, frames my face in his strong hands, and brushes his lips against mine. "Are you okay?"

"Yes." My breath hiccups. "I'm so sorry."

"Never apologize for using your word." He kisses my mouth and eases back to look into my eyes. "Everyone has limits."

I jerk my head. "You? What are they?"

He lowers, squatting between my legs and glides his hands down my neck. "Defecation."

"Defe—what?"

"Scat. Feces. That's a big fat *no*."

"Oh my God, people do that?"

"Yes." He fights a twitchy smile and wins, flattening his lips. "And bestiality. Also my limit."

My throat convulses. "How does your mind even go there?"

"You have to ask?"

I grin. He's a perverted, kinky man, and damn if I don't love that about him. "Good to know you won't be taking advantage of poor Schubert."

He makes a disgusted face. "That was *your* mind going *there*."

"You started it."

He molds his hands around my waist, his thumbs tracing my hipbones. "No sharing. Ever. You're mine. I'm yours. *That* is my hardest limit."

"You'd rather I shit on you than have sex with someone else?"

“Yes.” His gaze flies to mine, the hardening blue depths cemented with a biting tone. “If another man so much as touches you, my reaction will be murderous. Remember that.”

“Okay,” I whisper.

He rises to his feet, his fingers making a descent down the front of his waistcoat, slowly releasing each button as his eyes rake over my body. “Touch yourself.”

Parting my legs, I slide a hand between my thighs. His vest drops to the floor, and my nipples tighten against the sudden flutter of excitement.

He removes the tie and unbuttons the shirt in the same unhurried fashion, seemingly content with his view of me. His head tips minutely, lips parting as his gaze follows the roll of my fingers against my clit.

I stroke softly, watching him watch me, my pulse slurring a smooth legato rhythm through my veins.

He shrugs out of the shirt sleeves, exposing curved biceps and defined pecs and abs. Then he crouches to remove his shoes and socks, never looking away. “Lie back. Widen your legs.”

I scoot toward the center, lying sideways on the mattress, and swirl my fingers over my wet folds. The sensitivity of my touch and his uninterrupted attention on me fuels a blazing fire in my core. I’m so attuned to him, to the harmony of his breaths and the subtle twitches in his hands. It comes from a habit of sexual enjoyment of his presence, and it’s solidified in the knowledge that he will never let me down.

With an economy of movement, he loosens the belt, opens his slacks, and shoves the last of his clothes to the floor. I’ve seen his rock-strong body parts in bits and pieces, but never all of him at once, fully in the buff. Sweet heaven, he gives new meaning to *buff*.

His cock rises up, jutting above the columns of his powerful thighs. He doesn’t touch it, doesn’t even acknowledge it as he approaches, eyes locked on mine and expression intense.

He grips my ankle and circles the mattress, dragging my legs and rotating my position until my head is near the headboard. He stops with my feet at the foot of the bed and leans forward.

The indentation of his knee on the mattress jump-starts my heart. The predatory look in his eyes stops my breath. He crawls over me, legs on the outsides of mine, prowling on hands and knees and straddling my thighs.

I expected him to wrench my legs open and shove between them, but he's proved repeatedly he's not like the others.

Hovering over me, he fuses his mouth to mine while his hand roves my body, stroking and fondling my chest, thighs, and pussy. His feverish tongue, heavy exhales, and devilish touches drive me breathlessly insane.

I tug at his shoulder, attempting to bring him closer. "Will you...lie on top of me? Let me feel your weight?"

He's pinned me against a wall, tied me to a piano, and fingered me against the kitchen island, but I've never been in this position with him. No matter how many times I've imagined it, I know it'll be unlike anything I've experienced.

With my thighs squeezed together between his, he cups the back of my head in both hands and lowers his long frame on top of me. His eyes search my face as his weight sinks me into the mattress, his chest covering mine in heat and muscle.

My mouth falls open on a blissful gasp, and he catches it, his tongue sliding and claiming, his lips firm, aggressive, and all mine. The bulky size of him smothers me in security, his strength a shield of protection, and his hands supporting my head as if in supplication.

We kiss through an endless sonata of heartbeats and moans, our foreheads rolling together and hips grinding greedily. Our bodies rock in a synchronized wave, trapping the steely length of him between us.

I'm scared out of my ever-loving mind thinking about his wide girth being rammed up inside of me. But I'm ready. I've never been so ready for this.

I flex my quads, trying to open my thighs. Why hasn't he spread my legs already?

"Don't test me, Ivory." He reaches between us and rubs his fingers along the slippery seam of my pussy. "Where my head's at right now, I'll split you in half."

In the next breath, he flips us, rolling me on top and folding my legs to straddle his hips.

"I'm giving this to you. Just this once." He reaches over his head and grips the laddered rungs of the headboard. "My hands won't move. I'm going to lie here and hold still while *you fuck me.*"

Oh.

Wow.

Okay, that's...different. And really nice.

Until I gaze down at the huge, long cock rising up in front of me. How does this work? He wants me to...sit on that thing?

I meet his eyes, shaking my head. "I've never..."

His fingers blanch around the rungs, his expression pained. Is that anger?

"Never been on top?" he growls.

"Never." Nervous energy trickles through me. I grip his shaft with both hands, stroking up and down, reacquainting myself with his size. "I don't know, Emeric. Can I even fit...?"

His breath rushes out. "Dammit, Ivory. It'll fit." The sinews in his forearms strain with his hold on the headboard. "You're fucking tormenting me here."

Flexing his thighs beneath me, he pins me with a look that is so integral to who he is. The almighty confidence in his eyes tells me to shut up and pay attention because he's about to share a mind-blowing experience with me. It's his most powerful expression, one that's probably gotten him laid, without a single spoken word, more times than I care to think about.

“That look you’re giving me…” I squeeze my fingers around his cock, enjoying the sound of his strangled breath. “Do you do that when you’re performing on stage?”

His hips shift beneath me, his voice tortured. “What?”

“Do you eye fuck women in the audience?”

“Ivory, get on my dick before I lose my fucking mind.”

I bend down and place a kiss on the bulbous crown in an affectionate greeting. The next kiss is a plea to be gentle.

Then I rise on my knees and position him between my legs.

True to his word, he doesn’t thrust or move his hands. His eyes glow like blue flames as he waits for me to draw him inside.

I lower onto him, inch by inch, marveling at the stretching sensation, the easy slide, the perfect fit. It’s never this wet, this careful. Fuck, I feel so full. Hungry. *Relieved.*

The sound of his guttural groan spurs me faster. When he’s all the way in, I squeeze my inner muscles around him.

His eyes clamp shut, muscles flexing in his jaw, his body shaking beneath me. I don’t think he’s breathing.

“Emeric?”

A throaty grunt is the only response he gives, charging my already overloaded senses with giddiness. And I haven’t even moved yet.

I lean forward and press my lips to the ridge of his tense chest. “This is it. We’re doing it.”

His eyes fly open, and he releases a pained laugh. “We’re not *doing* anything.” His hands tighten around the headboard, his glare hard and demanding. “Fuck my cock, Ivory.”

I roll my hips, testing the feel of him sliding against my insides and filling me with jolts of static.

His entire body trembles beneath me. “Faster.”

With my palms on his chest, I rotate along his shaft, lifting and rocking. The dragging, tickling strokes are unreal. The little shocks of electricity, the panting sounds of our breaths, everything centers around where we're joined.

He raises his head, watching me intensely. "Ride it."

I do, willingly and with abandon.

"Fucking grind it." His hand slips from the headboard, but just as quickly, he adjusts his grip. "Harder, Ivory. Deeper."

I let loose, lifting my arms behind my head, closing my eyes, and circling my hips. When I bounce, my breasts sway and the bed frame creaks. When I bear down and rock, my clit catches fire.

I could come like this. A bona-fide orgasm. With a cock inside me. Mr. Marceaux's cock. Hard to ignore the significance of that.

"Ah, fuck." The headboard groans in his grip. "Look at you."

I open my eyes and collide with his, a smile pulling at my cheeks. "I'm fucking my teacher."

"Jesus Christ, Ivory." His biceps flex above his head, his thighs hardening beneath me. "Give me your mouth."

I slide up his chest and thrust my hips, delighting in the feeling of the new angle. When I reach his lips, his tongue seeks mine, twirling and tasting.

He snaps his teeth at me, his muscles bunching and twitching. "Your sloppy cunt is dripping all over me."

His filthy mouth strengthens the brewing tide inside me. I sweep my hands over his biceps and cup his face, the scratch of his stubble scraping my palms. He deepens the kiss, the strong stretch of his jaw as erotic as the sinful way he glides his tongue.

I miss his hands on me, though, and the bite of his belt, his painful pleasure. I don't like his silence, either. I ache for his growly orders commanding my every move. But he seems incapable of talking all of a sudden. With his body so rigid and

hard, I suspect it's taking a heavy dose of concentration to not move his hips or let go of the rungs.

No more torturing.

With my hands on his face, I kiss him fiercely, passionately, while working my pussy up and down his length, searching for the spot. When I find it, all of my nerves, cells, and thoughts rush to my womb, gathering, pressurizing, and exploding through my body in a pounding series of percussions.

My mouth opens in a soundless scream, my gaze locked on his eyes. His lips part with me, his pupils dilate, and his hands fly to the back of my head. Then he's kissing me mercilessly, hammering his hips, and spiraling me through another orgasm.

He rolls us, hands on my face, his mouth and breaths consuming mine. Our tongues battle, licking and lashing as his weight crushes my chest and his cock fills me up. Over and over, he slams his hips with wicked-hard thrusts. I reach down, put my hands on the hard muscle of his ass for the first time, and hold on.

My God, it's a perfect ass. He's perfect everywhere. The cinnamon on his tongue. The dark bass notes in his voice. The musical talent in his hands. The sight of him in jeans and t-shirts, ties and waistcoats, and nothing at all. I'll never get enough.

His plunging pace jumps and jerks, falling into an abrupt staccato. He tears his mouth away, his hand dropping to the mattress to support the bow of his back as he roars through his orgasm. His eyes stay with me through every gasping shout, telling me I'm the reason for his pleasure, the heart of it.

Lowering his head to my shoulder, he seems to be winding down, trying to steady his heaving breaths. But the press of his teeth against my skin holds me on a heightened edge of arousal.

A moment later, he pins my arms above my head, hips rocking, cock throbbing inside me. "Remember your word."

My eyes widen. "We're not done?"

He makes a tsking sound, closes a strong hand around my breast, and bites my nipple.

Then he fucks me.

For hours.

His rhythms span between gentle and wild, his tempo quickly changing with countless alternating positions. He arranges me on hands and knees and smacks my ass while he thrusts from behind. He tosses me on my back, collars my throat with his fingers, and fucks me with my thighs pinched together between his. The choreography gets a little foggy after that as my body surrenders to the floaty, perverted world of Emeric Marceaux.

Much of the evening slides past my heavy-lidded eyes in a blanket of sweat-slick skin, tender caresses, and passionate kisses. But as this is Emeric, and his way is infused with domination, it requires an emotional and mental subtlety that goes far beyond the technical act of sex. He tells me when, where, and how hard, and I roll with it, yearn for it, my need to satisfy him outweighing all else.

In turn, he pleasures me. Right into a coma.

“Ivory?” He bites my thigh.

I can’t even move. Why do I need to? He’ll just move me himself.

Having just come from the shower, where he banged me against the tiled wall, I lie face down on the bed. Naked, flushed, sated, I try to talk myself into lifting my hand to remove the dripping hair from my face. *I’ll do it in a minute.*

He moves up my limp body and brushes the wet strands behind my ear. “You’re ten years younger than me. Don’t tell me an old man wore you out.”

I snort—the extent of the energy I can muster. But in my defense, he works out two hours every day.

The mattress bounces as he shifts around me, kissing every inch of my body from my head to my toes. Doesn’t take long before I fall blissfully asleep beneath the affection.

When I wake, he's stretched out beside me with a towel wrapped around his waist, trailing a finger along my spine.

"How long was I out?"

"Fifteen minutes."

I fold my arms beneath my cheek and meet his hooded eyes. "I've never done this."

He reaches behind him, grabs a glass of water from the nightstand, and holds it out to me. "What?"

After a long refreshing drink, I hand it back and change the subject. "You didn't eat dinner."

He returns the glass then lies on his side, resting his head on the bend of his arm. "Neither of us ate. Finish what you were going to say."

I reach out and trace the curve of his upper lip. "The *after* stuff. This. It's always been sex and run, usually followed by crying and hiding." I give him a soft smile. "I like this. A lot."

He pulls me against his chest and kisses my temple. The hush of our breaths envelopes us, and he hugs me like that for so long I wonder if he fell asleep.

Eventually, his whisper breaks the silence. "I like it, too, Ivory. So much so I'm terrified it'll be taken from us."

I wrap an arm around his wide back. "We'll be careful."

"We need to tone it down at school."

I scratch my fingernail across his nipple. "You need to stop giving me those eyes."

"What eyes?" A smile teases his lips.

"The ones that say..." I deepen my voice. "*Come here, Miss Westbrook. Look at me, Miss Westbrook. On your knees* —"

He surges up with a roguish grin on his face.

I roll out of reach, my mocking tone tumbling into laughter. "*Suck my cock, Miss Westbrook.*"

He flashes his teeth and crawls after me, losing his towel in the process.

My gaze dips down his chest and lands on his dick. It's... *soft*? Holy shit, it looks weird. I tilt my head, trying to get a better view.

He sits back on his ankles and narrows his eyes. "You're going to give me a complex."

"I haven't ever..." I lean over his lap and wrap my hand around it. It's still heavy, just... "So soft."

He stares at me curiously. "Keep touching it, and it won't be."

Sure enough, within seconds, it begins to stiffen. I'm familiar with this part, and he's the biggest and baddest of them all. Ironically, he's also the safest.

He swings his arm around and slaps my ass. "I'm not finished with you, but we need to eat."

We make it through half a gourmet pepperoni pizza before he bends me over the kitchen island and proves exactly how he's not finished with me.

I hope he never is.

EMERIC

The following evening, I stretch behind the piano during the intermission of Mahler's Ninth Symphony and tug at the strangling bow tie. The tux is one of many from my private collection, tailored and designed with quality workmanship. Doesn't matter how fucking expensive it is. The restricting fabrics make me itchy and overheated. The whole pretentious look just doesn't suit me.

Neither does the music.

Joanne never attended my performances, claiming boredom in hearing the same masterpieces on concert programs year in and year out. Can I blame her?

While I appreciate the classics, I doubt Gustav Mahler intended for his symphonies to become commercialized affairs of mindless repetition. In his fifty-one years, he only conducted his second symphony ten times.

I scan the Beaux-Arts style of the philharmonic theater, surrounded by an orchestra of pompous old farts and full-time musicians, most of which have their own resident halls. Rather than composing passionate modern music, they seem to be content wasting their extraordinary talents on routine recycling of classical repertoire.

But *I* am not content. Not even a little.

So why am I here, wallowing in this jeremiad?

Securing a seat in the symphony was a natural progression in my musical career, a highly notable one. It was a means of

self-justification, a validation of all my hard work and talent. It wasn't until the goal was achieved that I realized it was the wrong aspiration for me.

I want to create my own music, tap into my imagination, and transform classical piano into something fresh and wild. And I want to share that passion, teach it, and open eager minds to new ideas.

Sitting behind the strings section, I take in the shadowed silhouettes of concert-goers in the balcony seats. A grin twitches my lips as Ivory's question teases my mind.

Do you eye fuck women in the audience?

There were several months after Joanne when the highlight of my concerts was finding my next fuck. Now?

My gaze connects with the most attractive feature in the theater, the only reason I'm smiling tonight.

She sits in the front row, glowing like a bright aria surrounded by dark instrumentals. Her red Versace dress follows the sinuous lines of her body from tits to toes, the thigh-high slit bordered with Swarovski rhinestones.

I know every detail because I handpicked it myself—just like I did all her clothes. But I chose this particular dress for a night just like this one, imagining her wearing it while watching me perform.

Despite my misgivings about her attending the concert, seeing her in that evening gown almost makes the risk worth it. Almost.

The parents of Le Moyne Academy students frequent these venues, and though Ivory drove separately with Stogie in tow, I worry about the wrong people making the right connections about our relationship. But she begged to be here, seducing me with *Please* on her lips. So I secured two front row seats and lined up her date.

Seated beside her, Stogie reluctantly wears the tux I bought for him, his big hand repeatedly rubbing his bald head, as if lamenting the absence of his beloved baseball cap. What a pair

they make. Two musicians passionate about classical interpretation, and this is their first philharmonic performance?

I wonder if it meets their expectations. I'll pay close attention to Ivory's reaction after the show, as well as her responses to the other things I have planned for her in the coming months. She claims she wants to attend Leopold, that her ultimate dream is to sit where I'm sitting now, *in a sold-out venue, shivering under the stage lights*.

But what does she really know about the music world and the opportunities available to her? I intend to enlighten her. Then, if she still wants to go to Leopold, I have a plan to make that happen.

Two sections away, my parents occupy their season-ticket seats, heads bowed together in conversation. I asked them not to approach Ivory tonight, in order to maintain her disassociation from me outside of school.

Ivory and I willingly accept the risks of our entanglement. But it also puts my parents' livelihoods in jeopardy. If I'm caught with her, no one would go to a doctor whose son is a convicted sex offender. And my mom? Leopold would burn her at the stake. So I've been holding Mom off from introductions.

The concert ends, and the next three weeks float by in a blissful fog of Ivory.

When Thanksgiving arrives, I finally give in to Mom's demands to meet her.

As I drive my seventeen-year-old student to my parents' house for turkey dinner, I'm on tenterhooks, not feeling any easier about the secrecy of our relationship.

The moment my mom opens the door and stares at my hand where it grips tightly to Ivory's, my hackles go up.

Yes, I'm her teacher. Yes, I shove my cock in her, rigorously and with unadulterated depravity, morning and night. But the depth of my feelings for her goes so far beyond bullshit laws I really don't give a fuck what anyone thinks.

But my parents worry. They're also overly supportive and devoted to my happiness. That's why I brought her here. She had a parent like mine once.

I want her to experience that kind of love again.

IVORY

After dinner, I lean back in the couch, shifting the waistband of my skirt to ease my aching belly. I don't know if it's from my overindulgence of turkey, mashed potatoes, and buttery bread, or if I'm riddled with plain old nerves about being alone with Laura Marceaux.

"I see why he's so taken with you." She smiles at me warmly and reclines in the chair beside the couch.

My gaze wanders through the doorway of the kitchen and lands on the white t-shirt stretching across Emeric's back. Sitting at the table with his dad, he straddles the back of a chair, deep in conversation. I can't see his face or hear his words, but the deep notes in his voice vibrate through me, soothing me like a sensual lullaby.

He doesn't wear briefs beneath his jeans, and right now, the denim hangs dangerously low on his hips, barely covering the hard muscles of his ass. If he leans over just a little more, my view will become a whole lot more distracting.

I clear my throat. "I'm taken with him, too."

She swirls the red wine in her glass, studying me intently. It's so strange to see Emeric's blue eyes set in such a soft expression. She's intimidatingly beautiful. Not a wisp of gray in her shoulder-length black hair. But there's decades of wisdom in the way she looks at me, like she can read my thoughts and make sense of them.

She sips her wine. "You both seem happy. Maybe a little on edge, understandably, but happy. You've only been living

together for...a month?"

"Five weeks."

Does she think that's insufficient? That five weeks isn't long enough to measure the seriousness of a relationship?

I want to point out that we've been emotionally wrapped up in each for three months and the actual sex part didn't happen until three weeks ago, but that's TMI. Besides, on the way here, Emeric forbade me to act weird about us. *No shame. Be yourself. They won't judge us.*

As it turns out, he was right. Laura carries on like the most important thing on her mind is her stories about Emeric's ornery childhood. Her kindness eventually opens me up enough to share memories of my dad. We steer clear of discussions about Leopold, the conflict of interest too sensitive. But it doesn't hinder us from settling into a comfortable exchange, as if I'm just a normal girlfriend, getting to know the family.

An hour later, I'm completely enraptured with her. Her disposition is so weightless and refreshing. Her gentle eyes and sincere smile radiates the kind of serenity that only comes from deep-seated happiness.

She's the embodiment of maternal warmth and affection. Such a devastating contrast to my own mother. She makes me feel accepted and nurtured and...young, but only in the best way.

In the kitchen, Dr. Marceaux stands from the table, squeezes Emeric's shoulder, and disappears down the hall that leads deeper into the estate.

"If you don't mind..." Laura rises from the chair. "I'm going to go see where Frank went off to." As she passes the couch, she reaches down and grips my hand. "It's so good to finally meet you, Ivory."

I let the tenderness of her words sink in. "You, too."

Emeric hasn't moved from his seat in the kitchen, his forearms folded on the back of the chair.

Standing, I brush down the flirty mid-thigh skirt. I feel pretty, but not flashy, my sleeveless green blouse a fitted button-up over a thin camisole. If I did my own shopping, the outfit is something I would've chosen.

I approach his back and zoom in on the peek of skin above his low-hanging jeans. No ass crack. He's too cool for that. But a shadow teases the valley between his brawny cheeks. It's too inviting to ignore.

I dip a finger beneath the denim and trace that sexy cleft.

He draws in a long, deep breath, his voice husky. "Ivory."

Stroking the top of his crack, I put my mouth next to his ear and whisper, "I love your ass."

His hips rock, and his forehead lowers to his bent arms. "My ass loves you."

My breath falters. His ass loves me or *he* loves me? I want him to mean both.

I place my palms over the lean muscles along his spine and caress in slow circles. I still find it startling that I'm able to touch him like this. To just walk up to him when we're alone and show him affection. How crazy is it that I actually *want* to put my hands on him?

The last five weeks have drastically changed my perceptions about myself and my ability to do normal things *with a man*.

Leaning in, I loop my arms around his shoulders and press my upper body against his.

With his head tipped down, he wraps a large hand around both of my wrists, shackling them against his chest. "One of the most erotic things a woman can do is brush her tits against a man's back, and Ivory, your tits are sinful."

Jesus, his parents could hear. I try to lift my chest away, but he holds me still with his grip on my arms. My attention flicks toward the empty hallway.

"Even sexier, you're not even trying to turn me on." He shifts his head and bites my bicep.

My mouth parts on a soundless gasp, my breath held in anticipation. What am I going to do with this naughty man? If he touches me in a more provocative manner, I won't care where we are or who's watching.

He slides his lips up my arm, and I melt against his back.

His free hand drifts behind me, latching onto the bare skin of my thigh beneath the skirt. "Did my mom give you the third degree?"

I kiss his neck, savoring his warm smell. "I've become impervious to the methods of Marceaux interrogation."

"Is that right?"

The tightening pressure of his fingers around my hands kicks up my pulse. His thumb strokes the underside of my wrist, and I know he can feel the thudding palpation of my heartbeat there.

I bury my nose in the soft hair behind his ear, inhaling the scent of wood from his shampoo. "What did you talk about with your dad?"

"You. Us."

With the manacle of his hand around my wrist, he hauls me to his side. Then he rises from the chair, snags his gray fedora from the table, and sets it on his head with a tilt so subtle it could be accidental.

I'm not fooled. Everything he does is insidiously calculated. Like pairing his jeans and white t-shirt with a fedora? Seemingly harmless, as if he just threw something on. But dammit, he knew that sexy look would work me into a lusty froth.

It's his steady stare, though, the deep oceans of his eyes beneath the brim of the hat, that makes me never want to look away.

The room dims around us until I'm only aware of him and the pulsing beats between us. I sink into the luring waves of desire, into that deliciously dark abyss that craves his punishing grip, growly voice, and vicious thrusts.

Not here.

With great effort, I pull myself back to the surface and take a deep breath. “You talked to your dad about us? What did he say?”

Does his dad condemn our relationship? Is Emeric having second thoughts?

The fingers around my wrist tighten, and he wrenches my arm behind my back. The movement shoves me right up against his swelling erection.

His eyes ensnare mine. “He wanted to make sure I have all my bases covered, that I’ve thought through everything.” With my arm pinned behind my back, he cradles my face with his free hand. “I’m working through a few cautionary measures to keep us safe until you graduate.”

“Like what?” I hate this constant looming threat of someone hurting us.

He brushes his mouth against mine. “Trust me?”

“Deeply.”

His teeth catch my bottom lip. “Let’s go home and take care of your pussy.”

I grin into the kiss. “Schubert?”

“Him, too.”

We say our goodbyes to his parents, climb into the car, and drive to his house without attacking one another. But the second the garage door closes behind the GTO, he gives me a look that liquefies every bone in my body.

In a fluidity of motion, he tosses his hat, releases our safety belts, and flings his seat backward away from the steering wheel.

His hands fly to his zipper, yanking it down and freeing his hard cock. “Straddle me.”

One gravelly command, and I’m instantly wet.

I launch at him, banging a knee on the console as I tumble into his lap. He wrenches my legs around him, my ass bumping the wheel and honking the horn. We laugh with our mouths melded together, his hands under my skirt and my fingers tangled in his sexy-as-hell hair.

Yanking the crotch of my panties to the side, he plunges a finger inside me. “So fucking ready.”

Then he slams me down on his cock.

I moan through the bursting sensations, clenching my inner muscles and arching my back. He grips my ass with one hand and the back of my head with the other, thrusting vigorously and holding me so tightly he’s the only thing that exists.

He bucks beneath me with hard-hitting drives as the hand on my head directs the angle and depth of the kiss. His tongue fucks my mouth the way his cock fills my pussy. Deeply, urgently, and completely unrestrained.

His muscles shake and contract. His hoarse groans harden my nipples, and the sensual, hungry roll of his hips reduces me to a trembling puddle of surrender.

I dissolve in the steel bands of his arms as he kisses me senseless, drags me up and down his length, and jacks himself off in the clutch of my body.

I come hard and long, my nails scratching his scalp and his name howling from my throat. He shoves inside me in a ruthless grind, drops his head on my shoulder, and chases his release with a deep, throaty groan.

When he lifts his head, we stare at each other, panting, clinging tightly together, lips touching and releasing. He trails his nose along mine, his eyes so close, never looking away. I’m so lost in this man, so over my head, heart wide open, and soul quaking.

We aren’t just a teacher and student, a Dom and submissive, a man and woman.

“We’re a timeless concerto.” I kiss his lips. “A musical masterpiece.”

He drags his mouth across my jaw, his cock jerking inside me. “Like Scriabin’s ‘Black Mass?’”

Too dissonant.

I arch my neck for his lips. “I was thinking along the lines of Beethoven’s ‘Ode to Joy.’”

“Lame.” He bites the skin beneath my ear. “We’re more like Van Halen’s ‘Hot For Teacher.’”

Oh my God. I stifle my grin. “You’re ruining my analogy. That’s not even a concerto.”

“We’ll compose our own masterpiece.” His mouth glides down my neck, kissing and licking. “A song that will never end.”

I *love* the sound of that.

IVORY

Two weeks later, I trudge across the school parking lot, digging through my satchel for the car keys. The sun's long gone, and the time is ticking somewhere south of sleep-thirty. Man, my ass is dragging.

At school, Emeric's been working me hard behind the piano in preparation for the holiday performance this weekend. At home, he works me hard against the wall, strapped to his headboard, and kneeling beneath the heat of his belt. He's an endless, high-intensity, cardiovascular workout. For the life of me, I don't know where he finds his energy.

There's only a few cars scattered in the lot, the Porsche on one end and the GTO on the other. The surrounding darkness cools the air, chilling my skin beneath the light sweater. The scarce lighting doesn't help my search for the keys. I root around the text books in my bag, head lowered, cursing under my breath.

Found them. I punch the unlock button and wince at the loud chirp.

When I look up, I come face to face with the last person I expected to see.

Six feet away and leaning against the Porsche, my brother gives me a no-good smile. "Where've you been, Ivory?"

My muscles freeze up. How does he know that's my car? Has he been following me? Does he know where I live? *Who* I'm living with?

I fidget with the key fob. No use hiding it. I already made the damn car light up. “It took you two months to come looking for me? Wow, Shane. I guess I should feel special you noticed me missing at all.”

He straightens and plucks a cigarette from the pack in his pocket. His buzzed blond hairline recedes from his broad pale forehead, his cheeks sunken beneath dark eyes. He looks as tired as I feel. And thinner. His jeans and flannel shirt hang on his tall, gaunt frame.

What the hell happened to him? Does this have anything to do with Lorenzo’s arrest? My chest tightens.

“Nice ride.” He lights the smoke and glides a hand over the white hood. “How’d you score it? Turning tricks?”

My trembling fingers curl around the strap of my satchel. Emeric will be right behind me, and Shane will recognize him from the night he broke Shane’s nose. If I run back inside, maybe I can circumvent him.

I pivot in the direction of Crescent Hall. Too late. Emeric’s halfway across the lot, his long strides eating up the pavement and heading right toward me. I can’t see his face from this distance, but I know exactly what I’d find in his eyes. The hairs lift on my arms.

How can I warn him that the shadowy line behind me is my brother? Anything I do will make Shane suspicious. He’s blocking my path to the car, but I could walk in the opposite direction, head down the road or something. Emeric would chase me down.

Shane would, too. He came here for a reason, and he’s not going to leave until he gets it.

There’s nothing I can do to stop this impending confrontation.

I spin back to Shane, my stomach rolling. “What do you want?”

He exhales a stream of smoke. “Mom’s gone.”

“So? She’s always—”

“No, she packed up her shit a month ago and fucking dis...” His eyes shift over my shoulder, tapering into slits. His mouth drops open in disbelief. “I fucking know that guy.”

Shit. My pulse leaps to my throat. Why couldn't Emeric just let me handle this?

“Is there a problem here?” His chilling voice is right behind me, tingling up my spine.

Emeric steps in front of me, hands clasped behind his rigid back, his expensive suit pervading the air with authority.

Shane might've lost weight, but his frame is wider and taller than Emeric's. If this turns into a physical throw down, Emeric might never be able to play piano again.

I move to Emeric's side. He shifts with me, as if to block me again, then stops, planting his feet in a wide stance. He knows as well as I do the importance of maintaining a neutral demeanor in front of my brother. He's here to investigate a trespasser, not to protect his girlfriend.

Shane takes him in from head to toe, flicking his ashes into the six-foot distance between them. “You work at Ivory's school? Like a teacher or something?”

Emeric cocks his head, eyes on Shane. “Miss Westbrook, is this man bothering you?”

I need to choose my words carefully. The intensity in the way Shane's gaze darts between Emeric and me tells me he's trying to figure out why a teacher at my uppity school walked into a bar and punched him four months ago.

I gaze up at the stone-hard angles of Emeric's profile and return to Shane. “This is my brother, and he was just leaving.”

Shane smirks. “Need some answers, little sis. Like, I don't know... Who are you living with? And why did this frat boy”—he waves the cigarette at Emeric—”break my fucking nose?”

With his attention bolted on Shane, Emeric doesn't move, not a twitch. His silence is somewhat shocking, but there's a purpose to everything he does. A spoken word reveals things.

Muteness gives less away. But Shane's not going to let this go, so I open my mouth.

"I'm staying with a friend from school." I arrange my lips into a display of wonderment. "She has this huge house and has all these spare cars." I gesture at the Porsche. "Can you blame me for moving out of our dump to live in a mansion? A mansion, Shane. For real."

He studies me with skepticism. "Didn't realize you gave a shit about that stuff."

I don't, dammit, but I can't exactly tell him the truth. "Where did Mom go?"

He drops the cigarette and smashes it with his boot. "Don't know." His eyebrows pull together, his focus flitting to Emeric and back to me. "Her phone's shut off. No note. No calls. Not even a *Fuck you. Have a nice life.*"

Even in her frequent absences, she always kept in touch with Shane.

I rub my arms. "Do you think she's in trouble?"

"Nah." He shrugs, stares at the pavement. "She found something better is all."

Something better than family. In a way, I guess I did, too.

We exchange a suspended look, and in that tiniest sliver of a heartbeat, I see the boy I knew before he enlisted in the Marines. The brother who used to walk me to school, put gum in my hair, and draw penises in my music books. The son who loved his father as much as I did. As we stare at one another, we share a raw moment of loss, for our dad, our mom, and the love we once had for each other.

He blinks, breaking the connection, and grips the back of his neck. "Someone is still paying the bills."

I wait for Emeric to react, but he stands still and silent like a watchtower, no doubt weighing every spoken word and preparing to expose his relationship with me if Shane does something stupid.

“I won’t leave you homeless.” *For now.* I send a silent thank you to the man at my side for covering the expenses and making this easier.

“I’m going away for a while.” Shane steps toward us, slowly, arms at his sides, expression sullen. “But I don’t want to lose Dad’s house.”

My head swims. “Where are you going?”

He stops within arm’s reach of Emeric and boldly plucks something from the lapel of Emeric’s jacket.

Tension seeps into Emeric’s posture, his lips flattening in a line. I stop breathing.

Shane holds up one of Schubert’s orange hairs between his pinched fingers.

A smirk twists his lips. “I used to live with a cat. Damn thing shed all over my clothes.” He flicks the hair and levels me with a knowing look. “I miss him.”

Dread swells in the back of my throat, and my skin breaks out in a sickly sweat. He knows. Oh God, he fucking knows.

His gaze touches mine, his tone bitterly soft. “Fuck you.” Shoving his hands in his pockets, he walks away. “Have a nice life.”

I hold my breath as his dark silhouette crosses the parking lot and melts into the shadows of the street. The road that will take him to the bus stop. To wherever he’s going. Hopefully to a place where he forgets all about me and the man at my side.

Emeric’s sharp whisper jolts me out of my breathless stasis. “Get in the car.”

EMERIC

I stretch my gait, running harder, faster, letting the burn sink deep into my muscles. The digital display on the treadmill reads *8.07 miles*. I have two more miles to go, but I might cut it short this morning. It's Saturday, and I'm anxious to crawl back into bed with Ivory.

I'd still be with her if my internal alarm clock hadn't woken me. Or maybe it was a nightmare. Awake or asleep, I can't shake this chronic feeling of dread.

It's been five days since Shane Westbrook disappeared. He walked out of the parking lot, and *poof*. Gone. After I put Ivory in her car, I drove the streets, looking for him. Then I turned the hunt over to my PI.

There hasn't been a sign of him at the house—his or mine, at the bars in Treme, or anywhere in New Orleans.

Of all the ways he could expose my relationship with Ivory, I repeatedly ask myself, *Why would he?* He has nothing to gain from it—except my retaliation. Why bite the hand that pays his bills? Doing so would only cause him to lose his father's house, which seemed to be the purpose of his surprise visit. That, and to say goodbye to Ivory.

Good fucking riddance.

The pound of my sneakers paces my breaths as my thoughts race ahead to tonight. The Holiday Chamber Music Celebration will be a sold-out event. Ivory is years ahead of her peers and too damn talented for the concertos she plays.

But I look forward to being there. I want to be at her side tonight and every night after, with an up-close view of every moment she shivers beneath the lights of her dreams.

Midway through my cool down, the doorbell rings. I hit the stop button and grab a towel, my pulse sprinting.

The security gate doesn't encompass the front entry, so anyone can walk right up to the door from the street. Who the hell would be here at seven in the morning?

I jog through the house, toweling sweat from my bare chest and neck.

Ivory stands beside the open front door with her back to me, her silhouette haloed by the flush of dawn.

What the fuck is she doing? She's blocking my view of whoever is on the porch. If it's someone from school...

"I'm a friend of Emeric's," says a familiar feline voice.

In three strides, I reach the door and meet Deb's vivid hazel eyes. She spent some time styling her light brown bob this morning, her full tits and shapely legs on display in the skimpy dress.

I suspect this visit is a mix of business and pleasure. "You should've called."

"I thought..." Her smirk reveals her dirty thoughts. It slips when she meets Ivory's glare. "I didn't know you had company."

It's none of her business who I spend my time with. But she's good people, and I have no reason to be a dick.

Ivory crosses her arms beneath her chest, her boobs threatening to spill out of her tiny camisole. Then she turns her glare on me. "You know her?"

"Yes." I grip the muscle on the back of her arm and apply a warning pressure. "This is Deb."

Ivory sets her jaw and widens her stance in cheeky sleep shorts that reveal more ass than they cover. My dick twitches.

“Ivory.” I wait for her to look at me. “Deb and I have a few things to discuss. Go start the coffee.”

She presses her lips flat, studying Deb from beneath her lashes, then storms off toward the kitchen.

I’m tempted to yank those sexy little shorts down and stripe her fucking ass.

The moment she disappears around the corner, Deb steps inside and caresses her hands over my pecs. “God, I’ve missed you.”

I clutch her wrist and guide her back, hardening my expression with a look that makes her posture wither.

She twists her arm until I release her, disappointment creasing her face. “Who is she?”

I close the front door. “*She* is serious.”

“I see that. She’s also a bit territorial, don’t you think? Where’d you find her?”

“*Where* isn’t important. What matters is she’s not going anywhere.”

She scans my face, and her shoulders slump. “Jesus. You love her?”

Also none of her business. I turn away and head toward the kitchen, expecting her to follow. “Did you get the recording?”

She catches up with me, dips a hand into her purse, and holds up a flash drive.

I take it from her, hoping to hell I’ll never have to use it.

In the kitchen, Ivory bends over my multi-thousand-dollar Astra coffee machine, squinting at all the switches. When she looks up, her attention locks on Deb, and a muscle bounces in her cheek.

She refocuses on me, her finger blindly, sassily, stabbing at buttons. “This thing doesn’t work.”

I feel my grin all the way to my cock. “Did you put the beans in?”

“Beans?” She stares at the funnel on top. “This?”

Adorable. With my hands on her hips, I scoot her to the side.

Deb settles in at the island behind us. “Nice place.”

The confirmation that she’s never been here should soothe some of Ivory’s bratty jealousy. I sneak a peek at her.

Nope. Ivory’s arms return to a crossed position beneath her heaving tits.

Focusing on the coffee, I level the beans in the scoop, discarding the ones that rise above the rim. It’s an impractical habit, one I enjoy for the pure trivia of it.

“Sixty beans?” Ivory asks.

“Yes.” I share a smile with her, marveling at the richness of her mind. “If I fill the scoop right to the rim.”

Deb watches us from the island. “Why sixty?”

Ivory leans against the counter. “Beethoven counted out sixty beans every time he brewed coffee. He claimed that made the perfect cup.” She raises her eyebrow at me. “He was rigidly meticulous.”

She’s trying to insult me, but I know she loves my attention to detail.

“So...Ivory?” Deb perches her chin on her hand. “Are you a musician, like Emeric?”

“Yes.” Ivory smiles, sweetly. “Emeric and I went to Leopold together.”

What is she up to?

Her grin doesn’t look as sweet when she glares in my direction. “He still has a hard time accepting that I graduated with higher honors than he did.”

I bite down on the inside of my cheek. I’m going to welt her so raw she sees triple.

With the coffee brewed and poured, Deb spends the next twenty minutes outlining her adulterous affair with the dean’s

husband, Howard Rivard. She's been fucking Mr. Rivard for weeks, without his knowledge of the recordings or suspicion of blackmail. It's more than enough.

Ivory refuses to join us at the island, maintaining her stubborn position against the back counter. During Deb's accounts, Ivory's expression morphs between shock and disgust, all while maintaining a heavy glare of antagonism.

Deb seems oblivious, her attention completely focused on me. "For an old guy, he's really quite virile." She winks at me. "But he's got nothing on you, Sir."

"That's it." Ivory charges toward the island and slams a hand on the surface, the other pointing shakily at Deb. "Who is she to you?"

Glancing at my wrist, I realize I'm not wearing my watch. But I know it's still early. I'll have plenty of time before her performance to draw out an appropriate punishment.

Pretending to ignore Ivory's outburst, I stand. "Thank you, Deb, for seeing this through."

She rises, glancing at Ivory and back to me, her lips turned down. "This is it, then."

"It is." There's only one woman in my future, and she's due for a spanking. "I'll walk you out."

Ivory's fuming glare follows me into the hall until I turn the corner. I wish Deb well at the door, close it with a relieved sigh of finality, and return to the kitchen.

Ivory paces along the counter, hands balled at her sides. "You've had sex with that woman. That much is obvious. But what else is going on? Why does she do things for you?" Her tone rises to a maniacal pitch, her strides quickening as she circles the island. "Oh, right. Because she wants you. She's so fucking hot for you I'm surprised she didn't pull your dick out and suck—"

"Ivory."

The strike of my voice brings her pacing to a full stop.

Lacing my fingers behind my back, I give her a list of short, specific commands and punctuate it with a stern, "Go."

A flush spreads from her neck to her chest, and I bet it travels further down and licks her sweet pussy like a hot, wet kiss. She wants what I offer more than she dreads it.

She stomps out of the kitchen. I pour another cup of coffee.

Her needs, desires, and fears run deep. So deep she could easily lose her way in the darkness. She needs a rope, not one that tethers her to her horrific past, but a strong, unbreakable line to guide her forward. The bindings might hold her down, but I'm pulling the other end.

I'll never let go.

With Schubert at my feet, I make him a plate of leftover chicken, grinning at the memory of Ivory's stern tone when she moved in. *No table scraps, Emeric!*

Sitting the cat in my lap, I let him lap at the dish of chicken on the island. It's a harmless secret between Schubert and me.

I scratch his neck while he eats and enjoy my coffee. When he's finished, I take a shower and throw on a pair of jeans. Then I grab my favorite belt, a length of rope, and find her waiting for me in the music room.

Naked and bent over the keyboard of the piano, she rests her palms on the lid beside the cuffs. Exactly as I instructed. Her feistiness might be my fuel, but her obedience is my fucking fire.

Without speaking, I lock her wrists in the shackles and use the rope to tie a simple breast harness around her chest, making sure the vertical sections press against her nipples. She watches me with huge brown eyes, her curiosity momentarily outweighing her anger.

Once her full tits are trussed up, I tighten the straps, cinching her against the piano until her chest brushes the keyboard.

When I take my position behind her, the erotic view poises my arousal on the cusp of detonation.

In teasing strokes, I trace the belt across the perfect rise of her ass. “What are the first rules I taught you?”

With her cheek pressed to the surface of the piano, her lips push out in a heavy sigh. “No lies. Don’t question your methods. Never look away.” She cranes her neck to glare at me. “And always call you out for being a dick.”

I swing the belt, my cock throbbing painfully at the sound of her yelp. “Apologize.”

“Fuck off. That’s *my* rule, and it stays. Whatever you’re doing with that woman...” Her chin quivers, her voice a pissed-off snarl. “You’re a dick.”

I stifle my grin and give her another hard whack. “You just doubled your strikes. Tell me what was going through your stubborn fucking head when you answered the door.”

“I checked through the window first. I’ve never seen her before. Not at school or—”

“Are you sure about that? Can you identify every parent of every student?”

She squeezes her eyes shut and groans. “No.”

“You fucked up.”

“Yeah.”

“No unnecessary risks, Ivory.”

“Okay.” She rocks her hips.

I let the belt fly, tapping, whipping, and pounding her ass like a drum, every strike filling the room with her musical moans.

When her backside glows hot and red, I bend over the curve of her spine, tightly embrace her slender torso, and let her feel me breathing with her. My lips touch her shoulder, and her inhale stutters. I cup her breast, pinching the rope around her nipple, and she grinds her fevered ass against my trapped cock.

I hold her there, caressing and kissing, until her breaths fall into rhythm with mine. “When I met Deb over the summer, she had some financial problems. I paid off her debt, and she did a few favors for me. Our relationship was physical, practical, and convenient.” I lick the soft skin on her neck, stroking her ear with a murmuring tone. “We haven’t been intimate since school began.”

She nods, her entire body lifting toward my voice, shivering beneath my lips, and purring for my touch. “Imagining you with her makes me feel really twisted up.”

Welcome to my world. With the belt in my grip, I tease her with it, dragging the leather up and down the *V* of her inner thighs. “You’ll never see her again.”

“Thank God.”

I release her abruptly and step back. “I, on the other hand, have to spend hours every day with Prescott, Sebastian, and all the other pricks who have touched you.”

“Shit.” She closes her eyes. “I never thought of that.”

I swing the belt again, over and over without pause. She tenses, whimpers, and jerks in the restraints. My cock throbs with the sound of every hard blow, my focus locked on the wriggle of her beautiful ass as I alternate between her cheeks, thighs, and the sides of her legs.

Within minutes, she sinks into the pain, her muscles relaxing, all that smooth golden skin a canvas of pink stripes.

Each snap of welting heat is a reminder she’s not the only one who feels jealous, possessive, and twisted up. But there’s a deeper purpose for the pain. It gives her the power to open her mind. To mend emotional injuries inflicted by men who used her. To put all her fears in my hands, trusting me to protect her.

“Please, Emeric.” She bends her neck to see me, her eyes half-mast and clouded in a fog of agony and pleasure.

Her pleading look and the hungry rush of her breaths jolts a primal current through me. I love fucking her, but nothing compares to this moment as she begs with a hooded

expression, her fingers curling against the shackles, and her arousal leaking down her thighs.

I grip the rope at her back and tighten the harness over her nipples, stimulating her until she releases a husky moan. Then I flog her again, harder, faster, relishing the bond in our eye contact.

She's mine, and her gaze tells me she knows this, her body trembling for me to take her and push her. To punish her so painfully she cries only for me, knowing I'll keep her safe from anyone who wishes to harm her.

When the tears finally come, she slumps over the keyboard and drops her head on the piano lid. Her skin flushes and shudders, her hips rolling with mindless need. She's so fucking captivating I drop the belt, unable to slow my urgent frenzy to remove my jeans.

I wrestle the denim down my legs and off my feet. Then I launch at her, dipping fingers inside her tight wet cunt and spreading her open. She moans and grinds against my hand, making me so goddamn hard I don't have the patience to slow this down.

I fist my cock with shaking fingers, line up our bodies, and bury myself in one, long thrust. We groan in concert, our hips crashing together and deepening the connection. Christ, she feels so fucking good. I drive harder, sinking and retreating, obsessed and enthralled with the snug clasp of her pussy.

Sliding my hands over her arms, I hook my thumbs beneath the shackles and lace our fingers together. She clutches at my grip and clamps down around my cock, her breaths a musical motif of desire.

Her reactions, her emotions, every movement she makes belongs to me. Entirely under my command to bend at my will. She possesses me, as well, in all the same ways. I'm hers.

Leaning over her back, I show her through the twitching heat of my body that she owns me. As I pound inside her, lost in her warmth, she rests her cheek on the piano and gasps with her eyes closed. Her soft mouth, the feel of her body against

mine, and the bliss of her clenching muscles around me propel me toward release.

“We’re going to come, Ivory.” I kick my hips and tighten my fingers around hers as the pressure in my cock builds, threatening to burst. “Now.”

With her mind and body under my charge, she leaps off the cliff with me, moaning and panting as we plunge together into an exploding, body-trembling harmony of pleasure.

I slide my lips over her spine, coating her skin with the heave of my breaths. She’s so sensitive, shivering against my touch. Fuck, I love that, almost as much as the way she strains in the restraints to arch into the brush of my mouth. I stay there, holding her in sated relief, mesmerized by the lyrical language of our heartbeats.

Eventually, we pull ourselves from the state of exhausted bliss. After I untie her, we eat breakfast and return to bed in an entwined knot of limbs. There, I make love to her without fight or urgency. My hips rock lazily between her thighs, her ankles cross at my back, and my mind revels in the erogenous sensation of tenderness. I can fuck her gently or violently, missionary or upside down. Doesn’t matter as long as I’m inside her, with her, connected to her on every level.

Too soon, the sun slants through the window and dips behind the horizon. I don’t want to leave the cocoon of her body, but it’s time to get ready.

Showered, shaved, and groomed, I stand at the dresser in my tux, fucking with the bow tie around my neck. The sound of her footsteps exiting the closet brings my head around.

The first glimpse stops my heart. As I absorb the view, my pulse restarts, ticking higher, faster, and striking the chime of complete and utter adoration.

Ushered in ivory lace, the Louis Vuitton gown sheathes her knockout figure from the bateau neckline to the crystal pumps on her feet. I bought the dress after the first time I heard her play, knowing without a doubt she would wear it for tonight’s performance in a sold-out theater.

“Turn—” My voice cracks. I cough behind my fist. “Turn around.”

A coy smile lifts her lips as she pivots. Her long dark hair wraps in an elegantly messy knot on the back of her head, with wayward tendrils trailing down her neck. Slim ivory straps loop around her shoulders, leaving the expanse of her back on gorgeous display.

Black curlicues of ink draw a graceful, meandering vine from her waist to her nape, swirling flourishes over her spine and around her shoulder blades. She’s so damn arresting, my chest burns with the reminder to breathe.

Crossing the room until I’m right up on her, I brush my lips along her shoulder. “So beautiful I’m shaking.”

I let her feel the tremors in my fingers as I trace the delicate artwork on her spine.

She hums softly, her head tipping. “The tat was my first *arrangement*.”

I freeze then resume my caress, my stomach twisting. “You were thirteen.”

“Yeah. I got it after my dad died.” Her hand reaches back and finds the one at my side, bringing it forward to rest on her hip. “Right after Lorenzo...”

Just the mention of his name makes me want to pound my fists into his face until he chokes on his blood.

Her shoulders tense, relax. “The tattoo artist refused me because of my age. Until I suggested a different kind of payment.”

I continue to trace the whorls of ink, letting the softness of her skin calm my rising anger. “You offered him sex.”

She nods. “I needed this tattoo.”

With her back to me, I can’t see her eyes, but the emotion in her voice squeezes my chest.

“My dad claimed he didn’t just hear the notes when he played. He could see them curling through the air like

scrollwork. Every song was a graphical image in his mind, and he drew those embellishments in the margins of his music sheets.”

When I was thirteen, I played with my dick while daydreaming about a girl—any girl—touching it.

When she was thirteen, she sold her body to a tattoo artist for a permanent keepsake of her dead father.

I glance down the curve of her back, my finger following the curls of ink with new appreciation. “Which song is this one?”

She gives me a watery smile over her shoulder. “His favorite Herbie Hancock, ‘Someday My Prince Will Come.’”

I’m no prince, but when I’m buried inside Ivory, I will always *come*.

Stepping around her, I remove a platinum bracelet from my pocket and clasp it around her wrist.

She studies it with wide eyes, holding the tiny frog charm between her fingers. “Edvard Grieg kept a frog figurine in his pocket at all times.”

I curve a hand around her waist, fingers stroking her naked back. “And he would rub it before concerts for good luck.”

She nods and kisses me, breathing against my lips, “Thank you.”

That night, she plays with more passion and skill than all of her peers combined. Stogie watches from the audience, his face stretched in a huge smile. I watch from the stage wings, my heart beating in time with her fingers.

Everything is good.

Joanne, Shane, and Lorenzo are gone. Prescott and Ms. Augustin are contained. The dean has nothing on me, while I have enough blackmail to ruin her career. I’ve been so careful.

Everything is perfect.

Too perfect. Like life has handed me a song filled with soul-deep joy and told me to savor every note.

Because eventually, the song will end.

IVORY

Christmas comes and goes in a blur of extravagant presents and warm smiles at his parents' house. Emeric and I spend the rest of our two-week break at home, in bed, tucked in an indestructible bubble of whispering, touching, kissing bliss. Every second with him feels like a dream, like any moment, someone's going to cruelly shake my shoulder and force me to wake up.

Since I moved in, our trips outside of the house have been limited to school, weekly visits to Stogie's, and weekend dinners at the Marceaux's. There are no date nights at the movies, romantic dinners in the French Quarter, or hand-holding strolls along the Mississippi River. We do *normal* in the privacy of our own world, such as binging on a TV series starring bearded pirates with perfect teeth.

Doesn't really matter what we do as long as I have him to do it with.

When I graduate, we'll be free of the student-teacher restriction. No more hiding and living in fear. Then...?

He says Leopold is mine if I want it. I don't know how. If he breaks his deal with the dean, our entire world will come crashing down. I intend to pursue a spot there on my own. Maybe it'll take me years. Maybe I'll move there and knock on the recruiters' doors every day until they get sick of seeing me.

He says he'll move to New York with me while I work on my degree. That makes my heart soar, but I can't ask him to

leave his job and his family.

He says I can do whatever I set my mind on. I believe him.

December ends a discordant passage in my life, a coda to Treme and my broken family.

January is the prelude of a new song, promising a year of hard decisions.

February glides by in a glissando of homework, piano lessons, and quiet evenings with Emeric.

March kicks off with a countdown to spring break, unseasonably warm weather, and...

A bladder infection.

Squatting on the toilet, I hunch over in pain. I haven't moved for thirty minutes, every teeny trickle of pee burning fire between my legs. "I'm going to be late for school."

Emeric crouches in front of me and rests the back of his hand on my forehead, concern darkening his blue eyes. "Still no fever, but you're staying home, and that's final." He shoves a glass of water in my hand. "Drink."

More water means more urinating, which means more burning. "No more."

He arranges my fingers around the glass, forcing me to hold it. "Dehydration is the reason you're sitting here."

"And too much sex." I manage a grin and take a sip.

"No such thing." His palms slide up my bare thighs, stroking tenderly. "Keep drinking."

I force down the fluid with a glare. The black hair on top of his head is a finger-raked rebellion of sexiness, while the trimmed sides scream clean-cut Mr. Professor. With his freshly shaved jawline, potently masculine scent, and swank gray waistcoat and jacket, he's ready to take on the world. Or at least, a school full of privileged teenagers.

My dirty ponytail hangs down the front of the only thing I'm wearing—his Guns N' Roses t-shirt. I won't be ready to

go anytime soon. My stomach sinks. For the first time in four years, I'm going to miss a day of school.

"I know it hurts." He takes the glass, sets it on the floor, and brushes his thumb over my bottom lip. "My dad's bringing medicine."

My body clenches against a sharp wave of pain, releasing another stream of pee. I groan, my eyes watering through the godawful burn.

"Fuck this." He reaches for the knot on his tie. "I'm staying here."

"What for?" I grab his hand, stopping his attack on the shirt collar. "What would you do? Sit in here and watch me pee all day?"

His eyes flash. "Yes."

"Terrible idea." I tangle our fingers together and hold them between my knees. "How will it look if we're both gone? Neither of us ever miss school. People will notice."

He drags his free hand down his face, his expression pained. The secrecy of our relationship, seeing me sick, leaving me alone, all of it torments him.

I lean in and kiss his mouth, wishing my teeth were clean. "This is embarrassing enough without your hawk eyes all up in my business."

It's really not that bad. I'm well-adjusted to his invasiveness. Whether I'm on my period or using the bathroom, he has no concept of personal boundaries, always hovering, interrogating, and examining me inside and out. I get it, though. Because I'm just as obsessed with him.

Straightening my back, I use one of his favorite commands. "Go."

I expect his jaw to harden and his voice to crack the walls in his outrage. But what I find in his eyes is something wholly different. Something that's been expanding between us for months, doubling in size when we're together, and growing in strength when we're apart. As if finally bold enough,

everything we've ever felt for one another gathers into one monumental sentiment and shines from his gaze.

He wraps his hands around my hips. "I love you."

There it is. Spoken without fireworks, received without weepy tears, and absorbed without the ricochet of distant thunder.

It's simple, real, and right there in the open.

In a bathroom.

I grip his face, eyes connected, hearts beating in sync. "You waited until *now* to tell me that?"

The corner of his mouth lifts. "It's not like you didn't already know."

"Yeah, but a girl doesn't forget the first time her crush says those words." I fight a grin. "I'll always remember this moment with the image of a toilet seat imprinting a ring on my ass."

He rests his forehead against mine. "Did you say *crush*?"

"Not just any crush." I touch our lips together. "A crush on my hot teacher, who also happens to be my cocky Master. And the man I love."

Doesn't matter if I'm sitting on a toilet, splayed on his piano, or straddling his lap. This is *our* secret world, and it's more meaningful than every aspiration I've ever set for myself. Our relationship isn't practical or convenient. And it's not just physical. We need each other, not because our bodies fit so well together, but because our hearts beat the same tune, for the same reason.

"Say it," he breathes.

"I love you." I'm not the first woman who's said those words to him, but I'll make damn sure I'm the last. I comb my fingers through his hair. "The kind of love that doesn't end in betrayal."

His hands clench against my hips. "It won't end at all. *Ever.*"

He kisses me passionately, achingly, his mouth molding against mine as if trying to convey the depth of his words. He kisses me until my bladder howls again.

Lingering longer than he should, he tucks me into bed and piles the nightstand with food and water. Then he leaves the room and returns a few minutes later with Schubert bundled in his arms.

I curl on my side, grinning despite the discomfort. “You thought of everything.”

“Not everything.” Settling Schubert beside me, he pets the kitty into a lazy purr of contentment. “I haven’t figured out a way to stay home with you.”

“You’re late, Mr. Marceaux. Get out of here.”

He presses a longing kiss to my lips. “Dad has his own code to get in, so stay up here. Get some sleep. He’ll be by soon.”

I close my eyes and stroke Schubert, trying to ignore the irritating urge to pee again. I sense Emeric hovering in the doorway for a silent moment before his footsteps fade down the hall.

The beep of the alarm tells me he armed it. The slam of the door punctuates his frustration about leaving.

Sleep pulls me under within minutes. It’s a disorienting, uncomfortable kind of slumber that bounces me between awareness and dreamland. Minutes pass, or maybe hours, as my mind replays Emeric’s tenderness while my body begs me to release my bladder.

At some point, the alarm system sounds its thirty-second entry delay, snapping my eyes open. I force myself up and make a mad dash to the toilet. After a great amount of trickling relief and scorching pain, I debate hunting down a pair of shorts. At the very least, I should put on underwear.

Fuck it. I’m sick, he’s a doctor, and the closet is too damn far away. Stretching the t-shirt down my thighs, I roll beneath the covers and wait for the blessed delivery of medicine.

I must've fallen asleep. Schubert leaps off the bed, startling me into a blinking state of grogginess as I try to make sense of the silhouette in the doorway.

Blue jeans. Black V-neck t-shirt. Dark skin. Beefed-up arms... I stare at the *Destroy* tattoo on his neck and choke.

Am I dreaming? Having a nightmare? This can't be real. Inwardly, I give myself a once-over. My heart is pounding, lungs panting, throat tight. This is really happening. A spasm convulses through my body.

Lorenzo stares right back with wide eyes. "You're supposed to be at school."

Ice saturates my veins as I scramble backward, dragging the sheet with me. "You're supposed to be in jail!"

He cocks his head and takes a step into the room. "How do you know about that?"

"Why are you here? What do you want?" With rasping breaths, I shove a hand beneath the covers and dig around. Where's my phone? Fuck, I know Emeric left it right next to me. Where is it? Where is it?

He slinks into the room and pauses in front of the closet. The bed sits in the center with the bathroom on the other side of the door. There's a lock on that door. I inch my way across the mattress in that direction.

Keeping his body angled toward me, he glances inside the closet, his vile gaze staining everything he looks at. "Shane and I have been casing the place."

Shane...? Casing...? My head spins as I covertly pick through the blankets. Where is the goddamn phone?

His eyes latch onto my trembling hands, and I freeze. I don't want to give him any reason to attack me.

Is Shane in the house? Are they here to rob Emeric? Lorenzo was arrested for burglary, but... "How did you get in?"

I slowly shift my legs beneath the covers, hoping to bump into the phone while subtly moving closer to the edge nearest

to the bathroom.

Lorenzo crosses his arms over his chest and studies me. “I know these alarm systems. There’s a master code, as well as codes assigned to each user. Shane guessed yours on the third try.”

The date my dad died. My heart caves in.

He tsks. “The weakest link in security is always the human.”

Sweltering pain grips my chest. Why is this happening? I can’t bear it if he touches me again. What the hell am I going to do?

My eyes blur with tears. “You have to leave. I’m expecting a delivery any second.”

He prowls closer. “Your brother is outside on lookout.”

And Shane doesn’t know I’m home? *Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.*

I scoot closer to the edge, untangling my legs from the blankets.

Lorenzo stops ten feet from the bed, watching me. “Don’t do anything stupid, Ivory. I know the suit you’re shackled up with is at school. We have *hours* before he comes home.” His smile forms a vicious fissure across in his face. “You owe me months.”

Changing course, he veers toward the foot of the bed. Anticipating my escape to the bathroom? He’s faster, stronger. If I run, he’ll beat me there.

“Where’s the safe?” he asks as he circles the mattress.

It’s in Emeric’s office, and I know the damn combination. But he won’t just take money. Not now that he’s seen me. I jerk my attention at the closet.

He follows my gaze, his body turning, distracted.

I waste a half-second scanning the sheets for the phone before shoving off the bed and running like hell into the bathroom. Heart racing, I skid through the doorway as he chases, screaming, “Ivory!”

I'm hyperventilating by the time the door slams. I hit the lock. Punch it again. And again. Then I step back, dizzy, nauseous, struggling to breathe. Will the door frame hold? The molding looks thick and sturdy. But will it keep out Lorenzo?

Not for long.

His fist pounds on the door. "Ivory! Open it the fuck up!"

I spin, scanning the bathroom for escape, self-defense, a weapon. The half-moon window is too high, too small, too unbreakable. I rip open drawers and cabinets, digging for something, anything.

Oh God, this can't be happening. How did he get out of jail? Why did he target *this* fucking house?

Shane.

That selfish motherfucker knew I lived with Emeric. He's been gone for three months. More than enough time to find out where I live. Or maybe he's known all along.

The heavy banging on the door hardens my stomach. "Ivory, if you don't open the goddamn door, we'll have to do this the hard way."

A chill sweeps down my spine. The banging stops.

I hold up a toothbrush and discard it for a hairbrush. What the fuck am I going to do with this?

"Here, kitty kitty," Lorenzo calls, softly.

The hairbrush thumps to the floor as all the blood in my body rushes to my feet. *No no no.*

"Come on out, Schubert."

His sickening sweet voice and gentle coaxing sounds twist my gut and flood my eyes with tears. Then he whistles, using the same cat call he's heard me use for years.

Everything inside me curls up in horror. I fly at the door and press my palms against it. *Run, Schubert. Oh God, please run.*

My heartbeat thrashes past my ears as silence draws tightly on the other side. I stare down at the handle. Emeric would whip my ass just for thinking about turning it. But Schubert...

His long, pained howl penetrates the door and rattles me to the bone.

A sob rips from my throat, and violent tremors wobble my legs. "Let him go!" My hand falls to the door handle, squeezing it in a death grip. "Let's talk about this. Just... please, let him go."

Schubert lets out another keening scream, this one louder, more frenzied.

I yank open the door and stumble out, eyes frantically searching.

Lorenzo leans a shoulder against the wall beside the bathroom, his hand around Schubert's neck as the cat's body flails and contorts in pain.

"Stop!" I launch at him, screaming and shaking with hysterics. "You're hurting him!"

He kicks me in the stomach, knocking the wind out of me and sending me sprawling across the floor. His hand clenches around that tiny neck so hard Schubert's back arches, legs spread out and thrashing against the restraint.

I scramble to my feet, fear tearing me apart as I throw myself at him again.

"Please, let go. Please," I wail uncontrollably, clawing at his arm, unable to remove his torturous hold. "He can't breathe. Oh God, stop!"

"Get on your hands and knees, ass in the air."

Every muscle in my body locks up in terror as the vulnerable hole in my backside clenches in remembered anguish. *I can't. Not there. I can't. I can't.*

"Do it!" he roars.

My head shakes on its own, taking control of my response. I want to be strong enough to do whatever is needed to free

Schubert. But my jaw is glued shut, my legs so frozen I can't feel them.

His entire demeanor changes, twisting and tightening, his expression transforming from rotten and ugly to horrifyingly evil. I see his intent coming a fraction of a second before it happens. But I move too slowly, too fucking weak to remove his hand from around Schubert's neck, to stop his arm from swinging, to prevent my beloved kitty from slamming into the wall.

Schubert's limp body drops to the floor, and something inside me breaks, detaches, and shrivels away. My ears hear him thump against the wood floor. My eyes trace the awkward, unmoving bend in his spine. But my mind refuses to accept it. *He's not dead. He's not. He can't die.*

The floor rises up and slams against my knees. I'm screaming, but there's a palm over my mouth. I'm crawling and reaching, but the heavy weight on my back pins me down. I'm sobbing, but I don't feel the tears. Determination drives me, my arms straining for my little broken kitty, aching to hold him. He needs me to comfort him, to fix him.

But his head's at the wrong angle. Eyes open. Not moving. Looking but not seeing. Oh God, why won't he move?

The sane part of my brain knows. But I bury it, focusing all of my strength on reaching him, desperate to shake him awake, to hear his purr, to see him shift those unblinking eyes.

Until the press of hard flesh probes between my legs.

Dead, chilling darkness sits on my senses. Numbing the hand on my hip. Lightening the chest on my back. Muting the sound of hungry breaths.

"Scriabin," I sob, fingers stretching and bumping against the soft pad of a kitty paw. "Scriabin."

Just a few more inches, and I'll be able to pull Schubert into my arms.

The forceful pressure against my core adjusts, realigning with the ring of muscle in my ass. I squeeze my eyes shut. Paying attention to my body will bring agonizing pain, so I

concentrate on the notes in my head, the dissonant sonata, the deadening dark where I can hold my kitty.

Fight, Ivory. Emeric's voice shatters through my mind.
Fight and fucking win.

The erection pushes against my barrier, searing my nerve-endings. I twist my neck and sink my teeth into the flesh of Lorenzo's bicep. Hard.

He bellows and rears back his arm.

Just as his fist flies toward me, Shane's frantic voice echoes from somewhere downstairs. "Lorenzo! Man, where are you?"

The punch connects with my face.

EMERIC

I idle the GTO at the gate and punch in my code. With all the neighbors at work, the street is deserted and quiet. I don't like quiet. It makes my instincts prickle with paranoia.

No doubt my nerves are related to the gamble in canceling my afternoon classes. But since my dad's delayed at the clinic, I claimed a family emergency, consequences be damn, and picked up her prescriptions on the way home.

When the gate opens, I follow the driveway around the back of the estate, wondering if Ivory hears the rumble of the engine.

I slam on the brakes. What the—?

An old black Honda is parked near the back door. Unfamiliar. Unoccupied. No tags.

My stomach hardens into ice. *Ivory.*

I don't breathe until I'm in the house. *The alarm isn't armed.*

The next breath doesn't come until I reach the kitchen. *Footsteps on the second floor.*

I race through the living room, every cell in my body hyperalert. *Who the fuck is here?*

“Lorenzo, he's in the driveway!” A man's voice echoes upstairs. “Where are you?”

Shane. My blood runs cold as I sprint toward the foyer. Did he say *Lorenzo*? How is that possible?

Lorenzo's in my fucking house.

With Ivory.

Rage propels me up the stairs, every step an opponent between me and her. I climb faster, taking two...three stairs at a time.

"The fuck?" Shane roars from the direction of my bedroom. "Get the fuck off her!"

No! Oh, Jesus, fuck, no! Urgency fuses into my muscles, pushing me faster, harder, locking my jaw. I can't hear her. Why can't I hear her?

I hurdle the last stair, but the remaining distance feels like it's forcing my heart to explode out of my chest. The landing is too big, the hall too long. I'm too far away. I never should've left. I failed her, and I'm fucking fuming in my regret. Goddamn shaking in my desperation to reach her.

I follow the sounds of rising shouts. Almost there. A few more steps. I rush through the doorway, my focus zooming in on the far side of the bedroom.

Ivory stands motionless in my t-shirt. Blood on her lips. Expression empty. Schubert in her arms. Dead.

Shane's balled fists. Wounds on Lorenzo's face and arm. His zipper open.

Each millisecond snapshot sears into me with a viciousness that staggers my steps.

No one notices me.

I'm outnumbered, unarmed, and over-fucking-wrought with fury. Everything inside me pulls toward Ivory, but I fight it, refusing to look at her or think about her. If I do, I'll lose my fucking shit.

Sticking to the edge of the room, I close the distance. Ivory stands a few feet away from the face-off between Shane and Lorenzo.

"Did you rape her, motherfucker?" Shane throws a punch at Lorenzo and misses his dodging head. "She was telling the

truth all this time?”

Cold lethal intent spreads through me, hiking my breaths. My fists flex for destruction. My heart hardens for permanent, irrevocable death. I will end this.

My impulses take over, my hands dropping to my belt and yanking it free as venom simmers through my veins.

Lorenzo widens his stance. “Dude. Look what she did to my face.”

“You were on top of her!” Shane attacks him, arms swinging.

Lorenzo ducks, hooks him around the waist, and takes him to the floor in a series of punches.

I approach on swift silent feet, sliding the end of the belt through the buckle. A foot away, I stand behind Lorenzo. Shane sprawls on his back with Lorenzo kneeling over him. I’m certain Shane sees me, but they’re both throwing punches, blocking, grunting.

I shove the belt loop over Lorenzo’s head and hold my madness together with both fists.

Shane’s eyes, red and outraged, collide with mine. Lorenzo turns his neck.

I cinch the belt around Lorenzo’s throat, wrenching the end with the full strength of my wrath.

His body flings backward with the ruthlessness of my pull, thrashing across the floor, hands scrabbling at the noose. I hang on, yanking harder, fueled with malicious purpose.

Shane crawls toward Lorenzo’s bucking body and glares up at me with feral eyes. How am I going to fight him off while holding on to the belt?

With a bellow of rage, he slams a knee onto his friend’s chest, his fists pummeling Lorenzo’s face. I falter, stunned, and readjust my grip, pulling the belt with a vengeance.

Shane’s weight holds Lorenzo to the floor as I stand over them and wring the garrote tighter, tighter, the brutal

imperative for this to end slicing through my wavering breaths.

Fingers clenched around the leather, I meet Ivory's shattered brown gaze. I'm killing a man in front of her, coldly, consciously, and without apology. There's no going back from this.

Her legs support her unmoving posture. Her hands hold Schubert's dead body. Her eyes stay with mine, but she's not here. She's not with me.

Probably for the best, because I'm not stopping until this son of a bitch can't hurt her anymore.

The phone in my pocket vibrates with an incoming call. The school? My parents? The fucking cops following up on suspicious activity? Fuck!

Lorenzo's jaw gapes in a silent scream. Blood smears his face, eyes swollen, his complexion waning from red to blue.

I stand on one side, hands numbing around the belt. On Lorenzo's other side, Shane presses him against the floor as his body writhes, legs kicking, fingers clawing at the leather around his throat.

Strangulation is an excruciatingly slow way to go. In those harrowing minutes, the enormity of what I'm doing has time to slither beneath my skin and suffocate my vital organs. I hold strong with the reminder that my responsibility to protect Ivory overrides everything else.

Lorenzo's fingers fall away from his throat, and with a jerk of his leg, he loses the fight.

It's finished.

Shane collapses on his ass, hands flying to the back of his head, his mouth hanging open with exertion. Horror. Shock.

Adrenaline tingles through my limbs as I drop the belt and press my shaking fingers against the swollen *Destroy* on Lorenzo's throat. No pulse. There's irony in that, something I'll contemplate when our wounds are no longer raw.

I step back and shrug out of my jacket, sweating against conflicting bouts of relief and reality.

I just killed a man.

A man who broke into my house.

Who killed our cat.

Who attempted and maybe succeeded in raping Ivory *again*.

Because I wasn't here.

My chest burns, my entire world rotating and spinning toward her. "Ivory?"

For the first time since I came in, she moves. Just her eyes, shifting them to mine. Blood rims her nostrils, stains her lips, and dots the front of her t-shirt.

My stomach twists. I need to take the cat, hug her, obliterate the distance between us. I reach for her.

She jerks back, her arms tightening around Schubert's dangling body.

Not ready to let him go? Not ready for me to touch her?

I understand, but dammit, I feel her rejection like a fist to the heart.

A glance at Shane confirms he's still dazed, staring at the body with unblinking, glassy eyes.

My pocket vibrates with a text alert. Goddammit. Whoever is trying to reach me has terrible timing.

I loosen my tie and toss it. Then I step in front of Ivory and brush my fingers across her jaw. She doesn't react, her gaze distant, unfocused. When I lower my caress to the arm around Schubert, she releases an anguished cry and stumbles back.

Okay. I won't separate her from the cat. "I just need to know you're okay."

Her demeanor goes cold, detached, except her arms, which hold Schubert tighter.

“I fought him.” Her voice is a hollow metronome. “Bit him. Scratched his face.”

“Good girl.” I want to pull her against me so badly, but if I do, I’ll unravel. I have to keep my shit together until this mess is contained. “Did he rape—?”

“No.” A flicker of life stirs in the muddy brown depths of her eyes. “Shane stopped him.”

Did her brother have a stroke of guilt? A sudden heart transplant? A hidden agenda? Hell knows why he stepped in, but fuck, I’m breathing a little easier knowing he did.

Shane’s wheezing grows louder, more frantic, his blood-shot eyes on the waste of life that was Lorenzo. Maybe Shane isn’t a threat at the moment, but he will be if he runs. Honestly, he looks like he’s seconds from a meltdown.

Another text comes in. I pull the phone from my pocket, but Shane’s guttural cry draws my attention.

He covers his face with his hands, wailing like a fucking pansy. “He was my best friend.” His body rocks. “Oh God, he saved my life, and we killed him.”

I maintain a towering stance above him, a position of power. “We killed the sack of shit who’s been raping your sister for four years.”

Snapping his jaw shut, he looks away.

Ivory stares at the floor, her expression blank. She’s in shock. But she’s strong as hell. There isn’t a doubt in my mind she’ll be sassing me again in no time.

I refocus on Shane and steel my voice with authority. “You’re in deeper shit than I am.”

His eyes lift, tears falling down his face. “How’s that? We both—”

“Castle law. In the state of Louisiana, I have the right to defend myself and others on my property. That includes the use of deadly force against intruders. Justifiable homicide.” I point at Ivory. “I was fucking justified.”

Problem is, if I call the cops, I'll be arrested for a different crime. My high school student wasn't just visiting my house while I was at work. She *lives* here. I won't be able to hide that. Not with Shane involved. If I turn him in, he'll return the favor.

I have two choices. Call the authorities and face a publicized student-teacher trial that would destroy not only my future, but Ivory's. Or deal with the body and make all of this go away.

The second option only works with Shane's cooperation. As much as I want to bury his worthless ass with Lorenzo, we're in this together.

I glance at my phone. A missed call and two texts from my PI.

Smith: Gandara is free.

No shit. I look up at Schubert in Ivory's arms, his neck hanging awkwardly, likely broken. A renewed wave of anger funnels through me.

Smith: Released yesterday. My CI just contacted me. Lawyer argued PTSD as grounds for an insanity defense. Got an appeal. Reduced sentence. I'll be in touch as soon as I locate Gandara's whereabouts.

Lorenzo had a year left on his sentence. At least now I don't have to worry about dealing with his release.

I type out an acknowledgment since that's what I would do if I weren't standing over a dead body. I'll let the PI look for Lorenzo. It's a risk, but I need to see if his investigation leads him back to me.

Shane's gaze bounces between the phone in my hand and the door, as if considering escape. "You can't call the cops, man. I stopped him from raping her!" His voice rises. "I killed my best friend. For *her*."

"Shut the fuck up." I hit send on the text and drill my gaze into his. "You broke into my house. You're an accomplice to murder. If you run, I'll make the call. If you give me what I want, this stays between the three of us."

He swallows. “What do you want?”

“Answers. Cooperation.” I flick a hand at the body. No way in hell can I lift that big motherfucker by myself. “Then you’ll crawl back into whatever hole you’ve been in for the past three months and never come back.”

“Okay.” He nods, his throat bobbing and eyes shifty. “I can do that.”

I don’t fucking trust him. In a perfect world, I would’ve killed Lorenzo without another soul knowing about it. Two witnesses are two risks too many. Ivory won’t betray me, but whatever knowledge she has about my next steps could incriminate her. I need to distance her from it.

I also need to disentangle her from Schubert.

“Ivory.” As I wait for her to look at me, I remember the reason I rushed home. “Do you need to use the bathroom?”

“I—” She hugs the cat against her neck, looks down at her bare legs, at the floor by the bathroom door, and back at her legs. “I might’ve...” Her chin quivers. “I’m sorry.”

Sorry for what? Releasing her bladder while fighting off a rapist?

I capture her arm and pull her to me. “I hope you fucking pissed all over him.”

Her hand strokes the cat’s fur. “I hope so, too.”

I slide my arm around her waist, shifting her against me with Schubert between us. I move my other hand over his eyes, brushing them closed, petting his soft fur, letting myself mourn his death.

He was a gift from her father, her comfort when she was scared, her friend when she had no one. He was all she had the last time she lost someone she loved. Now she has me.

I hold her until her tears fall and caress her back while she silently sobs. Her trembling makes me ache. Her grief magnifies my own.

Shane watches us from a few feet away, eyes wet and turbid, noises strangling in his throat as if he's trying to contain his sniveling. Maybe it's guilt. I hope he chokes on it.

I reluctantly lean back. "It's time to say goodbye."

The look of devastation on her beautiful face threatens to bring me to my knees.

I strengthen my stance and gesture Shane over. "Your brother's going to take Schubert."

Her arms tighten around the cat as a sob climbs up from deep in her chest.

I cradle her face. "I'm so sorry, Ivory. I would give anything to make this easier." I press a kiss to her forehead. "We'll bury him in the backyard. I'll build a memorial there, whatever you want, okay?"

Tears drip down her cheeks, mixing with the blood on her lips as she stares at the cat.

I nod at Shane.

After a few cries of protest, she releases her hold. Shane bundles the body against his chest, his face falling.

I turn her away, guide her into the bathroom, and draw the bath. "I'll be right back."

Grabbing a towel, I step out, close the door behind me, and meet Shane's eyes. "Who knows you're here?"

He flinches. "No one. I swear."

His promise means nothing to me.

"Go out the back door and get the medicine from my GTO. Park the Honda in the garage. You'll find a tarp and duct tape in there." I drop the towel beside the body. "Grab whatever else we might need."

If he's going to run, he would've done it by now. If he changes his mind, I won't be able to stop him. So I leave him there with the cat in his arms and hope he's smarter than he looks.

In the bathroom, I give Ivory some sleeping pills, roll up my sleeves, and silently, soothingly, bathe her into drowsiness. I hate sedating her, but I don't want to leave her awake and grieving by herself. She needs to be comatose for however many hours it takes to deal with the body.

The urge to call my parents itches at me. Mom could stay with her while I'm gone. But making them accessories to disposing of a body is not an option.

When a fist knocks on the bathroom door, some of the tension eases from my shoulders.

I gaze down at Ivory, her skin pink from the heat of the water and her eyes hooded with fatigue. "If I leave you here for a few minutes, are you going to drown?"

Her lashes lift, and a hint of a small smile touches her lips. "If you don't stop hovering, I might drown *you*."

There's my girl. I press a kiss to her brow, her nose, her mouth. Then I head toward the door.

"Emeric?"

I turn, my pulse singing at the sound of her voice.

She leans her head back on the ledge. "Thank you."

I doubt she's thanking me for a specific thing. Her gratefulness is always all-encompassing. Christ, I love this girl.

"I'll be right back." I slip out and shut the door.

Shane already has the body wrapped in tarp and duct tape. He sweeps the towel over the wood floors, clearing away any urine or blood, his expression colorless and etched in torment.

I step beside him. "You look like you've done this before."

"Never."

Fear, shock, revulsion...there are so many overpowering emotions in that whisper, I believe him.

With the body bagged, we haul it down the hall. I leave him at the stairs and return to Ivory.

By the time I dress her, give her the medicine, and tuck her into bed, she's deep asleep beneath the weight of sedation.

I spot check the wood floors for blood with each pass I make through the room. I'll do a thorough cleaning later, but to the unassuming eye, there's no indication a crime was committed here.

I change into a Henley and jeans and find Shane sitting on the top step, staring into space.

"Let's finish this." My voice makes him jump.

A few minutes later, the body is loaded in the Honda in the garage.

I hand Shane a shovel. "Where's Schubert?"

He takes it, his glare digging into the closed trunk of the car. "Shouldn't we deal with that first?"

"At dusk." I head toward the hall that leads to the back yard. "We need to talk."

Outside, the sun slips behind the monolithic tower of my estate, fading the sky into streaks of violet.

Surrounded by oaks and blooming bushes, I set Schubert's body on the ground and direct Shane to a spot beside the concrete bench in the garden. "Where have you been for the past three months?"

He stabs the shovel through the mulch and starts the hole. "Not in New Orleans."

If I press, he'll likely lie about his location. He said he flew in. Maybe that will help the PI track him this time.

I sit on the bench and take in his receding blond hair, pale complexion, and the stupidity emanating from his dull eyes. Hard to believe he's related to Ivory.

With a deep breath, I rest my elbows on my spread knees. "Tell me how this came about."

Working the shovel through the dirt, he says quietly, tiredly, "Lorenzo called me yesterday, said he was released—"

He stops, glances up at me, hesitating. “He was in jail for burglary.”

He’s either fucking with me or he doesn’t know my involvement in Lorenzo’s arrest. As dumb as he is, I’m leaning toward the latter. That means he didn’t want to mention the burglary conviction for another reason. I can guess why.

He returns to his task. “He called me when he got out, said he lost his apartment and needed fast money.” He shovels more dirt, avoiding my eyes. “I owed him my life, so I offered him a solution and flew home to help him.”

I look up at my estate as the pieces slowly click together. Shane must’ve been following Ivory before he approached her in the parking lot. If so, he already knew where she lives. When he saw me that night and recognized me as the guy who punched him, he figured out our relationship and *who* she lives with. Our schedule is obvious, so he bet on the assumption we would be at school.

“You came here to rob me.” My hands clench. “How did you get in?”

He pauses then resumes digging. “I guessed her code.”

Fuck. That’s a huge goddamn oversight on my part.

So then what? Lorenzo went in alone while Shane kept watch? She fought him. Somehow the cat was pulled into it. I won’t demand those details from Shane. She’ll give me an honest account when she’s ready.

He stares at the ground, voice tight. “She wasn’t supposed to be here.”

“Except she was. What do you think Lorenzo intended to do to her after he raped her? Would he have left her alive to point him out in a line up after he robbed the place?”

“Oh God.” His head lowers, his fingers wrapped so tightly around the handle of the shovel it has to be cutting circulation.

“Do you know why I punched you that night?”

He glares at the dirt, nostrils flaring.

“She came to school with a busted lip.” I let my disgust clip the words.

His eyes close, face pinched in pain.

I find a sick sort of comfort in his guilt. “A brother is supposed to protect his sister. Stand up to bullies for her. Walk through fucking fire for her.”

He leans on the shovel like a crutch, his entire body shaking. “I fucked up, okay?” He lets go of the handle and scrubs his hands over his head, his eyes stark with anguish. “She tried to tell me for years, but I didn’t listen. I was just so...*angry* with her. About the school thing and her relationship with Dad. Then here she is, living in this huge mansion...”

I don’t think he’s talking for my benefit, and I don’t give a shit what his justifications are. I just need to know if he’s going to be a continuing threat to Ivory.

Rising from the bench, I grab the shovel and dig. “So Lorenzo’s call gave you the idea to take from her. With his robbery experience, you jumped on the opportunity to steal some of her happiness for yourself.”

He drops his arms to his sides and stares at the house, his voice a croaked whisper. “Yeah.”

I settle the cat in the hole, swallow a knot of sadness, and return the dirt. “I should be burying you instead of Schubert.”

A frown contorts his face, his ignorant eyes backlit with conviction. “I promise I won’t cause her any more trouble. Fuck, I’ll spend the rest of my fucking life staying the hell out of hers. It’s the only thing I can offer her.”

I’ll have a PI on my payroll for the rest of her life to make sure of it. “It’s time to deal with the other thing.”

“Yeah.” He lifts his chin, gazing out toward the darkening sky over the eastern horizon. “I know a place.”

IVORY

The moment I wake, my muscles tighten in memory of the day's events. A dim lamp glows in the gloom of the bedroom, casting shadows over my brother's dour expression where he slouches in a chair beside the bed. It's disturbing to see him in this house, in a place that's always represented safety, happiness, and love. But I'm not scared. Emeric would kill him before allowing him to be alone with me again.

I shift my attention down the length of the mattress and find watchful devotion in eyes of shimmering blue. My heart hums.

Emeric told me once if anyone touched me, his response would be murderous. He's a man of his word. Lorenzo is gone. Dead. No longer able to hurt me. I still feel heavily weighted by shock, my insides aching with the loss of Schubert and coiling with worry over Emeric taking such a drastic gamble with his future to protect me. But we'll get through this together, no matter what.

Sitting on the bed beside my feet, he traces a hand along the outline of my leg in the blankets. His chiseled face is smoothed into a calm mien framed in exhaustion. His black hair spikes in a chaos of perfection, and a steel gray Henley stretches across his shoulders, accentuating the strength of his neck. He risks that neck for me repeatedly, and today was no different.

My grateful smile comes easily. "How long have I been out?"

His jaw shifts, mashing the gum in his mouth. “Six hours.”

I’m aware he spent that time dealing with Lorenzo’s body. What did he do with it? The flicker in his gaze tells me he anticipates the question, but there’s a hard glare there, too. He’s not going to tell me.

I don’t want him to carry this burden alone, but it would be important to him to keep me isolated from the details. Pushing him on it would only make him frustrated and conflicted.

I can be rational on this one thing.

His hand moves over the bend of my knee, his thumb stroking against the covers. “Your brother is leaving.” He looks at Shane and steels his voice. “For good this time.”

Blowing out a breath, I check what I’m wearing—another one of Emeric’s t-shirts. No panties. I shift to sit against the headboard, dragging the covers with me, and meet Shane’s eyes.

He scoots to the edge of the chair and rubs his palms over his jeans, watching the movement. “It’s a little late, but I’m saying it anyway.” He glances at me. “I’m sorry.”

Two words don’t erase years of abuse and bullshit. However, his actions today, his choosing *me* over Lorenzo, hit hard and true, fracturing the ugly barrier between us.

A fracture doesn’t bring down a wall. But it does leave behind a precious weak point, one that will always be there. Whenever I think of him, I’ll feel that fracture and remember it fondly.

Emeric studies our interaction, his expression neutral, his caresses lingering on my ankle.

Shane lifts a hand and reaches for mine, making an awkward hesitation in the space that separates us before hooking our fingers together.

He smiles sadly, squeezes my hand, and whispers, “Fuck you, Ivory.”

I squeeze back. “Have a nice life, Shane.”

He pulls his hand away, then his gaze, and walks out the door without looking back.

A pang of loss tightens my chest. The urge to stop him tenses my legs.

But he broke into Emeric's house. He beat me for years. I'm no longer a victim. With those reminders, I let him go.

Emeric follows him out. When he returns a few minutes later, he strips naked, slides into bed behind me, and curves his body around mine. I revel in the warmth of his skin and twine our legs together, melting against his chest with a sigh.

Instead of demanding I talk or eat or take my medicine, he touches his mouth to my shoulder then my neck and jaw. When I turn in his arms, he teases my lips apart and sinks his tongue in to slide against mine. The scruff on his chin rubs softly. Cinnamon flavors his breaths, his lips a firm pressure of sensuality.

His mouth is the best place to get lost in.

With my hand on those sexy indentations in his waist, I nip, lick, and taste, taking my time, following his lead. It's a kiss without expectation, a melding of lips simply for the comfort in the connection.

We maintain that gentle mood for the remainder of the evening.

The next morning begins with a fight.

He says we're not going to school. He can do what he wants. I'm going. He thinks I need rest and refuses to leave me home alone. It's Friday. I can rest over the weekend. If we both miss another day, we might as well announce our relationship over the intercom.

We argue for an hour. I win. It turns out to be an uneventful day. And fruitless. My concentration is shit. Emeric might've been right about one thing. I need rest—the mental kind.

By Saturday afternoon, the sore spot on my stomach where Lorenzo kicked me turns a violent shade of purple. Emeric's

horror at seeing it is the impetus for our inevitable conversation.

We soak in the tub, my back against his chest and his legs bracketing mine. As I walk him through what happened, he swirls soap over my skin, his fingers massaging and soothing. I give him every gritty detail, my voice strong at the beginning. When I tell him about my brainless attempt to use my safe word, his body turns to stone beneath me. My voice wavers from there. By the time I recall those final moments with Schubert's body in my arms, I crumble against him.

It hurts. That little fur ball was such an essential part of my life, and I ache in his absence. But I'm not broken. Not like I was when I lost my dad. It's easier this time. I feel it in every touch and glance Emeric gives me, that much-needed support of another person holding me up during those times when I struggle to stand on my own.

That night, he snores softly behind me, his chest pressed to my back, our limbs entangled, bodies aligned. I can't join him in sleep, my mind too restless, thinking about his reaction to using my word with Lorenzo.

Nothing has changed between Emeric and me. We haven't had sex since that day, but I've had a bladder infection. His lingering glances still make me purr. His kisses curl my toes. What I don't know is how I'll respond when he straps me down, grips my throat, or raises that belt. I trust him, unequivocally. But do I trust a word—any word—enough to use it again?

Before I met him, Scriabin's sonata was a black mass in my mind, the place I went to when terrible things happened to my body.

Over the past five months, those dark notes have become synonymous with Emeric and the safety he gives me. Did I ruin it by using it with the wrong man?

I play the sonata in my head, but I don't feel it. I need to hear it.

Sneaking out from beneath the heavy weight of his arms, I listen for his even breaths then tiptoe to the music room.

With the door shut, the room is supposed to be soundproof. I sit behind the piano, soaking in the silence and clearing my head. After a few calming breaths, I run my fingers over the keys and ease into Scriabin's Sonata No.9.

It's rough at first, the melody banging through the room in a disjointed rhythm. But I keep at it, transforming my interpretation from eerie and neurotic to something more nebular and meditative. The sonata drifts around me in a cloud of notes. My mind absorbs it, reflects it.

It feels safe. The kind of safe that enwraps me during my darkest times. It's doing that now, melting away the room, fogging my headspace, and immersing me in dissonance.

Except I suddenly don't feel like playing it. I rest my hands in my lap. The sonata is a place to go to, a word to speak, when I've reached my limit. But do I enjoy it? Not really. It doesn't...thrill me.

I want to try something different. Something beyond Chopin, Rachmaninov, and Debussy.

My attention shifts toward the door, and I startle.

Emeric leans against the frame, arms relaxed at his sides, his phone in one hand. He's been in constant communication with his PI over the past couple days. Probably tracking Shane. Maybe something involving Lorenzo, as well. He doesn't tell me, and I don't ask.

Black pajama pants sit seductively low on his trim hips, the *V* of his abs pointing like an arrow to the soft bulge beneath the cotton.

I raise a brow. "How long have you been there?"

"I followed you." His brows lower, his eyes dark, haunted. "You played Scriabin."

"Yeah. I needed to know." I glance at the keyboard. "I won't be afraid to say *no*. With the word." I return to him. "Trust me to use it."

He straightens, studying me intently. “Be sure, Ivory.”

“I’m sure. It’s safe.” I wrinkle my nose. “And kind of boring.”

His eyes light up. “I’m intrigued.” He prowls toward me. “Name a song that’s not boring.”

The tick of your watch. The harmony of your breaths. The tempo of your heart. The notes I feel whenever you’re near. “I Will Follow You Into The Dark.””

He stops behind me and places his phone on the bench beside my hip. “Death Cab for Cutie?”

I nod.

“Interesting choice.” He moves my hair aside and traces his knuckles along the line of my neck. “Play it.”

“I don’t have the music sheet.”

“You don’t need it.” His lips touch the path of his finger, his breath stroking my ear. “You have the world’s greatest teacher.”

I shiver. “So cocky.”

He gives my neck a warning bite and steps back. “Raise your arms.”

I do, recalling his words the night I sucked his cock in Le Moyne’s theater.

I want you naked, sitting at my piano and rolling your hips like you’re fucking the notes.

He pulls the t-shirt over my head and drops it, leaving me completely bare beneath his gaze. With his hands on my waist, he lifts me, takes my seat, and positions me on his lap, facing the keyboard.

This is different. I’m up a little higher, but as his arms come around me and his hands guide mine to the keys, I relax my weight on his powerful thighs. Knees together between his, I tremble in anticipation.

He cues up the song on his phone and sets it on the bench. In the next breath, the inspiring arrangement of music and lyrics trickle from the speaker. His hands move beneath mine and guide me through the simple complexity of chords.

I spread my fingers through the spaces between his. My hands are smaller, bonier, and darker-skinned, but they mold around his exquisitely, like our hands are meant to be joined this way, for holding each other, for creating music together.

Fumbling along, I become frustrated by my inability to catch on. I can recreate classical pieces without sheet music, only the ones I've played a gazillion times. How does he just pluck mysterious notes out of the air without visual guidance? It's insane. And brilliant.

"Listen." He brushes his mouth across my nape. "Feel it."

I close my eyes and focus on the beats, the glide of his fingers, and the sway and flex of his tensile muscles around me. His breaths on my neck and the twitches in his legs make it easier to predict his movements and rhythms. I don't just feel the music. I feel *him* as the vocals lead us through each measure, painting passionate imagery about fear being the heart of love.

I don't know how many times he replays the song. I'm lost in his arms and the meaning of the lyrics. Our love is risky, adventurous, and real. Is it founded in fear? Maybe, but it's a respectful fear, because our love is almighty and powerful.

The taut skin on his chest rubs against my bare back, the friction erotically pleasurable, his body a conductor of sensual heat and sound. I roll my hips against his, liberated by my nudity, rocking to the music and *fucking the notes*.

He groans, a seductive rumble, and one of his hands slides out from beneath mine. I carry the tune, missing keys but keeping up as he trails his fingers across my thigh, along my ribs, and around my nipple.

I sigh as his cock swells beneath my ass.

His other hand slips from the keyboard to join the first, and my pulse speeds up. His fingers rove hungrily around my

breasts, up and down my legs, over my arms, always returning to my chest. When his lips fall to my throat, my hands falter, ruining the melody, but I don't care. He's strumming a better song, *our* song, set to the tempo of our breaths and beating hearts.

Besides, his erection is all kinds of distracting, pinned beneath me and pumping with blood. I want to take him out of his pants and slide down that hard length as I continue to play.

I spread my legs, hooking them over his, my hands bungling two measures of the song. "Emeric."

His tongue traces the shell of my ear, his fingers dipping between my thighs, probing, rolling my clit, and sinking into my pussy. "So wet for me."

Gasping, I give up on the keyboard and grip his thighs where they flex between mine. The diabolical thrusts of his fingers arch my back, make me whimper, and propel me into a boiling crescendo of lust.

I tug at his pajama bottoms. "Take these off. I need you."

The recording on the phone ends, the sudden silence amplifying the chorus of our heavy breaths.

He pinches my clit with a wicked amount of pressure, shooting painful pleasure through my core. Working both hands between my legs, he slaps and strokes, flicks and dips inside. Whether it's ruthless or gentle, giving or taking, every touch is a declaration of utter commitment.

With an arm around my waist, he lifts my hips and shoves his pants to the floor, kicking them away. I shiver as he lowers me onto his cock and pushes inside. He's hard and persistent, thick and aggressive, his fingers digging against my hips and controlling the up and down glide of my body with powerful confidence.

I clutch his strong forearms and hang on, my head dropping back to his shoulder and my inner muscles spasming around every thrust. The deep slide of hot steel stretches my pussy and fills me up. My body sings for him with each

pulsing beat between my legs, pulling him in, clamping down, and holding him there. He belongs in me, with me.

“So fucking tight.” He kicks his hips. “Leaking all over me.” He grunts, his fingers tightening against my hips. “Love your hot little cunt.”

I love his dirty fucking mouth.

He grinds against me in tight circles, his timbre low and rough. “Play the song.”

Now? Without the recording? Even if I had total concentration, I would struggle. But while he’s fucking me? No way.

I turn my neck to look at him. His hand plunges into my hair, wrenching my head forward and angling it to the side. The graze of his teeth on my shoulder makes me shudder. The fucking bite that follows rips a scream from my throat.

The stinging burn seeps into my muscles, charging and rolling like liquid electricity. Holy shit, that’s going to leave a mark.

I stab my fingernails against his rock-hard forearms. “You’re an animal.”

He laughs, lifts me all the way off of his cock, and slams his hand against my ass. With a yelp, I fall forward and catch myself on the piano, fingers splayed over the keys.

The man knows exactly how to get what he wants.

He pulls me back down, shoving inside me with a force that brings tears to my eyes. It’s blissful, overpowering pain, the kind that stimulates the mind, arouses the body, and trembles the soul.

He heightens the sensation by rolling into tender thrusting, ensuring I feel every thick inch of him dragging along my sensitive walls.

“Play the song, Ivory.” He nips at my shoulder, his hand lifting to knead my breast.

With focused strokes, I launch into the parts I remember, mentally looping through chords and letting my fingers follow along.

He kisses my neck, tasting my skin, our bodies rocking and shuddering together as the music coaxes us into a languorous dance. He fucks me slowly, sensually. The motion of our hips wave in sync with my fingers on the keys as the sounds of our love-making hum a passionate rhythm.

We are the ultimate love song.

The tip of his tongue circles my earlobe. “Come.”

My body obeys instantly, and I moan through the vigorous ripple of pleasure, clenching around his length, my fingers depressing aimless keys.

“Ivory.” He groans, holding my hips against him as the hot pulse of his cock swells inside me, marking me, claiming me.

I twist my neck to watch him in the throes of his pleasure.

The air rushes from my lungs at the sight of his dilated pupils encircled by intensely beautiful swirls of blue fire. I used to hate his eyes, unable to imagine gentleness or safety in those crystalline depths. I was so very wrong. This is the only view I want, when I wake, when I go to sleep, and all the seconds in between.

I rise off of him and quickly spin to straddle his lap, sliding back onto his cock. The kiss that follows is a mutual seeking of lips, met in the space between us and prompted by a shared need to connect in every way.

He’s it for me. The zenith of my happiness. All roads, however perilous and winding, lead to this man, my teacher, the music of my soul.

I want to go to Leopold to learn from the best of the best, yet here I am, sitting on the cock of one of their most brilliant alumni. Whether it’s dumb luck or some kind of magical destiny that brought me here, I won’t squander it.

Leaning back, I frame his sculpted face with my hands. “Teach me how to play.”

“Miss Westbrook.” His lips form a firm line. “I *am* teaching—”

“No.” I kiss that hard mouth, because seriously, it’s too sexy to ignore. “Teach me the way you did tonight. Without classical music theory and technical books. I want to play... whatever I want to play.”

A very male smile breaches his lips, his cock jerking inside me. “Turn around. Hands on the keys.”

And so it goes. For the next few weeks, he teaches me how to play whatever rock or pop song that suits my mood while holding, touching, kissing, and fucking me.

Some songs are harder than others. All of them challenge me. I don’t use music sheets, but I don’t need them. Not with his fingers beneath mine, showing me, and his voice at my ear, instructing me.

Mastering modern music won’t help me get into Leopold, but man oh man, it exposes me to a whole world of composers outside of classrooms and textbooks. I discover a passion for blending classical masterpieces with top forty hits. There’s something about the originality and distinction in putting my own twist on the music. It strikes a glowing, breathing note inside me.

Of course, Emeric’s enthusiasm in teaching and disciplining me isn’t a surprise. He gets off on it, especially when I slip up. God, that man loves to spank my ass. But it’s his endless encouragement that reminds me why I’m so fiercely, deeply, crazy in love with him.

My eighteenth birthday falls on the last Friday in April. That morning, I wake with him straddling my hips, hands planted on either side of my head, and blue eyes filling my horizon. *Perfect.*

He puts his face in mine, his expression serious. “I’m going to ask you some questions, but before you answer... Take me out of the equation. I go where you go. We stay together no matter what.”

Okaaay. I nod.

He searches my face. “Do you want to go to Leopold?”

“Of course.” I raise my eyebrows. “What else would I do with my life?”

“Anything you want.” He kisses me, his voice a silken tempo of notes. “What does Ivory Westbrook want?”

Well, that’s easy. “I want to play piano, with you at center stage beside me.”

He grins, evidently liking that answer. “How will you get there?”

Hmmm. Is this a trick question? I’ve always believed rigorous training, persistence, and prestige will help me reach my dream. Isn’t Leopold the best way to obtain those things?

I purse my lips. “I don’t know.”

He reaches for something above my head and hands me... an airline ticket? “Let’s find out.”

EMERIC

Saturday morning, we don't fly out of New Orleans. I drive Ivory an hour and a half away to catch a plane from Baton Rouge. A city where I know no one. But as we walk through the airport—not touching—I'm suspicious as fuck of every person who casts their eyes in our direction. Do they know me? Are they affiliated with Le Moyne? I could explain our trip as business travel for the school, but that doesn't stop my skin from crawling with paranoia.

When we step off the plane at our destination, I finally let myself relax.

Ivory sits beside me in the limo, her eyes darting everywhere, her expression a mesmerizing depiction of wonderment. The wide grin, sparkling eyes, and bouncing hyperactivity has been ongoing since I gave her the first-class ticket last night. She's never been out of New Orleans. Never been on an airplane or in a limo or hotel.

I'll show her every corner of the world if it keeps that smile on her face.

It's been two months since Schubert died, and her happiness hasn't fully snapped back. Until now. Fuck if that doesn't make all my earlier nervousness worth it.

For the first time since we left Baton Rouge, I touch her, not as a teacher but as the man who loves her. In the privacy of the limo, I wrap an arm around her lower back and pull her against my side. Resting my lips against her temple, I stroke the crease of her thigh and hip.

She sighs, her body melting in my hold. “A limo, Emeric. It’s...unnecessary, but wow.” She leans forward, gaze locked on the side window and jaw hanging open as she takes in the surrounding glass metropolis of skyscrapers. “I can’t believe I’m in New York.”

I capture a strand of her hair and pull. “Can’t?”

She slides me a sexy grin, twists in the seat, and throws a leg across my lap, straddling me chest to chest.

With her hands on my face, she touches her smile to mine. “I can’t. I can’t. I can’t.”

I would bend her over my lap and spank her perfect ass, but we’re five minutes away from our first stop. So instead, I pinch her nipple through the dress and hang on.

She grips my wrist and tries to jerk back, but the movement tightens my fingers and elongates the pebble of flesh.

Grabbing my necktie, she yanks hard. That only brings our lips closer together. I take advantage, kissing her greedily while squeezing the hell out of her nipple.

Her body bucks, a devious curve of flesh wrapped in black silk, as she exhales heavy huffs. “I’ll never say *can’t* again. Just please...my boob!”

Blood rushes to my cock, making it rise.

I release her. “Good girl.”

She rubs her breast. “So mean.”

I spy the smile pushing through her pout. “You love it.”

She slides off my lap but stays close, leaning across my thighs to peer out my window. “Are we going to Leopold first?”

Familiar streets and sights pass by. We’re a block away.

She thinks we’re dressed up for a fancy dinner reservation and that the purpose of the trip is to open her eyes to Leopold campus life.

What she doesn't know is that I brought her here to open doors.

When the limo stops, she looks at the front of the building and gasps. Her elbow swings an inch from my face in her scramble across my lap to exit on the side closest to the shiny front doors.

I meet the driver's eyes in the rear view mirror. "We'll be a couple hours."

As I join her on the sidewalk, the brisk wind chills the back of my neck. But I barely feel it in the warmth of her blinding smile as she takes in the campus where I spent five years of my life, earning my undergrad and master's.

"Holy shit." She hooks an arm around mine, hugging tightly. "This is really happening. I'm really here."

As much as I loathe our secrecy, I force the warning tone past my lips. "Miss Westbrook."

"Shit." She drops her arm, steps an appropriate distance away, and stares straight ahead. "Sorry." The corner of her mouth twitches. "Mr. Marceaux."

Smart ass. "Follow me." I lead her inside and through the halls.

I haven't been here since I graduated four years ago. Nostalgia pulls at me, but I don't take the time to look around. We have an appointment.

She walks quickly to keep up with my long strides, her heels clicking against the cement floor. "You're not a very good tour guide. Slow down."

"We'll explore later." I stop at a closed door in Richter Hall and shift to face her.

She studies me, glances at the door, and looks back. Her hands rub down the front of her dress. "What are we doing?" She narrows her eyes, suspicion lashing through her tone. "What did you do?"

"You're here for an audition."

Her mouth falls open, working to form words. “Now?” She clutches the frog charm on her bracelet, rubbing with anxious fingers, her voice a harsh whisper. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because of this.” I touch her fidgeting hands and drop my arm. “Your excitement about this trip would’ve been ruined by nerves.”

She nods jerkily, her eyes wide and terrified.

The hallway is empty, but I won’t risk a kiss. Instead, I let her see the depths of my support and love in my gaze. “Remember, your sound is the first thing the panel members will judge you on, and they’ll do that in the first thirty seconds.”

“Oh God.” She inhales deeply. “Which pieces do I play?”

“Play what you identify most with, what you feel you play well, and what fits your style and aspirations. Let them see the exquisite heart of Ivory Westbrook.”

I check my watch. It’s time. Turning away, I open the door.

The stadium-style classroom hasn’t changed since all those semesters I spent taking notes right up there in the bleacher seats. The same Steinway grand piano sits in front near the door. It’s like walking into a time warp.

With Ivory at my side, I head toward the middle-aged woman and two lanky old men in the front row. I’ve never met them, but I’ve been in contact with the woman, Gail Gatlin, who stands and crosses the room to greet us.

Her stern gray eyes peer up at me from behind spectacles rimmed in gold. Sandy brown hair combs back from a complexion that probably sees little to no sunshine. Her stature is short and pudgy, yet she radiates confident authority.

She holds out her hand, shaking mine. “Welcome back, Mr. Marceaux.”

“Thanks for seeing us today.” I gesture to Ivory. “This is my protégé, Ivory Westbrook.”

“I’m Mrs. Gatlin.” Gail shakes Ivory’s outstretched hand. “You must be quite something for Mr. Marceaux to bring you

all the way here himself. His appraisal of your talent was convincing enough to gather a panel of judges on a Saturday.”

In other words, don't waste their time. I wouldn't have brought her here if I thought she would.

Gail gestures at the two men waiting in the front row. “We don't usually interact with the candidates, but since this is an unusual audition, it will be somewhat free-form. Begin when you're ready.” She nods at the piano and takes her seat.

Ivory settles behind the Steinway, her fingers rubbing the frog charm. I find a chair off to the side where I have a direct view of her face as she stares at the keyboard.

My leg bounces, and I tense it to stillness. What will she play?

Right now, her smile reminds me of Queensryche's “Silent Lucidity.” The corners of her lips lift in self-possession, the curved peaks arching into luminous competence as she looks her dream straight in the eye. A dream that has only just begun.

But Queensryche won't be in her repertoire. She's researched Leopold for years and knows the audition requires standard pieces from 19th-century concertos, contrasting movements from an unaccompanied Bach partita, and arpeggios in three octaves with double stops.

Whatever she chooses to play, she can nail it with her eyes closed.

Leaning over the keys, she moves her fingers and sways into a slow-burning prelude. I don't immediately recognize the piece. It's not baroque or classical... My breath catches. It's an Irish pop band.

My entire body locks up, my hands curling around the arm rests. What the hell is she doing?

The despairing chords of Kodaline's “All I Want” fill the room with heavy undercurrents of sadness and positivity. The unspoken lyrics scrawl across my mind, a message that can only be interpreted as, *It's over, but I'll find somebody. Life will go on.*

It's a breakup song.

My heart stops, sinking into the snarling pit of denial as the piano notes pound in my head. Why is she playing this? Is it a message to me?

Look at me, Ivory.

Her eyes flicker to mine and return to the keyboard, the fleeting glimpse too quick to read. I ache for her to glance up again, to give me something that will pull me out of this nebulous mindfuck.

I told her I'd follow her anywhere. I brought her here knowing she would get in. I'm fully committed to move back to New York with her. So what the fuck is she trying to tell me? And why is she ruining her audition to do it?

The judges shift uncomfortably in their seats. Any second, they're going to shut her down.

This is going all wrong. No, not wrong. There's so much passion and depth in the way she hits those keys. Her execution is perfect. But the song doesn't show off her technical talents. It most definitely doesn't meet the audition requirements.

Gail holds up a hand in a stopping motion, annoyance biting through her tone. "Miss Westbrook."

Ivory pauses, peering at the woman expectantly.

With a bothered sigh, Gail gestures at the surrounding walls. "This is Leopold. Not School of Pop."

Subtly, slowly, Ivory's eyes shift and connect with mine. In that fragment of a second, I see the heart of the woman I love, and it's smiling at me with radiant resolve. It's merely a moment of eye contact, but I feel her as if she were right beside me, assuring me that all is right in our world. My pulse thrums through my veins.

She knows exactly what she wants, and she's not just telling me. She's showing me in the most earthshaking way possible. In an audition for her dream. Through a song she identifies most with.

I maintain an expression of indifference and calmly fold my hands in my lap. But inside, I'm shaking beneath the shock of realization. She's not breaking up with me. She's saying goodbye to Leopold. What I don't understand is *why*? What changed?

Gail leans back in the chair. "Why do you want to attend this school?"

Shoulders back and spine straight, Ivory lifts her chin. "To learn from the best of the best."

"I see." Gail adjusts her glasses. "What are you looking for in an instructor?"

Ivory smiles, her eyes alight. "Expertise, of course. A firm hand to push me. An untraditional mind to expand my own. And discipline." Her gaze flicks to me and back to the judge. "When it's needed."

Her answer is directed at Gail, but I *know* those words are for me. I embody every trait she mentioned. *I* am her ideal instructor.

Gail's mouth forms a flat line. "Leopold is a traditional school, and our training concentrates on classical, baroque—"

Ivory turns to the keyboard and busts out the hardest section of Balakirev's Islamey.

If she doesn't intend to go to school here, I don't know what she's trying to prove. Nevertheless, the shivering intensity of her performance bangs through the room with gusto. There are no rhythm, note, dynamic errors. Every sound she produces is flawless.

All three judges lean forward in their chairs, eyes wide, mouths parted. Yeah, they're impressed. They fucking should be. I bet they've never seen someone attempt Islamey in an audition, let alone pull it off with immaculate skill.

Ivory cuts the piece short and raises a brow at them. I feel my pride all the way to my toes.

Gail rests her fingers over her mouth then smooths back her hair. "Okay, Miss Westbrook. You have our attention."

Wearing a private smile, Ivory rises, straightens the black dress, and steps toward them. “I’ve spent my entire life saying, ‘I want to get into Leopold.’ Most musicians do, you know? But I’ve been selling myself short. There are some brilliant piano instructors outside these walls. I can happily spend the next however many years perfecting my skill without moving to New York.”

My heart thumps so loudly I wonder if they can hear it across the room. I climb to my feet and step beside Ivory, hands clasped behind my back in silent support.

Gail stands, her expression etched in determination. “I need to converse with my colleagues...” When both men nod to her, she hardens her voice. “We would be honored for you to join us.”

Ivory nods. “Thank you, but I’ve made my decision.”

Extending an arm, Gail hands her a business card. “It’s an open offer. If you don’t find the instructor you’re looking for, this year, next year, or anytime in the future, we’ll have a seat for you.”

Goodbyes are exchanged, and Ivory and I walk silently through the halls, my head pounding with questions.

When we reach an empty courtyard outside, I can no longer hold my tongue. “Tell me why you did that. What the hell changed your mind?”

She wraps her arms around her waist and shudders against the chill in the air. “I don’t want to live here. It’s too cold.”

I hear the smile in her voice and shrug off my jacket, draping it over her shoulders.

She burrows into the wool, keeping her steps in pace with mine. “When I sat behind that piano, I imagined what it would be like learning from an instructor, a mentor, who isn’t you. Then I played the song that fit *me* instead of the requirements. A song that expresses passion and voice, something I’ve never felt through the textbook pieces. The judges didn’t approve, and that’s when I knew.” She stops and blinks up at me. “If I enrolled here, I would be forced to conform under the

instruction of someone who doesn't *know* me while practicing music that doesn't touch me.”

Tendrils of warmth spread through my chest, but I wonder if she's considered all the ramifications. “You won't receive a degree under my tutelage. If you're still aiming for that seat in the symphony, you won't have the pedigree and prestige to put you there.”

She shrugs. “A symphony, a theater, a stadium...the *where* isn't important. I want the lights, the audience, and the music. I guess I have a lot to figure out, and if it turns out that the degree is necessary, I'll get it.” She holds up the business card and smiles.

“That's why you played Islamey.”

“Backup plans are good to have. You never know. My current instructor might set his eyes on another student.” She smirks. “High school teachers have a way of falling fast and ignorantly in love.”

My hand flexes, burning to slam against her ass. “You amaze me.”

She grins. “I try.”

As we meander into the next building, I give her a proper tour. Her interest in the campus focuses on where I spent my time rather than how the facilities would help her if she ever changed her mind. She seems well and truly at peace with her decision.

Since it's the weekend, the halls are dark and vacant. Still, we maintain a professional distance, walking side by side as I point out my favorite stomping grounds and share memories about the people I hung out with.

“I don't get it.” She follows me into a dead-end hallway. “I've known you for eight months, and I've only ever heard you play old-guy rock on the piano.”

“Old-guy rock?”

“Guns N' Roses, Megadeth, AC/DC... I mean, that's your jam, so how did you handle the classical training here if you're

not into it?”

“I was just about to show you.”

At the end of the empty hall, I wiggle the handle on the last door. It opens, and I herd her inside, shutting and locking it behind me.

My hand hits the light switch in reflexive memory, and the overhead fluorescent buzzes to life.

The spartan, soundproofed practice room is big enough to hold the upright piano and two people. She glances around and gives me a confused look.

I lean against the upright. “I spent every day in here, practicing the songs I enjoyed without the rigid instruction of my mentors. I sat right there with my headphones on and my playlist on repeat. This is where I fell in love with metal on the piano.”

She runs a hand along the covered keyboard, inching toward me. “Every day? On this piano?”

“Yes.”

Slipping off the jacket, she drapes it over the bench. “Alone?”

“Of course.”

She stops just out of arm’s reach. “Did you ever bring a girl in here?”

“Just one.” My cock twitches. “Her panties are in danger of being ripped off.”

“I’m not wearing panties.”

Fuck, I’m hard. How did I miss her bare pussy when she was straddling me in the limo?

I glance at the door and remember I locked it.

A wicked grin twists her lips. “Did you jack off in here?”

I cough through a laugh.

She steps in front of me and grips my tie. “You did.”

I totally did.

She glances down at the piano, nibbling on her smile. “I bet you squirted on the keys. I wonder if there’s still—”

“You want to see my come?” I grip her wrist and hold her palm against my erection, desperate for relief. “You can watch it drip out of your cunt.”

My other hand goes to her hair, tangling in the thick strands as I pull her mouth to mine.

The kiss slips past gentle and plunges straight into hard, aggressive strokes. Her fingers squeeze me through the slacks, spurring my hips into motion, rocking against her hand as my tongue lashes and licks in her mouth. I bite down hard on her bottom lip and holy fucking hell, her nails dig into my balls.

I spin her toward the carpeted wall, chest to chest, and pin her arms above her head. She gazes up at me, her lips pouty, sensual, and swollen with lust. It’s that sexy-as-hell look she always gives me after I’ve kissed her into a daze. The kind of kiss that makes her entire body heavy and limp with desire.

Grinding my cock against her pussy, I trail my tongue along her neck. “Remember the first time we were in this position?”

She arches her neck for my mouth. “In the hall on the first day of school. Not quite the same position.”

“I wanted to restrain you just like this and bite your smart mouth.” I sink my teeth into her bottom lip, mercilessly, and release her.

Her breaths quicken. “You scared the shit out of me that day.”

“And now?”

“You scare me in a different way.” She kisses the spot over my heart, making my pulse race. “In the best way.”

“Flatten your palms against the wall.”

As she follows my order, I lean my weight against her, confining her while I tackle my belt, fumbling to loosen it.

Christ, I need her. I'm shaking with the urgency to bury myself inside her and thrust hard, fast, and unapologetically. I don't even care where we are.

I shove my slacks and briefs to my thighs and fist my dick, stroking with one hand as I yank up her dress with the other.

My fingers find her bare, soft, and soaked. Thank God, because I'm already lining up and... Ahhh! Fuck, that first thrust inside her always steals my air. She's so tight, so wet and warm. I let go, not holding back as I slam into her, again and again, lost in the snug clasp of her body.

Her hands stay on the wall, her thighs trembling against mine.

I lift her, hook her legs around my waist, and drive my hips, deeply, viciously. "I fucking love your pussy."

With a moan, she bows her back, ankles crossed against my ass, those dark brown eyes dilated and locked on me.

My body tightens with my desperation to come. She feels too damn good, too fucking perfect wrapped around my cock. I want to explode.

I grip the back of her head and press her mouth against mine. Not kissing. I'm too wild and frantic for that. I lock our lips, holding us tightly together, savoring her breaths, as I groan and thrust and fuck her to climax.

Her chest heaves through a series of rising moans, her hands sliding up and down the wall. The instant she clenches around me and her body shudders in release, I come so fucking hard my head spins. "Fuuuuck!"

I drop my brow to hers and hold her against the wall, lazily kissing and panting through the lingering vibrations of pleasure.

She wraps her arms around my neck, lips parted and teasing mine. "You're all I want."

I stroke my tongue against hers. "You're all I need."

"Mmm. I love that."

I pull from the warmth of her body, knowing I'll be back in it by the end of the day. "We only have twenty-four hours. Time to see the city."

By way of the limo, I give her a whirlwind tour from Central Park to the Statue of Liberty. We walk the crowded streets of Times Square. We dine at a fancy restaurant I had to book two months in advance. Not my thing, but it's something I wanted her to experience.

Late that night, we lie nude in bed in the Presidential Suite at the Four Seasons Hotel. I've been inside her for so long my dick's numb. But in about twenty minutes, I'll be ready to go again.

She watches me with heavy-lidded eyes, her arms extended above her head, wrists bound together with my belt. She doesn't bother moving them or asking me to untie her. I'm not sure she has the energy to speak.

I slide down her curves and kiss her hip, nipping at the bone with enough pressure to make her tremble.

"How did you get into..." She twists her wrists in the shackle of the belt. "This?"

Crawling back up her body, I undo the strap and massage her arms. "When I was fifteen, I found some books stashed away in my dad's office."

Her eyes widen, waking with alertness. "Like dirty sex books?"

I curl my fingers around one of her tits, trussing it up to roll my tongue around the nipple. "BDSM books. Kink. Master/slave stuff. I was instantly"—*hard as a fucking rock*—"intrigued. The next few years, I researched it. Obsessed about it. But I wasn't bold enough to try anything until I went to college."

The vein in her throat pulses. "With a girl here in New York?"

"No one important." I don't even remember her name.

She relaxes against the soft sheets, her fingers mindlessly combing through my hair as I lick, kiss, and caress her tits. She's so damn beautiful I can't keep my hands off her.

Her fingers still in my hair. "What risks did you take today? If I would've accepted a spot at Leopold, what would've happened with your job and the dean?"

"The risks are null. I want you to focus on graduating." I give her a steely look. "Trust me."

"Okay."

Bringing her here didn't put her education at risk. I knew the judges would accept her. If Beverly Rivard is double-dealing behind my back, it won't prevent Ivory from graduating from Le Moyne or achieving the future she wants.

There's only three weeks left of school, and Beverly believes I've already pushed Prescott's enrollment past the application process. I haven't, and I'm not going to. He'll get into a conservatory. It just won't be Leopold. By the time Beverly learns this, Ivory will be graduated and I'll have my resignation turned in.

I've done a lot of soul-searching over the past few months. Ivory wants to learn, and I want to teach. We'll get those things from each other. Then?

She has a very specific image of what her end goal looks like... The lights, the audience, the music. My aspirations aren't much different.

I know exactly how I'll make our dreams align.

EMERIC

The Monday following our New York trip, I find myself sitting in Beverly Rivard's office, exchanging glares with her across the desk. I have no idea why I'm here, only that I was summoned after second period. Is this about Leopold? Andrea Augustin? Prescott? Every possibility is a vindictive intruder trying to penetrate my defenses and steal away my future with Ivory.

The eight months that I've known Ivory have been a goddamn war, the entire world against her and me. But Shane is located—working as a grunt for a construction crew in Tennessee. Lorenzo is still *MIA*—my PI is embarrassed to report the trail went cold.

I've been waiting for the final shoe to drop.

Beverly draws out the silence, watching me with sharp eyes, probably an attempt to make me squirm.

I'm fighting a high-adrenaline battle on the inside, but I hold my posture loose and force a bored look on my face.

She straightens the long sleeves of her suit jacket and pats at the gray-blond bun at her nape. When she finishes her preening, she looks down her nose at me and sniffs. "I have some unfortunate news."

Whatever it is, she seems downright smug about it. That doesn't bode well for me.

I settle back in the chair with exaggerated casualness.

She unlocks the tablet on the desk and meets my eyes. “One of your students was expelled this morning.”

I have dozens of students, but deep down I know, *I fucking know* who she means, and it’s an excruciating punch in the gut.

The second punch comes when she rotates the tablet and slides it across the desk.

A soundless video plays on the screen. It’s grainy and dark around the edges, but the Le Moyne theater stage shines beneath the overhead lights. Front and center is Ivory, rising from the piano in a yellow and white daisy printed dress.

I watch in horror as she steps off the stage, walks to the edge of the screen, and kneels between a disembodied pair of legs. Darkness shrouds everything in front of her. The face, clothes, shoes, nothing identifies the person sitting in the shadows of the front row.

But I remember the seductive look in her eyes before the video shows it. I remember her words before her lips move silently on the screen.

I will crawl to you. Bow to you. Whatever you want, I want. Just...give me this.

My insides harden into fiery embers, hissing steam through my veins. If Beverly’s gaze wasn’t burning into me, if the consequences of this video weren’t boiling me into combustible rage, I would watch the remainder of it with a stiff cock and a hungry smile. Instead, I force myself to watch it as the man Beverly thought she hired. A jaded, insensitive teacher who only cares about his own agenda.

I pace my breathing and mask my expression, elbow on the arm rest, chin resting on a loosely fisted hand. I would turn off the video, but I need to know if the camera angle captured me when I exited.

The footage shows an indistinguishable hand in Ivory’s hair and her head bobbing up and down in a lap. It ends with her following an obscure silhouette into the dark.

Nothing on the video incriminates me. Hard to find relief in that when Ivory’s been kicked out of school three weeks

before her fucking graduation.

Beverly studies my face, her mouth pinched in a line. She's looking for a reaction from me. It takes every ounce of control I have to not give her one as a rapid-fire of questions riddle my thoughts with bleeding holes.

I'm not Ivory's only teacher, but I bet I'm the only one Beverly called in for a video viewing. What does she know? The footage is five months old. How long has she been sitting on it? Why is she just now using it?

Some of those answers might reveal themselves if I understood how and why the theater was equipped with a live camera.

I cock my head. "Signed parental consent is required by law to photograph or film a student, especially when it invades her privacy. What are you thinking? You know those laws are there specifically to protect student misconduct from public attention."

She turns her glare to the tablet in front of me. "The school didn't place the camera. It was someone's personal device."

There we go. That someone is either Andrea Augustin or Prescott. Both knew I moved Ivory's lessons to the theater, and both have a reason to fuck me over. But if they set me up, they would know it was me in the footage.

My pulse hurtles as I push a dispassionate tone through my voice. "Did you interrogate Miss Westbrook before you sent her home?"

"Yes, of course. She refused to...participate."

"Explain."

"She didn't say a word after I showed her the video." She shrugs. "It's her funeral."

Christ, Ivory must be freaking the fuck out right now. Why hasn't she called me?

My temperature rises, but I maintain a cool façade. "She wouldn't tell you the identity of the boy in the video?"

Beverly huffs. “She wouldn’t answer *any* of my questions.”

In a student-teacher affair, the student is a victim and therefore immune to school punishment or criminal action. All Ivory had to do was say my name, and she would’ve been exonerated.

Instead, she let Beverly assume her sexual misconduct was with another student, knowing it would result in her own expulsion. Four years at Le Moyne, and she gave up her high school diploma. A Le Moyne diploma. One that her father sacrificed everything for her to receive.

And she walked away from it.

To protect me.

I’ll rectify that right now.

“That’s me.” I tap the video screen.

Beverly blinks. “Mr. Marceaux—”

“Surely you figured that out based on the substantial size of the cock.” I grin. “I can pull it out if you need proof.”

She looks like she’s going to throw up, but beneath the disgust, there isn’t a hint of shock. “I don’t know what you’re up to, but I don’t believe for a minute you intend to ruin your career and go to jail for that...that...” She winces at my murderous glare. “*Girl.*”

The evidence of how deep I will go for Ivory is rotting at the bottom of a Louisiana swamp.

I pull the phone from my pocket and call her.

Beverly stretches an arm across the desk. “What are you doing?”

“Emeric.” The sound of Ivory’s tear-soaked voice makes my chest cave in.

I press the phone tighter to my ear. “Where are you?”

“Sitting in the parking lot.” Her tone rises an octave. “Oh God, Emeric. I wanted to call you, but I was afraid you would

be with the dean and—”

“I’m with her now.” I smile at the sight of Beverly viciously grinding her jaw. “Come back inside.”

“But I’m—”

“You’re not expelled. Go directly to her office.” I end the call.

Beverly jerks forward, hands fisted on the desk and eyes hard and tapered. “I’m going to turn you in to the authorities.”

Except she hasn’t made the call yet.

Because she still needs my referral for Prescott. And because misconduct between a student and teacher would be bad publicity for Le Moyne.

“Let’s get to the point, Beverly.” I set the phone on my knee and drum my fingers against it. “It’s clear you pulled this video out of your arsenal to get rid of Ivory. Tell me why you chose today, of all days, to do it.”

She straightens and draws in a deep breath. “I received a disturbing call last night.” An angry flush rises up her neck. “You took her to Leopold. For an audition.”

My assumptions were right about her double-dealing connections. “Who called you?”

“Someone who has access to the admittance records. The Leopold faculty is all in a buzz about the young virtuoso from Le Moyne. Yet not one person there has mentioned Prescott’s name.”

I’m going to go out on a limb here. “Prescott set up that camera and gave it to you months ago. You didn’t want to use it because you didn’t want the scandal. Now you’re panicking, because you realized I have no intention of pushing your worthless son past the auditions.”

One, he’s not good enough for Leopold. Two, I’ve drawn attention to myself after Ivory’s audition. The Leopold faculty would question why I didn’t bring Prescott for an audition as well. Someone would dig, and it would lead to my mom’s involvement.

Beverly called me in so she could deliver Ivory's *unfortunate news* herself and gloat over having the upper hand. She expected me to let Ivory take the fall alone and push Prescott through to keep my job.

Now, in a weak grasp at straws, she's threatening to call the authorities. Except the video doesn't implicate me.

She's got nothing.

I pull the tablet closer and launch a browser. "Ivory will graduate from Le Moyne, and you will treat her with the utmost respect."

"No!" Beverly glares at me so hard I think her eyeballs might burst. "I want her out of my school."

Logging onto a cloud storage platform, I access the account I set up in the event Beverly decides to be a bitch.

Kicking Ivory out of school? Definitely a bitch.

I cue up the first video and turn the tablet, rather enjoying the symbolic turning of tables.

Beverly snatches it from my hand. As she stares at the screen, her fingers clench around the plastic casing.

A fist knocks softly on the door.

I leave Beverly to watch her husband pile drive Deb's ass and open the door. I'm met with huge brown eyes, red-rimmed and swollen.

Ivory silently steps in. I shut the door, tangle our fingers together, and guide her to one of the chairs in front of Beverly's desk.

We sit side by side, hand in hand. She moves her gaze from our fingers to Beverly then to my face, her eyebrows lifting in question.

I would love to kiss her, but that might be pushing it. "Beverly was just about to tell you to return to class."

Beverly looks up from the screen, her complexion a sheet of white. She doesn't cry or rage or freeze up. I suspect she already knew her husband cheated. But given her strong need

to maintain an image that captivates and impresses everyone around her, she wouldn't want anyone to know her marriage is a steaming pile of shit.

I imagine right about now she's mentally shitting herself as she thinks through the fallout if those videos were ever made public. Her career as dean? Fucked. Her husband's face on all his car commercials? Forever associated with the money shot on Deb's ass. Prescott's connections to other colleges? As worthless as his musical ability.

With a look of defeat, she powers off the tablet and sets it down. "What do you want?"

I squeeze Ivory's hand. "I already told you."

Beverly sets her jaw. "I can't allow this..." She waves a hand between us. "To go on in my school. End things with Miss Westbrook."

Like hell. But I'm willing to compromise. "Ivory stays. I'll submit my resignation immediately."

Ivory flinches beside me. "Emeric, don't—"

I cinch my fingers around her wrist in a tight shackle, reminding her to trust me. I have her.

My unwavering gaze narrows on Beverly. "Tell Ivory to return to class."

Beverly stares at me from across the desk, her eyes deep cauldrons of hatred. "Miss Westbrook, return to class."

IVORY

I wake the same way I do most mornings. Drowsy, happy, horny. Except today is different.

Today, I'm a drowsy, happy, horny Le Moyne Academy *graduate*.

Yesterday's ceremony was held in the campus theater. The very same theater that almost cost me that diploma. Stogie and Emeric's parents were there. The dean demanded Emeric not show his face, though I'm certain I glimpsed his fedora in the crowd. When I asked him about it, he kissed me into a warm, gooey stupor. I'd love one of those kisses now.

I reach behind me, expecting to bump into warm skin. Instead, I encounter cold, vacant blankets.

Blowing out a breath, I sit up and glance at the clock. *7:13 AM*.

Damn him. He told me the morning workouts would stop. I hate waking up alone.

I climb out of bed, wrap a robe around my nude body, and set off to find him.

Ten minutes later, I come up empty and check the garage. The GTO is gone. Maybe he's picking up breakfast?

As I shuffle into the kitchen, something moves in my periphery. "The hell?"

I spin just as a tiny streak of black darts across the floor and disappears around the island. Is there a rat in the house?

Cautiously, I tiptoe around the corner and gasp. “Oh my... What?” I cover my smile with trembling fingers.

One look at those bright yellow eyes turns my vision into a wet blur.

A kitten. He brought a kitten home. My throat closes up.

Coal black fur covers the cat’s body from the peaks of the ears to the tip of the tail. I press my lips together as a sob rises up.

In the next heartbeat, I’m fucking crying. A damn mess of soggy snivels, runny nose, and noisy hiccups for no reason that makes sense. I did the same thing when my dad gave me Schubert.

I wipe my cheeks with the backs of my hands and slowly lower into a crouch, careful not to scare... Him? Her? Knowing Emeric, he’d want another male in the house.

Excitement races through me when I spy two charms hanging from the black collar.

I offer my hand in greeting. He sniffs my fingers, marks them, and makes me his. I melt.

Scooping him up, I nuzzle him against my neck and sink into the vibrating purr. I missed this so much.

With shaking fingers, I examine the silver charms. The first is a round ID tag with a name engraved. *Kodaline*.

The Irish pop band I played at my audition.

I shake my head, grinning. God, I love that man of mine.

The second charm is a heart-shaped locket with a raised treble clef on the front. I open the latch and a tiny folded note falls into my palm.

Sliding into the nearest stool, I set Kodaline on my lap and unravel the teeny piece of paper.

It’s an address in the French Quarter. Scrawled beneath the street name in his sexy male penmanship is, *Don’t keep me waiting*.

What has he done now?

I smile as I shower, fix my hair, and slip on a casual black rockabilly dress with gray rose print. The strapless bodice seductively hugs my cleavage. A flirty bow ties at the waist, and the skirt flares at the knees. I pair it with comfortable red pin-up pumps—as comfortable as heels can be anyway. The flats would be more practical, but I want to look good for him, for whatever he has planned.

My grin grows bigger and bigger on the drive there, making my cheeks ache in its refusal to go away. Smiling is as much a part of me as the clothes he picks out, the pain he pleasures me with, and the music he resonates in my heart.

With the address mapped on my phone, I follow the directions to a popular breakfast place in the French Quarter. The warm breeze kisses my face as I walk quickly along the flagstone passageway, surrounded by the ambiance of New Orleans' salient history and architecture.

Sunlight glints off the steeples, gables, and dormered rooftops. Dew clings to the gas lamp posts. Eager tourists gather around the vendors setting up booths beneath the blooming trees in Jackson Square. It's a beautiful southern morning. How could I have ever moved away from this?

I step into the restaurant and immediately spot him in a corner booth sipping his coffee. His blue eyes find mine, and for the second time this morning, I melt.

He watches me intently as I cross the busy dining room, his gaze roaming up and down and deep inside me.

When I reach the table, he stands and laces our fingers together. "You look ravishing."

Black hair falls over the cropped sides in disheveled strands, no doubt molested by his fingers since the moment he woke. His cobalt blue button-up matches his eyes and hangs open over a white t-shirt. The relaxed denim of his jeans sits low on his tapered hips, a fit so perfect it's as if every thread was woven to embrace his long-legged strides and cup his impressive bulge.

He looks like a man who intends to spend a lazy day strolling along the pier. Maybe that's the plan?

"You look damn fine yourself." I smile up at him. Rather than sitting across from him, I follow him in on his side, wrap my arms around his wide shoulders, and hold my lips to his. "Thank you for Kodaline."

"Fast friends, I take it?"

"Insta-love."

He steers the conversation through breakfast, keeping the chit-chat carefree and unassuming. He hasn't told me how he spent my last three weeks of school, but his entire demeanor has been focused and fueled with purpose. When I pry, it's always the same response. *Trust me.*

I'm getting that look now, the *wait-and-see* glimmer in his eyes. I don't care what he's keeping from me. I'm content to simply enjoy his company, holding his hand as his girlfriend and kissing his lips in public. No more hiding or living in fear. We're finally free.

After breakfast, we meander along the narrow streets of the French Quarter, fingers intertwined, sharing lingering glances and smiles.

With shops below and homes above, the rows of buildings dazzle with scrolling brackets of hand-wrought iron, fluted ionic columns, and balconies famous for bead tossing.

He stops in front of one of these structures, pulls a keyring from his pocket, and tilts his head up. I follow his gaze and lose my breath.

A huge, round sign dangles on metal chains from beneath the towering overhang. Framed in black wrought iron scrollwork, the name of the business makes my mouth go dry.

Emeric and Ivory

Dueling Piano Bar

My breath returns in a whoosh, only to be taken again as Emeric swoops me off my feet. Cradling me against his chest, he unlocks the glass door and carries me over the threshold.

“Holy shit.” My heart pounds. My arms shiver. My entire body floats through a dream. “How did you—? When did you—? This is ours? I can’t even.”

“Easy.” He sets me down on wobbly legs and locks the door behind us. “Deep breaths.”

My chest heaves as I take in the deep mahogany walls, Gothic mirrors, and black and ivory mosaic floor tiles. It’s classy and sophisticated, trendy and cocktail lounge-ish. Right in the heart of the French Quarter, the property value alone on this place must’ve cost him millions. I’m stunned into stupefied silence.

Two grand pianos sit on a platform at the center, facing away from each other. The keyboards are close enough together to share the long bench between them. Those will be *our* pianos? Where we’ll play together? With the lights, the audience, the music?

“Oh my God, Emeric. Pinch me.”

He does, right on the nipple, hard enough to make me yelp.

Leading me to the ornate wrap-around bar, he leans against the edge. “When I bought it a few months ago, I tried to find a loophole, but because of this”—he points at the shelves of liquor on the wall—“your name won’t be on the business license until you’re twenty-one.” He lifts my hand and presses a kiss to my fingers. “By then you’ll be Mrs. Ivory Marceaux.”

My heart sings a swooning melody. “You sure about that?”

“You bet your sweet ass.” He slams his palm against my butt with an echoing *whack*. “Go explore.”

There’s so much to take in I’m trembling against the significance of it. A piano bar. Just like my dad.

Shivery, joyous tears fall down my cheeks as I make a circuit around high-top tables, soft red velvet chairs, and black leather settees. Candlelight chandeliers illuminate the space in a warm glow. And the pianos...

I pause beside one of the Steinways, and my finger instantly finds a familiar scratch on the lid. My watery gaze

latches onto Emeric across the room.

Braced against the bar, he slides a stick of gum in his mouth and crosses his ankles. “I bought it the day I met Stogie. It’s yours.”

I glance back at the piano and swallow around the happiness swelling in my throat. “You’re going to make me ugly cry.”

“I’ll buy you a piano every day for the rest of your life just to see your beautiful tears.” He prowls toward me, hands clasped behind his back.

That look in his eyes, the devotion rimmed in desire, is my centering pitch, my musical note, the one that induces the perfect wave of vibrations inside me, balancing me.

He moves up behind me, slips an arm around my waist, and holds me against him, his cock hardening against my ass. “Stogie sold his shop.”

I glance back at him, startled.

He brushes his mouth against my ear. “Pain in the ass won’t retire, but we worked something out. He’s helping me with the inventory and hiring, and I set him up in one of those Creole townhouses a block away.”

Overcome with emotions, I try to unscramble my brain, parsing through everything he’s done and the future he’s spread out before me. “What about your teaching? How does this bar fulfill that?”

“I still have you. When you outgrow me—”

“I’ll never outgrow you.”

“—there’s a full second floor with a separate entrance in back. I’ll open a School of Old-guy Rock to the public and teach metal on the piano.”

Wow. He’s thought of everything, which leaves me with only one thing to say.

Thank you. I could vocalize it a million times over, but I don’t have to. He sees the salty rivers coursing down my

cheeks. He feels the trembling of my body against his. He hears the rushing whistle in my breaths.

Words aren't needed because we have something better. Our own notes. It's just us and our song, the tune pulsing between us, nourishing, fusing, and making us one.

He turns me in his arms and clutches me snugly against him. I lock my hands behind his back, rest my cheek on the warm wall of his chest, and close my eyes as he sways us to the beat of our hearts. Someday soon, we'll do this, right here, as the crowd applauds and cheers and pleads for an encore.

I sigh. Reality is better than any dream I imagined.

He hooks a finger beneath my chin, lifts my face, and puts his mouth on mine. He tastes like cinnamon and desire, his firm lips a devouring comfort of familiarity.

He passes me his gum with a roll of his tongue. The next sweeping stroke reclaims it. The bite of his teeth on my lip holds us together.

His hands slide beneath the dress and grip the backs of my thighs, lifting me to the edge of the piano so he can deepen the kiss. So he can tease his fingers between my legs. So he can rip—

There go my panties, tossed in a shred of silk behind him.

I grasp at his sexy hair as his fingers sink inside me, my tissues rioting beneath the sensual affection of his touch. His other hand yanks down the bodice of my dress. Then his lips are there, wrapped around my nipple, sucking it deep into his hot mouth.

My head falls back, my spine bowing against the brace of his arm at my back as moans spill from my mouth. Jesus, he knows how to work those fingers. On the piano. In my pussy. Around my heart.

I love this man. I love him, and when he's ninety and I'm eighty, I'll still love him. I grin at the image of his wrinkly body.

His eyes lift to mine, and his mouth releases my nipple. “What’s so funny?”

I trace the wet curve of his lip with a finger. “When you’re too old to get it up, I’ll still love you.”

He curls his fingers inside me and puts his face in mine, baring his teeth in a wicked smile. “Viagra, sweetheart.”

I shake my head. He has a solution for everything.

He removes his fingers from inside me and tackles the button on his jeans. “I’ve spent every day here for the last three weeks.” He releases his zipper and yanks the skirt of my dress out of the way. “Every day imagining fucking you here, just like this.”

“You could’ve told me.” I balance on the ledge of the piano, my bare legs trembling around his hips. “I would’ve come.”

“Oh, Ivory.” He notches the broad head of his cock against my pussy. “You’re going to come.”

His gaze holds mine as he thrusts. A low deep groan rumbles in his chest.

Pleasure floods my body in whipping torrents, one on top of the other, gathering into an overwhelming haze of need.

He kisses me passionately as our bodies slide together, rocking against the edge of the piano. My fingers sink into his hair. Our breaths mingle in a harmony of panting groans, and my hips absorb the impact of his as he fucks us into a wild and frantic crescendo.

His eyes never leave mine as he wraps a hand around my throat. He squeezes, and I whimper against the blissful pressure.

I love the way he holds me. “Harder.”

His fingers tighten, and he drives his hips faster, ruthless in his urgency.

We strain toward each other, hands clutching, eyes locked as we soar, lost in our private world of notes and dreams.

IVORY

Three years later.

People from all over the world come to the French Quarter for food, culture, and *music*. Bourbon Street is an endless party, day and night. Our dueling piano bar is smack at the center of it, booming with the overflow of enthusiastic tourists. Most nights, the line out the door snakes around two blocks.

The sound of laughter, clinking glasses, and scuffing shoes charges the atmosphere with excitement. We're so crammed in tonight the combined body heat stifles the air, made hotter by the bright lights above me.

I shudder with happy nerves and take a long draw from my beer, returning it to the shelf on my piano.

Stogie sits behind the bar, as old as the ninety-year rafters, smiling a youthful smile. Laura and Frank Marceaux sip their drinks in the seating area, surrounded by their friends.

Sharing the bench beside me, Emeric faces the other way, the shift of his hips creating a pleasurable glide against mine.

Our pianos sit in opposite directions and slightly off-center to allow elbow room as we play side by side.

He leans back against the keyboard of my piano, his eyes sweeping over my fitted ivory dress. "You look good enough to eat tonight, Mrs. Marceaux."

I take in his jeans, white t-shirt, and gray fedora, and damn near purr with appreciation. “Hope you’re hungry, Mr. Marceaux.”

“Endlessly.” He launches at me, gripping my hair and giving me a kiss so scandalous the crowd explodes in whistles and catcalls.

When he breaks the kiss, my body swims in his lingering heat.

I focus on his bright blue eyes. “What are we dueling first?”

Grinning, he poises his fingers on his keyboard and nudges his shoulder against mine. “Guns N’ Roses.”

I tilt my smile upward and shiver beneath the lights. “And Kodaline.”

Then the music begins...

For more sexy and emotional romance from Pam Godwin, be sure to read ONE IS A PROMISE now >

OVERTURE

By
SKYE WARREN

CHAPTER ONE

Beethoven would count out exactly sixty coffee beans each time he had a cup

SAMANTHA

The whir of the espresso machine lures me downstairs.

I'm not naturally an early riser, especially on a Saturday, but Liam always waits for me. The food could get cold, but he'd still be there, with his newspaper and his endless patience and his deep green eyes.

He gives me a small nod in greeting.

Only the sound of foaming milk breaks the morning quiet. There's avocado toast with walnut oil and fresh lemon juice at my place. On the other side of the table, scrambled egg whites and steamed broccoli. A ritual we've shared for the past six years...

And it's going to end in a matter of weeks when I graduate high school.

When I turn eighteen. When I leave for the music tour that will take me around the country and across the globe... away from the man I've come to need more than I should.

"The interviewer from *Classical Notes* should be here at noon," he says, handing me a steaming mug with Earl Grey and lavender and a liberal splash of cream. He would never use anything as sweet and unnecessary as cream in his own drinks, but thankfully he's never controlled what I eat. He only controls everything else.

The reporter is doing a profile on me for the magazine. The famous child prodigy. *Ugh*. That's the last thing a seventeen-year-old girl wants to be called—a child.

I'm almost an adult now, but the label follows me around.

I take a fortifying sip of the hot liquid, closing my eyes against the burn. When I open them again, Liam looks at me with a strange expression. That's when I realize I let out a moan of pleasure. "Sounds good," I say a little too brightly, trying to cover my embarrassment.

He clears his throat and takes a seat at the head of the table. "Right. Well. I doubt the interview will take very long. I'll let him know you need to practice."

A strange thrill moves through me. Defiance? Not exactly, but I feel energized all the same. He doesn't have to protect me anymore. And soon he won't have the right. The tour is going to change everything for me—and between us. I look forward to it as much as I dread it. "I do need to practice, but you don't have to rush the interview."

"Remember," he says as if I hadn't spoken. "You don't have to answer anything you don't like. If a question gets too personal, I'll step in."

My cheeks heat. Of course I know why he's being so protective. There were some disastrous interviews when I was six, seven, eight years old. Daddy didn't care to be in the room with me. Some of the questions would be inappropriate or downright aggressive. The classical music world is basically a viper's nest, and child prodigies are regarded with a mixture of awe and distrust.

And then there was the interviewer from a national newspaper. He had been ushered into the drawing room and left alone with me for thirty uncomfortable minutes, where he coaxed me to sit on his lap and nuzzled my neck. Daddy's aide found me crying in a closet hours later.

All of that is in the past. I'm no longer a scared little girl.

I shrug as if it doesn't bother me. "These classical music reporters ask the same questions. Who's my favorite

composer? Who do I want to play with in the future?”

Liam’s stern expression doesn’t waver. No doubt he remembers how I had trembled before the first interview, shortly after he got custody of me. I’d brokenly shared the story with him. At the time I was too afraid that he would give me away if I didn’t tell the truth, to make anything up. So I told him about the reporter who held me on his lap. From that moment on I never did an interview alone. Liam is always there, always protecting me.

“Who *do* you want to play with?” he asks, his tone mild. As if he hasn’t heard me wax poetic about my favorite violinists and maestros for years.

“I should say Harry March.” He’s the celebrity tenor headlining the tour. The rest of us have notoriety only in the classical music world. Harry March, with his crossover pop songs and playboy lifestyle, is basically a household name.

“You should say whatever’s the truth,” Liam counters.

“Well, I *am* excited about the tour.” And I’m aware that the only reason I got the soloist spot is because the famous solo cellist on the Billboard Top 100 was Harry March’s lover—until their dramatic breakup that was covered by TMZ. “It’s an incredible opportunity, especially considering I haven’t been touring.”

My cheeks flush because I hadn’t meant to say that. It sounds like an accusation, even though it isn’t. Well, not exactly.

Liam is the reason I haven’t been touring.

“Because you wanted a well-rounded education,” he says.

“Right.” The word comes out hollow because it doesn’t really matter what I think. Or at least it didn’t matter for a long time. If Liam had said I wanted to be a circus clown, I would have gone along with it as a scared twelve-year-old girl. All I’d wanted was a place to call home.

Liam gave me that, which means more than he can ever know.

Soon I'm graduating from that well-rounded education. I'm going to turn eighteen. And then I'll leave on the tour, walking away from the only home I've ever known.

LIAM

The doorbell rings at exactly noon. I like punctuality, but I'd like it even better if members of the press never spoke to Samantha Brooks again. I've limited their access to her greatly—maybe even to her detriment, considering press helps her get concert invitations and recording contracts.

I never planned to have children, and at the age of twenty-eight I had hardly been in a position to be the father of a twelve-year-old girl. That's exactly what happened when a judge signed the papers giving me guardianship of Samantha. Her mother had been long gone. Her father had just died. Her brother had no interest in a sister he'd never known.

Somehow the two of us, complete and utter strangers, became a family.

The sweet strains of the violin follow me downstairs. She practices every day before school. Every day after school. Every weekend. It's become the dew that coats every part of my life, a fresh breath of daylight in a world of dark.

It's hard to believe that in only a few weeks the house will be silent. I steel my expression into remoteness. It isn't the stodgy old reporter's fault that I resent the tour that will take Samantha away from me—and the press that's naturally a part of it.

"Hello." A woman in a sleek suit gives me a slow smile. "You must be Liam North."

My eyebrows rise. This isn't an aging gentleman with white hair and a plaid sweater vest. Maybe the magazine thought a woman would be able to connect better with Samantha. The thought gives me pause. Maybe she's been missing a female influence in her life.

Dating has been the last thing on my mind the past six years.

“That’s me.” I shake her hand. “I’m going to sit in on the interview.”

She purses ruby-red lips. “Why?”

Already this interview is going differently than the last one. The older gentleman had spent more time reminiscing about meeting Fritz Kreisler to ask too many questions. When he remembered to do the actual interview, he asked the kinds of standard questions Samantha remembered at breakfast. What routine do you have to warm up? What’s the hardest piece you’ve played?

The man hardly noticed that I was in the room except to send me a reproving glance when he asked about her schooling. Why not attend a performing arts school? Did she want to move to New York City or London where she could have more exposure to professional musicians?

“Because I’m her legal guardian,” I say, not bothering to hide the steel beneath the words.

“Does that mean she isn’t allowed to speak her mind?”

Christ. I have half a mind to slam the door on this reporter’s face. I don’t trust her as far as I could throw her. If this were six years ago, I would do just that.

It could risk Samantha’s involvement in the tour, though. She earned the right to do this. I may be her legal guardian, but not for much longer.

“It means it’s my job to protect her from members of the press who are more interested in a juicy story than the privacy of an underage young woman.” I keep my voice level, but there’s no mistaking my meaning. If she tries to pull anything in front of Samantha, she’s gone.

The reporter smiles. “I’ll be on my best behavior then. And if I step out of line, maybe we can meet up after and you can teach me a lesson I won’t forget.”

I stare after her as she heads into the house, following the sound of the violin without knowing the way. That’s how rusty I am at dating—that it takes me a second to realize she was

flirting with me. I have a feeling it's more than flirting. An offer. She would be in my bed tonight if I wanted her.

So why don't I want her? She's a beautiful woman, there's no doubt. And it's not like I have an abundance of options spending my days here at the compound. I don't date any of my employees or anyone who lives in Kingston. It might lead to complications. Come to think of it, I'm in the middle of a dry spell that's pretty damn long.

I already know that I'm not going to take the pretty reporter up on her offer. It has something to do with the violinist she's here to interview. *Because I don't want anything to distract from my duties as her guardian.* At least that's what I tell myself.

Samantha's face in rapture as she takes the first sip of her hot tea flashes through my mind. I'm afraid my reasons for abstaining may be something far more base.

No, that can't be right. Samantha is my responsibility. I'm sixteen years older than her and in a position of power. I absolutely cannot think of the small moan she made.

My body reacted to the sound with instant carnal hunger.

I grit my teeth and follow the reporter to the music room because I'll be damned if I'm going to let this interview get out of hand. Something tells me this reporter is eager enough to push her luck. No one messes with Samantha Brooks—not even me.

CHAPTER TWO

A single violin is made from over seventy individual pieces of wood

SAMANTHA

I can tell from the moment the reporter steps into the room that everything will be different. She has hair so glossy and curled—I didn't know it could look that way outside of a magazine. Her eyebrows belong in some kind of YouTube tutorial. And she's dressed like we're in a New York City high-rise instead of a small-town ex-military compound. The house is large and expensive, with marble floors and crown molding—but it's clearly designed to hold men.

Lots of men. Everything large and solid. Very few women ever walk through these rooms. There are some women who work for North Security. My friend Laney's mom is on the Red Team, for example. They're rare. And when they do come around, they dress and act as tough as the men—tougher, because they *need* to be tougher to survive in what's still mostly a man's world. A housekeeping service comes once a week, but they wear uniforms and comfortable, sturdy tennis shoes.

Nothing like the blush heels she wears.

She gives me a warm smile. “You must be Samantha. I'm Kimberly Cox. Of course I've read all about you. And that sounded absolutely lovely. I can see why everyone loves you.”

“Oh.” My cheeks turn warm. “Thank you. I'm not sure everyone loves me.”

“When I spoke with Harry March a couple weeks ago, he said he was dying to meet you.”

A startled laugh bursts out of me, embarrassing because it’s so inappropriate. She must be exaggerating. Maybe she wants some kind of reaction? A lot of girls have crushes on Harry March. A lot of boys, too. “Well, that’s very kind of him. I’m really excited to meet him, too.”

She pauses, glancing around the room. “So this is where the magic happens.”

“I don’t like much distraction,” I say, feeling as if I have to make excuses for the bare walls. The room is large enough for a whole orchestra to play in, almost a full ballroom, but there’s only me. A single chair, not even cushioned. A stand for sheet music and my phone.

Liam appears in the doorway behind her, looking stern and... strange, somehow. His eyes have turned almost olive, a haunting color. He must have noticed that Kimberly Cox is nothing like the other classical music journalists we’ve met. Does he like the way she looks? Of course he likes the way she looks.

She’s beautiful, and his eyes work just fine.

He doesn’t say anything, only leans back against the doorframe—watching. Probably watching her. He’s already seen me. I’m not the one with flawless eyeliner and amazing calf muscles.

Something dark and a little green stirs in my center. Is this jealousy? Oh my God, I’m jealous of this woman and the way that Liam North must think of her. Sexually, that’s how he must think of her. As a grown woman. Not a child.

“There’s a speaker system,” I say, nervous energy making me speak. I pull up my phone and play Schubert. “Der Erlkönig” streams in perfect, terrible angst from all corners of the room. “That’s how I practice accompaniments.”

She cocks her head, listening. “This piece was based on a poem, wasn’t it?”

“A child was taken by a monster in the woods.” The high-pitched notes are the child’s cries, and in response the father replies in low, placating reassurance.

It turns out to be an empty promise. The poem doesn’t end happily. I press the Pause button on the app to stop the music. Silence reverberates in the room.

“Is there somewhere we can sit and talk?” Kimberly asks, glancing around at the empty room, where there are no other chairs except mine.

“My office,” Liam says, striding between us and pushing open the door that separates the two rooms. His office is just as large as the music room, with a sitting area in front of gleaming walnut bookcases.

I take one of the armchairs while Kimberly takes the other.

Liam starts to close the doors, with him inside.

The reporter clears her throat. “Actually I was hoping to have a moment alone to interview Ms. Brooks. I know you’re concerned about her, but she seems more than capable of speaking for herself.”

A shadow passes over Liam’s green eyes, turning them moss. “I made it clear that the answer to that is no. If you don’t follow the rules, you’ll have to leave.”

Kimberly doesn’t look surprised or taken aback by his hard tone. “Don’t you think Samantha can make that decision? There will be lots of interviews on the tour, and you won’t be there, will you?”

My stomach clenches because she’s right. For so long I’ve done my best to be the good, obedient girl. *If you don’t follow the rules, you’ll have to leave.* That’s been my greatest fear. Except I did follow the rules, all of them, and I’m still going to graduate and turn eighteen.

I still have to leave.

“I’ll do it,” I say, my voice soft.

Liam turns to me. “No, Samantha. She doesn’t get to dictate what happens in this house.”

No, I think, *only you get to do that*. “I’ll think of it like practice,” I say instead. “There will be lots of press stops on the tour, and I should be able to do this.”

He frowns, and I think for a moment he might refuse. “I’ll be right outside,” he says, his voice dark. There’s no question that I could have this woman off the property. The part of me that’s small and jealous wants her gone, where Liam can’t see her. Where he can’t get turned on and think about sex and maybe even ask her out on a date.

The bigger part of me knows that she has nothing to do with it. There are beautiful women all over the world, and Liam North has no doubt dated many of them. He’s always been careful to keep that part of his life hidden from me, part of his iron control and discipline, but that doesn’t mean he’s a monk. Does it?

I’m desperate to know something, *anything* about Liam’s sex life.

Kimberly gives me a rueful smile as the door closes behind him. “I don’t think I made a new friend with him. He sounded pretty strict about staying in the room with you.”

“He’s just protective,” I say, feeling defensive of him, even though it would probably be better if she thinks he’s an asshole. “You never really know what you’re getting with reporters.”

For example, sometimes they show up thirty years younger than you think.

She leans closer and gives me a conspiratorial smile. “All the more reason for him to be gone while we talk about your personal life.”

“Oh.” I blink, trying to make sense of her words. “I thought you... well, I thought you’d ask me about my favorite composer and who I want to work with.”

“I’m assuming your favorite composer hasn’t changed from the interview you did for BBC last year. As for who you want to work with, you should probably say Harry March even if that’s not true.”

A huff of laughter escapes me. “Okay, so what do you want to ask me?”

“My readers want to know the person behind the violin. They already know they’re going to get your best when they buy a ticket. They want to know something they can’t see onstage. What do you love about your best friend? Who’s the last boy you kissed?”

Unease moves inside me. “I’m not dating anyone.”

“Oh, come now,” she says, coaxing. “There must be someone you’re interested in. I know that you attend St. Agnes. That must give you even more opportunity to meet boys than if you only had tutors.”

There is someone I’m interested in, but it’s wholly inappropriate. Wrong on every level. Completely forbidden. I barely even let myself think it, but Liam is the only person that comes to mind when I dream about kissing or sex. “It’s really just me and my violin,” I say, trying to sound breezy.

I think that’s how a woman of the world should sound. Someone who doesn’t have a crush on the man who’s been her guardian for the past six years. That crush feels painfully childish with this woman sitting in front of me, everything about her sexy and grown-up.

Thankfully she moves on to asking about friends and about school. Safe questions.

When she’s done, she closes her notebook with a brusque *snap*. “Thank you so much for talking with me, Samantha. I appreciate your time and your candor.”

My gaze hits the floor because I wasn’t completely honest. It’s not that I feel guilty about that exactly. I don’t owe a random reporter my deepest secrets. But I do feel guilty about having the secret, about having a crush on the man who’s only ever protected me.

That man waits in the hallway when Kimberly opens the door. “Just the person I wanted to see,” she says. “The rest of my questions are for you.”

CHAPTER THREE

The smallest violin comes in size 1/64th, perfect for children aged two and three

LIAM

Christ.

Samantha stands behind the reporter, her eyes wide with curiosity. And something else. Betrayal? “Questions for me?” I ask, keeping my expression blank. I sure as hell hope she isn’t coming on to me with my ward in the same room.

Kimberly gives me a wry smile. “Part of my interview process. I like to speak to the important people in the musician’s lives, get their perspectives.”

I’ve been an important person in Samantha’s life for the past six years. It wasn’t a role I particularly wanted, but now that I’m here—the thought of her leaving makes me feel hollow. “I see.”

“We can use your office,” the reporter prompts.

“Right,” I say, hiding my reluctance. I don’t want to discuss my feelings for Samantha with anyone. They cut too deep for words. I don’t want to hinder her press opportunity. The way she stood up to me when she asked to speak to the reporter alone—it was a small thing, but it was new. God, she’s going to be eighteen in a few weeks. I can support her independence... even if it kills me.

I stand aside to hold the door open for Samantha to leave. The last thing I need is her watching me while I talk about...

what, exactly? My perspective, whatever that means. There's a dark undercurrent to my thoughts about her. Like the way I keep thinking of her expression as she moaned.

The betrayal in her wide brown eyes gets deeper as she passes by me on her way to the hallway. She's hurt because I'm kicking her out of the room. She'd be hurt a lot more if she knew these thoughts I have about her. That's why I plan on tamping them down—way down.

I close the door and glare at a knot in the wood. *Get your shit together, North.*

I've done some limited press for my company, making formal comments on the security for a high-profile client when it's required. More than that, I'm on conference calls with some of the highest-ranking politicians in the country. Nothing rattles me.

The look of betrayal in Samantha's eyes—that rattles me.

I don't join the reporter at the armchairs. Instead I take a seat behind my desk, leaving her to sit on the other side. "Your questions?" I ask, my tone brusque.

She sits down in a businesslike manner. "Thanks for taking the time, Mr. North. I understand that you've had custody of Samantha Brooks for six years."

"That's right."

"How is it that you became her guardian?"

"Her father passed away in—"

"Of course, the death of Ambassador Brooks is a matter of public record. I'm referring to the fact that you aren't related to Samantha through either blood or marriage."

The question hits me like a sledgehammer. I should have seen it coming. Years of military strategy should have prepared me for this, but I'm blindsided. For six years no one has asked me this question beyond the perfunctory reason that her father died. Her school, the society that awarded her a grant. I suppose it's alarming that someone could so easily

take custody of a child that isn't theirs. A well-placed donation to a cause and a back-room deal with lawyers.

That's all it took to make Samantha mine.

She knows we're not related, but she thinks I was friends with her father. I could use that line with the reporter, but it sounds like she's done her homework.

How deep has she been digging?

"I knew her father," I say, choosing my words with care. I didn't know him as a friend, but I knew who he was. And I knew everything about him. "He passed without someone to care for her. I felt it was my civic responsibility to step in."

"Civic responsibility," the reporter repeats, sounding skeptical.

"That's right."

"The demands of raising a child prodigy are not ordinary. She has a famous violinist in his own right living nearby—you covered his expenses and pay a generous salary so she can meet him once a week. You deal with press interviews." She gives a little smile. "Like this one."

"It's no problem." This press interview is becoming a big problem.

From the smile playing at her lips, she knows it. "It's interesting that you were unmarried and had no children of your own when you decided to take on this civic responsibility. Had you met Samantha before you became her guardian?"

The question dances perilously close to, *Had you met Samantha's father before you became her guardian?* I don't mind lying to protect Samantha's privacy, but that might make things worse. It would be possible to confirm that there's no record of her father and me ever being in the same room together. How much does she know?

I stand up and face the window, which overlooks acres of North property.

"We hadn't met," I say without turning.

She was a twelve-year-old with messy brown hair and lost brown eyes. I had been completely out of my depth. It's a wonder she's turned out as smart and self-sufficient as she has, but I don't kid myself. She was mostly grown-up at age twelve.

Terrified and alone, yes. But she already knew how to survive—she'd learned that out of necessity.

Kimberly appears beside me, the sunlight bright on her pale skin. This is the kind of woman I should take to bed. The kind of woman that should make my cock hard. It's wrong, it's so fucking wrong, that all I can think about is Samantha's moan.

"That's interesting," Kimberly says, her voice low, as if she can see inside me. What would happen if she knew the truth? If she printed the truth in an article? "That the court couldn't find someone else to care for her. That they trusted you when you didn't even know her."

"The world is a stark place," I say.

There aren't always people who care about kids. My brothers and I learned that early. Samantha deserves more than that. She deserves all the safety and comfort I can find.

She deserves the truth too, but she's not getting that.

Kimberly turns so that her body is between mine and the window. She faces me, her breasts brushing my chest through our clothes. "I think you have secrets, Mr. North."

I'm not sure she's even aware of it, the choice she's giving me. I can kiss her. I can fuck this woman right now, and it will be enough to throw her off the scent. She may not realize it, but it's there, shining in her eyes. She wants oblivion, and my body can give it to her.

Am I willing to do that to protect Samantha's privacy? Hell yes.

Don't be so fucking noble, North. You're not protecting Samantha. You're protecting yourself.

And it wouldn't exactly be a hardship to have sex with a beautiful woman. Even if she's not the one I want. Kimberly's body sways toward me, sensing my deliberation. I catch her and keep her close, feeling her warmth. Why does she do nothing for me? No woman has done it for me. Maybe it's more than a dry spell.

Maybe I've been fundamentally broken.

Except that seeing Samantha makes my blood run hot.

That's when I decide to do it—I need to fuck this woman if only to prove that I can. If only to prove that Samantha is safe from my baser desires. I've always known I'm a fucked-up son of a bitch. That's why I picked a profession that could get me killed any minute. Someone has to do the job. Might as well be me.

Then Samantha changed everything. For the first time I actually wanted to stay alive.

I never would have shackled a woman to me. Never would have had children of my own, but Samantha... she's in a different category. The judge granted her custody to me, but from the moment he signed that piece of paper, I belonged to her.

My head lowers. I'm determined to exorcise my sexual demons with this woman who clearly wants this, who can handle it and walk away unscathed. Our lips meet. Every muscle in my body remains as hard and cold as marble. Desperation courses through my veins. How can I keep Samantha safe from this? From me?

An image of Samantha's face flashes through my head, her eyes closed in ecstasy, a low sound of pleasure vibrating through her throat. My eyes are closed, too. That's all I can see. I grasp the jaw of the woman I'm holding, then slide my hand to her neck. My other hand slides back to clench in her hair—something is wrong, this isn't what her hair would feel like. I pull hard enough that she makes a soft sound of protest.

My eyes snap open. What the hell am I doing?

I take a step away from the woman. She deserves more than a man who's imagining someone else. And Samantha deserves more than a guardian who thinks about her while fucking.

Kimberly's breathing hard. Her hand goes to her throat, where the skin is still red from my grip. "I knew it would be intense with you. But that was—"

"A mistake," I say, trying to soften my voice. Failing. I'm hard all over and nothing that happens in this room can fix that. "I shouldn't have kissed you."

In fact I really didn't kiss her. Our lips were a millimeter apart before I stopped. That's how close I came to finally finding relief, and all I feel is betrayal to Samantha.

The sensual haze slowly lifts from the reporter's eyes, replaced with that shrewd journalistic instinct I should never have let into this house. "Because you're seeing someone else?"

"Does it matter?"

"It might matter, if it's something worth writing about."

My eyes narrow. "You have an accusation? Come out and say it, Ms. Cox."

"I'm a journalist. I only have questions."

"I shouldn't have kissed you because you're here to do a story on Samantha Brooks, the prodigy, the soloist, who has incomparable talent and a hell of a bright future. You're not here to take your clothes off for me. Unless that's a perk that comes from *Classical Notes Magazine* now."

She flinches, which makes me a true bastard. She's done nothing wrong except be damn good at her job. It's the only way I can get her to back off the damn story.

There is no story.

Nothing has ever happened between me and Samantha, and that can't change. No matter how badly I want her. No matter how hard I ache for just one taste.

CHAPTER FOUR

String players, like violinists, tend to have larger brains. This is due in part to the complex motor skills and reasoning required to play the instrument.

SAMANTHA

The string vibrates on a C sharp, the note echoing in the chamber after my bow lifts.

Silence descends in slow degrees. I could be turning the page to my sheet music or tightening a string. I could be doing any number of things to continue practice, instead of sitting with my violin across my lap, the bow clutched artlessly in my fist. I have lived a thousand lives in the dramatic rise of a musical piece, feeling the intensity grow, the complexity develop. This moment in my life should have been marked by an entire orchestra, bodies moving in harmony, instruments an extension of bone and flesh.

Instead there's only a curious quiet, so rare and therefore precious.

I feel the answering stillness in the room next door. He could be shifting pieces of paper, noiseless and precise. He could be examining numbers and tactical formations on the flat privacy screen, but I know he's noticing the lack of music. We're connected enough that I can tell he's wondering what I'm doing.

I'm wondering the same thing.

Booted footsteps cross the gleaming parquet floor. Every aspect of this room has been designed to enhance sound, and it turns his approach into a military drum. He appears in the archway. The doors remain open every afternoon, even though my practice must disturb his work. Liam North takes his responsibilities seriously.

And I'm his responsibility.

"What's wrong?" he asks, crouching in front of me, taking in every aspect of my body with an impersonal evergreen glance. This is the way he corrects my position—no slouching, no leaning. He treats violin practice like a drill, and I am his soldier. I must do it right, must do it again, do you want to give up? No, sir.

Mostly, mostly, I love this about him. Today I don't.

What's wrong? This crush on him. It's wrong and taboo and completely unstoppable. "I don't feel good," I say, which isn't entirely a lie. I don't feel good, but I don't feel bad either. Instead I feel... enervated. There hasn't been room in my life for feelings before. Only music.

He studies me with the same impassive expression he would give a map. Around this corner and aha, there, through that mountain pass. Something he must traverse. "Since when?"

Since Kimberly Cox came to the house.

Since he kissed her in his office while I watched through a crack in the door. Though it would be more accurate to say she kissed him.

She stalked him through the house like a tiger over the plains.

And I followed her like a house cat, clumsy, copying.

She pressed her body against his. I heard his surprised inhale of breath, so quiet, so quiet. Heard the sound that came low in her throat. Her whole body moved in some purely feminine way, like water, so fluid. And he was a rock, solid and hard. Her hand reached between them, and he became somehow more still.

Until he grasped her wrist and pushed her away.

Something became warm inside me. Warm and new. Seventeen years old means I know what sex is about but I've never seen it, not that close, not with a man I looked up to like a father. Well, not exactly a father.

He may have legal custody of me, but I've never quite seen him as a father.

Something flashes through Liam's dark eyes. Worry? "Is it the tour?"

"No, of course not. I'm ready for the tour." Though *ready* isn't exactly the word I would use to describe myself. Terrified and breathless, maybe. The interview also drove home how soon I'll leave for the tour. Three months from now I'll walk out these doors.

Three months from now everything will change.

Liam puts his hand on my forehead, the contact so sudden I make a squeak of surprise. "No fever," he mutters, more to himself than to me. "Should I call Dr. Foster?"

"It's probably nothing," I say quickly, besieged by an image of the doctor making a house call. *Wet*, he would announce after an examination. *And flushed. And clenching her thighs every time you look at her. It's an acute case of lust, I'm afraid. Only one thing can cure it.*

I can understand Liam's surprise. When's the last time I caught a cold?

Maybe never.

In this household bodies are treated like one of the well-oiled guns in his cabinet. Organic vegetables and grass-fed beef. We sleep on a schedule designed for optimum performance. There's no entry in the procedure for *Samantha has a crush on Liam North, the man who's taken care of her for the last six years.*

"Rest," he says, nodding his head, decisive. "You'll take the rest of the day off."

“I’m sure I’ll feel better tomorrow.” Maybe once I’ve hidden under the covers, touching myself and pretending it’s him, making myself come about a thousand times.

His brows draw together. It’s a strange look on him. It takes me a minute to place it—uncertainty. He’s never looked uncertain before. “Maybe I *should* call the doctor.”

“God. No. Please.”

That only makes his expression more severe. “Samantha. Are you sure?”

He doesn’t wait for an answer. Two fingers tilt my chin up. His other hand holds my face up for his focus. His thumb brushes my eyebrow. My cheek. My jaw. All entirely ordinary places on a body, somehow lit by a thousand lights. There’s no reason a man can’t touch a young woman he considers his daughter, when he’s worried that she’s sick. It doesn’t mean he wants to have sex with her, never that.

Except he looks a little shaken when he’s done with his perusal, his eyes blinking as if surprised to find himself touching me, his throat working as he swallows. “You would tell me if something were wrong.”

Not a question. It’s a statement. “Yes.”

I manage not to add *sir*, but only barely.

When I first moved here, I called him *sir* like the young recruits he trained. *Yes, sir. No, sir.* He inspires that kind of respect. The people from his company would raise their eyebrows when they heard me say it. *You run a tight ship*, they would say, sounding impressed and a little intimidated.

He told me not to, but it still slips out when I’m nervous.

You’re not under my command, he muttered in a rare show of impatience, even though it feels like I am. Who else would I be under?

He’s the one who gives me orders. I’m the one who obeys. We both know who’s in charge.

It’s like he can hear the unspoken *sir* anyway. His jaw tightens. “Go,” he says.

He doesn't take a step back. Instead he watches while I bend to place my violin and bow in the case and close it. I stand up, but there's no room to stand or walk or breathe. He's filling every square inch of the room with his broad chest and dark eyes. Logically I know that I can walk around him, that he's waiting for me to do that, but somehow I'm standing here, one inch away from him, my small breasts almost brushing his chest when I breathe in and out.

There are foreign mercenaries and five-star generals who walk through these hallways. Large men. Muscled men, but none of them compare to Liam. There are a few sets of weights in the gym downstairs, but he doesn't use them. You practice the way you perform. That's what he taught me about the violin. It's the way he approaches his work, spending hours a day in the obstacle course that takes up a few acres in back.

Soldiers ten years younger than him can't keep up.

I know he's a large man, but it still feels impossible to look up far enough. When I meet his gaze, awareness sparks from him to me, every place on my body that's an inch away from his.

"Tomorrow," he says, his voice somehow lower. "You'll be yourself again tomorrow."

God, I want that to be true. I'm not sure who that is anymore. The obedient girl who practices her violin for hours every afternoon? Not exactly. No matter how much he wants that to be true. Something is going to happen tonight. I'm not sure whether I'll become more myself—or less.

His scent suffuses my lungs, my mouth. There's hard, sterile soap and something earthy from working outside and the elusive musk that is Liam North. My lips part, as if to draw in more of him. His eyes darken to deep sage, though I'm not sure what it means.

My heart pounds in my chest, and I skip around him in a frantic bid for safety, a rabbit scampering away from a fox. The only reason I reach the door is because he lets me.

I race up the stairs even though no one's following.

Inside my room I lean against the door, eyes closed, panting like I ran a million miles to get here. I need to fix whatever's happening inside me. No more stopping in the middle of practice. No more imagining Liam losing control.

Whatever I do for the rest of the afternoon, it has to be the end.

CHAPTER FIVE

Bach and Handel were both blinded by the same ocular surgeon

LIAM

I watch Samantha flee up the stairs, looking scared enough to make me uncomfortable, lithe enough to make me ache. What the hell's going on with her today? *You'll be yourself again tomorrow.* I know that's not true. She won't ever be the timid little prodigy who landed on my doorstep, eyes wide behind her glasses, fingers impossibly nimble across the violin strings. She's still a genius with the instrument, but it's no longer a little girl who plays. It's a young woman, and I'm the one who can't go back to the way things were. I can't unsee the flush of arousal on her cheeks. *Fucking hell.*

I return to my desk and try to focus on the field reports from my agent.

After reading the same sentence five times, I have to push the reports aside.

Footsteps approach the office, and I tense, fighting the impulse to stand up and close the door. Josh is second-in-command for North Security. He also happens to be my brother. He's whistling and stomping and generally being a pain in my ass. The man can cross a South American jungle without disturbing a single tree frog, but he makes enough noise now to wake the dead. It's a harsh contrast to the sweet violin that usually fills the air.

"Problem?" I ask, raising a brow.

He pauses with an exaggerated tilt of his head. “Why is it so quiet?”

I glare at him, but it doesn’t shut him up. “You’re fired.”

A hand to his heart, the dramatic bastard. “Where’s our beautiful Disney princess making music and drawing all the little woodland creatures to the window?”

“It was *one* squirrel.” One squirrel who pressed its little hands against the window every day for almost two months, listening to the music as if he could soak in its beauty.

Strange, feeling a kinship with a rodent, but there it was.

It’s not an accident that Samantha’s music room is right next to my study. The house has thirty thousand square feet. I could have put her anywhere, but I wanted her near me. I’m soaking up every goddamn second until she leaves for good.

Josh leans against the bookshelf and crosses one ankle over the other, the very picture of casual disinterest. I know my brother well enough to see right through his exterior. Unfortunately he also knows me well enough to see through mine. “What’s up?”

“Maybe we shouldn’t go out tonight.”

“And skip Hassan’s bachelor party? He would never forgive us. I would never forgive us either. We haven’t had a break in weeks.”

“She said she wasn’t feeling well.”

He frowns. “Samantha?”

“No fever. No cough. I could call Dr. Foster.”

“Is it the tour?”

I make a growl. “Maybe. It’s a hell of a lot of pressure. She wants us to think she’s all grown-up, but an eighteen-year-old has a lot of growing up to do.”

“We enlisted when we were eighteen,” he says.

“And I’d take a battle zone over Carnegie Hall any day.”

“She’s more mature than you were at eighteen.” He pauses. “Well, maybe not. You were an old fucking soul even as a kid. But so is she. You have that in common.”

The press will be all over every conference. Press with interview questions about her father? Red carpets. Meet and greets with VIP guests who are heads of state and A-list actors. And then there’s Harry March, the celebrity tenor headlining the tour, known for being volatile.

I hate that I can’t protect her from any of it. “There’s no way I can make her stop the tour. She’s got her heart set on it.”

“And you can never say no to Samantha.”

That makes me scowl. “I said no to concerts if they interrupted school for the past six years. She deserves to make her own choices now.”

“Not to mention she’ll be eighteen by then.”

My heart thumps against my chest in useless protest, but I make sure not to show any sign of it to my brother. Christ. I ignore the way my pulse thrums. It would be too easy to rise to the bait. Too easy to take the stairs two at a time and prove to myself that Samantha’s still there, if only for a short time more. “Kiss my ass.”

“You’re really worried about her.”

“Is there actually a reason why you’re here, or do you just love to annoy me?”

“Annoying you is reason enough, in my opinion, but I do actually have something work related. The Red Team has gone dark.” He stands almost at attention, as if we were both still in the navy.

That makes me pause. Three highly trained operatives could handle themselves in the frozen tundra. There were reasons they might go dark in order to maintain cover. “How long?”

“A week.”

Of course. For all that Josh acts like he doesn’t give a shit, he manages the daily operations of North Security with sharp

intelligence.

He wouldn't have brought me this unless it was serious.

“What did their last report say?”

“I'm sending you the full file now, starting with the last entry, but it doesn't indicate a problem. We have their coordinates to the south of the Ural Mountains. No injuries or major setbacks.”

“And the target?”

“Local intelligence indicated he might be hiding in the wilderness.”

That left a lot of terrain to cover, but that's why I sent the Red Team. They're the best. Efficient. Skilled. And goddamn discreet, though that is really a job requirement here.

I stand and pace across the marble floor, something I do when I'm faced with a problem. It would be better if there were music being played by a world-class musician, but she's not feeling well. Why isn't she feeling well? *Focus, North*. “What's your read on the situation?” I ask because Josh has been with me through a hell of a lot of campaigns.

Those blue eyes are a little darker today. “It's a long time for what should have been a straightforward task, but they know the stakes.”

The stakes, meaning detection by the local law enforcement agencies. Identify a traitor to the United States with enough survivalist tendencies to last ten years in the forest. All while remaining invisible to Russia's police and military. Straightforward? Yes, that's one way to describe it. Fucking dangerous, too. That's what we do.

“The Red Team is the best,” I say, sitting down again. “We trust them. And if they went dark to stay off the grid, sending in another team could risk the entire operation.”

Josh nods, looking about two percent relieved. He's a genius at operations, but it takes something different to be in command. The hard truth is that it takes heartlessness. I care about the men and women under me, but I still send them into

the line of fire. I still risk their lives so we can all make a few bucks.

That's the cold and utterly honest reason why I'm the one sitting in this chair.

Neither of us mention that our brother Elijah leads the Red Team.

The three of us are related by blood, but it would be a stretch to call us a family after our upbringing. I'm the one who founded North Security, but I gave both my brothers a stake when they joined the company. Elijah insists on leading the Red Team, with its dangerous missions and its near-constant deployment.

"Oh, and Josh?" I say as he turns to leave. "Put the other men on standby."

I'm responsible for their lives, which means I'm also responsible for their deaths. It might be a bullet from the traitor or even local military taking umbrage to American mercenaries. It might be tomorrow or in five years, but whenever it happens, their blood will be on my hands.

CHAPTER SIX

*A violinist burns about one hundred seventy calories per hour,
almost twice as much as masturbating*

SAMANTHA

Zero. That's how many times I've stopped practice early.

I've never been someone overly interested in breaking the rules. A people pleaser, that's me. Especially if the person is a hard-ass. My dad wanted me to play the violin perfectly to impress his diplomat friends? I did that. He wanted me to clean our little apartment and cook dinner? I could make roast chicken with a side of green beans by the time I turned five. He wanted me to follow him around the world without uttering a single complaint. Done.

When he died, some part of the twelve-year-old girl thought it had to be my fault. My mother was from Indonesia. She met my father when he lived there—and she died a long time ago. My older brother had no interest in coming back to take care of me.

It was Liam North who stepped up to do that duty.

I knew, without anyone telling me, that I couldn't mess this up. We weren't even related by blood. He was friends with my father. Or as he'd said to the reporter, *I felt it was my civic responsibility to step in*. I was just a kid, but even kids understand basic math.

There was no one left on this earth to care about me.

I took every independent thought, even the tiniest shred of rebellion through my teenage years, and poured them into my music. Something safe.

Suddenly it's not enough.

I want to do something wild and crazy like go skinny dipping in the lake down the hill. I want to ride in fast cars and parachute out of a plane. I want to do something shocking.

My room looks the way I left it this morning, everything neat and orderly, my books in alphabetical order. Alphabetical order! I can't even blame that on my quasi-military surroundings. Liam North does not require this kind of precision from me. Well, he also doesn't really read anything that isn't a classified brief, but that's beside the point.

I pull out *A Concise History of Western Music* with its worn spine and shove it next to *The Rose That Grew from Concrete*.

And then clench my hands into fists to keep from moving it back.

"Such a rebel," I mutter to myself. "You're the actual worst at this." It's going to take a lot more than unalphabetized books to fix this ache inside me, and I can't even manage to do that much.

Rest, Liam told me.

He's right about a lot of things. Maybe he's right about this. I climb onto the cool pink sheets, hoping that a nap will suddenly make me content with this quiet little life.

Even though I know it won't.

Besides, I'm too wired to actually sleep. The white lace coverlet is both delicate and comfy. It's actually what I would have picked out for myself, except I didn't pick it out. I've been incapable of picking anything, of choosing anything, of deciding anything as part of some deep-seated fear that I'll be abandoned.

The coverlet, like everything else in my life, simply appeared.

And the person responsible for its appearance? Liam North.

I climb under the blanket and stare at the ceiling. My body feels overly warm, but it still feels good to be tucked into the blankets. The blankets *he* picked out for me.

It's really so wrong to think of him in a sexual way. He's my guardian, literally. Legally. And he has never done anything to make me think he sees *me* in a sexual way.

This is it. This is the answer.

I don't need to go skinny dipping in the lake down the hill. Thinking about Liam North in a sexual way is my fast car. My parachute out of a plane.

My eyes squeeze shut.

That's all it takes to see Liam's stern expression, those fathomless green eyes and the glint of dark blond whiskers that are always there by late afternoon. And then there's the way he touched me. My forehead, sure, but it's more than he's done before. That broad palm on my sensitive skin.

My thighs press together. They want something between them, and I give them a pillow. Even the way I masturbate is small and timid, never making a sound, barely moving at all, but I can't change it now. I can't moan or throw back my head even for the sake of rebellion.

But I can push my hips against the pillow, rocking my whole body as I imagine Liam doing more than touching my forehead. He would trail his hand down my cheek, my neck, my shoulder.

Repressed. I'm so repressed it's hard to imagine more than that.

I make myself do it, make myself trail my hand down between my breasts, where it's warm and velvety soft, where I imagine Liam would know exactly how to touch me.

You're so beautiful, he would say. *Your breasts are perfect*.

Because Imaginary Liam wouldn't care about big breasts. He would like them small and soft with pale nipples. That

would be the absolute perfect pair of breasts for him.

And he would probably do something obscene and rude. Like lick them.

My hips press against the pillow, almost pushing it down to the mattress, rocking and rocking. There's not anything sexy or graceful about what I'm doing. It's pure instinct. Pure need.

The beginning of a climax wraps itself around me. Claws sink into my skin. There's almost certain death, and I'm fighting, fighting, fighting for it with the pillow clenched hard.

“Oh fuck.”

The words come soft enough someone else might not hear them. They're more exhalation of breath, the consonants a faint break in the sound. I have excellent hearing. Ridiculous, crazy good hearing that had me tuning instruments before I could ride a bike.

My eyes snap open, and there's Liam, standing there, frozen. Those green eyes locked on mine. His body clenched tight only three feet away from me. He doesn't come closer, but he doesn't leave.

Orgasm breaks me apart, and I cry out in surprise and denial and relief. “*Liam.*”

It goes on and on, the terrible pleasure of it. The wrenching embarrassment of coming while looking into the eyes of the man who raised me for the past six years.

My hips pump against the mattress, pulling out the last few pulses between my legs.

And then I'm lying there, wrapped tight around a pillow, unable to move, panting.

I've never seen Liam looking anything other than calm and cool and capable. He can handle anything with a command that's almost terrifying in its competency. Right now he looks at a loss.

His voice is low and rough. “We should talk about this.”

I can't think of anything in the world I'd rather do less. "Or we could just..." I hate that I still somehow sound breathy and turned on. There are little quivers in my thighs. "Pretend this never happened?"

"Come downstairs when you're—"

The sentence hangs between us, leaving me to fill in the blank. *Come downstairs when you're done fucking yourself in the bed I bought for you. Come downstairs when you're done humiliating yourself.*

He gives a short nod, as if the unspoken answer is the right one.

Then he turns, an about-face appropriate to any military ceremony.

Alone in the room I have no choice but to face the mechanics of untangling myself. Unclenching my fists from the pillow. Pulling apart my legs. Acknowledging the dampness between my thighs.

"Please be a dream," I whisper, but my face is too hot. Burning up. This is real.

On shaky legs I stand up from the bed and cross to the bathroom, where I wash my hands. Then my face. Then brush my teeth. I'm going into battle downstairs, and apparently good hygiene is my armor.

Or maybe I'm just delaying the inevitable.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Harvard University found that early training in the violin improves memory

LIAM

FUBAR. That's military speak for fucked up beyond all recognition. I've seen a lot of situations where the term applies, but none as fucked up as this one. As seeing a sexy woman hump a goddamn pillow while moaning my name, her soulful brown eyes locked on mine. Jesus.

And the worst part, the truly terrible fucking part, is how my cock is iron hard.

It's like walking around with a goddamn club between my legs. It would be way too big and angry to put inside a woman right now, especially one as delicate, as innocent as Samantha Brooks. So it's a real good thing that it's never going to happen. We're not a regular man and woman. This isn't a casual fuck. This is a person I'm responsible for raising. My ward.

I press the heel of my hand against my cock, willing it to go down. For someone with a ridiculous amount of control over his body, I'm acting like a horny teenager who's just seen a pair of tits for the first time.

Samantha appears at the door of my office, her cheeks an adorable shade of pink.

"Have a seat," I tell her, wondering if I should have had this conversation in the living room or maybe the

conservatory. Where do normal families talk about the birds and the bees? Then again, we're about the furthest fucking thing from a normal family.

She crosses her ankles and folds her hands together, the picture of a good little student. Even though her little cunt must still be soft from orgasm, the folds still damp with arousal. It would be so easy to make her climax again, already warm and set and ready for me.

I lean back against the desk, trying not to think about how those hands looked clutching the pillow. "First of all, I'm sorry for walking in on you. I was worried and didn't think... well, you have a right to privacy, and I want you to know that."

Her flush deepens to red. "Please, sir—"

"Liam. We've talked about this." At the beginning I didn't want her to call me *sir* because she shouldn't have to do that. Lately there's a different reason. Because of the way my cock jerks every time she says the word. God, she's almost begging. *Please, sir*. That's how she would sound if I spread her wide on her bed, tasting her little pussy.

She coughs. "Can we just... is there any way we can pretend that never happened?"

Christ. The memory of her sweet little body writhing on the bed is forever burned into my brain. I see it every time I close my eyes. I can't imagine that changing any time soon. "Look, I should have talked to you about sex a long time ago."

"What?" The word comes out as a squeak.

"It's part of my responsibility as your guardian." And it's not my responsibility to demonstrate any of this personally—not, not, not. I can't touch her, but I can make sure she's educated about it.

"I'm almost eighteen years old."

"Which is why I should have done this a long time ago. It isn't right that I let my own... discomfort get in the way of your sexual education. I hired tutors for math and science and history, but I neglected this subject entirely."

She looks dubious. “You’re going to hire a sex tutor?”

The thought of teaching her what she needs to know makes my blood run fast and hot. I swallow around the knot in my throat. I would show her where to put her hands, her tongue; I would give her so much pleasure, until tears leaked down her cheeks. “I don’t think that will be necessary, but you still should know some elementary facts before you—”

Before she does what? Has sex? Who the hell is she going to have sex with when the only people she comes into contact with are military bastards employed by North Security?

As soon as the thought comes into my head, it’s all I can think about. What if she wants to have sex with someone who works for me? How will I keep from killing him? Where will I bury the body?

Then an even worse thought occurs to me. “You haven’t already had sex, have you?”

She looks stricken. “No, sir.”

I’m screwing this up. I don’t know what normal families do, what a healthy, supportive conversation about sex would look like, but it probably isn’t this. “I wouldn’t be angry if the answer were yes, Samantha. It’s your body. You get to make the decisions.”

Of course I don’t mention that if a man under my command took advantage of her, I would have some very inventive ways to teach him a lesson. Never mind that I’ve recently become obsessed with taking advantage of her myself. I haven’t touched her—and that can’t change. I can’t kiss her or lick her or... bite her. God, I want to bite her.

Her uncertain expression makes her look so young. “I’m the one who should be apologizing. Doing that in the middle of the day... saying your name... thinking about you when I do that.”

Hell. I have to stand and turn away from her to hide the massive, throbbing boner in my slacks. “You can do all those things. I just need to make sure you understand safe sex.”

She makes a face. “Why?”

Because there will be plenty of boys who want to fuck her on her goddamn global tour, where she'll be both a celebrity and completely inexperienced. "Because you're going to walk out of this house in three months, and you need to know what's out there."

Something passes through her eyes—maybe grief. "I see."

"So," I say, my voice businesslike. "Sex."

"I know about condoms."

She knows about condoms. "You do?"

"The oldest known use of condoms dates back fifteen thousand years ago, on a cave painting in France."

Surprise comes out as a racking cough. "Where did you learn that?"

"A history book."

I stare at her, shocked that someone so incredibly intelligent, an actual genius by multiple measures, is this clueless about sex. It's my fault, of course. I'm the leader in this house. It was my job to make sure she knew about her body. About protection. "Here's what you need to know about condoms. They're absolutely mandatory. If you decide to have sex with someone—and it *is* your decision—you have to use a condom. Say it back to me, Samantha. I need to know you understand."

"Condoms are mandatory," she says obediently.

That's good, but it's not enough. How could it possibly be enough? How could it convey to her how many assholes were out there, waiting for the chance to take advantage of her?

Is this how fathers feel when they send their daughters into the world?

I'm not her father. Not even close. I can't imagine Ambassador Brooks having this conversation with his daughter, even if he had lived to have the chance. He wasn't exactly a concerned father. His daughter had been a little secretary in his house, given orders and expected to follow them.

Are you treating her any better, North?

“Samantha.”

She blinks up at me, so damn trusting. I want her to look at me that way with my cock in her mouth, with her eyes watering. “Yes, sir?”

“Call me Liam.”

A little cough that’s the closest she comes to telling me no. “Is there anything else?”

Damned if this little violin prodigy doesn’t know how to dismiss a hardened, experienced soldier. She sits there so fucking prim and so heartbreakingly pretty I don’t know how to handle it. Maybe she is ready to go out into the world, to experience sex, to discover how much better a climax can be when given by someone else’s hand, but I’m not ready for it. Not even close.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Japanese word “karaoke” comes from a phrase meaning “empty orchestra.”

SAMANTHA

Four years old. Saint Petersburg. The teacher suggested that I be placed in the music program so that it would be easier for me to acclimate to the school. Daddy signed the paper because it wouldn't cost anything. The school provided an ancient basswood violin with a hard plastic case. A wrinkled instruction booklet showed how to place your fingers and introductory sheet music. I stayed up night after night working my fingers until they were raw.

That began my love affair with the violin.

Even when I'm not playing, the music lives inside me.

I'm still warm between my legs, my body ready for something that's never happened except in my imagination. I've made love with music a thousand times, but never with a man. Especially not the man who invades my thoughts every time I touch myself. He's invading my thoughts right now, those green eyes and stern mouth a hazy picture in my mind. Muscles bunching in his jaw as he thinks about what to say next.

Things like, *It isn't right that I let my own... discomfort get in the way of your sex education.* That's what he thinks of when it comes to me and sex—discomfort.

I run up the stairs, still feeling the strings against my finger pads, the powder in the air. The hard gaze of Liam North. The sensations should be different, the structure of a violin wholly apart from the tangle of feelings I have around the man. They blur together anyway, a physical symphony I play and play.

When I get to my room, Laney is there. She's been my best friend ever since I moved here. She holds a black long-sleeve sweater in one hand and a black floor-length skirt in the other. "Oh my God," she says on a moan. "You could work in a funeral home."

"Concert dress," I say, rueful. There are black skirts in velvet and cotton and silk. Mandatory for playing in an orchestra, and even once I started playing solo, I still follow the rules.

"What about if you have to go to a party?"

"After a concert?"

"Is music all you think about? Don't answer that."

Actually my mind is flush with other thoughts, far more illicit, after the most uncomfortable sex talk in the history of sex talks. "It doesn't matter what I wear. We're not going to meet guys."

"Aha!" She holds up a blouse with silk ruffles and no sleeves. I usually pair it with a black camisole underneath and a thin suit jacket over the top, the fabric stretchy enough so I can raise my arms and play violin. "This will be sexy in a prim librarian kind of way."

"Why am I trying to look sexy?"

"Because we're going to sneak out and go to a club tonight."

"Tonight?"

"This is for Cody. You can't say no."

A few weeks ago Cody confided that the new coach at Kingston High made him nervous. That's how he said it—made him nervous. We thought maybe he was one of those macho bastards who would hit someone if they didn't run laps

fast enough. It took some coaxing on Laney's part to get Cody to reveal what he really meant.

That he got a little too close to the boys he was supposed to be coaching.

"How is going to a club going to help Cody?"

"Ohhh, and these will be great underneath."

I stare at the tiny scrap of black fabric she's wearing. Spandex. "Those are booty shorts. They go under my skirt so I don't accidentally flash five hundred people after Brahms's 'Sonata No. 3.'"

"We can pair them with some stockings I saw in your drawer. That flash of thigh is going to be the sexiest thing these boys have ever seen."

"They're basically underwear. Why do we have to go to a club to help Cody? Why can't we help in a library? Somewhere that we can wear regular clothes and go during the day?"

"Because this guy has incriminating evidence on Coach Price."

"And he's just going to give it to us?"

"That reminds me. Do you have five thousand dollars?"

"Oh my God."

"Look, don't freak out. People our age go to clubs all the time."

"I've never been inside one."

"Because Liam still acts like you're twelve years old and watches your every move."

In my mind I can see Liam's stern expression. *Say it back to me, Samantha. I need to know you understand.* Imagine if I told him I wasn't a virgin. *I already know about condoms because I use them all the time.* Well, maybe not all the time. Once would be enough.

Would he have been shocked? Probably. He might have tried to lock me up in a tower and throw away the key. Or maybe he finally would have seen me as a woman. He wouldn't treat me like I was a little girl if I wasn't a virgin. Would he?

"Fine," I say, grabbing the clothes. "We can stop by the bank."

She follows me into the bathroom. "I've been working on cat eyeliner."

"A little privacy, please?"

That earns me an eye roll. "Okay, Ms. Concert Dress. I happen to know there's no privacy in those backstage rooms. And no marble floors either. So stop complaining."

Privacy? No. There's not enough room for that. And any rooms with doors are taken by people having hookups before the show. It would have been easy to lose my virginity to someone playing the tuba or even a conductor, but I never wanted that. Being a so-called child prodigy has made me weird enough. I would like my first time to happen an ordinary way—with a man who cares about me, preferably.

Condoms are mandatory. The words come back to me in a humiliated rush, my cheeks heating with the memory. I actually said that to Liam North. The words came out of my mouth when I was only a few feet away from him.

Not only that, but I told him about condoms appearing on cave paintings.

Awesome.

The first attempt at eye makeup turns me into a raccoon.

The second one isn't much better.

By the third attempt Laney achieves a somewhat smoky eye that tilts up at the side. I stare in the mirror, wondering how I look like a stranger even to myself. The ruffled silk blouse and black boy shorts look cute and sexy and completely un-Samantha-like. Maybe this is what it would feel like to be normal.

Laney stands back, looking pleased with herself. “You look so slutty right now.”

That makes me laugh. “Thanks, I guess.”

She’s an unconventional fairy godmother, transforming me into someone who can go to the ball. Some people think that Cinderella was weak because she needed help. Those of us who’ve been orphaned, who’ve been alone, who’ve been smudged in cinders, we know the truth. We can be strong every day of every year. The hard part is leaving it behind for even a night.

LIAM

Knock knock knock.

I’ve definitely learned to knock every single time I want to speak to her. Even if I hear voices coming from inside the room—Samantha and Laney. The door is too thick to hear what they’re saying, but they’ve been friends for a long time.

“Yes?” That’s Laney, sounding playful and defiant like she usually does.

It makes me wonder if Samantha told her about me walking in on her. I’m not sure whether I hope she does or hope she doesn’t.

She deserves to share something that’s bothering her. On the other hand, it feels strangely good to have a dirty little secret with her. Too good.

“Can I talk to Samantha?” I say through the door. Normally I would have opened it by now. It’s not like Samantha’s humping a pillow at this exact moment. Except I can’t bring myself to turn the knob. My fist tightens on the cool metal, but all I can see is small hands clenched on a white pillowcase.

“No,” Samantha says, too loud and fast. “We’re having girl talk. Very, very private girl talk.”

Very, very private girl talk.

Then she *is* telling her friend about what happened this afternoon. My cheeks feel warm. Jesus. How long has it been

since I actually blushed? Certainly not when I saw her hips fucking a pillow. All I felt was pure lust. Now I'm wondering what she's saying about me. *He's a fucking bastard who's barely hiding his erection when I'm around him.* No, she wouldn't talk like that. It's the truth, though.

"I'm heading out for the night. Call my cell if you need anything."

"Okay," she says through the door, her voice like a squeak.

Hell. "Leave her alone, North," I mutter to myself.

The rest of the men are already gathered downstairs, wearing clothes other than fatigues for a change, laughter bouncing off the walls. I meet Josh by the wet bar, where he's pouring himself a drink. He salutes me with a wry expression. "Thought I might not see you tonight. Figured you'd stay here and play nurse for the night."

"Fuck you."

Eyebrows go up. "Well, well. What crawled up your ass?"

Having to give a safe sex talk to the girl in my custody, a girl I'm responsible for. A girl I want to taste more than my next breath. "What are we doing tonight?" I ask, ignoring his question. "Because I already know it's not a strip club."

"Not when you threatened to kick my ass."

"Sorry, but the stink of desperation and coercion really messes with my hard-on."

"What about a girl who loves attention and dancing?" Josh says, challenging me. He likes fucking with me. And apparently, he also likes strippers.

"Are you really going to tell them apart?" I ask, my voice caustic. I can't keep my employees from visiting a strip club on their off time, but I'll be damned if I go with them.

"Or a college girl who's paying for tuition on tips?"

"What about all the girls turning in their take to a pimp at the end of the day? The ones kicked out of their homes? Underage? What about the ones who don't have a fucking

choice?" I stop myself, breathing hard. Too late, I realize how much I gave away with my little speech. It's too painful to think about what could have happened to Samantha without someone to look after her. Her violin fame might have given her some protection—or it could have made her a greater target.

He gives me a hard look, but his voice is light. "Okay, we can have a good time without the chance of human trafficking. If you insist."

I wouldn't be okay with strippers on a regular day.

Today is not a regular day.

After having the sex talk with Samantha, I have no desire to watch men reduced to animals over a pair of tits. Especially when all I can see is Samantha's full lips forming my name, her eyes fluttering as she imagines me between her thighs.

"So what's the plan?" I say, forcing my tone to be casual.

Josh pulls out his phone and texts me. The message contains only a photo of an ordinary brown rock holding down a one-dollar bill. The prize. "Jeff's going to fly us over the desert," he says, referring to our resident pilot. "We each get a parachute and a bottle of water. First one to find the prize wins."

This is what happens when you put a bunch of over-muscled alpha men together. We have to compete to find out who's the best, even if one of us has to die trying.

I glance down at my gray button-down and black slacks that I wore for a night in the city. "You could have told me before I got dressed."

"There are a handful of not-quite-street-legal cars waiting for us at the rendezvous point. We'll take them into the city. Drinks. Dinner. More drinks."

Hassan joins us at the bar, throwing his arms over our shoulders. He's already buzzed, which is maybe not ideal for jumping into the desert. "Let's get this fucking party started," he says.

I raise my eyebrow at Josh, who sighs. We'll have to jump after Hassan and make sure he makes it to the rendezvous point. It wouldn't do to have him die the night before his wedding. His fiancée would be pissed, for one thing. And all those hors d'oeuvres would go to waste.

CHAPTER NINE

The Helicopter Quartet was written by controversial composer Karlheinz Stockhausen. It involves sending four members of a string quartet into the sky in four separate helicopters and having each musician play their individual part. Meanwhile, they are recorded and broadcasted into an auditorium where they are all played simultaneously for an audience. Stockhausen reportedly composed the piece after a series of unusual dreams involving helicopters and a swarm of bees.

LIAM

The call comes when I'm ten thousand feet above the ground. A small buzz in my pocket, which reminds me to zip my phone and wallet into the harness so I don't lose them on the way down. I glance at the screen. A notification that someone's at the south rear exit.

Someone's always coming and going at the compound. An overzealous security system monitors every single entry point. I'm anal enough to leave the notifications on even though I don't usually need to see who it is. Except right now almost everyone is on a job or in the chopper. I left two men at North Security, one on guard duty, one off. I don't expect trouble, but I'm a cautious man. Untrusting.

Which means there are very few people who could be leaving right now.

If I had to guess, it would be Cody in his beat-up truck that's older than him with a hundred and fifty thousand miles on it. He probably visited Laney and Samantha, playing Mario

Kart in the game room. There are a few people in front of me to jump, so I swipe to pull up the secure app that streams the video cameras.

Sure enough, there's the white truck pulling to a stop.

The gate slides open, well-maintained and smooth. The truck pulls forward and disappears from view. Relief fills my chest, which is funny considering I'm about to jump out of the open side door of the chopper. This is an adrenaline jump. A good-time jump. A hundred times easier than having the sex talk with Samantha, pretending that I think of her as a daughter when I don't.

Hassan jumps, and the men cheer.

The next few guys go quickly. They're eager to get down on the ground so they can beat the groom-to-be. Either that or they're hungry. Probably both.

Josh glances back at me, a question in his eyes. We've been through enough close calls that he can feel the unease inside me without me having to say a word. He can feel it even before I do.

Why the fuck am I uneasy?

Everything I do at home, the training and the security, it's about precaution—not actual danger. That's for South America and the Middle East. That's for the fucking jungle that is Washington DC. In the hill country of Texas? This is my land. I shouldn't be worried about a damn thing.

I give Josh a terse nod. Whatever it is, it can wait.

He offers a salute, lacking his usual ironic twist.

When it comes to the command structure, we don't fuck around, not even on a bachelor party. He jumps, his movements as casual as stepping off a porch. The wind carries him sideways, so it looks like he's floating. In the next moment a deepening fog swallows him whole. My stomach clenches into knots, but it has nothing to do with the men who just jumped out of the helicopter.

"Your turn," comes a voice in my ear. The pilot.

“Sorry, Jeff. Looks like you’re our designated driver.”

“We’re all driving once we get to the cars,” he reminds me, his voice unnaturally clear as the wind buffets around me, pulling me toward the door even as it tries to shove me deeper into the belly of the chopper. “And I’d rather be behind the controls than jumping out.”

I glance at my phone again, sliding the little circle on the video replay back. There’s the white truck again. I can make out his silhouette, but only barely. It’s brighter in the air than it was on land. Dusk already fell. I narrow my eyes at the video, watching as the truck pulls forward.

There. A movement, breaking the flat line of the seat beside him.

As if someone had been crouched low to hide from the cameras, bobbing up a second too early. Who the fuck is in the truck with him? I’m afraid I already know. My gut was legendary in the navy. It’s not about a magical sixth sense. It’s a culmination of all my tactical knowledge and hands-on experience. A million different data points coalesced into a single decision—safety or danger. Life or death.

“Hell,” I say.

“What’s wrong?”

“Take me back to the compound,” I say, biting out the words. Except they’re already gone. Even at 150 knots it’s going to take twenty minutes. They already have a head start, and there’s only one place they would go, especially without telling me. Into the city.

To practice that safe sex you told her about, my mind says helpfully.

Jesus.

“Sir?” comes Jeff’s voice. He wouldn’t normally question an order, but this isn’t exactly a mission. If I stay quiet another two seconds, he’s going to turn the chopper around no matter what.

“Belay that,” I say, my voice harsher than I intend. “Keep going.”

“Yes, sir,” he says, which is basically the same as asking what the fuck I’m thinking.

I honestly have no idea. Why the fuck is she going into the city right now? The answer is simple: to put the safe sex talk into action.

Which means she could be hooking up with some frat boy right now.

All I can see is red when I think of some asshole in a club thinking Samantha’s an easy target. It would be easy to blame Laney for being a bad influence or Cody for helping her sneak out, but Samantha’s a smart girl. She knows how dangerous the world can be. There’s a fucking reason she isn’t allowed to drive around without an escort. But I haven’t told her every single reason. That’s on me.

Yeah, I’ll take this jump, but I have no intention of tracking down a dollar bill.

“Tell the boys not to wait up for me,” I say. That’s the last thing I get out before I step off the helicopter floor. The wind holds me tight in its grasp, sucking the air out of my lungs. I’m twisted and turned, and I let my body drift through it.

Adrenaline surges through my veins, but I save it, save it, save it. That’s for later, when I find Samantha somewhere in the city. And whatever fucker thinks he can put his hands on her.

SAMANTHA

Bass reverberates through rusted metal and torn leather. The truck pulls to a slow stop around the corner from the club, hiding in the shadow of an abandoned warehouse.

“I don’t like this,” Cody says, gripping the steering wheel like he’s forcing himself to keep it still. He looks about two seconds away from kicking the gear into drive and taking us home.

“Of course you don’t like it,” Laney says, fighting to open the door. It fights right back, struggling to keep her inside as if it’s an extension of Cody’s will. She gives it a kick with her black heels, and the door finally springs open with a bereaved grunt. “You don’t like anything fun.”

“We’re only going for an hour,” I say quickly before Cody can change his mind.

Cody lives with his father in an apartment in town. His father isn’t around much, which is probably a good thing. Most nights he’s in a bar starting a fight.

And spending the next day in lockup.

Laney’s mother works for North Security. She’s on the Red Team, the most active group of soldiers, so Laney stays on the compound more often than not. The three of us made up a strange little band of friends, despite our many differences. Like the fact that Cody has in-out privileges at the gates without needing a security escort. That comes from doing work after school on the compound. Ironic, since he’s the only one of us who doesn’t live there.

“Why did I agree to this?” Cody mutters, more to himself than to me. “Your parents probably know a hundred ways to kill someone. And they’re definitely going to kill me.”

“No, they’re not, because they’re not going to find out.” Laney slams the door shut and then smiles sweetly through the dusty window, posing as if for a camera.

I hide a wince in the back seat. It’s not a very well-kept secret that Cody has had a crush on Laney since the day they met. That’s not exactly Laney’s fault. She can’t help the fact that he has a crush, but she does seem to take a certain delight in tormenting him.

“I’ll make sure she’s safe,” I promise, stepping out into the cool night.

“Hell,” Cody says, and I close the door against the ache in his voice. He wants to be the one escorting her into a nightclub like the line of couples behind a velvet rope. Not as part of a secret night out and definitely not as our designated driver.

“You’re mean,” I whisper as Laney links our arms together.

“Maybe,” she says, sounding a little sad. “But this is for his own good.”

“I still think we should tell him what we’re doing.”

“He would never have driven us here if he knew.”

Laney tosses her hair back, marching right up to the bouncer, bypassing the line of people. “Hey, sweetheart. We’re looking for a good time.”

The man has arms the size of my head. He looks intimidating, and considering I live in a sprawling complex that houses armed mercenaries, that’s saying something. His dark gaze sweeps down Laney’s body, leaving no doubt that he’s weighing what he’s seeing.

My impromptu blouse and short shorts might look sassy enough to get into a club, but her red dress is the star of the show.

“What’s your name?” he asks.

“The name’s Jennifer,” she lies.

“Sure it is,” he says, stepping aside to let us in. “I go on break in thirty.”

Laney waves at him as we slip past.

“How are we going to find this guy?” I shout to be heard over the *thump thump thump*. Someone stamps my hand, and then I’m shoved into a sea of people.

Bodies move me back and forth, interchangeable, indistinguishable. My stomach clenches. I’ve never been around this many people at once. Strobe lights flash over the blinding white smile of a woman. The heavy-lidded eyes of a man. Writhing bodies that make plain the kind of sexual knowledge I could only pretend earlier, humping my pillow alone.

CHAPTER TEN

The word “music” comes from the word “muse” in Greek. The Muses were daughters to Zeus and Mnemosyne, and protected the arts, including writing, dance, and music.

SAMANTHA

The front looks like a warehouse with a bar installed. Laney slips a wad of hundreds to a bouncer, and we wind up in the VIP section in the back.

Once we slip past the red velvet curtain, the scene changes completely. Deep leather couches create little islands for people to talk... or other, more physical activity. Raised sections of the floor surrounded by a metal railing put on a show.

“Women only,” the bouncer says, nodding to the platform.

“Sweet,” Laney says, grabbing my hand. “Let’s dance.”

I linger near the entrance, reluctant to be the center of attention. There are other women dancing, and Laney was right about one thing—my impromptu outfit doesn’t look out of place. “We’re not here to dance,” I say. Laney is crazy smart, but she’s like a hummingbird, drifting from flower to flower, her body held in suspension only because of how fast she moves.

She snorts. “Yeah, sure. Let’s stand at the door asking every person whether they’re going to sell us incriminating photos. We’re trying to appear normal, remember?”

That's enough to push me up the short steps to join the other women. I can be normal, damn it. I can do normal things like dance in front of a bunch of men I don't know in what basically amounts to my underwear... Acid rises in my throat. Oh God, I can't do this.

I've never heard the song that plays over the speakers, loud enough that the bass reverberates in my bones. That's just another sign that I'm *not* actually normal. I can name the composer in a handful of opening notes for most classical music, but I don't know what's popular on the radio right now.

A man reclines on the black leather, his skin a sharp contrast to the shadows, his gaze locked on mine. Most of the men are looking at the bodies in motion. He's looking at me—with amusement.

Panic wraps itself around my throat, and I close my eyes against the strobe lights.

The darkness settles over me, and I can block out the dancing around me and the men surrounding us. It doesn't matter that I don't know the song. I know the beat. The notes. The rhythm. Music is a universal language, and it speaks through me now, moving my hips in time.

In the best moments I don't move the bow or the strings. It's they who move me the way they need. That's what happens now, a kind of perfect passivity. The bass takes hold of me. My body reacts to the overt sexuality of the lyrics, turning warm and then hot, molten by the time the track *thump thumps* its way to transition to a new song.

I open my eyes and realize that Laney's watching me, her eyes wide. And she's not the only one. "I didn't know you could dance," she says, something like awe in her voice.

Heat rushes my cheeks. "I can't."

That makes her laugh, almost a euphoric sound, one that expresses the freedom that I feel in every breath after being caged for so long. "You should see yourself."

I can't help but grin back. "You're a maniac."

“Back atcha,” she says, throwing her arms around me for a hug.

“I’m going to look around,” I say as I squeeze her back.

There is no one more loyal or caring than Laney, but she’s already distracted by the music, shaking her booty with another woman when I duck beneath the railing.

I glimpse broad shoulders in the crowd, and my heart skips a beat.

It can’t be Liam, of course. He doesn’t know I sneaked off the property. He doesn’t know what club I’m in or that we paid our way into the VIP section, but that doesn’t stop the worry from bumping through my veins. Swallowing hard, I force myself to skirt the edges of the room, looking for someone who might be looking for me.

Laney is right about one thing—we can’t stand at the door asking every person whether they’re going to sell us incriminating photos. Only about half of the clubgoers are dancing.

The other half are standing around, looking sexy and faintly dangerous.

Then I glance up at a dark balcony. There are no dancing people up there. Only a single man wearing a black button-down shirt and dark jeans. I recognize him as the one who watched me dance before. He could be any one of the men come to pick up girls, but he surveys the club with a sense of proprietorship, as if he’s above it all.

His dark gaze meets mine, and an eyebrow arches in challenge.

I feel my cheeks flush. Is this how I would react to anyone flirting with me? Except I have the sense that he isn’t flirting. At least, not only that. There’s a sense that he’s waiting to see whether I’ll react. Like maybe he’s looking for the buyer to incriminating photos.

Circling the edge of the room I find a black spiral staircase with a thin metal railing. It leads me up to the balcony, where he remains with his forearms on the rail.

“What’s your name?” this man asks.

“Samantha,” I say before realizing that I could have made something up.

North Security is located in Kingston, Texas, a small town that had plenty of undeveloped land for Liam to purchase twenty years ago. There are endless hills for his obstacle courses as well as natural features like lakes and cliffs and even caves.

People in Kingston know the ex-military men who visit the security company. Sometimes they even know Samantha Brooks, the violinist who appears in newspaper articles.

We’re in Austin right now, the city with a sprawling college campus and state government buildings and a bubbling tech industry. There’s no way anyone would know who I am. Except that he gives me a slight, knowing smile.

“Samantha. You look different than the pictures online.” There’s nothing but ordinary lust in his eyes as his gaze dips to my silk blouse and the flushed skin it reveals.

“You’re the one with the photos?”

That same slight smile. “Let me get you a drink.”

I narrow my eyes. I’m the one who’s going to be giving him money tonight, not the other way around. “Are you the person I’m looking for or not?”

“You don’t trust me?”

“Not as far as I could throw you.”

He laughs. “Smart girl.”

I glance back at the platform, but I can only see a flash of Laney’s dark hair. She’s clearly enjoying herself, and I have no desire to put a damper on that. Besides, I don’t need her to make this exchange. I can do this and prove that I’m an adult. That I don’t need Liam North. Knots tighten in my stomach, because he would be furious if he knew I was here right now.

Which is exactly why I need to do this. My imagination may not stretch that far, but I need to solve my own problems.

Maybe then I'll be able to move past this completely inappropriate and unrequited crush. Then I can move on to a quiet, boring life of endless practice, alone, alone, alone, playing the violin until my fingers fall off.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Baritone Leonard Warren died onstage at the Met in 1960 just as he had finished singing Verdi's "Morir, Tremenda Cosi," which means "To Die, a Momentous Thing."

LIAM

Once I hit the ground, it takes twenty minutes to get to the drop point.

A row of luxury cars stands at attention—an orange McLaren, a red Ferrari, a yellow Lamborghini. Hassan is already there, holding up a dollar bill and grinning at me. His smile slips when he sees my expression.

"Something happen, boss?"

He means did something happen with the Red Team or one of the other men. Something life or death. Samantha sneaking out at night doesn't qualify, even if it feels that way in the heavy beat in my chest. "No, but I'm going to head out before the rest of the guys make it. I'll catch up with you tonight."

He still looks concerned. "You sure?"

"Positive." I don't want to disrupt the bachelor party any more than I will by leaving early. More than that, I don't want any witnesses for what's going to happen next.

Mostly because I have no idea what's going to happen next. I'm a man who makes a plan and sticks to it. There are contingencies built in at every step. No surprises.

And somehow, somehow I'm fucking surprised.

I decide to take a rebuilt silver Rolls-Royce Phantom because it's the least ostentatious of the group, which isn't saying much. The keys are hidden under the back wheel in a little case I know to be fireproof and highly secure. Luckily I already know the combination—I study the shape of the back; 1956, the year this car was manufactured, though not the year it was sold.

That's what Josh would pick.

Sure enough, the case opens to a plain silver key.

I'm driving down the dirt road when Josh and another man make it over the crest, their silhouettes in my rearview mirror. Hassan will let them know that I've tapped out, and I have no doubt that they'll enjoy the evening on North Security's corporate credit card.

Cody answers the phone in two rings. There's a pause. Then, "Yes, sir?"

He's not officially under my command, not the way the ex-military men and women are on payroll. He does work for the company after school. Mostly he purchases supplies for the house and helps me build the training courses.

So there's no reason he needs to call me *sir*, but he does anyway.

I've always found it endearing.

Now I have to grit my teeth against the urge to swear at him.

"Where are you?" I ask instead.

A pause. "Sir?"

"I assume you're still with them. I know that even if you were stupid enough to sneak the girls off the compound, you would never leave them alone where anything could happen. Right, Cody?"

A longer pause this time, one I imagine he's going to break by blaming the girls for making him help them or try to play it off like it's no big deal. Stronger men than him have cried

when I use this tone. *Give me the right answer or they'll never find the body*, that's what this tone means.

"No, sir," he says slowly, and I have to give him credit. He sounds resigned to his fate, but he isn't buckling. "I'm right here waiting for them, outside Club Melody."

"Don't move," I tell him before hanging up. "Not an inch."

He can follow an order, at the very least. He's parked on the other side of the street from the club. Laney's sitting on the back of his truck, legs dangling over. Both of them have a worried expression, which kicks my latent panic into high gear. I've been trying to reassure myself that teenagers go out at night all the damn time.

But the solemn expressions of Cody and Laney make me want to radio in every single team under my command and declare a fucking war.

"Where is she?"

Cody swallows. "Inside the club. At least I'm pretty sure."

"It's my fault," Laney says, putting her hand on his arm. "I'm the one who wanted to go out, who convinced Samantha to come with me. And she was right there. We were dancing in the back, the VIP section. She took a break. I thought she was going to get a drink or something."

"She's not old enough."

"I know." Laney wrings her hands together. "Cody called and told me you were coming, and I looked for her so we could meet you outside. But she wasn't by the bar or in the bathroom. I tried asking around, but people could barely hear me, and I don't know where she went."

The girl seems near tears, and Cody puts his arm around her shoulders, managing a glare at me—which really takes some balls, under the circumstances. "Take her back to the compound," I tell him, my voice hard. "You and I will have a talk when I get back."

His brows draw together. "But Samantha—"

"I'll find her and bring her myself."

CHAPTER TWELVE

In 800 BCE the first recovered piece of recorded music was found. It was written in cuneiform and was a religious hymn. It should be noted that cuneiform is not a type of musical notation.

SAMANTHA

The man leads me to a back room in the club. I'm expecting a supply closet or a bathroom—something secret and genuinely illicit. This is an office, a little messy but clearly used by someone with authority. Framed vinyl records line the walls.

He reclines on a file cabinet, his posture relaxed.

“Do you work here?”

“You could say that. I also own the place.”

I reach for my clutch, which contains the envelope. “Then why do you need money selling photographs of sleazy coaches?”

A low laugh. “How do you think we afford strobe lights around here? My business is information, and you want to buy information.”

“Fine. Show me the video, and I'll give you the money.”

He gives me a slow grin. “What's the hurry? I saw you dancing out there, sweetheart. Wouldn't mind getting to know you a little better.”

I swallow hard. “Not interested.”

The sound of a scuffle in the hallway catches my attention. The door slams open, revealing Liam North in sharp relief, his eyes a brilliant, burning emerald.

“Oh no,” I whisper.

If Liam finds out what we’re doing here, everything is going to be ruined. Luckily the man seems to know that as well as I do. He takes a step back as if he’d just been touching me, as if he’s just been caught in the act. “Christ. You underage?”

“Out,” Liam says, and the man gives him a nervous look before leaving.

I stare at Liam. “Oh my God. You followed me here?”

He stalks into the room. “That’s what you’re going to say right now? How about, I’m sorry I snuck out of the house at night and gave you a heart attack, Liam?”

Pretend you came here to make out with a guy. “I’m not going to apologize.”

A low growl fills the room. “You followed a man to a back room without even telling Laney where you went. I ought to lock you in your damn room and throw away the key.”

“Hey, what happened to, ‘it’s your decision what you do with your body?’”

“I take it back.”

“You don’t get to take it back. I’m almost eighteen. You won’t have custody of me anymore.”

“You aren’t eighteen yet. Almost doesn’t count.”

Something occurs to me. “You can’t be mad at Cody for this. Don’t fire him or make him do a thousand push-ups or anything. I made him go. Laney, too.”

“So all of you are fucking Spartacus?”

“Huh?”

“All of you are trying to take the blame.”

“Oh.”

He closes the door behind him. And locks it. “You might understand more references if you actually watched a movie once in a while. Or TV.”

My pulse races. We’re alone right now. Very alone. “I prefer music.”

A glance at the carved vinyl records. They don’t hold his attention very long. His gaze locks on mine. “Since when did I get cast as the Roman general in this little drama?”

I glance at his fists. “Did you hurt a bouncer on your way inside?”

“In my defense, they were standing in my way. I don’t take very kindly to people who get between me and my family. Besides, they don’t have to be hospitalized. Pretty sure.”

My throat feels tight. “Your family.”

“That’s you, Samantha.”

I look away, hiding how much pleasure the word gives me. “Does that mean you’ll keep in touch with me when I go on tour? Will you come see me play?”

His expression darkens. “We’re not going to be pen pals, if that’s what you’re asking.”

It’s a physical blow to my stomach, the dismissal in his words. My instinct is to deny it. He couldn’t have meant it. He couldn’t have meant it to hurt this much. Then the moment passes and I’m left feeling sick, about to vomit all over the office. “Pen pals?”

Something in his eyes softens. He doesn’t look warm exactly, but he doesn’t look quite so pissed anymore. “I didn’t realize you would want to keep in touch after you left.”

The memory of our last talk heats the air between us—about condoms and sex. And the way he walked in on me when I moaned his name. God. I’m not sure I can stand another talk like that. “I’m not naive, Liam. I know you took me in because I didn’t have anywhere else to go.”

A muscle in his jaw ticks. “That wasn’t exactly the reason. And even though I didn’t know you before I took custody, I’ve

grown to care about you over the years. If I didn't state it clearly enough, then the fault lies with me. I wasn't raised to show... affection."

I stare at him, incredulous. Affection? It's a cold comfort to a girl who's always wanted the surety of forever. And the word might as well be alien to a man like him. "I'm going to tour the country. The world. I'm leaving, Liam."

He looks away. "Christ."

Unease moves through me. "Did you really think I wouldn't come back?"

"I don't know why you would want to."

"Because I care about you." Liam is six feet of pure muscle and hard will. There's no way someone like me could go up against him and win. Except that when I take a step closer, he tenses. Another step and he goes still as stone. It gives me a sense of power, enough that I take the final step. "I care about you even though you're controlling."

There's only an inch between the ruffle of my blouse and the flat of his abs.

"You think I'm going to apologize for keeping you safe?" he mutters. "You think I give a damn that you're mad at me as long as you're in one piece? That's the only thing that matters."

"Because you think of me like a daughter?"

He shakes his head slowly, not breaking eye contact. "No."

"No?" I whisper.

"When I walked in on you..." His voice is hoarse. "I didn't think of you like a daughter."

I should probably be horrified that he would think about me in any way other than family, except I'm the one who started it. I take a step closer, and there's nowhere for him to go. He's already backed up against the wall. This big, strong man who could probably make a whole army quake—or at least a battalion. And he's cornered by me.

This close I can see the green of his eyes, so dark they're almost emerald, flecked with gold. A scar bisects one dark eyebrow, probably a scar from something terrifying and deadly.

"How did you think of me?" I'm afraid to know the answer, but I'm even more terrified of never knowing. Of being a nameless, faceless body in that writhing crowd, hooking up with a stranger when the man I really want is standing right in front of me, inches away, his breath a feather-touch on my forehead.

A small shake of his head. "It's not right."

I'm not sure what right and wrong mean when it comes to us, but I know what it means for music. Someone can play a piece with perfect timing and notation. They can hit every single note, but it still won't have passion. That part comes from inside. "Then be wrong with me. Don't make me do it alone."

I push up on my toes, pressing my lips against his in a blind, artless kiss. I'm off center of his mouth, kissing the corner. He stands still as a statue, letting me wobble on my heels, letting me fall against him, only my broken kiss to balance me.

Grief beats against my ribs. He's going to make me do it alone. Of course he is. I'm always alone. A small sound escapes me. Loneliness. Pain. It vibrates against his mouth, sound made real.

He jolts as if I've shocked him. Something unspools inside him. I feel it in the inch of air between us. And then I feel it in my lips. He takes over the kiss with shocking possession, his hand behind my head, his body turning us so I'm against the wall. He looms in front of me, blocking out the view. There are no vinyl records on the wall, no bass thrumming through concrete and steel. There's only him, only *this*. How is it possible that only a few minutes ago I felt powerful? I didn't know what this would be. I couldn't know the way I'd revel in surrender.

His tongue touches the seam of my lips, a pure electric sensation that makes me jump. I part my lips in surprise, pulling in the scent of him—man and earth, salt and sea. He tastes elemental. His tongue swipes the tender inside of my bottom lip. It's more sensitive there than I could have imagined. I feel the slickness of the caress all the way in my core. My thighs clench together.

So careful. So wary. I touch my tongue against his. He's the one who groans.

His hand fists in my hair, creating a delicious little ache. "Do you know what you're doing to me?" he breathes, and I try to shake my head; it only makes him pull harder.

"Liam... I need..." It's like the bedroom when he walked in on me, my hips rocking, mindless, hungry. Worse than that. My whole body is moving restlessly against him.

He tears himself away with a hard sound. Only an inch away. A rough tremor runs through him. It's a small comfort, knowing that I've moved this man. Knowing how much control he has, knowing it's eroded. But only a small comfort. He still leaves me panting against the door.

"I'm supposed to protect you," he says, his voice taut with guilt.

"Against people like that?"

"Yes, against people like that. He's more than a club owner, Samantha. At least that's not all he is. He's a loan shark. The dangerous kind. One who makes sure his debts are paid with money or with blood. He doesn't give a shit about doing the right thing."

A shiver runs through me. "How do you know him?"

"I run a security firm. It's my job to know these things." He cups my jaw. "Even if it wasn't, I would make sure to know every single danger within a hundred-mile radius. You're too important to risk."

Determination hardens my tone. "You tell me you want me to make my own decisions as a woman, and then you take them away."

He pulls back, and cool air rushes into the space between us. “Because you lied to me, Samantha. Something could have happened to you, and there’d be no one to protect you, no one to even know where you went. That’s not a grown-up decision.”

I look down where he’s holding my hips in place. It’s like prying metal, watching him lift his fingers one by one. Each loss feels like a chain link snapped.

He pulls his hands away with an audible groan. “I’m not going to touch you again.”

Hurt licks against my skin like flames, but I try to act casual. “Right.”

“If you want to go out, of course you can. I’ll send Josh with you.”

“Is that an order?”

“Absolutely,” he says with burning green eyes.

Despite the hunger in his voice, there’s no trace of vulnerability in his expression. He’s made of stone and water, as unconcerned as air. Gone is the man incandescent with desire. How am I supposed to be interested in the boys who are dancing in clubs when this man has kissed me? How can I be satisfied with warmth when I know how it feels to burn?

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Violinist Lindsey Stirling has over 10.5 million subscribers on YouTube

SAMANTHA

A message blinks on my phone when I get home from school.

The picture shows a mane of wild red curls, the kind I would have happily traded for my ordinary brown hair. I met Beatrix Cartwright many years ago, back when we were both children.

Our upbringings couldn't have been more different.

She came from a wealthy family, her mother a famous pianist, her father a tech industrialist who doted on his family. Meanwhile my father had to be reminded that my Sergio Peresson violin was on loan from a music society, and we couldn't sell it because they knew who had it. That didn't stop him from threatening to whenever he was particularly broke.

Her parents invested in her musical education and were supremely interested in her feelings. My father only agreed to let me play in the London concert because the queen herself would be in attendance. He spent most of the concert on the phone in the lobby, coming up for air only to glad hand during the reception.

On the surface it seemed like we had very little in common, but Beatrix and I had something in common—we

were both children with unusual talent in a world ruled by fierce, egotistical adults.

Somewhere between practice and performance we became fast friends.

Maybe it was fate, which knew we were both on the same dark path. The death of her parents changed the course of her life. I gave her what support I could over e-mail as I followed my father from desert to jungle to tundra, only to begin all over again.

And then my father died, giving us one more thing in common.

Orphans, both of us.

I'm excited about the tour, her text says with a string of green-faced emojis, each of them about to throw up. She's always had a dry sense of humor and a weak stomach.

You're going to be amazing, I text back.

Her anxiety goes beyond stage fright. For many years after her parents' deaths she didn't even leave the penthouse in the hotel where she lived. Only recently did she begin to venture out, but it's still difficult for her to deal with crowds.

I only agreed to it because you're coming, she says. *When do you get here, anyway? Can it be now?*

Words appear on the screen even though I don't feel myself typing them—I'm afraid to leave. I don't want to. What if I never see Liam again? What if he never forgives me for lying to him? The thoughts are too private to be read, even by me.

I hold down the Backspace button until they're gone.

Soon. I punctuate the word with a string of sobbing emojis. Three months, to be exact. It's the closest I can come to revealing my true feelings, the same way the green-faced emojis revealed hers.

How is Liam doing?

Oh you know. The same. Stoic and strong and serious.

So he's being an asshole?

No, of course not. I blush, trying to think of how to word this, how to describe what happened in the back office of the club. I'm not even sure I know the words. Not kiss or touch. Something more meaningful—and more fleeting. *Actually, something happened.*

Uh oh.

It's hard to explain. We sort of... we almost kissed.

Oh my God. Samantha. SAMANTHA. Did he take advantage of you? I'm going to fly to Kingston right now and punch him in the face.

What? Don't be silly, I say, typing quickly because she might actually do it despite her extreme fear of public transportation and the baby girl she has at home. She's only doing the opening show in Tanglewood, which is where she lives. I wouldn't be surprised if the label planted the opening show there just for her.

Beatrix Cartwright is maybe the most famous musician on the tour, besides Harry March himself. She has a massive internet following from playing covers of popular songs and posting the videos online. It's a different direction than the old-world classical music that consumes me, but I admire her skill—as well as her poise in the face of notoriety.

He didn't take advantage of anything, I tell her. *If anything I took advantage of him.*

I'm giving you such a look right now. A look of disbelief.

Really. I'm the one who wants him to see me as more than a child.

But you ARE a child.

I make a rude gesture using an emoticon in response. She's only a few years older than me, and she's already married with a baby. It's actually common for people in our position—strange and rare though it is. We grow up fast and either settle down or burn out.

Well, she says. I'm sure he turned you down. Liam North doesn't know how to have fun, which has never seemed like more of a virtue than right now.

Fun? The idea makes me smile. He knows how to fight and work and struggle. The idea of fun is as foreign to him as it is to me. We're well suited that way. *Yes, I admit. He turned me down.*

What aren't you telling me?

That makes me sigh. *He really did turn me down. After he kissed me. It wasn't almost anything. We did actually kiss.*

OMG.

Don't freak out. I know it's probably inappropriate.

Probably???

God, how to explain the exhilaration of knowing he had chased after me, bursting into a nightclub, breaking through muscled bouncers to make sure that I was safe. And then the way his large hand had cupped my jaw, making me feel delicate.

I want him to do it again. The cursor blinks at the end of the sentence, waiting with an accusatory rhythm. When I press the Send button, I feel only a sense of rightness. It's honest, at least.

A long time passes with the three little dots hovering where her response will go. She's writing a long lecture about all the ways it's wrong for me to lust after Liam, I'm guessing.

But her text is very short. *What happens when you leave?*

I know what she means. Both of us know what it is to be alone. To be left behind. It doesn't matter that I'm the one walking away this time. Being adrift at sea is no better than being stranded on an island.

Then it's over, I say, knowing there won't be any civic responsibility after that.

LIAM

Leaning back in my office chair, I close my eyes. The strains of the violin wash over me, soothing the rough edges inside me. I'm in agony thinking of the day when the room next door will be silent. What will happen to every jagged, violent thought inside me?

And even still I look forward to the day that she's gone. Because she shouldn't be near me, shouldn't have to soothe the devil that pants and snorts inside me. A goddamn bull, that's what I am—and her innocence is the red I run toward.

Well, I won't be able to ignore her today. We need to talk about the e-mail from Kimberly Cox. *Good news*, the subject line says. She goes on to explain that Samantha was given a short mention in the digital edition today to raise publicity for the tour, in advance of her deeper profile in the print magazine.

There are a hundred amazing things about Samantha Brooks. The mention could have shared any number of those things. The way she plays like a goddamn angel. The way she mastered violin beyond what most grown men can do at the tender age of six. The way she infuses new life into the classics, drawing the interest of maestros and luthiers from around the world.

Of course the mention doesn't say any of that.

That would make too much sense.

Instead it laments the mark of grief that Samantha still bears from losing her father at a young age. *She used to hide under the desk in his office in Saint Petersburg.*

In fact she was there the fateful day that he died.

The sentence makes my blood run cold. I never should have let the damned reporter speak to Samantha alone. Except that she'll be alone on the tour. I can't stand next to her for the rest of her life, putting limits on how much she says.

I stand and follow the music like she's the goddamn piper. I want to follow her anywhere, everywhere, want to drown if that's where she leads me—and I suppose I'm halfway there.

It's my habit to wait until she finishes a piece. The last note sails through the air, sweet and melancholy. There are only four fucking strings on the instrument. She imbues each and every touch of the bow with some new emotion. It reaches into the hard core of me, deadly, devastating.

"Did you read it?" I ask, my voice a harsh echo in the chamber.

She blinks at me as if coming out of a deep sleep. That's what music is for her, a kind of trance. Her cheeks are flushed with awareness. "Read what?"

"The e-mail from Kimberly Cox, the reporter from *Classical Notes*."

"Oh, about the digital feature? Yeah, that's cool."

Cool. Not the word I would have used to describe it, but then I know that her father didn't die of a heart attack. "They printed the story about your father."

"Right. Well. It would have been more interesting if it were about music, but I guess they figure it was more of a public interest story that way."

"She had no right to share that."

Samantha gives me a strange look. "Are you worried that I'll remember it?"

Yes, but not because of the fear and anxiety the moment would give her. I'm worried that she'll remember it because then she'll know I was there that day. A blessing. That's what the psychologist said about her memory loss. And I couldn't disagree.

I crouch down in front of her, the same way I did when she was twelve years old. Even then she would clutch her violin for comfort. She does it now without even realizing. "Samantha, I told you that your father had enemies. If they think you know something—"

"I was just a child."

Children can be dangerous. This one had always terrified me. "A child who might remember something from when she

was hiding under her father's desk. Not only from the day he died. From before that. A phone call. A conversation."

She stares at me, bewildered. "What could I have heard that's dangerous?"

Because her father was a diplomat between politicians who aren't in power anymore. That's what she means. But what she doesn't know is that he was a traitor to his country. That his actions disrupted governments—*this* country's government—with repercussions that continued past his death.

Yes, people would kill to keep those kinds of secrets quiet.

"I'm going to ask you to do something, Samantha. When you do the press for the tour, when the reporters ask you about this, say you don't remember anything."

She blinks. "They're only going to ask about the music."

"Kimberly Cox didn't only ask about the music."

Her brown eyes turn dark. "Are you sorry she came here?"

She isn't asking about the damn questions. She wants to know about the kiss. I should say yes. I should be sorry that the woman kissed me, that I kissed her back for even a split second, wanting her to be someone else. But that led to me walking in on Samantha. As wrong as it was, it was the single most erotic experience of my life. It was more than I dreamed I'd ever have of her.

To my shame I've jerked off to the image of her in my head every single night. Every morning. My cock throbs in my slacks right now, eager to push through the fabric. To shove aside her skirt and press itself into her warm, welcoming body. She'd let me. She'd beg me to keep going.

"No," I say, my voice rough. "I'm not sorry."

Hurt flashes through her eyes, but I can't begin to explain the complexity of my feelings for her. The way I shouldn't want her. The way I want her anyway. My father always said I had the devil inside me. Part of me never really believed him—at least until I saw her masturbating. It took every last, torn shred of decency I have left inside me to walk away.

Her chin rises, because she's always been so damn strong. She's always deserved better than me. "I'll agree to your rule if you answer one question. Honestly."

My insides tighten. I don't want this bargain, but her safety is worth it. It's worth anything. "What's the question?"

I expect her to ask something about her father, to finally back me into a corner and demand the truth. She deserves that much. *Why did you get custody of me? What happened to my father?* I would have to tell her.

"Did you ever want me?" she asks. "Really want me."

I swallow hard. "That's what you want to know?"

The milestones are coming at me fast, and they're coming hard. Soon she'll graduate from high school. She'll turn eighteen. Those milestones are taking her away from me, bit by bit. None of them compare to what happens when her tour begins. Then she moves to Tanglewood for two months of practice for the tour and the opening show. She'll travel the whole world.

"Yes, I want you," I say, my voice hard. "No, that doesn't even begin to describe... I need you. I crave you. I dream about that kiss in the club."

"Then why won't you—"

"Because you're not eighteen, for one thing. Almost doesn't count."

"What about when I turn eighteen? Isn't there a chance that you and I—"

I would fall to my knees if I thought she should. "I don't see why you'd want to," I say, keeping my voice bland. "You'll have a career then, a record deal, a string of performances under your belt. There will be any number of men."

She reaches out, her hand cupping my face. God, she's innocent. She can't know what she does to my body, the soft touch of her palm, the warmth of her. Or maybe she does

know. Maybe she enjoys torturing me. “At the club you said you don’t think of me like a daughter.”

Slowly I shake my head, my gaze locked on hers. “I don’t.”

“Then how do you think of me?”

My greatest pride and my deepest regret. And I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if I kept her tied here in the middle of nowhere. If I trapped her in the closet with me while I watched her slowly starve. “You saved me,” I say simply, unable to lie about this.

Surprise flashes through those pretty brown eyes. “It was the other way around.”

“Ah, no, Samantha. I was nothing when you came to me. A man with a death wish. A business that kept me from drinking myself into a stupor every night. When you came to me, it gave me something to live for. Something to believe in.”

Enemy fire. Missiles. Ambush. There are things I could handle on the fly, but only one thing could strike fear into my heart—and that’s the hope in her eyes. “Then you love me?”

I squeeze her knee and stand up, removing myself from her gaze. “Samantha. I’m sorry. You deserve a family who loves you, but that’s not me. I’m not capable of the emotion.”

Her eyes glisten with tears before she looks down. “You’re wrong.”

“And you have unbearably low standards. I only look like a good father because your own was such a bastard. When you go out into the world, you’ll understand. You want to come back after the tour? Fine. I’ll leave your room the way it is. What do I need it for, anyway? It will keep its pink walls and its white ruffles. And if you tour the world for a year and a half and still want the emptiness that’s waiting here for you, you’re welcome to have it.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Composer Franz Liszt received so many requests for locks of his hair that he bought a dog and sent fur clippings instead.

SAMANTHA

I give Liam the silent treatment the rest of the week. It makes me feel like a child, but I can't help it. He has all the power in this relationship. All the secrets. Beatrix wasn't completely wrong. He's really a bastard sometimes.

He's also the closest thing I have to family.

It wasn't only him. All three of the North brothers took me in.

Josh taught me how to throw knives even though Liam nearly killed him for it. I'm weirdly good at them. Turns out the upper body strength and nimble fingers you cultivate playing violin translates well to six inches of stainless steel.

I can hit the painted targets almost as well as a soldier.

It was the youngest North brother who drove to the convenience store to buy maxi pads because I started bleeding when Liam was on an overnight trip. It was my first period. Even if Daddy had been alive, I don't know how he would have handled that. Probably one of his aides would have taught me. Instead Elijah knocked at the bathroom door, grim-faced as he answered my questions—how long would it last and why did it happen.

Probably I should be grateful to have them. So grateful that I don't ask any more questions, but I can't let go of my past. I

can't forget the guarded look in Liam's eyes when I asked him about my father. What's he hiding?

It's easy to keep up the silent treatment, because everyone's busy with the wedding. Rows of white chairs replace tractor tires. Flowers overflow rustic wood containers. The entire lawn transforms from a high-impact obstacle course to a romantic lawn in a matter of days. These are soldiers. They perform their mission with precision and fearlessness, even if it involves canapes instead of sniper rifles.

Of course, there probably *are* sniper rifles hidden around the property. I've played the violin in the room beside Liam's office every day for the past six years. I can hear him even when he thinks I'm focused on the strings. He would see the wedding as an opening, something that an enemy could exploit. There would be even more defenses in place today.

Liam is the best man, looking austere and remote in his tuxedo, standing with Hassan at the makeshift altar. There are faint shadows under his green eyes, the only hint that he did anything other than sleep. They're interesting, those shadows, because of how rare they are.

This is a man who doesn't show signs of weakness.

It might be daunting to some brides, the preponderance of stern, muscled men filling the white folding chairs. Jane teaches kindergarten at the local elementary school. Nothing scares her. That's what she told me the first time we met, and it looks like it's true. She's beaming in her white dress with lace that cups her bodice and flares out to a wide skirt.

Hassan swallows hard as she steps out of the tent, his eyes glittering.

Play whatever you want, she told me. I'm sure it will be beautiful.

So I play the song I would want if I were to get married, the one I've imagined walking down the aisle to, even though I'd never admit it out loud. Pachelbel composed "Canon in D" to play with three violins and a bass continuo, but I love it even more with a single lilting strain. My Nicolo Amati violin

is small and proud. It prefers to play solo. That's where it really sings.

My troubled gaze finds Liam. He's watching me, those green eyes sharp in the sunlight. He owns the land we're standing on, acres and acres of it. He owns the company that employs almost everyone here. He's a leader and a soldier and a confidant to the men beside him.

And he's my guardian. He wouldn't hurt me. I have to believe in that, because without that I don't know what I'd think. I don't know who I could trust.

I try to imbue the words into the bow, into the strings—*I trust you, I trust you*. But I'm afraid they aren't completely true. I love him. I need him, but I don't necessarily trust him. Maybe it's part of growing up to realize that they aren't the same thing—and I'm forced to look away.

He finds me after the ceremony. "We should talk."

I give him a pointed look.

"Still giving me the silent treatment?"

When I was twelve years old, on the cusp of homelessness, of ruin, it was enough to know Liam would take care of me. I didn't need details. Maybe I didn't want details.

Now it feels scarier not to know, to go into the world misled.

Without a word I tuck my violin case beneath the risers near the house. It's always strange to walk around carrying something worth a quarter of a million dollars. Some people say the violin is like a limb, but it's more than that. It's my heart. My soul.

And it's sitting in a velvet-lined case on the grass. No one would dare steal from Liam North, and technically the instrument belongs to him. How vulnerable it makes me to have something vital to my existence belong to another human being.

A massive white tent covers endless platters of meat, pork belly sliders with homemade coleslaw and beef chuck-eye

roast with a paprika herb rub. The bar serves blueberry mojitos with muddled mint leaves and fruit.

A little glass pot contains scoops of warm tri-colored mashed potatoes. I add chives and shredded cheese before carrying it with me, circling the edges of the party. This far away I can see Liam with a mug in his hand, surrounded by people. He's holding court, I realize. Some of the guests are clients of the company. Even wealthy men, successful men, look to him. He grants his audiences rarely with a reserved nod.

He gives approval even more rarely.

Josh slides into the seat beside me, a beer in his hand. "Nice job on the music," he says. "Half the bridesmaids started crying, I have a hell of a time hitting on a girl with mascara running down their cheeks."

That makes me snort. "I wouldn't think that would stop you."

"Well, I'm not saying I'm going to stop."

"If you want my advice, pick one this time." There was an incident last year where he'd lured two women into his bed for a threesome. Except he had only mentioned it to one of the girls. The other one had not been pleased to realize she wasn't the only one joining him.

"In my defense, I was falling down drunk."

"How is that a defense?"

He grins, unrepentant. "She still called me for a date the next day."

I can't help but glance at Liam, where a woman touches his arm as she laughs, leaning close to give him a view down her dress. Will he invite her to his bedroom? There's no question what her answer would be. Morosely I take a bite of the mashed potatoes, but even the buttery carbs can't soothe the jagged edges of jealousy.

"You have nothing to worry about here," Josh says, his voice dry.

“I’m not worried.”

“He hasn’t slept with a woman in so long I’m pretty sure he’s forgotten how. Or maybe key parts of his anatomy have atrophied and fallen off. It’s not healthy.”

I give him a sideways glance. “How would you know?”

“Because no one who’s gotten laid would be that tense.”

He *does* look tense. His knuckles are white where he grips the coffee mug. And who drinks coffee at a wedding, anyway? Everyone around him laughs and dances and flirts. These men put their lives on the line every time they take a job. They work hard, and they party even harder. This reception will continue long into the night. It won’t stop when Hassan and his pretty new wife leave for Hawaii.

Liam looks like he’d rather be anywhere else.

“Is it the Red Team?” I ask. Those kinds of things are top secret, but you hear bits and pieces when you spend hours outside the office every day.

“Maybe,” Josh says. “But I think more than that, it’s the wedding.”

“It’s beautiful.”

“So much happiness and love in the air,” Josh says in agreement.

It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out that the brothers had a rough childhood. Even this violinist knows that much. Only the details are hazy. “So he doesn’t believe in happily ever after?”

“He believes in it for some people. Just not for himself.”

The man in question looks this way, as if he can feel my regard. His green eyes burn as he stares at me from across the room. “That’s the saddest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“You want my advice?” Josh asks.

“Not really.”

“You got a hard-on for your legal guardian? Go for it. You want to work out some good old-fashioned daddy issues with Liam North, be my guest. I’m not the goddamn morality police, and Lord knows he could use the relief. But don’t expect anything more from him.”

My cheeks flame. Is my lust for his brother that obvious? Even more than embarrassment I’m furious that he would presume to warn me away. “Maybe you’re not giving me enough credit. Someone might be interested in me for more than just sex.”

He looks vaguely surprised. “Of course he *wants* you for more than sex. That’s not the issue.”

Liam must see something on my face, because he starts heading this way. People stop him as he goes, catching his arm. He turns to give them a few words before continuing toward us. “I know I’m not experienced enough for him—”

“He doesn’t think he has it in him to love someone.”

My heart aches for what could have made him that way. “He’s wrong, of course.”

“No, sweetheart. That’s the problem. He’s right.”

Liam reaches us in a few long strides, his expression hard. The tan of his skin contrasts sharply with his white shirt. He’s removed his tux jacket, which only serves to emphasize the hard, lean line of his body. Silver cuff links glint from his wrists. He’s as well-formed as any piece of art, a feast of shape and texture for the eyes—but undoubtedly his eyes are the crown jewels. A deep green like malachite, with darker striations running through them.

Josh stands. “How are you, dear brother?”

The question is asked in a mocking tone, but Liam rarely rises to the bait. Instead he studies me, his green eyes questioning. “Are you all right?”

I press my hands to my cheeks, feeling the warmth raging. *You want to work out some good old-fashioned daddy issues with Liam North, be my guest.* It’s hard to find my composure with those words still ringing. “I’m fine,” I say on a squeak.

A low laugh from Josh as he wanders away.

“Do I need to kick his ass?” Liam asks, looking grim. It’s not an idle threat. In the ways of male siblings, they have been known to throw a punch in an argument. And I have the sense that their past was more violent than most, which may make it worse.

“Absolutely not,” I say, keeping my voice light. “He’s too hard-headed to learn this lesson anyway.”

You got a hard-on for your legal guardian? Go for it.

Somehow I don’t think the rest of society would view it in such a light. Things between Liam and me would always be taboo. Always forbidden. It makes me wonder if that makes it sweeter. Then I see the concern in Liam’s expression, the wry humor in his eyes, the depth of feeling, and I know I would have wanted him no matter what.

LIAM

There’s something strange about the way Samantha looks at me. Almost... nervous. Is she afraid of me? Jesus. “Well,” I say. “You’re probably right. But I’d feel better.”

She gives me a droll look that says I’m all talk—which is mostly true. I don’t go around beating up people because they say shit to me.

Then again, if they say shit to Samantha, that’s a different story.

And her forced casual expression can’t quite hide the way her cheeks are pink, her eyes wide as she looks up at me. Definitely nervous about something.

I find Josh outside the tent with one of the bridesmaids, about two seconds away from bringing her to orgasm with the crowd of revelers inside. I clear my throat, which makes him growl his annoyance. “Go away.”

He rocks her against his thigh until she comes, biting his shoulder through his tux jacket. Then he whispers something in her ear that makes her giggle, and sends her away on unsteady legs with a pat to her ass.

“God, you’re such a bastard,” he says without heat.

“You have a bedroom.”

“And taking her there would mean giving up on the buffet early.”

Naturally he doesn’t mean the food buffet. “What did you tell Samantha? She was acting strange after you talked to her.”

He rolls his eyes, which is something most men at North Security wouldn’t do. That’s the thing about working with your brothers. “I told her about the baby bird.”

Fury stiffens every muscle inside me. “You did not.”

“Oh yes, big brother. Remember that little bird? It had such soft feathers. You wouldn’t think feathers could be fluffy, but they were. It had fallen out of its nest.”

I have to fight to keep from throwing up on the grass. Wouldn’t that be the perfect way to end the day? It’s been pure torture watching the happy couple, listening to Samantha play songs about forever and always. And now this.

“Don’t,” I say, my voice harsh enough that even my brother should know better.

He grins the same way he did as a kid—full of bravado. He would rather get the shit kicked out of him than admit defeat, and in our house, our father was happy to oblige. “You kept her in your closet, feeding her little bits of bread and peanut butter.”

“You did *not* tell this to Samantha.”

“So what if I did?” he says, laughing. “She was so sad when I told her about the peanut butter.”

I grasp him by the lapels and slam him against a tree beside the tent. “You had no fucking right to do that. You fucking bastard.”

He leans his head back, still laughing. “Don’t get your panties in a twist. I didn’t tell her about the baby bird, or about how Father found out. Or how he locked you in the closet with

the bird for days, until you'd practically died of starvation and the bird had died in your hands."

I shove Josh against the tree and push away, breathing hard. "You're a sick fuck."

"Yeah," he says a little sadly. "I come by it honest."

He's still fucked up over what our father did, and I wish I could help him, I really do. All I can do is give him operational command of North Security. All I can give Elijah is the chance to shoot at assholes when they shoot first. That's what our family has come to.

"There's no point talking about the past," I say. "It doesn't matter now."

"Doesn't it?" Josh says, following the path the bridesmaid took toward the entrance to the tent. "Sometimes I think you still haven't let go of that baby bird."

SAMANTHA

I'm the first one who leaves, slipping into the house with my violin case like a shadow. The faint clatter of dishes comes from the kitchen—the caterers hard at work feeding men who are never really full. I put my violin away with the same care a mother must show her infant child. It might seem extreme to some people, but the violin can't protect itself. It can't wipe away the rosin or polish its wood, so I do it.

In the cool, conditioned air I realize that I've been sweating. The linen of my pale pink dress clings to my skin. Upstairs I take a shower, washing away the scent of the outside, turning my face to the hot spray until I run out of breath.

I slip into my pajamas. Little penguins march across the pale blue flannel. It makes me feel safe and warm—I need that tonight. There are only a couple more months of sleeping in this house. There's no reason for me to come live here after.

The lights are off when I step into the bedroom. A lamp clicks, and light floods the plush beige carpet. I gasp at the sight of Liam standing near the entrance. His lids are low in the dim lighting, his green eyes burning emerald tonight.

“Going to bed?” he says, the question lazy. Of course I’m going to bed. The question is what he’s doing here.

“I’m tired,” I say, a little cautious. A little afraid. “Are you going to bed, too?”

He shakes his head. “I thought I’d tuck you in.”

Tuck me in? He didn’t do that when I was twelve years old. Why would he do it now? The idea wakes up every nerve ending in my body, as if I’m imagining his touch over the blanket, under the blanket, all around me. Nothing about my thoughts is innocent.

He waits while I brush my teeth and change in the closet. I find him sitting on the edge of the bed when I come out, and I climb in, uncertain what comes next.

“Your father made some people angry,” he says, his voice low. It’s as if the admission is torn from him, and it makes me wonder what else he’s been keeping held so tight. He pulls the sheets up high on my body, so it almost touches my chin.

“What does that mean?”

Liam brushes the hair away from my forehead, the touch of his blunt fingertips shocking even in their innocence. “It means he had enemies when he died. Dangerous people who would have hurt you out of a misguided sense of revenge. You couldn’t go into the system.”

“Is that why you got custody of me?”

“I could protect you.”

My throat feels tight. “So you didn’t know my father? Not really?”

“I knew *of* him. That was enough for me. The rest doesn’t matter.”

“Of course it matters,” I say, frustrated that he can still pretend this isn’t everything. “It’s the whole reason you took me in. The reason you turned your life upside down.”

“You’re safe now, child.”

The word *child* makes me rankle with the desire to refute him. But he's sitting on the edge of my twin-size bed, wearing a tux while I'm in jammies. I can't refute anything. He bends to kiss my forehead, and I push him away with a glare. I don't want a chaste kiss on my forehead. I won't accept it.

He frowns. "What exactly did Josh say to you tonight?"

"He said you believe you can't love anyone. Is that true?"

"I suppose it is," Liam says, sounding unnaturally calm about it. As if it doesn't bother him to miss out on such a thing. "I care for you, though. Is that what you're worried about?"

I sit up in bed. "Tell me something. If you weren't friends with my father, how did you even *know* that his daughter was orphaned? Was there some kind of mass e-mail to people in the intelligence sector? A post in a secret Facebook group? Lost little girl needs a strong and seriously grumpy man to become her guardian."

I'm panting by the time I'm done talking. It's not only myself that I'm fighting for right now—it's him. It's us. And I'm willing to tear down every construct of our guardian-ward relationship to do it.

Unfortunately he doesn't seem to understand the severity of the situation. His lip twitches as if he's holding back a laugh. "Seriously grumpy man?"

"You're like a bear who's been woken up from hibernation."

"Maybe," he allows. "But I have a reason to be concerned about you."

"That's why you freaked out about us going to the club?"

"Well, that and the fact that you're not eighteen yet. Where did you get fake IDs?"

"Look... I have to tell you something about the club." Nighttime is made for confidences, and I have the irrepressible urge to confide in him. Maybe it will become my downfall, trusting Liam. I have to try. "That man—"

“Criminal,” Liam corrects gently.

“It wasn’t random that I met him there. I went there to find him, so that I could—”

“I know exactly why you went there.”

My mouth snaps shut. “Excuse me?”

“You obviously were looking to lose your virginity.”

Shock steals my breath, so I can only stare at him in bewildered horror. After a moment I’m suffused with outrage. “And what makes you so sure about that?”

“I understand,” he says, with what appears to be sympathy. “You’re clearly experiencing a spike in hormones. Maybe even still suffering from some late stage puberty.”

I stare at him in undiluted horror. I’m over here thinking about love and sex, about protecting my friend, about a new beginning. And he thinks I’m having *hormones*.

“Samantha,” he says gently.

“No, you’re probably right. Hormones. Puberty.”

“It’s nothing to be embarrassed about.”

I’m embarrassed and horrified and most of all, so sad I could cry. Tears prick my eyes. Anger rushes through my veins in a heavy beat. Maybe I actually am experiencing hormones, but that doesn’t mean what I feel for him isn’t real. “Good night.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The violin was considered the leader of the orchestra before conductors became common

SAMANTHA

In some ways Liam North was an indulgent guardian. He would spend two hundred thousand dollars on a violin. He persuaded an infamous violin teacher to move to Kingston so that I could visit him once a week. There were an endless supply of books and music. I always had the latest model phone, some before they were released to the public due to his connections at the major tech companies.

In other ways Liam was the strictest guardian.

My transient existence as a diplomat's daughter had given me its own education. I knew how to barter for fish in an Indonesian market and how to counter the early signs of frostbite, but I couldn't name most of the states. School, he decided. Not private tutors. Not correspondence courses. I should attend an ordinary school with ordinary classes. I'm not sure how ordinary it is to be driven every day by an armed guard in a limo, but St. Agnes did give me a normal experience.

As normal as you can be when the tuition costs thirty thousand a year.

"You ready?" Laney murmurs.

I'm fiddling with the Bunsen burner, nudging the beaker with my tongs. According to Mr. Washington there should be

precipitate once the molecules get hot enough to release the sodium. “I’m ready to be done with this experiment.”

“Forget about the experiment.”

“That’s easy for you to say. You’re going into finals with a ninety-nine.” Laney is freakishly smart, which means she can get straight As without even paying attention. Meanwhile I can’t figure out whether I missed something crucial not going to elementary school or whether I’m just naturally terrible at chemistry. If these were sheep intestines that needed to be stretched, if I needed to figure out the precise frequency of a note, I could muster up some interest.

Impatient, Laney taps the beaker. A small pile of white powder appears at the bottom. “We should be grateful he agreed to meet us here.”

“Seriously?” I mutter, writing down my findings in the lab notebook. “I know that, but I still don’t know how we’re going to get past the hall monitors.”

St. Agnes could pass for a high-security prison. Every school shooting that happens somewhere in the country is another excuse for them to add metal detectors and cameras—all of it expensive. It makes doing something as simple as skipping class a tactical maneuver worthy of North Security. Luckily I have the daughter of one of the greatest strategists for a partner.

She pulls a key card from her pocket, letting me see it for only a brief moment before slipping it back into her navy blue sweater. “Simple.”

I stare at her, incredulous. “You stole Mr. Washington’s security pass?”

“Don’t freak out. He’s always losing his pass, so much that the secretary at the front office keeps an extra one for him in her desk.”

“What happens when she sees that it’s gone?”

“That won’t be for days. We’re going to graduate next week.”

I'm simultaneously impressed and horrified at how casually my friend has broken the rules. "You realize we're upgrading from breaking school rules to illegal activity, right?"

She scoffs. "What's illegal about swiping a key card?"

"Theft." I tick the words off with my fingers. "Trespassing. Oh, not to mention blackmail."

"All for the greater good."

Acid rises in my throat. If she weren't right about that, I would refuse to do it. I'm not a rule breaker. Not a rebel. At least I didn't use to be. That seems to be changing. "All I'm saying is that if we wind up in jail, I'm blaming you."

"Please. I have about three fake passports that could get me out of the country." At my expression, she adds, "I'm kidding, of course."

I don't think she's kidding. "And leave me here to take the fall?"

Like the way she did at the club. But I know that about her. She's the one who found the guy selling a tape that we can use for blackmail. She also set up the meeting. That's actually a high amount of planning for someone who flew to Coachella in a hot air balloon. I'm the one with the envelope of cash in my backpack. I have to be the one to finish this.

"Nothing is going to happen," she says. "No one is going to fall. This is exactly how my mom got into a Nicaraguan embassy *and* aided the rebellion."

"Which rebellion?"

"Does it matter? We're speaking truth to power right now. Coach Price is going down."

Because Laney is a smart girl and because it's the only plan we have, I manage to convince myself that everything is going to be fine.

We'll buy the evidence we need to blackmail Coach Price. We'll protect Cody and the other boys he coaches without

breaking our vow of silence. And we'll definitely not end up fleeing the country under an assumed name.

At least I believe that until I use the card to get to the tennis court, where the club owner is supposed to be waiting. Only, he's not there. Principal Keller stands there instead.

SAMANTHA

Liam and I have sat in the principal's office together before. Once when he enrolled me in the school, after an interview process where Liam drilled the teachers in both core subjects and drama and of course music. Even though it was understood that the serious music learning would happen with my tutors outside school, both Liam and the school agreed that I should participate in orchestra. For the camaraderie, Miss Harper said. If six girls hating my guts for taking first chair every year was camaraderie, then it had definitely worked.

Then again every year as we discussed my progress, my course schedule, my socialization. That's what they called me sitting alone at the lunch table in tenth grade when Laney had volunteered in Costa Rica for a semester.

Daddy never set foot in one of my schools. He would write a note—or have one of his aides write a note. I would take the bus to school, if there was a bus. I also took a train or a rickshaw or in one singular incident in Columbia, a donkey.

And if a teacher ever demanded to see my father, if that was the price of entry, then I simply wouldn't go. *We'll be leaving this hellhole soon enough, Sam.* He called them all hellholes, even if it was a five-star hotel with crystal glasses and gold chandeliers.

Liam showing such an interest in my schooling was strange. Foreign.

And a balm to my grieving little heart.

I repaid him by being the best student St. Agnes had ever seen, forcing my brain to make sense of literature and government when all I really wanted to think about was music.

The number of times he got called to the principal's office for bad behavior?

Zero.

Until today. His expression when he appears at the door is hard. Remote. His green eyes promise punishment. This is the Liam that enemies see when he's in the field, and I shiver in response. I'm the enemy in this situation. I'm sitting in a chair beside the receptionist's desk—probably the same chair where Laney was sitting when she stole that security card.

Thankfully I managed to shut the door in Laney's face before Principal Keller saw her, which means she's in the clear. My fate is yet to be decided.

I make a sound of dismay, of apology.

"Samantha?" he says, his voice severe. I think he wants me to have some easy explanation for what's happening, but I don't even know. How did Keller know I would be there?

"I'm sorry," I say, feeling miserable. I'm not only sorry for him being called in. I'm sorry that I can't confide in him, that as close as we are, we're not close enough for that. Judging from the dark cloud that passes over his expression, he knows what I mean.

Principal Keller appears at the door, a tall man who seems to become more slender every year. His mouth is set in a severe line. "Mr. North. Thank you for taking the time to come today. Please come in."

Liam looks at me. Apparently he wants me to come in with them. I follow the principal inside with my head down. I take the seat nearest the door, as if I could bolt. Liam sits in the seat beside me, reclined in a pose that's deceptively casual. He shouldn't even fit in the chair. Six-foot-something with lean muscles. The itchy gray fabric on top of a hard-plank of a chair is designed for teenagers. Or maybe adults from fifty years ago. Liam doesn't look bothered by the size of the chair or its questionable stains. Discomfort can't touch him. He looks like he could sit there for years, or that's what it feels like, his gaze heavy on me. My face flames.

Principal Keller clears his throat. "I'm afraid that Ms. Brooks faces serious charges today. We found her with a

security pass belonging to a teacher. She used it to leave the building, when she should have been in calculus.”

“Is that true?” Liam asks softly.

The principal looks affronted. “I found her outside holding the—”

“I asked her a question,” Liam says, without taking his gaze from me. He’s going to make me say it. He’s going to make me admit the shame out loud.

“Yes,” I whisper, not sure whether I’m more humiliated that I did it or that I got caught.

“I’m afraid it gets worse,” Principal Keller says, pulling out a familiar white envelope. He sets it on the desk as if it’s a proclamation of guilt—and well, I suppose it is. “She had this on her person. A rather large amount of money to be carrying around on a Monday, don’t you think? I suppose she wanted to purchase an extra snack at lunch.”

Oh great, now he’s a comedian. Of course no one laughs. Liam opens the envelope and glances inside, his thumb rifling through the hundred-dollar bills. He’s probably counted the money down to the exact amount.

“No doubt she was going to buy drugs,” Principal Keller adds.

“Leave,” Liam says, his voice low.

My stomach sinks. It’s only my worst fear for the past six years, that I would have no place to go, that the one person in the world who cared about me would have enough. Every muscle in my body knots hard enough to make me throw up. I’m clenched on the edge of the hard chair, panic thick in my throat.

Liam looks toward the principal. “We need a minute.”

“This is my office, sir.” Principal Keller’s mouth opens and closes like a fish. “Well, I can see that this is a very serious matter. Probably you want to... one minute, only.”

Then we’re alone.

I can't relax. He wasn't speaking to me then, but that doesn't mean I'm off the hook. *It was only a matter of time until he got tired of you.* I should be grateful that he kept me around this long. At least I'll have graduated high school, assuming St. Agnes gives me a diploma. I won't have a violin if he kicks me out, but I know how to play.

"Stop that," he mutters.

I swallow hard. "Stop what?"

"Whatever it is you're thinking. It makes me feel like I'm kicking a damn puppy. Don't give me those eyes; you're going to explain yourself. Where did you get this money?"

"It's my violin money." There have been some performances in the space between school—a few concerts over the summer and a trip to Italy last winter break. They pay pretty well. It would have been within Liam's rights to keep the money. After all, he's the one who pays for my school and my clothes. He paid for the violin I used to play.

But he's always kept the money in a bank account under my name only.

"You were going to spend your violin money on drugs," he says, his voice flat.

"I wasn't going to buy drugs," I say, affronted. Bad enough that he knows I lied to him, that I kept a secret. The thought of disappointing him makes my stomach turn inside out. He doesn't need to think I'm trying to get high on top of that.

"Then what the hell is the money for?"

I press my lips together. Cody and Laney are two of my best friends in the world. I promised them I wouldn't share this secret, but that was before Liam looked at me like I'd disappointed him. "It was for a good cause," I say. "We were going to speak truth to power."

"We?" he asks, his eyebrow rising.

Shit. I'm sure he can guess who my partners in crime are, even if I did manage to keep Laney out of trouble. "Look, the

truth is... I can't tell you everything. It's about loyalty and doing the right thing, even when it's hard."

"Christ," he says.

I take a deep breath, tears stinging my eyes. "And if you want me to move out, I'll understand that. I'm almost eighteen, almost graduated high school, and then the tour—"

He makes a slashing motion with his hand. "Move out? You're clearly upset and caught in the middle of something, so I'm going to pretend like that's not a goddamn insult. Did you think that when I took custody of you, it was just for when things were easy? That I would only want you around if you made the goddamn dean's list?"

The way he says it means the answer is no, but I lived too long without any approval to really believe otherwise. My whole life has been about pleasing other people—about making my fingers move fast enough so that someone would clap at the end of the song.

"We're going home," he says, almost growling the words. "Where you will go to your room and think about what you've done. Because you are officially grounded."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

When violinist Fritz Kreisler served in WWII, his aural sensitivity helped him determine the location of large artillery by listening to the changing pitch of incoming shells across the battlefield.

SAMANTHA

Liam gets called away for work on the drive home, which is a relief. It gives me time to rebuild my defenses. Grounded? I've never been grounded in my life. He has no right to do that. And I still don't trust him to do the right thing where Coach Price is concerned.

He might decide to do nothing *and* to block me from helping. That's what he said about the guy at the club, after all. That he would look the other way for local criminals, as long as they left him alone.

That hasn't changed, but we've run out of options. The tapes that we were going to use to blackmail Coach Price disappeared along with the club owner. Liam has the money that I was going to use to buy them, anyway. My violin money—gone.

There's nothing left to do but trust Liam, and the knowledge rises like acid in my throat. I'll have to tell him that Coach Price was doing bad things. That Cody needed us to do this. Maybe he'll consider it his civic responsibility to help. *Like me.*

That night I wander through the halls of the darkened house. Our bedrooms have never been close together, one of

the many ways that he's kept distance between us. Ironically I sleep in what's formally the family wing of the house, in the master bedroom. Liam uses a room beside his office to sleep. I have to pass the music room along the way, the shadows heavy, the silence dark. My violin rests in its case, but I feel its uneasy heartbeat as I pass.

A sound comes into the hallway, and I pause on the hard wood.

It was almost an animal sound, grumbling and dangerous. I take another step. Another. There's only quiet now, but the hair on the back of my neck rises.

Then I hear it again—a growl of warning.

Blood races through my veins. I may not fully trust Liam, but he's the only place I feel safe. His door is cracked open, revealing only a blanket of darkness. I push inside to safety, glancing over my shoulder, my pulse a hard staccato in my throat. Closing the door, I lean against it, panting.

Only to realize the sound is coming from inside the room.

A form writhes on the bed, large, menacing. A wild sound of rage. Of pain?

“Liam?” I whisper.

My eyes adjust so slowly, revealing a feral animal, revealing a man in sleep. White sheets are tangled around his waist. His shoulders are thick with muscle. He grasps the sheets, the pillows, fighting something. My heart clenches at the realization.

Liam North is having a nightmare.

I put my hand on his shoulder. Tension ripples beneath my palm. He's facing down, fighting some invisible enemy, sweat a faint gleam across a landscape of strength.

He goes still.

“It's just a dream,” I say, soothing. Only it doesn't feel like a dream. There are terrible demons in the room, as living and breathing as I stand here. Maybe more.

A crash of motion, and then I'm pulled, twisted, pinned onto the bed. I land hard on the expanse of cool sheets. Breath leaves me in a rush. A large body cages me from above, an arm pressed across my neck. It's not hard enough to keep me from breathing, but I definitely can't move.

"Liam," I say, gasping. "*Liam!*"

He trembles above me, around me. He's become my whole world—and it's a dark place to live. His breath saws through the air like a serrated blade.

"How dare you," he says, his voice guttural.

He's asleep, he's still asleep, and I don't know how to wake him up. Only then his hand moves from my neck to my jaw.

His thumb brushes over my cheek. "Samantha," he mutters.

"I'm sorry," I say, more for whatever horrors haunted him in the nightmare than for waking him. Someone should be here every night, to pull him back to the land of the living.

"I could have hurt you." He sounds hoarse but coming awake. "Do you have a goddamn death wish, Samantha? I could have killed you."

I'm trembling underneath him, still trying to make sense of how I ended up on his bed, how I ended up between his thighs, the heavy weight of *something* on my stomach. "You wouldn't hurt me," I say, the words coming breathless and unsure.

The smell of him—earth and musk and salt. It's all I can think about, the way he surrounds me. The way he moves over me. This is how it would feel if we made love. Even his arm across my neck... it's meant to be a violent act, but it feels sensual. My nerves pick apart every sensation: the heat of him, the rasp of hair across his forearm, the throb of his pulse.

This is every erotic dream I've ever had, everything I see when I close my eyes, my hands between my legs. It would be perfect—if he wasn't still trembling from aftershocks. What kind of terrible thing would make Liam so scared he would

lash out like an animal? He's the most controlled person I've ever met.

He dips his head, his lips against the curve of my ear. "I would," he murmurs, but it sounds like he's trying to convince himself. "You aren't safe with me."

The words resound inside me. I'm not sure they're true, but I'm sure he believes them. Don't they match what I thought when I came here? That I can't trust him. That I would be a fool to trust him... and yet, seeing him in the throes of his nightmare has changed everything. He's two hundred pounds of solid muscle straining above me, but he's the vulnerable one right now.

I run my hand over his back as if I can soothe him.

As if I can tame him.

LIAM

My mind reels from the sudden break of night.

Darkness blankets the bedroom, but not like my dreams. It's not the lack of light that makes dreams dangerous. It's the lack of hope.

Breath saws through my throat. Every muscle is pulled tight, ready to strike. Slowly, slowly, the shadows form into the shape of a person. Samantha looks up at me, her eyes wide with fear.

"Christ," I say, my voice hoarse. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

She blinks at me, her mouth open. That's when I realize that I still have my arm across her neck. She can't breathe. I'm hurting her. I swore I'd never hurt her.

I pull back enough to let her breathe, but something strange happens. I can't stop touching her. I'm clutching her, feeling her, making sure she's not broken or bruised. My hands are rough. I'm probably making it worse, but I need to feel her solid and warm and alive.

A ragged breath. Another. Her slender body shakes underneath me, her eyes watering. "I'm fine," she says even

though it's clearly a lie. "Fine."

"Fine," I repeat, grim and sick with it. "You're the furthest fucking thing from fine. I could have killed you, Samantha. Do you understand that? I could have crushed your windpipe in a second."

A shiver takes her body. She's scared of me.

As she should be.

It's not a regular man who got custody of her six years ago. I hide the feral part of me, but it's inside, waiting to get out. "Don't ever do that again—Jesus, don't. Don't cry."

Tears slip from her eyes, but she doesn't make a sound. That hurts almost more than if she'd sobbed in my arms. I learned violence in my childhood. She learned to hide her pain.

"I'm not hurt," she whispers.

"You are," I say, insistent. She's hurt in so many ways she can't even count them all. She came to me shattered. The bastard of a father had neglected her in a thousand ways for the first twelve years of her life. And then he'd died. My fault. It was my fault he was gone, and the worst part is that I'd never once regretted it. Not when it brought her to me.

Her palm cups my face, rubbing gently. Her skin is so soft, impossibly fragile as it rasps against a day's growth on my jaw. "What were you dreaming about?"

My entire body reacts to that—a sudden jerk, as if she slapped me instead of caressed me.

What was I dreaming about? I don't want that near her. Not even the description of it. Not even the thoughts. "It doesn't matter."

Her eyebrows draw together. "Was it from when you were overseas?"

From my time as a soldier. Yes, there were some dark moments. Blood and death. That's probably what I should be having nightmares about. I'll send my brain a fucking memo,

because it can't seem to get over what happened years before that. "No."

"You sounded..." She swallows. "Afraid."

Afraid. Yeah, I'd been afraid. It had buried itself deep in my skin, and all these years later, even knowing that no one can hurt me, it hasn't left. The irony is that it made me a beast on the battlefield. I wasn't afraid of a goddamn IED blast. Nothing in that godforsaken desert could scare me. There'd been a time in my life it would have been a blessing.

Another tear rolls down her face, and I realize she isn't crying because I hurt her. She's crying because I'm hurt. Something strange tightens in my chest. I basically attacked her like an animal, like a fucking animal, and she's worried about me.

"It doesn't matter what I dream about. The important thing is that you never do that again. Why did you come here?" But for some reason I can't make myself let go of her.

She's still underneath me, her body warm and quivering.

My cock is hard. The warmth of her, the sweet scent of her. She must feel my erection where I'm straddling her. Does she know what it means? *Of course she does, you bastard.*

"It does matter," she says, squirming a little in ways that make my cock flex against her flat little stomach. "It matters what you're dreaming about."

My body doesn't feel like it's under my control. I want to blame the nightmare, but this isn't something I ever thought about when I was five years old in a goddamn well. I dip my head to breathe her in. Maybe the scent, one deep breath—it might be enough. It's not. I need more. I press my face against her neck. The bristles on my jaw rasp against her. My lips follow to soothe away the sting. Her breath catches, and I can't make myself stop.

"I'll prove it to you," I mutter, my voice almost a growl.

Her eyes widen, dark pools that I could drown in, but she doesn't look afraid.

She looks curious.

How can I send her out into the world like this? So damn innocent. So trusting, when she has no idea all the ways I want to use her. I close my fist hard, pulling her hair taut, exposing her neck, a pale column against the wild shadows of her hair.

A squeak escapes her, but that's not enough to make me stop. She'll be alone on that tour, at the mercy of men like Harry March, men who don't have any morals. Men like me.

I press my hips down, rubbing my erection against her small body. She has to know what she's up against. She has to know what I want.

She wriggles underneath me, probably trying to escape. All it does is make me harder. I'm so much bigger than she is, so much stronger.

"Tell me no," I say, my words hard and cold. "Fight me."

"What?" she gasps.

"You have to be safe." It's become a prayer. A promise. "If a man tries to touch you... You have to protect yourself from people like me."

That's the part I didn't say during our sex talk. The part I couldn't bring myself to say. Couldn't bring myself to think about. Samantha, hurt. Samantha, afraid. Until I was twenty thousand feet above the ground, watching her sneak out on the goddamn video camera, ice in my veins.

And still she blinks up at me. There's an entire universe inside her. Creation and destruction. A million stars lighting up the night.

"What happens if I don't say no?" she asks. "What if I say yes?"

Oh God, she's testing me. Tempting me. She has no idea what she's asking for, what I could do to her before she has a chance to object. *Show her*, the devil inside me whispers.

It sounds like my voice, that devil. It's me.

I lean down, my lips an inch from hers. But I don't do anything as sweet or ordinary as kiss her. That would be too much like romance, too much like love, and those impulses were beaten out of me a long time ago. Instead I bite her lip, tugging her tender flesh between my teeth.

It's a threat, the way I give her a little pressure, only enough to hurt. I won't leave bruises, but I want to. That's how fucked up I am. I want to leave my mark on her body, on her soul.

I've never let those impulses out of their godforsaken cages, but it's happening now. I trail my lips to her jaw and scrape her velvet-soft skin with the edge of my teeth. If this is what it takes for her to understand the threats, for her to protect herself from the dangers out there in the world... if this is what it takes to keep her safe...

That's the excuse I tell myself as I grasp her earlobe between my teeth.

Peaches. Vanilla. Sweetness and cream.

Her scent reaches inside my lungs, imprinting on me the way I want to imprint my will on her. Something feral takes over my body. I'm acting on pure instinct as I burrow closer to her. Down the smooth line of her neck, where it meets her shoulder. That's where I bite her.

She jolts beneath me, making a sound that's every bit as animal, a sound of submission and pleasure. It would be so easy to pull her nightshirt up, to rip her panties to shreds. To push my aching cock inside her little cunt and finally have relief.

"Yes," she whispers as if she can read my thoughts. "Please."

Her small hands grasp my shoulders, my chest, my abs. She rocks herself up, thrusting her flat belly against my erection, and I grunt at the terrible pleasure. God.

Even more than I want to fuck her, I want to eat her. To bite my way down her lithe body, to sink my teeth into her hips, her thighs. To lave my tongue right between her—

“No,” I choke out, pushing back from the bed. There’s physical pain, removing myself from her clumsy embrace, as if I cut off a limb. My cock throbs in my briefs. It knows how close it came to heaven.

“Tell me what the money was for.”

SAMANTHA

I’m panting in the erotic haze he left me in. This is probably some kind of military interrogation technique, to make someone writhe and shudder. And then ask her a question. My brain is too muddled to come up with a lie. And worse than that, my defenses are down.

Slowly I sit up on the bed and grab a pillow to clutch in my lap, but it’s not much of a wall. It doesn’t protect me from his harsh breathing or the broad silhouette from the moon in the window.

“Okay,” I say, my voice trembling only slightly. “I’ll tell you.”

There may as well be a marble statue in the room with me for how still he is, except that he’s emanating heat at approximately ten thousand degrees. It radiates from him in furious demand.

“There’s a new coach at Kingston High.” There are really only two high schools in the city, the public high school with its large football stadium and massive prom nights. And St. Agnes, which is where Laney and I attend. “Cody told us that he’s... that he’s watching them. Touching them.”

My cheeks flame at the words.

A low growl fills the room, raising the hair on the back of my neck. “Touching them?”

“Not like that,” I say quickly. “At least not yet.” I heard this only secondhand. Cody confided in Laney, who broke his confidence enough to share it with me.

“Then what is it like?” Liam bites off the words.

“He gives them a hug if they lose a game. Or he’ll give a player a massage if he has a tight muscle. Things like that.” I

shake my head, struggling to explain. We couldn't go to the authorities with something like that, couldn't risk everything on a bad feeling. What if no one believed us? What if Coach Price retaliated against Cody for saying something? The boys already started pairing off when they go to the locker room, but it's only a matter of time.

"What was the money for?" Liam asks, his voice strangely calm. Gone is the panting, raging man who hovered over me only a few minutes ago. This is the high-paid security operative. "Were you trying to pay him to leave?"

"Kind of. It was for a video."

"A video of what?"

"I don't know," I confess, my cheeks burning in the dark. "Laney did some digging at the school in Austin where he worked last. Apparently there was some scandal that they hushed up. And this guy had some kind of incriminating video file."

"So you were going to buy the video. And then what?"

I blink. "What do you mean?"

His voice goes subzero. "What were you going to do with the file, Samantha?"

That was the easy part, wasn't it? Only we never got that far. "We'd blackmail him, make him leave the boys alone, make him resign his position."

A low growl. "Did it occur to you that he might have bought your silence a different way? By hurting you? Threatening you? Killing you?"

My stomach turns over. "We would have been careful."

The long pause that follows makes me think of every bad thing that could have happened to Laney or Cody. If anything would happen to me, I know that Liam North would blame himself.

"Careful," he says, his voice hollow. "There is no amount of careful that would be good enough. How dare you risk your life like that? Do you know what I would do if you—"

Shock makes me breathless. “You risk your life all the time. You send men and women to risk their lives for North Security. But I can’t do the same thing?”

“No, goddamn you.”

I flinch from the venom in his voice. “That’s not fair.”

“Life isn’t fair, Samantha. That’s something Cody and his teammates already learned, and it’s something you’re going to have to learn, too.”

“So you aren’t going to do anything to help?”

“It’s not my business.”

Acid rises in my throat. “What if you had said that about me?”

Something dark moves through the forest of his eyes. “I didn’t.”

“What’s so different between me and Cody? Why would you help me but not him?”

“Don’t ask me that, Samantha.”

“No! I’ve had enough of being quiet, of being the good little girl who does what she’s told. If you won’t help him, I’m going to.”

A harsh laugh. “Don’t push me. I’m about two seconds away from locking you up.”

Indignation and a strange secret desire rise inside me. The indignation wins. “You can’t lock me up. I’m an adult now.”

“Almost an adult. And as I said before, almost doesn’t count.”

He makes me so angry, there may as well be steam rising from my ears. I clutch the pillow tighter, wondering about whether I should throw it at him. But then I would lose my shield.

I don’t know why a twelve-year-old girl he’d never met mattered to him when a boy who lives in the same city

doesn't, but I'm not above using that to my advantage. "What if I ask you to?"

He freezes. "Ask me to what?"

I stand up from the bed and take a step closer to him—and almost, almost touch him. "You can use my violin money. If you buy the video, he won't be able to hurt you."

"You want this from me?"

A solemn nod.

The closet light flicks on, blinding me. His body blocks it, and then he's getting dressed right in front of me. Worn jeans pulled on over his briefs. A T-shirt covering his abs. I've never watched him get dressed before, but there's something studiously casual about his movements.

As if he's hiding a black hole of emotion.

I'm wearing a tank top and panties, the same as I do every night. The same as I was when I walked in here, but I feel more exposed now that he's wearing regular clothes.

The closet light casts his face in sharp contrast, the stark handsomeness of his features abutted against pure dark. "I'm not going to give that man a single goddamn cent, but if I did, it sure as hell wouldn't be your violin money."

There's a boulder in my chest, crashing left and right. "You're going to do it?"

"I'm going to do it," he says, his tone grim, and I can't shake the feeling that something powerful is in play, more than a guardian doing a favor for his ward.

"Tomorrow?" I ask.

He gives a low growl of assent. "Tomorrow."

"You're not... mad. Are you? About what happened?" I can't quite look back at the bed where we were. I have only the fleeting impression of rumpled sheets. Sheets that had held Liam's muscled body.

"At you? No."

Acid rises in my throat. Oh, he's going to blame himself. "Liam."

He ties a knot with hard, efficient movements and stands. "You'll stay here where it's safe until I have the video. I'll have Josh watch you. No sneaking out again."

Such a parental thing to say. "You didn't do anything wrong," I tell him, earnest, desperate to save what I've already lost. I can feel the grains of sand between my fingers. "You didn't hurt me. You only—"

You only bit me.

A humorless laugh is my answer. "The coach is abusing his power. You were the one telling me how wrong it is, how I should stop him. How is what I did on that bed any different?"

"Because I wanted it."

He shakes his head, turning away from me. "That doesn't matter."

His broad back will be the last thing I see of him, on the one night he sees me as more than a child. I can't let him leave this way. I'm done letting him tell me what to do. "It matters."

I'm standing in his bedroom, my bare feet rooted to the ground. He's in the doorway, his whole body tense as if he needs to flee. Well, maybe he does. Maybe he can't handle what he wants or what I want. Maybe he can't handle me, but I'll be damned if I let him think he's doing this for my own good.

"What did you say?" he asks, his voice soft.

Anyone else would be wary to hear that tone. Anyone else would be terrified, but he had his chance to hurt me. He could have done so on the bed. And he could have hurt me worse, so much worse, if he hadn't agreed to help me with Coach Price.

My voice still quavers as I stand my ground. "Rebels took the embassy in Jakarta. I was five years old, and I hid in the cabinets until they found me the next day."

He makes a low sound of protest. "What's your point?"

“The motorcade left me behind outside Moscow. It took my father two days to realize I wasn’t there. I hiked to the nearest village and begged them to let me stay in broken Russian.”

“So your father was a bastard,” he says, his voice flat. “I already knew that.”

“I grew up faster than anyone at St. Agnes, and you know it. I may not be experienced with... sex things, but I know what I want. And that’s you.”

He looks so alone standing there, a fortress that will never be torn down, self-contained and isolated. I let myself think that he might let me in, that he might trust me the way I’d brought myself to trust him. It’s enough to make my breath quicken, this hope. This longing.

When he turns away from me, it shouldn’t be a surprise. The weight of it shouldn’t crush me. I’ve had a brick wall around me since I was a child.

Only Liam has the power to tear it down.

“Let me stay,” I say softly.

“Why?” he asks, his broad back still and dark like a statue in the room.

“Because I have nightmares, too.”

He’ll leave now. That’s the only thing he can do. The only thing he’ll allow himself to do. I’m not the only one with a brick wall around me. He has his own, and I’ve never been able to breach it. Which is why I’m not expecting it when he pulls me into his arms. He carries me to bed, holding me tight through my tremors of shock and years-long relief.

That’s how I fall asleep—with him protecting me in the most elemental way, blocking out the bad thoughts with his body. I use him as a shield, but I do more than that. I shield him, too. When he’s holding me, the darkness can’t reach us.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Violin strings were originally made from dried sheep intestines

LIAM

In the days that follow, I pay a visit to the club where I found Samantha and get the tape—using my reputation and intimidation rather than her precious violin money. I meet with local police and school board members. Coach Price is stripped of his position with the kind of expediency that can only come from a massive scandal. Or in this case the threat of one. A generous endowment to the school's sports program means they'll be able to hire a new coach and renovate the gymnasium.

I may have resisted this errand at first, but I find it gives me a sense of satisfaction to make this right, to do something for Samantha.

And in the nights that follow I'm confronted with the worst kind of temptation. I go to sleep alone, certain that I can smell Samantha, that I can feel her body heat left over.

She tiptoes into my room around midnight. I wake up wrapped around her small body, her soft hair in my hands, my nose pressed to her skin, my dick aching from being hard for hours with no relief. It's an exquisite torture, wrong on every level, and I never want it to end.

On the fifth night I wake to find her legs wrapped around me, our bodies aligned in the most carnal way, my dick throbbing against the heat it can feel through the fabric of my briefs and her panties. Bad enough that I gave in and kissed

her in that club. I'm not going to thrust against her until she comes. I'm not, I'm not. I repeat the words until they become a chant, a plea to a God I never believed in.

Carefully I pull her limbs away from me, untangling our bodies, until she clasps a pillow close and settles back into sleep. Then I cross the large bedroom to the bathroom and close the door. *Christ.*

Thinking of tactical formations isn't going to help. The only thing that will bring down this erection is to jack off. I turn on the shower and set it to scalding hot.

Steam coats the glass.

I step inside and grasp my dick, which aches like a motherfucker. It doesn't want the calluses on my palm or the rough, angry tugs. It wants to be encased in soft, wet velvet.

My eyes fall shut, and I imagine that she's in the shower with me, her skin slippery, droplets running down her breasts. I would catch them as I suck on her nipples. I would drink the warm water in open mouthed kisses along the flat of her stomach. It would taste like nothing, nothing at all, until I'd slide my tongue between her legs, finding salt and desire.

Water trails down my body, and I imagine that it's her tongue, finding the dips and rises of my muscles. She would get on her knees in front of me and lick her pink lips.

A little sound makes my eyes fly open.

Samantha stands in the doorway to the bedroom, her mouth parted in surprise, her eyes wide in unmistakable arousal. There's enough steam coating the glass to make her hazy, as if she isn't quite real, the sweetest dream I've ever had. I should stop, I should absolutely stop touching myself, stop fucking myself. Instead I squeeze hard from the base to the tip, punishing myself for how good it feels.

At the very least I expect her to flee the room, but she stands there, watching me with hunger in her dark gaze, with an innocent curiosity that makes my blood run hot.

And then she takes a step closer.

I plant my hand on the cool tile and use the other one to pump my dick. And then I still my fist, moving my hips instead, thrusting the way I want to do inside her body. I would hold her head as the water came down around us, using her sweet mouth until I came in a blinding rush. My cum would fill her mouth, and she would have no choice but to swallow it down. I'd catch clear water on my fingertips and feed it to her to wash me down. Then I'd reach down between her legs, make her climax as she knelt on the smooth tile of the shower, legs splayed and useless, arms clinging to my leg in surrender, the salt of my sex still on her tongue.

Every thought is in my eyes as I watch her, and she seems to know it—if not the exact contents, at least the spirit of it. She takes another step closer, and then another, until the only thing between us is the steamed glass of the shower door.

She puts her hand on it, her palm toward me, fingers spread.

I touch her hand through the glass, as if I can feel her.

My forehead rests on the glass, needing the connection, every part of me straining to break through the tempered glass and touch her, how soft she would be, how warm, as I come with a shout of forbidden pleasure, my whole body convulsing, hips fucking the air, my cock in agony as it comes in the warm, humid air instead of her tight cunt.

My head bows as I catch my breath, panting like an animal in the aftermath.

When I look up again, she's gone. The doorway is dark. I can almost believe that she was part of my fantasy, not a real person who watched me come, except for the small handprint breaking up the steam on the other side of the glass.

God, she's probably run back to her room—and no wonder. I should never have kept touching myself when she walked in. Then again this is my bathroom. My shower. The lines between right and wrong have blurred so much that I don't know where to begin.

The only thing I know for sure is that I want to fuck her so bad it hurts.

Dressing quickly, pulling on a T-shirt and briefs over my wet skin, I head into the bedroom. I'll have to find her in the house and make sure I haven't scared her. Except she's lying in bed where I left her, her dark eyes catching light from the bathroom and throwing it back to me in the dark.

"Are you okay?" I ask, my voice low.

"Yes," she says. "Why wouldn't I be okay?"

So she doesn't want to talk about it. I should tell her to go back to her room. It isn't appropriate for her to be here. Except that she wasn't lying about having nightmares. Sometimes she cries out in her sleep. Remembering the night her father died?

Part of me wants to rage at her for leaving. Part of me wants to push her out of the fucking nest, to let her fly or fall, not to catch her on the way down. It isn't in me to make her leave, so I climb back into bed with her. She curls herself against me, her hair dampened from standing in the bathroom, steam rising from both of our bodies.

LIAM

I'm asleep when the call arrives, but my body is trained to come fully awake at the first sign of trouble. I suppose I would have cultivated that skill in the military if I needed to.

I had it the day I enlisted. That's what comes of growing up with a man who believed the devil resided in you. My childhood was a study in wild opposites, the intense high of an exuberant, loving father, and then the inevitable turn that came at night. He would charge into my room because of some nightmare he had, a sense that the devil was inside me, determined to drive him away. Anything that had happened during the day, a phrase I had used or an expression on my face, could be caused by the devil. My father would do anything to drive him out—press my hands onto the lit burner of the stove, choke me until I passed out. Throw me into the well so the cold and damp would drive away evil spirits.

The red light blinks on my phone, which means it's coming in from a secure line. We have servers set up so that teams on deployment can reach us from anywhere without our location, and thus their identity, being compromised. "Hello," I say, my voice hoarse as if I've been shouting in my sleep. I didn't even realize I still had nightmares about the well until Samantha woke me up. She's sleeping soundly in bed right now, and I take a few steps away, toward the bathroom, so I don't wake her up.

A female voice identifies herself using a nine-digit alphanumeric code, her latitude and longitude, and an abbreviation that means she's not being coerced to make this call. Laney's mother. That's a fucking relief. The last thing we need is another orphan around here.

"Sitrep," I say, already pulling on my jeans. I give Samantha a last glance before I shut the door to my bedroom, keeping her shielded from the darkness in my world. This is one area where I won't compromise her safety.

"We ran into some trouble during our exfil from the region. A local drug lord and pimp was making an example of one of his girls. The team commander took exception."

Striding through the hallway, I almost collide with Josh, who's heading to the office. He got the same notification that I did about the secure line and probably hit the Answer button a millisecond after I did, barely missing the call. He managed to pull on a shirt, which is one step more than I did. His eyes are alert, but he doesn't say anything, waiting for me to finish the call.

"Where is the team commander?" I ask, flipping on the lights.

"Uncertain. He ordered us to hang back while he scoped out the situation."

I press two fingers to my brow where a sharp pain slices my skull. There's a wealth of problems in a handful of words. As the team commander, Elijah's word would be final on a situation. Team members like Laney's mother could advise him, but he had the final say—chain of command is crucial to

these missions. Of course, sticking to the objective is also crucial.

An objective that has nothing to do with a local drug lord.

“What were his exact orders?”

“He told us to go dark until we met up at the rendezvous point, which would have been this morning. We waited three hours past the mark before retreating.”

“Are any of you injured?”

“Negative.”

Christ. I give the sitrep to Josh, who swears in a long and creative streak.

“He wasn’t going to *scope out* the situation,” Josh says, biting off the words. “He was going to assassinate the fucker, and probably start an international incident while he’s at it.”

Unfortunately there’s a very real possibility of that. While no one would cry over a shitty drug lord, the balance of power in these places is precarious. It’s even possible this person was backed by the local authorities, making Elijah the target of a corrupt government. “At the very least it sounds like he may have gotten himself captured.”

“Or killed,” Josh says. “And endangered his team in the process.”

Any other employee of North Security would have found himself fired for even a fraction of the breaks in protocol. Elijah North is more than an employee. He’s our brother. Which means I’m more interested in finding his ass than firing it—and then giving him a well-deserved black eye.

“Hold your position,” I say into the phone. “We’re sending reinforcements.”

It will take at least twelve hours to get on the ground there, but I’m not going to send the team looking for them when they’re already a man down and probably half-frozen from hiding out in the godforsaken wasteland that is northern Russia. I give her details of a rendezvous point for us to meet while Josh notifies the pilot to get his ass out of bed.

“Three men,” I say when we’re both off the phone. “I don’t want to send in the whole Blue Team now that I know the situation. Who knows what kind of fucking drug turf war we’re walking into. Quiet as a fucking mouse. Lewis and Jameson.”

“And you?” Josh says, raising his eyebrows.

It’s hardly uncommon for me to join a mission, especially one as crucial as this one. If word gets out that North Security was in the area, fucking around with criminal activity, then it means our true objective will also be exposed. “Do you have an objection?”

A sardonic rise of his brow. “Samantha’s graduation.”

How could I forget? There are a thousand dates in my head, but I don’t want to think about her graduation. It’s one step closer to taking her away from me.

Her graduation and then her birthday. And then the goddamn tour.

We’re only a month away from it now. I would give almost anything not to attend the damned ceremony with her self-righteous principal and the piece of paper he’ll give her that says she’s all grown-up.

I would give anything not to attend, except that it would hurt Samantha. That’s pretty much the one thing I’m not willing to do. “You’re right,” I say, gruff in my sense of loss.

“I’ll bring Elijah back,” Josh says, sounding grim. And of course he will.

Elijah’s the youngest of the three of us. For a time it looked like he would turn out the most normal. He was going to marry his high school sweetheart, until she was kidnapped on her senior trip. It’s been years now, but I think some part of him thinks she’s still alive somewhere. That poor girl that the pimp made an example of, she could have been the girl he loved.

Hell, I probably would have done the same thing. If Elijah wasn’t successful in exterminating the pimp, I’d help him do

it. The girl would have reminded me too much of Samantha, at the mercy of terrible men.

Of what could have happened to her if I hadn't gotten custody.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“I love power. But it is as an artist that I love it. I love it as a musician loves his violin, to draw out its sounds and chords and harmonies.” - Napoleon Bonaparte

LIAM

“A damned embarrassing business,” a man says.

I recognize him from the St. Agnes Board of Directors, of which I’m also a member. It’s a fancy name for parents who’ve paid enough money to ensure their children get special treatment at the elite private school. Or in my case, my ward.

We’re standing in a room with three hundred chairs and a makeshift stage while we wait for the students to emerge in their caps and gowns. The room is abuzz with proud parents, with boasts of honors and Ivy League colleges.

“The business about the coach from the public school,” he explains. “It’s a shame what happens for the regular kids in this country.”

“A shame,” I echo, keeping my tone bland. “If only there were people in a position to give their time and money to improve them.”

He gives me an uncertain look. “It falls to their parents, of course.”

“Of course.” The working parents of the kids at Kingston High are barely keeping food on the table, much less personally vetting every new hire at the school. And most of

them don't have the money or clout to expose a predator like that, even if they suspect something.

No, I'm well aware that it falls to men like us to protect the children in our communities. My shame comes from how long it took me to understand that.

I needed Samantha to convince me.

My phone buzzes. "Excuse me," I tell him, stepping away.

Found him, it says from an undisclosed number.

I type in the reply quickly. *Alive?*

Unfortunately.

Relief fills me. That would be Josh's sense of humor. He wouldn't be making jokes if our brother Elijah were seriously injured.

Josh thinks he's being clever and incisive—and damn him for being right. What he said about the baby bird at the wedding? I'm still thinking about that, when I had almost forgotten. If not forgotten, at least buried deep enough to slowly poison me from the inside. Close enough.

My stomach clenches hard.

On the first day we'd been locked inside, I had run my fingers through the pile on the carpet, into the seams of my pockets, searching for crumbs to feed her.

On the second day I had wrapped the baby bird in an old sweater so it would stay in the corner, safe and unharmed, while I rammed my shoulder into the door again and again, until the wood splintered—but did not break—and my shoulder throbbed.

On the third day I'd simply held her, whispering things about blue skies and a ground full of delicious worms. I told her how soft she was, what a good baby bird, as she grew more and more quiet. Until she finally stilled, falling asleep for the last time.

I have tickets for a box at Samantha's opening show. At the next one and the next one. Maybe it's fucked up that I

could have followed her whole goddamn tour, but I realize now that I can't. It would be like trapping her in the closet with me.

She would never survive, and I would have to watch her slowly die.

SAMANTHA

The graduation ceremony at St. Agnes takes twice as long as the one at Kingston High, even though we have a fraction of the number of students. There are speeches by the principal and the counselor. Laney gives a moving speech as the valedictorian, one about loss and the intractability of hope—all the more meaningful because her mother isn't home for this.

The commencement speech comes from a former senator, who speaks to the small room as if we were gathered on the lawn of Princeton.

The senator's pale eyes flicker with recognition when my name is called. Samantha Alistair Brooks. Despite the smattering of fan mail I get every week, I'm not really famous outside the music world. I doubt he read the in-depth article in *Classical Notes*.

He probably knew my father.

Tension knots in my stomach as I climb the short steps.

My gaze crosses the room, past the rows of proud parents in bamboo chairs, to the man in the back. Liam North stands with a sense of resolve, as if facing some dangerous enemy, resolute in the face of death. His eyes have turned dark emerald, unreadable as I cross the stage.

Principal Keller gives me a grim smile and the same murmured praise in Latin that every other student receives. I'm sure he's glad that I'll be gone from the school. Doesn't matter that I graduated in the top one percent. Liam made it clear that I would not perform on behalf of the music department during the interview, which means that despite having a semi-famous student, they could never use me.

At least I didn't get expelled shortly before graduation.

The senator also greets every student, a practiced political smile on his face. He clasps my hand but doesn't let go. "Samantha Alistair Brooks. Daughter of the diplomat?"

I don't like his clammy grip, but I can't break free. Not without causing a fuss in front of the entire graduating class and their parents. "Yes, sir," I say, keeping my eyes averted. *Don't hold up the line*, I urge him silently, hoping that his sense of propriety won't prolong the conversation.

"A good man," he says, keeping hold on me. "A patriot. It was a great loss to the country when he passed away. A heart attack, was it?"

"Yes, sir." I don't mention that his death was seen as suspicious at the time. Secret Service conducted an investigation, but nothing was conclusive. Or at least, nothing they told his twelve-year-old daughter.

"Didn't he have a son, as well?"

I glance back at Liam. He's taken two steps forward, and I know I only have to give him the signal and he'll barge onto the stage to remove the senator's hand from me. A short shake of my head. I can handle this myself. As he pointed out, I'll be on my own during the tour—and for the years to follow. My chest feels impossibly full at the thought.

Graduation should feel like a time of possibility, a time of hope. It makes me ache that my independence will come at such a steep price, distance from the man who's my only home.

"We aren't close," I say, which is an understatement. I haven't seen my brother since the last time he fought with my father and left. He's been in the military, though I suppose I wouldn't know if he got out. He declined to take custody of me when my father died. And he never reached out to me after that.

"A shame," the man says, still studying me.

I yank my hand back, the action sudden enough that he lets go of me. There's a residue of slickness left on my palm from the encounter, and I wipe my hand surreptitiously on my black

gown. Perhaps my actions would be rude, but I think the senator was rude to detain me against my will.

There's another hour before the ceremony ends, during which time I can only play with the edges of the rolled diploma and the heavy satin ribbon that holds it.

When the principal finally calls an end to the proceedings, the parents surge forward in an enthusiastic rush. There are flowers and cards and balloons for the new graduates.

It's hard to see anything through the crowd of people. When I finally scoot my way to the back of the room, it's empty. I glance toward the stage, uncertain. Did he push inside the mass toward me? No, because if he had done that, he would have found me.

Which can only mean one thing—he left.

My stomach turns over. There are hundreds of people in the small auditorium, but I've never felt so alone. I can see Cody congratulating Laney across the room, but I don't want to answer questions about why Liam left early. And the last thing I want to do is be caught by the senator for more questions. I step into the hallway, which is abruptly empty, no one slamming lockers or dashing toward their classes.

That part of my life is over now.

I wander down the hallway, wondering if he's waiting for me by the car. For all I know he already left to go back to the house. It was Cody who dropped me and Laney off this morning. I'm sure he's willing to drive us back home, but the thought of Liam leaving without me makes my eyes burn.

Something slows my steps in front of the library, an unnatural awareness.

That's where I find him, amid the dusty shelves and walnut study tables. He stands by the large globe that serves as the library's centerpiece. It has three ornate iron feet to carry its weight, and two circumferences of wood that hold it in place. The surface of the water is smooth, and I know from memory, cool to the touch—made of stone, ironically. The land rises in

uneven terrain, made from dark metal. He studies the staggering mass of North America, hands behind his back.

I come to him from behind. As far as I can tell, I haven't made a sound, but he can sense my presence.

"Congratulations," he says without turning.

"Thank you," I say, feeling cautious. There's a strange energy in the room, a kind of electric current, as if a thousand bolts of lightning spread out in infinite fractals, Liam at the center of the storm.

He reaches toward the globe. The blunt of his finger brushes Tanglewood, which is only a few hours from where we're standing. And the place where the tour will begin. "In a few months you'll be here. Practicing with Harry March. Performing in front of thousands of people."

My throat clenches around anxiety—and around grief. I'll start my life in Tanglewood, but before that I'll have to say goodbye to the one I have now. No matter where I go in the world, Liam will be here running North Security.

"Will you miss me?" I venture to ask.

He moves his finger up to New York City, where we'll play Carnegie Hall, one of the most prestigious venues for classical music. Rumor is that a pedestrian on Fifty-seventh Street, Manhattan, stopped the violinist and composer Heifetz and inquired, *Could you tell me how to get to Carnegie Hall?*

Yes, said Heifetz. *Practice!*

The story has become part of the lore around Carnegie Hall—and around classical music itself. All that practice must have paid off, because I'm heading there. It will be the culmination of a dream.

And the end of a childhood marked by loneliness and tenuous hope.

Hope that came from Liam North.

"Miss you?" he says, almost tasting the words, as if they're foreign to him. Maybe for a man like him they are foreign, the whole idea of needing someone else. Of longing for them.

He's so strong. So self-contained. Is that something I'll find as I get older? Or is it unique to him, forever out of my reach?

His hand falls away, and I replace it with mine, touching New York City and then Boston and then Chicago. Vancouver and then Seattle. Los Angeles. That will be the last stop on the US tour.

I lift my finger so it hovers over the globe, the metal landscape apart from me.

Liam spins the globe lightly, until I'm holding my finger over Tokyo. The first stop on the Asia tour. Then there will be the European tour. And South America.

A major record label put together the tour. They're going to record the first concert, the one in Tanglewood, and release it as an album titled *Concerto*. Its release will be staggered across the globe to coincide with our tour.

"I won't miss you," he says, his tone soft and final.

My breath catches. *Don't cry*, I order myself. I swallow down the lump in my throat. Is there something wrong with me? Am I inherently unlovable? "I'll miss you," I say, not caring if it makes me weak.

"I *can't* miss you," he says, placing his hand over mine, moving our fingers back to the hill country of Texas, where Kingston nestles among the land and the lakes. "I wouldn't survive it."

"I'll come back," I promise, breathless. "After the tour. I'll visit—"

"Do you want to kill me, Samantha?"

I break off, uncertain whether he wants me to leave or stay here forever. Not knowing whether he hates me or loves me. "I want to please you."

"Then go away from here. Leave and don't come back."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The most expensive opera costume of all time was worn by Adelina Patti at Covent Garden in 1895. It was worth £15 million.

SAMANTHA

A row of shops along South Congress carry only the unique and eclectic and antique. There's a flower shop with a sofa and chair and coffee table molded from the ground and then grown over with super soft grass. An old record shop with cats that sleep in the dusty trays, shooting a dirty look if you try to shift the vinyl around them.

A whimsical toy shop that sells an action figure of Jane Austen.

Our goal is a large vintage clothing shop that takes up three stories. It's the kind of place where you have to look through a hundred racks of clothing to find one thing to buy. The smell of mothballs and incense fills the air. I didn't really feel like shopping, but poor Laney needs the distraction. Her mother has been gone a long time, and even for the daughter of a mercenary, someone used to absences, she must be getting nervous.

And maybe I'll find something special to wear on the tour.

Laney holds up a bright purple dress with puffy sleeves that could only have come from the eighties. "What do you think? It would be like that girl from *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, except instead of a giant blueberry I could be a giant grape."

“Knowing you, you’d probably bring the style back.”

She shudders in mock agreement and shoves the dress back onto the rack. “You’re probably right.” After a short pause of moving hangers, she sighs. “I wish I could actually see the clothes that are right in front of me, but my mind keeps wandering. Next thing I know I’m looking at a lace cocktail dress in army green.”

“Oh, that sounds nice actually,” I say, peering around the thick rack of clothes. She swats me away, determined as ever to make me wear something that will actually attract attention instead of hide me. “Did you talk to Liam about it?”

“Yes,” she says glumly. “He says they’re safe and sound in Germany, resting before they come back. That’s what he said—resting. Like what, are they taking a nap or something?”

“I’m sure they have a good reason,” I say, keeping my voice free of the worry twisting my stomach. I’m not sure how she’s managed to stay as calm and cool, but then again, she’s had plenty of practice.

“Of course they have a good reason,” she says. “Like the fact that they’re *not* safe and sound. How do we feel about plaid? I mean in a short skirt—obviously yes. But what about this beret?”

I give her a dubious look. “Where would you wear a beret?”

“In Paris, when I have a torrid love affair with a moody musician. Oh by the way, I’m going to need you to introduce me to some moody musicians.”

“Okay, well, first I’ll have to meet some myself.”

“You’ll meet *plenty* on the tour. Starting with Harry March.”

I make a face. “He’s probably not even going to talk to me. I’ll be like the stagehand, except less important, because I won’t know where his microphone is.”

“Whatever. You’re going to wear something fabulous and you’re going to play that way you do where everyone starts

crying, and then he's going to fall madly in love with you."

"Speaking of madly in love, how is Cody?"

"Why would *that* be speaking of madly in love?"

Because he's been in love with Laney since they were children. "No reason."

She sighs. "He's glad that Coach Price is gone, obviously. But he didn't exactly bounce back from the experience. The school counselor tried to talk to him, but he shut her down."

"I'm sorry," I say, squeezing her hand. "He'll work through it in his own time."

"But my timeline is so much faster," she says, plaintive.

My hands pause in their path through the clothes. I pull out the black dress, a flush warming me. The fabric hangs awkwardly on the hanger, but there's something about it...

I wander over to one of the standing mirrors and hold the gown against me. It's an asymmetrical line, sloping down across my body. Ruffles of black silk line the top. It's simple and dramatic all at once, and the way it's cut will emphasize the violin I'll hold. It falls to the floor, approximating the more formal gown that a classical musician would wear, but with a high slit, befitting a popular music stage.

"Perfect," Laney breathes. "You have to get it."

"For the tour, right?"

"Well, sure, but you should wear it where Liam can see you. Maybe tomorrow."

Tomorrow is my birthday. Which means that at midnight Liam North will cease to be my court-ordered guardian. I make a face, trying to act like it's no big deal. "We don't have any big plans."

There's a pang in my chest, because we usually do something for my birthday. A nice dinner at the country club in Kingston or the latest hipster foodie restaurant in Austin. Liam will hand me a birthday card that's completely impersonal, in which he's signed his name—that's it.

We've done it for the past six years, so I just assumed... well, I suppose he doesn't owe me that. After all he's done, he doesn't owe me anything.

"Hey," Laney says, hugging me from behind. She gives me a small smile in the mirror. "Everyone is safe and sound, remember? They're only taking a nap."

I force a smile. "Of course they are. So let's pick out something for you. You *are* going to come to the opening night, aren't you? I'll have the moody musicians all lined up to meet you."

We look through racks for a few minutes, getting separated in the maze of old clothes, only the sound of hangers scraping across metal filling the air.

A sound comes from behind me, and I whirl, looking at the sea of colors, a thousand different fabrics and colors. *It would be so easy to hide in here.* The thought whispers through my brain. My heart pounds, and I take a step back.

Footsteps land heavy on the stairs, coming up toward us. For a second I think we're under attack, that someone dangerous is here.

Josh appears at the top of the stairs. "You girls ready?"

My breath still comes fast as I stare at him. I glance over my shoulder, but the riot of fabric looks the same. I must have imagined it. Living in the headquarters of North Security has probably made me paranoid. We check out at the registers downstairs.

As we get into Josh's truck, I glance at the upstairs window, where it looks like a shadow moves. Unease floods through my veins in staccato.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Before the nineteenth century, the violin bow was shaped like a hunting bow

LIAM

Moonlight streams through the open window. Something must have woken me up. I check my phone, but there are no missed calls. It could have been a nightmare. Then I hear the strains of the violin drift through the crack in the door. I double-check the time.

Ten minutes to midnight.

She's only my ward for another ten minutes. Christ.

I pull on some jeans and head toward the music, not sure what I'll say when I get there. She used to wake up in the middle of the night to play, when she first got here. There was no sense of a normal schedule for her. She ate and slept and breathed on her father's wishes. I tried to instill a sense of normalcy, tried to show her what it was like to have a stable home, tried to... oh hell, whatever I tried, that's over now.

She usually wears her school uniform when she plays. Or jeans and a T-shirt. Something comfortable to last the hours she'll sit in roughly the same position.

But she's not wearing anything like that now.

Instead she's in a black dress that I've never seen before. My throat goes dry. She looks like someone else, like a grown woman. A sensual woman.

My body reacts suddenly, violently.

I force myself to walk into the room, to pretend like this is a thousand other times from the past, that she's still a child and I'm her guardian. Even though the seconds tick away with every breath.

"What's that?" I crouch down in front of her.

There are fifteen major violin scales. An almost infinite number of concertos and sonatas. I know almost all of them by heart. They are embedded into my skin, etched deeper with every afternoon of careful practice.

This one I don't recognize.

A blush steals over her cheeks. "Nothing."

The dress has a high slit, exposing one perfectly shaped leg. It would be so easy to push her knee open, to draw my fingers up the inside of her thigh. I rest my hand on her other knee, the one that's covered by black silky fabric.

"It's beautiful." *And haunting.*

"I'm only playing around," she says, her voice wavering.

"You're composing?" That's not something she's ever told me about. To play with her skill is a form of composition. She lends her interpretation to every piece—her passion, her heart. There is no such thing as a rote recitation for a prodigy like her.

Even so, writing her own composition would be something new.

"It's no big deal," she says quickly, giving a little shrug that moves the ruffles that lie against her breast, drawing my attention to the gentle curve.

"Where'd you get this?" I ask, keeping my voice even.

She didn't mean to kill me with this dress.

She doesn't mean to torture me, I'm almost sure.

"A vintage shop," she says, sounding shy. Maybe she *does* mean to torture me. "I thought I could wear it on the tour.

What do you think? Should I?"

The thought of thousands of men seeing her in this dress makes me want to lock her away. She would be terrified if she knew everything I think about. I can imagine her tied down on my bed wearing this dress, unable to get away from me, unable to do anything but take me. *Fuck*.

"Perhaps," I say, my tone noncommittal.

Disappointment flits across her pretty features. "Well, it's not decided or anything. There's still time to look. I just thought I'd try to play while I'm wearing it."

Christ. She deserves more than a surly bastard more concerned about his unholy obsession than her feelings. "You look beautiful, Samantha. You look..." I swallow hard. "You look like the most perfect woman I've ever seen. But I don't think it's the dress. It's you."

I've knelt down in front of her a thousand times before, but she's never been in a dress like this. And I've never been shirtless, my feet bare.

"Is that the only reason you're up this late? To try on the dress?"

A blush creeps up her cheeks, the soft line of her neck. The tops of her breasts, plump and gently sloping above the black ruffles. "I couldn't sleep, knowing that I turn eighteen soon."

"In about five minutes."

Emotions chase across her face, as clear as the notes she plays on her violin—excitement, apprehension, a tentative hope. "I guess you must be relieved. Your civic responsibility will be over soon."

"Were you listening outside the door, Samantha?"

A soft laugh. "Guilty."

How can I resist her? The girl was beautiful and strong. The woman is devastating. "I do feel responsibility for you, but it has nothing to do with civic duty."

"Then why did you say that to the reporter?"

“I wanted her to leave it alone. And I didn’t want to tell the real reason.” I can’t resist the truth when she’s looking at me like that, her eyes liquid brown, full of desire. It makes me want to be the man she thinks I am—the one who could cherish and keep her. Have her and hold her. That man will never be me, but doesn’t she deserve to know?

Or maybe I want one night of truth.

“What was the real reason?”

“That I loved you as soon as I heard you play. That I saw the way your father left you to fend for yourself, well before he died. That I wanted to hide you away from the world that would hurt you and scare you and use you, and I was just selfish enough to actually do it.”

Her eyes widen. “You never said you loved me before.”

“Love isn’t something I ever wanted, Samantha. Especially parental love. That was the worst kind of all. It was dangerous. Cruel. I never wanted to do that to you.”

It’s more than I meant to give away, revealing what I think about parental love, how horrible it can be. She doesn’t miss the implication. Her brown eyes widen. “What did your parents do to you?”

Once a principal had called my father. *This is incredible news*, the woman had said. *Your son is extremely gifted*. I spent three days and three nights in the well because of those test scores. I learned to get the answer wrong enough times not to attract attention, after that.

I never really believed the devil lived inside me. If I believed in the devil, then I had to believe in God, and he had abandoned me too long ago for me to speak his name—even to myself. It wasn’t the devil, precisely. It was me. Simply me. As I’d traced my fingers along the moss-damp bottom of the well, I knew that I deserved to be down here. That every glimpse of sunlight was a gift I didn’t deserve.

That every sweet thing I’d ever have would have to be stolen.

“And then when that love started to change into something else, when it was spiked with desire, I didn’t know how to handle that. It was better and so much worse at the same time.”

“You don’t have to be afraid of it.”

“I’m not afraid.”

“Maybe it’s time that I gave you the sex talk,” she says, her tone impish. “So that way you’ll know what you’re doing. Repeat after me: condoms are mandatory.”

A bark of laughter escapes me. “I never stood a chance against you, did I?”

Her humor fades. “You’ve done a pretty good job resisting this.”

Part of me still wants to deny it. Stubborn to a fault, that’s me. But I can’t pretend not to want her anymore. Lust thrums through my body in visible shudders. Being this close to her, touching her, but not having her—it’s enough to rip me to shreds. “I shouldn’t have kissed you.”

“How much longer?” she whispers.

My internal clock is accurate down to the second. “A minute.”

“What would you do to me? If I were over eighteen?”

Heat races through my veins. “I shouldn’t have kissed you, but I would do it again. And again. And again until you moaned into my mouth. And then I’d move lower, down your body. To your shoulders and your stomach. Your breasts. It’s all I can think about.”

Her chest rises and falls with rapid breaths. “Keep going.”

How did I ever think I was the one with control in this relationship? Because I made rules and she followed them, but that was always her choice. I only ever had as much control as she gave me. And I’m helpless in the face of her desire. “I want to kiss you between your legs, to taste you, to drink you in and make you push your hips against my face. And all the

while you'll play the violin, so perfect, so perfect, because you don't know how to make a mistake, not even if you tried."

Her eyes are wide and dark and luminous. "*Liam.*"

"But then I would find your clit. It would already be hard and throbbing. Slick. I'd flick it with my tongue, again and again, ruthless, not caring that you'd beg me to go slower or softer. Your hands would falter, and there would be a terrible sound from the violin, because you would come hard enough to forget."

"How much longer?" she says on a tortured breath.

At some point my words stopped being hypothetical. They became a promise, and every muscle in me strains for completion. My whole body aches to hear the beautiful sounds as she rises and the terrible screech as she comes for me.

"Almost doesn't count," I mutter, grim and aching.

"Now."

I shake my head, my eyes not leaving hers. She's heavy-lidded, her lips gently parted. "Ten," I tell her. "Nine. Eight."

She moves her violin back into place, her arms up as the bow goes into position. How many times have I seen her like this? And yet she's completely different. It can't be the seconds ticking away. Nothing as external as time. Something's changed inside her.

"Seven. Six. Five."

The first note enters the air around us, and I feel it deep inside my body. In my muscle and bone. In my cock, which pushes against the rough denim of my jeans.

There is more than welcome in her eyes. There's challenge.

SAMANTHA

I don't expect him to actually touch me. "Four," he says, and I begin the opening rise of Beethoven's "5 Secrets." They're moving and sweet, with a touch of melancholy.

His eyes flicker with a deep shame. He doesn't want to want me, which is what makes it so sad. The music is how I speak to him. It's how he speaks back to me, his head bowed before me. Does it really matter so much whether I'm seventeen or eighteen? Does it really matter that a piece of paper makes him my guardian? He does not have a monopoly on being protective. It's not only him who decides what happens here.

I want to guard him from the onyx shadows in his green eyes.

"Three," he murmurs, and I expect him to walk away.

The bow moves almost on its own, my limbs forming around the instrument the way it wants. It's a sensual experience, playing the violin. I didn't realize how much until now.

He touches my lips with his thumb, the movement bold. His hand trails lower, over the shape of my breasts and the concave of my stomach.

"Two," he says, pushing my legs. The backs of his knuckles brush the insides of my thighs, and everything in me tightens. Muscle memory is a powerful thing, and I manage to keep playing without missing a single note. Two fingers slip beneath the slit of the dress. Those green eyes widen, and I know he's shocked that I'm not wearing anything underneath.

My regular panties left an obvious line in the thin fabric of the dress. I'll need something else to wear underneath—a thong. Though at the moment having nothing feels more right than anything I could buy at a store.

"One," he says, his voice almost sympathetic. Rough finger pads open my most private place, searching and inexorable. I've never felt so exposed, even with nothing bared to his sight.

The hard part isn't playing the notes. It's keeping the tempo the same. My hands want to speed up, my body moving toward an uncertain peak. He finds a well of moisture and

draws it up, his forefinger circling my clit. My breath shudders out of me.

“Keep playing,” he murmurs, his thumb moving to my clit, his fingers searching below.

My eyes fall shut, but my hands know what to do even without watching. The bow meets the strings in perfect accord, the tempo rising only slightly. “Don’t stop,” I say on a moan.

A humorless huff of laughter. “I couldn’t.”

His hands move with startling knowledge of my body, as if he’s been practicing for ten thousand hours, as if I’m his instrument to play. Pleasure swirls inside me, soft at first, and then louder, unmistakable. Orgasm wrenches my body with sudden violence.

A loud screech rents the air as my bow rubs discordant against the strings.

In the aftermath of my climax, Liam gently strokes the inside of my thigh. My body twitches and sighs, struggling for equilibrium. I open my eyes to find him watching me.

“You stopped playing,” he says, his tone grave, a hint of erotic playfulness lurking deep in those moss-green eyes. “We’ll have to start over again. And again. Until you get it right.”

“Oh no,” I protest weakly, not sure my body can take another ounce of pleasure.

“Oh yes,” he says, a note of mock regret in his voice. “Practice makes perfect.”

My limbs feel like they’re made of jelly as I play the opening rise of Beethoven’s “5 Secrets” again. Liam’s fingers work with devastating accuracy to bring me to the peak. I tighten my hold on the neck of the violin, determined to finish this time, to play the song to completion.

Then he spreads my legs wider and presses his mouth to my core, and I’m lost.

LIAM

I rest my forehead against the inside of her thigh, breathing roughly, struggling to control the lust raging in my veins. My lips feel swollen from kissing her. The scent of her arousal engraves my memory for safekeeping. There will be no time when I don't think of this night, when it doesn't make me hard. When I don't wish I could do it again.

Samantha makes little whimpers, as if it's too much, as if she's oversensitive even though I'm not touching her anymore. There's no way she can know how the sounds incense me, how I want to make her come again just to prove that she can take more. I'll show her, I'll *make* her. Some shred of reason holds me back. Perhaps the certainty that I would not be able to keep from fucking her if I heard her come again, if I felt her liquid on my lips, her secret muscles clenching my tongue as if they could draw it inside her body.

"God," she says, sounding shattered. Sounding broken.

I did that to her.

The irony rises over me, a shadow with weight, a goddamn cross to bear. *God*, she says again, but it doesn't have anything to do with a divine being. It's the other guy. The one who's always been inside me. By touching Samantha, I finally proved my father right. The devil lives inside me. Doesn't he? And the worst part, the truly unforgivable part, is that I would do it again. Now that I know Samantha's intimate flavor I can't imagine not knowing. It seems like not breathing. Not living. And I'd gave up any miniscule chance at redemption to have it.

"Go to bed," I say, hoarse from the restraint it takes to not bear her down on the floor and invade her body like an animal, in full view of her violin and my office. These symbols of my guardianship and her childhood made witness. "It's late."

I move to stand up, but her hand touches my cock. It just reaches out and lands on my cock, only denim and cotton separating her flesh from mine. A wave of desire overtakes me, and the only thing I can do is freeze.

"Let me," she says, still breathless, almost begging. "Let me touch you."

“No.” The word comes out like a slap, and she flinches.

“I want to please you.”

There is no hell that would be deep enough, hot enough, painful enough for me. “I took advantage of you. And now you want to please me?”

Anger shoulders aside the lust in her eyes. “You took advantage of me? No, Liam. I made this decision.”

“Really? You put on that dress because you wanted to make me insane with desire? You wore no panties so I wouldn’t rip them to shreds? You spread your legs because you knew I would eat you like a madman?” She looks so beautiful as she comes. Her hoarse cries are sweeter music than anything her violin could produce. She’s everything good and pure and right in this world, and all I can think about is defiling her again.

Her cheeks turn pink. “I didn’t plan this, but I chose it all the same. I could have said no.”

“It wouldn’t have stopped me.”

“Liar,” she says, softly, almost sadly. “You didn’t take advantage of me, and you couldn’t hurt me if you tried. Not like this. You hurt me in other ways. By telling me that you don’t want a relationship after the tour. That you don’t love me. I love you, you know that? I do, but you don’t care. You’re too busy fighting with your demons.”

“I’m not fighting demons, sweetheart. I am one.”

Her eyes are wide and luminous. “You really believe that, don’t you?” she says, her voice wondering. “Why do you believe that?”

With a growl I push away from her, pacing across the parquet floor, damning the iron-hard erection in my jeans. “If you knew the number of people I killed you wouldn’t ask that.”

“Almost everyone on your payroll is ex-military,” she says in an outrageously reasonable tone. “Do you think they’re bad people?”

“Of course not.”

“Then what makes you different?”

I can't possibly explain all the deep-rooted ways. When you grow up with abusive parents you either hate the world or you find a way to rationalize their behavior. You think, maybe they're right. Maybe they see something in me that's fundamentally flawed. Maybe I should drink dirty well water to survive, only to throw it back up, and then stew in it for the next twenty-four hours before my father sends the rope down. Samantha knows something about shitty parents, but she doesn't know my secrets—and God willing she never will.

That's how I leave her, collapsed on her practice chair, boneless with satiated desire, hurt a clear bell in her eyes.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The most expensive violin ever sold cost \$16 million

SAMANTHA

When I wake up in the morning, I'm back in my bed, Liam nowhere to be seen. I don't feel one year older or one day older. I'm a million years older, not because of the clock ticking away—but because of what happened with Liam last night. I examine myself in the mirror—the same brown eyes and brown hair. The same slight build that by some quirk of nature gave me the ability to play the violin with a speed and grace that astonished kings. Well, so much for being a child prodigy. It's my eighteenth birthday.

I'm not a child any longer.

Liam North doesn't have custody of me anymore.

The knowledge should give me a sense of independence, of grief. Of power and loss in equal measure. For surely I've lost as much as I've gained as the calendar flicked past yesterday. I don't feel any of those things, only a curious hollowness. Maybe I'm in a kind of emotional shock, my body resorting to numbness in order to avoid the pain.

There is only one thing that could possibly cut through the gauzy material that separates me from reality right now. The same thing that has always helped me hurt and heal, the lodestone of all my emotion. And that's music. After a quick shower I make my way downstairs.

Standing in the doorway, I know immediately that something is different.

That something is wrong.

The violin I've used for the past five years is a lovely Nicolo Amati, its bearing proud, its sound clear. There are multiple cracks that have been professionally repaired. It is on the whole weatherworn and discolored, the pedigree exceeding its appearance.

Even in its shabby state it's worth several hundred thousand dollars at auction—and of course, like most other things in my possession, it does not actually belong to me. It's owned by Liam North, purchased by him, his name on the insurance papers. It sleeps in a thoroughly modern suspension case made of carbon fiber. There could be a nuclear disaster, and the violin would remain inside the rectangular case, fully protected and encased in microfiber.

Gone.

The carbon fiber case, the Nicolo Amati violin. All of it, gone.

There is my chair with faded fabric and gleaming wood, the one I usually use to practice. My stand. The sheets of music that I'm practicing for the tour.

"A birthday gift," comes a low voice from behind me. Liam moves so stealthy that I didn't hear him. "We still have the Amati, if you want to keep it."

I take a step closer, examining the case, which is clearly an antique in its own right, with its smooth satinwood surface and brass closures. Even a few feet away I can feel the presence of the violin inside, as if its heartbeat thrums through the case.

He said I could keep the Amati, but it isn't really mine.

"I—don't understand." Violins like this aren't gifts. They are sold at auction, usually to museums and societies. Occasionally to eccentric billionaires with more money than musical skill.

“I had a hell of a time tracking down the owner after the last auction. He preferred to remain anonymous, but I promised him—well, more money than he can spend in his lifetime. And a private demonstration at its debut in Tanglewood by the famous violin prodigy Samantha Brooks.”

A brass lock plate is engraved with the following words:
Lady Tennant/40 Grosvenor Square W.

“Oh my God,” I whisper.

“We can get a new case,” he says, sounding gruff and strangely uncertain. “One with your name on it. This is the one it came with.”

“Don’t you dare,” I say, half laughing, half crying.

There are only five hundred Stradivarius violins left in the world. Even so there are too many for me to know the provenance of every single one, but I know this one. *Lady Tennant* got its name because it was purchased by Sir Charles Tennant as a gift for his wife.

My hands are shaking as I reach for the clasps and open the case. I barely feel worthy to touch this violin—and I can’t even imagine owning it, even though that’s apparently what’s just happened. I grasp the violin gently by its neck, lifting it from the case, and all my tremors evaporate. It’s like the part in Harry Potter where the wand chooses the wizard. In this case it’s the violin choosing me.

I’m tempted to run my fingertips over the strings and the neck, to learn its terrain by touch. But a violin’s imperative is to play, and so I lift the bow and touch it to the strings. The sound soars through the air, the clearest note I’ve ever heard.

An opening scale and it sounds as momentous and poignant as any classical piece. It feels like I’m playing violin for the first time, hearing notes in an entirely new way.

I look back at Liam. He’s always appreciated my playing. I suppose he would have gone mad by now if he didn’t, having my music room connected to his office. Even he looks awed by the sound.

“How did you know?” I murmur, reluctant to set down the violin for even one moment.

“You like it?” His voice is roughened with something, maybe emotion. Are the strings of a Stradivarius so compelling that they’ll move a man of strength and stoicism to this?

“It’s the best thing anyone’s ever done for me. More than I ever imagined.” And then it doesn’t matter how much I long to hold Lady Tennant or play everything I’ve learned with her—I have to set her gently into the case. That’s where my carefulness ends.

I launch myself at Liam, throwing my arms around his neck and squeezing. There’s moisture where my cheek touches his hard jaw, and I know he’ll be embarrassed by my wild show of gratitude. He’s never liked me being overly emotional, so I’ve tried so hard to be like him.

When I pull back, his green eyes shine with what can only be tears. It’s enough to make my breath catch. Maybe he isn’t as stoic as he wants me to think.

Maybe we’re more alike than I ever knew.

In the moments that follow I become aware that I’m clinging to him like I’m drowning and he’s my last chance of survival. Sensation blooms in my chest, my belly, and lower, to where my legs are half wrapped around him. He releases me gently, and I slide down his body to the floor.

“I’m old enough,” I whisper, because it means he doesn’t have to hold himself back from me. He doesn’t have to feel bad about the erection I can feel cradled between our bodies.

He looks more torn than ever, shame hard in his eyes, his mouth a firm line. “The violin, Samantha. It was more than a birthday present. It’s a goodbye.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

In comparison to many other instruments, the piano is relatively new. It was invented in 1698 by Bartolomeo Cristofori in Italy.

SAMANTHA

Bea calls me that afternoon, launching into an a cappella rendition of “Happy Birthday” with her husky, show tunes voice as soon as I say hello.

I grin at her on FaceTime. “You should give up the whole piano thing,” I tell her. “Or at the very least become the next Adele.”

“We’ll call that plan B,” she says, laughing.

“You won’t believe what happened this morning.”

“Ooh, something fun, I hope.”

“I still can’t even believe it, and I was there.” I’ve got Lady Tennant in my lap, stroking the wood. I haven’t been able to let go of it, actually. When I’m not playing it, I’m holding it.

“Now you’re just teasing me. What happened?”

“Liam got me a Strad,” I tell her, unable to hold back the squeal. A professional violinist may go through a few violins in their lifetime, on the quest to find the perfect one. Other times it comes to you early.

“Oh. My. God.”

“The Lady Tennant.” It’s incredible to be able to share this with another musician. She’s not a violinist, but she understands the power of a premier instrument—especially one with history.

“The Lady Tennant?” she says, sounding awed.

“He bought it. Outright. And then gave it to me. Honestly I might throw up.”

“Well, don’t throw up on a Stradivarius or you’ll probably lose your violin license.”

“I can’t put it down. Like honestly, it’s been hours. I can’t let go of it.”

“Of course you can’t let go of it. It’s your baby now. What are you just going to put it back in its case? How will it know how much you love it?” She’s teasing me, in the way where she fully understands why I can’t let go of it.

I’m in my bedroom now, and I gently nudge the door shut so I can say what’s on my mind. “Actually, the violin is more than a birthday present. It’s a goodbye present.”

A pause. “What does that mean?”

Grief lances my heart, but I try for a matter-of-fact tone. “I guess it means I’m not going to see Liam again after I leave for the tour. That’s probably for the best. It’s not like we’re family.”

“Wow,” she says, falling silent again.

“Wow what?”

“That’s both incredibly generous and incredibly cold.”

“No, it’s—” My throat tightens. “He doesn’t owe me anything. He certainly didn’t owe me this violin. It shows how much he understands me. How much he cares for me.”

“Yes,” she says drily. “So much that he doesn’t want to see you again.”

Tears prick my eyes like hot poker. “He’s always been a realist.”

“He’s always been an asshole,” she says with a sigh. “But you love him.”

Yes, but not the way she means. Not as a father. I love him as more than that—as my everything. “You don’t keep in touch with Edward,” I say, trying to sound reasonable. We had that in common, guardians who cared for us out of obligation rather than familial love.

“Because I didn’t love Edward. And he didn’t love me.”

“There. You see? Exactly like me and Liam.”

“It’s the exact opposite of you and Liam, Samantha. You love him. And he feels something for you. Why do you think I called him an asshole?”

“Because he wanted me to go to high school instead of tour professionally?”

“No, he was probably right about that. I thought he was an asshole because he keeps his distance from you instead of saying how he really feels.”

My body tightens as I remember his hands on my thighs, his tongue on my clit. “What if the way he feels about me isn’t appropriate for a guardian to his ward?”

“He isn’t a regular guardian,” she says gently. “And you aren’t a regular ward. So why should your feelings be the same as other people?”

“Beatrix, whatever happened between you and Edward?” He was her father’s business partner. When both her parents died, he became the trustee of the considerable wealth she inherited. The only thing I know is that they had a falling out about her husband.

“He wanted to marry me,” she admits. “Not in the sweet ‘I love you’ way. More like a ‘you can’t leave the penthouse so you’ll make a nice attic wife for me’ way.”

“Oh, Bea. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I was embarrassed. Ashamed, really. I didn’t have a regular life going to high school. You know I couldn’t even leave the hotel for years, until I met Hugo.”

“Edward didn’t take it well?”

“No, and there’s something else, something I found out about his past. It doesn’t matter now except to say that he’s not a good man.”

My heart clenches. “I’m sorry.”

“I know we have this in common, and I’m grateful to call you my friend. But our situations are completely different. Even before I knew the truth about Edward, I knew I couldn’t marry him. That I would never love him—not as a husband or as a guardian.”

She’s right. Our situations aren’t the same at all. If Liam North were to ask me to marry him, I would give up everything to say yes. The tour, a music career. Traveling the world. I’m excited about it, but it pales in comparison to the man one floor down. Of course, he would never ask me to marry him. He doesn’t even want to see me again. I stroke the smooth wood of the Stradivarius, which may be all I ever have of Liam North.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The world's fastest violinist played "The Flight of the Bumblebee" averaging fifteen notes per second.

SAMANTHA

Laney insists on taking me to the local café, where we have tea and chocolate croissants while discussing the latest *Outlander* episode. Josh drives us there, even securing the back exit before he lets us come inside. I give him a strange look. He's often been responsible for driving us around, the most overqualified chauffeur in the world, but this seems extreme.

In answer he gives me a wink and takes his latte outside.

I glance back at Laney, who's trying to hide her grin. And the notch of worry between her eyes is gone. "Do you have good news?" I demand, already suspecting as much.

A grin. "I wasn't supposed to tell you, but...my mom got back last night. She's exhausted but absolutely all in one piece. I checked. Two arms. Two legs. One nose. It's all there."

I give her a quick hug. "I'm so glad. But wait. Why were you not supposed to tell me?"

She rolls her eyes. "Because Elijah came back with her, and he's all like, 'I got Samantha a snow globe from the Kremlin and you can't tell her I'm here until I give it to her.'"

A bemused laugh escapes me. None of that sounds true. "Whatever."

“The important thing is that everyone is home. Nothing dangerous ever happens in Kingston.”

I stick out my tongue at her. “Way to tempt fate.”

An unrepentant grin. “Sorry, but I’m a firm believer in nihilism. We don’t believe in fate, but we also think that if fate did exist, tempting it wouldn’t matter. What’s going to happen will happen.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s determinism.”

“Exactly,” she says, snatching the last bite of chocolate croissant from my plate. “Which means I’m not responsible for stealing this, and it doesn’t matter anyway.”

“You know what? I’m not even mad.”

She grins. “Because you have a fancy new violin waiting at home?”

“Yes.” My smile fades. “Though it won’t be home for long.”

“Ugh. I can’t believe he said that to you. Just do what I do when I don’t like something—pretend it didn’t happen. Show up whenever you want. What is he gonna do? Turn you away?”

My stomach turns over, despite the comforting tea and croissant I just ate. “Even if I can come back, that’s going to be in a year and a half. And that’s only the initial tour dates. If I get booked for concerts after that, it could be even longer.”

The label will put me up in hotels for the tour. And after that? I’ll basically be homeless. Oh, I’ll have enough money to rent an apartment or something.

It won’t really be a home.

Silence falls between us, both of us wondering where we’ll be in two years from now. The future stretches out with endless uncertainty. Well, maybe I’m the only one wondering that. It’s possible Laney’s considering stealing the chocolate croissant from the display case.

After all, it would happen anyway.

A rap on the window. Josh taps his watch.

“Let’s go,” Laney says, grabbing her purse.

I take a final swallow of my tea. “Yeah, I’ve got to get my snow globe.”

On the drive back to the house I notice Josh’s raw knuckles.

“Who did you hit?” I say, disapproving. All three brothers are well trained and determined, but of the three of them, only Josh enjoys a fight.

“Oh, this?” he says, his tone innocent. “This was just a love tap.”

He drops us off at the front of the house. It’s dark and unnervingly quiet inside. I wonder if Liam is working, and if he’d mind if I played the Strad again.

“*Surprise!*”

A squeak escapes me as people jump out from behind the furniture and around the corner. My heart thumps in uneven rhythm. I grin at Laney with accusation. “Did you know about this?”

“It was my job to distract you.”

“So sneaky,” I say, looking around at the hot pink balloons and neon green streamers. A cake on the dining table forms the shape of a violin, the frosting in bright colors.

“I basically told you,” she protests, laughing. “The snow globe. *The Kremlin*. Honestly who buys souvenirs from the Kremlin?”

“Those are the worst hints in the history of the world.” I throw my arms around her for a big hug. “And thank you for being an amazing friend.”

It seems like all the people who work for North Security are in attendance, including Hassan and his young bride, back from their honeymoon and googly-eyed in love. There’s Laney’s mom, looking no worse for the wear. Liam, looking grave surrounded by so much revelry.

Elijah is back, and though he doesn't have a snow globe, he does have a black eye. I'm careful not to make a fuss over him in front of everyone—I know he'd hate that.

After "Happy Birthday" has been sung and the cake has been cut, I corner Elijah with a hug. He gives me a quick squeeze before letting me go. Strangely enough, Elijah is known as the asshole out of the three brothers, but my relationship with him has always been easiest. Maybe because we're closest in age or because you always know where you stand with him.

Though I think it's more likely because we both know about loss.

"I was worried about you," I tell him.

"You know I'm too stubborn to die. I'll probably live to be two hundred." He doesn't sound very cheerful about the prospect. But then again, he doesn't sound cheerful about much of anything.

I give a pointed look to his black eye. "You're not infallible."

"You should see the other guy."

"Nice try, but I already know Josh hit you. And he looks fine."

He grins, which with the black eye makes him look like a pirate. "And I'm guessing Liam will give me a matching one on the other side when he has a spare minute."

"Liam wouldn't hit you," I say, indignant. "You're injured."

"My pride is the only thing injured if you think I can't take a punch. Besides, I deserved it. I deserved worse than that, but Liam's gone soft."

"Because he cares about you."

Elijah studies me, his hard features set into shadows and edges. His face gives the impression of a cliff, something that's been hewn over centuries of water and wind but still manages to have hard angles. "No, squirt," he says gently. "It's

because he cares about you. Everything changed the day he got custody of you.”

I look away. Is that why he’s so eager to get rid of me? I imagine a twelve-year-old girl would cramp anyone’s style, especially a man in his prime who loves adventure. And women. My stomach clenches. “I suppose he’ll join one of the teams once I’m gone.”

“He doesn’t want to do that shit anymore.”

“Or maybe he just didn’t go because he felt obligated to stay with me.”

“He used to take any job. Every job. If it was likely to end up with him in a wooden box, he would do it. He wanted it to end that way. It was only his bad luck that kept him alive.”

The way Elijah speaks, I know he’s talking from experience. “Is that what you do?”

A humorless smile. “That’s the North brothers’ curse. To survive.”

SAMANTHA

The party goes late into the night. It’s ten o’clock when Laney comes to me quietly. “Cody’s here. He’s outside. He doesn’t want to come in.”

The hair on the back of my neck rises at her tone. “What’s going on?”

She glances to the large windows that overlook the hills. Any gathering here involves beer and an overabundance of testosterone, which led to the men competing in impromptu boxing matches. Liam was called outside to arbitrate a particularly dirty one.

Only his decisions are trusted as being completely impartial.

“He’s got bruises,” she whispers.

Birthday cake turns to lead in my stomach. Cody has always hidden his bruises from Liam—and usually from us.

He must be in a bad way if he's come here. "Should I tell Liam?"

Her eyes widen. "You can't."

"He helped with Coach Price."

"That was different. He could get rid of Coach Price. How is he going to get rid of Cody's dad?"

"The authorities. A social worker. I don't know."

"The man's the only family Cody has. Do you think he's going to be safer in some group home? And besides, you had to convince Liam to help with Coach Price. What if he won't be convinced this time?"

For all I know there are a hundred Coach Prices working at the group home. And besides, I know what it's like to have a father who isn't very good—but he's the only one you have. I wouldn't want Cody to lose that—or to suffer retribution if his father finds out he talked to us.

"I still think we should tell Liam."

"We can talk about that later, but right now I'm going on a drive with him."

"Do you want me to come with you?"

"Maybe," she says. "No, it's your birthday party. Don't be silly."

"I'm not being silly. You guys are my best friends. If he needs to talk, I should be there." A thought occurs to me, and my cheeks heat. "Unless you'd rather be alone."

Shock widens her eyes. "Nothing like that is going to happen."

"Okay," I say, keeping my tone mild.

"I'm serious. Now you have to come."

She slips outside, and I start to follow. At the threshold of the house I pause, remembering the strange sounds and shadows in the antique shop. Probably my imagination.

"Come on," she says, and I take another step forward.

And then stop.

Your father had enemies. If they think you know something

No, I won't leave without telling anyone where I'm going. Liam was right about that—it's not the grown-up decision to make people worry.

I find Liam outside, shaking his head as Josh and Elijah fight across the grass, tumbling outside the makeshift white boundary, using moves that I'm pretty sure aren't allowed in even the most underground boxing ring.

"I'm going on a drive with Laney and Cody."

"No," he says, almost absently, his eyes still on the fight.

"I'm not asking permission," I tell him gently. "I'm eighteen now. Remember?"

He glances at me, his green eyes filled with humor and melancholy. "Would you have asked permission if I agreed to be pen pals when you left?"

I shake my head slowly, not breaking eye contact.

"Christ," he says. "All right. Go. I won't try to stop you, but I'm still responsible for your safety as long as I—as long as you're here. I'll follow at a discreet distance."

I make a face. "Are you serious?"

"Hey," he says gently. "I know how to tail someone without them knowing."

"That's weirdly reassuring."

That earns me a small smile.

Outside I find Cody and Laney waiting by the beat-up white truck, Cody looking miserable, his shoulders slumped as if perpetually protecting himself. He actually looks better than Elijah—no black eyes or visible bruises. I think they're all on his ribs. His father hits him where it can't be seen.

I move to hug him, but he takes a reflexive step back.

My face falls, but I struggle to act casual. “I heard we’re going for a drive.”

“Happy birthday,” he says, apology in his voice. “I got you a present, but it’s... I lost it.”

More likely his father found it, whatever it was, and beat him for it. Acid rises in my throat. I hate not being able to do anything about it.

Maybe on the drive I can convince him Liam can help.

“The only thing I want for my birthday is hanging out with you,” I say, climbing into the truck. I don’t know how much a normal high school experience really helped me. The endless classes and exams when all I really wanted to do was play the violin. Having Laney and Cody as friends is different. If this is what normal means, I understand why it’s so important.

I know without asking that we’re heading to the lake, where trails lead to a rocky swimming hole. We go there a lot to hang out. Except we barely get ten minutes from home before headlights appear behind us, way too close to the truck. Cody swears in surprise. “What the hell?”

“Oh my God,” I moan. “He said he would be discreet.”

Laney turns in her seat. “I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but that’s not anyone from North Security. It’s a Crown Victoria, late nineties model.”

She has that kind of detailed knowledge of random things, so I trust her. The North Security vehicles are all black Explorers designed to hold a maximum number of people, and a couple large trucks for hauling supplies.

“Then who is it?” Cody says as the car behind us speeds up.

Impact. We’re jolted forward as the car slams into the truck. Cody swerves hard but manages to keep the truck on the road.

“No one we want to meet,” I say, gripping the leather seat. “Keep going.”

It comes to me with calm certainty—this is about my father.

A child who might remember something from when she was hiding under her father's desk. Not only from the day he died. From before that. A phone call. A conversation.

I still don't remember anything. There were diplomats and formal dinners where I would be forced to wear itchy dresses. Endless phone calls where I would play with my doll underneath his desk. *What could I have heard that's dangerous?* Maybe Liam is right. It doesn't matter what I've heard. It only matters that someone thinks I might know something.

The car behind us speeds up, pulling alongside. "Oh shit," Laney says.

They're trying to run us off the road. The crunch of metal. Cody fights to keep the truck straight. If we go off the road right now, we'll head straight into a ditch—and then be sitting ducks. Elijah taught me self-defense, but I have a feeling the man in that car has a gun.

A burst of light as a large black SUV jumps onto the road, headlights overbright, engine smooth and loud. It must be Liam in one of the Explorers. He slams into the Crown Vic, pushing it into the embankment instead of us.

Cody fights the steering, but we're going too fast. There's a loud *pop* as the ancient white pickup truck is pushed one mile past its endurance. The truck swerves hard, almost flipping over, before it rocks back onto four wheels.

There's a shout. A wild cry.

The whole world shakes as we leave the pavement and hit sliding rocks.

A tree looms ahead in the windshield. We're slowing down, but not fast enough. We slam into the trunk with a loud *thunk* and the punch of a half-inflated, ancient, yellowed airbag.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The London Symphony Orchestra was booked to travel on the Titanic's maiden voyage, but they changed boats at the last minute.

LIAM

The man driving the Crown Victoria has pale eyes and a scar across his left eye. I put a bullet in the middle of his forehead before he can talk. There's a half second of regret about that. He could have had useful information, though probably not. And he deserved a painful death. But I can't risk the fucker hurting anyone while I'm losing my mind with worry. I sprint across the road to the white truck, which smokes from its rumpled hood. By the time I get there Cody is helping Laney out. Samantha pushes her way out from the other side, in time for me to catch her in my arms.

"Are you okay? Talk to me." I run my hands over her body, searching for injuries. The whole chase probably lasted two and a half seconds, but it's more than enough for someone to be hurt. For someone to be killed. The human body is so fucking fragile.

She pushes at my hands. "I'm fine. *Liam*, I'm fine."

I hold myself back long enough to study her face. Her brown eyes are wide with worry. Tear tracks glisten down her cheeks. "I'm not," I say hoarsely. "I'm not fucking fine."

Then I clutch her to my chest, trying in vain to control the wild beat of my heart. I feel like some kind of feral creature. I want to beat the earth and howl at the moon. I want to find the

fuckers who sent an *assassin* after Samantha and rip them apart with my bare hands.

All I can do is stand here and hold her—and hold her. And hold her. It's woefully inadequate, but the alternative is to lose my fucking mind, and she needs me right now.

It feels like an eternity, the perfect clock in my head gone haywire. Three Explorers pull up, my brothers descending with harsh efficiency to handle the body, to check on Laney and Cody, to get the local law enforcement involved. That last one is a courtesy. We all know with grim and silent communication that we'll find the fuckers behind this and dispose of them ourselves.

Josh tries to take her from me. "I'm not sure she can breathe," he says.

Of course she can breathe. I have my hand on her back, feeling her lungs move. I've touched her pulse. Even the tears that dampen her lashes. I need to feel those signs of life.

Elijah shows up with a grim face. "No ID on the body. The tags are cut off his clothes. The VIN number filed off the car. The sheriff's going to call in the FBI on this."

Christ, this place was going to be a circus in a matter of minutes.

"I'm taking her back to the house. They can question us there once they've processed the scene."

"They aren't going to like the shooter leaving," Josh says, rueful.

"Wait," Samantha says, struggling to step back. "I'm not going to leave Laney and Cody here."

"They'll be safe," I say, lifting her body into the air and hauling her to the nearest company car. She gasps in shock, fighting me before I click the seat belt into place and shut the door. Her loyalty to her friends is admirable, but they have a goddamn army to protect them in case there are any more mercenaries lurking in these woods.

And I'm not going to leave Samantha exposed out here for one more second, not for anything, not when I feel her trembling in my arms.

When we get home, I carry her upstairs, even though she protests she can walk. I consider taking her to my room—I want her in my bed, where she'll be safe. And never leave.

Instead I force myself to carry her to her bedroom. I set her down on the warm tile of her bathroom floor as I turn the water to hot and fill the tub.

She works at the hem of her shirt, getting herself caught in the fabric. She's too worked up to undress herself—and so I'll do it for her. I unveil each inch of skin with undue care, mindful of bruises that might form in the next few hours, even days. Small quivers take her muscles, a reminder that she isn't as composed as she wants me to think.

This is the first time I've ever seen her fully naked.

Even with danger so nearby, my body reacts to hers with intense arousal. As I pull her panties down her legs, exposing her slender thighs and the dark curls between them, my cock reacts with a throb. I want the ultimate sign of life, her cunt pulsing around me, slick and warm and soft. She looks like a dream, full of rosy peach hues and creamy vanilla. There is no end to the places I want to taste her. I could make her stand in the foyer as a living statue. It's sick, the ways I want to see her, use her, the ideas her bare body gives me. Depraved.

Instead I help her into the bathtub, where I wash her with soap. Everywhere. Even when she blushes and murmurs in embarrassment, I slide the soap over her nipples and between her legs. Between the firm cheeks of her ass. There is a primal need inside me, to serve her, to care for her, and I'm as helpless to the urge as she is. She's Venus with her upturned breasts and demure pose. Her hair falling around her in erotic abandon. There's never been anything more beautiful than this. Enough to bring a man to his knees. Enough to make me wish I was anything other than her former guardian.

I use the peach-scented bottles to wash and shampoo her hair, my rough hands working carefully through the strands,

making them lather and then cream and then clean again.

When she's dry, I tuck her into bed with its pale pink sheets and white lace coverlet, with the cream-colored throw pillow with a brown violin embroidered on it. God, she looks so vulnerable in that bed. So vulnerable and impossibly strong. The urge to hold her runs through me, a physical sensation that makes me tremble.

I turn to leave her, forcing myself to let her rest. She deserves that much.

“Don't go,” she whispers.

The bed is twin-size, which isn't enough for the both of us. And it highlights how young she is, how wrong I was to ever let her climb into my king-size bed down the hall.

Shivers run through her, and I climb in behind her, pulling her close into the fortress of my body. My eyes are wide. Sleep will be impossible tonight. Tomorrow. Maybe ever. All I can do is watch over her. No one will touch her.

She drifts into a restless slumber, her body warm but still shivering.

SAMANTHA

Liam wakes me up just before midnight, nudging me gently out of the hazy, dark sinkhole of dreams. It takes me a moment to remember that the crash wasn't only in my imagination. New twinges wake up throughout my body as I move to stand, and I can't hide a wince.

“Dr. Foster's downstairs,” he says, a knowing sympathy in his eyes. “And the police want to ask some questions. I've given them fifteen minutes. They know you need to sleep.”

I manage a wry smile. “If a question gets too personal, you'll step in?”

He raises an eyebrow, bemused by my mood. I'm bemused, too. It's a strange thing to realize I miss his overprotective tendencies. Maybe that's how I truly know I've grown up—that I can long for the relative safety of my childhood with Liam North.

But the detectives are courteous and professional. Unlike the reporter, they haven't been digging into my personal background before they show up. They aren't aware there's any connection between my father and what happened tonight. *Did the driver interact with you before he rammed from behind? Do you know why he was chasing you?*

They show me a photo of him, leaning back in the driver's seat, a neat hole in the center of his forehead. I shiver, and Liam rubs slow circles on my back. *Have you seen him before?*

No, no, and no.

The doctor looks me over and declares me healthy—some bruising, he says, offering a prescription that is guaranteed to numb the pain.

“No,” I say because I think the nightmares may be worse.

Liam accepts the bottle with a grim nod, keeping it safe in case I need it.

Then he takes me back upstairs and tucks me into bed. “What about Laney?” I ask, pain and adrenaline making me jittery. “What about Cody's truck? His dad—”

“I know,” Liam says, his green eyes fathomless. “I'll take care of them.”

“You said he's not your business.”

“I was wrong, Samantha.”

I clasp his wrist in a wordless plea, feeling the interplay of tendon and muscle, a silent string instrument in the form of a man.

He climbs into the bed behind me, his warmth an immediate comfort.

“You don't have to stay.” I close my hand around his arm, pressing my fingers along the strings as if it were the neck of a violin—G4, D4, A4, E5.

He doesn't move, but I feel his gentle amusement ripple the air. “Let me,” he murmurs. “After seeing the truck go off

the road, I'm definitely going to have nightmares.”

And I sink back into the murky sleep, the one with my father shouting, pleading, cursing.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

In addition to being a composer and talented violinist, Vivaldi was ordained by the Catholic Church. He was given the nickname The Red Priest in reference to his hair color.

LIAM

In my dream there are soft hands exploring me.

These are the hands of a violinist, incredibly swift and strong and sure. I suck in a breath when they find a decades-old cut on my side. It feels like a lance, the gentle fingertip tracing the scar. They move lower, lower, lower. The backs of delicate knuckles brush against stiff denim, a butterfly beating its wings against a boulder—and breaking it apart.

I roll the warm weight of her beneath me, determined to extract payment. My dick throbs with years of unspent desire. My hands aren't nearly so soft. I'm going to rip her silk-flutter skin the way I'm grabbing her, holding her, using her, but I can't make myself stop.

It's a dream; I don't have to stop.

I press my face into her hair, breathing in the sun-drenched strands. Her skin feels impossibly smooth against my cheek, beneath my lips. I lick her to see if she tastes as sweet. Like the velvet skin of a peach, holding such treasure inside.

The curve of her neck and the place it joins her shoulder. That's where I bite down, reveling in the squeak of sound she makes, the way she stiffens beneath my thighs. Afraid. Afraid. Afraid. She should be scared of me. It would take so little

force to break the skin. I must be careful. Even in my dream, I can't hurt her.

I turn my attention lower, to the slope of her breast. The faint memory of black ruffles threatens the edges of my mind... but there is no silk here. There's only a thin T-shirt, and the warning bells recede. My tongue finds her nipple, teasing until it becomes hard enough to bite through the fabric. I've never been tame.

Even when I stand in a suit, in a roomful of a hundred other people, I'm a wild animal wearing clothes. The fact that I choose not to rage and rip and roar does not change who I am.

During sex my base nature reveals fully.

I close my lips around her breast, sucking her through the cotton. My hand plays with her other nipple, which is already hard; it wants my attention there, my mouth.

"Oh God," someone moans, but I must have imagined that.

I find the hem of her shirt and lift until her breasts are exposed to the cool night air. I nuzzle them from underneath, where a deep warmth permeates her skin. And then higher, to her nipple. This is her punishment for touching me, from waking me from hibernation.

She tastes so goddamn sweet. Like sunshine made flesh.

One of my knees nudges her legs apart. My hips settle against hers in an ages-old formation. There's a warm notch for my cock. Even through her panties and my jeans, I can feel the cradle of her body. It's the perfect place to settle while I kiss her breasts.

Forever. That's how long I could remain here, feeling her warmth, petting her softness while she writhes in helpless welcome. While she makes little sounds.

Her hips move against me, hesitant and hungry.

"That's right," I mutter against her nipple, licking in approval. "Make yourself ready for me. I'm so fucking hard right now. I need you soft and ready."

If she isn't, I could hurt her—bruise her secret muscles or tear her tender folds. I clasp her hip and hitch her against me to show her the rhythm. When she comes, her tight little body will clench and release liquid that will ease the way.

She isn't a hot shower and the jerk of my fist. Once I get my cock inside her, I'm going to stay there for a long time. Even when I break her little hymen, I'm going to slide through the blood and the arousal. When I come, I'm going to keep fucking her, the salt enough to sting any break in her skin. Even that wouldn't be enough to make me stop.

Those inquisitive little hands grasp my side, my back, struggling to hold on as the climax rises up. My cock throbs in desperation, feeling the gush of liquid heat. She cries out, and I capture the sound in my mouth, sliding my tongue against hers.

She comes in exquisite little pulses, legs clamping around my body, moaning into my mouth, vibrations I can feel down to my soul. Her body collapses back against the sheets, legs splayed open, arms beside her head. She's never been more beautiful.

“Don't stop now,” Dream Samantha says.

Why does she think I would stop? My cock is hard enough to split in half, made of marble, brought to the breaking point. She's soft and ready for me.

I reach to shove down my jeans. There's no time for anything else; I push aside the wet fabric of her panties. A small pile of curls and slick flesh. Heat races chills along my spine. I press the head of my cock to her—and push push push.

A short, muffled scream of pain pierces the air.

SAMANTHA

Liam stops moving, but it does not quiet the chaos. The pulse beating in my ears, the ache in my breasts. The throbbing between my legs. I shouldn't have made a sound. I tried to be quiet. Everyone knows the first time will hurt, but it took me by surprise—both the flash of pain and the fullness.

God, the fullness. It's like having a club inside me. Or maybe the curved head of a violin. Something that most definitely does not fit.

"You're not a dream," Liam says, his voice thick as honey.

"A dream?" I say faintly. My legs are spread wide, his body shoving inside me, and he thinks I might not be real. I have the sudden wild urge to giggle—wholly inappropriate. The words *a condom is mandatory* float through my mind. Preposterous, things like practicality, in the face of his wild animal need.

This is nothing planned or careful. This is two animals mating in the jungle. There is no place for latex here.

"I thought—" He makes a low sound of grief. "You're so beautiful and warm. And wet. Samantha, you need to stop clenching like that. It makes me—"

"I'm sorry," I say on a breathless laugh. I'm on the other side of the looking glass now, my old life strange and boring in light of the terrifying wonder before me. "I'm not doing it on purpose."

One thrust of his hips and he pushes in another inch.

I won't survive it. "How much more?"

"I'm not fucking you," he says, unsteady, but there's no conviction in his voice. How can there be when he forces himself another inch?

He's a large man, but I never worried that he wouldn't fit inside me. Men and women perform this act every day. Surely I can figure it out. The theory is nothing more than a smooth water's surface—a mirage replaced with sudden violence by the reality of him. His shoulders loom above me. His muscular thighs hold mine open as wide as they can go. And his cock burrows deeper into my body.

This is everything I've ever wanted, and now that it's here, I can't take it. My body refuses. I wriggle instinctively, trying to get away, to find relief, and he clasps my shoulders in an impossible grip. "No, don't," he gasps, green eyes hazy. "Don't move. Not like that."

“Hurts,” I say, barely able to squeeze out the word.

“Sorry. Sorry.” He drops his head to taste my shoulder in an openmouthed kiss. “I need to get off you, to stop touching you. To stop fucking you. I’m sorry.”

He doesn’t stop.

His hips pull away only long enough to let cool air soothe my tender skin. Then he pushes back inside with a grunt. I might as well try to stop a boulder rolling down a mountain, picking up speed as it goes. And I don’t want him to stop, not really. It’s only that I want this terrible pressure to ease. It makes me pant and writhe.

I don’t know whether he’s exceptionally large or I’m exceptionally small. Maybe both. It would be only right that we would be mismatched this way, when everything else about us is also wrong. We are not meant to be together; it’s only the force of our wills that makes it work.

“No, no,” he mutters to himself, fighting it even as he fucks me, thrusting deep inside me, going slow enough that I feel every ounce of friction against my intimate walls. His eyes are wild and angry and somehow frightened. “Make me stop,” he says.

I press a kiss to the only part of him I can reach—the bulge of his pecs.

He flinches beneath my lips.

My chest aches with something that has nothing to do with his cock. I’m hurting for the man who thought I’d leave for my tour with a cheerful goodbye and never come back. For the man who thought that would be best for me, as if he’s been nothing but a vending machine, a place where I got safety and comfort without ever caring about him in return.

“It’s okay,” I whisper. “I want this. I want you.”

With a groan he thrusts hard inside me. I can only close my eyes, tears leaking down my cheeks. Thank God it’s too dark for him to see. He’s not looking anyway; his head is down, hips moving swift and fierce. His shout is both masculine power and utter surrender. His body turns taut,

straining against me, pushing me into the mattress so hard I can't breathe.

A sense of victory expands in my chest. It's like we climbed the tallest mountain or fought an entire army. That's what we did together, and I stroke his head, feeling the impossible softness as his muscled body weighs me down.

He stirs in slow degrees, his hips moving experimentally, his cock nudging me in an intimate place. I wait for him to pull away. He'll probably leave the bed now. I have no illusions about his reaction to this. I'm the one who started touching him, knowing it would lead to sex. I'm the one who made the overture. He's the one who will retreat.

Except he doesn't leave my body. Instead he thrusts back inside, as if we're still having sex. As if he didn't just flex and spurt warm liquid into my body.

"What are you doing?" I whisper.

"Losing," he says.

"But didn't we just—"

"One time isn't enough," he says, his tone dark with promise.

It sounds like a threat, except the large pulses of cum smooth the way for his cock. They give me a sense of warmth that wasn't there before. Then he shifts his angle slightly, and his cock finds a place inside me that makes me arch and cry out.

"Wait," I say, but he doesn't wait. He does it again, finding the place with a carnal knowledge. How can he know my body better than I do? My secret muscles clench helplessly around him, and he answers with a flex of his cock.

He fucks me with a wealth of patience, pulling pleasure out of my body so long and hard that every muscle hurts, thrusting inside me long enough that I feel myself turn raw. I know what he wants from me, but it's too much.

"I can't," I say in broken sobs, desperate enough to beg.

"You can," he says, his voice a velvet murmur.

His thumb reaches down to press my clit, and I flinch in the few precious moments before the climax overtakes me, clamping down on every muscle, squeezing my lungs, tightening my sex around something too large to fit.

His groan sounds like pain. Like a small and welcome death.

He collapses on me for a second time, and I think to myself, *We've done it. Finally.* Except his cock stirs inside me, and I realize I did not understand the size of this mountain. I did not know the strength of this army.

“Again,” he demands, tender and inexorable.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Stravinsky's ballet The Rite of Spring was so original and provoking that during its 1913 premier it caused protest and violence from the audience.

LIAM

“What the fuck is this?”

The words rip through the air, tearing me out of sleep.

Elijah stands in the doorway, surveying our naked bodies with a mixture of shock and fury. He looks ready to kill me. I pull on my jeans, so that at least I can die with some dignity.

“Let’s take this outside,” I say as Samantha stirs in the bed.

“No, you can explain what the fuck you were doing to Samantha Brooks, the child you’re responsible for, practically your daughter, right fucking here.”

I don’t flinch, but it’s a close thing. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh really. Did you put your dick in her?”

Josh appears behind him in the hallway, looking almost amused, the bastard. “Are we going to have the birds-and-the-bees talk?”

“You knew about this?” Elijah says, incredulous.

“I figured he was teaching her safe sex.”

Elijah lets out a growl. He’s always been the one with the most normal sense of morality, between the three of us. “I

thought you were better than this,” he says softly.

“I’m not,” I say because he doesn’t need any fucking illusions.

Samantha pulls herself out of bed, fully awake now. “Hey, can you stop talking about me like I’m not part of this? I’m an adult now. I get to make these decisions for myself.”

She’s using the pink sheet to cover herself, but in the sunbreak it’s practically translucent. With a growl I push her behind me. Elijah lets out a snort. “Oh, now you’re worried about someone seeing her? After you fucked her?”

“Well, we can see why,” Josh says, his tone appreciative. “Look at her with that just-got-fucked hair and whisker burn on her shoulders. Someone’s all grown-up.”

Red colors my vision, and my control snaps. I launch myself at my brother, throwing a punch that sends him careening into the wall. It leaves me open for a split second—a second that Elijah uses to land a fist in my gut. I absorb the blow with a quiet *oomph*, stepping back from the force. Samantha grabs my arm, which is raised to hit back.

“No,” she cries, and the sound cuts through the haze of shame and fury.

“Christ,” I say, glaring at Josh. I want another go at him.

“Please,” she says, tear tracks glistening on her cheeks. “Don’t fight.”

“Why the fuck not?” Elijah says, muscles straining as Josh holds him back.

“Because I won’t be the reason you hurt each other,” Samantha says, her voice trembling. “If you want to punch each other, you’ll have to come up with another reason.”

She stands there with her chin held high, a sheet wrapped around her slender body. She weighs a hundred pounds of nothing, but she looks like she can stop a war. That’s what she’s doing, with nothing more than the force of her will.

If there was ever a piece of my heart held back, a part of me that wasn’t fully in love with her, it’s gone now. She’s a

warrior. A goddess. I want to fall at her feet in supplication. Now I understand why knights would kneel before their queen and bow their heads. It's the only position that makes sense for a man in the presence of such a woman.

"I love our family reunions," Josh says with a quicksilver grin.

Elijah lets out a low growl that I can empathize with. I wouldn't want to be held back from a fight, either. And I can't even argue his point. I deserve to be beaten. I deserve to be locked in a closet, thrown down a well. I've always deserved it.

"Go," she says, her head held high. "I love that you care about me this much, and I know that because of a messed-up childhood, this may be the only way you know how to show it. But I'm a grown woman. You don't get to dictate who I sleep with. And I'm asking you to leave."

Only Elijah looks at all chastened by the words. Josh gives an irreverent little salute before heading down the hallway. I'm the only one left, and I turn to face her.

"Samantha, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have—"

"You too," she says softly, heartbreak lending her brown eyes an almost rust-colored red. "You're the worst one, about to apologize for taking my virginity not even a full day after you did it. I deserve better than that. If you want to get back into bed, to try to find some peace and joy together, then you can stay. But if you want to apologize for wanting me, you can leave."

I swallow hard, but there's only one thing I can do.

My feet suddenly weigh a thousand tons. My head swims with the certainty that I will regret this moment until my final day. And my heart beats with a terrible truth, that I can't possibly stay in this room. Josh was wrong when he said I was still holding on to that baby bird in the closet. I have to let her go. And so I walk out of the room, my expression stoic as it slams behind me. We can't be on the same side of the door, not when I'm trapped in hell.

SAMANTHA

I grew up without being able to count on my father. Even when Liam North became my guardian, part of me had already learned not to trust grown-ups. They only wanted to tell me what to do, only wanted me to please them. Some things are learned deep in your bones.

I couldn't wait to become an adult so that I could make my own decisions. Now that I'm here, I realize something was missing in my dreams of adulthood. I can make my own choices; I can choose Liam, but I can't make him choose me. The sky is full of wind and storm; my wings only take me so far.

That's how I find myself playing the Lady Tennant, my own composition of loss and heartbreak. It makes me think of biting cold and lonely nights. I thought I wanted to graduate from high school, to turn eighteen, to play on a tour—when all I really wanted was not to be left behind.

That's what's happening, even if I'm the one walking out the door.

We're not going to be pen pals. I may be an adult now, but Liam still makes the rules. I can't make him write or call or visit me. And I definitely can't make him love me.

The composition ends abruptly, written only in my head.

It felt wrong to give it one last sorrowful note.

It felt final.

Now the true end comes to me, a silvery line that flutters, uncertain. It darts this way and that, caught on some uplifting wind.

The notes rise higher, ending on the auspice of hope.

Only a few months ago, my bow fell still in the middle of a song. Now it comes to a graceful close at the end of one I wrote myself. Instead of waiting for Liam to react to the silence, I stand and cross the threshold.

He sits at his office, not making any pretense of work. His large flat-screen monitor is dark. The black leather blotter on

his desk is empty. The lamp is off.

“Did you like it?” I ask.

“It was the most beautiful thing I’ve ever heard.”

A window behind him provides the only illumination. Moonlight limns his broad shoulders and fair hair. I think more than anything that’s happened, *this* is what marks adulthood. Fighting for the life I want.

Fighting for the man I love.

Circling his desk, I come to stand in front of him. His chair is turned slightly so that I can kneel down almost in front of him. The way he did to me a thousand times, a light touch on my knee, looking me in the eyes like I was important to him.

The deep green of his eyes is only a suggestion in the shadows.

I touch my palms to his knees. “You don’t want to hear me play in concert?”

“I want it more than life,” he says, his voice rough—even rougher when my hands skate on top of his thighs. I already fought for him with music. Now there’s a different kind of battle to be waged. “More than I should.”

“More than writing letters,” I say, a small mocking note.

“We’re not—” A sharp indrawn breath as I feel his hardness through his slacks. “We’re not going to be pen pals.”

I shake my head slowly. “That’s not what I want from you anyway.”

He moves as if to push me away, only to fall still when I touch the head of his cock. That’s when he goes completely still, hissing out a breath. “What you want is impossible.”

“Explain it to me,” I say, tracing a ridge that circles him. Everything about this is new and exciting. I would enjoy it if there weren’t so much on the line.

“I’m not— Oh God, sweetheart. I’m not made for that. All I do is hurt people, all I do is trap them. Starve them. Make them close their eyes and go to sleep.”

His words don't make sense on the surface, but they do on a deep level. I feel them resonate on the same level as my bone-deep certainties. That I'll always be left by a man who doesn't love me. And he's so worried about trapping me that he's determined to leave. We make quite a pair.

"You don't have to protect me anymore," I whisper. "I'm grown-up now."

"You won't ever be old enough, understand? It's not about your age. It's about the fact that I'm responsible for you. I can't let you die."

Maybe it should scare me—that word. *I can't let you die*. Except this is a man who has lived with death as his shadow for so long. I see what it costs him to send men and women into danger. What it costs him to risk his own brothers with every mission.

I find the button to his slacks and work them, clumsy in the dark. And then his zipper. At any moment he might stop me. His breathing saws in and out, audible even though he can run twelve miles a morning barely breaking a sweat. *This* is what's straining him, the hardness of his cock in my hand. It feels softer than I expected. The salt tang of him comes to me in the dark, and I nudge toward him, in search of his desire. My nose bumps his cock first, and a shudder runs through him.

"Samantha," he says on a helpless chant. "Samantha. *Samantha*."

Blindly I search for him in the dark, my lips landing on some velvet-burn place on him. I send my tongue to feel him, to trace a raised vein. Then I pull back, toward the tip, finding that ridge again, exploring it with my mouth while he pants and groans above me, a benediction in the night.

"Is this okay?" I say, pausing uncertainly.

His hand lands on top of my head, falling down to stroke my hair, to grab it in unruly fistfuls. "It's more than okay. It's incredible. I can't take it. I'm dying."

I might not know what he means except that he did the same thing to me while I played Beethoven's "5 Secrets."

Which means I know that dying means he's close—but not there yet. So I lick him again, remembering the rhythm he used between my legs.

His hips push forward in small thrusts, uncontrolled, almost as if he can't stop them. His cock moves through the circle of my fist, the same way he did in the shower.

My lips feel swollen as I pull back, sliding against the soft head of his cock as I speak. "You were angry at me that I kept the Coach Price thing a secret, but how many secrets are you keeping from me?"

"It's my job to keep those secrets."

"Bullshit," I say, punctuating the word with a pump of my fist. The velvet skin moves apart from the hard muscle beneath. "I'm not talking about any of your classified government contracts. I'm talking about you and me and how I came to be in your custody."

He makes a sound of protest—and I don't want to hear him give me more lies, more platitudes. More attempts to soothe his own guilt by telling himself that's what I need from him.

So I press a kiss to the head of his cock, to where the wetness pools into a salty drop. I lick it away from him. And lick again, to find that another one has formed. It's a sensual feast, doing this in the dark, hearing his shuddery breaths.

"You have to stop," he says, his hips pushing harder and harder.

I make my fist tighter around him, working him, making love to him with my hand—it isn't impersonal at all. This is the way I make music with my bow and violin. Every twitch of my fingers, every slight pressure. His ragged breathing and low groans are the music I make.

Heat gathers between my legs, but I force myself to ignore that. There are more important things at stake than my arousal, the dampness in my sex. The ache in my clit.

"Don't you know how it takes away my power, not to know what happened to my own father, what happened to me? I can't even remember that night. Only that when I woke up,

my father was dead and there was a stranger who would take care of me. Don't you see how it's hurting me?"

A low animal sound of pain fills the air, making the hair on the back of my neck rise. He does see it, he does, but he can't do anything except succumb to the physical release. I close my mouth around his cock, catching his climax on my tongue. I swallow, greedy, knowing this might be my only taste. I love him gently, kiss him, kiss him, soothing him as he comes down in jerks and pants.

Without warning or ceremony, he drags me onto his lap, fingers working quickly at my jeans, finding their way inside to the slick center. I jerk at the intrusion. Too much friction, too fast. "Wait," I whisper.

"Now," he says, unbending.

I try to clamp my legs shut, but it only makes the pressure more intense. "Tell me we can have more than this. Tell me you'll see me on the tour. Tell me you'll wait for me to come back."

He doesn't tell me any of those things. His silence is answer enough. My body doesn't realize it's lost—the climax builds in pleasure-drenched waves, leaving me panting and sated on the lap of a man who's just turned me away.

His lips brush my forehead, chaste even as my arousal dries on his fingers. "There is no future for you and me. I'm no longer your guardian. You're no longer my ward."

Tears dampen my lashes. "We could make something new."

He pushes me gently off his lap, and I stagger like a deer on my legs for the first time. "You're forgetting something, sweetheart. I don't want that."

Every molecule in my body shouts at me to push him, to shake him, to make him see that we can work. Whether he's trying to protect me or protect himself, the result is the same. I can't make him want this. And I don't think he'll ever really see me as an adult while I live under his roof.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

There are two skulls in composer Joseph Haydn's tomb. His head was stolen by phrenologists and a replacement skull was put in his tomb. In 1954, the real skull was restored, but the substitute was not removed.

LIAM

My hands are steeped in blood and dirt. I've been working through the obstacle course we use for training for the past five hours, pretending that my life is at stake—because in some ways it is. I set every barrier to its highest point, every weight to its heaviest. I'm still alive, which means we really need to make it harder. Torn muscles ache everywhere in my body. I wipe the sweat and grit from my eyes.

I started this afternoon, and the sun set a little while ago. Footsteps approach from the house. My senses are dulled by pain, which is the point.

“Go the fuck away,” I tell Josh. He's come to check on me every hour, offering water and energy bars and once, the use of his pistol. *Finish the fucking job, if that's what you want*, he said. He should have given it to Elijah, who probably wouldn't mind using it.

“I might,” comes a feminine voice. *Samantha*. “I have some questions first.”

I drag myself into a sitting position, leaning back against a 4x4 staked into the ground. The world tilts wildly until I close my eyes. Something nudges my hand. A bottle of water. I take a swallow, downing half the liquid before I take a breath.

Samantha kneels in front of me, the way I did so often as she played the violin. She holds out something in her hand, her expression solemn. It's a couple of ibuprofens. I stare at the pills, so innocuous and small, so ordinary when the world is shattering. I swallow them down and finish the rest of the water. "Thanks," I say gruffly.

"How did you know my father?" she says, her brown eyes as clear as I've ever seen them in the deepening night. "The real answer this time."

"I wasn't friends with him," I admit. "We hadn't ever met."

She takes a seat a few feet away, her legs crossed. She's wearing jeans and a T-shirt with her high school crest on it—which makes her look like a child. She isn't a child anymore, but that doesn't change what she is to me. Like the bird that fell from the nest before it could fly.

"Go on," she says.

"He was a spy," I say, my voice abrupt. Businesslike. Because this had been my business for so long. "He took money under the table from a few different countries, but mostly Russia. It was my job to identify men like that and then eliminate them. But sometimes we would wait. If they could be useful, we'd keep them around, let them lead us to even bigger targets."

Her eyes are troubled, though she doesn't look particularly surprised. It's as if I'm reminding her of something she already knew. Children are smart, even when they don't know all the facts. They know what's important. "That's how you knew him? You were watching him?"

"Those were my orders, except he started getting too erratic."

She's quiet a moment. "So your team eliminated him?"

"No, sweetheart. I did that."

A flinch. "You were just doing your job."

Even now she wants to make excuses for me. “My orders were to continue to watch him. They wanted to see what happened next. I already knew, and I wasn’t going to wait around. So I slipped a little something into his special dark roast coffee beans, the ones he guarded so fucking religiously that no one else could drink it.”

Her eyes are wide. She knows what’s coming next. “The coffee.”

She never drank coffee with me, not once. Only tea. Some part of her recognized the danger, even if she couldn’t remember why. “I didn’t know that a twelve-year-old little girl liked to sneak a sip of the stuff. Not until I found out she was in the hospital.”

Tears fall down her cheeks. “That’s why I don’t remember.”

“They didn’t put it together at the time. An old man dying of a heart attack. A young girl who’d seen it, passed out with memory loss from seeing something tragic. By the time anyone thought to investigate, he was cremated.”

“Is that why you wanted custody of me?” she says, the words like venom, full of pain. “To make sure no one could run a blood test on me without your permission?”

“Christ. No, Samantha. Any trace would be gone from your system.”

“Then why?”

“Because you deserved a hell of a lot better than a traitor for a father and a bastard for a brother.” I give a humorless laugh, knocking my head back against the splintery wood. “Do you know what I regret the most? Not killing him. I’m sorry I didn’t do it sooner. I had to watch him forget to feed you, forget to clothe you. I saw him leave you at the square in Leningrad while it was snowing, and you weren’t even wearing boots—I couldn’t call anyone to get you because it would prove he was being surveilled.”

She listens to me speak and then gives a brief nod, as if our conversation is concluded. And I suppose it is. This is the only

way it could end—with the truth.

SAMANTHA

In some ways the information about my father wasn't a surprise. I may not have known the specifics, but I knew what kind of man he was. Loyalty wasn't in his vocabulary. And if I had thought more about it—the money that would come and go. The way he'd buy me a new dress to attend a fancy dinner one week and then leave the pantry empty the next. Alistair Brooks was a desperate man. And I was his desperate daughter, so eager to believe that someone cared about me that I invented stories. If only I could play violin well enough, if I followed the rules hard enough. If I wanted it bad enough, there would be a father to love me.

Growing up isn't about learning something new. It's about unlearning the fairy tales you believe as a child. Elijah offered to take me away from here, but I won't put that between the brothers. Instead I call a cab and pack a single carry-on suitcase. A flight leaves Austin in a few hours that will take me to Chicago, and then on to Tanglewood. I can start my new life there, a little earlier than I had planned. I'm ready.

I put my suitcase in the car and step into the back of the cab. The front door opens, and Liam strides toward me. *Don't ask me to stay*, I beg him silently. I'm not sure I can say no. It's not because I stopped loving him. I think I love him even more now, somehow, seeing him battered and broken against the obstacle course he built himself, beating himself against his own guilt. But he will never see me as a grown woman while I stay here. He will never accept me as an equal while I remain in his custody, if only in body and not spirit.

The only choice is to leave, which means it's not really a choice at all.

His silhouette breaks from the house, and I realize he's holding the violin. The Stradivarius. I hadn't brought it with me. There are violins everywhere, and societies and museums would be happy to loan me a great one. It wouldn't equal the Lady Tennant, but nothing would.

“Why did you leave it behind?” he asks, his voice hoarse.

“I wasn’t sure you’d want me to have it. After everything that happened.”

His green eyes are lighter than I’ve ever seen them, almost see-through. This is the most he’s ever shown me of him—his past, his emotion. All it took was for me to leave.

“Bullshit,” he says.

“Fine. Maybe I wasn’t sure I still wanted it. After everything that happened.”

“Take it. That is, if you want to play this violin, then I want you to have it.”

I swallow hard and take the case, my fingers brushing his on the wooden handle.

“And if you ever need me—” His voice breaks.

“I know where to find you,” I finish for him.

He shuts the door and slaps the top of the cab so we move forward. I watch my home disappear through my tears. Only when we get to the airport do I realize that it’s Josh driving the cab. “What the hell?” I say as he steps out to squint at a parking meter.

“Do you have a quarter?” he says, digging through his pocket.

With an exasperated sigh I reach into my jeans and find a dollar bill. He plucks it out of my hands. “Thanks. You have now officially hired North Security as your personal bodyguard.”

I cross my arms. “Pretty sure that’s not legally binding.”

“And I’m pretty sure Liam North would shit a brick before he ever let you leave without adequate protection. The guy in the Crown Vic may be dead, but someone else ordered the hit. You’re not safe until we neutralize them for good.”

A rush of emotion wells in my throat. I know I need to leave Liam, but it hurts worse than anything I can imagine. I could turn Lady Tennant into firewood, and it still wouldn’t break my heart as much as this. A sob escapes me, and Josh’s

face blurs into a thousand pointillism dots. Through the tears, I see him open his arms. I let him hold me as I break apart. He has the same build as Liam, the same coloring, and I feel close to the man I love—and so far away I'm not sure we'll ever be able to cross the distance.

LIAM

I sit in the armchair in my office, the fire blazing. It can't penetrate the chill. Samantha took any warmth from the house, and I don't expect it to return.

That doesn't absolve me of my responsibility where she's concerned.

I should probably feel guilty about defiling a priceless violin with a micro-tracking device, but there is nothing I won't do to keep her safe.

Elijah enters the room, his face implacable. He wants to kick my ass, but it's a testament to how terrible I look that he doesn't bother.

"You're a bastard," he says instead, no heat in his voice.

"Are you more angry that I failed in protecting Samantha—or that I failed in protecting you?" I enlisted the day I turned eighteen, leaving my brothers behind. Josh was old enough to defend himself by then, at least. Elijah had no such power. It took years before I had the money and the strength to return home to get him out of there.

"You didn't fail," he says. "That's not giving Samantha enough credit."

No, she became a strong woman with fierce loyalty. No thanks to me. I don't expect I'll ever get to touch her again. Won't get to see her except from afar. But I can damn well protect her. "A drug lord?"

A humorless smile. "That was an unexpected detour."

"Christ, Elijah."

"We found the target and confirmed his identity."

I flip through the pages in a manila folder, proof that one Kimberly Cox never actually existed. She has a convincing portfolio of freelance articles, an apartment in Brooklyn, a 401K. She had a contract with *Classical Notes* to interview the performers on tour.

Except that she's not a real person.

The woman who came to our house that day was a fraud.

“Did he make you?” I ask.

“Negative, but he knows someone's after him.”

A few months ago I heard whispers that Alistair Brooks survived the assassination.

I sent the Red Team to find out if the whispers were true. And then a reporter shows up asking questions about her background. Quite a coincidence. That had been enough to make me concerned. I stepped up her security detail quietly, making sure one of the men was always nearby.

Josh will keep her safe while I find the traitorous fucker and finish the job.

She'll be safe once and for all—and she won't ever have to know that the man who ordered the hit was her father.

* * *

Thank you so much for reading OVERTURE!

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VIOLENT DELIGHTS

By
Jessica Hawkins

PROLOGUE

On my bedroom balcony, I danced to the upbeat mariachi music coming from the parade in town. Street fireworks popped and crackled to a soundtrack of trumpets and violins, but I couldn't see much beyond the fortress of olive trees surrounding our compound. They'd been planted after my first birthday party, when my father had been shot at in the backyard while holding me. The *sicario* had hit an inflatable bouncy castle instead, trapping kids inside and inciting a mob of screaming parents. That was what my best friend had told me years later, anyway, and Diego would know, since his parents had ordered the hit.

I waved to one of the guards, who tipped his AK-47 to me. I was supposed to be at the Day of the Dead parade now, honoring the deceased. Diego had promised me two slices of sugar skull cake if I went early and got a good spot, but since Papá was out of town with half his security, my mother didn't want me leaving the premises without her. And as important as every man around here acted, she was the neck that turned the head of the Cruz cartel.

I returned inside to see why she was taking so long, twirling through the maze of hallways so the colorful, floral embroidery of my floor-length skirt ran together. Almost an hour ago, my mother had been nearly ready in an off-the-shoulder, white, green, and yellow dress with a red ruffle along the bottom. She'd pulled her hair back with silk, orange marigolds, and I'd stood on a stepstool to clasp her necklace, a starburst with gilded chains heavy enough to sink a small ship.

“We’re missing the parade,” I called as I skipped down the corridor, my woven leather sandals clicking on the tile. I rounded the corner into my parents’ sunny bedroom, tripped, and landed in a puddle.

A pair of combat boots stopped in front of me. I raised my eyes to meet the cold, distant gaze of a man dressed in all black—Cristiano de la Rosa, a high-level member of my father’s security team.

“Get out of here,” he ordered. “Now.”

Cristiano was all brawn, beast, and towering height with opaque eyes to match his hair. Based on the stories Diego had told me, people feared his older brother, but I had no real reason to. Though their parents had been enemies of ours once, Cristiano and Diego had been on our side for eight of the nine years I’d been alive.

Plus, Mamá had always told me—go to Cristiano in an emergency. He would protect me.

But something was off. He didn’t like me being here.

In one of his large, powerful hands, he held an army-green duffel bag. In the other, a solid black gun. Then, there was the blood—on his pants, splattered on his shoes and hands.

And on mine. Warm and sticky between my fingers, soaking through my fancy skirt. Not even its metallic smell could mask my mother’s signature perfume.

I looked over my shoulder. I hadn’t tripped over my own two feet, but hers. Mamá was lying on her back. Sunlight glinted off the large, gold necklace she’d bought for the parade. Her gleaming black hair was coming loose from its bun after she’d spent all that time pinning flowers in it. She shouldn’t be on the ground in her expensive new dress—it was already ripped at the neckline. The vibrant design almost hid what seeped through its fabric, pooling on the terra-cotta tile underneath her body.

Blood.

Goose bumps started at my scalp and spread to my fingers and toes. *No.*

Gasping for air, I scrambled to her side. “Mamá.”

Her lids eased open as she struggled to focus. “Natalia,” she managed.

My chin wobbled as I fought back tears and grasped her still-warm hand. A bruise formed on her cheek.

“*Mija*.” She fought to keep her eyes open, but they went glassy as her gaze shifted over my head. “Please, Cristiano,” she begged, her voice strangled. “Please don’t ...” She shuddered with the effort. “My daughter ...”

“I’m here,” I whispered, but she wasn’t talking to me.

I looked up at Cristiano. His jaw sharpened as he clenched it and turned his face away. “*Sueña con los angelitos*.”

Dream with little angels. When I turned back, she’d gone still.

“No,” I whispered.

Cristiano tossed the bag and gun onto the cloud-like comforter and reached for me. On instinct, I dove under the bed, knowing he’d be too big to follow—and came face to face with *la Monarca Blanca*. I wrapped my hand around the cold, hard metal of my father’s two-tone silver-and-gold-plated 9mm. Time slowed as I ran my thumb over the pearl grip where the name was engraved into the side.

White Monarch.

I choked back a sob. This was the kind of emergency I was supposed to go to Cristiano for, but *he* was the one standing over my mother’s dead body as she begged him for mercy.

He grabbed my ankles and slid me out from under the bed. I screamed in a way I never had before, ear-splitting, throat-shredding, as I tried to kick him off.

He clamped a hand over my mouth as his other arm circled my body and pinned my arms to my sides. “Natalia, *hush*,” he said in his chillingly deep voice as he lifted me off the ground. “Let me handle this.”

I wailed against his hand, thrashing and trying to hit him with the gun, but my arms were trapped. I slammed my heels into his thigh and groin.

But Cristiano was the cartel's most lethal soldier for a reason. It wouldn't have mattered who I was—nobody could match his strength, which had to be that of two men. By the age of twenty-three, he had more kills under his belt than most in the cartel.

He'd been raised as a weapon.

His hands had taken the lives of our family's enemies—but never any of our own.

Until now.

Footsteps sounded in the hall, and Diego rushed into the room with his gun drawn. He stopped short and sucked in a breath as he noticed the body. He shut his lids briefly. I tried to call for my best friend, but Cristiano's hand muffled my words.

Diego's eyes flew open and darted over Cristiano and me. He was dressed for the parade in a loose, white button-down and jeans. He scanned the room, his gaze shrewd as he tucked some loose strands of his brown hair behind his ear. "What the hell is this? What happened?"

"I don't know," Cristiano said. "I got here right before you did."

Liar. I inhaled smoke and gunpowder as I squirmed against Cristiano's hand, trying to convey to Diego what I'd seen.

Diego turned his attention on me, his forehead wrinkling as if he was trying to read my mind. *He did this*, I tried to tell him. *Cristiano shot her.*

After a moment, Diego swallowed. "Put Natalia down."

"Holster the gun, and I will," Cristiano answered.

Diego looked at his pistol as if he hadn't realized he'd been holding it. He was no saint, either—he'd done things I wasn't supposed to hear about at my age, according to Papá—

but that didn't make Diego anything like his brother. Diego was a lover, not a fighter. He was only sixteen, and he still had a chance to make something of his life. His eyes drifted from the firearm to my mother, then across the room. His expression eased as realization seemed to dawn on him. He turned back to Cristiano.

"After everything they've done for us?" Diego asked and gestured the gun toward my parents' walk-in closet. "This is how you repay them?"

The safe lay open and empty except for scattered paperwork. The White Monarch had been in there, along with cash and my mother's jewels. I tried to nod at the duffel bag but couldn't move my head.

"Careful what you say, Diego," Cristiano said evenly. "You *know* I didn't do this."

"Then who?" Diego asked. "The house is surrounded by security. Who else could get in here? In the safe?"

"It was already open," Cristiano said in an increasingly frustrated voice. "As I said, I walked in right before you."

Diego shoved his fingers through his hair, then spotted the duffel. "What's that?" Diego would never hurt me, but when he raised his gun at us, my heartbeat quickened. He kept the weapon and his eyes on Cristiano as he moved toward the bed. With his free hand, Diego slid the bag across the comforter and glanced inside. "Cash and jewelry from the safe, but not much."

"I know." Cristiano readjusted his grip around my torso. "I found it discarded by the bed."

"Where's the rest of it?"

Cristiano hesitated. "Someone must've been here—"

"Impossible," Diego said, and he was right. My father took no risks when it came to his family's safety. "There are two ways in—through the guards out front or the guards at the tunnels."

Diego took a two-way radio from his back pocket.

“Diego,” Cristiano said, warning clear in his voice. “Don’t.”

He pressed a button and spoke into the device. “*Doña Bianca* has been shot. By Cristiano. I need security in here now.”

Cristiano noticeably stiffened behind me. “*Vete a la chingada*,” he cursed. “You’re going to tell Costa I did this? I’m your blood, Diego.”

“And Bianca was just as much my family.” The anguish in Diego’s eyes conveyed what my mother meant to him. At her urging, my family had taken him in when he was only eight and Cristiano was fifteen. Tears leaked from my eyes and onto Cristiano’s hand as I looked anywhere but at her body.

“She was family to *me*, too,” Cristiano said through his teeth. He was so angry, his voice broke, and he forgot to keep my mouth covered. “You can’t accuse me of hurting her.”

“All you do is hurt people,” I screamed. “You’re a—”

He slapped his hand over my mouth just as the front door slammed downstairs. “*Fuck*,” Cristiano said. “Tell them I didn’t do this, Diego, or they’ll kill me on the spot.”

“Release Natalia,” Diego begged. “Please. Try to remember who you were before all of this—you wouldn’t have hurt an innocent girl.”

Cristiano started left then shifted to go right, as if trapped. Finally, he released my mouth but kept me against him like a shield as he one-handedly wrestled the White Monarch from my grip.

He was going to kill Diego next.

Diego.

The boy who’d not only watched me grow up, but had protected me like an older brother. Who’d never treated me like a little girl despite a seven-year age difference. Who brought me stinky marigolds when I was sad and never complained that we could only ride our horses up to and along

the fence Papá had built to keep me in, even though *Diego* could go anywhere he wanted.

Diego's eyes widened as Cristiano got the gun from me. It would devastate Diego to kill his own brother, but for Cristiano to shoot Diego, it would mean nothing. Cristiano took lives all the time.

"You're caught, brother," Diego said. His nostrils flared as his anger finally seemed to override his confusion. "Don't make this worse than it is. Put her down and face them."

Boots pounded up the staircase with a chorus of shouting men. Cristiano carried me toward the door, his back to the wall, eyes on Diego. He switched the gun to his other hand to lock the door.

In that split second, Diego lunged forward.

Cristiano whipped around and pulled the trigger.

I screamed when the shot rang through the air, covering my ears as I hit the ground. Diego crumpled, clutching his bloodied thigh.

Men pounded at the bullet-resistant door Papá had specially installed. Fists hammered the wood, followed by what sounded like the butts of their rifles.

Cristiano picked up Diego's gun, stuck it in his waistband, and leveled the White Monarch on his brother's writhing body. "You left me no choice. Loyalty is king around here, but look how quickly it's broken."

"Don't shoot—I know a way out," I exclaimed through my sobs. Cristiano towered over me, looking like the Grim Reaper himself. "I can help you escape," I said.

Cristiano stilled. "It's not possible."

"I know a secret way." My voice shook. I wasn't helping my mother's killer, I told myself, but protecting Diego and me.

"Natalia, no," Diego said, huffing as he made an effort to sit up. "He—he has to pay for this."

"Where is it?" Cristiano asked.

Diego was getting unnaturally pale as if he might pass out any second. I got to my feet and started to go to him, but Cristiano grabbed my arm and yanked me back against his hip. “They’ll get in before he dies. Show me the way out.”

Diego groaned and closed his eyes, and I inhaled a quick, stuttering breath to keep my panic at bay. “The c-closet,” I managed.

Cristiano marched me back across the room and into my old nursery. Once I’d outgrown the space, my mother had converted it into a sizeable walk-in closet that held much more than just clothing. There were walls of shoes, purses, drawers, and mirrors, as well as an island in the center for her costume jewelry and Papá’s ties.

Cristiano took a chair from my mother’s vanity dresser, wedged it under the closet’s door handle, and turned to look at me. “Now what?”

I couldn’t think. There was a bullet in my mother’s stomach and one in my best friend’s leg. My bloodied skirt stuck to my knees. I was going to be sick. “The ... the dresses.”

Cristiano walked to me. He put the chilled metal barrel of the gun under my chin and tilted back my head to get me to look him in the eye. “If they get in here before I get out, I can’t promise we’ll both make it out alive. Show me the escape, or tell your father I didn’t do this. Those are your options.”

I tried to swallow, but I couldn’t even breathe. I’d never been so sure I would die if I made one wrong move. I shook my head hard. “I won’t lie for you.”

“Look what loyalty got me, Natalia.” He raised the gun higher and I glanced down the barrel. The silver nearly sparkled under the closet’s lamp. “Whether I did or didn’t do this, I’m dead. If they don’t get me here, they’ll hunt me down. That isn’t loyalty, and there is no justice.”

“*Loyalty?*” I was shaking now, but there was no quiver in Cristiano’s voice, no tremble in his hand. “You killed my

mother. Why? She cared about you—she treated you like a *son*.”

His Adam’s apple bobbed as we stared at each other. “Show me the way out,” he commanded.

“I’ll help you, but only to save Diego,” I said. “Promise you’ll never come back here.”

“I can’t.” His expression hardened as his voice dropped. “Consider this a lesson—never trade your life for someone else’s.”

I backed away slowly, turned, and went to the safe. Amongst the papers, I found the small metal box I needed. I popped it open, took out a key, and stilled with a *bang* from the next room. If security was breaking down the door, then Diego must not have been able to let them in. I quickly prayed he was still alive.

I hurried to the closet that held my mother’s party dresses. They were heavy enough that I had to use both hands to push them apart so I could crawl through them. “In here,” I said.

Against the closet’s back wall, I felt around for a keyhole. It was dark, but my father had walked me through this plenty of times. There were tunnels under the house all the security knew about, including Cristiano, but *this* secret passageway was only for my parents and me. When I’d pointed out to Papá that the men who’d built it must’ve known about it, he’d exchanged a grim look with my mother and changed the subject.

I put the key into the hole, but it was already unlocked. I slid the wall open to reveal a dark, dank room. “There.”

If Cristiano was surprised, he didn’t show it. “There what?”

I pointed to a trapdoor inside. “Go down that hole. There are no lights; you’ll have to feel your way.”

He stared into the dark. “How do I know this isn’t a trap?”

“It’s your only choice.”

He got closer, his presence looming tall. “Open it for me.”

It wasn't a request. Fortunately, my father had ensured that I knew the escape drill well, so entering the small space wasn't foreign to me.

I squatted down to unlatch the trapdoor that led to the one passageway nobody else knew about. Cristiano closed and bolted the door behind himself, extinguishing everything but a sliver of the closet's warm light.

I hoisted open the hatch and it fell with a hard *thud* against the ground. I concentrated on keeping my voice steady. "This also connects to the tunnels the mules use," I explained. "But if you stay to the left, that's a way nobody else knows about. It will take you south."

"To where?"

I glanced back at him. "That's all my parents told me."

The dark turned him into a shadow as he stalked toward me. "I'll have to take you with me."

"What?"

"We're going down there together."

I backed away, but since he blocked the door, there wasn't anywhere to go. "Why?"

He tucked the White Monarch into his waistband with his other gun, grabbed my arm, and yanked me toward the entrance of the tunnel. I flew forward, no match for his strength. My heart leapt into my throat as everything happened in a flash. He couldn't take me. He wouldn't. Nobody dared cross my father—but Cristiano already had, and now, he had nothing left to lose. If he got me into that tunnel, I'd never return. Never see Diego again. My father. I wouldn't attend my mother's funeral.

"I *helped* you," I said as more sobs bubbled up into my throat. I looked down the ladder. Since we were on the second floor, one push would send me flying some five meters down into the pitch dark. "Why are you doing this?"

"To show you that you can't trust anyone. Not me, not Diego, maybe not even your parents. Just because you help

someone doesn't mean they won't betray you." He turned toward the ladder. "And because I need a head start. Get on my back."

Once he released me, I switched into high gear. Perhaps he was known for his ruthlessness, but I'd spent my short life sneaking into places I shouldn't, surprising even the stealthiest of my father's guards. I grasped the White Monarch from his pants and stumbled back, leveling the pistol on him with both hands.

With the light at my back, I saw a hint of amusement flash in his eyes. "You don't know true fear, little girl. It puts you in danger."

I *did* know fear. I was staring at my mother's murderer. I couldn't swallow. Couldn't hear over the deafening pounding of my heart.

Wherever Cristiano surfaced, my father would kill him.

Or I could save Papá the trouble and do it myself.

For the first time since before I'd tripped over my mother's dying body, calmness fell over me. Nobody had been able to stop Cristiano—not my mother or father, not Diego, and not security. I could, though. He deserved to die for his sins.

I urged myself to act, but something Cristiano had said stopped me. *There is no justice*. Was I sure, down to my very core, that he had done this? What if he hadn't? I didn't know him nearly as well as I did Diego. Cristiano was fourteen years older than me—a man. Despite his reputation as a killer, he had always treated me with kindness.

And my mother, too.

But as he'd said—you couldn't trust anyone in this world. Not even your own blood.

"Do it," he invited.

Based on what I'd seen, I was pretty sure in order to shoot, I first had to slide the top of the gun toward me. But the firearm itself was so heavy, I needed both hands to keep it

steady. I glanced at the top part to determine the best way to do this.

“Never hesitate, Natalia.” Cristiano snatched the pistol from me and pressed the muzzle to my forehead. “See? *Bang*. You’re dead.”

My breath caught in my throat. *I was dead*. Defenseless. Shivering like the little girl I was.

“And *never* draw a weapon you can’t operate. When you aim, kill.” He flicked a switch on the side, stuck the gun back in his pants, and grabbed me.

“Stop,” I cried and pushed against him as he hugged me to his chest with his arm.

“Hold on.” One-handedly, he quickly descended the ladder.

I wrapped my arms around his neck. He was the furthest thing from a safe place, but in that moment, I was no longer concerned with being brave. I was trapped. I gave into my fear, submitting to the warmth of his body, sobbing into his neck as he descended into the dark.

“Is there another key to the secret door?” he asked.

I sniffled. “My father keeps it on him.”

“He’s probably already on his way,” Cristiano said, almost consolingly. “They’ll find you eventually, Natalia. This is the only way I’ll be able to put enough distance between them and me.”

It was cold and black at the bottom. I shivered uncontrollably as he reached the final rung of the ladder and jumped the rest of the way. *Never go down if you don’t have to*, Father had said. *You won’t be able to reach the ladder to get back up*.

This was it. I was at Cristiano’s mercy now.

On solid ground, he took a few slow steps, feeling for a wall. When he found one, he squatted. “Sit here,” he said. “Don’t move until they come for you.”

I didn't let go of his neck. The scent of his sweat and my tears mixed with the soil around us. I'd never been worried about the dark before, but I couldn't even see my own hand.

"What if nobody comes?" I asked.

"They will. And by that time, I'll be long gone." He pulled at my arms. "You're brave. Let go."

I released him. The next thing I heard was his retreating footsteps. I sat against the wall, wrapped my arms around my knees, and held my breath. Tears flooded my eyes, overflowing onto my cheeks.

I'd always known the love and protection of my parents and their titles. Being the daughter of one of the most powerful drug lords in Mexico meant I'd been in danger since the day I was born—and also sheltered from everything.

No longer.

As the threat of Cristiano receded, I was left alone in the dark with the realization that my mother had kissed my cheek and tucked me in for the last time. Her lyrical voice would never again lull me to sleep and end each night with, "*Te quiero mucho, mariposita.*" There would be no more of her famous homemade "Talia taffy" for the rest of my birthdays, no more riding horses into town to shop for fabric or spices.

That morning, impatient to go, I'd hugged her waist and asked her to hurry up as she'd done her makeup. Now, I wished only to stay with her a little longer. I wished for more time.

But the parade was over.

Death's day had come.

NATALIA

Eleven years later

I ducked out of the helicopter and into dry desert air as the blades whipped wind through my hair. My father's head of security offered a hand and helped me down. "*Bienvenida a casa, señorita,*" Barto called over the whirl of the rotors.

Welcome home.

The pilot carried my bags to a black Suburban waiting on the tarmac. Somehow, the Mexican heat felt stronger than in California, the sun intense and unforgiving. I slipped my sunglasses into place and followed Barto to the car.

"How's it feel to be back?" he asked.

No words could properly convey it. Leaving home for a boarding school in the United States had been my choice, but Father would've shipped me off even if it wasn't. I both dreaded and anticipated coming here. California was safe, clean, easy. Nothing like this place, where danger haunted the streets. It was the thought of seeing Diego that lifted any sense of dread that came with getting into a car headed for home.

Barto glanced at me in the rearview mirror. "If I can say so, you look more and more like *señora* Cruz each time I see you."

I had my mother's light eyes, and her small, sharp nose, but our physical similarities stopped there. "I'm more like my father," I said.

"But you have her grace."

I swallowed. *Regal* was how my father often described her.

“And that determined look she often wore,” Barto added.

I didn’t doubt that. I wasn’t only home to spend time with my dad, catch up with friends, and celebrate Easter. I was here for Diego—my best friend and my love. The boy who knew all my secrets because he’d been there for many of them, if not physically, then a phone call away. But with the distance between us, we’d done enough talking for a lifetime. I couldn’t wait to just be close to him for the first time in a year.

Next summer, I’d be graduating, and I was dead set on having Diego in Santa Clara with me by then—permanently. But since my dad wanted the opposite, it would take some convincing.

Barto steered us up the long, winding drive lined with imported banana leaf trees. Men with AR-15s stood along the side of the dirt road, waving us on, smiling at me through the blacked-out windows.

Barto handled my luggage and sent me straight upstairs to see my father. At the threshold to Papá’s study at the south end of the mansion, I stopped when I heard his raised voice. “Do you have any *idea* the magnitude of what you’ve committed us to?”

“We can handle it.” When Diego spoke, a kaleidoscope of butterflies erupted in my stomach. “We’ve been refining our operation for over a decade, and it’s as close to perfect as it gets.”

“‘Close to perfect’ is not perfect,” came my father’s grave response.

“Nevertheless, we’re ready. With this partnership, we take things to the next level.”

I should’ve made my presence known. I’d found out at a young age that sneaking around was the only way to get information. Back then, it’d been exciting. Now, information was both powerful and burdensome. People who knew too much were targets. Witnesses. Leverage. The more you knew, the harder it was to escape this life.

And the more dangerous you became.

But my curiosity continued to burn the brightest flame, no matter how I tried to extinguish it. I resisted the old habit of removing my shoes to mute my steps, but I still peeked into the light-filled room, finally laying my eyes on Diego. He was as beautiful as ever. His normally silken brown hair had been kissed by the sun and was long enough to tuck behind his ears. He'd been working outdoors more, and it showed, not just in his skin tone and hair color, but in his broad, muscular shoulders. He stood straight and tall to address my father. I wanted to run and throw my arms around his neck, but Papá wouldn't stand for it.

Patience, Diego had told me a million times before.

It had never been my strong suit.

“This is not a *partnership*.” Deep lines slatted across Papá's tanned face. Each time I saw him, he appeared older, but his voice boomed, and his clear, molten brown eyes painted him as more youthful than his fifty years. He was as astute as ever, and his overbearing height defied how the bags under his eyes sometimes made him seem tired. “The Maldonado cartel is not a partner but a master,” he said. “With this deal, they'll own us.”

I considered entering the room and cutting off the conversation, but the name stopped me short. Even *I* knew—and I made it my business not to know much anymore—doing business with the Maldonados was dangerous.

“Times have changed, Costa,” Diego said. “Eleven years ago, you reevaluated your business model, trading risk for security and violence for a quiet life—not that such a thing exists in this world. It's time to adapt again.”

With my mother's death, much had changed, and not just in the obvious ways. Father had scaled back his business as newer, more bloodthirsty cartels like the Maldonados had come up the ranks.

“My father would roll in his grave to know we're not as feared as we once were,” my dad said, glancing out the

window of his second-floor office.

Diego put a hand on his shoulder. “We’re still here, and we’re just as powerful, but in different ways.”

Diego spoke earnestly and with his hands. It was hard *not* to see his passion, intelligence, and charm, but that still wasn’t enough to convince Papá that Diego was the man for me. Nobody was good enough in my father’s eyes—especially not someone who belonged in this world. My father cared about Diego in his own way; he’d practically raised him. But unless I could convince him otherwise, Diego would always be a soldier, a right-hand man, a cartel member ... and a threat to my safety.

“Many leaders of the old order have either been captured, killed, or forced out,” Diego continued. “Who of your former enemies remains? Not many. I’m going to ensure the Cruz cartel—and the de la Rosas—don’t fall to the same fate. We do that by moving forward with the times.”

“The de la Rosas don’t exist,” Father said, warning in his voice as he regarded Diego with heavy eyebrows. “You’re a Cruz. And while I know our success is as important to you as it is to me, there’s risk in wanting more. There’s much to be said for stability.”

“With new technology hitting the market each day, there’s more risk in staying still. We’re number one in shipping and logistics now, but that can always change.”

I leaned on the doorjamb, worried Diego was into something he shouldn’t be. If I asked either of them why they’d taken a meeting with the Maldonados in the first place, I’d get the same answer I always did.

Don’t worry. Todo bien. Everything’s fine.

My father rubbed his forehead as he frowned. “And making a risky deal is moving forward?”

“We’ll deliver,” Diego said, crossing his arms with a shrug. “Their requirements are no different than any of our other arrangements. They have a valuable shipment to get

across the border. As the premier transportation option in México, we can make that happen. Simple.”

“The difference is who we’re dealing with. How much product are we moving?”

“More than we’re used to,” Diego admitted. “But I’m not concerned. As other cartels distract themselves battling each other, we’ve solidified a nearly flawless, strategic network. I’ve assured them an eighty-seven percent success rate.”

“Eighty-seven, eh?” Papá asked, slipping on his glasses to bend over and read his computer screen.

“Lower than our stellar average,” Diego said, pulling back his shoulders. “We’ve delivered better results countless times, and in less than the twenty-one days they’ve given us.”

“And after that?”

“We make a more permanent arrangement,” Diego said. “With the rate they’re growing, their business could take us to the next level.”

“I’ve been at that level,” Dad said. “It’s dangerous up there.”

“But those who were once your competitors are now your customers. You’ve neutralized.” Diego stuck his hands in his pockets and glanced out one of the study’s wide windows. “We’ll use the income the Maldonado deal generates to expand.”

Papá grunted. “You didn’t say how much we have to move.”

“Two-hundred million in product in three weeks.”

My father straightened up. “That’s almost four times what we normally do.”

“The amount doesn’t matter as much as—”

Papá held up a hand for Diego to stop when he saw me leaning in the doorway. “*Mija*,” he called, removing his glasses and opening his arms. “*Ven aquí*.”

He shut his laptop as I went to him, then surrounded me in a strong, protective embrace.

Over his shoulder, I met Diego's gaze. His face had been pinched, but it eased as his eyes cleared to emerald green. Neither video chatting nor photos did the color of them justice. "Welcome home," he mouthed.

Home. It had been once, but I found no comfort in the word now. Diego schooled his expression for my dad, but I knew him well enough to read his happiness to see me.

"What's wrong?" I asked, reluctantly tearing my eyes from Diego to look up at Papá. "You were arguing."

"Not at all. Don't worry." He kissed the top of my head, then turned to Diego. "Leave us."

Diego didn't flinch, though I knew the dismissal hurt. He yearned for my dad's respect, but I could see age and experience had not fully earned him it. *Yet.* I didn't doubt my father would one day see what I did, but I also knew it pained Diego that the approval he'd so desperately sought since his own father's death continued to elude him.

I hoped during this trip I'd be able to open my dad's eyes to who Diego really was—a sensitive, creative man who'd been trapped by circumstance. My father wanted me out of this life, and I wanted that too, but to Papá, Diego *was* this life. I had to show him the potential Diego had outside of it.

With a short bow and a brief, promising wink in my direction, Diego exited the room.

My father took my shoulders and held me at arm's length. "Let me look at you. *Qué bella.* Turn for me."

"Papá." I blushed. "Please."

"I don't get to see you often enough and want to commit every visit to memory."

"We were together at Christmas."

"But that was in California, not here, where I watched you grow up. Indulge your old man."

Rolling my eyes playfully, I turned in a circle. “All my limbs intact as previously reported,” I said. “Fingers and toes too.”

“Your hair has grown. Do they not have salons in Santa Clara?”

I smiled. “Of course, but long hair is always in style.”

“You’re taller too, no? You get that from me.”

I had taken after my father’s side of the family and was the tallest of my girlfriends at five-foot-seven. He was a sturdy six-foot-two, my grandpa even taller, which had suited his far more menacing temperament.

Father liked to tell the story of an eighteen-year-old girl named Bianca who’d flown down from northern Mexico “like a migrating butterfly.” She’d come for a cousin’s *quinceañera* and stayed for love, caught in my father’s net by the time dessert was served.

As romantic as it was, sometimes I wondered why she’d been stupid enough to trade a safe and happy life as a farmer’s daughter for this. It’d been foolish and risky, and it had gotten her killed. I wouldn’t share her fate, and neither would Diego.

I had to find a way to free him from the chains of the cartel so he could come to the States and start a life with me. I would convince my dad to let us go and live in peace rather than war, looking over the Pacific instead of over our shoulders.

Diego had been in my father’s grip too long, and I was the only one who could ask a favor like this.

Father sat back behind his desk. “Tonight, we celebrate. What’re your plans while home?”

“I thought maybe you, me, and Diego could have dinner tonight,” I said.

He picked up his folded glasses and tapped them against his temple. “I’ve already arranged a feast in your honor.”

“Tomorrow then, or sometime this week.”

“What for? I’d rather just the two of us,” he said. “Anyway, my annual party is Thursday night as you know. I’ll have my hands full with that, and so will Diego.” He frowned. “Why don’t you visit the stables? It’s been so long since you’ve ridden.”

Eleven years to be exact. I would go see the horses, but I hadn’t gotten on one since my mother’s death. It’d been our thing, an activity we’d done together almost every day. I nodded so as not to start off my visit with an argument. “Maybe, but it’s hotter than Hades here. I’ll go to the beach, no doubt.”

“No doubt.” He patted my hip. “How was the trip?”

“Barto took great care as always. No attempted murders.”

“A joke,” he said. “I’m glad you see the humor. I don’t.”

It was important to remember to laugh when traveling with three guards and in bulletproof transportation.

“I need to get back to work,” he said, opening his laptop. “Dress well for dinner.”

I stooped to kiss his cheek. Out of habit, I glanced at the computer screen for clues as to what he and Diego had been discussing, but I forced my eyes away. I didn’t want trouble. I just wanted to get Diego and myself the hell out of there before someone else I cared about got killed.

On my way out, Papá called me back. “One more thing. Don’t let me catch you trying to sneak into the ballroom again this year. It’s no place for a young girl.”

“I know many girls who’ve been to your parties.”

“None of which is my only daughter.”

My mom had hosted a legendary annual affair for clients and friends of the Cruz cartel in a ballroom on the property. I’d never made it into a party and had been forced to settle for hearing the music from my bedroom across the lawn, followed by weeks of gossip and folklore. Papá had tried his best to keep me isolated from this world since birth, but that’d bred curiosity.

Now that I knew better, I appreciated his intent. But it hadn't saved me from witnessing my mother's murder.

"I'm not a young girl anymore," I said with a shrug. "I'm twenty."

I left the room and tried not to think about the party. I'd once harbored a morbid curiosity about the life my parents led—until I'd learned firsthand the senseless violence, corruption, and evil that came with it. Since then, I'd been trying to tame the little girl in me who'd been fearless enough to draw a weapon on a man three times her size. The girl who'd equated danger with fun. The one who'd listened to the devil whispering in my ear that there was no escaping this life, not now, not ever.

I had run away from all this, but the devil still tempted that stupid little girl. She knew better than most what could come of that.

After all, she'd ended up locked in a pitch-dark hole for hours, senseless and defenseless, covered in her own mother's blood.

NATALIA

In the corridor on my way to the library, a figure sprang from the shadows and seized me from behind. I gasped, but the moment I caught Diego's familiar scent, I relaxed in his arms.

"Buenas, princesa," he murmured in my ear, stealing me toward the library.

As children, Diego and I had scoured almost every inch of the house with the exception of my parents' bedroom. We knew it better than any member of the security team, likely better than my father himself, as he couldn't fit in some of the spaces Diego and I had been known for folding ourselves into back then.

The library was one of the only surveillance-free spots. Papá had built it for my mother's ever-curious mind, but hardly anyone went in it anymore. My dad claimed he wasn't intelligent like my mother and had no use for books, but it was simply too painful for him to spend time in here.

My father was smart in other ways.

Diego left the door open behind us. Since we'd spent so much time together growing up, it wouldn't be unusual for a guard or even my dad to find us alone together. But with the door closed? That would raise red flags.

He spun me around and pressed his lips to mine for a hasty kiss. "Are you really here?"

"I am." I put my hands to the chiseled, lean jaw and high cheekbones of a face worthy of being immortalized on a

statue. “Every time I see you, you’re less the boy I knew and more the man I love.”

He took my wrists and kissed the inside of one palm. “I was a man back then, Tali. I had to be.”

“I know.” His bravery in a world of danger and a life of loss continued to awe me. “Are you happy to see me?”

“You have no idea.” He went to the long window overlooking the grounds, then turned and perched on the sill. His eyes lingered on me. “Every time I see you, you’re less the girl I knew and more an alluring creature with wiles that could possess the devil.”

“You’d call me a creature?” I asked, smiling as I formed claws with my hands and stalked toward him in my leopard-print flats.

He held up his hands to form a square, looking at me through it. “When you’re back at school, I’ll remember you this way—a lioness.”

“You won’t have to remember,” I said. “You’ll be able to look up and see me with your own eyes.”

“I want that more than you know.” When I neared, he put his hands on my hips and drew me to him. “I just don’t want you to get your hopes up.”

“He’ll understand once I tell him how much you mean to me. How much you’ve *always* meant to me,” I said, smoothing away dark, golden strands that fell right back over his forehead. “My father adores you.”

“Adores?” He arched an eyebrow. “He adores two things in this world—you, and the memory of your mother. The rest of us hope for his respect and his mercy.”

I wrinkled my nose. “You’re exaggerating. These days, he’s more forgiving than most. At least, more than my grandpa ever was. Papá is a fair man.”

“Fairest in all the land,” Diego agreed. “But nothing about the land is fair. Except for his daughter. She’s both her mother and her father, darkly beautiful with cunning eyes.”

My beloved was a poet—a side he only showed to me. I wanted to melt into him, but I could sense the tension in his forearms, the restraint in his touch. Diego followed my father's example, though, and rarely volunteered when something was wrong. I would've happily ignored any problems, except that I didn't want my time with Diego encumbered by the stresses of business. "What was your argument about?" I asked.

"Nothing, nothing, *está bien*." He slid a hand under the hem of my top. I arched into the warmth of his skin on mine while acutely aware of the open door behind me. His green eyes danced as he looked up at me. "Tali?"

"Diego."

"We have to talk about our future."

I grinned. "That's why I'm here."

"I want nothing more than to be with you." He sighed. "This town is a jail cell. A death sentence, even. I'm only alive today. Tomorrow is never guaranteed."

When he talked like that, it hit too close to the truth. So many nights, I'd stared up at the ceiling of my dorm room waiting to hear from Diego, both craving and fearing news. Keeping in touch with someone whose life depended on staying under the radar hadn't been easy. "It won't be for much longer," I said. "You'll see."

"But how can I leave?" He inched his fingertips a little higher. "I have responsibilities here."

I bit my bottom lip as he approached the underwire of my bra. "You'll get out of them."

"This isn't a job I can just quit. Your father took me in when he didn't have to." He removed his hand from my top to rest it on the outside of my thigh. "Costa brought me into this business and gave me a chance."

I didn't want him to stop touching me, but even though our self-control continued to hold, it was thin. "That doesn't mean you're indebted to him forever."

“I’ll never be able to leave without your father’s blessing, and he won’t give me that.”

“He brought you and your brother in at my mother’s urging, out of a sense of duty for what he did to your parents.” I slipped my hand in his and squeezed. “And yes, he could’ve left you behind, or worse, killed both of you. But he’s also the reason you’re an orphan in the first place.”

Diego’s eyebrows knitted. “I’ve never heard you put it like that. Are you suggesting I hold that against him?”

“No,” I said. “He won’t feel any guilt. He did what he had to. If he hadn’t gone after your parents, they would’ve come for him. And I don’t think the de la Rosas would’ve taken *me* in if the situation had been reversed.”

“They wouldn’t have. I miss my mom and dad, but you’re right—they weren’t so merciful.” He glanced away. “Perhaps it would’ve ended up worse for you than death.”

What was worse for a young girl than death, I didn’t have to ask. Though our families had been rivals, they’d still abided by a code. Back then, the de la Rosas had trafficked weapons, and the Cruzes had dealt in narcotics. My father and grandfather had imposed a strict pact that neither family would enter into the vile space of human trafficking. And when Papá had discovered Diego’s parents had broken that pact, the de la Rosas had needed to be dealt with.

But it was plotting against my father that’d ultimately gotten them killed.

I sighed. “Maybe we should just smuggle you across the border like a brick of cocaine.” I leaned in conspiratorially. “After all, that’s what the Cruz cartel is known for, right? Our unusually high success rate at getting illegal goods into North America?”

The corner of Diego’s mouth quirked. “Where’d you hear that?”

“It’s true, isn’t it? My father’s instinct is unrivaled, but you’re the brains behind this business.”

“I’m hardly that,” he said, but deep dimples appeared with his smile. Once I’d been old enough to notice how sexy they were, they’d proven irresistible. “I just want him to see me as ...”

“As?”

“More than the others.” He kissed the back of my hand. “Someone worthy of being part of his family.”

“You *are* worthy. I know that, and so does he.”

“But I can’t blame him for doubting me after the way my parents conspired against him.”

I refrained from pointing out what he already knew. Yes, Papá *had* agreed to take in both boys, but on one condition—that they wouldn’t follow in their father’s footsteps. In order to ensure the boys never made a move against Costa Cruz, my dad had made them watch as he’d put bullets in their parents—a warning.

“My father knows you’d never go against him,” I said. “Their murder ended a decades-long feud between our families—”

“Until Cristiano,” Diego said.

I shivered, a natural response to hearing the devil called by his name.

Mamá’s hospitality had come with a price—her life. But it had also brought Diego into mine.

He’d understood that my father and *abuelo* had had no choice but to stop his parents.

Cristiano, on the other hand, hadn’t.

Eleven years later, he should’ve been a distant memory. I tried not to think of his tight grip on my arm, his gun tipping up my chin, or the shadowed, divine face of a godless man. But how could I not look over my shoulder? Cristiano de la Rosa still inspired dread, even from the grave. At least, I hoped that’s where he was. Despite rumors that he’d been running an underground drug empire in Russia, or that he owned a freighting company in Bolivia, or had become an

arms trafficker between America and the Philippines—I'd convinced myself he was six feet under. I didn't sleep well most nights, but assuming he was dead helped a little.

“My father knows you aren't your father, and he *definitely* doesn't think you're anything like your brother,” I said.

Diego stuck his hands in the back pockets of my jeans and pulled me closer. We were tempting fate by being affectionate out in the open, but it excited me that Diego couldn't resist touching me. “Your parents treated Cristiano like a son, and he *still* turned on them,” Diego said. “No matter how I prove myself, your father keeps me at arm's length—even before the betrayal, I was just another worker to him. I sometimes question whether Costa would've taken me in without my brother.”

Even though it hurt to hear that, I understood why Diego felt that way. Both boys had been tossed into the Cruz cartel army right away. Cristiano had taken to it like a child to sweets, while sensitive, creative Diego had struggled to adapt.

“You've shown him almost twenty years of loyalty,” I said. “You're now one of the cartel's most trusted advisors. You've helped make this business what it is—one with an average success rate above eighty-seven percent.”

Diego's mouth fell open as he scoff-laughed. “How long were you listening at the door?” He narrowed his eyes, playfully scolding me. “You little snoop.”

“I just didn't want to interrupt,” I said. “But is eighty-seven percent good?”

“The best. Our competitors don't even touch us. Cartels come to us when they need the absolute best chance of getting their shipment over the border.” He winked. “That's how we can charge so much.”

“See?” I said. “You could never be just another worker. Papá knows that.”

“Let's get back to the topic of our future.” He squeezed my ass cheeks. “In the States, will we be royalty like we are now?”

Not if I could help it. To be royalty was to put a target on our backs. We already had that here; I wanted to escape it. There was much more to life than wealth and status. “How does a bungalow near the Pacific Ocean sound?” I asked. “Fresh fish, fruits, and vegetables every day. No guns in sight. And California has great schools.”

“Schools?”

“For the children.”

He chuckled. “We have children, do we? Do they have names?”

“I’m serious,” I said. “Once I graduate and start my career, we’ll marry in a small, cozy ceremony. Although, the churches there are big and tacky, not like the ones here.” Regretfully. Our little Roman Catholic church in the town center was beautifully maintained thanks to my family. Father lavished millions every year on our small *pueblo* nestled between arid desert lowlands and lush mountainside on the west side of the country—a business investment more than charity, as it secured him the loyalty of the townspeople and local law enforcement.

“But how will I show off such a beautiful princess if we have a cozy ceremony?” he teased.

“Oh, my whole family will be there. Show off what you like, but I don’t care about being fancy—I just want you and the people I love around.” Diego made good money here, and had been saving instead of blowing it like a lot of his friends, but it wouldn’t last forever where we were going. California was expensive, and Diego would struggle to find work without experience. I wanted to make sure he knew I didn’t need money to be happy. I cupped his cheek, impatient to feel his lips on mine again. “We can throw a party that would blow all other weddings away if that’s what you want, but all I need is you.”

He leaned into my palm. “If I could, I’d make you mine tomorrow.”

Excitement fluttered in my tummy. I'd pictured our nuptials many times. Whether the affair was big or small, blessed by my father or forbidden, the core of it remained the same. Diego was my soul mate. He'd seen me through the dark months after my mother's death, checking on me whenever he could get away from the ranch, making sure I'd slept and eaten and gotten fresh air when I'd only wanted to give up. It wasn't hard to conjure the image of promising to care for *him* too in sickness and in health.

But would my father be there to walk me down the aisle?

Papá was a fair and decent man, but he'd been ruthless once. He didn't value anyone's innocence but mine. He'd tried to awaken more in Diego, to turn him into the killer his brother was, but Diego remained pure. A peaceful soul trapped in a fight for survival. He wasn't made for this world, but there was no way out—except, maybe, through me.

Diego frowned. "I should go check on things at home before anyone notices my absence."

I sighed, but sulking wouldn't change anything. "When will I see you next?"

"I wish I knew. I have to show my face at the costume party and do some networking. Then this weekend, I'm trapped at the house to oversee some things."

"I've still never seen your place," I hinted. Diego had told me enough about it over the phone that I could picture it clearly. "What if I come over?"

Diego rose from the windowsill and lifted my chin with his knuckle. "You know I'd love that if it wasn't too dangerous. It's a hub. Men come and go from my house all day. And if I know your dad, he'll have security detail on you the next two weeks. They'd never let you come over, and you can't be there without them."

"But *you'll* be there." Everyone loved to remind me how dangerous this life was as if I didn't know. And though staying in the dark felt safer, I also knew ignorance could expose me to danger.

“I’ll be preoccupied, though,” he said.

“Then what about the party?” I asked. “I promised my dad I wouldn’t show up, but if you think about it, isn’t it really the *safest* place to be? With all the important people in attendance, there’ll be a guard every meter.”

“He’s not keeping you from the ballroom for safety reasons, Natalia Lourdes.” Diego only used my full name when he was serious. “His parties are a cesspool.”

“They’re attended by the highest government officials in the country.”

“My point exactly. Those people are deadlier, greedier, and more corrupt than anyone. They’ve ruined countless lives and families without ever dirtying their hands.” He thumbed my bottom lip. “Promise me you’ll stay home. I have no doubt you’ve already mapped a route inside.”

“I don’t care about the party. I have no interest in what goes on there.” That wasn’t entirely true, but the only thing stronger than my curiosity was my desire to disassociate myself from this life. Then again, what trumped *all* of that—was Diego. “I don’t have much time here,” I said. “I only want to spend it with you.”

“I want that too, *princesa*, but not if it puts you at risk.” He glanced over my head, then pecked the bridge of my nose. “I’ll see if I can steal away for a kiss after the party, all right?”

“You expect me to sit home and wait on the small chance you’ll be able to meet me?”

“No, my angel straight from heaven. My Aphrodite incarnate. I don’t expect it, but I hope for it.” He took me in his arms and brushed his lips over my cheek, then the corner of my mouth. “Promise me you’ll stay home,” he said in my ear, “and in exchange, I’ll tell you a secret.”

I was getting exactly what I wanted—a clear divide between myself and this life. But I wasn’t getting what I needed—Diego. Maybe the party was wild, but it would also be safe. Security would be tight. If I found the right costume, nobody would even recognize me. “I’ll stay home,” I said. It

wasn't exactly a lie—the ballroom was on our property.
“What’s the secret?”

“I wrote you something.”

“A poem?” I melted against his hard chest. “Let’s hear it.”

“Not so much a poem as a love letter. A tribute to my princess.” He half-smiled. “It’s in my pocket, but it’s not ready.”

I reached for it. “Give it to me.”

He laughed, catching my wrists and pulling me close. “If you put your hands in there, I can’t promise I’ll let them out.”

I blushed, at a loss for a response. We’d been best friends a long time, and we were still a little new at the intimate parts. I laced our hands together, admiring his long fingers and the tattoo on the inside of one—a sketch of roses he’d done with his family name and the date of his parents’ death.

And inked on his inner ring finger, small enough so nobody like my father would notice, were our initials in black ink. I brushed my lips over his knuckles.

“God, I’ve dreamed of your mouth on me since your last visit.” His voice dropped. “Tell me you’re still my girl, Talia.”

I knew what he was asking, and although I’d assured him many times that I’d kept my virginity intact at school, there was always an edge to his voice when he asked. I put my cheek to his. It was easier to talk about sex without looking at him. “I’m still your girl.”

“Good.” The word came out on a growl. “I worry about those fraternity sharks circling someone as sweet as you.”

“Sharks don’t eat sweets,” I said with a smile. “The sharks are *here*—out for blood. Americans are boys compared to you. I’ve no interest in them.” I put my arms around him and nuzzled his neck. “I only think of you.”

He sighed. “How have we lasted this long?”

Even though most of my friends, both here and in the States, had lost their virginity, it was easy to save myself

knowing I'd only ever give myself to one man—my best friend. As scary as my father's grief had been after Mamá's death, I still wanted what they'd had—an all-consuming devotion to each other, even now. As far as I knew, Papá had never so much as been on a date with another woman in the last decade. "Because it's important to me," I said. "I want to commit myself to you in every way once it's time."

He kissed my forehead. "It's important to me too."

I arched a brow at him. "Only because you're afraid my father will find out we didn't wait."

He laughed lightly. "It's true—I value my life. Luckily, even if we were tempted, the guards keep you in and me out." He ran his fingers through the ends of my hair. "Our first time will be special, *mi sol*."

I smiled quizzically. He hadn't called me that before. "Your sun?"

"You're always alight. That, and you hate the night."

"Mmm. It rhymes. You *are* a poet."

Diego knew me well, but then, he'd heard firsthand accounts of my night terrors until I'd left for boarding school. The shadows that tried to catch me, the lingering memories of a nine-year-old watching her mother take her last breath ... and then there was his brother.

"Promise you'll never come back here," I said.

"I can't."

It was hard to believe Cristiano had once been the hero of my nightmares. Like the time, as a girl, I'd woken up screaming, and my mother had come running. She'd smoothed sweat-sticky hair off my face and asked me what I'd dreamed about.

"Monsters," I'd told her.

I hadn't noticed Cristiano, who'd been patrolling the property, standing in the dark doorway, until my mother had turned to him. "Are there monsters here, Cristiano?" she'd asked.

“Yes,” he’d said gravely. “But they’ll never hurt Natalia.”

My little heart had raced as fresh tears had filled my eyes. “How do you know?” I’d asked him.

“Because I’m here to protect you,” he’d answered. “And I’m scarier than any monster.”

Cristiano had chased away the monsters under the bed until he’d become one.

And Diego was the light.

“Will your nightmares return?” Diego asked.

Not wanting to worry him, I’d told him I didn’t have them while at school since they were less frequent and less frightening. Now that I was home, I expected they’d return, but there was nothing he could do about that, so I shook my head.

If I had my way, I’d be on a plane back to California before my nightmares could even catch up with me.

But I knew from experience—I could never completely outrun them.

NATALIA

Under a starry sky, I walked away from the house, crossing our damp back lawn in heels. Lit from within, my father's ballroom shimmered like a golden paradise to welcome the state's elite. Town cars and limos lined the curved driveway, inching forward to meet the valet. Fountains out front glowed sky-blue, the water shimmering as it reflected hundreds of strung lights. It was how I imagined the gates of heaven—down to the large men in suits and earpieces guarding the entrance and scrutinizing invitations.

Unfortunately, I had to use heaven's back door. Security was heaviest at events like these. Armed men patrolled the perimeter of the property, keeping certain criminals out and others in. The main house was off-limits.

I took cover in the garden between the house and ballroom, crouching behind a fountain with a statue of Poseidon.

Your curiosity is an affliction, my father had often said to me. *And there's no cure*, I'd teased him. Being forbidden from the party was like being sent from the dinner table as a girl when conversations had turned to business. Or like when my father had put up a fence in our backyard to keep me from exploring the grounds beyond the trees. Most of the time, finding ways around the blockades was more fun than whatever lay on the other side.

Once one of the guards had turned back the way he'd come, I hurried through the courtyard. Intricate, lifelike butterfly wings, strapped over a black bodysuit, flapped at my

back. My best friend, Pilar, had been too skittish to sneak in with me, but I'd convinced her to help me make an elaborate black-and-orange eye mask with feathers and glitter before streaking blonde extensions through my hair. She'd then clipped handmade, delicate monarch butterflies throughout my curls.

Full costume required. It'd been printed there on the invitation, and from what I'd heard and glimpsed of these parties, anything less than an extravagant, costly costume, and I'd stick out.

"*Alto,*" I heard behind me. I stopped and turned as a guard approached. "*¿Qué hace?*"

I swallowed and disguised my voice with my best North American accent. "*¿Hablas inglés?*"

"You are not permitted here," he said in broken English. "*¿Invitación?*"

I pulled a sharp-cornered card from my pocket and handed it over. I'd looked at the guest list earlier to forge an invite with the names of one of the few attending couples from the States.

"*Señor Matthewson?*" the guard asked.

"Husband." I flashed a small diamond ring one of my uncles had gifted me at my *quinceañera*. "Inside. Waiting."

He picked up his two-way radio, but as he was about to speak, a voice came through asking for security at the front. He handed me back the invitation. "*Adelante. Quédate en la fiesta.*"

Stay in the party. I continued around the side of the house. A Playboy bunny with red lipstick and a cigarette held open the door for me on her way out, and I entered the hall to "Walk Like an Egyptian." As my eyes adjusted to the glittering affair, waiters circled with trays, passing between rooms. To my right, disco music vibrated the chandeliers that looked as if they'd been dipped in gold and crystals and hung to dry.

Belly dancers rippled through the crowd. Walking toward the main hall, I crossed the imported Moroccan tile Mamá had

bought on a trip to Africa, hypnotized as a heavysset man took the stage for an emotional aria.

Partygoers showed off their costumes—a black vinyl catsuit that hugged every curve. Cleopatra in a metallic leotard with layers upon layers of necklaces over her breasts, her nipples poking through. A bare-chested Tarzan with nothing but a cloth covering his genitals. Marie Antoinette walked in on the arm of Two-Face. Even some of the security guards wore painted masks or had gold-plated machine guns.

A waiter stopped and lowered his tray for me. It wasn't canapes or mini quiche as I would've thought but an assortment of pills and powder. Growing up in the world of drugs, I had little interest in them, so I opted for a fizzing drink instead. With a sip, bubbles tickled my mouth and made me smile.

This wasn't the ballroom in which I'd grown up playing hide-and-seek or had taken piano lessons, but an opulent show come to life. I walked into the next room, my heels solid on the floor even as music muted them. On a balconette overlooking a dancefloor, a row of women in lace corsets, bejeweled thigh-high stockings, and vibrant feather boas kicked slender legs for the can-can. A man in an open-collared suit and gold chains stood beneath them, likely hoping for a glimpse of heaven. I turned in a circle, taking in the spinning dancers. Men wore women's clothing, ladies dressed as animals, and caged birds sang. In one corner, a tiger paced its gilded pen for partygoers' amusement. Nearby, a woman in black leather also wore a leash.

The affair lived up to its tales of opulence and extravagance. I could hardly believe all this had been happening a hundred meters from my bedroom.

Glancing up, I spotted Diego in a long-sleeved denim shirt, a brown suede vest, and a cowboy hat. He surveyed the room from behind a second-floor railing. When our eyes met, he narrowed his. I bit my bottom lip as recognition crossed his features. He shook his head at me to signal his disapproval but tipped his hat with a small smile. After a quick scan of the room, he started down to the ground floor, but a security guard

stopped him to speak in his ear. Diego looked at me, checked his watch, then turned back up the stairs.

I walked toward a pair of fire dancers twirling on the patio, their flames making shapes against the backdrop of night, but my attention snagged on a scribbled *Fortune Teller* sign. One corner of the room had been sectioned off with hung purple fabric. *How strange*. My father became more devout in his faith the older he got and held nothing but contempt for the occult.

I heard Papá's booming voice before I saw him. I craned my neck, but he was a head taller than most and easy to find. He shook hands with a governor. If Diego recognized me, my father probably would too, and I'd be banished back to the house.

I ducked behind the fortune teller's curtains to watch through a sliver. Papá carried an ornamental staff and wore a heavy looking jeweled crown that flattened out his black and gray hair. A ruby-red velvet cape with ermine trim weighed on his big frame.

"All these riches will be yours one day," said a craggy female voice.

Startled, I turned around. The partitioned area was shrouded in crimson light, but a glowing purple crystal ball illuminated the deep-set wrinkles and dark eyes of a woman at a small table. On the exotic tapestry, a stack of tarot cards sat by her slender, veiny hand. A convincing actress, she certainly looked the part. "I'm sorry?"

"You will inherit all of this. Not just material things."

"I don't want my fortune read," I said, peeking back through the curtains.

"You don't believe in it?"

"No."

"Then what's the harm?"

Damn. I'd lost sight of my father.

“It’s no use hiding. He’ll find you.” She spoke unevenly, her words jagged.

I glanced over my shoulder. “Who?”

She stared at me from under thick black lashes and a shimmering gold headdress. “I see a man ...” She tapped one nail on the table, squinting. “The man of the rose.”

De la Rosa. It wasn’t unusual that she’d have heard Diego’s name somewhere—he was well-known around here. “You’re wrong,” I said. “I’m not hiding from him.”

“I’m rarely wrong, *muñeca.*” She gestured for me, calling me a doll and treating me as one, too. “Come. *Siéntate.* The monarch wills it.”

I turned to face her completely as chills covered my shoulders. It occurred to me that up until my mother’s death, she’d planned every detail of these parties. Maybe she’d known this woman. “What?”

She said nothing more, waiting. Father would never have a true oracle here, if such a thing existed. As she’d said, what harm could it do? I took the cushioned folding chair across from her. In the light, her eyes were as ultraviolet as they appeared shrewd. One look told me she had seen things, knew things, but that didn’t scare me. The past was the past. It was impossible to tell the future.

“Did you know Bianca King Cruz?” I asked.

“Only from afar.” The woman lifted up and fixed the pillow on her chair. “*Perdón.* My achy back.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, unsure of the appropriate response. Her musky, floral perfume wafted across the table. When she didn’t offer anything else, I held out my palm. “Well? Are you going to read it?”

“You’re a young girl,” she said.

“That’s obvious to anyone with eyes.” My gaze drifted to the deck of cards. “Aren’t you going to tell my fortune?”

“I don’t need to. It’s clear as day.” She reached out, her bracelets jangling as she took my hand in hers. She wore rings

upon rings on each finger—amethyst gemstones set in gold, a silver snake coiled to the knuckle of her right thumb, a pearl cradled by a tiny pair of intricately carved, pewter hands. “With so few years behind you, you’ve already met your true love.”

“Yes, I have.”

“You know who he is?” she asked. “He’s close by.”

I nodded. “He’s here tonight.”

“I see great love for you.”

Diego had taken a bullet for me all those years ago, and he’d saved my life many times since as he’d seen me through brutal pre-teen years without a mom. We already possessed a deep devotion to each other, and we hadn’t even been intimate yet. I nodded. “It is a great love.”

“I see pain,” she said in the same flat tone.

I shifted in my seat. That was a given considering the circles my father moved in. He and I had already gone through tragedy—that was, if there was such a thing as going through it. Grief ebbed and flowed, but it never truly receded. Now, he ran a more respectable operation, but for those who dealt in vice and contraband, risk would always be present. The fortune teller saw pain? She could’ve been speaking to anyone in the room.

“I see betrayal and violence,” she continued. “And much death.”

The grandfather clock in the main ballroom chimed. How long had I been sitting there? “I’ve already experienced all of those.”

“And at such a young age,” she said, clucking. “There’s more to come, I’m afraid.”

Whether I believed in her powers or not, that wasn’t what I’d hoped to hear. I took my hand back to put it in my lap. “Whose death?” I asked, touching the diamond on my finger.

Her rings clinked against the glass ball as she palmed it, but she didn’t bother to look, as if that was just the most

convenient place to rest her hands. “You will die for him, your love,” she said.

“I would, yes.”

“No. You *will* die for him.”

Goose bumps pebbled my skin. I thought of the barrel of Cristiano’s gun pressed to my forehead. “*Bang. You’re dead.*”

The dark came next. The pitch black, my cries, and the scurrying rodents, the smell and feel of blood that didn’t leave me for weeks. A shadow, the same one that often haunted my dreams, rose in me.

My heart raced. In the warm glow of the red and purple light, I couldn’t tell if the woman looked on with sympathy or delight. Either way, I didn’t like her face just then, or any of this. It was silly. Child’s play. She was wrong to hide behind a costume for a night and play with people’s lives.

“This is stupid,” I said and stood to return to my post at the curtains. I willed my heart rate to slow so I could focus on finding Diego. I spotted him standing in the entrance hall. He looked like he belonged in an old Western in his cowboy getup, yet blended perfectly amongst Mexico’s upper echelon. At the same time, he was utterly out of place. I could give him an escape. I could give him everything.

Was I going to die for him?

I slipped out from the make-believe lair, and like a hawk to a mouse, his eyes set on me. The worry in them eased, replaced with the same longing surely reflected in my eyes. The soothsayer’s dark words lifted, and I saw them for what they were—generic, baseless, fearmongering sentiments, a one-size-fits-all likelihood that more than the majority of this room would encounter death, pain, violence—and *riches*. That was the point of all of this, anyway.

As if plotting his route to me, Diego rubbed his jaw. He’d be blamed if we were caught together. That didn’t stop my craving to feel his lips on mine. He started toward me, but after only a few steps, my father appeared, slapped him on the back, and pulled him away to introduce him to a couple.

I moved through the crowd, catching and losing Diego's gaze as people passed between us. He shook the hand of an Elvis impersonator as I ducked by a man in a toga. He kissed Catwoman's cheek but winked at *me*. I touched my neck in mock-offense and stopped short of face-planting into a wall of a security guard.

"*Perdón*," I said as I went to go around the man.

The guard moved to block me, and in an instant, the energy around me shifted. I tilted my head back until I was looking straight up at a monster of a man and into the face of a ghoulish black-and-white skull. The blackened eye sockets, rimmed in deep red, didn't hide the menacing way his eyes focused on me. Nor did the drawn-on teeth, shaped in a sinister grin, disguise his frown—or the flawless bone structure beneath his veneer. Raven-black hair had been slicked back, as stark against the chalky face paint as his tie cutting down the center of a pressed white dress shirt.

Standing as still and straight-backed as a mannequin, and looking as polished as one too, he inclined his head toward me. "May I have this dance?"

NATALIA

It wasn't a request.

The stranger costumed as a brooding *calavera* sugar skull wasn't *asking* for a dance. There was more than simple bass and gravel weighing down his words—he spoke the way a lion growled, with a snarl and a gaze as powerful as the muscles rippling under what appeared to be an expensive custom suit.

May I have this dance?

No. Neither my gut nor my brain left any room for argument, but my body drew toward his, as if he were the sun pulling me into its orbit. I forced myself to step back. He wasn't security; he wasn't here to protect me, but the opposite. He was the danger my father had warned me of. This was a man who walked into a room and left with what he wanted—revenge, money, women ...

Me.

No one in the room matched his obvious strength. It would take a bullet to stop him.

He'd asked my permission, and though I declined in a whisper, he put a large hand on my waist anyway, drawing me in, towering over me like a threat.

The dancers gave him a wide berth, staying just outside the span of his long arms—as if he might reach out and snatch one of them. He placed my hand on his solid bicep and engulfed my other with a gentleness that contradicted his hold on my side and the severity of his costume.

“I don’t know how to tango,” I said as a Gotan Project song started.

“You’ve been away from Latin men too long,” he said. “Follow my lead, *mariposa*.”

What made him think I’d been away at all? I’d lived in North America eight years, but the Latina in me would never fade. I did, in fact, have some basic knowledge of the dance and fell into step with him.

“We’re a match,” he said, his eyes drifting over the butterflies in my hair.

“I’m sorry?”

“Our costumes.”

There was no obvious correlation between a sugar skull and a butterfly, but I didn’t dare contradict him.

“Why the monarch?” he asked.

I turned my cheek. Beside us, a minotaur and a French maid danced a beat faster. I wasn’t going to tell this calavera what monarchs meant to me, so I resorted to facts. “It feeds on poison.”

“Milkweed—to render itself unpalatable to predators,” he said, sliding his hand to the center of my back where my leotard dipped. I stiffened as he dug his fingertips under the straps of my wings, into my exposed flesh. “One bitter taste, and the hunter backs off.”

His skin touched mine and stole my focus, just like that. It had taken Diego years to make his first move. Against my will, my nipples hardened between us. “I—I think it’s clever that they do that.”

“It’s just nature,” he said. “Monarchs also represent the souls of the departed. Like me.”

I looked up at him, unnerved at the way his black eyes drank me in. “You’re very much alive.”

Leaning in, he lowered his voice. “It’s said if you whisper your desire to one, it can deliver your wish to the gods on

quick and soundless wings.”

I realized he was dancing me farther from the other partygoers. “I should get back,” I said.

“To?”

“My ... fiancé,” I said, hoping it would fizzle his interest in me.

He stopped dancing. “Your fiancé? What about California?”

My mouth fell open, but I quickly closed it. I should’ve known better than to look caught off guard, having been raised by masters of schooling their emotions. “Do I know you?”

He hesitated before resuming our tango. He danced with precision and a peculiar grace, like a hunting lion. “I detect an American accent.”

Somehow, that didn’t give me any relief. “I have to go,” I said, trying to pull away.

He tightened his grip on me, and with what I suspected was hardly any effort on his part, kept me where I was. “But I haven’t whispered my wish in your ear yet.”

I swallowed dryly, wondering where Diego had gone. Surely, he wouldn’t like to find me pressed against another man. “People are waiting for me.”

His roughened hand constricted around mine. I followed his gaze to the diamond ring on my finger. “Which people?” he asked.

Would my father’s wrath be safer than where I stood now? The mystery around this man stopped me from telling him who I was. “People who would not like me to go missing.”

“Then perhaps they shouldn’t have left you all alone, *mariposita*.”

“Don’t call me that.” Sometimes, my parents had called me their little butterfly. Even my father knew better than to use that nickname anymore. I looked around the man, panic rising the more tightly he held me.

He drew me flush to him, the warmth of his body contradicting his cold stare. “Then what should I call you?”

My gaze locked onto Diego as he separated from my father and scanned the room.

“And nobody left me alone,” I said, ignoring the man’s question. “I can take care of myself.”

“Is that so?” he asked. “Regardless, I wouldn’t take the chance if you were mine.”

If I was his. My chest rose and fell a little faster, but this time, it wasn’t in fear. His tight, possessive hold made it feel as if he already thought I belonged to him. For a split second, the thought of being at his mercy both scared and excited me. “But I’m not yours,” I said to gauge his reaction.

“Are you suggesting I remedy that?”

How bold. Nobody in this world had ever come on to me like this. “You could try,” I said, “but I can promise it wouldn’t go well for you.”

“I like a challenge. Because it doesn’t sound to me as if your *fiancé* deserves you. He’d be wise to recognize that someone else might come along and show you that.”

I didn’t know many men around here who would speak so shamelessly about another man’s fiancée. “You’re worse than that hag of a fortune teller,” I bit out.

One dark eyebrow rose, his interest obviously piqued. “What’d she tell you?”

I looked around his shoulder and saw Diego wipe his temple as he started toward the dancefloor. He still hadn’t spotted me, but his movements became agitated. I tried frantically to make eye contact. “She told me not to dance with masked strangers.”

The man moved so I could see nothing but him. He had tangoed us into a dark corner, away from anyone else, and my heart started to thump. He lowered his mouth to my ear. “What if I’m not a stranger?”

He was playing games. As he isolated me from the crowd, all I heard was Cristiano de la Rosa's threats to my nine-year-old self. *You don't know true fear.*

"What are you doing?" I asked, trying to see around him.

"Tell me. Are you willing to die for your fiancé?"

The eerie echo of the soothsayer's words made my face heat with anger. "Are *you* willing to die for *me*?"

"Excuse me?"

"If you don't let me go," I said, searching for the most menacing threat I could, "I'll scream."

"I thought you could take care of yourself."

"I'm no match for your size. I wouldn't scream to be rescued, but as the fastest means to get a gun in your face."

"I see. Do you think they'll hear you over the music?" he asked, sounding amused.

"I'll scream as loud as I can, for as long as I can, until my vocal cords give out or I can no longer keep my mouth open."

A disarmingly slow smile moved over his face, the teeth of his disguise spreading ear to ear. "I admit, I *am* curious to see how long you can keep your mouth open."

I shivered at the insinuation and pulled back, this time unable to hide my shock. "You've threatened the wrong person. I can have you killed in seconds without lifting a finger."

"Then I'd like to change my order. Please tell the heavens it is my dying wish to hear you scream."

He spoke with a rumble so deep, I felt his voice between my legs. And I was sure, by the way his eyes bore into mine, he'd meant me to. He wanted my screams, and to scare me, but it didn't come from a place of menace. I couldn't put my finger on his intention, but it was something much more carnal.

We were no longer dancing, but his hand still clenched mine as his fingers buried into the skin of my back. He held

me like I was an instrument to be played, one he would snap in half before he gave it up. Not even Diego held me so greedily.

“Then I’ll grant you your wish,” I threatened.

“Your loyalty to him is admirable if not baffling.” He checked over his shoulder, then released me with a bow. “We’ve been discovered anyway. If you’ll excuse me, I’ll have to take you with me.”

I’ll have to take you with me.

I’d heard those words in my nightmares and any place I was alone in the dark too long. “What?” I asked, my throat suddenly dry as I was transported back to the tunnel.

“I said, I’ll have to take my leave. Excuse me.”

He walked away, leaving me in darkness as I hung on his words, torn between never wanting to see him again and a temptation to call him back—in a way that felt all too familiar.

Diego pushed his way through the crowd. “Who was that?” he asked when he finally reached me.

“I don’t know,” I said, hugging myself. “I told him I didn’t want to dance.”

“And the bastard put his hands on you anyway? I should get Barto so we can hunt that *cabrón* down and teach him some manners.” Diego searched the space around us. “I told you not to come.”

“You knew I would anyway.”

He paused, then glanced over my costume, and his expression relaxed. “In a mask that didn’t fool me for a second. You make a liar of an innocent butterfly, Natalia.”

“I didn’t lie,” I said, cozying up to him, pulling gently on his bolo tie. The braided leather was held together by a metal shield with his family name in decorative script. “I said I’d stay home, and I did. This is my home.”

He drew his brows together, something unfamiliar sparking in his eyes, but then he glanced away.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Nothing.”

I ducked my head to get him to look at me. “No, it’s something. Tell me.”

“I promise, it was a passing thought.”

I crossed my arms. “Diego.”

He took my shoulders and brought me close to kiss my forehead. “It’s nothing bad. I just had this weird ... sense of joy hearing you call this place home again.”

His sense of joy was my sinking feeling. Diego’s attachment to this town was stronger than mine; he’d never lived anywhere else. There were times I questioned how devoted he was to leaving here. He said he wanted a life in California with me, yet he continued to embed himself in the cartel and ingratiate himself with my father.

“This place will always be part of me,” I said, “but I can’t call this home again. Not knowing that every day I’m here, every day *you’re* here, death is a possibility.”

“I know, and of course, I’m in complete agreement that the U.S. is where we belong.” He pecked me briefly and ghosted his thumb over my bottom lip. “Let’s not argue about something we both agree on. We should move before someone recognizes you.”

I ran my fingertip over the curling, cursive letters of the *de la Rosa* engraved on his metal tie. “You won’t make me go back to the house, will you?”

“Not if you swear you’ll stay by my side every moment.”

“An easy promise to make.” I smiled as he guided me through the crowd by my shoulders until a friend waved at us from the main room.

“There’s an announcement coming,” Tepic called. Dressed in a Hawaiian shirt, fanny pack, and aviators, Tepic was as wild as the curls on his head and only as tall as me, but compact and mighty nonetheless. As we approached, he took an entire tray out of a waiter’s hands. “Come one, come all,”

he said, showing us an assortment of narcotics. “What kind of night do you wish to have?”

“A sober one.” Diego waved a hand. “None for us, *compa.*”

I glanced around the room for the skull-faced stranger. There was something about him my mind tried to grasp on to, like a word at the tip of my tongue.

“Aren’t you going to introduce me?” Tepic eyed me when I looked back at him. “I’m Tepic, like the city I come from.”

“You don’t say.” I laughed and shook his hand. “*Mucho gusto.*”

“You must’ve missed the gossip,” Diego said, sliding an arm around my shoulders and looking into my eyes. “Should we let him in on our secret?”

Tepic lowered his sunglasses, gaping. “Talia? I didn’t recognize you in that mask.”

“That was the plan.”

“Costa will be happy to have you here for Easter,” he said, looking up as the music lowered. “Speak of the devil.”

On a large, wide balcony overlooking the main room, dancers stopped the can-can and parted, gathering on both sides of the gallery. My dad appeared through red velvet curtains and came to the railing, scanning the crowd and waving as his staff herded everyone into the same room. I moved behind Diego but kept my eyes on Papá, who looked almost cherubic with a cheeky grin, red face, and his crown tilted to one side. He tapped his scepter against the tile to get everyone’s attention, but the effect was muffled by a clear tarp on the ground. Soon, silence fell over his audience.

“Thank you all for coming to celebrate tonight,” he said almost drunkenly yet maintaining the sense of calm and composure he’d become known for in a world of chaos. “I know you’re all eager to get back to the party and to the drinking,”—he paused for some laughs—“as am I. But there’s a quick matter I want to resolve while all my closest friends and colleagues are in one place.”

Diego glanced over his shoulder at me, his eyebrows drawn in question. I shrugged.

A waiter handed Papá a champagne glass. “On this day, the Cruz cartel welcomes back an old friend.”

A murmur moved through the crowd as Tepic whispered to Diego, “¿*Qué está pasando?*”

Diego kept his eyes up and shook his head to say he didn’t know what was happening. “*No sé.*”

If Diego didn’t know about this, I wasn’t sure who would. I slipped my hand into his and squeezed.

“Years ago, a wrongdoing was committed, and I intend to make it right before all of you tonight.” Papá looked over his shoulder, into the wings. “Let it be known that a Cruz doesn’t cower from his mistakes or turn his back on *familia.*”

What family did he speak of? I looked to Diego, but his gaze was still trained on my father.

Papá turned forward again, and any belligerence vanished as he fell serious. “And that in the Cruz cartel, no betrayal goes unpunished.”

The audience clapped, ready for a show.

“It gives me great pleasure to present you the leader of the *Calaveras,*” my dad said. “But more importantly, to accept back into our lives a man who was once like a son to me and my wife.”

“Calavera?” Diego asked. “He can’t be serious.”

“Who are they?” I asked.

“One of the new order cartels that has come to power over the past few years,” Tepic explained quickly.

An “old friend” Diego knew nothing about—and an unknown cartel that had to do with my family? I struggled to connect the pieces. “Why would he ... who is more like a son to him than you, Diego?”

Papá half-turned and beckoned the suited man in face paint I’d danced with. He stepped forward, surveying the room with

black eyes that landed on Diego and me. My heart slammed against my chest as the pieces clicked and the puzzle finally revealed itself.

Father raised his champagne glass. “Welcome home, Cristiano de la Rosa.”

“*Put a madre,*” came Diego’s slow curse.

Fear flooded my limbs with the same force and speed it had in the closet eleven years earlier. My mind stripped away the face paint and I saw Cristiano clear as day. He was harder, angrier, an indisputable man who’d seen things. With a rippling red curtain at his back, he appeared like a devil looking down on us from hell.

No betrayal goes unpunished. My eyes fell to the tarp. Would he make an example of my mother’s murderer here in front of everyone?

Instead of putting a bullet in Cristiano—who’d had a considerable bounty on his head for more than half my life—my father shook his hand.

My stomach turned over.

Flashbulbs popped as reporters captured the moment.

My father drew his shoulders back. “The Calaveras have risen to success faster than any cartel in México’s history under the guidance of Cristiano.”

The crowd remained silent at first, as if unsure of how to react. Cristiano’s role was widely known in Bianca King Cruz’s death; Diego had led the charge to hunt Cristiano with the help of most people in this room for years.

“Friends, *por favor,*” Papá said in a less jovial tone. “Show my *compadre* some respect so we can get on with it.”

People applauded as Diego and I stood frozen. He squeezed my hand until it hurt, but I couldn’t speak, even if I wanted to. I would not show dirt respect.

“If my wife were here, I know she would feel the same,” my father continued.

What? My gut smarted as if I'd been sucker punched.

"This cannot be," Diego said, staring up at his brother. Cristiano watched us back, still as polished as a mannequin.

I had danced with him. Let him touch me, hold me, whisper in my ear. A crook, a ruthless monster, and a cold-blooded killer.

Did I know somewhere deep down it was him?

I silenced the thought. I wouldn't have danced with him knowingly.

By the way he set unforgiving eyes on me, Cristiano knew exactly who I was—and he hadn't forgotten anything about that day eleven years ago.

Diego followed Cristiano's heated gaze to me, then pulled me possessively into the crook of his arm.

"Cristiano has come to me with new evidence in the death of my beloved wife," Father said, passing his drink to a member of the staff. "*Que su alma descanse eternamente en paz,*" he added, making the sign of the cross as he wished eternal peace on her soul. "Cristiano de la Rosa did not kill my wife."

I covered my mouth to silence my gasp, but it didn't matter—everyone around me was just as shocked. What was my father saying? Why was he dishonoring my mother this way?

Cristiano looked out over the crowd. "It's good to be welcomed back to a home I have missed," he said. "But there's a more pressing matter to address." He held up a gun. The warm light of the chandeliers flashed off burnished gold, sleek silver, and milky pearl.

White Monarch.

I grabbed onto Diego's arm. "What's he doing?"

Cristiano handed it to my father, then disappeared behind the curtain. He returned dragging a bloodied-and-bruised older man whose hands were bound in front of him. He released the

man's bicep with a push, and he stumbled to the railing, next to my father. Blood soaked his light t-shirt.

Diego stepped backward. "Fuck."

"Who is that?" I asked.

"I don't know," Diego said without removing his eyes from the balcony. "Look away, Natalia."

"This *sicario*, who doesn't even deserve to be named, defiled and killed Bianca Cruz," Cristiano said, "and he is my gift to her family."

I covered my stomach. It wasn't possible. I'd never seen that man—

My father put the gun to the hitman's temple. To the thrilled screams and cheers of the crowd, he pulled the trigger and blew up his head like a firework.

NATALIA

My bare feet sank into the soil of my mother's garden as I emptied the contents of my stomach onto one of her rosebushes. Diego held my heels in one hand, dodging my wings as he tried to keep my hair off my face. Everything was a blur. I didn't remember screaming with the crowd, running out, or ripping off my mask and shoes.

"Careful for the thorns," Diego said about the bushes.

My eyes watered, blurring the roses' blood-red color. A man's head had exploded. His brains had splattered across the tarp. His body had crumpled at my father's feet. I held onto Diego's arm until I could stand without wobbling.

Loitering by the fountain, Tepic pushed his aviators to the top of his head and chuckled through the cigarette in his mouth. "You okay, Talia?" he asked. "What a show, eh?"

At least Diego still possessed enough compassion to look as ill as I felt, his face colorless and drawn. He smoothed my hair off my forehead gently but said to Tepic, "Shut the fuck up. Can't you see she's sick?"

"What's the matter, Diego?" Tepic asked, getting another cigarette and his lighter from his fanny pack. "You look like you've never seen a man's head blown off. Or blown it off yourself."

Diego rubbed the inside corners of his eyes. "Not in front of Natalia."

In front of me, my father had once dragged a drunk out of a restaurant by his hair for waving a gun near my family. My mom had told me to stop crying; that was how Papá handled his business. Dad had returned ten minutes later and ordered a towel and ice for his bloody knuckles followed by a slice of *tres leches* cake. Over the years here and there, I'd witnessed him knock his men around or order to have people "taken care of" and "made an example of." I was no stranger to the stories about him, either—like the one where Papá had supposedly addressed a package with an army general's fingers in it to the mayor and dropped it in a public mailbox.

I had always known my father to be feared, but to me, he was just Papi. Now, because of him, I'd seen a man's brains. I breathed through another urge to vomit.

Careful to avoid where I'd gotten sick, Diego stooped to pick up some of the butterflies that'd fallen out of my hair. "I'm sorry you saw that," he said to me.

"Sorry?" Tepic asked. "She just watched her father take the sweetest kind of revenge. Anyone who's lost a mother should be so lucky to witness what Talia just did."

"It should've been Cristiano," I heard myself say. It had been a long time since I'd wished death on him.

"Not if he didn't do it," Tepic pointed out.

I quelled my shaking and tried to piece together my thoughts. "There's no way he didn't," I said to Diego as he stood. "You were there. You saw. There has to be an explanation."

"I know. Come on out of the dirt," he said, extending a hand to me.

I took it, wiping my bare feet in the grass before I stepped over a row of tiny lanterns. Diego led me to the glowing fountain, set my delicate hair clips on the ledge with my mask, and helped me out of my wings.

"How is Cristiano back?" I asked. "And why does Father believe he didn't do this?"

“I don’t know.” Diego crouched to strap my shoes back on. “But I’m going to find out.”

I stood. “I want to hear it from my father.”

Diego pulled me into a hug, shushing me. “Just take a minute to calm down,” he said, rubbing my back. “Breathe.”

I buried my face in his chest, where it was familiar, where his shirt smelled like soap, suede, and cigars—where it was safe. Warm. I wanted to stay in his arms and pretend I hadn’t just watched my own father brutally murder a person. That Cristiano hadn’t just reentered our world. That everything I knew about my mother’s death hadn’t just been called into question.

How had Cristiano pulled this off?

How could my father shame my mother’s memory this way?

“I need to see my dad,” I said, disconnecting from Diego.

He held my elbow. “Not tonight, my love. You’re not even supposed to be here.”

“I don’t care.” I frowned up at him. “I want answers. I demand them.”

“Cool off. Let Costa do the same. Can you even look him in the eye right now?”

That hadn’t occurred to me, but Diego was right—even though I wanted answers, the thought of facing my dad made my stomach roil again. It would be too hard. Diego knew my mind better than I did in that moment, so I surrendered to the safety of his arms, deciding to wait until the morning to approach my father.

But I wouldn’t let him off the hook. Not for this.

I shifted my focus to the other side of the equation—Cristiano. Why was he back? Where had he gone? What had given him the confidence to return with a million-dollar bounty on his head?

“I didn’t even know Cristiano was still in the country,” I said.

Tepic tapped ash from his cigarette. “Me neither.”

“Who are the Calaveras?” I asked.

Diego and Tepic exchanged looks. “You mind if I smoke?” Diego asked me. “I could use one.”

“I don’t care,” I said, drawing back. “Are they a cartel?”

“Stay,” Diego murmured, one arm around my shoulders while Tepic passed him a cigarette. As he stuck it in his mouth and lit it, he nodded. “Calavera is a cartel that came to power while you were away,” he said, exhaling smoke, “and has been growing at an exponential rate. They move narcotics too, but they’re mainly in arms trafficking, like my father was, and extremely private—”

“As they are violent,” Tepic added.

“They’re like a gang of misfits from all over,” Diego said. “Tightly knit. Supposedly make big decisions as a whole. But also a little cultish over their leader.”

“Cristiano?” I asked. “And you didn’t know it was him?”

“I didn’t even know he was back.” Diego shook his head. “Their leader was anonymous until now. Most likely hiding behind a front to keep his identity secret.”

“Because of my family?” I guessed. “If we’d known where to find him, it would’ve been Cristiano up there on his knees just now.”

“I assume so.” Diego took a drag, squinting ahead. “The question is why Cristiano’s back, what he wants, and how he pulled this off. I have no doubt he’s filled Costa’s head with lies.”

“Even with that display, you still think Cristiano’s guilty?” Tepic asked.

“I don’t think it.” Diego pressed his lips into a thin line. “I know it.”

“You would too if you’d seen what we did,” I told Tepic. Cristiano had killed my mother. If I’d walked in a couple minutes earlier, I probably would’ve witnessed it. Why was Father denying it, and in front of such important people? “It must be blackmail.”

“Wow, Tali. Good thinking.” Tepic stopped pacing, looking from me to Diego. “That’s got to be it, hasn’t it?”

“I wouldn’t put it past my brother.” Diego nuzzled my hair. “He was always dangerous, but if the rumors are true, Cristiano became something else entirely after he fled here.”

I kissed Diego’s cheek. Sometimes I forgot that the day I’d lost my mom, he’d essentially lost a brother. “What rumors?” I asked. “The ones I heard were mostly in regard to his whereabouts.”

“It’s, ah,”—Diego grimaced—“not really suitable for your ears.”

“If you don’t tell me, I’ll find out another way,” I said. It brought me no joy to hear graphic details about the man who continued to haunt me, but if he was back in our lives, then I had to know what I was dealing with.

“The Calaveras aren’t like us,” Diego said. “We grew up here. Our home is our identity. These transients from all over the world are here to take advantage of our market.” He waved smoke from around my head. “They have no loyalty and no home—literally. Since they didn’t have a location to operate out of, they took a town about an hour north of here.”

“What do you mean they *took* it?” I asked.

“Like a hostile takeover. The Calaveras seized it to run their operations. Raped the local women, pillaged and stole businesses, enslaved their people.” Diego checked my expression. “Now, the whole town is walled off on three sides, and the back abuts a mountainside. Some sadistic shit goes on in the Badlands, I’ll bet.”

“Badlands?” I asked.

“That’s what some people call it. Rough terrain.” Tepic wiggled his fingers like a witch. “*Las puertas del infierno.*”

The gates of hell. That sounded familiar. Suddenly, the designation *Badlands* rang a bell. I'd heard it before but couldn't remember where. "He made his own town?"

"More or less. There are homes and businesses within its walls, but who knows what's true or legitimate. As far I know, nobody has ever escaped, nor has anyone infiltrated and lived to tell the tale."

"They're like a cult," Tepic said, waving his cigarette toward the house with a grimace. "Satanic rituals and shit. They eat snails, speak in tongues, sacrifice virgins, throw rotten fish at whores, that kind of stuff."

I widened my eyes. I'd heard a lot of cartel-related fact that better resembled fiction, but nothing involving any of that. "How do you know all that if nobody's ever escaped?"

"Who knows how rumors start?" Tepic said. "But I don't doubt what I've heard. I just feel bad for the women trapped there who—"

"Tepic," Diego warned. "Stop. You're scaring her."

I would've had to believe all that to be afraid, and I wasn't sure I did. Rotten fish? Speaking in tongues? It sounded pretty far-fetched. Although, I started to vaguely recall a news story from years earlier about a foreign cartel that operated differently than others. Its boss had a long, international reach and an even longer rap sheet. It'd claimed he'd never been photographed or named and had taken more bullets than he had drugs in his lifetime—and survived.

I stared at the fountain, comforted by the sound of running water. Why were women trapped, and how come nobody had freed them? Did Cristiano really have something to do with that? Until the dark day in question, he'd always been respectful of my mother, and she had cared for him. As a girl, I'd caught Cristiano watching me many times with something that'd felt akin to affection. Nothing that'd made me fearful. Maybe I'd just been too young to know better, though.

"What about the women trapped there?" I asked to stop my mind from filling in the blanks.

“It’s terrible, Tali, really,” Diego said. “You don’t want to know. It’s my father all over again, which is why I don’t understand how Costa could go into business with Cristiano. He represents the same things my parents did.”

“Human trafficking?” I asked quietly.

“It’s fucked up.” He knocked ash from his cigarette, looking somewhere over my head. “But not all that surprising, I guess. Cristiano and my dad are a lot alike, which is why they never got along.”

“The women are mostly foreigners if that makes you feel any safer, Tals,” Tepic said.

Who could feel anything but disgusted hearing that? My stomach churned. Had there ever been anything redeemable about Cristiano? Why had my mother not only taken him in, but, as I remembered it, treated him with tenderness?

“It makes *me* feel like shit,” Diego said, glancing down at me. “I don’t want you anywhere near him. If he ever gets you alone, you scream, hear me?”

I had screamed—and screamed and screamed. And nobody had been able to stop him. Not in my parents’ bedroom, nor their closet, nor the tunnel beneath it.

I removed my arms from around Diego, suddenly warm. “He can’t get away with this,” I said. “If any women, from my country or another, are being held by Cristiano, my father wouldn’t accept him back.”

“And yet it seems he has,” Diego said. “It’s just another business to Cristiano. He traffics some, and other women are there for him and his gang’s use.”

I couldn’t keep my disgust at bay any longer. Bile rose in my throat, even as I tried not to let my imagination wander down that path. This was the side of my father’s world he tried to shield me from, but I was in it nonetheless. Did that make me complicit? What about Diego? Could either of them even stop someone like Cristiano?

“Are you sure?” I asked.

Diego glanced at me and flicked his cigarette butt away. “Jesus,” he said, taking my shoulders to hold me at arm’s length. “You’re pale again. I told you not to ask.”

“It’s okay,” I said. These were things I had decided long ago I didn’t want to know about. But now that I *did* know, I was less frightened than I thought I’d be and more quietly enraged. What about the millions of women in my country who didn’t have access to the defenses I did? Who was on their side?

Cristiano had always been a calculating killer, that was no shock—but apparently, he’d grown into a disloyal degenerate, a callous crook, a master of mind games. Hades of the Badlands.

Diego massaged my shoulders. “Relax. This is not something you need to worry about. I will always protect my sun—without you, I’d live in the dark. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

“Cristiano can’t get away with all the things he has,” I said. What did he have over Papá? It had to be big for him to ignore the horrors I’d just heard. After all, he’d taken down Cristiano and Diego’s father for similar offenses. “He must have a reason.”

“Who, Costa? He has none. He’s lost his mind,” Diego said and gestured at Tepic. “¿*Tienes otro?*”

Tepic passed him another cigarette, then dropped his and used his heel to stamp out the butt. “I’ll see what I can find out from Barto and the guys.”

Diego nodded him on. “Go.”

I tried to wrap my head around why Papá would do this to us. To *himself*. Just seeing Cristiano brought back scores of memories better left to rest.

Had he manipulated my father? Or could there be any truth to his claims?

Was there even a sliver of possibility that Cristiano was innocent?

It was a thought I knew I should ignore, because if he was or wasn't, either answer would only incite more questions. And if my curiosity was an affliction, then my curiosity about a man like Cristiano could be of the fatal sort indeed.

NATALIA

Some details from the Day of the Dead eleven years earlier were hazy, and some crystal clear, but I'd never doubted that Cristiano had left my mother for dead and had been about to take off with our valuables.

As Tepic returned to the ballroom on a quest for information, and Diego removed his arm from me to light a fresh cigarette, I paced by the fountain and tried to figure out the riddle before me.

Cristiano had forgotten the duffel on the bed, but enough cash and jewelry had gone missing from the safe to set him up for a long time.

Then there was the fact that nobody else could've come or gone from my mother's bedroom that day without being seen. And that the mansion's security system, including the cameras, had been magically disabled, which Barto claimed could only be done quickly and by someone familiar with it. Cristiano, who'd been one of the only guards with the highest security clearance at the time, had known it intimately. Then, getting access to my parents' safe was nearly impossible—it would've taken someone close enough to the inside to find out the combination.

That was as far as I let my mind go. Whatever struggle had caused the tear in Mamá's dress and the bruises on her face—whatever had happened between the intruder entering the bedroom and me skipping in—I couldn't think of without

getting sick, so I never did. I knew it tortured Papá enough for the both of us.

And the final detail that didn't add up was the small fact that a *sicario* didn't kill of his own volition. He would've been hired. So if Papá believed Cristiano hadn't done this, then who did? Who had the hitman worked for?

Some of the more conspiracy-minded newspapers back then had speculated rival federations had done it instead of Cristiano, but growing up, I'd dismissed those theories without a second thought.

I stopped pacing. "Could any of this have to do with the Maldonado cartel?"

Diego frowned from a couple meters away. "Cristiano's return?"

"No. My mother's death."

"The Maldonados didn't exist back then." Diego sat on the edge of the fountain, placed his cowboy hat next to him, and scrubbed a hand through his disheveled hair. "They're newer. What do you know about them anyway?"

"Mostly what I've read in the news or what I overheard in the study the other day," I said.

"I thought you wanted to stay out of all this." He sucked on his cigarette, squinting at me as silky strands of his dark-cocoa hair fell around his cheekbones. "Yet as soon as you got here, you were already hiding in hallways like you did as a kid."

"I want to live a respectable and honest life away from all this, but that doesn't mean I want to be ignorant." I couldn't blame his quizzical look. When I was away at school and we spoke on the phone, I *was* ignorant. I'd ask about business because it was his life, but then I'd let him get away with cursory answers.

After my mother's death, I'd no longer wanted to hear about the things I'd sought to know growing up—the handshake deals made over caramel flan with men visiting from exotic-sounding countries. The foreign sports cars,

endless vices, and other spoils that came from feeding the world's various drug addictions. The lost boys of the town that the cartel took under its wing, protecting and feeding them while training them like wards.

Back then, I'd do more than hide. I would seek information, curious about the dangers I was always kept from. I'd sneak away from the house and ride my bike a few kilometers to the sprawling, private ranch house on our property that housed boys and men like Diego and Cristiano. There, they'd learned everything about the business—including how to protect and kill for it. From a distance, I'd been introduced to the different kinds of arms and how to carry them. Other things happened in those training camps too, but those I didn't stick around for. I hadn't wanted to learn what could be worse than death.

As far as I knew, the ranch house had been empty since Papá had traded all that for less violence, going from rival cartels' competition to their solution. They now paid him top dollar to move contraband across borders, and since he'd nearly monopolized the shipping market, he could be more discerning than most.

“My father can pick and choose who he associates with,” I said. “If he worked so hard to minimize risk and violence, why are we suddenly involved with two of the most dangerous cartels?”

“Calavera and Maldonado have nothing to do with each other,” Diego said, raising his eyes to mine.

“Are you sure?” I resumed pacing in hopes that moving would help the uneasiness building in me. “Maybe there's some connection between them.”

“I don't see how there could be. Maldonado is my thing. I brought them in.”

From what I'd heard in the office, it hadn't sounded as if Papá had been completely on board. “It wasn't my father's call?”

“I brought the contract to him once it had all been arranged.” The orange tip of his cigarette flared with a drag. “He would’ve said no otherwise. Your dad wants to keep doing things as he’s always done, but that’s dangerous.”

“Dangerous or wise?” I stopped in front of Diego and crossed my arms. “If it works, why tempt fate?”

“What do you think happens when a wild animal slows down to rest or to tend to his wounds, or if he gets sentimental about his prey—the way Costa has about Cristiano? Nothing good.” He put out the smoke on the ledge, picked up his hat, and leaned his elbows on his knees. “If you’re not moving forward, you’re going backward,” he said. “Adaptation is the key to survival.”

I could see Diego’s point. We’d done case studies in business school about insolvent companies—those that’d changed too fast, or in the wrong ways. Those that had been left behind.

“Why does adapting have to mean taking on more risk?” I asked.

“Working with the Maldonados isn’t any more dangerous than what we normally do—it just sounds that way because they’re ...” He scratched his temple. “Let’s just say they’re less forgiving than most.”

“What does that mean?”

“Can you come here, please?” He reached for me. “We don’t get much time together as it is. Why waste it on talking about stuff we can’t control?”

It was all I had wanted in the last year—to have Diego’s hands on me again. To be ignorant of the dark side of this business. This was exactly why I tried to stay out of these things. Now, I knew too much and had too many questions to overlook what was happening.

Not only that, but I couldn’t ignore how invested Diego was in the future of a cartel he was planning to leave behind soon.

I stayed where I was. “What does ‘less forgiving’ mean, Diego?”

He looked down at the hat as he turned it over in his hands. “They don’t do business the way your dad and his friends did. If they don’t like something, they get rid of it. They kill unnecessarily and without regard for the rules.”

“There *are* no rules,” I pointed out.

“Not true. As you know, up until the past decade or so, there was a code. There were *agreements*—like the one my family broke. But older cartel leaders are being replaced with ones who think they’re above the law of the land. With the Maldonados, there’s no justice—only the word of those in charge.”

Justice. In a strange way, it did exist in this world. I thought back to what Cristiano had said to me about justice and loyalty before he’d forced me down the tunnel. My father or his men would’ve killed him without trial based on the damning evidence they’d had. I could almost see Cristiano’s reasoning. If the Maldonados murdered who they wanted when they wanted, then that bred more distrust, disloyalty, and violence within their own cartel and amongst others.

“And you made a *deal* with them?” I asked, spinning the diamond on my ring finger. “What happens if you don’t deliver?”

“I will, Talia. I’ve done my homework. I’m talking over fifty percent more profit for maybe nine or ten percent more risk. How can I refuse those odds?”

“Because if there are no rules, how do you know when you’ve broken one? Or what they’re capable of?” I paused. “What *are* they capable of?”

“Things you’ve asked me not to tell you before.”

This was the kind of information I could never forget once I knew. And yet, if it involved Diego’s life, remaining in the dark didn’t feel like an option. I stilled my fidgeting hands. “I’m asking now. You’re caught up in this. So is my father. I want to know what happens if something goes wrong.”

“You’re overreacting, Tali. I’ve got everything under—”

He stopped when he picked up on my glare. “Life or death is overreacting?” I asked tersely.

Sighing, he looked away from me. “What happens if something goes wrong with the Maldonados? Death if they’re merciful. If not, it’s because they can do worse. Enslave a man to do their bidding, hold his family hostage, torture him by killing off his brothers, sell his women and kids.”

My heart rate kicked up a notch. It wasn’t as if I had no clue of the reach these criminals around me had. But it scared me that although Diego was most likely smarter than the people he did business with, he’d never be as ruthless. “You have to cancel the deal.”

He whipped his gaze to me, brows drawn. “I can’t do that, Tali. What’s done is done, and we need their business anyway. If this goes well, then an ongoing arrangement with the Maldonados would set all of us up for *life*.”

“What kind of life is it if you’re looking over your shoulder every day? If you’re never allowed to make mistakes?” I ran my hands over my face. “No amount of money is worth that.”

“You can’t even comprehend the kind of money I’m talking about.”

“I don’t *care*,” I said, throwing up my arms in exasperation. “This is exactly the life I don’t want—one I’m trying to help *you* escape. Why are you even worrying about an ongoing deal if you’re trying to get out?”

“I have to make as much money as I can before I leave,” he said adamantly, imploring me with his eyes. “When I get to the States, I’ll be back at square one. What will I do for work? I need a bank account with enough zeros to take care of you.”

“Diego.” I squatted in front of him, set his hat on the lip of the fountain, and took his hands. “That’s not how I need to be taken care of. I could have that life if I wanted it, but I don’t. I chose to leave, and I thought you wanted the same.” I

swallowed, searching his eyes. “Do you not want to come to California?”

“I do. I want that so much, but I have to know I can provide for you first. Whether you ask me to or not, it’s my responsibility as a man, and I won’t be happy anywhere if I can’t do it.” He moved some of my hair behind my ear and tilted up my chin. “It’s not just about the money. This first run will net me enough to come with you, and then you and I will be set until I get on my feet. But if it goes well, it’ll also secure the most profitable deal your dad has ever made. It’ll prove to your father that he can bring his business into the present, and ...”

“And?” I asked.

He looked at me with cinched eyebrows, as if in pain. Diego felt everything. I hated arguing with him, but it was important that he see that money and status meant less to me than being with him. I was tired of living a country apart.

He glanced toward the house, avoiding my eyes. “It’ll show your dad what I’m capable of. That I’m more than some lackey on his payroll. That I’m good enough for you and can care for you—not just financially, but in every way.”

“Oh, Diego.” I cupped his jaw, and he leaned into my hand. “He doesn’t doubt what a strong, smart, skillful man you are. He just doesn’t want me near any of this. It wouldn’t matter who you were.”

He put his hand over mine, turning his face into my palm to kiss it. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“All of this. Worrying you about Maldonado and Calavera. I’m sorry you had to see my fucking *pinche* brother.” He brushed his lips up my wrist and forearm, smiling against my skin when I shivered. “I know how those memories of Cristiano affect you,” he said softly, “but I’m not going to let him anywhere near you.”

Diego *didn’t* know. Not entirely. My nightmares were not limited to the horror of finding Mamá in a pool of her own

blood. Cristiano had taught me that the gilded fortress I'd grown up in wasn't as secure as I'd thought. He'd robbed me of my carefree childhood. I'd sat in the dark, my nine-year-old mind growing more and more paranoid I might never be found, trying to think of how I could reach the last rung of the ladder without the height or vision I needed. Even if Cristiano hadn't killed my mom, I didn't know if I could ever disassociate him with the fear he'd inspired or the lessons I'd learned too early in life.

Trust no one.

Never draw a weapon unless you meant to kill.

Loyalty didn't guarantee loyalty, even to your own blood.

Anyone, even the most loyal disciple, could turn.

And I had danced with him tonight, aroused by a possessive touch and menacing words that should've sent me running into Diego's arms. I could've screamed like I'd threatened—but I hadn't. What was wrong with me?

I stood, pulled Diego up from the fountain's ledge, and wrapped my arms around his neck. "Thank you for protecting me," I whispered as I brushed my cheek against his. "For wanting more for us. For taking a bullet for me all those years ago. I love you."

"I only wish I could do more." He slid his hands down my back, lowering his mouth but pausing before our lips touched. "I would erase that day for you."

I hugged him more tightly, breathing him in as he pecked me once. Twice. His tongue slid between my lips, tasting me. "My sweet Natalia," he said on a moan.

I loved how he said my name. Even as Diego and I had changed, as our relationship had grown and our devotion to each other had solidified, he continued to say my name the same way—as if he owned it. As if nobody else knew it like he did.

I deepened the kiss. The world fell away, and we were just two people in love who hadn't had enough chances to show it.

His hands moved everywhere—searching, finding, claiming. He cupped my ass and pulled my hips against his, and I groaned.

“God, I want you,” he said, his voice hoarse. “I don’t know how much longer I can wait.”

In that moment, I felt the same. I’d preserved my virginity for him—that part was easy. But keeping it *from* him? I struggled to be good. I wanted to do right by my faith, act with grace as my mother had, and be a woman she would’ve been proud of. But sometimes I wondered if it even mattered since I would marry Diego no matter what.

His hand dropped lower than it ever had, and the wrongness of being groped outside where anyone could happen upon us made something pull deep in my tummy. From behind, Diego cupped me between the legs and held me in place as he ground against me, rubbing a sensitive spot that made me moan up at the sky. “Oh, *god*. That ...”

“Hmm?” he asked, running his tongue along the shell of my ear.

“That feels so good,” I breathed.

“For me too. I’m getting hard, *Tals*.”

Desire washed over me. This was still new territory for us. It wasn’t easy to talk dirty to my best friend over the phone when we’d only ever stolen a few kisses here, a few intimate touches there.

“Tell me something too,” he said in my ear. “Are you wet?”

I curled my fingers in his hair, taking two handfuls of honeyed downy strands. I hadn’t known a question like that would excite me so much. “I think I am now,” I said.

He smiled against my cheek. “You’re pulling my hair.”

“Oh—sorry.” I released my fists.

“I don’t mind it. How about you?” Keeping one hand under my ass, he tugged on my curls with the other, causing a butterfly clip to fall out. “Or is it too much?”

He'd been gentle, but I bit my lip as a passion we rarely got to explore warmed the space between us. "It's not too much."

His eyes darkened. "Tell me you love me, Talia."

"You know I do."

"But *say* it, *princesa*." He growled a little, in a way I'd never heard from him. "When I ask, that means I want to hear it."

I was taken aback by the tremor of frustration in his voice, especially because I couldn't think of a time I'd ever denied him anything. That was one thing he and I had never experienced—a chase. We played the games that had been forced upon us by keeping our romance a secret, but maybe the hungry look in his eyes now meant Diego also wanted to hunt a little.

What would happen if I didn't give him what he wanted every time he asked for it?

"No," I said softly.

"No?" He pulled me against him once more, bringing me to the tips of my toes. "Don't keep your love from me, Talia. Ever."

He sounded angry, but his excitement was growing more and more obvious against my stomach. And something about refusing him was equally as exhilarating for me.

I shook my head.

"You don't love me?" He nipped my earlobe. "All I want is to take care of you. Protect you. Love you. And you'll deny me?" He took my face with one large hand, his grip rough but his dancing eyes boring into mine, challenging me in a way that sent a thrill down my spine. His hand under my buttocks crept lower and locked between my legs. He had me trapped, my face secure, while his fingers were centimeters from my most intimate spot. "Tell me how much you love me," he demanded. "I won't ask again."

With footsteps at Diego's back, I jumped back as my heart launched into my throat. We'd let down our guards, which might've made our fondling more thrilling, but that was never smart around here. I hid behind Diego, adjusting my neckline, even though we hadn't been doing anything.

Diego turned just his head to the side. "Move along," he called over his shoulder. "Pervert."

No response. I looked around him and swallowed at the skull in the shadows. One that both arrested my gaze and inspired my instinct to flee. Cristiano had found us vulnerable, away from the team that protected us. I wasn't even sure if Diego had his gun. Cristiano could shoot me. Take me. Hurt me.

But would he? Who was he now? How was he different from the protector I'd grown up with? I couldn't even be sure that version of him was the same man who'd murdered my mother.

If he had at all.

Was I really questioning what I'd seen?

God. Cristiano hadn't even spoken yet, and he was playing mind games with me. His composure and coded words from earlier put a match to the embers of curiosity I continually tried to extinguish.

Diego turned, standing protectively in front of me.

The figure stepped into the moonlight. "You were going to take her out here for everyone to see," Cristiano said with an inviting gesture. "Don't let us interrupt."

I shivered at the thought, wondering how long he'd been watching.

Diego put a hand back to stop me from reacting. "What the hell are you doing here?" he asked Cristiano.

Even Cristiano's shrug was threatening. "I came outside to say hello to the brother I haven't seen in years."

"You know what I mean," Diego said. "Why are you in town?"

Cristiano turned his glare on me. “It’s time for you to go home.”

And leave Diego alone? “No.”

“You haven’t changed.” Cristiano’s eyes scanned my body, lingering on my breasts and hips. “And in some ways, you’re entirely different.”

“Fuck off,” Diego said, moving to block me from Cristiano. “She has nothing to do with this.”

“So send her away, as she doesn’t seem to listen to me. Never did.” A whistle sounded over our heads, and I jumped with its visceral *bang*. A burst of shimmering gold lit up the sky. Cristiano shook his head at me, as if disappointed. “I can see your fear from our last encounter has worn off, Natalia. What a shame.”

I bit my tongue to stop from retorting *what a shame* it was that he’d lived to see anything at all. It was enough that Diego and I had his attention; it wouldn’t help to anger him.

“Tell me,” Cristiano said, moving to see me better. “Have you learned how to shoot a gun yet?”

When you aim, kill. “Hand me yours,” I said, “and let’s find out.”

“*Cuidado*, Talia,” Diego said through his teeth. “Careful. You don’t know what he’s capable of. Go back to the party. I’ll find you.”

I kept my eyes on Cristiano as he stayed on me. “What if he tries to hurt you?” I asked.

“Not unless the traitor strikes first,” Cristiano said. “Go back to the house, and I promise you my brother’s safety.”

A second firework sailed through the night sky and exploded blood red. “He’s not a traitor, and he’s not your brother. I don’t know what my father wants with you, but you’re not family.”

I immediately wished I’d kept my mouth shut. Cristiano came closer, tilting his head as his black eyes took me in. “Natalia Lourdes,” he said, drawing out my full name in a way

that made it sound sinful, like wisps of breath against a neck that didn't belong to him, and dangerous, like sharpening a knife.

With a sudden movement from Diego, Cristiano turned his head, focusing on his brother. "If you're going to draw your gun on me like you did back then," he said, "aim well. You'll only have one shot, and this time, you'd better be willing to die for it."

Behind him, the shadows stirred. Two shapes with two sharp pairs of eyes took form. Were these the misfits Diego and Tepic had spoken of?

Before anyone could make a move, voices from the lawn made me turn.

Barto approached with two members of our security team. He looked between Cristiano and Diego. "Costa wants to see you both in the ballroom. Now." Barto turned to me. "And you, Natalia. What are you doing here?"

"I was just taking her back to the house," Diego said.

Barto frowned at him, shaking his head. "You'd do better with the truth, Diego."

"Meaning?"

"Costa's likely to be less angry that she snuck into the party on her own than that she came to spend time with you."

Diego licked his lips. "Had I been *informed* we were hosting a known murderer and rapist, I would've obviously sent Tali straight back."

Cristiano barely noticed the insult. Instead, he was watching me. Listening. He'd always been that way, taking in everything around him, processing it like a computer, keeping his observations to himself—to what end, God only knew. Was he plotting ways to terrorize me more? Reminiscing about the life he'd had here?

Fantasizing about dancing in dark corners?

Or worse?

A small part of me couldn't reconcile the human trafficker to the Cristiano I'd known before he'd fled. He'd been next to impossible to get to know back then, even putting aside our fourteen-year age difference. But having only ever been under his protection growing up, I'd never seen him as the vicious killer everyone else had.

Until that day.

Barto nodded at the brothers. "Costa is waiting. Tonight, he's not feeling patient."

Cristiano and Barto exchanged an unfriendly look, which reminded me that before all this, they'd been close. They had come into the cartel around the same age and had risen in the ranks together. Barto, an important member of our security team even then, had been away on business with my father during Cristiano's attack on my mom. Like Cristiano, Barto never said much, but I knew he constantly beat himself up over it.

Barto had lost not only my mother—a member of the family he'd been hired to protect—but Cristiano too, his closest friend and comrade.

"Send someone back to the house with Talia," Diego told Barto.

"It's okay," I said, even though Cristiano still hadn't removed his eyes from me. "I don't need an escort."

As Cristiano passed me on his way toward the house, he stalled. "I'll see you to your bedroom if you like," he said so only I could hear.

The suggestive offer, not made out of graciousness, made me think of our tango. Or perhaps it was more appropriate to call it a mind game than a dance. It was becoming clear Cristiano liked to play. With Father demanding his presence and Barto watching on, I was safe. Instead of cowering at his suggestion, I called his bluff and offered my elbow as I would to an escort. "Let's go."

"Let's go indeed," he said with a hint of a smirk before he walked off with Diego and Barto.

Apparently, my discomfort amused him—but so did my fight.

That didn't surprise me.

Cristiano would pinch a butterfly's wings together just to watch her struggle.

NATALIA

Aromas of coffee and cinnamon-raisin toast preceded the *pop* of a toaster as I entered the open, airy kitchen. Papá sat at the breakfast counter with a newspaper as Paz filled a mug with spicy *café de olla* from an orange enamel pot.

“*Buenos días, Natalia,*” Paz said as she served him.

“*¿Cómo está?*” I greeted, pulling my damp hair into a ponytail so it wouldn’t get my t-shirt wet. Despite my shower, I still had flecks of glitter embedded into my hairline and arms from the night before.

Paz responded, nodded at my father’s half-eaten plate of eggs and *pico de gallo*, and asked if I was hungry. When I told her my stomach was still uneasy from the night before, she got me a warm can of Coke Light.

“Good morning, *mi amor.*” My father held up the front page to show me a picture of himself with the governor and his wife. Lower down the page, Papá shook hands with the head Calavera himself. I couldn’t even bring myself to think the devil’s name. “You wouldn’t believe the morning’s headlines,” he said. “Everyone says it was a great party.”

No mention of the murder within its walls? Whatever “journalists” had been in attendance should be stripped of the designation.

“*¿Hace mucho calor, no?*” he asked as Paz set down his toast.

With his complaint about the heat, she set to work opening the windows.

Papá sipped his coffee as I stared at his scabbed knuckles and slightly swollen right hand, remembering how he'd gripped the gun. I knew he'd killed before as sure as I knew my own name. That was no surprise. But to see it with my own eyes, and so carelessly, like plucking an orange off a tree or tossing aside a piece of junk mail. No warning or word of acknowledgment.

A breeze passed through the room, alleviating the heat. "I saw what you did," I said.

"Hmm?" He looked up at me. "What?"

"Last night, at the party. I was there."

He stared at me a moment, then stood and carried his silverware and plate of eggs across the kitchen. He threw them in the sink with a clatter. "Goddamn it, Natalia."

"Why?" I asked.

He turned to the maid as she tried to salvage the cracked dish. "*Gracias, Paz.*"

She hurried from the room.

When it came to me, my father's bark was much worse than his bite. I stood my ground. "How could you let that monster back into our lives?" I asked.

"I was going to talk to you today. I didn't want you to find out that way," he said. I knew his scolding frown all too well. "I told you not to go to the party. You defied me."

"If I hadn't, I'd be reading lies for headlines." I picked up his picture with Cristiano and thrust it toward him. "My father, shaking hands with my mother's murderer? How were you going to explain this?"

"With the truth." He came back for his coffee, took the paper from me, and looked at the photo. "Cristiano is innocent."

“It’s impossible.” My voice broke, but I did my best to swallow down my grief. If I got emotional, his instinct to protect me would prevent him from sharing anything beyond the fundamentals. “Cristiano killed her, stole from us, and left me in a tunnel to rot.”

“I should belt you for doubting me. My father would’ve,” he said without any conviction. From my grandfather, that threat would’ve scared me. He’d had a temper. My dad wasn’t like that, though.

“Is he blackmailing you?” I asked.

He put down the newspaper and slid his toast toward him. “No—”

“Papá.” I pleaded with him. “Tell me the truth. What does Cristiano have on you?”

“Nothing.” Leaning one hand on the counter, he took a bite, then tossed the remaining bread back on the plate as if he couldn’t stomach it. “And spreading a rumor like that makes me vulnerable, so watch your mouth.”

“What is it then?” I asked, undeterred.

He sighed into his coffee. “If you’d let me get a word in, I’d tell you. You’re like your mother, storming in here yelling at me for things I didn’t do.”

“You shot a man in the head,” I cried. “I saw it.”

Even as his color drained, he straightened up. “Cristiano has proven his loyalty, Talia. For the last decade, he’s done more than built himself a strong, successful cartel—”

“How can you say that?” I fell onto a breakfast stool. “I’ve heard the kind of ‘business’ he runs, and it’s vile.”

“His business isn’t anything you should worry about. All you need to know is what Cristiano has done for your mother. For *us*.” Birds chirped outside, and a sparrow landed on the sill. Papá shooed it away. “When Cristiano left here,” he continued, “he ruthlessly and relentlessly hunted your mother’s murderer. He made it his mission to find the motherfucker who entered my house—my *bedroom*—and took

almost everything from me. I've had dark moments since learning this. I question Our Lady of Guadalupe for letting this stranger into my home, but I thank her you didn't come into the room any earlier."

With my elbows on the counter, I put my head in my hands. I didn't know what to think. "Who—"

"Let me finish. Cristiano delivered the *sicario*, forced him to his knees, and made him beg me for his life. It took a lot of time and resources to find that man you saw up there. Shooting him in the head in front of everyone was probably the kindest way to kill him."

If Father believed that, I didn't doubt a lack of mercy had been shown behind the curtains. It explained his battered hand this morning—and the man's swollen face and blood-soaked clothing. "And you believe it?" I asked.

"I heard it from the rat's mouth."

"Of course the hitman would say anything Cristiano told him to if he thought it might save his life." I nervously *pinged* the tab of my soda can. "Cristiano wants to clear his name and stop running."

"He doesn't need to be protected from me. He's built himself a cartel that surpasses my own. He has his own success, money, and status now. His network spans the world, and he could've built his business in Colombia, Russia, Bolivia—anywhere. But he returned."

He could've been anywhere, but he was here, turning my world upside down. I gritted my teeth, wishing he'd stayed lost. "Why?"

"Because this is his home. There's greater risk for Cristiano to return than to stay hidden. *Dios mío, me duele la cabeza.*" As he grumbled of a headache, he went to the fridge and removed leftover tostadas and a small *talavera* bowl of salsa. "If I hadn't believed Cristiano about the *sicario*, I wouldn't have hesitated to execute him on the spot. I almost did."

“Why even stop to let him explain?” I asked. “And what lies could he have possibly given to change your mind?”

“Cristiano managed to track down some of your mother’s stolen jewelry. Each piece told its own story, and each ending eventually led him one place—to this *sicario*.”

“It was jewelry *Cristiano* took,” I said, not bothering to keep my cynicism from my voice. “He didn’t need to look further than himself.”

“If he’d taken the jewels, he would’ve sold them to survive, wouldn’t he?”

“Yes,” I agreed. “No question he did.”

“And then tracked all of it down again?” Papá shook his head as he stuffed his face with chicken and refried beans. “They were one-of-a-kind pieces,” he said as he chewed and swallowed. “The diamonds, rubies, and other precious gems *Cristiano* returned to me have unique settings I designed for your mother myself. He wouldn’t have kept them when he had nothing and could sell them.” He wiped his mouth with a paper towel. “The hitman was hired, Natalia. Someone wanted my wife dead.”

Hearing it in such certain terms, I touched the base of my neck. At the time, Costa Cruz had been a feared drug lord. It would’ve been no small thing to hire a hit on a family like ours. I only knew of one other cartel who’d tried that, and the de la Rosas no longer existed, considering the leaders were dead. There was something as sinister about that as there was *Cristiano* killing the woman who’d acted as a second mother to him. “Hired by who?”

He massaged his temples with one hand. “A rival cartel, apparently.”

“But why? Who? And how did the man get in? How would he have disabled the—”

“Slow down, Tali.” He shut his eyes and took a breath. “Your old man can’t drink like he used to. I have a hell of a hangover.”

I went to a junk drawer, found painkillers, and tossed him the bottle. “Which cartel?”

“They’re no longer in existence.” He fiddled with the childproof cap until it popped open. “I’d deal with them if I could, but they’ve disbanded already.”

“How convenient you can’t confirm Cristiano’s story.” I got him a water bottle from the fridge. “It could be an elaborate scheme.”

“To what end?” He shook some pills into his palm and tossed them back. I placed the water in front of him, but he washed down the drugs with a gulp of coffee. “I know you were young and may have forgotten,” he said, “but your mother trusted Cristiano above anyone except me, and he cared for her. You too.”

I hadn’t forgotten. Cristiano had been her protector, but that didn’t mean her instincts couldn’t have been wrong about him. “He knew how much you loved her, and he wanted revenge for what you did to his parents.”

“It wasn’t revenge. Take my word for it.” He replaced the cap on the pill bottle and looked at it pensively, as if lost in a thought. “It was a confusing time. I fell prey to my rage,” he said finally. “I needed someone to blame, and Cristiano had fled, so it was easy to convince myself he’d run out of guilt. There was no other possibility, no evidence but what I had in front of me, and what you and Diego saw. But looking back, deep down, I questioned how it was possible he’d done what he’d been accused of. To assault Bianca and steal from us—it was out of character for him.”

“But he did that for a living—he was a *hitman*.”

“For us. Not against us. Never did he so much as raise his voice toward either me or her.”

My throat thickened. Why couldn’t he recognize that his devotion to Cristiano might be misguided? I could admit there was a *sliver* of possibility another explanation existed for that day—but to blindly trust him after all this time? “I know what

I saw. I know what felt. I see it in my nightmares, Papá—*please.*”

“I’m sorry, *mija.*” He reached out for my hand and squeezed it. “It must be hard to see him again, and maybe I should’ve warned you, but I was trying to—”

“Protect me, I know.” I took back my hand and covered my face. “He put a *gun* under my chin. He *shot* Diego. He left me in a *tunnel.*”

“He knew I would find you,” Dad said. “He was desperate. He understood I would’ve had no choice but to kill him with the evidence I had at the time.”

“I don’t know if I can believe any of it,” I said, my throat thick as I tried to control my emotions. “I don’t trust him.”

“You don’t have to. You just have to trust me.” He returned to the sink for the clay pot and refilled his drink. “I’m sorry for what you saw last night,” he said with his back to me. “If I’d known you were watching ...”

“You wouldn’t have done it?”

He turned his head over his shoulder, giving me his profile. “I would’ve had you removed from the party.”

I swallowed. He didn’t regret it.

A question I’d been fighting since the night before struggled to surface. If *I’d* believed that was the man who’d brutally attacked and killed my mother, would I have been as horrified?

If it’d been Cristiano up there with his hands tied and face beaten, would I have tried to stop it?

Or would I have reveled in his murder?

“You were there with Diego last night?” he asked.

Papá had heard my questions—now I’d have to answer some of his. I’d implicated both Diego and myself. “Yes.”

He dumped sugar into his coffee. “I’ll have to have a little chat with him then,” he muttered.

“Have the chat with me,” I said. “I want to talk to you about Diego anyway.”

“Don’t bother.” His spoon *clinked* the sides of the mug as he stirred. “My answer is no.”

“*Papi, por favor—escúchame.* You can’t tell me what to do anymore. You have to listen.”

“*Bueno.* Go ahead,” he said, with an inviting gesture. “But it will fall on deaf ears.”

“I love him.” He froze, his mug halfway to his mouth. “Don’t look so surprised,” I said. “You know I do.”

He lowered his drink, staring at me. “I know you *think* you do.”

“Why do you doubt it?” I asked. “Diego has been there for me practically since I was born. He takes care of me. He treats this family and me with respect. He *loves* me.”

“He is dangerous, Tali. Everyone here is. I wouldn’t let you date the fucking chief of police.”

I looked out the window. Two sparrows played in the terracotta birdbath Mom had hand-painted brown and green to look like a tree. Though the landscapers maintained it along with her garden, much of the paint had chipped off. “He’s not like the others,” I said, turning back. “Diego is sensitive. Sweet. Creative.”

My dad seemed to think a moment before he burst into laughter. “My sweet girl. You’re smart like your mother. She could teach me about everything from Shakespeare to how to have patience. She’d philosophize on the nuances of morality and ethics, then help me devise the best plan of attack against those who’d wronged me. She’d explain expressionism versus impressionism in a way that made me care.”

I had not fully gotten to know that side of my mother. By age nine, I was only beginning to learn the many facets of her personality. But I still understood her innate warmth and intelligence exceeded that of most people. “Do you still think of her every day?”

“What a question, Tali. Of course I do. The day I don’t is the day I never think again. But her heart was too pure,” he continued. “She could never pull one over on me. When it comes to character, that’s where *I’m* smart.”

“What are you saying?” I asked, nesting my hands together in my lap. “You doubt Diego’s character?”

“No—he has been a good addition to the cartel, and faithful to me. But I wouldn’t call him ‘sensitive’ or unlike the rest of us. He is very much an active part of this world.”

“Then why would he want to leave it?” I asked.

My father drew back, looking amused as he dipped crust from his toast into the salsa. “Does he?”

“That’s what I want to talk to you about.” I wrung my fingers. “Diego’s and my plans.”

“Your plans.” He sighed, reclining a hip against one counter. “Which are ... ?”

I stilled my hands. This was why I was here. Asking my father to accept us might not be an easy conversation, but it was a necessary one. The thought of leaving here knowing Diego would follow gave me strength. I steeled myself with a breath. “I want you to let Diego leave the cartel so he can come to California and be with me,” I said. “I—we—want to start a new life there. Together.”

He took the sip of coffee I’d kept him from and said simply, “It can’t be, Natalia.”

Expecting he’d say that, frustration rose in me quickly. I set my jaw. “You’re not even listening. He’s only dangerous *here*. With *you*. Once he’s away from all of this, he’ll be free to start over. To reach his full potential.”

“As what?” He set down his mug and rapped his knuckles on the counter as he intoned, “This is in his *blood*, Tali—it will follow him wherever he goes. He can run away from México, but not from this life.”

“Then maybe it’s better to have him by my side,” I argued. “Diego is a natural protector. He confronted Cristiano when he

could've run away. He knows how a criminal thinks and won't let anything happen to me."

He chuckled. "I'm impressed with your efforts. That debate class has paid off. But my answer is no."

My head began to throb. I slid out my ponytail holder and scrubbed my hand through my hair. "I know Diego is an important part of your business, but he isn't happy—"

"Maybe that's what he tells you, but it isn't so," Dad said, crossing his arms. "There's no escaping this life for me or him. What would he do in California? Bag groceries? That's all he's qualified for."

I frowned, stung and perplexed that he was around Diego nearly daily and somehow didn't see what I did. "He's smart and resourceful," I reasoned. "He can do anything."

"That means nothing to a man like him. We're cut from the same cloth. Here, he's respected—a businessman, a top advisor. In the U.S., he'll be powerless. He will be nothing."

"He'll be with *me*," I said, rising from the stool. "That's all we care about."

"Diego will never have a normal life. And I know him better than you—he doesn't *want* one."

"He does," I shot back. It earned me a look that made me lower my voice. "You're wrong. He's not made for this world. You're the only thing keeping him here."

Again, he laughed, and it echoed flatly off the tile floors. "You couldn't be more wrong," my father said. "Diego's in too deep. People's fortunes, futures, and *lives* are in his hands. Once a man gets a taste of that kind of power, he can never walk away from it. Not even for a woman."

"But—"

"Enough." He pressed his mouth into a firm line. "Your safety is my number one priority, and Diego can't offer you that. A peaceful, simple life would be death for him." He turned to dump the rest of his toast into the sink. "Go back to

school,” he grumbled. “Meet someone who can offer you more. Someone worthy.”

“He is.”

He turned abruptly. “Diego has been an asset to me in many ways,” he said evenly. “He’s shrewd, and a better businessman than most—even without an education. He’s good, but for you, good isn’t enough. I want someone great.” He paused as he balled and flexed both hands. “These things are not to be taken lightly, Natalia. I loved your mother very much. There is no higher honor in my life than to be called her husband and your father.”

“Then you’re taking that honor from Diego.”

He finished off his coffee and placed it in the sink too. “You will thank me one day.”

My face heated. Did he think he was *God*? That he could control love? That he had any right to decide who was great and who wasn’t? “I’m sorry you don’t see the truth about us,” I said, “but you can’t stop me from loving him. I’m going to marry him someday, with or without your blessing.”

He leveled me with a glare. “No.”

“*No?*”

“Marriage is sacred. You will do it once, and only once,” he said, raising his voice. “You’re too young to know how you feel about him.”

“You were twenty when you married Mami,” I accused. “She was even younger.”

“What your mother and I had was one-of-a-kind. Special. By comparing it to you and Diego, you make a mockery of my marriage.”

As he spoke, frustrated tears heated the backs of my eyes. I lowered my gaze to hide them from him. What else could I say to convince him Diego and I had something real? Papá was leaving me no option but to find a way to *show* him.

“When you talk about building a life with someone,” he said, “it should only be with the person you’re going to die

next to.”

Shiny black and orange specks blurred on my arm. I fruitlessly tried to pick off the glitter. “Diego *is* that person.”

“I don’t want you around him anymore. He’s already let things get too far with you. You’re on the verge of getting your heart broken, and if that happens, I’ll have to kill him. Do you want me to kill him?”

I choked back a sob. It was an empty threat, I knew. But for him to react so vehemently was like a slap in the face. I had no misconceptions that he’d disapprove, but he didn’t *actually* think he could forbid me from Diego—did he? “He’s my best friend,” I said. “I don’t want to stay away.”

Papá sighed, then came around the counter and pulled me into his arms. I fought him at first, but his comfort was exactly what I needed just then—even if he was the cause of my distress. “I’m sorry.” He kissed the top of my head. “But nobody risks their life for puppy love.”

“Mami did. She cut off her family knowing the danger it would put them in to be associated with the cartel, and she traded small town security for—for *you*.”

“And look what it got her, eh? Is that the fate you want?” He took my shoulders and peeled me off. “You have much to learn yet about manipulation, Talia. It won’t work on me. I’m your father.”

“Please,” I begged as he stomped away in the direction of his study.

He turned back. “Diego is this life no matter where he lays his head at night. You might think it’s romantic what your mother did for me, but let me tell you—the pain of losing her plagues me every day. You might think you’d die for him, but I won’t permit it.”

“It doesn’t matter what you want,” I said. “At the end of the day, we’re adults. And you can’t keep us apart.”

On his way out of the kitchen, he snorted. “Watch me.”

My father's blessing meant as much to me as his opinion. He was *the* rock in my life. The one who'd done everything in his power to protect me, and not just physically. After Mamá's death, I could sense how badly he'd wanted to shut down, but he'd pushed through as a newly single parent—for me.

But Diego had been there too. He'd proven his love through a lifetime outstanding by me. I had to believe with all of my heart our love was enough for him—even if my father didn't.

NATALIA

It was a good thing Diego had described his home to me in such detail—it made it easier to find and show up uninvited. A large concrete wall enclosed the property, but the custom look of the wood-and-steel gate and the natural stone driveway gave away Diego’s eye for detail.

I rang the buzzer at the end of the drive. Diego had told me not to come, but if I didn’t take things into my own hands, I’d never get time alone with him. On top of his work obligations, now I couldn’t even spend time with him at home, where Papá might see.

After a few moments, movement in the top right corner of the wall caught my attention. I waved into a security camera. With some yelling inside the house, I heard a door open on the other side of the gate.

“*Por Dios*, Natalia Lourdes,” Diego called to me. The gate rumbled as it slid open. He stepped out with a scowl—slightly disheveled and totally sexy in a cream-colored Henley and camouflage cargos. He glanced both ways, pulled me inside, and typed a code on the keypad inside the wall. The gate stalled, then creaked as it reversed closed. “What the hell are you doing here?” he asked.

His exasperation was nothing after what I’d endured from my father the day before. I crossed my arms. “We have to talk, Diego.”

Where our compound was a more traditional Spanish-style hacienda, Diego’s was sleek and modern. The single-story

house was a third the size of Papá's—not even counting our hundreds of hectares of land—but still a mansion for these parts with stacked stone columns, a flawlessly smooth, white exterior, and manicured bushes around the yard. He led me up the walkway to the front door. Floor-to-ceiling glass windows showcased a cloud-like, puffy leather couch, flat-screen TV, and brass-and-mirrored coffee table atop a neutral geometric-patterned rug—plus the armed men who guarded all of it.

“You can't just show up, *mi amor*,” Diego said, opening the door. “That's one way to get a bullet in your head.”

“I tried texting, calling, e-mailing—everything,” I said. “I miss you, and I'm tired of sitting around watching the clock tick down.”

“I know. I had to get rid of my last burner.” He shut the door behind us and dismissed a guard from the entryway. “I've been trying to make it to the house to see you. Because *obviously*, I miss you too—but it's no excuse for putting yourself in danger.”

He was right. I was being stupid for love like my mother. Knowing I'd anger my father wasn't enough to keep me away, though. He wanted to separate us, but that didn't mean he got to. Nobody was immune to love or resistant to the blindness it could cause. I shrugged helplessly. “I'm in love's grip.”

Finally, he opened his arms, and I walked into his embrace. “I'm in *your* grip,” he said, smoothing his hands down my backside. “I like this summery dress. Where are you supposed to be?”

“Shopping with Pilar.”

“And how did you get here?”

“A cab. Security will be looking for me.”

“*Ay*, Tali. If you don't get me killed, you'll give me a heart attack. I know Pilar is your best friend, but she's weak. She will give you up.”

“She won't,” I said. “She's easily spooked, but loyal as they come.”

I needed to let her know I'd made it safely. We'd spent the morning in town, browsing the shops before an early lunch. We'd attended a service at the church—a gothic-style structure modeled after Spanish cathedrals with Oaxacan *cantera verde* stone and a domed bell tower. Saints looked over the altar from panels of floor-to-ceiling stained-glass windows, centered by a Virgin Mary. It was one of the only places that reminded me of my mother without inflicting pain.

There were *some* things I missed about Mexico. Grand parades and festivals that shut down the town. Unbreakable loyalty that put family above all else. Goods made by hand with love and attention to detail I could never seem to find in the States.

And Diego, of course.

I craned my neck to look around the place where Diego both lived and conducted business. I hadn't been anywhere the cartel operated aside from home and had only seen photographs and heard descriptions of safe houses, warehouses, and labs. "Can I have a tour?"

"You shouldn't be here," he said. "Someone could tell Costa."

"So send them away. You're the boss, aren't you?"

He shook his head slowly. "I can't. There's too much work to be done."

I played with the placket of buttons at his collar. The ribbed style of shirt only seemed to highlight his tanned neck and muscular pecs. "I've been worried."

"I know, but this is different than sneaking around your own property in a flimsy costume."

My mouth dropped open. "It wasn't *flimsy*. Tepic didn't even recognize me."

He reproached me with a frown not unlike the one Papá had worn at breakfast the day before. "Ditching your security detail leaves you defenseless against anyone who might be looking for vulnerabilities in the Cruz family."

I blinked up at him. “*You* said we no longer have enemies. Most of our rivals were incarcerated, overthrown, or died, and we never made new ones because we’re no longer competitors.”

“Don’t question that the Maldonados—or other cartels we do business with—know who you are. Our enemies won’t come looking for weak spots or collateral *after* a fuck-up—they already know who and where to strike to deliver the most pain.” He glanced through the entryway windows. “We especially have to be careful now that my brother’s back in town.”

“What happened when you and Cristiano met with my father during the party?”

Diego inhaled deeply. “How about that tour?” he teased.

I smiled. Because I was also curious about the house, I let him change the subject—for now. He walked me through the living area to a state-of-the-art kitchen with glossy, handleless cabinets and a black-quartz island square under a rack of hanging copper pots and pans.

He pulsed his eyebrows at me. “Want to see the bedroom?”

“I thought you’d never ask.”

We linked hands, and he led me down a long hall to the master, a large but mostly bare room with a dresser under a TV, a walk-in closet, and two bedside tables. Dove-gray sheets rumbled his king bed. “Well, now I know—you sleep on the left side,” I said and grinned. “I sleep on the right.”

“Match made in heaven,” he said. “If I’d known you were coming, I would’ve made the bed. Nobody ever comes in here but the maid, and I gave her two weeks off for Easter.”

“I don’t care,” I said, looking over my shoulder at him as I walked farther into the room. “I like tidying. I’ll make the bed when we live together.”

“When we live together, there’ll be no point in ever making the bed.”

My cheeks heated at the fantasy of waking up next to Diego each morning, lounging, laughing, and making love until we were forced to get up. “I can’t wait,” I murmured, stopping at the nightstand on the left side. It had only a phone charger, two business textbooks, and a picture frame. I picked up a photo of Diego and me smiling at my parents’ pool. “I remember this day,” I said. “It was the first time I’d ever worn a bikini.”

“I remember it too, believe me. The bikini best of all.”

I half-gaped at my white bathing suit, grateful it at least wasn’t sheer. Diego hadn’t yet grown into his broad shoulders, and his chest was smooth, not muscular like now. “How old were we here?”

“You were fourteen,” he said.

“Which would’ve made you ... a cradle robber.”

He laughed. “You know it wasn’t like that. You were like a younger sister to me. I remember that bikini because I almost punched my friend in the face for staring at you in it.”

I glanced back. “You never told me that.”

He stuck his hands in his pockets and shrugged. “And I never told you that when you came home from school two years later, every *puto* within a kilometer radius was talking about the beauty you’d become.”

I wrinkled my nose. “You’re exaggerating.”

“I wish I were. I’d hear them talking about you. ‘*Qué linda, Natalia Cruz,*’” he mimicked. “That was when I knew.”

I bit my bottom lip. “Knew what?”

“I felt more than just protective,” he said. “I was jealous.”

At times it felt as if Diego and I had talked about everything under the sun. That didn’t mean I didn’t love hearing all of his thoughts when it came to him and me. “But no other boys ever even *looked* at me,” I said.

“I made sure of it.”

A pleasant warmth crept over me. With his golden-brown hair in disarray and amusement dancing in his gemstone-green eyes, it was sometimes hard to reconcile the boy he'd been with the man he was now. He'd always been older to me—I'd turned sixteen only four years ago, when he was twenty-three. But he seemed much more comfortable in his skin now at twenty-seven.

"I remember being sixteen and already *crazy* over you, but I thought you'd always see me as a little girl."

"I did," he said. "Until I didn't."

"I'll never forget when you finally began to notice me," I said. "I used to sit on the sidelines and watch you and the guys play outdoor basketball. Then one day, I showed up, and you walked off the court to come talk to me. You'd never done that before."

"The guys teased me for it," he said. "I didn't care. It meant they knew you were mine."

"I never noticed anyone else," I said, glancing back at the picture. "But you know that. When we took this, you were both a best friend and like a brother to me—I didn't really know what was happening, but I was falling in love."

"Then why'd you leave me?"

I set down the photo and perched on the bed to face him. "The same reasons I always get back on the plane. I don't want to end up like my mother. And I don't want to lose anyone else. Papá never gave me a choice anyway. He *still* isn't giving me one."

He furrowed his brows. "Did you talk to him about us?"

"Yes. He doesn't understand that we're serious, no matter how I explain it."

Diego pursed his lips. "I warned you he wouldn't."

"But he wouldn't hear *anything*. He doesn't even want me seeing you anymore, like at all. Not even while I'm home."

He ran his hands over his face and looked to the ceiling. "Let me guess—I'm not good enough for you."

“According to him, nobody is—you know that. It’s not personal.” I stood and crossed the room to him, wrapping my arms around his middle. “It doesn’t matter what he thinks, though.”

Diego lowered just his eyes to look down his nose at me. “You know it does. He’s your dad.”

I shook my head hard. “Not enough to keep me away from you. I’m more worried about other things he said.”

He nodded once to prompt me. “Like what?”

I rolled my lips together, trying to think of how to put it in a way that Diego wouldn’t get defensive. “Papá thinks men who’ve only known this life can never leave it behind. Even if they want to.”

“Of course he’ll say that,” Diego said. “It’s to plant a seed of doubt in your mind about me.” He used both hands to smooth my hair back from my face. “Is it working, Tali?”

I hadn’t thought of much since yesterday except the new information involving my mother’s death, and what Dad had warned about Diego’s entrenchment in this world. I’d fought my father on each point, but with some distance, I worried his arguments might hold some validity. “Could you be happy in Santa Clara with me?” I asked. “It’s nothing like here.”

“My love ...” He held my cheeks and pressed his lips to my forehead. “Are you *seriously* asking if I can endure a life where I’m not in danger of being killed—or killing—each day ... *and* I get to sleep by your side each night?”

I smiled a little. “It does sound ridiculous when you put it that way, but still. What would you do for work?”

“That’s why this Maldonado deal means so much to me,” he said. “The money I’ll make off it will set us up for a long time, Tali. And if your father makes an ongoing arrangement with them, even if I get a small percent for brokering the contract—it will be enough that neither of us will even have to work again.”

“But I don’t want that,” I said. “I want an honest job and clean money. I’m not working this hard for a business degree

I'm not going to use."

"It's not about the money, Natalia. It's important to me as a man that I provide for you. That means gifting you the freedom to follow your dreams, whatever they are, free of any financial burden."

"And what about your dreams?"

"I'm afraid to have any until I know I can." He smiled sadly and hugged me to him. "Once I pull this off, I can do anything. Including marry you. I want your father's approval, believe me—it would mean everything to have him see me as a suitable son-in-law. But at the end of the day, once I can support us no matter what, Costa doesn't *have* to agree."

I shook my head. "I could never abandon him," I said.

"Then we'll stay in California or wherever you want, but we're old enough to decide for ourselves. He'll have to learn to accept our plans if he wants you in his life." He smiled. "Because I'm not going anywhere. You will be my wife."

Excitement tickled my tummy the way a sip of champagne fizzed in my mouth. The idea of walking down the aisle to him made me giddy.

"Let's finish this talk over food. I'm starving." He pulled me by my hand. "Did you eat?"

"I had lunch with Pilar," I said as we walked back through the house. When I noticed Diego humming Led Zeppelin, I gave him a quizzical look.

"I've had it stuck in my head since this morning," he said. "There's this new drug in development, and it's called *Escalera al Cielo*."

"Stairway to Heaven," I translated.

"*Sí*." In the kitchen, he disappeared into the pantry. "You remember that guy Juan Pablo Perez?"

"The really good chemist from Nogales?" I asked as I sat at the dining table.

“He’s more than really good. He’s one of the top scientists in the country now. Probably the world.” He returned and handed me a Coke Light. “Tepic told me yesterday he invented a sedative with tetro-something. It’s a neurotoxin that comes from ... *¿cómo se dice? Botete?* What’s the word in English?”

“Puffer fish,” I said and tabbed open my soda.

“*Sí*. Anyway, it’s poisonous to ingest, but Tepic says in the right dosage, it’s not fatal.”

I sipped my cola. “Why would anyone want to take that?”

“Because, as Tepic put it,” Diego said, gesticulating with flourish to imitate Tepic, “it’s supposed to be a high more *addicting* than coke. More *life-altering* than ayahuasca. More *euphoric* than ecstasy.”

I giggled, raising my soda can. “But is it more satisfying than Coca-Cola?”

“Apparently.”

“But why the name?”

“Juan Pablo says it’s a round-trip ticket to heaven.” Diego came and hugged my neck from behind. “It’s peaceful. Euphoric. It starts with tingling in the lips ...” He kissed the corner of my mouth, then brushed his lips over my neck. “Then moves down to your fingers and arms. It puts you in a trance, and ...” He tapped me once between the breasts with his fingertip. “Slows your heart ...” He waited several seconds, then tapped again. “Like that.”

I put my hands on his forearms, keeping him close. “That sounds dangerous.”

“That’s the price for a high like no other.” He kissed my cheek and returned to looking in the fridge.

“And with the wrong dose?” I asked.

“What?”

“You said with the *right* dose, it’s not fatal. What happens if Juan Pablo gets it wrong?”

Diego leaned out from behind the refrigerator door and cut his finger across his neck. “*Te mueres.*”

“Death. It’s literal then—a stairway to heaven.”

“He wouldn’t put it on the market until it was safe, but I’ll be honest. *I’m* not about to risk it.” He shut the fridge door and grabbed a mango from a fruit basket. “We don’t have shit to eat.”

I toed off my flats and pulled my foot onto the chair to hug my knee. I fixed the skirt of my dress even though I wore boy shorts underneath. “Are you going to tell me about the meeting you and Cristiano had with my dad? I talked to him the next morning.”

Diego picked up a small knife from a drying rack on the counter. “How much did he reveal?”

“Everything, I hope.” If there was more to the story my father had shared, then Papá probably didn’t know it. I picked invisible lint off my dress. “He said Cristiano found and returned jewelry that the hitman had sold. And that the *sicario* admitted to being hired by another cartel.”

Diego rested his hip against the counter. “That’s what he told me too.”

“Do you believe it?”

“I ... I’m skeptical. I’m not sure how—” He blinked at me and shook his head. “I don’t know why I’m making excuses. No—I don’t buy the story. I don’t trust Cristiano, but I’ve never known Costa to be gullible.”

“Exactly,” I said. “My father *isn’t* gullible. He’s trusting his instinct with the evidence he has.”

“Something he’s known for,” Diego pointed out. “Strong intuition. But I’m afraid he’s too close to this.”

Like my mother had been? She’d trusted her life in Cristiano’s hands and had lost it.

“You heard what Costa said at the party—the prodigal son returns.” Diego balanced the mango on a plate and sliced a

clean curve along the skin. “I think it’s obvious he has never been a good judge of Cristiano’s character.”

“What if Cristiano’s telling the truth, though?” I asked. “Why would he come back knowing my father’s been hunting him?”

“It’s been years. Maybe he thought the old man had softened.”

“Papá made it sound as if it took Cristiano that long to track down the jewelry and the hitman.” If that was true, I could see why my father had said Cristiano had proven his loyalty. But I’d spent so long hating him, acknowledging anything positive about him felt foreign. And disloyal to my mom.

Diego’s knife slipped, and I jumped as it slammed the plate. He glanced at the table, barely noticing, as if lost in a thought. “Whatever Cristiano’s reason for returning,” he said, “it must be worth risking his life.”

“But if the Calaveras are as successful as you say, what could he want from us?”

Diego resumed skinning the fruit. After a few moments, he responded quietly. “Once a man gets a taste of power, his need for it surpasses hunger. It’s a sickness that demands more.”

Papá had said something similar about Diego. Because he was *somebody* in this life, he couldn’t ever be *nobody*. “What’s the *more* that he wants?”

He twisted his lips. “He was Costa’s star quarterback, as the *gringos* say. Cristiano never failed at any task. Other cartels tried to lure him away, but he stayed true. He was the only one who could talk back to your father and not get punished for it.” Diego gently separated the mango’s skin, but his knuckles whitened around the knife handle. “Maybe Cristiano thought he’d one day partner with Costa—or even take over the cartel.”

Picturing Cristiano at the helm wasn’t that hard to do. He’d worked side by side often with my father and had sat with us at the family dinner table far more than anyone else in Papá’s

business. “If that’s true,” I said, “then Cristiano probably felt he lost all that when he had to flee.”

Diego nodded. “And now he wants it back.”

Even if Cristiano hadn’t killed my mother, he’d been blamed for it. What did an accusation like that do to a person? He’d had eleven years to nurse his grudge. I’d never forgotten what he’d said to me before we’d descended into the tunnel: “*Look what loyalty got me.*” Those weren’t the words of someone who wanted to be accepted home. They were those of a man who felt he’d been wronged.

Certainly Cristiano’s definition of loyalty had changed that day.

And that made him dangerous.

Diego raised his voice as he ran the garbage disposal. “Do you know the real reason for the nickname *El Polvo*?”

The Dust. That was what some had called Cristiano when he’d worked for my father. “Because he arrives on a cloud of dust, delivering death before the dirt clears.”

“That’s what people say, but no.” He flipped off the disposal and washed his hands. “It’s actually because of how he executed his first kill.”

“How?” I asked.

“It’s gruesome.” He dried his hands on a dishtowel. “On second thought, maybe I shouldn’t say.”

At this point, I was in too deep not to ask. My curiosity was being stoked at every turn and fighting it just made my imagination run wild. “Tell me,” I said.

“He got a bucket of sand from the desert,” Diego said, rubbing his palms together. “Then tied up a man twice his age and poured it down his throat until he choked to death.”

I gripped my neck, suddenly unable to breathe. “No.”

Diego nodded. “I’ve seen him do it. No screaming that way. No blood. No marks. And the bonus of a slow death ...”

My nostrils flared as I inhaled. I felt that sand in my throat, strangling me. Death by torture—that was worse than death itself.

“After the party, I started looking into the Calaveras more. I’ve heard all kinds of inhumane things.” Diego brought the plate of fruit to the table, removed his shoes, and sat across from me. “Apparently they have a soundproof dungeon where they keep one body part from each person who has betrayed them.”

I stopped the question on my tongue—why. *Why* was a dangerous word. I didn’t want to know. Dungeons and soundproof rooms and body parts could only mean bad things. Despicable, torturous things. But what was worse—to know the truth, or let ignorance leave me vulnerable? Where Cristiano was concerned, I never wanted to be in the dark again.

“What else have you learned?” I asked. “And don’t tell me not to ask. I can handle it.”

He shifted in his seat. “The worst, I guess, is abducting children to do his bidding.”

As horrifying as that was, my father had taken in Diego and Cristiano for similar reasons. They had food and a place to sleep at night, but also an obligation to the cartel that they could never escape. “Is that different than what you guys do?” I asked.

“The kids in our cartel are like family. Your father never treated us like slaves. I’m talking bigger stuff. The Calaveras have gone as far as to purchase an entire shipment of children for labor.”

I recoiled, clamping a hand over my mouth. What even *was* a shipment of children? And how did someone *purchase* one? Bile rose up my throat, and I pushed the mango slices away. “What ... but how? How can he get away with that?”

Diego ran his sock along my inner calf. It was a small gesture, but still comforting. He lowered his voice, leaning in although we were alone. “Cristiano is powerful. He has even

the most pious of government officials in his pocket and within Badlands' walls are all kinds of businesses, big and small. From *supermercados* and hardware stores to drone security centers and freight shipping offices.”

“But shipping is your business,” I said. “Isn’t that stepping on your toes?”

“We own ports and plazas and have arrangements all the way from individual fishermen to fleet management companies, which reduces our risk.” He ate a piece of fruit. “Cristiano invests but also has solutions in-house—”

“*Con permiso, señor.*” A boy who couldn’t have been more than sixteen stood in the doorway. “*Hay un problema.*”

Diego nodded as he wiped his fingers on his pants. “Speak.”

“Tepic is trying to reach you. It’s, ah ...” He glanced at me with anxious eyes. “*Es importante.*”

Diego stood and kissed the top of my head. “I’ll be right back,” he said, taking out his phone. “Feel free to snoop around the kitchen—unless it’s not as much fun when you have permission?”

I stuck my tongue out at him as he left, then texted with Pilar to update her.

By the time Diego returned, I’d finished all the mango. “Sorry,” I said as he stayed in the doorway, typing something into his phone. “I guess I was hungry after all. Want me to cut another?”

He glanced up but looked past me, staring off as if he hadn’t quite registered that I was there.

“Diego?” I asked, sitting up straighter.

He blinked, and recognition crossed his face. “What?” he asked. “Did you say something?”

“What’s the matter?” I got up and went to him. “What was the problem?”

He ran a hand through his hair, then looked at his cell. “Ah, it’s nothing, but ... I have to get back to work.” As soon as he stuck the phone in his pocket, it started to ring, and he took it back out. “I’ll have someone take you home.”

“I can get a cab.”

“Hmm?” He checked the screen and ran a hand over his mouth with a curse.

“You’re getting pale,” I said. “What’d Tepic say?”

“I have to take this, Tali. Don’t get a cab.” He kissed me quickly on the lips, then retreated. “Sit tight, and I’ll send someone in to drive you.”

“But—” He was already halfway out the door. “When will I see you next?” I called.

“Soon, *mi amor*. I’ll be in touch.” As he exited the room, he answered the phone with, “Jojo? There’s been a theft.”

Despite his unusual behavior, my shoulders relaxed with a small degree of relief. Stolen goods didn’t sound like much to be concerned about when a phone call could mean anything from a kidnapping to a RICO charge to the death of a family member.

I put my shoes back on and sat to wait for a ride, feeling slightly comforted.

As far as bad news went, I would take a theft over the alternative any day.

DIEGO

Our waitress looked between my brother and me in the low light of a steak restaurant, trying to decide which one she liked better. It'd been a while since we'd been sized up that way. Women had started comparing Cristiano and me once I was old enough to get female attention.

"Brothers?" she asked, placing Cristiano's mezcal on the table.

Don Costa sat back in his dining chair, reveling in the show. "What gave it away?" he asked her.

She twisted her red lips at Cristiano, her eyes glimmering. Apparently, she'd chosen him, not that I cared. With a long nose and features that didn't quite register as feminine, she was no Natalia. "The height," she answered. "Dark hair. Same smile. You look a lot alike, but there's also something very different about you."

"What do you suppose that is?" Costa asked Cristiano.

Who gave a shit? I checked my phone for news from Tepic. We'd been in constant contact with the increasingly dire events of the past couple days, but it'd been a few hours since I'd heard anything.

I prayed that was a good sign.

"One of you is lighter." The waitress returned her eyes to me as she served my tequila. "Must be the eyes."

"Or Diego's soul isn't as charred as mine," Cristiano said with a half-smirk. "Yet."

She laughed. “Enjoy. I’ll be back soon to take your orders.”

When she was gone, Costa looked me over. “You like her?” he asked me. “We can send a chopper back for you tomorrow if you want to stay the night in the city.”

I bit my tongue to keep my temper in check. Anything to keep me from Natalia. I unfolded my napkin onto my lap. “No, thank you.”

“All right then.” Costa leaned his elbows on the table. All mirth drained from his features as he lowered his voice. “You have fucked us, Diego.”

We’d taken a helicopter all the way here, to an exclusive restaurant that topped the city’s tallest building, for him to say that. Two tables away, Mexico’s attorney general dined with his wife. At the bar sat a rep for one of Bolivia’s most pervasive cartels. *Comandante* Trujillo laughed with cronies across the room.

It was no accident that Costa, Cristiano, and I were showing our faces here tonight.

“Two stash houses were hit in two days,” Costa said. “Millions worth of product stolen. What do you have to say, Diego?”

No excuse would do. I hadn’t slept much and needed to return home to help prepare the next few deliveries, but instead, I was here, putting on a show. “It can only be explained as bad luck,” I said.

My brother picked up his drink. “Two direct hits less than forty-eight hours apart? Nothing to do with luck. You have a leak.”

“Unlikely.” A rat inside the walls would fall on my shoulders, and having a solid team I could trust was one of the things I prided myself on. “My men wouldn’t do that.”

“Until they would,” Cristiano said.

I looked to my brother. Over the last decade, I’d worked side by side with Costa to strategize and build a more

advanced tunnel system, to secure long-term relationships with border agents, to arrange reliable shipping via land, air, and water in all corners of the Americas, and more. Cristiano hadn't been there for any of it, so why was he here now?

"How much is gone?" Cristiano asked.

"We're still within reach of what I promised the Maldonados," I said, "but that means we have to be especially careful going forward. No hiccups at the border."

"There are always hiccups at the border," Costa said. "You know that better than anyone, Diego. When have you ever gotten every last kilo across? It can't be done."

Costa spoke with a smile for anyone who might be watching. Rumors were likely starting to circulate, and the first sign of trouble would only breed more of it. Our current clients would pull their cargo until they heard more. A broken link in our system would expose us to weakness. And most importantly—the Maldonados would start asking questions.

Questions they wouldn't like the answers to.

We were here tonight to reassure those around us that we weren't worried, and to crush any rumors that might start circulating about our business or our relationship with Cristiano.

"We have some leeway still," I said, massaging my eyes as they burned from lack of sleep. "I just have to take extra precautions with the transport."

"That's not acceptable." Costa struggled to keep his voice level, but anyone paying close attention would see the tension in his posture. "Failure to deliver means more than retaliation. It's complete obliteration."

That wouldn't happen. If I'd thought there was a possibility of it, I never would've made the deal. I'd even accounted for bad luck. With the odds I'd calculated, doing business with the Maldonados had been a no-brainer. A little risk was good, but there was a point where it became reckless, and we hadn't reached that. I knew my business in and out.

Still, I paired a long sip of tequila with a quick prayer. “I’ll handle it.”

“Did you see yesterday’s news?” Costa asked. “A potential witness in the latest case against Ángel Maldonado was found at the top of a pyramid.”

I frowned. “A pyramid?”

“*Of human bodies,*” he said. “Every member of his family from Chihuahua to Oaxaca.”

There was a time when that mental image would’ve made my stomach churn. Now, gruesome death was sadly routine.

“This happened while the witness was under twenty-four-seven government protection,” Cristiano added. “That’s not the Maldonados handling a problem—it’s a clear message to anyone thinking of flipping.”

I wasn’t flipping. I was costing the Maldonados money—equally bad if not worse.

With a vibration in my pocket, I put down my drink and read Tepic’s text: *Emergencia*.

Shit. What now? Forcing my shoulders down, I excused myself and dialed Tepic as I wound through the tables toward the windowed perimeter of the dining room.

“Diego,” Tepic answered breathlessly. “Have you talked to Jojo?”

“I’m still in the city with Costa.” I stopped at a floor-to-ceiling glass wall overlooking the city. “What is it?”

“An explosion at the Juárez-El Paso tunnel.”

I closed my eyes and clenched a fist. *What the fuck?* That tunnel had been a million-dollar construction in itself, not to mention a crucial channel into the States. “Tell me that’s the only news.”

“No.” He hesitated. “Mike and Felipe were inside. And they didn’t make it.”

I looked down, massaging my temples with one hand. I was no stranger to losing people on my crew, but it never got

any easier. It was personal. Mike and Felipe were more than workers—they were friends. I refrained from making the sign of the cross only so I wouldn't draw attention. "This wasn't an accident," I said.

"No, *patrón*."

"What happened? How much did they have with them?"

After some static on the line, Tepic said, "I'm finding out the exact amount—"

"How much?" I repeated.

"Jojo says they were mid-delivery. Some made it but not all. Five, maybe six containers gone."

"*Put a madre*," I said under my breath. "Make sure every border agent on our payroll knows we have no margins. Pay them more if you have to. And get *every* man we have guarding *every* stash house."

"Some are en route to Guadalajara to meet with Nuñez's guys."

"Bring them back. We need all hands on deck." I glanced at the table to find Cristiano watching me as Costa picked a cigar from a box the waitress offered. "Keep me updated," I told Tepic and hung up.

The cityscape glowed against a starless night sky. I tried to figure out how to break this to Costa. This wasn't human-pyramid bad, but now we'd hit our absolute limit. That was a serious problem in itself made worse by the fact that whatever was happening, it was calculated. And it was in front of Cristiano. Or because of him?

He'd been back less than a week, and things we're starting to fall apart on the most important deal I'd ever made. Natalia had drawn the right conclusion—Cristiano had lost the only life he'd known when he'd been forced from the compound. A life he'd felt he'd deserved, even if it'd been built on betrayal. And now he was back—but *I* was the one who had Costa's trust.

Was my brother here to earn it back?

And how would he regain it?

I didn't doubt he had come home with a plan. Did the Maldonados somehow play into it?

I pocketed my phone and returned to the table. There was no use in drawing out bad news, so I resumed my seat at the table and dismissed the waitress.

"What is it?" Costa asked, puffing on his Montecristo. "I was about to order."

I placed my elbows on the table, leaning in. "A tunnel has been compromised at the border," I said.

Costa nearly choked. As he coughed, smoke billowed around him, shrouding his reddening face. As I sensed his temper mounting, I glanced around to remind him we had onlookers.

When he'd calmed, at least in appearance, he spoke. "We're under attack."

I nodded. "Yes."

Costa looked to Cristiano. "It has to be one of the Maldonado cartel's many enemies who don't like the idea of us working together. Don't they know fucking with us means severing ties to our network?"

"I can find out." Cristiano spun his glass on the table. "But right now, you need a plan."

"Damn right we do." Costa scrubbed a hand over his face and pulled at his long chin. "What are you thinking?"

Why was he looking to Cristiano for guidance? How easily they fell into old patterns. After our parents' murder, Costa Cruz had set us up at the ranch house on his compound, far enough away that gunfire wouldn't draw attention, but close enough that the main house was only a short drive. At the ranch, Cristiano had been fed choice food, armed with the finest "toys," and boarded in a private room while I'd shared everything with the others adopted by the cartel.

Costa and Bianca Cruz had favored Cristiano up until her *untimely* death. But now, I was the one who ate at Costa's

dinner table many nights. I had over a decade on my brother of unwavering loyalty to Costa. Of standing by his side to build a business with limitless potential—and profits. And of being there for Natalia whenever she needed me.

Failing the Maldonados could take all of that from me. And if my instinct was right—Cristiano knew it.

“I can still salvage the shipment,” I interjected. I couldn’t dwell on what was gone. I needed to protect what remained. “We won’t exceed the Maldonados’ expectations as I’d hoped, but we’ll still be within the percentage we promised.”

Costa raised his cigar to a comrade across the restaurant. A signal that we had things under control.

But over the past two days, we’d lost more than just control.

“How close?” Costa asked.

“Some of the drop was made.” I looked to the ceiling to subtract what we’d potentially lost and the containers that had made it. “If we move everything left, we’re likely still within a percent or two of what we guaranteed the Maldonados would make it across the border.”

“So you need a ninety-nine percent success rate for what’s left.” Costa set his jaw. “Not *one* seizure at the border. It can’t be done.”

“It can if I move slowly, carefully, and strategically,” I said.

“You’ve run out of time for that,” my brother said. “You’re being targeted, and you need everything in the States immediately.”

Cristiano had to comprehend the scope of that operation, even for a company in supply chain management. To mitigate risk, product was stored all over town, then moved in small batches across the border, mostly by individual vehicles. “I can’t just send it across all at once,” I said.

“And what if another stash house falls tonight? Tomorrow?” Cristiano asked. “You’d be a dead man walking.”

You, and everyone associated with you. Including Costa.”

I pulled at my collar feeling suddenly parched. The situation was dire, yes, but Cristiano was just trying to rattle me. “That won’t happen,” I said after gulping some water. “I’ve called in all our security and alerted them to the gravity of the problem. It’s all under guard.”

“By men who have inside information about where everything is kept,” Cristiano pointed out.

“*You* have inside information,” I shot back at my brother. “And you were the last to show up around here. So how the hell do I know you’re not behind this?”

“*Tranquilo*, Diego,” Costa warned. “Calm down.”

Cristiano took a slow sip of his mezcal, watching me over the rim. The Cristiano I’d known had never touched alcohol and wouldn’t have cared enough to distinguish top-shelf tequila from sludge. Then again, I’d never seen him in a suit until his return, either, and definitely nothing near the fine, custom-made ensemble he currently wore. What was the point of a gangster like him in a bespoke suit that’d surely be ruined by the blood of his enemies? He could show off all he wanted, but while some of us did what was necessary to get by, Cristiano thrived on being a natural killer.

“I’ve spent the past decade trying to get back in Costa’s good graces,” Cristiano reasoned. “Why would I immediately turn around and jeopardize that?”

“That’s what I intend to find out,” I said.

The corner of Cristiano’s mouth ticked. “There’s no ruse. I can tell you the truth of it. It’s that I’ve missed this—strategizing under fire. Enjoying a meal with the great minds at this table. Spending time with *mi familia*.” He said *family* with an edge that Costa seemed to miss. That, or he didn’t want to see it. Cristiano looked between both of us. “It has been too long.”

“It has,” Costa agreed.

I bit my tongue. What Cristiano missed wasn’t family—he’d given that up long ago. It was the prestige and power he

could gain by partnering with Costa.

Prestige and power I would earn by pulling off this deal.

“Your brother is right,” Costa said. “You need to get every last kilo over the border as quickly as possible.”

That was easy for Costa to say. He had nothing but constraints to contribute to the process. He was asking for complete accuracy on an impossible schedule. It wasn't as if he'd be down in the trenches with us. “Even with a full crew, I don't have the manpower,” I said.

Cristiano drank some mezcal and studied his glass. “I do.”

Of course he did, but I wouldn't allow him to insert himself in my deal. “I'll make it work.”

“Then at least let me try to reason with the Maldonados,” Cristiano said. With his elbow resting on the back of his seat and a passive expression, he could've been discussing anything from wine varietals to horse racing.

“Why would that make any difference?” I asked.

“We have history,” he explained, “and they need my guns more than I need their money.”

As Cristiano and I locked eyes, his plan began to take form before me. His timing *wasn't* a coincidence. Cristiano wanted in on this deal. But if I knew him, it wasn't about the money. He wanted the credit. By saving *my* Maldonado deal, *he'd* be the hero. He'd win back Costa's favor. And he'd undercut me in the process. Everything he wanted with one fell swoop.

“I can't guarantee anything,” Cristiano continued, “but perhaps it'll help ease the sting if I tell them they might not get the results they were promised.”

The results *I* had promised was what he meant. Results that were challenging but should've been attainable. Unless someone with a motive to bring me down had interfered.

Costa nodded along as if Cristiano spoke the word of a patron saint. “That's a generous offer, but a last resort,” Costa said. “I'd rather not get the Maldonados involved until we

have to. We'll take you up on help consolidating what's left, though."

"I'll make some calls," Cristiano said. "Get your most trusted men together, and I'll get mine. We can store the product in one of my warehouses. Nobody will know the location, and if they do, they wouldn't dare cross me."

Cristiano was hijacking my deal in front of my eyes. How would it look to Costa that I needed to be rescued? How would it look to *Natalia*? With a deep ache in my jaw, I unclenched my teeth. "You expect me to trust my livelihood to you and your unhinged *cabrónes*?" I asked.

"Cristiano is offering to help," Costa said. "Where is this warehouse?"

"At the border of town where the desert starts," Cristiano said and glanced at me. "Nothing to do with the Badlands if that's what you're referring to."

"Sounds like a plan," Costa said. "With both cartels working together, we can pull this off."

"With our two cartels working together," Cristiano said, returning his gaze to Costa, "we can pull *anything* off."

I narrowed my eyes on him. *Aha*. There was more to it than I'd thought. The Calaveras had their own solutions for trafficking, but if they joined forces with us, they could move double the volume *and* restrict their competitors from our services.

But that would mean a merger—one I'd be excluded from.

And not just any merger, but one between the de la Rosas and the Cruzes.

Anyone at the helm of both the Calavera and Cruz organizations would be afforded a power few others could match. Did Cristiano feel he was owed that after the decade he'd lost? Was it not enough that he'd taken our parents from me? Now he was back to take the rest? If so, his endgame was bigger than I'd guessed.

He had reason to push me out ... but no—it was impossible for him to know that. I was nothing if not careful and always had been. Cristiano would've gone to Costa by now, and this conversation would be happening atop a fresh grave.

“*Perdón.*” Cristiano rose from the table with his cell phone in hand. He started to turn but paused. “You may want to consider putting Natalia on a plane, don Costa. In case things get any worse.”

I wondered, not for the first time, why Cristiano was concerned with Natalia at all. I hadn't missed the way he'd looked at her at the costume party, first predatorily from the balcony, then later, the way a man regards a woman who has something he likes.

I recognized his interest in Natalia because I shared it as well.

She was more than an interest to me, though. I loved her. She was my weakness.

Did we share that as well?

Did Cristiano have a tender spot for her that he might not even be aware of ... until someone stepped on it?

As Cristiano left the table, Costa turned to me. “*Are* things going to get worse for my daughter, Diego?”

He said everything he needed to in that one question. It had nothing to do with how the Maldonados could hurt her, but how *I* could. “Natalia is my best friend,” I said carefully. “I'd do anything to protect her.”

“That won't be necessary. The best thing you can do is put her safety above all else and release her.”

I didn't have to be explicitly told to stay away from her—that had always been implied. But it was the closest Costa had come to acknowledging my relationship with her. I wasn't going to get his blessing. Which turned the question from how to get his approval ... to whether I needed it.

“So I ask you again,” Costa said. “Are things going to get worse for Natalia?”

I shook my head, looking into my glass. “No, *señor*.”

“Good. As for your brother,” he said. “He wants to help.”

“And you don’t wonder why?” I asked.

Costa sucked his teeth, charting Cristiano from across the restaurant as he made a call on the patio. “No. Because he is grateful I have welcomed him back to his home,” he said. “Finish your drink. Then go and express your gratitude for your brother’s offer to help.”

Cristiano wasn’t here to help. He was here to hurt. Or worse ...

No doubt he thought I’d turned my back on him eleven years ago and blamed me for everything he’d lost. It occurred to me that I hadn’t even considered the worst Cristiano could do.

It was true that by saving my Maldonado deal, he’d get credit for it, win back Costa’s favor, and potentially replace me. I’d assumed that was the fastest way for him to get everything he wanted.

But perhaps I’d been looking at the wrong side of the coin.

He could sabotage the deal instead.

If it failed ... the Maldonados would see to my demise quickly and swiftly. Cristiano wouldn’t even have to get his hands dirty.

And I’d be removed from the picture entirely.

NATALIA

Art belonged to my mother. Trying to read brushstrokes or create my own wasn't something I understood. I learned about the world from books or travel, found nature by cantering a horse, and studied history by passing on legends through *corridos*—Mexican ballads.

Art, to me, was living in the world, not observing it. Floating on my back in the ocean on a hot day, finding shapes in the clouds. My aunt's laugh when my nephew took a bite straight out of his birthday cake and came up with a face full of icing. Art lived in people.

It was the way one look from Diego could warm me to my core.

My mom's studio spanned the top floor of the house. With a glass dome in the center and large corner windows facing southwest, it had the best light.

When I was younger, I'd hide in here to see how long it would take Diego to find me. We'd dip our hands in paint and make colorful prints on the tarp Mamá had put down. But most commonly, we'd look at the constellations with a telescope, our own private planetarium.

All the paint and easels had been removed, but the telescope sat on the deck. Tonight, I opened the doors and windows and watched the sun set while I waited for Diego.

When tires crunched dirt, I jumped up and leaned over the rail. A convoy of three cars kicked up dust as they wound up the driveway and parked out front. Cristiano and Diego got

out, moving almost lethargically up the walk until my father stepped out of the house to meet them. It was strange, after all this time, to see Cristiano and Diego casually standing next to each other. I leaned out farther to try to piece together their conversation.

“... forty-eight hours.”

“No word ... Maldonado.”

“*Antes de que salgas ...*”

Before you leave? My heart dropped at the thought of Diego disappearing again when I hadn't seen him in three days. As if sensing my anguish, he looked up, met my eyes, and winked discreetly. I watched until they moved inside. As tempted as I was to run downstairs, I waited where I was, knowing Diego would come to me.

Paciencia should've been my second name—it was all I seemed to do. Wait. Bide my time. Bite my tongue. A sitting duck, as Americans said.

I killed time by peering through the telescope, but it wasn't dark enough to see much yet. Eventually, the door to the studio opened. I sprang to my feet, hurrying across the wood floors to meet Diego. He caught me in his arms and lifted me for a kiss.

“Why have you stayed away so long?” I rushed out in a whisper, even though we were alone. “I'm set to fly home in a week.”

“I'm sorry, Talia. I haven't had such a bad week in recent history. I shouldn't be up here, but I texted because I needed to see you, even for a moment, to get me through.” He set me on my feet and gripped my waist. “But if your father catches me here, he'll put you on the next flight out of México.”

“He wouldn't. Easter is Sunday.”

“Believe me, he would.”

Papá wouldn't ruin our holiday for that reason. I touched the brown, coarse stubble on Diego's face. He stank of alcohol, sweat, and cigars, but I was comforted just to be in his presence. “Where have you been? Have you even slept?”

“No.” He loosened his already sagging tie. “We went to the city for dinner last night, then flew back. Cristiano and I worked through to just now.”

To hear about cartel life over the phone was one thing, but the evidence of its non-stop demands stood in front of me. I hated to think of Diego overworking himself. “You need rest. Come. Sit and tell me everything.”

“I can’t stay, Tali. If Costa finds me here after dark—”

“He won’t.” I pulled him to the deck by his hand. Even his palm seemed rougher. “He never comes up here.”

“Your father’s serious about keeping us apart.” Diego sat in an Adirondack chair, following me with his eyes as I went to the linen closet. “It wasn’t an idle threat,” he said. “At dinner, Costa said he’s thinking of sending you back early.”

I stopped short, clutching a blanket. “But I’ve barely spent any time with you! I see you for a few hours, and then you disappear for a few *days*.”

He stood to take the wool throw from me. “Sit down,” he said.

I fell into the chair next to his. “He didn’t mention anything today, and we had lunch.”

“Does he ever? He keeps you in the dark to protect you. If he wants you gone, he’ll put you on a plane. He wouldn’t ask your permission first.” He unfurled the blanket over me. “I’m starting to think Costa will never come around to the idea of us. And then what?” He swallowed as he focused on tucking me in. “Would you still want me?”

I reached up to grab his cheeks. “Yes,” I said, forcing him to hold my gaze. “I’ll never give up on us. We’ll find a way.”

He searched my eyes. Though his were alight, the dark circles under them betrayed his lack of sleep. What had brought on his sudden doubts, and why did my father want me gone so soon?

“I have to ask, Tali ...” Diego went as still and quiet as the sprawling night around us. “Could you be happy without your

father in your life?”

To choose between my dad and Diego? It would be impossible. “He’s already lost too much,” I said. “If it came down to it, he’d be forced to accept us. I don’t think he’d ever make me choose.”

“But if he did?” Diego pressed his lips to my forehead before pulling his chair closer to mine to sit. “I just want you to start considering that possibility.”

I couldn’t imagine not calling Papá whenever I had a question, missed my mom, or simply had the urge. He always spent Christmas with me at school. And just because I only visited once a year didn’t mean I wanted to give up the possibility of coming home one day. Having one parent taken from me, I would never willingly give up the other. At the same time, I’d chosen to leave this life as much as I had been sent away.

But not once did I ever *choose* to be separated from Diego.

“And his approval is only half of the issue,” Diego added.

Diego didn’t want to be separated from me, either. It just wasn’t necessarily up to him. I opened the blanket, and he pulled part of it over himself, checking to make sure I was still covered. “You mean leaving the cartel,” I said.

“It’s not as if I can just put in my two weeks’ notice. If Costa thought I was abandoning the cartel without permission or trying to steal you away ...”

My father raised the White Monarch, put it to the sicario’s head, and bang!

It was an image I doubted I’d ever be able to scrub from my mind.

What would it take for him to “handle” Diego? He’d leveled a threat in the kitchen days earlier, but I hadn’t taken it seriously. Diego was practically family to him.

“He wouldn’t hurt you,” I said. “He has to know what that would do to me.” I believed that, but there was another truth I

couldn't ignore. Papá hadn't gotten to where he was by letting offenses slide, no matter how sentimental he might feel.

“As long as he doesn't take us seriously, he'll go out of his way to put up a wall between us,” Diego said. “He has to realize this isn't a game to us, *princesa*. That we're in this for life.”

Diego spoke with such conviction that *for life* inspired a thrill in me. I was his princess, but I was also that to my father—and in his eyes, Diego was just a ward of the cartel, forbidden from entering the proverbial castle walls he guarded.

“Then we'll have to make sure my father understands that if he doesn't let you go so we can start a life together, he will lose me.”

“You've told him how you feel. *I've* tried to broach the subject, but he won't hear me. What else can we do to get him to see?”

It would have to be something that couldn't be ignored, dismissed, or stopped. I thought back to my conversation with Papá in the kitchen about loving one person and being willing to risk everything for them. About the ties my mother had cut for my father. About how marriage was sacred and should only happen once. With the person you were willing to die for.

“If we can't tell him, then we'll have to show him,” I said. “Even if it means something drastic.”

“Such as?”

My heart began to race. I looked out toward bruise-colored mountains as dusk swallowed the day. I was too shy to say it directly to Diego's face in case it wasn't anything close to what he was thinking. “We could always elope.”

When he didn't respond, I finally chanced a look at him.

He stared at me with a tenderness that melted my insides and left me a puddle of need and longing. This was the art of life—the art of Diego—and what I would risk my father's wrath for. Diego possessed a potential he would never reach here. He'd supported my decision to go away knowing he'd be left behind. And he wanted the best for me, even if it meant

the worst for him. *He* would never make me choose between the two of them.

“Marriage, Tali?” he asked softly, almost reverently.

“It’s a lot, I know—”

“It’s everything.” He took my hand under the blanket. “You’re the only one who believes in me enough to trust me with your love. With the *world*. I have tried and tried to show your father the man I can be. I have no one else—my parents gone and a brother I no longer recognize. You and Costa are my family, but he continues to deny me. And you have never once failed to accept me.”

Moved by his openness, my throat thickened. “He won’t be able to deny you once he sees how devoted we are.”

Diego slid his hand up my arm and massaged my shoulder. “I don’t understand how Costa freely respects Cristiano but continues to hold me at arm’s length. Last night, we were three grown men drinking and talking business, and yet, it’s like I was a teenager at the ranch again.”

I hated that Diego had grown up feeling second best to Cristiano, who’d been treated like a prodigy just because of his size and capacity for brutality. “There’s no way my father can just switch his trust for Cristiano back on.”

“It feels that way—like I’m being replaced.”

“Never, *mi amor*.” I stretched over the arm of the chair to kiss him for all the times we’d had this conversation and I hadn’t been able to physically comfort him. “I’ll show you so much love and respect that you won’t need it from anyone else.”

He held the back of my head for another peck. “We will be married,” he said, “but I can already declare that I intend to love you until death do us part.”

And death would do us part.

The soothsayer’s unwelcome warnings shivered through me. Damn her and her bullshit fortune. I forced her voice from my head and replaced it with a glowing vision of myself in all

white, facing a suited Diego. We stood before an altar, hands intertwined as we committed our lives and love to each other. I'd dreamed of it many times at school, but for the first time, calling him my husband felt within grasp. "I wish the day were tomorrow," I said.

"Don't tempt me." He released me to recline back. "I may steal you away and officially make you mine."

"*Stealing* implies I wouldn't go willingly." Under the blanket, I folded my hands in my lap and squinted up, hoping for a shooting star. We needed all the help we could get. "I'll be on a plane soon, Diego."

He nodded slowly. "What're you suggesting?"

"I don't know. Just pointing out that we don't know when we'll be together next, so if we were going to do something drastic ..." It would have to be now. I absentmindedly picked at my fingernails as I thought. "If the Maldonados gave you twenty-one days, then you only have less than two weeks left until you're out of that. Then it's over, right? But I'll be gone."

He fell quiet as he stared at the night sky, but he didn't seem to be marveling over its wonders. He was working through something in his head, and the longer it took him to figure out his response, the more concerned I became. "What is it?" I asked.

"You know what this reminds me of?" he asked.

I studied his profile. "Catching insects in the rose garden?"

"I don't know why I'm still surprised when you read my mind," he said with a sad smile.

"Up here and out there were the two places you could sneak to for a little bit to keep me company."

"Your mom would always find us and send me immediately back to the ranch."

"She had to. My dad would've been upset. You were supposed to be working, and I wasn't supposed to be around you guys."

“I got to have a childhood through you, hearing about your adventures while I was off doing unimaginable shit to my own people. I never told you this because you were so young, but once, Cristiano used me as bait to kidnap a friend we grew up with.”

“What?” I asked, lifting my head. “How come? What happened to him?”

“What do you think?” Diego asked. “He ended up at the bottom of a wash.”

“But why?”

“Cristiano found out the kid was paying for his drugs by pimping out his underage sister. To Cristiano, that was enough reason to make our friend disappear.”

Good, I thought, and immediately covered my mouth. Who was I to say who lived or died? Who was Cristiano to play God? But who was anyone to pimp out a young girl? Around here, justice wasn't always served through the channels it was supposed to be. Most of the police were corrupt, and the ones who weren't were overwhelmed by either trying to prevent or clean up near daily murders.

“I'm sorry,” Diego said, removing his hand from under the blanket to take mine from my face. He intertwined our fingers. “That was too much.”

“No,” I said. “I just didn't realize ... I didn't think the cartel would handle something like that. Did your friend work in the cartel?”

“No, just a customer. I mean, your dad would never stand for underage prostitution,” Diego said. “He might've ordered it done or cut off his dick or something. But Cristiano didn't even go to him. He just popped the kid on his own time.”

I rested my head back against the chair with a mental image I could've done without. Had Diego's friend automatically broken some imaginary law my dad held that Cristiano had enforced? Or had Cristiano done it out of compassion toward the girl? Considering the kind of cartel

Cristiano ran now, I wondered if any of that benevolence remained. “Do you think the kid deserved it?” I asked.

Diego ran a hand over his stubble and scratched his chin. “Yeah, it had to be done. But I was a kid too, like thirteen or fourteen. I’d known him my whole life.”

“That’s messed up,” I agreed, grateful my dad had moved on from that kind of business.

“You were my break from all of it.” Diego kept my hand in his but put his other arm behind his head. “You’d tell me about your adventures of the day. Your mom would take you to the outdoor *mercado* and you’d sneak fruit right from the stands. You’d come home with an orange-stained tongue or dirty fingers from picking wildflowers on the way back. Bianca loved to be outdoors.”

“My mom grew up helping my grandparents on their farm.” It was strange to call two people I didn’t know *grandparents*. They’d wanted no affiliation with anything illegal, and my mom had respected their decision in order to keep them out of danger.

Diego and I had nice memories, but the past couldn’t distract me from the fact that he was clearly avoiding the subject of his very dangerous arrangement. “Is something wrong with the Maldonados?” I asked, taking my hand back. “Don’t lie to me.”

“I wouldn’t lie. I just don’t want to worry you.” He removed his arm from behind his head and shifted to face me. “It’s just that—I ... it looks like someone’s sabotaging the deal.”

My heart dropped. After what Diego had told me about the Maldonados, even the *threat* of a problem would worry me. “Why didn’t you tell me?” I asked. “And what does ‘sabotaging’ mean?”

“Just how it sounds. There’s no reason we shouldn’t have been able to deliver what I promised the Maldonados, but *a lot* of their product has been compromised. And it’s no accident.” He rubbed his eyebrow. “The majority hasn’t even crossed the

border yet, which is usually where it gets confiscated or stolen. Someone has to be messing with us, but not many would on our own turf.”

“How exactly did they target you?” I asked, trying to ignore the sudden tightness in my chest.

“There were thefts at two secret locations and an explosion in one of our tunnels the *exact* time my men were passing through.”

Thefts. The phone call Diego had gotten when I’d been at his house came rushing back to me. In this case, a theft wasn’t better than the alternative. It could mean death.

“Your dad and I have a plan in place to make sure nothing else happens to the rest of it. That’s why I was up all night. But until everything has crossed, I’m going to be on edge.”

“How could you not be?” I asked. “What happens if anything else goes missing?”

“This is the most we’ve ever undertaken,” he said. “Millions of dollars’ worth of drugs. It’s not like we can afford to cover it. So that means it’s gone.”

Gone.

I had the same shortness of breath I got whenever I thought too long about Cristiano forcing me to the brink of the tunnel. It had taken no effort on his part. Despite every ounce of fight I’d had, no matter what argument I’d put up, he’d still gotten me to the edge. And then down, down, down.

“What’s the plan?” I asked. “Please tell me it involves taking out whoever’s behind this.”

“It would if we knew who it was. Costa and Cristiano think it’s one of the Maldonados’ rivals ...”

I frowned. “But you don’t agree.”

He flicked his thumb and middle finger a few times, then flexed his hand. “There are pieces of the puzzle that don’t make sense.”

The only new variables in Papá's business were the Maldonados and Cristiano. But Cristiano was more than a puzzle piece. He *was* the puzzle. Nothing about him was clear—not his involvement in my mother's death, his unusual business practices, his patched together past, nor the men he surrounded himself with. "Cristiano is the wild card," I said.

"Exactly." Diego sat forward and looked back at me. "Jesus, Talia—I swear, you're the only person who gets it. You should be in charge around here."

I blushed. "It's not that big of a leap to make."

"You'd think."

Cristiano had once been the best man to protect us. He'd known our weaknesses. Then, possibly, he'd exploited them. Had he returned to right the wrongs he felt had been dealt him as Diego had suggested? Did Cristiano actually hope to reposition himself in our family?

A pit formed in my stomach at the thought that he had a greater plan. I didn't trust Cristiano, but I *did* trust he could accomplish anything he set his mind to. "So how does your Maldonado deal fit into his plan?"

"That's what I'm trying to figure out. My gut tells me it's some kind of power grab. Like we talked about the other day, an alliance between the Calaveras and the Cruzes would be formidable." Diego leaned his elbows on his knees and ran both hands over his hair. "My father plotted to steal your family's territory. He would've done it if Costa hadn't put a bullet in him." He glanced back at me. "History repeats itself."

"But your father's plan was to kill mine," I said. "Not unite."

Diego shrugged, but not casually. "What's to stop Cristiano from *anything* once he's gained your father's trust?" He gestured toward the darkness concealing the compound before us. "If they merge, Cristiano will replace me. And once I'm out of the picture, there's nobody in his path."

"His path to what?"

“It’s a tale as old as time, Natalia. It’s only a matter of time before a prince fantasizes about being king.”

“He’s king of his own cartel,” I said.

“Cristiano’s anger has been simmering for many years. Maybe he still feels like a prince who never got what he was owed. The taste of power lingers eternal on a man’s tongue. Now that Cristiano has his own kingdom, I have no doubt he hungers for a second.”

“Are you saying ...” My throat went dry, and the first image that popped into my head was Cristiano and his bucket of sand. I grimaced. “Are you saying Cristiano wants to usurp my father?”

Diego balled his fists, still leaning forward in the chair. “He’d have to earn Costa’s complete faith first. Then, Costa wouldn’t worry about turning his back to him. And that’s when Cristiano slips the knife in.”

With a sharp pain in my jaw, I unclenched my teeth. Cristiano had already taken one parent from me. History would *not* repeat itself. I wouldn’t let it. “We have to tell my dad,” I said.

“Costa won’t hear it. I’ve tried. Cristiano’s reach is too far and too deep. He has to be cut off at the root.”

“You have no time left.” I knew how stubborn my dad could be, but if I caught him at the right time, maybe he’d listen. “I could talk to Papá.”

“And say what? The minute you start asking questions, he’ll assume I sent you, put you on a plane, and come looking for me.”

I massaged my palm with my thumb as I thought. “What happens if I return to school and one day, I get a call that Cristiano succeeded in taking out everyone who means anything to me? And I’d done nothing?”

“What you did was keep yourself safe. That was the whole purpose of you going to school in the first place.” Diego bit his bottom lip, looking over his shoulder at me. Anxious as I was

about what he was telling me, his concern for me was kind of *sexy*. “You’re out of this life, Natalia. Why dip a toe back in?”

“To help you,” I said quietly.

Diego blinked at me, then reached over and tucked my hair behind my ear. “That’s not your responsibility. I shouldn’t even be worrying you over this—it’s just that nobody else sees the truth.”

“If I’d defy my own father to marry you, why wouldn’t I do everything I could to save your life? Even if it meant going to Cristiano myself?”

“Going to *Cristiano*? No. I’ll figure this out, Natalia,” he said with conviction. “Believe me. Just the thought of building a life with you fuels me. I’d marry you tomorrow if only I could predict how this deal will end.”

Cristiano had taken my fate into his hands once. He’d changed my life in moments. I wouldn’t afford him that kind of power again. If he stood between Diego and me, if he deigned to think he could lay a hand on my father, then I had to do something.

I wouldn’t lose anyone else I loved to him.

Ever since I’d fallen in a puddle of blood at his feet, our every interaction had been a mind game. Somehow, he’d known who I was at the costume ball and instead of keeping his distance, he’d danced with me. Toyed with me. Touched me. I couldn’t deny the rush that had accompanied his hands on me. Maybe I could use that to my advantage.

He wanted to play. I could play too.

The deep distrust Diego had for his brother was most likely reciprocated. That day eleven years ago, Cristiano had denied any part in my mother’s death, yet Diego had chosen truth and honor over his own blood. To many men in this world, that was an unforgiveable sin.

And if Cristiano had considered my parents family, then I’d committed the same offense against him with my own accusations that day. But could there be any trace left of the

man my mother and father had trusted? Was there more to Cristiano than a ruthless killer?

If so, then there was a chance I could scratch his cold exterior and find the warmth beneath. “I’ll talk to Cristiano.”

“*Jamás*. Never.” Diego frowned. “I couldn’t ask you to do that.”

“You didn’t.” I took a breath, hugging myself as the night began to cool. “I need to know for myself why he’s here, and what he’s planning.”

“How? He’s not easily cracked, Talia.” Diego bit his thumbnail. “And yet ... I sometimes wonder if he holds a soft spot where you’re concerned. Like maybe he cares about you.”

That was a stretch. If there was anything between Cristiano and me, it was more carnal. More savage. A thirst for power and a knowledge that the most effective way to hurt my father would be through me. I was a tool for him. After so many years, it likely ran deeper still—an obsession with my family, and maybe even my mother, that had been fostered and stoked to the point that not even an eye for an eye would be enough. Perhaps he longed to defile me while my father stood helpless. I didn’t doubt Cristiano possessed a craving for me, even if it was just as simple as a man desiring a woman. But a fondness? No. The only soft spot between us was whichever part of my body he held in his grip. My girlish bicep years ago. My defiant gaze. My arched back as a woman, my hair tickling his forearm during our tango.

My breath sped thinking of the possibilities. Instinct alone had told me as a nine-year-old girl that being the subject of Cristiano’s attention was as thrilling as it was dangerous.

I didn’t know what exactly tied me to Cristiano, but I understood I could tighten the knot between us if I wanted. If I had the courage. “I think I can get in his head.”

“You probably could, but I won’t let you.” Diego flipped the blanket off himself and stood to pace. “It’s too risky.”

“I *want* to,” I said, following him with my eyes.

He glanced over at me. “But you’ve always feared him, and with good reason.”

What I knew about Cristiano scared me as much as what I *didn’t* know. Somehow, the more I learned, the more mysterious he grew. A perverse side of me wanted to test that fear to see if I could glimpse what he never seemed to show anyone.

Nobody ran toward a man like Cristiano de la Rosa. How would he react if I did?

“I have as much reason as anyone to want to bring him down,” I said.

Diego raised his eyebrows at me. “I know, but—”

“What other choice do we have?” I asked. “You were right. My father wants my head in the sand. He won’t respond well to me asking questions. And Cristiano doesn’t trust you.”

“You think he trusts you?”

He’d handled me like I was a child once but had spoken to me the opposite. He’d warned me of loyalty and justice and hadn’t shielded me from the reality that he could kill me if I didn’t help him. “He has no reason to trust me,” I answered, “but I think he did once.”

Diego ran his hands over his face and looked up at the sky. “I’m corrupting you.”

I wrapped myself in the warmth of the wool and got up to stand in front of him. “It’s a means to an end. Let me see if I can figure out why he’s back, and what he knows about the Maldonados.”

Diego rubbed my arms through the blanket as his eyes drifted over my face. Resignation crossed his features as he nodded. “Okay. But you couldn’t just go to Cristiano or he’d suspect something. He has to come to you.”

“How?”

He blew out a breath. “Well ... since I’ve been looking into him, I’ve discovered that he goes to this nightclub a

couple towns over on Thursday nights. If you show up, he'll want to know why you're there. Then, you get him talking."

My heart pounded at just the thought of being alone in the dark with Cristiano again.

"I'd be there of course," Diego said, lowering his voice as he put his forehead to mine. "Watching from afar. Keeping you safe. Believe me when I say—he doesn't lay a *finger* on you."

I nodded slowly. I was walking into the fire. Was it naïve to think I wouldn't get burned? That I could possibly use the unidentifiable, twisted bond that had solidified Cristiano and me years ago to control a conversation with him now?

"Won't he be suspicious if I show up at a place out of town?" I asked.

He twisted his lips. "No. Your father has a lot of eyeballs here who will report your whereabouts back to him, and Cristiano knows that. He'll think you snuck out, because that's what he *wants* to see."

"What does that mean?"

"My brother is a born hunter. He'll assume he caught you out in the wild. Let him hunt. Let him chase. If you make it easy, he'll see right through you." He squeezed my shoulders. "And be careful, Natalia. He's a master manipulator. He'll try to twist your memories or your perspective of him, but never forget what he's capable of or what he did."

If he did it. I pushed the unbidden thought from my head. How could I doubt what I'd seen with my own eyes? What I knew in my gut? Cristiano had spoken of justice all those years ago, but nobody had ever imposed it on him.

"I won't forget," I said.

"He's hurt too many people, and he will continue if we don't stop him. Let your fury burn." Diego clasped my hands and brought them to his mouth. Pressing a kiss to my knuckles, and with fervor in his words, he added, "Let it drive you toward the answers we need to stop him."

"I will," I said.

It was a promise. It had to be. Because even if I harbored the slightest doubt about what Cristiano had done, there was no question of what he *could* do.

I feared I hadn't even begun to imagine what he was capable of.

And that if he caught me trying to cross him, I would learn.

NATALIA

In the States, there wasn't much of a rush in trying to get past a bouncer who studied my tits harder than my fake ID. But here, at *La Madrina*, while the doorman inspected my license, I could only think about how I was putting my life on the line to get information from one kingpin to save another. And I hated that each time my heart palpitated with trepidation, a tremor of excitement followed.

The bouncer gave Pilar and me a once-over before he unhooked the velvet rope to let us pass. I entered the nightclub with nothing on me but a credit card stuck into the neckline of my black, strapless mini dress and oversized gold hoops that swung each time my platforms hit the ground.

The windowless club had three levels with VIP railed off and overlooking the dancefloor from three sides. A large, rotating disco ball had been hung for the 70s theme, and it reflected white light from a DJ booth against the wall opposite the entrance. The club was dark enough to hide in corners, but a girl could still be seen if she wanted. Somewhere up there, Diego waited in the wings, hidden from everyone, including me—watching, anticipating, guarding.

Pilar and I hit the bar first and the dancefloor next. Diego was convinced I didn't need to do anything to capture Cristiano's attention except show up and dance, so that's what I did, dangling myself out in the open like a fresh piece of meat.

When a gut feeling spurred me to look up, I met a dark and burning gaze from the floor above. In a white dress shirt with rolled sleeves and an open collar, Cristiano leaned his elbows on the rail with a drink in hand. A cigarette dangled from his lips. He'd clearly been staring but didn't flinch or pull away.

I sipped from my straw. *Will you come?*

He shifted against the rail, narrowing his eyes on me.

I turned slightly, holding his gaze as I moved my hair off my neck.

Oh, yes. He stubbed out his cigarette and turned away.

He didn't come at first, but I felt eyes on my every move. Was it only Diego? Or both men? To have Cristiano's interest was to put myself in the line of fire, and I was in his crosshairs now, wearing nothing more than a bandage for a dress.

Pilar had picked up a dance partner, and the man's friend slid up behind me.

Before I could react, Pilar grabbed my arm and yanked me to her. "I-I think Cristiano de la Rosa is here."

"He is," I said. "I saw him."

"Then that's him coming over here? Why?" The cubes in her Long Island Iced Tea rattled against the glass. "What does he want?"

"Nothing with you," I assured her.

"This is *Cristiano* we're talking about, he—" She jumped when her dance partner touched her waist. Her drink fell and shattered at our feet. "*Perdón*," she said, bending to pick up the glass. "I'm sorry. It slipped."

"Don't touch that." I stopped her, urging her back up. "What's wrong?"

"He's a bastard, Talia." Her eyes widened into saucers. "He nearly beat *mi primo* to death, remember? In my mom's shop."

"Your cousin was skimming off the top," I told her. "*And* bragging about it."

“I was there,” she whispered. “I ran into the stockroom to hide, but that was where Cristiano took him to do it. I saw the whole thing from behind some pineapple crates.”

“I know.” I rubbed my eyebrow. “But that was years ago —”

“And your mother?” she asked, raising her voice over the music. “Do you tell yourself it doesn’t matter because it was so long ago?”

The man Pilar had been dancing with closed in again as his friend slipped an arm around my waist. I swatted at him, and he backed off. “I didn’t mean it like that,” I said to Pilar.

“That *monster* is ten times worse now—*why* did your father bring him here?” She took my arm, trying in vain to pull me away. “Please, we have to leave.”

“He won’t do anything, Pila. We’re in public.”

“Do you think that matters?”

I didn’t have to answer. Cristiano probably got off on taking a life in front of an audience. “Go get someone to clean this mess. I can handle Cristiano,” I said, even as a wave of doubt coursed through me.

“He has to be two meters tall. He could pick you up with one hand, Tali.” She shook her head. “You can’t be alone with him.”

“I’m not alone. Look at all these people.” My dance partner tried to slip between Pilar and me. “*Déjame en paz*,” I said, pushing him off, hoping Diego wouldn’t get jealous and blow his cover. “Go away.”

The man showed me his palms but continued dancing near us.

“But—” Pilar began.

I pulled her to me and whispered, “I’m *fine*. Diego’s here—no, don’t look for him. Is Cristiano still coming?”

“He’s walking onto the dancefloor—”

“Go to the bar,” I pleaded. “Now.”

She was trembling. “I shouldn’t leave you.”

Within moments, Cristiano’s unmistakable presence warmed my back. I inhaled slowly to calm myself, even as my palms sweat. I hadn’t knowingly been alone with him since the tunnel.

I wasn’t alone, though. Diego was here.

“*Vete*,” Cristiano ordered from behind me.

With the command to leave, the man circling me looked over my head and left the dancefloor.

“Go,” Cristiano said to Pilar next.

She nearly tripped over herself as she scurried to the bar.

After a moment, he spoke near my ear. “You’re more courageous than your friend.”

It went against my every instinct to keep my back to him. The hairs on my nape rose. The mix of my pounding heart and the drink I’d had formed little stars in my vision. I tried to pass off my swaying as dancing rather than nerves. It would serve me right to fall on my face for toying with the devil. Could Diego even stop Cristiano from doing what he wanted? I’d never been scared of the dark while surrounded by this many people.

“More courageous?” I asked. “Or more foolish?”

He grunted. “Where are your guards?” When I didn’t answer, he added, “Can you turn around and look at me, Natalia?”

A wild animal like him would sense my fear. I wasn’t sure if vulnerability would help or hurt me. I turned just my head over my shoulder but didn’t look at him. “*Por favor*. Go. I’m just here to have a girls’ night.”

“You’re a little far from home.”

“We didn’t want to run into anyone we might know. We’re not supposed to be out.”

“Ah. You’re unsupervised then.” He lowered his mouth to my ear. “I won’t ask twice. Turn ... around. Look—at—me.”

It was no longer a request. I obeyed, facing broad, pulled back shoulders, somehow both severe and elegant. They squared off to the lean, muscular arms that had pinned me to his body as a girl, that had held me tight as we'd danced a week ago. His skull face paint had enhanced his bone structure then—or so I'd thought. Even without the mask, his angular jaw sharpened with high cheekbones and caved cheeks. A darker, more demanding beauty than his brother's left me breathless. They had similar faces arranged like Greek gods, but where Diego's features yielded to sun-kissed, smooth skin, Cristiano was harsher, weather-beaten with crow's feet around his eyes. His neatly parted hair and clean-shaven face contrasted his stern expression.

I sipped my drink, hoping to calm my nerves. "Why bother asking for anything if you're just going to demand it?"

He licked his lips as his eyes drifted over the short, tight dress Diego had picked out for me. Though Cristiano's eyes were as black as a starless sky, they still glimmered behind his hooded gaze. "It's the polite thing to do."

Had I been brave enough, I would've snorted in his face. He'd just shooed off Pilar with no regard for her obvious anxiety. "Is it *polite* to make a woman tremble with just a word?"

"Very." One hollowed dimple appeared as the corner of his mouth rose. "Sometime I'll demonstrate on you."

My face flushed. He wanted to make me scream and tremble. Despite what I'd heard about his brutality, my mind descended into a shameful vision of being trapped underneath his wide shoulders, begging for a different kind of mercy.

He took my Long Island Iced Tea from me and handed it to a random woman. She started to protest but then looked up and disappeared like the others. "Let me get you a real drink," he said to me.

Diego was right about playing hard to get. It was working. "I have to check on my friend," I said. I took a step, but he wrapped his hand all the way around my upper arm and pulled me back against his wall of a body. "Watch your step,

mamacita,” he rumbled before he picked me up by my waist, turned, and set me down.

I lost my breath, disoriented by being repositioned like a doll. “What are you doing?”

“There’s glass all over.” Cristiano signaled across the bar, alerting them to the mess.

He kept one hand lightly at my hip. I shifted to see if he’d let me go. He flexed his long fingers against me, pressing the pad of his thumb into my hipbone. A few degrees south, and he would’ve found a pistol strapped to my upper thigh—if only Diego hadn’t made me leave it behind, rendering me defenseless.

Cristiano started to pull me closer, but I moved away. He dropped just his eyes to mine. If he wasn’t six-foot-five as Pilar had guessed, he was within centimeters of it. “What’s the matter?” he asked. “You only dance with men in costume?”

“You looked friendlier then.”

He pursed his lips as if suppressing a smile. “I wasn’t.”

“Did you know it was me at the party?” I asked, even though I could guess his answer.

“It’s too loud down here. Come with me.” He nodded behind him. “Arms up.”

Reflexively, I raised them when he cupped the sides of my breasts and slid the deadly weapons he called hands down my waist and hips. “What? Where?”

“Upstairs.” He squatted to clasp one of my ankles.

“What are you doing?” I asked, trying to free my leg.

“Security check.”

“My legs are bare.”

“Nevertheless.” One dark eyebrow quirked. “People are creative about where they hide their weapons.” He grazed both palms along my outer and inner calf, higher and higher, until his hands were under my skirt. Finally, something else

overtook my nervousness—a pulse of heat between my legs as his fingers lingered there.

“Hold onto me if you feel weak,” he said, a hint of teasing in his voice.

Nobody around us even flinched, either unsurprised or keeping their heads down. I tried to push his hands out from under my skirt. “I don’t have anything on me, not even my phone.”

“Is that wise?” he asked.

“I had nowhere to put it.”

He paused but didn’t remove his hands.

“And I’m not going anywhere alone with you,” I added.

“We won’t be alone.” His lifted his eyes to look directly into mine. “My men are everywhere.”

A threat. Perhaps Diego had my back, but he was one man against who knew how many savages. I couldn’t go anywhere with Cristiano. Either I’d be leaving myself vulnerable or Diego would try to stop it and put himself in Calavera crosshairs.

Cristiano’s gentle touch didn’t distract me from the fact that it was still callused, or that his hands, as they moved to my other thigh, had taken many lives. His fingertips started high and then slid down to my ankle, which he squeezed almost tenderly before standing again.

Kicking some glass aside, he gestured toward an elevator I hadn’t noticed before. “After you.”

“I’m expected to trust that *you* aren’t armed?”

He opened his arms. “Frisk me.”

My heart skipped at the thought of touching him. The sprawling shoulders and flat pecs under a crisp white shirt. His wide, powerful torso. *He* was the weapon, big everywhere that I could see. What about where I couldn’t? My gaze started to drift down, but I stopped it and turned my reddening cheek to him.

“I’ll save you the trouble,” he said, lowering his arms back to his sides. “Not only am I armed, but one signal from me could light this place up with fireworks.”

I flashed back to the barrel of his gun under my chin. Diego couldn’t stop his brother then—how could he take on the devil now? I crossed my arms. “I’m not leaving the dancefloor.”

White light reflected off the disco ball and flashed over the hard angles of his face. “Then you’ll have to come closer so I don’t miss a word you say.”

That was better than the alternative, so I closed the gap between us with a step. We were nearly toe to toe, but he still had to lean down to speak in a normal tone. “Of course I knew who you were at the party. I wouldn’t whisper my wishes to just any butterfly.”

I tried to force my muscles to relax. We were out in the open, and he was willing to talk. “Why me?” I asked.

“Perhaps to see if you’d cower. To test whether I’d scared that little girl well enough. The fact that you’re standing here tells me I didn’t.”

“I do cower. You can’t expect me not to in front of my mother’s murderer.”

He started to jut his chin but stopped. “I’m only dangerous to those who cross me or have a right to be afraid,” he said. “Do you?”

My instinct was to look up for Diego, but I schooled it. “Did my mother?”

His jaw ticked. “No.”

I dropped my eyes. I couldn’t think of her now. Even as I questioned what I knew, it felt like a betrayal to even be in the same room as Cristiano without attempting to burn it down. This was for a greater cause, though. The sooner I had what I needed, the sooner I could be free of this place and of him.

I looked up again. “Why are you here?” I asked.

“It’s my nightclub.”

Words escaped me. If Diego had known that, he'd neglected to clue me in. "That's not what I meant. Why are you *back*?"

"To dance." Cristiano took my hips and pulled me flush against him. With a slow roll of his body, I felt every bump and ridge of what *had* to be a gun. If it wasn't ...

"I warned you I was armed," he said.

A flush crept its way up my neck. He held me still and moved his hips to the smooth, sultry beat of Donna Summer's "Love to Love You Baby." My body undulated on its own as my hands slid up his chest. He squeezed my backside, moving me against him faster, harder, until we were so synced, he could've picked up my leg and slipped right inside me.

I gasped at the thought and shoved his chest. "Stop."

He didn't budge, but loosened his grip on me, giving me space. "No need for violence, Lourdes. All you had to do was ask."

I inhaled a sharp breath. My second name had been my mother's first choice, but she'd deferred to Papá's love of *Natalia*. "Nobody calls me that."

"I call you what I want—Lourdes. Or maybe Natasha. How do you like that?"

"Years away, and you've forgotten me completely. It's *Natalia*."

"Forgotten you? No. Not after the way you helped me escape." His eyes drifted to my mouth, then along my neck and chest. "Natasha is what you'd be called in Russia." He moved his hand to my upper back and pushed gently. "Let's go. Our drinks are ready."

"What? Where?"

"Come with me." He guided me through the dancefloor, which was emptier than it'd been before his arrival.

It was slightly quieter at the bar, where he handed me a tall, chilled shot glass of clear liquid. I put my nose to the rim, but it was odorless. "Vodka?"

“Straight from the heart of Siberia. I brought it myself. Have you eaten?”

“I had dinner. Why?”

“Good.” He took a second shot from the bar, raised it, and said something in what sounded like Russian, followed by, “*Salud.*”

I followed his lead and tasted the cool liquid, holding it on my tongue a moment before swallowing. It was definitely smoother than the drugstore vodka my friends and I drank at school. “You’ve been to Russia?” I asked, hoping for a clue as to what he’d been doing during the years he’d disappeared.

“*Da.* That means *yes*. I’ve been many places, but like you, I’ve returned where I belong. I’ve come home.”

I tucked the information away for later. “This isn’t my home.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t want this life.”

“Ah.” He clicked his tongue like a wink. “But it lives in you, Natalia, and its roots never stop growing.”

It was one of my greatest fears—that I’d seen and learned too much to ever lead a normal life. That no matter what, I’d always be the nine-year-old girl who could trip over the dead body of a loved one at any moment—and then be forced to get right back up and defend my life. “Like a cancer,” I said into my shot glass.

“No.” He tilted up my chin with his knuckle. “Like a heart. Like blood in your veins. Like bones.”

“You’re wrong.” I tried to focus on anything but his skin on mine, but it only made me more aware of his touch. “Every day I cut more and more of this cancer from my body, and I’m still standing.”

“You can’t remove it completely. Pretend it’s gone if it helps you sleep, but the poison’s already in you. You grew up feeding on it, and any predator who comes after you will get a

bitter taste. Because you're a survivor. Like the monarch. Like me."

Taken aback, I blurted, "I'm not like you."

He finished his shot and signaled for another. "Let's hope you're never forced to find out."

"With a bounty on your head, you strolled back into our lives. That sounds more like a death wish than a will to survive."

"I'm here, aren't I?" he asked. "I was driven from the only life I knew with nothing but what was on my body. Now, I'm back with the world at my fingertips."

"But it's not enough."

He tilted his head at me almost imperceptibly. "Meaning?"

"You want more than you have. I know that's why you're here." I rested my elbow on the bar. "Give me another reason that makes sense. There is none."

"What about history? A sense of home?" He raised his glass to someone across the room and drank. "I've found myself a family who'd die for me and I for them, but I've discovered a man can travel the world and never find home, Natalia. And *you* will never escape it."

Cristiano was more machine than man, always calculating, always locked and loaded to kill. Perhaps he couldn't help what he'd been taught, but it didn't make it any less true. "Maybe my father trusts you," I said, "but I don't. I know what I saw that day. I believe what I've heard, both when you worked for us and after. You're not here out of nostalgia."

"Why am I here then?" he asked. "Tell me, Lourdes."

"Power. Revenge. If you take out my father and steal his business, you get both." I hadn't meant to say so much, but with Cristiano, candor was best. It was becoming clear he and I could talk each other in circles—I needed answers, though. "And don't call me Lourdes."

"Why not? Because your mother did?"

My heart palpitated once. That was exactly why. It surprised me he remembered. “Yes,” I said. “It reminds me of her, and for you to use it is a slap in the face.”

“It suits you, though,” he mused after another sip. “Natalia is a girl’s name.”

He thought he had me pegged, but he’d been gone a long time. I wouldn’t try to change his perception of me. Any misconceptions could only hurt him—and help me.

“What if you’re right about my plans?” he asked, setting his glass on the bar. “Will you stop me?”

I couldn’t. He had an army and the means to fund it. All I had was a sliver of hope that somewhere in his body, a heart still beat. That maybe he’d cared for my parents and me once. “Don’t hurt my family any more than you already have,” I said. “That includes Diego.”

A smirk ghosted over his hard, chiseled features. “No, I never forgot little Talia, fiercely loyal to someone who doesn’t deserve it. Where is my snake of a brother anyway?”

Cristiano calling Diego a snake was like my nine-year-old self stumbling across my mother’s body and taunting her murderer for being scared. “You have that one backward.”

“Do you still believe after all this time that Diego would stick out his own neck to save yours?” Cristiano asked.

“He already did,” I said. “He took a bullet for me. You’ll remember—you were the one who shot him.”

Cristiano scanned my face a moment, then laughed. It was a foreign sound that caught me off guard, a rumble both dark and delighted. As he reached up, I flinched, but it didn’t deter him from pinching my chin between his thumb and forefinger. “You have no idea what it means to be willing to die for someone. Diego took a bullet, I’ll give you that. But *for you*? No, *mamacita*. When someone does that, you’ll know.”

That was bullshit. Diego had been brave. There was nothing else he could’ve done. And if there was, I didn’t blame him. We’d both been in shock—scared and worried for each other. Once he’d been shot, he’d passed out. What did

Cristiano expect, that Diego would magically heal his leg, regain consciousness, and throw himself down the tunnel after us?

Why was I even questioning it? Diego had warned me Cristiano would try to manipulate the truth. “You’re wrong,” I said. “He’ll always have my back.”

“And yet, the evidence of his cowardice stands in front of me. Diego has sent a woman to do a man’s job.” He swept his thumb over my bottom lip and released my face. “Where is he?”

I refrained from touching my tingling mouth to erase his uninvited, overly intimate caress. “I don’t know,” I answered.

“I believe you don’t know his exact location, but he sent you.”

My heart began to hammer against my breastbone. Cristiano didn’t believe I was alone, and I suspected he never had. “You’re the one who came to me,” I pointed out.

“Diego knew I would.” Cristiano turned his head slightly over one shoulder. “Perhaps he’s right at my back. Or above us. Or in the shadows of the dancefloor. He’s not far, is he?”

If I thought I could fool Cristiano one moment longer, I might’ve tried, but he was too shrewd for that. I couldn’t risk him catching me in a lie and walking away before I got any information. Honesty was likely the best way to get the same in return. “He’s here.”

Cristiano drew back a little, his eyebrows rising. “Maybe your loyalty isn’t as strong as I thought.”

“I’m loyal to Diego, but I’m not stupid. Neither are you.”

“You may be if you thought you could deceive me.” He cocked his head. “I should be mad, shouldn’t I?” He cleared some of my hair away, lighting goose bumps over my neck and shoulders. “But I’m more intrigued to know that my brother is watching us now.”

I stilled so I wouldn’t betray how he was affecting me. “If you touch me, you’ll be dead,” I warned him.

“Ah, but I already have. Not once, not twice, not even three times,” he said, grazing my hip with one hand as he brushed his knuckle under my chin once more. “And now, I’m touching you again.” He placed his hands on my jaw, cupping my face as carefully as he might cradle a baby bird. He tilted my head up until I could look nowhere but into his eyes. “I put my hands up your skirt earlier. And where was your Diego?”

Chills made an icy trail down my spine as I tensed, waiting for some kind of consequence to befall Cristiano. And yet, he didn’t even look back. His eyes remained unwary.

He turned my head to one side and whispered in my ear, “Understand me. The next time my hands are that close to heaven, they will enter whether Diego is watching or not.”

Blood rushed to my head as the tender warmth of his breath warred with such an offensive suggestion. I couldn’t respond, my throat suddenly dry, my tongue numb. *Gracias a Dios* I hadn’t gone anywhere alone with him—I didn’t question his hands would do as they pleased. And to make Diego *watch*? I shivered. How indecent. How obscene and filthy.

And yet, heaven throbbed between my legs. That was the devil’s manipulation, making me think I *liked* the idea.

“You’re here to do Diego’s bidding,” Cristiano said. “To get answers for questions you don’t even know to ask. But how far would you go to get them?”

He let me jerk my head away. “I have morals.”

“You don’t even know the game he plays with you—you never did.”

“For some of us,” I said, “life is more than a game to play, a prize to hold tight, a lesson to be taught. There’s more to it than money and power.”

“Such as?”

“Love. Ethics.” I raised my chin. “*Justice*. You understood that once.”

He narrowed his eyes. “You remember that?”

“What you said to me about justice? *Sí*. That there is none.”

“There is in my world. I live by my own code, and you may not see it, but it’s both fair and ethical.” He inclined his head. “For those who are deserving, I ask before I take. I feed those who feed me. I can’t control how others interpret things, but I give honesty where I get it. You’ll find me dead before you find me a liar.”

My chest rose and fell faster as I held his gaze despite the fact that I was stupidly pushing his buttons. “A liar would be an improvement for a murderer like you.”

One corner of his mouth twitched. “I’m only deadly to those who’ve taken risks knowing the consequences. They traded a life of safety for money and power. They deserved it, as do I.” He crossed himself in a gross display of blasphemy. What right did a depraved criminal like him have to ask anything of the Holy Trinity? A hint of a smile touched his lips. “If I died tomorrow, I would not say the assassin had no right to do it. Though I’d commend him for accomplishing a nearly impossible task.”

“You say you’re honest as you lie. You’re not fair or ethical; you’ve executed people who didn’t deserve it.”

“Deep down, you know I didn’t kill your mother, Natalia.” Any suggestion of humor left his tone, replaced by graveness. “And that there’s more to her death than you’re willing to admit.”

His acknowledgement of her murder made me step back. I’d heard the denial from my father, but not yet directly from Cristiano since his return. The conviction in his voice angered me. He had no right to dismiss her death. To question what I knew in the depths of my soul. “I saw you,” I said. “The gun, the blood, the duffel bag—I ...” I didn’t want to believe there could be anything else to it. A hired hitman made her death even more confusing. More senseless. “You were a *sicario for a living*,” I said. I slammed the rest of my shot, and my throat burned with its spicy aftertaste. “You took as many lives as my father and grandfather commanded you to. Maybe one of their

rivals paid you handsomely for this order, or maybe it was retribution for what my dad did to yours, but either way, I caught you red-handed.”

“You were naïve back then, but you’re old enough to know better now. Nothing is black and white.” He slid my glass toward a bartender, who refilled the vodka and replaced it in front of me.

I resisted my temptation to drink more. The liquor was dangerously good, and I needed my wits about me. “No, thank you,” I said.

Cristiano leaned in. “This *is* a game, Natalia, and you *have* to play—or you’ll lose. Learn your lesson should someone care enough to teach you. And never doubt that you *are* a prize to hold tight.” He slipped an arm around my waist like we were going to tango again, and advanced until I was backed up against the lip of the bar. When our bodies were flush, he spoke firmly. “Believe me when I say, if Diego’s and my roles were reversed, I would hold you so tight, you would forget what it was to breathe. And I would not, for neither money nor power, ever send you into the fire just to see my enemy burn as he has done.”

My breathing sped. He was close, his spicy scent as smooth and dangerous as Russian vodka. And he was talking shit about the man I loved. Diego would never put me at risk. He’d fought me on coming here in the first place. There was no way Cristiano could know I’d walked into the blaze on my own, but let him distract himself into thinking Diego had orchestrated this. “Why do you care *how* Diego holds me?” I asked.

“Because *I* held you as a baby,” he said intently. “I was responsible for your *life* once.” Cristiano’s hand tensed over my lower back. “My brother’s using you to light the fire, but don’t forget—a match also burns.”

I resisted the mental image of Cristiano cradling me as an infant. That was what I’d hoped to tap into, but he also knew exactly how to soften me. I wanted to believe he’d cared for

my family at some point during the eight years he'd been with us.

"Now, it's *my* turn for questions," he said, easing back. He fixed the roll of one shirtsleeve so it exposed a little more of his dark, brawny forearm. "That night at the costume party when I found you with my brother in the garden—was he forceful with you?"

Unprepared for the topic change, I didn't answer right away. What did Cristiano think he'd seen that night by the fountain? Diego'd had one hand nearly between my legs with his other holding my jaw. From behind, it could've looked as if he'd been covering my mouth as he'd made demands.

"Tell me how much you love me. I won't ask again."

"No," I said. "Diego's not like you."

"And how am I?"

"I've heard things. I've seen things. I know what you do to women."

He pressed his lips together, assessing me coolly. "And yet you still tested me by coming here. Some part of you must not believe the rumors."

"I believe them," I said without hesitation so he wouldn't guess the truth—where Cristiano was concerned, I was beginning to question anything I knew.

"You didn't answer my question." He took his cell from his shirt pocket as it vibrated but kept his eyes on me. "Has he ever so much as laid a finger on you without your permission?"

"No," I said. "We were playing a game." It was the most plausible excuse—and yet it also held truth.

One of Cristiano's dark, thick brows lifted. Without removing his eyes from me, he answered his phone. "*Sí.*" His eyes roamed over the alcohol bottles lining the back wall of the bar. After a pause, he said, "*Adelante*" and ended the call. While typing out a message, he said to me, "Tell Diego to take you straight home. It's not safe after dark right now."

After dark, when the creatures of the night played. “I suppose you would know.”

“You’re looking for a monster, and you found one in me.” He tucked his phone back in his pocket. “But I’m not the one you should fear. Just remember—no monster thinks of himself that way. He’s just living by a different code than yours.” He nodded once at me and turned to leave. “Goodnight, Natalia.”

Goodnight? I hadn’t gotten nearly what I’d wanted from him. If anything, I only had more questions. This was my last shot. I had to demand his attention. “What’s your involvement with the Maldonados?”

He froze. His large frame expanded with a breath, his muscles pulling gracefully under his white dress shirt. Even from behind, he was beautiful—and menacing.

Had I gone too far? I slid a couple steps back along the edge of the bar.

Getting him to talk in hopes that something useful might slip was one thing. But legitimate information was dangerous. If he thought I actually knew anything, that could make me a liability. Or worse—a threat.

After a moment, he turned back. “I have no deal with them. You should be asking Diego this.”

“I have, and I know everything he does.” I was in too deep to turn back, and I realized I didn’t want to, even if I was scared. Finally, I was getting what I came for. “Now I want to know what *you* know.”

He returned to standing in front of me. “What I know? My brother’s in serious trouble, and if he minimized the danger he’s in at all, then he lied to you. He’s putting everyone at risk, including you.”

“*He* isn’t, but someone is. *Someone* doesn’t want this deal to happen. Is it you? Are you the one stealing from him?”

His jaw sharpened as it ticked. “Be careful, Natalia. You’re out of your depth.”

It was the first crack in his composure I'd gotten tonight, and it sent a thrill through me. I wanted more. "I'll come upstairs with you," I said.

He glanced at the glass wall behind the DJ booth. It wasn't a wall at all, I realized, but a one-way window that most likely looked from his office onto the dancefloor. I wondered if he'd been watching me before I'd even noticed him.

"*Nyet*, Natasha."

I turned back to him. "*No*, in Russian," I guessed.

"Correct. I have business now. Maybe another time."

I tilted my head. "Is it easier to think of me differently as a Natasha?"

"Why would I want to think of you differently?"

"So you don't have to see me as the little girl you once promised to protect."

He tilted his head. The pulse at the base of his neck jumped as he let his eyes wander down my dress. "Believe me, I see you just fine as you are. I happen to like the name. I knew a Natasha once." His eyes leapt back to mine. "She sucked my dick like it would end with a mouthful of gold."

My throat constricted. Nobody had ever said anything like that to me. "That's not why I wanted to come up. I won't do that willingly. Not ever. But maybe Natasha said the same thing."

He stilled completely. The lights and music seemed to dim along with his demeanor. "You're accusing me of rape?"

My mom's dress was ripped. It was perhaps the one thing I couldn't bring myself to ask about. The answer might be too painful. "You expect me to believe your men do it, but you don't?"

"You insult me. If I want a woman, I can get her without force," he said sharply. "That includes *you*."

I drew back with an audible swallow. He didn't treat me the way others did, yet despite his steely expression and cool

gaze, my gut told me he didn't mean it. He only wanted a reaction. Could I trust that instinct, though? In my experience, cartel bosses didn't tease.

And they didn't invite women in skimpy dresses anywhere private to talk.

The dark cloud that'd just fallen over him seemed to lift. "With me, you always have a choice. You're not beholden to my wishes, but I hope you'll still carry them on your wings and deliver them for me." He brushed hair from my cheek, trailing a fingertip over my skin in a way that I had to fight to keep my eyes from falling shut. "Just know that I don't rely on anyone, not even the heavens, to grant my wishes. I make them come true on my own."

He retreated a few steps, holding my gaze, before he turned and walked away.

I hung on his words. What *were* his wishes? What did they have to do with me? I stayed where I was despite my urge to call him back and ask the questions forming in my head.

Because nothing good could come from chasing after *el anticristo*.

Especially if he was saying what I thought he was.

If you're what I want, then I'll find a way to have you.

NATALIA

Diego's hand slipped higher up my dress as the glowing red hand of his speedometer rose. He sped away from the club through deserted roads as if he also knew of the after-dark danger Cristiano had warned me of.

Only the warm lights of the dashboard glowed against its all-black interior. Silence stretched over the smooth hum of his Mercedes once I'd finished relaying most of my conversation with Cristiano. All in all, there wasn't much to tell.

"Are you okay?" Diego asked for the second time.

"I'm fine." *Because you're a survivor. Like the monarch. Like me.* Cristiano's words echoed in my mind.

"He kept touching you because he knew I was there." He released my leg to grip the steering wheel. "I assumed he'd frisk you, but that's all."

I wouldn't even call what he'd done *frisking*. Cristiano had tested my boundaries as he'd taunted Diego. He'd had his hands everywhere from my ankles to my thighs, my neck and face. He'd touched me in ways only Diego should.

And Diego had let him—or had he not seen well enough the liberties Cristiano had taken with my body? "Cristiano said next time he frisks me, he won't stop his hands at the gates of heaven, even if you're watching."

"Heaven?" Diego's nostrils flared as he hit the steering wheel. "Let him try. I'll cut off his devil hands." He snorted

not unlike a Pamplona bull. “Not that you’ll ever be in that position again.”

I wasn’t sure what aroused me more—Diego’s possessiveness or the idea of Cristiano boldly taking what didn’t belong to him. I only knew that what aroused me, also horrified me. What was wrong with me for getting excited Cristiano might want me when his brother already had me? The same Cristiano who, the last decade, I’d vehemently hated? I shifted in the leather seat. “He only said it to scare me,” I said. “It didn’t mean anything.”

“I know. Still ... I should knock his teeth out.” Diego massaged around his nose. “It wasn’t easy to watch. He knows you’re mine and that you’re the quickest way to get under my skin.”

“He only thinks of me as a weapon against you.” And if anyone knew how to wield a weapon, it was Cristiano. “I’m sorry I didn’t get more information.”

“You were perfect.” He glanced over at me, running a hand through his hair to get it out of his eyes. “Cristiano *didn’t* scare you, did he?”

He’d tried. But had he succeeded? With his comments about Natasha and about how he could have me if he wanted, what unnerved me most was that I *wasn’t* scared. “No.”

A dog darted into the street. Diego hit the brakes, and I outstretched my arms to catch myself against the glove compartment.

“Shit. Sorry,” he said as he decelerated for a yellow light. “You all right?”

I glanced behind us for the dog, but it was gone. “Yes.”

Diego stopped the car at an intersection and slid his hand in mine. “You look so beautiful tonight. I can’t say I blame him for being so forward. As angry as it makes me, I feel lucky to be the one who gets to take you home.”

“Always,” I said.

“It’s good you didn’t go anywhere with him.” Diego’s phone rang. He released my hand to get it from his pocket as he reiterated, “I would’ve beaten him half to death if he’d tried to get you alone.” He swiped his thumb across the screen and held it to his ear. “*Bueno.*”

As Diego listened to the line, I turned my head toward the faint strains of buoyant violin and guitarrón coming from a corner market. Mariachi music didn’t always remind me of the moments before I’d skipped down the hall to hurry my mother for the parade, but in that moment, I saw Cristiano standing in the bedroom, dressed in all black, rising from the ashes. Out front of the *mercado*, a few men smoked, drank, and blared a boombox. Despite opaque, bulletproof windows, I got a chill when one of the men opened his jacket and flashed a gun in our direction. I’d never liked riding around in showy cars when poverty permeated our state.

“I’m not far, but I have Natalia,” Diego said into the phone. “I’ll drop her off and come.” The stoplight changed to green, but he didn’t move. “No. I want everyone on site.”

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Some issue at the *fucking* warehouse,” he whispered to me. He paused, listening. “No, don’t send one of them. I don’t trust them around Natalia. Can you break into it?” He snorted. “*Claro que no.* I’ll be there in an hour. Just move on to something else until I’m back.” He hung up, dropped the phone into a cup holder, and stepped on the gas.

“Is that the warehouse with all the Maldonados’ stock?” I asked.

“*Sí.* We moved it all to one spot since none of our regular houses are safe right now. Then it’s all going *al otro lado*—into the U.S.—at once.” He rested an elbow on the door panel and bit his thumbnail, steering with one hand. “Every call I get, I worry something else has gone wrong.”

“Who was on the phone?”

“Jojo. We transported everything to the new location in armored vehicles,” he said. “I have the only set of keys to the

truck they need to get into right now—and of course, it's impenetrable, so they can't break in, *puta madre*."

I glanced through the windshield. "You said we're close?"

"We just passed the turnoff."

"When does everything need to go?"

"Tomorrow afternoon." He shook his head out the window. "They're loading everything tonight."

I reached over to knead the back of his neck with one hand. "Go to the warehouse. Drop off the keys."

He shook his head. "It's too dangerous."

"Isn't *everyone* in the cartel there guarding it?" I argued.

"Not everyone. In case the hits were due to a leak—which I don't believe—I only have my most trustworthy men there."

"Then what's the danger?"

"No matter how many precautions we have in place," he said, slowing for another red light, "with all the product consolidated in one location, all the risk is there too."

"We're still twenty minutes from the house, which means it would take you forty round trip to get back. This is a priority."

The stoplight changed to green, but he just scratched his chin. "Which won't matter if Costa kills me for taking you to the warehouse."

"He thinks I'm still at the movie theater for a *Star Wars* triple-feature." I checked the clock on the dash—half past nine. "Right about now, Pilar and I are finishing *Attack of the Clones*. The next episode is almost two-and-a-half hours."

"*Dios mío*. You know the runtime and everything?" He reached over to squeeze my knee in the exact spot I was ticklish. I laughed as I squirmed. "Are you this devious in the States?" he asked.

I leaned over the console, batting my lashes up at him. "You'll soon find out."

Someone honked behind us for sitting at a green light before swerving past. Diego barely noticed.

“Mmm.” He nuzzled my nose with his, then kissed me softly, sweetly. “You make a good argument, my little C-3PO, but I don’t want to risk it.” He brushed my hair from my face and tucked it behind my ear. “Even if nothing happens, I don’t want anyone to see you there. If it gets back to Costa, or if the wrong person sees you unguarded—”

“I just faced off with Cristiano by myself,” I pointed out. “I’ll be *fine*. I’ll wait in the car. Just go. It’ll take five minutes.”

“Not even. I’ll have Jojo come out and get the keys.” Diego sighed, resigned. “You’re tough.”

“This is good practice for when we’re married and I win all our arguments.”

He scoffed, seizing my leg again. I squealed, grabbing his wrist as I backed against the door. “Tickling is off-limits.”

“I don’t think so, *princesa*,” he said but smiled and released me. He checked his rearview mirror and swerved into the next lane. Ignoring the red arrow, he flipped the car around to zoom back the way we’d come. The men loitering outside the *tienda* were gone, but as we whizzed by, I could’ve sworn I heard the echo of mariachi music.

In under ten minutes, we were at the edge of town and approaching a sprawling concrete block. Surrounded by desert, it seemed to have risen from the ground.

“I’m going to park in back so nobody sees you,” Diego said, slowing to turn down a dark road. “Do you see a black fob in the center console?”

I opened it and sorted through several sets of keys until I found the one he needed. He rolled down his window and stuck it out as we pulled up to an industrial looking metal gate. As it slid open, Diego killed the headlights and parked in an unlit backlot. He quickly sent off a text, then reclined the driver’s seat a little and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

It was the second time I'd noticed him do it since we'd gotten in the car. "Do you have a headache?"

"Yeah. I'm just tired and feeling queasy." He squinted through the windshield. "I've barely slept in days. Every time I close my eyes, I think of what'll happen if tomorrow doesn't go well."

"Come here." I unfastened my seatbelt to give him the best sideways hug I could and kissed his cheek. "You're almost there. By this time tomorrow, the shipment will be on its way and you'll be *that* much closer to pulling off the most impressive deal the Cruz cartel has ever seen."

He turned his head to graze the tips of our noses. "And then?" he asked.

"And then it's you and me with nothing ahead of us but our future."

He tilted his head and kissed me gently. "I love the sound of that. I love *you*."

"I love you too," I said. *Enough to die for you*, a voice in my head said. The fortune teller. Why did she still haunt me when I knew her words held no truth?

A knock at the driver's side made me jump back with a gasp. I clutched my throat, my heart pounding.

"It's just Jojo," Diego said, patting my thigh. I could barely make out a figure until Diego rolled the window down.

Jojo, one of Diego's foremen, nodded at me. "¿*Qué tal, Talia?*"

Even though my heart pounded from the scare, I nodded. "*Todo bien*. All good."

"How's it going in there?" Diego asked, passing Jojo the keys.

Jojo wiped his hairline, leaving a grease mark on his forehead. "One of the semi engines is fucked. We're working on it."

"Where's the mechanic?" Diego asked.

“Not picking up his phone, but don’t worry, *jefe*. We’ll get him here.”

“You checked the fuel and oil levels? The battery?” Diego asked, his brows cinched.

“Yeah, *I* didn’t, but Tomás knows all that shit and I think he—”

“Did he disengage the lock?”

Jojo showed us his grimy palms. “I dunno.”

“Tell him to try that,” Diego said. “If it doesn’t work, check the ECM ground wire.”

“What the fuck is that?” Jojo asked, wetting his finger to rub grease off his wrist.

“Come on, *cabron*. Like I don’t have enough on my plate?” Diego blew out a sigh. “I’ll text Tomás.”

Seeing the veins pop in Diego’s hands and neck as he gripped the steering wheel, I caressed his right forearm. “Go look at it,” I said. “I’ll be fine here for a few minutes.”

“Maybe if I didn’t hire such dumb motherfuckers,” Diego muttered.

Diego didn’t mean it—he cared a great deal for his men—and Jojo knew it. Jojo smiled with a shrug. “Sorry I couldn’t afford to go to college for engines.”

Diego rolled his eyes. “Wait there,” he said and raised the window before turning to me. “Are you sure? It’s dark out here, and you can’t turn on the lights or someone might see you. I know that scares you.”

Nothing happened in the dark. That was part of why it frightened me—not knowing whose footsteps were coming or going, or who might be at my back, or whether the right or wrong person had found me until it was too late to do anything about it. When Barto had come rushing down the tunnel ladder for me, I hadn’t known who he was until he’d held the flashlight under his chin. The shadows had created a ghoulish, haunting mask that hadn’t looked at all like the Barto I’d grown up around. I’d gone with him willingly, relieved to have

been found, but part of me had questioned him—and everything—until we'd emerged from the tunnel into the closet. Doors had been broken down, my mother's body had been covered, and Papá had crushed me to him for a breathless hug.

I wished there were at least lamps in the lot, but if I said that, Diego would stay when he was clearly needed inside. "I'm not nine anymore," I told him. "I'll be fine."

"I'll just go talk to Tomás and come right back." He leaned over to peck me once more. "Okay?"

"Go."

The dome light came on as he switched off the engine and handed me the keys. "If you see anything—anything *at all*—get the fuck out of here."

"Without you?" I asked.

"Yes." He shut off the light and the car went pitch dark. Not even a sliver of moonlight touched the area. He passed me the keys with the fob. "These are for the gate and the warehouse. Nothing will happen, but I don't care if a jackrabbit hops by and looks at you funny. Just go."

I nodded, gripping the keys. "Got it."

"Lock the door after me and keep the lights off." When he ducked out, I hit a button on the roof to plunge the car back into darkness. I barely made out his shadow as he met Jojo at the back door and disappeared inside the warehouse.

With desert all around me, it might've *felt* as if I was in the middle of nowhere, but I had to remember there were many people here. Specifically, men with guns who'd been hired by my father. They wouldn't let anything bad happen. They were on our side.

Then again, Cristiano had been too when he'd left me in the dark.

Even though it was hard to see, nothing would ever be as pitch-black as the underground tunnel. At least now, I wasn't covered in blood and on the precipice of a future that'd been

dimmed significantly. I'd hugged my knees to my chest and tried to stop picturing all the vibrant colors of my mom's dress darkened with blood. What if I'd been ten minutes earlier? Or had heard the shot? Would it have changed anything?

The only thing I'd actually seen in that tunnel had been Barto's shadowed face. All I'd heard was his voice, oddly as cajoling as Cristiano's hours earlier, my own sobs, and the pests scampering around me.

As my chest tightened with panic, I coaxed myself to breathe through it. But no matter how many times I told myself I was too old to be afraid of the dark, fears as deeply rooted as mine knew no age.

With a piercing screech of metal scraping metal, I spun in my seat to look out the back window but saw nothing. My heartbeat echoed in my ears. I turned forward again. The time on the dash changed. In an alternate universe, Pilar and I were starting *Revenge of the Sith*. I closed my eyes and hummed the opening bars to *Star Wars*.

Like a clap of thunder, rumbling motorcycle engines jarred me back to reality. As two bikes pulled up to the driver's side, I ducked into a ball on the floorboard. It went silent again. A large shadow passed Diego's window. My heart pounded as the other biker approached. Keys jingled from somewhere. A silhouette peered into the car. On what looked like a beanie or hat, I made out the small but distinct glowing outline of a white sugar skull. A *calavera*.

They were Cristiano's men.

At Diego's warehouse.

Which held every last gram of the Maldonado product.

Diego had been right—Cristiano *did* have something to do with the robberies. And it looked like he was back for more.

Diego had told me to go if I saw anything suspicious, but he had to know I'd never leave him stranded. I had an opportunity to warn him, and I needed to take it.

NATALIA

The Maldonados wouldn't hesitate to kill Diego if he lost any more of their shipment. That was why this deal had been haunting Diego's nights since the first theft. I had no idea how the Calaveras had found the top-secret warehouse, but I knew why they were here—for the drugs.

As soon as the skull-adorned bikers stepped away from Diego's car, I opened the glovebox to get my cell. I sent Diego a hurried text that some Calaveras were out back. The keys to the Mercedes dug into my palm, but I wouldn't leave him here.

I stared at my screen, praying for a response. I couldn't take the chance that these men would ambush Diego and turn the situation with the Maldonados critical. Or worse—hurt him. When a minute had passed without a response, I stuck my phone in the neckline of my dress and sat up. I didn't see the men anywhere, but I couldn't see much to begin with.

I could help. I had to. I knew what it was to feel helpless during and after a tragedy, and it was a form of torture, especially paired with grief. Tonight, I could move soundlessly and use the element of surprise to my advantage to hopefully reach Diego before they did.

I fumbled for the fob to make sure I had the right set of keys, then quietly opened the car door. I ducked behind the side panel, listening as my eyes adjusted. The area seemed clear, so I tiptoed toward the back door, where I deftly tried each key until the lock finally gave.

The door opened to a wide, dark hallway with a light at the end of it. I tugged down the hem of my dress and felt my way along one wall, stepping carefully over boxes. I almost rolled my heel on some screws but managed to steady myself against a crate. As I got closer, men's voices and the *clink* of what sounded like metal tools carried through the doorway. I listened for yelling, threats, or arguing but heard nothing of the sort.

When I'd reached the end of the hall, I inhaled a deep breath and peeked in. It was a garage with two eighteen-wheeler trucks parked side by side. The one closest to me had its hood popped. Diego worked underneath it, standing on a stepladder with a tool belt around his waist and his sleeves rolled.

I scanned the room for the men I'd seen. I recognized my father's soldiers as they unloaded cartons from an armored vehicle, but others didn't look familiar at all. Hadn't Diego said only their most trusted men were here?

When I returned my eyes to the semi, Diego had his phone out. After reading the screen, he looked toward the doorway, and his eyes widened when he saw me. Wiping his hands on a rag, he nodded for me to get back in the hall. I hid as he said something about the engine to the other men. Moments later, he came around the corner and nearly knocked me over.

He grasped my shoulders. "You okay?" he whispered.

"I saw men in Calavera clothing outside," I rushed out. "I think they were sneaking in the back door."

"Yeah, I know. They're with us."

I blinked twice as my mouth fell open. "*What?*"

"This is Cristiano's warehouse." Diego took his suit jacket from over his elbow, put it around my shoulders, and moved me farther from the doorway. "We decided to store everything here after our locations were compromised."

I leaned in and spoke softly. "But what if Cristiano is behind the attacks?"

“It wasn’t my decision, believe me, but we’re in a crunch.” Diego frowned. “I had no other option. I just hope Cristiano has enough of a reason not to sabotage us.”

I eased back. “You mean because he might be planning to take it all over.”

“Right.” Diego glanced over his shoulder. “Jojo says everything’s been quiet. They’re even getting along with Cristiano’s guys. But you still shouldn’t be in here.”

“I don’t want to go back to the car,” I said. “The dark ... it just takes me back to being down there.”

“I get it.” He pulled the jacket closed and kissed my forehead. “I actually feel safer with you inside. The engine isn’t fixed yet, but I see the problem. Tomás can probably take it from here.”

“I have two hours before I have to be home. I’d feel better if you guys just fixed the problem,” I said. “Because if you can’t get the truck to start ... then what?”

“Then I can’t make half the delivery tomorrow,” he said. “And all our plans go to shit.”

“Then you should handle it. I’ll just stay hidden.”

“Not here. People are coming and going.” He glanced toward the ceiling. “We take breaks on the roof. You could go up there, because I assure you, no one’s taking a fucking break tonight. There are lights too. You still have those keys?”

I held up the set. He picked through them until he found the one he was looking for, then walked by me to open the door to the expansive warehouse. He flipped some switches and fluorescent lights flickered on as I entered.

My heels echoed through the building that stored stacks of massive wooden crates and heavy-duty machinery. Attached to one wall was an office with storage lockers. “What is all this?” I asked.

“Calavera contraband. Artillery. Semi-automatics, grenades, drones, IEDs—that kind of thing.”

I turned in a circle. No wonder this place was so dangerous. “Where’s it all going?”

“Most of it is coming. Smuggled from up north so criminals like us can organize and protect our product. From each other and from law enforcement.” He pointed across the warehouse to a staircase. “Just take that up to the access door on the roof. Up there, you’ll see lounge chairs and stuff.”

“What if someone comes up?”

“Nobody else has keys to this side of the warehouse except me and Cristiano’s right-hand man, who’s not here tonight. But the door locks automatically behind you, so just in case, take the keys.” He kissed me quickly. “I’ll be up shortly.”

I held Diego’s jacket closed as I crossed the room, climbed the stairs to the second level, and continued up a short access hall. At the end stood a single door with a long glass window big enough for me to glimpse the sky.

I stepped out onto the roof. Outdoor LED lights guided me through rows of solar panels and across a helipad.

I found an area of loungers and camping chairs where the men must’ve taken their breaks, picked up a *sarape* blanket, and sat underneath it near a portable grill. Clusters of stars were the only light in the black, horizonless desert. Behind me, the town twinkled. In that direction, light and life thrived in the dark while the desert had killed the most resilient of men. Why had I chosen to face the direction that was nothing but desert? Why confront Cristiano when being on his radar could only lead to trouble?

Darkness called to me.

That didn’t mean I had to answer.

It’d been too easy to enmesh myself in Cristiano’s game. Too natural to succumb to the shadows that swarmed my nightmares. Cristiano had said this life lived in me like a heart. Maybe that was true, but hearts could be replaced. A brain couldn’t. I wasn’t going to walk toward darkness like my mother had.

I leaned my head back. As adrenaline from my emotional and mental warfare with Cristiano wore off, I drifted in and out of consciousness until my phone dinged with a text from Diego that he was on his way up.

I went to meet him at the door. He slipped his arms inside my jacket and scooped me up by my waist, walking us backward. “Nice up here, isn’t it? You wouldn’t expect it to be.”

“I can count every star.”

“Funny, I’m seeing stars too ...” He captured my mouth for a kiss. “Put your legs around me.”

He lifted me by my ass, and I locked my ankles at his lower back. “Did you fix the engine?” I asked.

“It’s all good.” He pecked me. “Everything’s on schedule to leave late-morning.” His lips brushed the underside of my jaw. “Border patrol is expecting us. Law enforcement is standing by to escort us.” He moved his mouth down my neck, warming me with his breath. “We’re closer and closer to freedom.”

That explained his sudden good mood. I raised my eyes to the sky as he sucked and nibbled the tender skin along my throat. “We’re so close,” I said, nearly moaning.

“We are.”

“And we’ve been *so* good.”

I felt his smile against my skin. “We have.”

“Almost saintly.”

He laughed hotly into the curve of my neck. “I didn’t know saints kissed this way.”

My dress inched up the backs of my thighs. He helped it along until my thong was almost exposed. I lifted up to readjust, and the length of him pressed solid between my legs, eliciting my gasp and his pained groan. He wanted me. He was ready for me.

Maybe it was being out in the open, but I was hit with the uneasy question of what my mother would think if she was looking down now. Would she understand Diego and I were meant to be as she and my father had been? They were younger than me when they married. And Diego's optimism was contagious. Finally, I felt as if he wanted to start over in California more than he needed the constant threat of danger that made cartel life both treacherous and exhilarating.

He lowered me onto the cushion of a chaise lounge and kneeled at my feet to remove my shoes. He kissed the inside of my ankle, and I shivered as he grazed his five o'clock shadow up the inside of my leg. He climbed over me, and fixed his mouth on mine, his kiss becoming hungry as our tongues met fast and slippery. "I want you so bad, Tali," he said, panting. "I can't wait any longer to bury myself inside you."

His bold words thrilled me, and as he kissed his way down my collarbone and chest, I doubted my decision to wait. Diego and I were destined. Tomorrow would go well, and he'd come to California.

If it didn't, then I'd have bigger worries than my virginity.

If anything went wrong, wouldn't I wish I'd had this night with him?

We were as good as committed to each other. Why wait for a ceremony?

Diego paused, lifting his head. "Where'd you go, *princesa*?"

"I'm here. I was just trying to remember why we're waiting."

"How much of that vodka did you drink?" he asked with a haphazard smile.

"It's not that. I feel fine. I'm just ..."

"Horny?"

I laughed. "That goes without saying."

"You have no idea how much it turns me on to know that *you're* turned on." He sat back on his calves. "But if you have

to think about whether you're ready, then we shouldn't go any further."

I sat up on my elbows, awed by his restraint. By his *gallantry*. "Really?" I asked.

"Our first time isn't going to be on top of a warehouse. Or any piece of property that belongs to my fucking brother." He stretched out next to me, and I lifted my head to settle into the crook of his arm. "Damn," he said. "It feels good to lie down."

"Do you have to come back here after you drop me off?"

"Yeah I will, even though Jojo told me to go home and sleep since I need to be alert during the delivery."

I glanced up at him. "You're going with them tomorrow?"

"I have to." With his eyes on the sky, his jaw squared as he swallowed. "It's too important for me not to be there."

My heart sank. The last shipment to attempt to cross the border had been blown up, killing two men. "Aren't you more valuable here?" I asked. "Like those people in the movies who stay in the control center during a shuttle launch?"

Diego kissed my temple when I shuddered. "I'll be all right. Don't worry. I'm more resilient than you think, and I'm not planning to meet God any time soon."

I let his resolve soothe me. Because it was that same determination in his voice that told me I wouldn't be able to talk him out of going. A sense of duty ran almost as deeply as loyalty within the cartel. Diego would see this through to the end.

I wanted to be content to sit in peace with Diego and take in these rare moments we had alone, but because the past had crept up on me in the car, my mind kept flashing there. The nebulous shape of my mother's blood on the cold tile. The black, cold-as-steel Glock engulfed by Cristiano's hand. I smelled gunpowder and expensive perfume and heard my father's sobs, as subdued as thunder, the night he'd returned home from his trip. My mother had struggled to warn me about Cristiano. If he hadn't shot her, why had she looked so scared as she'd pleaded with him for my life?

I'd locked these memories away, but Cristiano's presence dredged up more each day. His cryptic words earlier had wormed their way into my consciousness. I'd gotten good at pushing the darkness away, but tonight, it pushed back.

Were there other things about that day I hadn't noticed? Could someone else have gotten into the house somehow? I'd spent almost half of my life seeing Cristiano as a protector—but I'd spent more of it thinking of him as my mother's murderer. Diego, too, had believed the worst in his brother for a long time.

Diego squeezed me closer. "You got quiet. You all right?"

"Are *you*?" I asked.

His eyebrows drew together. "Why?"

"We've talked a lot about how I'm dealing with everything, but I haven't really asked what it's like for you to have Cristiano back—and to consider he might not have done this."

He scratched the bridge of his nose. "I ... I'm not sure it matters. Whether Cristiano murdered Bianca or not, too much damage has been done." His chest expanded with a deep inhale. "There's no chance Cristiano and I could repair our relationship."

"Even if he's proven innocent?" I asked. "I've spent a long time blaming him for this too, but as much as I don't trust him, I *do* trust my father."

"Cristiano's not innocent," Diego said without an ounce of doubt. "But neither am I."

I cocked my head into the nook of his shoulder. "What?"

"It's beginning to hit me that Cristiano and I ..." He shifted in the chair. "We're more similar than I'd like to admit."

Diego and Cristiano—*similar*? Aside from sharing some physical attributes, they were night and day to me. "You're not like him," I said, tracing my index finger over the stubble shading his chin. "Not in a million years."

I lifted my head when Diego repositioned his arm under me, as if he couldn't get comfortable. "He betrayed our family," Diego said, "and I betrayed him."

"You mean Cristiano betrayed my father ...?"

"No. Mine." He paused, lowering his eyes from the sky to the desert. "When Costa killed my parents, I didn't fully grasp the business they were in. I do now. I understand why they couldn't continue down that path." His face screwed up as if he'd bitten into something sour. "But they didn't need to die for it."

Diego didn't talk about his parents much, but when he did, he got pensive. Still, I'd never questioned that he understood why their death had to happen.

"Our families had a pact not to get into human trafficking. Your parents broke it," I reminded him, flattening my hand over his chest. His heart beat strong against my palm. "But the real reason Papá did what he did was because they plotted against him."

"I know. I get it. But they're my blood, Natalia."

"That doesn't excuse everything under the sun. It *can't*."

"I thought it did. Cristiano went against my parents because he didn't agree with how they ran their business. At the time, I thought him a traitor—and I still do." He wiped his forehead with his shirtsleeve and blew out a breath. "I didn't think anything should ever break the bonds of family. But then I did that exact thing to Cristiano."

"It takes courage to resist blind loyalty," I said soothingly, trying to comfort him.

"Or does it take courage to stick by family no matter what?" he asked. I heard the struggle in his voice and wondered how long he'd been thinking all this. "As Cristiano couldn't excuse my parents for getting involved in things like forced labor or sex slavery, I couldn't excuse him for taking your mother's life—and I turned on him. My own blood."

"You had no other choice, Diego." When he didn't respond, I added, "There has to be a line somewhere, even for

family.”

“I’m not sure I agree. Sometimes, I get overwhelmed by helplessness wondering if I betrayed my family by joining yours. I hate Cristiano for what he did to Bianca, but perhaps doing nothing was just as bad.”

Doing *something* would’ve meant retaliation. “Did you ever think of taking vengeance for their death?”

He didn’t answer right away. As seconds ticked by, I grew uneasy. There was only one person Diego would take revenge on. My father.

“In my darkest moments, yes,” he admitted.

My heart thumped once. I’d never heard Diego mention a desire for retribution, but I supposed that was human nature. It wasn’t as if *I’d* never wondered how things might’ve turned out differently if I’d actually known how to operate the gun I’d pulled on Cristiano all those years ago.

“But that’s how you and Cristiano are different,” I said, balling his shirt in my fist. “*You* are good. You never would’ve acted on those feelings.”

“At the core of it, though, Tali—we’ve each committed the highest sin in this world. We turned against family, and that’s how we’re alike.” His body depressed into the chair with a long exhale. “It’s why we can never repair what’s left between us. Even if we’re forced to do business together as Costa wants, even if we find a way to make things right again—the distrust between us will never go away.”

“You keep saying Cristiano turned against family,” I said, trying to decipher what exactly he meant. Did he mean because Cristiano had joined our cartel? “When he hurt my mom, he was close enough to my parents to be *like* family, but they weren’t blood as you continue to point out.”

“I’m not talking about what he did to your family. I’m talking about what he did to *mine*.”

What? I furrowed my eyebrows. I didn’t understand what he meant, but as Cristiano had warned me hours earlier—I was

starting to believe there *was* more to my mother's murder than I knew.

I sat up on one elbow to look down at him. "What are you saying?" I asked.

"You asked if I ever think of vengeance," he said slowly. "I do. But not against your father. He may have pulled the trigger, but Cristiano is the one who told Costa what my parents were doing, and what they were planning."

It took a moment for his words to sink in. I'd never questioned how my father had learned that the de la Rosas were conspiring against him. I wouldn't have guessed the information that would get them killed would come from within their own family. "Cristiano had your parents killed?"

"Yes. That's the betrayal I mean." Diego glanced away. "My brother has no loyalty. He never has. It's what I've been trying to tell Costa. I can't trust him ... but I *can* trust a man's motivations."

"What are his motivations?" I asked. My mind raced as this new door opened. Could this help reconcile any holes in my past? "Why is he back? I thought it was to avenge his parents' death, but if he caused it, then Papá was right. He's not here for revenge. So what does he want?"

Diego searched the night sky as if it might hold the answers we needed. "By this time tomorrow, the Maldonado deal will either be done or it won't," he said. "I don't know why Cristiano is here. But I suspect we'll find out soon enough."

NATALIA

My mother would sometimes braid her hair into a thick, black arrow she wore over one shoulder. It was that way now, but tonight was the first time it twinkled with stars. They winked at me as she held my hand and led me to my bed.

“It’s time to sleep, Natasha,” she said.

“*Natalia*,” I corrected as I got under the covers.

She kneeled next to me. Heavy bracelets *clinked* on her wrists as she touched my forehead, chest, and each shoulder. “You’re old enough to know better now,” she said.

“I’m only nine.”

“The truth is in you like a heart. Like blood in your veins. Like bones.” She smiled. “Kiss me goodnight.”

I sat up and hugged her neck, resting my head on her shoulder. Somewhere on the compound a shot rang out.

“*Mami?*”

“It’s okay, *mariposita*.” She laid me back on the bed. When she drew back, blood covered my nightgown. With another shot, she fell over me.

I couldn’t breathe. From somewhere in the house, my father screamed at me to get down, but I was stuck under her body. I curled up under the bedspread and hid from the next round of shots. This time, they kept coming, an endless *rat-a-tat-tat*.

“Natalia!”

Jolted out of my dream, I launched forward, gasping for breath, as if someone had been sitting on my chest.

The sky was lightening from black to indigo. Sweat trickled down my temple. I was still in Diego's jacket ... on the roof. We'd fallen asleep. My father would be looking for us, and—

“Get *down*.” Diego shoved me over the side of the chaise, and I landed on my shoulder on the concrete.

I hadn't dreamed the shots. With another round, I covered my ears and moved my head under the chair. Most everyone I'd known had heard the echoes of a turf war at some point, but this wasn't happening *somewhere*. These shots were being fired right underneath us.

“Stay here.” Diego crawled to the side of the roof, rose to his knees, and looked over. “Fuck.” He ran both hands through his hair and made two fists. “*Fuck*.”

“What?” I cried just as the shots stopped.

“Shh.” He motioned for me to be quiet before slinking back. “The warehouse is under attack. Stay up here.”

“*What?*” My heart beat hard enough to shake my whole body. I reached under the chair to grab his elbow. “Don't leave me.”

“They're trying to steal what's left, Tali. You know I can't let them. I can't, or else—” He inhaled a breath. “That product down there is the difference between life or death for me.”

“They could *shoot* you.”

“I won't let that happen.” He dragged himself close enough to kiss me. “It'll be okay.”

“Diego,” I said shakily. “Let me come with you.”

“Talia, you *must* hide under here. Give me the keys. Listen. Are you listening?” He took the keys from my shaky hands. “Do you have your phone?”

I nodded quickly. “Yes.”

“If I don’t make it back, stay hidden.” His words were soothing, but I heard the crack in his voice. When more shots sounded, he flinched. “Don’t come looking for me. Text Barto—he’ll find you. I’ll be back for you in no time.”

I clung to his arm, tears blurring my vision. Was this what I’d been warned of? *I see pain. I see betrayal and violence. And much death.* What were the chances Diego would go downstairs and never return? They weren’t odds I wanted to take. I choked back a sob. “Don’t go.”

“I have to, *princesa.*”

My hair fell over my right eye, but I refused to release him. “I’ll come with you.”

“It’s too dangerous. It’s for your own protection, and those are my men down there. I can’t leave them stranded.”

“But I need you.” My heart had already been irreparably damaged losing one person—I couldn’t say good-bye to another. I wouldn’t abandon Diego. “You can’t die. You can’t.”

“I’m not dying today, Talia. No way in hell.” He lifted the black veil of my hair and settled it over my shoulder. “When I go, you’ll be by my side, okay? I’m with you, life or death.”

With a thick throat, I nodded. “Life or death,” I rasped.

“Good girl.” He kissed my forehead. “I love you.”

He angled to get his 9mm from its holster, maneuvered out from under the chair, and sprinted across the roof.

“I love you,” I whispered back.

Night’s cloak lifted as the sun peeked over the distant mountains. With the whir of a helicopter, I curled all the way under the chaise and clutched Diego’s jacket closed around myself. A spotlight flashed over the roof. With a whistle from above, an explosion on the ground shook the building. The helicopter circled one more time, dropping grenades that rattled every bone in my body. I covered my mouth. Tires screeched, and the helicopter flew off.

With unsteady fingers, I shot Barto a quick text. After what could've been thirty seconds or five minutes of silence, I crawled out. The helicopter was nowhere in sight, so I peeked above the concrete ledge. The rising sun cast rich purple shadows over a vast desert. Behind me, the town woke up, cars honking and people screaming. Men yelled below me. The blasts had stopped, so I risked getting to my feet to look all the way over the side of the roof.

Flames raged below, licking the side of the building, jumping from one wood container to the next as black smoke billowed from the windows. I had to get off the roof now, or I'd be trapped. I needed to get to Diego. I snatched my shoes off the ground, ran for the door, and grabbed the handle, but it was locked.

I slammed my fists against the industrial metal door, then my stiletto against the sliver of glass. I traded it for a discarded lead pipe and smashed the window. It shattered, leaving a space just big enough for me to get an arm through. Smoke wafted out, curling around me before it disintegrated in the wind. My eyes watered, and my nostrils burned. I whipped off Diego's jacket to cover my mouth, knotting the sleeves at the back of my head.

I rose onto the tips of my toes, feeling around. My skin heated fast while glass sliced into my forearm, but finally, I managed to grab the handle. I cranked it, opened the door, and ran down the stairs holding the jacket in place. I tried to blink away the burn blurring my vision as plumes of smoke surrounded me. I leaned over the railing and jumped back as heat scorched my hand. Movement below caught my eye. It looked as if men were running in and out. I waved the jacket and screamed for help. Flames engulfed almost everything on the ground floor, consuming the base of the stairs. If I didn't get through, I'd have to jump over the side of the roof.

I started down the steps when someone caught my waist from behind, picked me up, and carried me back up the stairwell. "Diego?" I cried.

Strong, sinewy forearms pinned me to a hard body, easily wrapping around my torso. A voice rumbled against my back,

deep and full of grit. “Try again.”

Cristiano.

I struggled to turn, and when we were back on the roof, I kicked his shin. He released me, and I stumbled back, spinning to face him.

“What are you doing here?” I choked out.

“Ladder,” he said, coming toward me. “*Now.*”

“What ladder?” I backed away. With my eyes watering, he almost seemed like an apparition from the night before, still in his open-collar white dress shirt and wrinkled suit pants. It didn’t take long for me to connect the pieces. “You did this.”

“We have to get out of here.”

“I’m not going *anywhere* with you.” I snarled. “Your brother’s inside.”

“You have no other choice.” He grabbed me by the arm. I wrestled with him, my chest tightening in panic as he easily yanked me toward the ladder. Suddenly, I was nine years old again and his puppet, pulled along like I weighed nothing, forced to the edge of nothingness.

I coughed as smoke suffocated my lungs. “Let go.”

He took my shoulders and shook me. “*Wake up*, Natalia. This warehouse could blow any second.”

It hit me then what was inside—gunpowder. Artillery. Explosives. Fear gripped me as easily now as it had the last time Cristiano had torn me away from my loved ones when they needed me most. But this time, I wasn’t afraid of what Cristiano would do to me. I feared for Diego. I didn’t think I could survive the crumbling of my future if he was taken from me. I tried to wriggle free. “I have to tell him.”

“He knows. Diego can take care of himself, and if he can’t, it’s already too late.”

I pushed him away. “Fuck you. I’m not leaving him.”

“What are you going to do? If you run back in there, you’ll burn alive. Down is the only way out.” He didn’t give me a

chance to answer. In one mighty swoop, he had me off my feet and over his shoulder.

“What are you doing?” I screeched.

He strode toward the edge with no signs of stopping. For a split second, I believed he was going to launch me over the side until we reached an access ladder I hadn't noticed before. “What the fuck were you doing up here?” he growled, descending down the side of the building swiftly, as if he didn't have an adult female hanging over his back. “I told you to go straight home.”

“He's your *brother*.”

Upside down, I spotted Diego's Mercedes. We were at the back gate. The fire roared on all sides but hadn't reached the lot yet. On the ground, Cristiano set me on my feet and scanned my legs and dress. In the cold light of breaking dawn, he seared me with a different kind of heat than he had the night before. He didn't seem to like what he saw anymore. “Get on the horse,” he said.

Near the open gate, a man on a horse held the reins of a rearing black stallion. I wasn't going anywhere without Diego. I turned to run around front where the semis were parked, but Cristiano snatched my elbow, pulled me back, and hoisted me up. I struggled, trying to kick him as he carried me toward the exit. He put a hand to the horse's nose, and when it'd calmed, Cristiano dropped me on its back.

“You can't do this,” I said, my throat thick. “We can't leave Diego here.”

He grabbed the horn and butt of the saddle, trapping me. “Your misguided loyalty is going to get you killed, but not today.” He pulled himself up, took the reins in one hand, and wrapped an arm around my waist to secure my back to his front. “Hold on,” he said and spurred the horse with a “*Hyah!*”

The stallion jerked into motion, and we exited into the desert. I squirmed against Cristiano, fighting to look back. The other rider took off in the opposite direction to catch up with a group of men on horses. I braced myself for a bone-rattling

explosion, and another irrevocable shift in my life. “He’s going to *die*,” I said.

“Cockroaches survive fire. Butterflies, on the other hand ...” He tightened his hold on me. “They go up in smoke. You’ll see your Romeo again, I guarantee it.”

“Let me go.” My imagination jumped ahead to Diego’s funeral. The only black dress I had was the one on my body. The last one I’d seen him in. A scrap of fabric. I’d have to buy one. Or dye something black. Another dress for another funeral ...

“Please.” My voice cracked, but I clawed at the solid bar of his forearm, trying to free myself, prepared to fall off if I had to. I didn’t expect him to release me, so when he did, I braced to hit the ground. He grabbed me again, capturing my upper arms and pinning them to my sides. “I can’t leave Diego there.”

“You’re not,” he said. “I’m forcing you away.”

“Take me back.”

“Have you learned nothing from your mother’s death?” Cristiano held me in a grip so tight, his fingertips dug into my bicep. “If you’re drawn to this life, fine—but you can’t be so fucking reckless.”

My vocal cords protested, but I continued to fight. “I’m not drawn to it. I want no part of this.”

“You’re lying to yourself, but if you want me to make that true, say the word. I’ll put the fear of God into you and send you sprinting back to California for good.” He put his mouth to my ear. “I thought I’d scared you straight years ago, but I’m happy to try again.”

In that moment, any thoughts of Diego vanished. I remembered who I was with—the devil himself. “Where are you taking me?” I asked, twisting my torso against him.

Riding one-handed, he slid his coarse palm higher up my bare shoulder. “I suppose I could take you anywhere, couldn’t I? Imagine if I showed up at the gates of hell with an angel like you.”

Where young women were trapped and used, bought and sold. Dread spread through my body to my toes and fingers. There were worse things than death in this world, and Cristiano wanted to teach me a lesson. My heart hammered as his suit pants scraped my bare outer thighs. “But—why would you ... you can’t—”

“Mmm, there it is, the fear,” he said as I struggled to beat back my panic. “Don’t worry. You get used to the underworld’s fire.” He put his scratchy cheek to mine. “And I suppose, in exchange, *I* could be persuaded to give heaven a try.”

We’d left the warehouse behind and were galloping along the edge of town, toward the thick of trees that surrounded the compound. Even when I recognized we were on our way home, my shivering didn’t subside. The power in Cristiano’s every touch, in his words, reminded me that despite the time that had passed, and despite the fact that I was no longer a child—I still held no chance against him. His grip on me never relented. He was in control of my fate.

I couldn’t fight Cristiano. I was in both God’s and the devil’s hands now. Wherever he chose to take me, I had to go.

“That’s it,” Cristiano said when I sank against him, his voice suddenly hoarse. “I suspect you’ll even like the feeling of surrender.”

For possibly the first time since it’d happened, I recalled crying into Cristiano’s neck as he’d taken me down the ladder into the tunnel. I’d had a strange albeit fleeting sense of safety. Despite all the things he’d done and the rumors I’d heard, I’d been programmed as a girl to see him as a protector no matter what he was, and somehow, a piece of that trust in him still remained.

The sun rose between two mountains as we steered away from endless desert. Wind whipped my hair the way it hadn’t in years—not since the last time my mother and I had ridden the Cruz property, cataloguing different types of vegetation, a project for my science class that’d turned into a regular weekend activity for us. The fresh morning air felt good—

reinvigorating even. The thought came with a wave of guilt. How could I think that when there was a possibility Diego had taken his last breath?

Cristiano rode up the long drive toward the house. A team of men in black scurried around trucks and tanks like ants on a hill. They stopped to look as we approached, some of them raising their rifles, only lowering them once they saw me.

Cristiano halted the stallion, hopped down, and reached for me. I slid off the other side and gasped as I landed on my bare feet. Pain shot through my soles, but I ran into Barto's open arms.

"We were looking for you all night," he hissed.

"There was an attack," I rushed out. "And a fire at the warehouse—"

"I got your text." Barto frowned as he rubbed between my eyebrows and showed me his soot-darkened thumb. "Diego took you there?"

"Is he alive?"

"I just spoke to him."

Barto clutched me to him as my knees gave out in relief. With gritted teeth, I turned my glare on Cristiano, who stared daggers right back at us, his eyes narrowing on Barto. "He did this," I told Barto.

"Who, Cristiano?" he asked. "Did he hurt you?"

"No, but—"

I jumped with a *bang* behind me. My father stormed down the front steps, the door swinging in his wake. "Natalia Lourdes King Cruz. Where the fuck have you been?" He stopped abruptly when he saw Cristiano. "You brought her back?"

"I called him about the warehouse fire," Barto said.

"I was already on my way, so I said I'd look for her," Cristiano said.

“*And?*” Papá demanded. In a rumpled button-down and jeans, he looked as if he’d gotten dressed in the dark. “You have as much in that warehouse as we do.”

“More,” Cristiano said.

“Yet you bring my daughter back to me yourself? The warehouse could explode. You should be there putting out the fire.”

Cristiano pushed back some of his jet-black hair that had fallen over his forehead. “She was stuck on the roof,” he said. “Everything else can be replaced. Protecting your family has always been my priority.”

My father’s ashen face stilled. He charged forward and shook Cristiano’s hand with vigor. “Your courage will be rewarded. What the devil was she doing there?”

Cristiano glanced over. “Ask her.”

Papá turned on me. Shadows marked his face like bruises. “What happened? Why were you there?”

As my immediate fears of losing Diego and being kidnapped by Cristiano subsided, I was left with my father’s fury. “*Lo siento, Papá.*”

“You’re *sorry?*” His voice rose as he stepped toward me. “Answer me when I question you. *¿Qué la chingada* were you doing there?”

I tried to stand tall in nothing more than a skimpy dress as my father, all his men, and Cristiano stared at me. “I—I ...”

“She spent the night there,” Cristiano supplied. “With Diego.”

Father took one look at my outfit, hair, and makeup, and he grabbed me by the arm. “He better pray he burns alive. I will kill him for this.”

“No,” I cried. I’d managed to keep my emotions in check since I’d been torn from my dream earlier, but now, they overcame me. “It’s not what you think,” I said as my voice broke. “We were talking and we fell asleep—”

“Get inside.” He shoved me up the stairs to the house.
“Indecent *brat*.”

“Papi—”

“Do you think this is a game?” he bellowed, throwing me into the foyer so I landed on my behind. Standing over me, he seethed, “It wasn’t enough I lost my wife and the love of my life? I should lose you too? You want me to spend the rest of my days mourning my entire family?”

While anger reddened his face, pain was clear in his eyes. My chest stuttered as I tried to hold in my breaking sobs. “No. I’m s-sorry.”

“I have *enemies*, Natalia. Do you know what they do to daughters like you? Kidnap, rape, and beat you half to death as —”

“Enough,” Cristiano said.

“As they videotape it all for me. Then they cut your neck. Is that the memory you want to leave me with?”

My throat closed hearing him talk more candidly than he ever had around me. “But I was with Diego—”

“You will never—*ever*—see him again. You’re forbidden.”

I closed my fist against the tile. “You can’t do that,” I said.

“Do not talk back to me.” He raised his hand, and I ducked to cover my head. “My father would’ve belted me a hundred times by your age for all the ways you’ve defied me.”

“Enough,” Cristiano repeated. It was the calmest, most controlled threat I’d ever heard. I peeked out from under my arms. Cristiano filled the doorway but said no more.

Papá started as if broken from a trance. He began to shake and lowered his arm before limping forward to steady himself on the foyer table. “I can’t lose you too,” he said shakily as tears filled his eyes. “Nothing scares me more than that possibility, *Lourdesita*.”

He hadn’t called me “Little Lourdes” since before I’d left for school. And he’d never even come close to laying a finger

on me. He was in pain. I scrambled to my feet and hugged his waist. “I love you. I never want to hurt you.”

His heart pounded against my cheek. “I’m—I’m sorry, *mija*. You’re not the one I’m angry with, and you know I would never ...”

“*Yo sé*, Papi. I know.” I buried my face in his chest and cried until he kissed the top of my head.

“All right, Talia. I have to deal with this fire. Go upstairs and get cleaned up.” He pulled away and said over my head, “Ride with me.”

“I have transportation,” Cristiano answered.

I’d almost forgotten he was there.

“I’ll see you at the warehouse then,” my father said on his way out the front door. He disappeared into a black car. Trucks rumbled and shuddered with power. The first in a line of cars tore down the winding road, and the rest followed, kicking up clouds of dust.

The house became eerily and unusually quiet. For everyone except a couple guards out front to leave, it had to be serious. For them to leave me alone with a killer, it had to be life or death.

And it was. Reality dawned. The warehouse ... the goods inside. The damage done was enough to seal Diego’s fate. There was no escaping a loss of this magnitude.

“You’re responsible for this,” I said. Had Cristiano’s talk of games the night before been a warning? If so, he’d made a move that would put us all in the crosshairs of the Maldonados. “My father trusted you. *Diego* trusted you, and you tried to kill him.”

“If I had, he’d be dead.”

“Like your parents?”

He took a step toward me. “Meaning?”

“Diego told me everything. If you’d have your own parents killed, you wouldn’t hesitate to do the same to anyone

else.”

As he advanced, I retreated until I was up against a wall. “And you think I’d destroy my own livelihood to do it?” he asked.

If it meant getting what he wanted, I wouldn’t put it past him. Which suggested he’d go to great lengths to grant his own wishes. To position himself at my father’s side and strike when Papá least expected it. To see Diego gone.

To take back what he thought he was owed.

What did loyalty mean to a man who’d betrayed and been betrayed by those he’d trusted? Even if he hadn’t committed the murder, what loyalty remained after eleven years on the run? A feral cat could be domesticated, but it would never stop looking over its shoulder.

If Diego’s suspicions were right, then Cristiano wouldn’t stop until he got what he’d come for.

The question was—did I fit into this somehow?

The answer, I feared, I was about to learn.

“My father’s expecting you at the warehouse,” I reminded him.

“I’m not going to the warehouse.” Cristiano wore no expression. He spoke with the ease and confidence of a predator who’d cornered its prey and had the time and proclivity to savor picking it apart. “I’m staying right where I am. Now, come here.”

NATALIA

Was this how my mother had felt? Cornered by Cristiano with nobody in the house to protect her? *No*. It was worse for her. Cristiano wasn't breaking my trust like he had hers. And he couldn't destroy my sense of safety in my own home. He'd already done that years ago. It wasn't the first time Cristiano and I had squared off under this roof.

His eyes lingered over my dress. "Did my brother do that?"

I followed his gaze to the blood and dirt smeared on my legs. As soon as I noticed the bruises on my forearm and wrists, and the cuts on my ankles and feet, they began to throb. "I already told you, he isn't like that."

Cristiano came toward me, and I backed away, suddenly aware of the glass wedged in my feet. When he was close enough that I could inhale his smoky mix of sweat and burnt wood, he said, "You can limp to your bedroom, or I can carry you there."

My breath caught in my throat. "My bedroom? Why?"

"Use your imagination."

I could think of no reason Cristiano would want to take me upstairs except for the obvious one. What chance did I stand against him? He might as well have been made of marble for all his muscle. Resisting him would be like fighting a statue. He knew that. Maybe he wanted my struggle. If it was he who'd tried this with my mother, her fight had cost her her life.

But if he touched me, he'd lose any shot at uniting our families. I had to believe that was reason enough to stop him from hurting me.

"My father would murder you in cold blood," I warned.

"Understood." He moved aside to let me pass.

With Cristiano at my back, I crossed the foyer to the dining room and made my way to the stairs. On the second floor, I stopped at my closed door, remembering how I'd skipped down the hall to my mother's room. He reached past me, turned the handle, and pushed it open. "Inside," he said.

I took a breath and stepped over the threshold. With the curtains drawn, my room was dark. He shut the door behind himself, stood at my back, and moved my hair over my shoulder before lowering the zipper of my dress.

"Strip," he said.

Fear and curiosity warred inside me. Was Cristiano so weak that he'd risk his chance at an empire just to have me? If he raped me, killed me, or both, there'd be no question as to his guilt for doing the same to my mother. He'd be back on the run.

My trust in him was buried somewhere deep, and I drew from it now. I was hit hard with a memory I hadn't thought of in over a decade—my mother and I encountering a young Cristiano while gathering flowers in the garden for one of Mamá's parties. I had to have been five or six, which would've made him almost twenty. He'd never picked flowers, he'd told us, and we'd giggled as Mamá had made him carry our baskets of bouquets around for the afternoon. It was one of the only instances I could remember him without a scowl. Even when he'd promised me he was a monster far worse than any that dared hide under my bed, he'd spoken gravely.

"My mother is watching," I said into the dark. If any part of him regretted what'd happened to her, maybe he'd soften.

"I'm not going to hurt you," he said.

I supposed that was the best I could ask for. To come out of this no more wounded than I already was. I pulled down my

dress and stood in my thong and strapless bra.

He placed his palm on my upper back. “Walk,” he said.

I raised my eyes to the bed in front of me. He could have me any way he wanted, and nobody would stop him. Everything I’d saved for Diego would be taken in a flash. Was there anything left of that man who’d been so devoted to our family that he’d carried baskets of flowers for us? There had to be. I wasn’t sure how I knew, but like the way he’d nonchalantly referred to Natasha, my gut told me Cristiano only wanted to see how far he could push me.

I straightened my shoulders and stepped toward the bed. When I neared the footboard, he applied pressure to my back, guiding me away from it and toward the en suite bathroom instead.

Inside, he flipped on a dim overhead light. I watched in the reflection of the mirror over the sink as he circled me, his eyes roaming over my back. He set his jaw, inspecting my body almost clinically. Just another Natasha.

He stopped at the counter to empty his pockets. With his attention diverted, I studied him back. His stark white dress shirt had been marred by smoke, ash, and what looked like blood. My blood, I realized, from when he’d carried me down the access ladder. Without thinking, I dropped my gaze and sucked in a breath at the bulge in his pants.

He glanced up at me, his watch *clinking* as he set it on the Italian marble countertop. He tightened the roll of one sleeve, securing it at his elbow, then the other. The mere sight of his powerful, sinewy forearms made me light-headed. They were weapons in their own right. Every part of him was, it seemed, down to the beast straining against his zipper. Most of the men I knew couldn’t match his strength. What chance did *I* stand against him if he tried to overpower me?

He stepped forward, towering over me, soot smudged on his admittedly handsome face—he looked the way I imagined the Grim Reaper might if he shopped in the finest apparel stores and possessed the chiseled features of a god. “Wash the cuts,” he said.

I tensed. “What?”

He moved around me and turned on the faucet to the bathtub. “The cuts on your arms and legs. I told you to watch out for glass, did I not?” He grunted. “I can’t help but think you ran through it just to spite me.”

“I did it for Diego,” I said, although it was only half-true. “And I’d do it again.”

He looked over his shoulder at me, his gaze shadowed. “So you continue to remind me, even though I was there. I watched you run into the fire for him.”

I limped to the tub. “You were wrong earlier. Butterflies aren’t delicate.”

We switched places. He pulled open my top drawer and started pushing products around. “No?”

“During a wildfire, they don’t go up in smoke. They bury themselves in soil.”

He moved to the next drawer, shoving aside my hair dryer. “Another way they’re survivors.”

I perched on the inside edge of the tub so I wouldn’t have my back to him. He kept his to me as he rifled in my drawers, his muscled back rippling under his dress shirt. He dumped my makeup bag into the sink, picking through items while I gently soaped my right arm and hand.

He went through every basket, drawer and cabinet, including the medicine one over the sink, gathering things and placing them by the side of the toilet.

I moved on to cleaning my feet. Eventually, Cristiano sat on the outside lip of the tub and held out his hand for the soap. I gave it to him, and he reached in to clean my other foot. He alternated between lathering the soap over my cuts and massaging my ankles. “What happened to your shoulder?” he asked.

I hadn’t realized I was holding it. Or the throb of pain when I raised my arm. “I fell.”

When he seemed satisfied with my feet, he stood and lowered the lid of the toilet. “Sit,” he said to me before disappearing into my bedroom.

I moved from the bath, dried myself off, and slipped on my purple satin robe. Seated on the toilet, I swayed a little, recalling the sensation of riding for the first time in over a decade. For some time, I’d craved that feeling of driving a horse again the way I had with my mother on one side, but the longer I put it off, the harder it was to get back on.

Cristiano returned with my desk chair. He sat in front of me and handed me a towel of ice. “For your shoulder.”

I inspected it as if it might be hiding mini daggers before deciding to take my chances. I held it to my arm. “Thank you.”

He took tweezers from the counter and grasped my wrist. “This is a deep one, but it’ll be the worst one.”

I’d sooner faint than show him my pain. I made a fist with my opposite hand as he squeezed my skin.

“Why were you at the warehouse?” he asked quietly as he inspected the cut. Somehow, he was more menacing when he was calm and collected than when yelling.

“Diego stopped to check on a problem.”

“And he decided *that* was the right place to fuck you? You’re a foolish girl.”

“*Foolish?*” I bit out, my temper flaring. “For your information, we barely touched.”

“I don’t believe you.”

I set my jaw. “You don’t know a single *thing* about him, me, or our relationship—”

One corner of his mouth crooked. “There it is.”

“What?”

Belatedly, dull pain radiated from a spot on my palm. He held up the tweezers to show me a thin but substantial shard of glass. “If you can take that, the rest should be easy.”

I shut my mouth. I hadn't even felt it. He'd tricked me to distract me.

His expression defaulted to a scowl as he turned over my hand to inspect my knuckles. "You should never have gone anywhere without your guards," he scolded. "Not the club, and especially not the warehouse."

"I don't need to be looked after," I said firmly, but my heart skipped. Perhaps what scared me most wasn't Cristiano's reputation, but the fact that he was unreadable. Unpredictable. That he had not only the strength to shove me down a dark tunnel but that he might do it for no other reason than to amuse himself. *How* could Father trust him?

"You'd feel differently if there wasn't anybody to look after you." He tweezed a few small pieces from my forearm. "You've never had to survive in the wild. You're just the kind of prey some predators are looking for—one with a false sense of bravery."

He had no right to accuse me of that. We'd faced off when I'd been weaponless and small enough that I'd only come up to his waist. I'd held my own for a kid. "I *have* survived," I said. "Not all danger is physical. I've navigated through a different kind of wild, one you know nothing about."

He worked silently a few moments. "You forget I've lost parents too—and a brother as far as I'm concerned. I was thrown out of the only life I knew and forced to fend for myself."

"You have only yourself to blame for the consequences of your actions."

He glanced up at me. "You still think I'm guilty?"

"Yes," I said. No matter what questions I had, he'd latch onto any weakness I showed, so I kept my mounting doubts to myself.

"Nah," he said. "I'm innocent. You know I am. Yet my brother chose not to believe me, even though it would end my life. So what do you suggest I do about that?"

I tried not to let his twisted truths worm their way into my consciousness. He was only trying to manipulate me against Diego, that was all. “*Nothing.*”

Like Diego, Cristiano had long, full lashes. But behind them, his dark, calculating eyes betrayed the differences between them. “You know I can’t let something like that slide.”

Goose bumps spread over my skin, prickling my hair under my silky robe. “So you are here for revenge.”

He returned to the task in front of him. “I reached out to him once, about four years after Bianca’s death. Did he tell you? I wanted to come home. To tell Costa the truth and pledge my loyalty to him.”

I shifted on the seat. I’d only been thirteen and already away at school. I hadn’t heard anything about Cristiano reaching out then or since. “What happened?”

“He said he’d broker a meeting between your father and me, but it was a setup. He tried to have me killed.” Holding my wrist in one hand, he ripped open a bandage with his teeth and stuck it on one of my cuts. “There’s no trust amongst us, and there never will be.”

It wasn’t as if my father or Diego told me much to begin with, but that seemed like an important detail to keep from me. And if they’d hide that, what else didn’t I know? Could I even believe Cristiano?

“What about me?” I asked quietly. “I said you were guilty too. You must think I also betrayed you.”

I swallowed when he didn’t respond. If Cristiano had anything to do with the fall of the Maldonado deal, he must’ve known they’d come after Diego—and the people he cared about. “I guess that was your plan all along. We didn’t give you a chance to prove your innocence. My father and Diego hunted you for years. Now, the Maldonados can take us all out in one fell swoop and you command both cartels.”

“If you believe that, why aren’t you running for your life?”

“I wouldn’t leave my father or Diego behind.”

“You don’t know what you’re toying with, *mamacita*,” he said, shaking his head. “Where was Diego when you were on the roof alone? *He left you behind.*”

“He had to salvage what he could of the product. When he ran downstairs, the fire hadn’t started yet. He couldn’t have known that would happen.” I adjusted the ice pack. “He was coming back for me.”

“It only matters that you believe he would’ve.”

He released my arm, and I pulled it back, cradling it to my body. “That’s not fair. Diego has been there for me my whole life.”

“It must be coincidence that staying by your side also serves his best interests.”

I wanted to ask Cristiano what he meant, but giving him the chance to spin more lies felt like a betrayal to Diego.

I bent my knee as Cristiano picked up my foot and placed it in his lap. He held my ankle in one hand and ran his fingers along my arch. I jerked but tried to hide that I was ticklish. His touch firmed and my reflex to squirm disappeared. A sharp, pleasant thrill traveled up the inside of my thigh. My instinct should’ve been to pull away, but warmth coursed through me instead. Satisfaction bloomed like surrendering to a protective embrace as arousal tightened my insides.

Cristiano had a face made to lure prey, a voice as powerful as the sensation of skin on skin, a presence that demanded my attention. But I knew the danger he presented—how could I possibly harbor any attraction to him? What had given me the confidence that he hadn’t brought me up here to hurt me? My body and mind betrayed me.

As he dug the tweezers into a particularly sensitive spot, I clenched my fist around the towel of ice and sucked in a breath. He raised his eyes to mine. “Mmm,” he said. “*Qué interesante.*”

“What’s interesting?” I breathed.

“You’re excited by a little pinch.”

“I am not. I’m in pain.”

“And a part of you likes it.” He blinked lazily at me. “A part of *me* likes it.”

I inhaled. *Please tell the heavens it is my dying wish to hear you scream.* The warmth he’d awakened in me simmered to a tingle between my legs. Why did things that should intimidate me arouse me instead? So far, his threats had been hollow, but just because Cristiano was handling me gently now didn’t mean I was in the clear.

“I’ll bet you wish your guards were here now,” he said with an almost imperceptible smile.

“I want my gun back,” I said.

He paused, then glanced up at me. “Will you learn how to use her?”

“Yes.”

He extracted more shards and wiped them on a towel before setting aside the tweezers to spread antibiotic ointment onto the wounds. “Better?” he asked when I put down the ice pack and rolled my numb shoulder.

I mumbled my agreement as he applied bandages to the deepest cuts. He smoothed his thumb back and forth over the final one to make it stick but didn’t stop there. The pad of his finger slid to my ankle, and he turned my foot over to inspect it. It tickled slightly, but resisting the urge to squirm only made me more aware of his palm as it grazed upward. His breath shallowed as he looked over my leg, then glanced at me. His pupils dilated, and his eyes grew darker.

My heart pounded, not just because his hand kept going but also with surprise for the effect I had on someone as taciturn as Cristiano. He wanted me and wasn’t hiding it. My traitorous body came alive under his firm but deliberate examination. I shouldn’t notice how good his touch felt. I *should* have cared that we were alone and nobody could hear me scream.

As Cristiano moved the hem of my robe aside, I slapped my hand over his, stopping him in his tracks. “I’m waiting

until marriage,” I blurted. I wasn’t sure why I said it, or why I thought that might deter him.

His lip curled in a way I could only interpret as angry. “A virgin?”

I swallowed as an electric current passed between us.

His fingertips dug into my thigh. “You’ve saved yourself,” he said slowly, half statement, half question. “And you think using that as an argument won’t have the opposite effect you want it to?”

My brain scrambled to keep up. It sounded as if he meant my virginity was something he’d want, but I couldn’t fathom why. I wouldn’t know what to do with a man as experienced as he was.

But I could learn.

I forced the thought away. “I’ve saved myself for Diego,” I said. “You’d be taking that away from him. From *me*.”

His nostrils flared. “You think I’d go as far as to rape you in your father’s home?”

My thigh pulsed with warmth where his hand had stopped, my skin sensitive under his rough palm. “I think back then, whatever plans you had were interrupted by my mother or by me. And I think you’re too smart to make that same mistake twice.”

His gaze drifted down between my legs, where only a silky piece of fabric hid what he so clearly wanted. “Plans? Regretfully, I have none for *you*, Natalia.”

He stood and returned to the sink to replace his watch and the contents of his pockets. I waited, tense as a bowstring, until he left the room. And I didn’t breathe again until I heard the front door close.

Once the immediate fear of what Cristiano might do subsided, a violent tremble overtook me. I waited for relief to come, but adrenaline coursed through me. Now that I was alone, I felt as if I should do something. I was safe, but would it last? How long until he returned? Until he struck again?

I hugged my shoulders, dropped to my knees on the bathroom floor, and crossed myself. I thanked *La Virgen de Guadalupe* for sparing myself and Diego.

Then I prayed I'd never see Cristiano again.

CRISTIANO

In my office overlooking *La Madrina*, I fixed a drink. Mid-afternoon, the nightclub was quiet as the cleaning crew scrubbed the downstairs floors and walls. In a few hours, the bar staff would prepare for all the sinners who'd spend their Good Friday night celebrating tonight's theme—*la iglesia roja*. Red church. Sturdy construction would mute the thump of bass, and the dancefloor's crimson glow would make my office look like an opium den.

I'd been up most of the night, but I felt invigorated. Serving justice could do that to a man. With a third direct attack on his deal, Diego would've worked everything out by now—but he'd be missing the final piece. “You can expect my brother any minute,” I said to Maksim, who stood straight-backed by the door to my office.

“I figured.”

I held up a bottle of *Rey Sol Añejo*. “Drink?” I asked.

“Nah.” Max chewed on a toothpick. “Guess I should have my wits about me. His claws will be out.”

“He'll fight, but not physically. He can't win. Instead, he'll try to manipulate the game board.”

Diego had run out of moves, though. After over a decade of being hunted by my brother, our day of reckoning had come. Only, I wasn't the one caught in a trap. For a third of my life, I'd been mislabeled a traitor, had been forced from friends, family, and a life I'd valued, and I'd done whatever

I'd had to in order to survive. And in mere moments, Diego would pay the price for it.

I swirled my drink, breathing in caramel and tobacco. "Try not to kill him if you can help it."

Max's two-way radio beeped and Alejo's voice came through. "We've got a visitor."

"Bring him in," I said.

Max removed his assault rifle from across his body and held it with one hand. "You got it, *jefe*."

"*Oye. Muy bien*. Your Spanish is coming along."

With barely a chuckle, Max went downstairs to meet Diego and his other escorts. I shrugged into my suit jacket and stood at the one-sided glass wall. I wasn't in the habit of spending so much time at the club, but it'd been easier to conduct business here than drive back and forth from the Badlands. The evening before, I'd been on a call to Turkey when my men had alerted me of Natalia's presence. I could still see her now, all bronze legs and arms, the ends of her black hair brushing her waist as she'd moved her hips to disco. Her wide, nervous eyes as she'd turned to face me on the dancefloor.

I shouldn't have been surprised to return home and find Natalia so enchanting—she'd always fascinated me, but not just with her beauty. She tested boundaries, even when fearful. *Especiall*y when fearful. She'd manipulated her parents in childish but effective ways. She held unwavering devotion to my brother. Her sheltered childhood had given her a false sense of safety as an adult, but I'd hoped her mother's death, and our encounter that day, would scare her into obedience. I didn't know if it was more frustrating or charming that it hadn't.

She'd still dangled herself as bait in front of me, a man she knew to be dangerous. A man she believed was her mother's murderer. Every time I tried to scare her, she returned for more. Even hours earlier, when I'd stood at her back in her bedroom and had practically watched her imagination run wild

with all the possible things I could do to her while we were alone, she hadn't cowered long.

She should cower, though. Testing boundaries got her into trouble. Case in point—she'd stupidly spent last night in the most dangerous place possible.

With Diego. *For* Diego.

It hadn't occurred to me they might be there. None of my men had seen her. I gripped my glass at the thought of Diego alone with her all night. It was like the unnerving feeling I'd gotten when I'd come across them in the courtyard at the costume party. Jealousy had warred with my fury. Any other time, I would've been delighted to catch Diego in a vulnerable moment, but Bianca Cruz's dying words had been for me. A plea. And no matter how far I'd run, or how hard I'd worked, I'd never forgotten them. And that tied me to Natalia in ways she didn't understand.

Maybe Natalia Lourdes was no longer my responsibility, but that instinct to protect her remained. Seeing her again had reawakened an unwelcome fondness for her, but my fascination wasn't nearly as innocent as it'd once been. But who could blame me?

She had mesmerizing violet eyes that could charm a man to walk into a burning building.

Long legs that could wrap around him for days.

And I hadn't stopped thinking about that virgin pussy since this morning.

Diego wouldn't know what the fuck to do with a *panocha* like that. I knew exactly what I'd do with it, though. And it would start with my tongue buried so deep inside her, I'd be tasting her for weeks.

With a knock at the door, I took a moment to collect myself. This was why I didn't fuck with sirens like Natalia King Cruz. I was thinking about *her* when I'd spent years anticipating this final standoff with my brother. Costa had cleared my name, and I was back where I belonged—but I still

had one more loose end to tie up. I couldn't let Diego's faithlessness in me go unpunished.

And I was going to revel in every moment of what was to come.

I turned from the window. "*Pasen.*"

Maksim entered first, followed by two of my men as they restrained Diego. Max tossed a semi-automatic pistol next to the bottle of tequila on my desk. "He's clean."

"My brother shouldn't cause you any trouble," I said, picking up a second glass from the drink tray to pour a fresh one. "He's smart enough to know he's cornered."

"Your head of security has a glass eye and your bouncer a severe limp," Diego said. "They'd be lucky to get a shot anywhere near a target."

"I'd think twice about insulting anyone in this room." I gestured at a club chair. "Have a seat."

"I'm not staying," Diego said. Covered in ash and soot, with cuts along his face and hands, my brother looked as if he'd been up all night fighting for his life. Which, I supposed he had.

"*Siéntate,*" Eduardo ordered.

"You were expecting me." Diego sat on the edge of the chair. "Why not show up at the warehouse like a man to face those you ruined?"

"I had something to attend to at Costa's." I held out the tequila to him. "Here."

He waved off the drink. "Costa was with me."

"*¿Seguro?* Are you sure?" I asked, offering it again. "It's top-shelf. A special edition sent especially from a tequila bar in Guadalajara."

"I'm sure what's 'special' about it is a dram of poison," Diego said.

I gave Eduardo the glass. "Enjoy, *compadre,*" I said.

Ed nodded as he accepted it. “*Gracias, señor.*”

I returned in front of Diego, picked up my drink, and sat back against the edge of my desk. “Costa left his poor, trembling daughter alone in that big house this morning. And during such a dangerous time.” I frowned into my drink. “I took it upon myself to offer her my protection. And my comfort.”

Diego narrowed his eyes on me. “What’d you do to Natalia?”

“Nothing she didn’t enjoy—don’t worry.”

“*Vete a la chingada,*” he said, jumping out of his chair. “Fuck you, *pinche puto pendejo.*”

As Diego released a string of curses, I held up a hand to stop my men from drawing their weapons. Had I hit a nerve? When it came to Costa and his family, Diego put on an admirable performance, but today, we had no audience. Could it be that his feelings for Natalia were *genuine*? I smiled. That would make this even more interesting. Diego was about to lose more than I could’ve even planned for.

“You almost *killed* her this morning,” Diego said.

She wasn’t supposed to have been at the warehouse, nor was he. It was a fuck-up on my part, but I wouldn’t let him see that. “*Tranquilo,*” I said, keeping my tone light to calm him. “I simply bandaged her up.” Bandaged her up and resisted my every urge to fuck her until she forgot my brother’s name. If waiting years for this moment with Diego wasn’t evidence of my unrivaled self-control, removing my hands from Natalia’s smooth, firm thigh was.

A round with me and she’d question everything she knew—including her devotion to Diego. It hadn’t occurred to me until now that she might actually mean something to him.

“She was trapped on the roof of the warehouse with no way out,” I said. “Luckily, I was there, or she’d have been burned alive.”

“You say that like it was a coincidence,” he said. “You planned it that way.”

“Planned it? No. I was supposed to watch from a distance as your hopes, dreams, and livelihood went up in smoke.” I took a sip. “I hadn’t intended to risk my own life for your Natalia.” Despite the silky vanilla-almond flavor the tequila had left, *your Natalia* tasted bitter on my tongue. *My Natalia* sounded better, but I couldn’t entertain that thought.

After this, she’d never forgive me.

“You did this, Cristiano,” Diego said evenly, taking a step toward me. “The hits on the safe houses. The tunnel explosion. The warehouse fire. You’re responsible for all of it. And now, I have nothing to offer the Maldonados but ashes.”

I stood to meet him. “I warned you one shot was all you’d get,” I said. “You missed. That was your mistake.”

“I’ve never taken a shot at family. That was you.”

“You put me in front of the firing squad, which is worse,” I said, holding his stare. “First, by accusing me of Bianca’s murder, then years later when I reached out to you for help. You sent men to kill me as soon as you knew where I was, and they came home empty-handed. Never take aim if you can’t hit the bullseye. You missed both times.”

“You went to Costa, our family’s enemy, with information that you knew would get our parents killed,” he said, balling his fists. “I tried turning you over to Costa, yes, but that’s no different than what you did to our mother and father.”

“It’s completely different. The victims of my crimes are never victims—they know exactly the risks of the life they lead.” I picked up the tequila bottle in the likeness of a smiling golden sun and pulled off the top. “Our parents were getting deeper and deeper into trafficking innocent children and women,” I said. “I went to Costa for help because you and I were too young to do anything, and they had to be stopped.”

“Nothing breaks the bond of family,” Diego said. “Costa might’ve pulled the trigger, but you murdered them. Their blood is on your hands.”

I made a show of checking my knuckles. They were callused and scarred from years of defense, offense, and

survival. But there wasn't a spot of blood on them. "You're one to talk about breaking family bonds." I refilled my drink. "Do you know what tomorrow is, Diego?"

Diego took my drink off the desk and gulped from it. "Holy Saturday."

"The burning of Judas." I filled another glass on the tray for myself. "We'll be celebrating here at the club in case you know any traitors. There's still time to make an effigy."

"Then make it in your likeness." His nostrils flared. He thrust the glass in my direction, and tequila sloshed over the side as he pointed. "You killed *our parents*."

"Costa did."

"And he has paid half the price," Diego bit out. "His debt will be settled once his daughter chooses me over him. Once he realizes I can take her away from him if I choose. But *you* haven't been made to pay at all."

"I've paid, believe me. The Cruzes were my family, and they turned on me for a crime I didn't commit."

"They are not your family!" He shoved a hand in his hair and turned around, pacing to the glass. "They never were. You don't deserve one after what you did to ours."

The Cruzes *had* been family to me once, especially Bianca. Costa's wife could've easily cast me off or ignored me as she had Diego—who, I was certain, she'd seen through from the start.

But she hadn't. She'd cared for me the way a mother should when she had no reason to. But she'd never get to speak her truth—so I would do it for her.

"Bianca *was* family," I said. "You didn't know her like I did."

"No, I never got the privilege," Diego said, turning back to level me with a glare. "We all know how *well* you knew her. Despite Costa's pardon, the state they found her in speaks for itself."

I dropped my glass and charged at him, seizing him by his shirt. “I never touched her, and you know it. You talk of loyalty but reek of betrayal, and that’s why she kept you at arm’s length. It’s why Costa will *never* let you near his daughter. They only trust you so far.”

Diego grabbed my lapels to try to push me off, but Max drew his gun in a split second. Glass eye or not, my right-hand man had as unshakeable an allegiance to me as I did to him, and that made him a killer of the deadliest sort. Diego clenched his teeth but let go of my jacket.

“You’ve planted some bullshit ideas in Natalia’s head,” I said, “but don’t think I don’t know where they came from. You’re the one with plans to take over, not me.”

Diego laughed grimly. “I’ll do it the noble way. I don’t have to force a woman like you. My plans are to marry Natalia, who loves me, and stand by Costa’s side until he’s ready to hand over the reins.”

I released him with a shove. It was uncanny, my ability to sniff out when my brother was lying. Why other certain people couldn’t see it, I had no idea. “You fused yourself to Natalia when she was most vulnerable. Bianca would never have allowed you to get so close to her. You saw an opportunity and you took it. And if Costa wasn’t going to give you what you wanted, you were going to use Natalia’s love for you against him.”

“You’d have done the same,” Diego said. “The difference is, Natalia fell for me, not you.”

I had traveled the world in search of the kind of loyalty she gave Diego. I’d lost any family bonds I’d had or formed. My parents were dead. Bianca was dead. The only man I’d ever looked up to had thought I’d violated and murdered his wife. I’d gone through great pains to surround myself with men and women I trusted my life to every day—ones I’d give mine for in return.

Yet I remained haunted by the day Natalia had risked her life for my *brother*. A man who didn’t deserve her. To have what I’d built was one thing. To have the unflinching devotion

of a woman like her, to be loved the way Bianca had loved Costa, was surely nirvana.

But devotion to the wrong man could get you killed; my mother was evidence of that.

Diego made Natalia weak—I was doing her a favor.

Because Natalia had proved a woman who couldn't be moved with words or reason. It had to be with action and force.

“Natalia didn't fall for you. She was manipulated.” I stalked closer to him, enjoying the way he pulled back his shoulders, as if he thought he stood a chance against me. “You slowly secured her loyalty to you over anyone else, so when you were ready to make demands of Costa, he'd have no choice but to give in or lose her.”

“That doesn't mean I don't love her or see him as a father,” Diego said. “I know what's best for all of us.”

A monster didn't always perceive himself that way. But I saw right through my brother. “It was an admirable grab at power, not unlike something our father would've done, but it didn't work. And in the end, it doesn't matter, because it won't change your fate.”

“Once the Maldonados hear about the fire, they'll come looking for me.” A vein in his forehead appeared as he tensed his jaw. “I can't recover from this.”

“No, you can't.”

He swallowed, his hands twitching as if he had to resist throwing a punch. “So, here I am. You have me where you want me. What do you want, Cristiano?”

“Nobody gives me what I want. I take it.”

He ran a hand through his hair and made a fist. “I've cost them over a hundred million dollars. They'll crucify me. And Costa. And everyone who ever spoke a word to me.”

I undid my jacket as I rounded my desk to make a fresh drink. “You knew the risk of writing a check you might not be able to cash.”

“I would’ve been able to—if not for you.”

“There is no use in *if*, Diego.” I sat in my leather chair and leaned back. Diego continued to stand tall, though I read the agitation in his eyes and hands. “What’s done is done.”

“So that’s it. You’ll ruin the Cruzes too? Stand back and watch as the cartel takes revenge on everyone involved—me, my men ... Natalia?”

I didn’t respond at first, letting that sink in for Diego. He had fucked with me, and now I had the power to destroy him and everyone he loved. His precious Natalia too, who’d be especially devastated since she’d been lying to herself for years that she wanted nothing to do with this life. Now his sins would be hers.

When recognition of my reach began to cross his features, I spoke again.

“Ángel Maldonado and I happen to have an amicable relationship,” I said, crossing an ankle over one knee. “For his mercy, I will pay a hefty price, but it can be arranged—for those I find deserving, at least.”

His shoulders loosened just a little. “I figured as much. So what do you want in exchange for that ‘hefty price’?”

“From you? Nothing. I’ll pay the toll to spare Costa and his family—who have acted as *my* family.”

“And me?” he asked, drawing back. “Your own brother?”

“You’ve been in my shoes.” I opened the top drawer of my desk and took out a box of Cubans. “You had the chance to save my life by speaking to my innocence, but you didn’t.”

“I was trying to protect the family you claim to love. I had no reason to believe you weren’t guilty.”

I cut the tip of one cigar and glanced up at Diego to scrutinize his reaction to what I said next. “I’m not sure I believe that.”

His jaw set as the pulse at the base of his neck quickened. He flattened his hands on my desk. “Whatever lies you’ve

convinced yourself of, you can't hide from the truth. You'd murder your own brother."

"No. The Maldonados will do it for me." I flicked my lighter and held the flame to the end of the cigar. "You left me at the mercy of another—now I'll do the same for you."

"Why not just shoot me here?" he asked. "Don't you have the guts?"

"I hope for a long, prosperous relationship with Costa if he wants one."

"And killing me might jeopardize that."

"I'm not killing you. You got yourself into this mess. I'm simply not going to help you." I puffed on the cigar, feeling gratified, then offered it to him. "Eye for an eye, Diego. It's more than you deserve after everything you've done."

He ignored my gift and straightened up, regaining composure as if he'd grasped an answer that could earn his freedom. There was none, but I'd play along until I got bored. I'd waited for this moment too long to rush it.

"You want to see me stripped of everything? My family, my money, my woman?" he asked. "You hold the cards, Cristiano. *Tienes todo el control*. I'm at your mercy—but you cannot let the Maldonados go through with this. They won't just kill me ... they will make an example of me—"

"As they should." I traded the cigar for my drink. With a celebratory sip of tequila, I ran my tongue over my teeth, pleased to find revenge had hints of peach and sweet agave. "There has been a snake in the grass far too long, and it's only fair somebody separate its deceitful mind from its body."

He began to pace in front of my desk. "Name your price, then."

"There's none."

"There's always a price. Whatever it is, however high, tell me now."

I watched him quietly, reveling in the way his eyebrows knitted together when the truth dawned on him. *This* was the

final puzzle piece he'd come looking for today, the one thing he couldn't figure out. What did I want in exchange for taking mercy on him?

Nothing.

I hadn't manipulated him into this position to extract anything. Because of him, I'd suffered. For years, I'd been on the run, looking over my shoulder for a *sicario* in the dark. I'd lived with the knowledge that the people I'd cared for most had thought me a traitor. I had pulled myself from nothing and built an empire. I was wealthier than God and surrounded by a steadfast army. I'd made peace with Costa. All that remained was to see my brother pay for his sins, which I suspected ran deeper than he was willing to admit.

And now I would.

And now he knew the truth.

Betrayal had a price, and even family had to pay.

"Confess your sins and pray for mercy," I said. "But you'll get none from me."

Diego had plans to take over Costa's cartel and drag down Natalia as he followed in my father's footsteps, but I wouldn't allow it. The world would be a better place devoid of any de la Rosa men, but especially without the two of them.

Diego shut his eyes, his chest expanding with each deep breath. When he looked at me again, his gaze burned with hatred. "You can't do this," he said.

"It is done." I looked to Maksim, Eduardo, and Alejo—my friends and my *compadres*—as I spoke to Diego. "You can run. I did for years. But I expect you won't make it months." I returned my eyes to my brother. "Then again, perhaps you'll surprise me."

"Or *perhaps* I'll spend my final days in California. Natalia is headed back soon. She'd like to have me with her."

I flattened a hand on my desk. I could order the Maldonados not to kill Natalia, but there was no guarantee they wouldn't if she purposely got in the way. I hadn't been

able to stop my mother from supporting and defending my father's decision to get into the sex trade industry.

"You'd be putting Natalia at risk. You know what they'd do to her. It would be selfish. Are you a selfish man, Diego?"

He glanced away.

I didn't need an answer. I'd convince Costa to keep Natalia close in the coming days. With his help, no harm would befall her. I took a final pull from my cigar and stood, cracking my knuckles. "Do as you please with your final days. We're finished here." From my pocket, I took a silver coin and flipped it at him.

He caught it and turned it over in his palm. "What's this?"

"The ferryman demands a toll to take passengers to the underworld," I said. "This one's on me. Safe travels to hell, *hermano*."

Diego stood his ground, raising cold, bitter eyes to mine. "I'll beg if that's what it takes. Whatever you want, it's yours."

"You have nothing to offer me. What've you got that I can't buy for myself?"

"Besides my loyalty—information," he said. "I know everything there is to know about Costa's business. I can give you inside access. Together, we can take over his cartel and you can rule them both with me as an advisor."

"I have no need for Costa's business, but if I did, I'd manage to secure it fine without you." I signaled for my men to remove Diego.

"Help me leave town," Diego said, growing louder as he rushed out his final pleas. "This will be the last you ever see or hear of me. You can tell everyone, including the Maldonados, I attacked you and died as a traitor. Tell them anything."

I rose from my chair, buttoning my jacket as I strolled around the side of my desk to face him. "You've plotted against Costa; why should I believe you wouldn't do the same to me? I can already see the wheels turning in your mind as a

plan forms. I won't spend my life looking over my shoulder anymore."

"I will, you have my word," he rushed out. "I'll disappear completely."

"Your word means nothing. A parasite doesn't change its ways." I nodded to Maksim. "Remove him."

Eduardo and Alejo rushed forward like a stampede and took Diego's arms, forcing him toward the door.

"*Suéltame*," Diego said, struggling against them. "Get off!"

As they dragged him backward, I turned back for my cigar.

"You're wrong, Cristiano," Diego said. "About one thing, you're wrong."

Despite the desperation that remained in his voice, something about it had turned chilling, almost satisfied. He wasn't entirely defeated as he should be. Nor was he filtering himself anymore or hiding behind a persona he'd crafted.

It was enough to get me to look back and raise a hand to stop my men. I smiled. "Tell me what I'm wrong about."

His breathing evened out as smug certainty tainted his words. "You say you have everything you want—but that isn't true. Some things can't be taken. Some things must be *given*."

I narrowed my eyes on him as red light flickered and faded downstairs. "There's nothing in this world you have that I can't take for myself."

"Then you're no different from our father."

I drew back. He was right—because my father had taken *people*. If Diego was saying what I thought he was, then even *I* had underestimated the lengths he would go to to save himself. Something stirred deep inside me, a desire I tried not to acknowledge for fear of where it could lead.

"Don't think I don't know your weak spot, brother," Diego said. "Because it is mine too."

I raised my chin. I couldn't protest. I should've stopped him by now, but I hadn't—because in this area, I wasn't sure I wanted to be strong. “That's not yours to give.”

“It is. Call off the Maldonados.” He bowed his head and spoke ardently. “Spare my life, and I will deliver it to you.”

I should've had Max finish him off there for trying to tempt me. I had a plan. More importantly, I had a code, especially when it came to human lives. I hadn't encountered many reasons in my life to break it.

But this possession wasn't only something I wanted. It was something *Diego* wanted.

And that made it all the more precious.

NATALIA

I sat at my dresser in a daze, unsure of how long I'd been brushing my hair and willing my phone to ring. I hadn't heard from Diego since the warehouse had burned, and my father was making arrangements to get me out of Mexico. Diego had to know how worried I was. And how that anxiety ruled my imagination. If the Maldonados knew about the warehouse, Diego could very well be dead by now.

Until I spoke to him, there was nothing I could do but pray for his safe return. I traded my brush for a match. When I struck it, fire flamed. I held it to the wick of my Virgin Mary candle, lit a few others on my dresser, and closed my eyes.

But I didn't think of Our Lady or God or even Diego.

Instead, the devil came to mind.

Cristiano had fooled everyone around him—except me. I still hadn't completely processed Cristiano's involvement in the death of his own parents. At only fifteen, he'd come to my father, the head of their rival cartel, with information that he knew would seal their fate. How could my father have trusted someone who'd committed that kind of betrayal against his blood?

And now, Diego would pay the price.

No, I couldn't think like that. Diego would pull himself out of this, and I had to hold on to that hope for both of us. Whatever it took, I wasn't going to let him go. I couldn't. Having Mamá ripped from my arms was enough heartbreak for one lifetime. Diego wasn't just the love of my life—he was

my past and future. He anchored me. We had a long life ahead of us—a cliffside California wedding, children that would resemble each of us, safety and security that had been earned over a lifetime.

Saying good-bye to all of that would be too difficult to bear.

I'd protect it however I needed to.

Diego had already shaken hands with one devil. Whether it was the Maldonados or Cristiano who held his fate, we'd take it back—even if it meant making a new deal.

No matter what my father said, I wasn't leaving Mexico until I knew Diego was safe.

I paid no attention to the first couple taps at my window, but when the third came, I jumped up. Barely noticing how my feet smarted, I ran onto the balcony, tying my robe closed, and leaned over the side. On the dark lawn, a shadowed figure looked up at me from under a black hoodie.

My heart leapt. "*Diego*," I said. "I've been trying to reach you."

He held a finger to his lips. After glancing left and right, he scaled the trellis along one wall he'd used before to sneak into my room.

I scanned the yard as he climbed, making sure nobody saw. As he reached the top, the wood lattice under his foot snapped. He jerked, cursing as he almost lost his footing. I reached for him, and a vision flashed—his fingertips centimeters from mine before he lost his grip and fell to his death.

I shook the harrowing thought from my mind. "Careful," I whispered.

He grasped my hand and heaved himself up the rest of the way. I grabbed his cheeks and pulled his mouth to mine. He thrust one hand in my hair, holding me as he devoured me for a kiss that tasted of soot, smoke, and death. My fingers traveled his face, brushing over cuts and bumps. I drew back to take in the bloodied bruises on his cheekbones, nose, and forehead.

Seeing the evidence of his fight against that morning's attack made my chin wobble.

"Oh, no, *princesa*. Don't cry," Diego said softly. "Let me in. After the last twenty-four hours, it'd be a waste for me to get shot here."

I moved so he could climb over the concrete balustrade. Once inside, I hugged his neck. "I'm so scared."

"Shh." He rubbed my back. "Come. I need you to be strong for me."

I swallowed down the urge to cry and reluctantly released him. "What's happening?"

Diego sat on the edge of the bed, put his elbows on his knees, and ran both hands through his hair. "Please forgive me for last night. Please. I need you to know that I came back for you, but you were gone."

"Against my will," I said. "I would never have left you, either."

"Cristiano." As he cupped a hand over his other fist and squeezed it, the tendons of his forearms went taut. "Did he hurt you?"

The fear and concern in his eyes made me go to him. He pulled me onto his lap and wrapped his arms around me. "No," I said. "He forced me to leave and brought me home."

His fingertips dug into my hip. "I want to curse him and thank him all at once. He may have saved your life, but it was only so he could flaunt that in my face."

"You've spoken to him?"

"Yes." Diego looked up at me, his expression pained as he caressed my back. "First, just promise me he didn't lay a finger on you."

I nearly shivered remembering Cristiano's threatening presence behind me in my bedroom. My thoughts as they'd strayed to the possibility that he'd unapologetically take what I'd saved for Diego. The way he'd held my wrist and provoked me with words to distract me from the pinch of the

tweezers. His fingertips trailing up my leg, his grip on my upper thigh, his unusual reaction to hearing about my virginity.

I smoothed Diego's brown hair from his forehead. It was no less silky for whatever trauma he'd been through. "He dropped me off," I said. "That's all."

"Really?" Diego's expression eased. "He never touched you?"

"Really." I was surprised at the lie, but relief crossed Diego's face for the first time since he'd arrived.

"I never should've taken you to the warehouse," he said. "Being around me puts you in danger."

Because my father had said the same to me many times, hearing that from Diego almost felt like a betrayal. I drew back. "That's *my* choice to make," I said. "Papá wants to send me home early, but I'm not leaving you."

"When?"

"Sunday. He says we'll go to Easter Mass, but the helicopter leaves before nightfall."

"I'm doing everything in my power to get us out of this," Diego said. "I need you now more than ever—you are my strength." He glanced out my window, setting his jaw as if he were fighting himself. "But Costa is right. You shouldn't be here. I'd never be able to live with myself if anything happened to you."

"But you just said you need me." I gritted my teeth to stem a fresh wave of tears, but not because I was sad. I hated that Diego and my father wanted me gone when this was the only place I should be. "I won't abandon either of you."

"This isn't a game, Tali," he said, looking back. "When the Maldonados come for me, they'll come for us all." He lowered his voice. "We owe them a lot of money."

I would've had to have been a fool not to know that, but hearing it sent chills down my spine. "How much?"

"Millions and millions," he said quietly. "More than we can ever repay."

I covered my mouth. “There has to be a way out. Can you borrow it from somewhere? Ask for more time?”

“Years wouldn’t be enough. Retribution is taken with a long arm and a firm grip. Not even Costa can protect us.”

“Then we have to leave,” I said, standing, ready to run the second he agreed. “Fuck this life! Just come with me.”

“I can’t.” He reached for me. “You know there’s nowhere I can run they won’t follow.”

I went to my closet. “Well, we can’t stay here,” I said, wrestling my suitcase from the top shelf. “Since when are we sitting ducks? Why not at least try to disappear? We can get passports and start over—”

“Please, Talia,” he said, rising from the bed. “Don’t pull away from me.”

He caught my elbow and drew me into his embrace. Cupping my face, he kissed the tears that’d escaped down my cheeks. “Forgive me,” he whispered, sliding his hands everywhere on my body. “I’m desperate.”

His hungry lips found mine, and I grasped his hair as he took my mouth. I arched into him, letting him walk me backward toward the bed. He untied my robe and slipped his hands inside to grab my ass. His kiss grew more feverish. This time, he didn’t stop it, as if sensing this might be the last time.

As that reality hit me, I choked back a sob but tried to hide my despair with a moan.

Diego wrenched himself away and strode to the other side of the room. “We can’t do this.” His hair fell forward, and he tucked it behind both ears. “My God, Natalia. You are so beautiful ... but we can’t. I’m weak.”

“Then let us be weak together.”

He paced the room. “It was a mistake to let myself fall in love with you, but I could no more help it than I could growing older each day.”

My gut smarted as if his words had delivered a punch to my stomach. “You don’t mean that.”

“How can I not?” His anguished eyes met mine. “I’m a dead man. I’ll never have you. Not now.”

“Don’t talk like that.” My throat thickened again. “You’ll find a way out of this, and then my father will understand—”

“Your father? He’s the least of our worries.” Diego unzipped his hoodie, balled it up, and tossed it on my reading chair. It slipped over the arm onto the floor. “It’s *over*, Tali—don’t you see?” He strode back and forth, his muscles straining his black t-shirt each time he thrust his hands in his hair. “Even if I found a way out of this, Costa would never forgive a failure of this magnitude.”

“Then there’s nothing keeping us here,” I said, reaching for him. “We have to go.”

He avoided my eyes as if it was easier to pretend I wasn’t here. “They’ll find us, and when they do, they’ll kill us both. I can’t put you in that position.” Finally, he stopped moving and pinched the inside corners of his eyes. “I’m as good as dead. The only peace I can have now is knowing you’re safe.”

My chest stuttered with a panicked breath. Fear crept into every part of my body. I had known it was bad, but seeing Diego come apart in front of me made everything even more real. He’d never expressed anything close to this level of anguish. “We’ll elope,” I said. “Papá will understand how much I love you, and he’ll find a way to stop the Maldonados. He has that power.”

“He doesn’t,” Diego said. “If he did, he would’ve stopped them already because he ...” His jaw squared as if he were checking his emotions. “He’s in just as much danger as I am.”

No. My heart fell to my feet. I’d lose the two people who meant the most to me in the world. I put my hands over my face. “They’ll kill him too.”

“I’m sorry.” His voice came out strangled. “I’m so sorry, Tali.”

I wanted to sink into a ball on the floor, but that wouldn’t help. As despair weighed on me, I forced myself to hold it

together. I picked up his hoodie to fold it over the arm of my chair. “There has to be another way. There must be.”

“There ...” He hesitated. “There is.”

I glanced up at him, unsure I’d heard him correctly. “What is it?”

“It’s not on the table,” he said. “I won’t involve you in any way.”

Me? I could do something? I didn’t care what it was. I hurried over to take his hands. “If I can help, let me. *Please.*”

He brought the backs of my hands to his lips. “I don’t deserve you. You should walk away now.”

“You must know I’d die for you if it came to that,” I said firmly.

He swallowed, his eyebrows cinching. “Tali.”

“I would,” I said. “Now tell me what can be done.”

With obvious trepidation, he paused for a breath, seeming to struggle to get the words out. “The Maldonados are too powerful. Nobody who would help us can match them. They don’t fear us—but they could.”

Hope surged in me. There was a way—that was all that mattered. Not all was lost. I would take a sliver of hope over nothing. “How?”

“Neither your family nor mine is strong enough to stand against them alone. But together ...”

Together. Two families standing as one. Unified.

“You’ve been part of our cartel longer than you haven’t,” I said. “We *already* stand together.”

“Not officially.”

To bind our families in a legal sense meant ...

Marriage.

My heart soared. Relief and joy—and a sense of rebellion—spread through me. They thought they could destroy us, but we’d fight back. My father thought he knew better, but he’d

see that keeping us apart wasn't the answer. Taking Diego's name was not only a privilege, but now it was my destiny. I could save us—and I'd be getting exactly what I'd always wanted.

“We'd stay in the shipping business but bring on a weapons and narcotics division,” Diego explained. “Each cartel would benefit from the others' infrastructure. Pooling our resources, network, and cash, we'd become a formidable front.”

“Father would forbid it,” I cautioned. “He'd never let us go through with it.”

“Once it was done, he'd be forced to see it was the only way. Our houses, united, expands his empire. He'd control the movement of his own drugs and guns—we'd be untouchable.”

“But where do the drugs and guns come from?” I asked.

“Cristiano.”

My stomach dropped. So it had come to that—making a deal with Hades to get another devil off our back. “But he set all of this in motion. Why would he help us?”

“Because it gives him power. Even more than our parents had. More than your father has. More than the Maldonados.” He closed his hands over mine, pressing my palms together as if we were both in prayer. “That was his goal all along, and this is the fastest way to get it. He gains more than he did as Costa's partner—the protection of family. He knows what it means to bear the Cruz-de la Rosa name.”

I got a silent thrill hearing our names together that way, even if it meant tying us to Cristiano. For once, I didn't feel so helpless. I could act. Wanting to marry Diego—to take his name and give myself to him in every sense—no longer felt small, selfish, or disobedient. With our promise to each other before God, I'd be saving us all. There was no holier union than that.

“But *would* Cristiano help us?” I said. “Have you asked?”

“It came up when we spoke earlier, but I'd decided not to ask this of you.”

“I’m glad you did,” I said.

“If you go, Tali, you at least have a chance of survival. Your safety can be arranged, and you can continue your schooling. Agreeing to this means—”

“I stay. I know.” None of that mattered now. I could figure out my school situation later. “Did Cristiano agree when you spoke to him?”

“He’s greedy and calculating. For once, it works in our favor. But a warning—I’d have to be willing to promise him anything to get him on our side. Even if I don’t mean to keep those promises. Once we’re safe and can regroup, we’ll strategize a way to separate from him.” Diego gently took my face, thumbing the corners of my mouth. “I wish it had never come to this, Tali, but it’s where we are. Would you do this for me?”

My heart skipped. I didn’t need a proposal or pretty words or a grand gesture. I just needed Diego. “Life or death. I belong to you in either.”

He swooped down to wrap his arms around my waist and lift me off my feet. “What have I done to deserve your love and loyalty?”

“Everything.”

He brushed kisses along my neck and jaw, eliciting a shiver from my body. I had no idea how it was possible that moments ago, everything had felt hopeless, and now I couldn’t stop smiling. “How do we do it?” I asked.

He caressed my cheek with his stubble, a scrape that soothed me with its familiarity. “On Sunday, pack your bags before Mass. Bring them. Don’t breathe a word to your father, or he’ll try to stop us.” Finally, his eyes danced as his posture straightened once again. It felt good to be able to take away his worries. “When we were kids, you wanted to go to Antarctica.”

I laughed. “Are we going on a trip?”

“No, but is the coldest place on Earth still on your bucket list?”

“I thought it sounded exotic—it was always so hot here. The grass was greener and all that.”

He smiled. “I’m not even sure they have grass there. So where do you want to go?”

Fleetingly, I thought of my life in California, and all the dreams I’d had for us there. Was that over? Or on hold? I couldn’t think of that now. Nothing mattered more than the man standing in front of me. “Why?” I asked. “Will we have to leave for a while?”

“No, *mi amor*.” He lowered me onto my feet. “Just indulge me.”

Ah. A honeymoon? He kept me in his arms as I kept mine around his neck. I lifted one shoulder, trying not to seem too giddy. “I’ve been many places with Papá. New York, Buenos Aires, São Paulo ... and I’ve seen even more with my school friends.” I ran my palm down his wide, muscular chest. “But I’ve not yet been to Southern Europe. I’d like to see Tuscany.”

“Make me a promise,” he said, absentmindedly twirling the ends of my hair around his finger. “If things get hard, if you miss me and we can’t connect, promise me you’ll dream of us under the warmth of the Italian sun. When it’s dark, and you’re worried the light won’t come again, dream up ideas for us to do once we can get there.”

As tempting as it was to fall into that fantasy, all I heard was what he wasn’t saying. Was there a chance we’d be separated? “Diego ...”

He kissed the tip of my nose. “Just know that it may not be right away, but we’ll make it to Europe one day. When the time is right.”

I balled his t-shirt in my fist. “You’re making me nervous.”

“*I’m* the one who’s nervous.” He raised his eyebrows. “See the sweat on my temple?”

I blew gently on his hairline to cool him. “What is it?”

He took my hands, kissed each of my palms, and held them between us as if we were standing at the altar. “I can’t

ask what I want to ask. It wouldn't be right. But ...”

I blinked up at him. What could possibly make him nervous when his life had just been on the line—and still was?

Oh. With the realization, I involuntarily rose onto my toes with excitement. We were promising our lives to each other. I didn't need a proposal—but now that I was getting one, I couldn't keep my grin at bay. “Yes?”

“Natalia.” He smiled down on me, gently squeezing my hands. “Make an unworthy man happy. Meet me at the church this Sunday.”

NATALIA

It was a question that had only one answer.

There wasn't a sliver of doubt in my mind that I'd marry Diego. He'd been my best friend and my love for a long time, but now, he'd finally be my husband. "Yes," I whispered. "I will meet you at the church on Sunday."

He lifted my hand to kiss my ring finger. His lips lingered there until he pressed his forehead against the back of my hand. "*Por favor,*" he whispered. "Holy Virgin Mary."

"What's wrong?" I asked at the overwhelming sadness in his appeal. "Why don't you look happy?"

"I am, but I fear what lies ahead."

The gauzy curtains of my balcony fluttered, causing the candles on my dresser to flicker. I pulled him by his hand toward the bed. "Then lie with me and forget."

"Tali ..."

"It's not a request." Diego and I had waited long enough. I had no more doubts about making this union. My heart hammered as I slipped my robe over my shoulders. "I almost lost you today," I said, tugging on the sash to open the bow. My robe fell to my feet, revealing my negligee. "And I'll be damned if either of us leaves this world without having spent a night together."

"You *may* be damned, Tali."

“I won’t, because I know what’s true in my heart.” Sunday, we’d commit ourselves to each other before God, but tonight, we’d make love as husband and wife in our souls.

“And what’s true?” he asked.

I put my hand to his cheek. “That I love you.”

“And I you.” His eyes roamed over my short, strappy nightgown. “You are so lovely in indigo silk that matches your eyes.”

“*Mi madre* said a lady never wore anything less than the best to bed.”

He smiled crookedly at his basic black tee and chinos. “I’m underdressed.”

“You’re *overdressed*. If you want to see more, you have to show more.”

He arched an eyebrow. “A motto I can stand by.” Bathed in candlelight, he grimaced as he slowly pulled his shirt over his head.

“Are you hurt?” I asked.

“A couple bruised ribs, nothing more.”

I gently pressed my lips to a purple mark blooming on his chest and then a small gash on his right bicep. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m not. I’m still standing. And here with you, no less.”

I touched the button of his pants, pausing to ask for permission. It came in the form of his low-lidded stare as he wet his lips. I undid his pants and pushed them down.

He cast them aside, took my chin, and tilted my eyes up to meet his. After a tender kiss to my forehead, then the bridge of my nose, he gathered up the hem of my negligee. I raised my arms so he could slip it over my head.

He stepped back, gripping the purple silk as his eyes drifted down my bare breasts and stomach to my lacy underwear. I kept my shoulders back even as nerves tickled my tummy. He’d never seen me this way. I knew he’d been with other girls—and that I actually meant something to him.

But as he stared, doubt took over. Had he been expecting more? Was he worried about my inexperience? Or was it simply too strange to see his best friend naked?

He wore only boxer briefs, but it wasn't much different than seeing him in a bathing suit.

“Well?” I asked finally.

“My life is on the line,” he said, swallowing, “and yet, I don't believe I've ever experienced such happiness.”

My heart fluttered, pumping relief throughout me. “I've heard it only gets better from here.”

He grinned, then swooped down to hug my waist and litter kisses on my neck until I laughed.

“You were never *this* ticklish when we were younger,” he said, lifting me so my legs wrapped around him.

“Well, you never tickled my neck, did you?” I arched into him as he lowered me to the mattress and climbed over me. I bent and opened my knees to make a home for his hips.

“Would you like to hear my ode to you now?” he asked when we were mouth to mouth.

I nodded breathlessly.

He cupped my cheek, thumbing the apple of it. “She is a heavenly creature cut from the finest cloth with which God had to work. A fabric *so* fine, that to be dressed in it is to be a king, and to forget anything that came before it.” He paused as candlelight flickered over his face. I ran a fingertip along a cut near his hairline. “Her love is all-consuming and more addictive than any high. It can twist fantasy to truth and make honest men lie—without blame. Those hopeless to receive it turn mad.”

I didn't know any other man who felt so deeply, much less possessed the gift of expressing it so beautifully. A tear of love and joy slid down my cheek. “Diego.”

“There is no greater pleasure than to be in the presence of your love,” he finished.

I put my arms around his neck and pulled him down to me. He kissed me, running a hand along my waist and under my backside, then drew me against him.

I gasped softly as the length of him slid over my thigh. I was both eager and tentative to finally touch him. I wanted to do it right, to know that I could make him feel good.

He brushed his lips along my neck, and I quivered as he kissed my collarbone, then down my chest. “I can’t believe we’ve held off this long,” he said.

“Our patience has been admirable.”

“Our patience has been *foreplay*,” he said, running his tongue along the skin under my nipple, “and it will be rewarded.”

In that moment, the sensation of his breath cooling my tender skin was the best thing I’d ever felt—until he pulled my nipple into his mouth and sucked, sending ripple after ripple of pleasure down my stomach.

“*Oh.*” I moaned, inadvertently drawing my shoulder blades together to give him more access.

“I’m trying not to rush, my love—but I can’t wait much longer to be inside you,” he said before lavishing the same diligent attention on my other breast.

My heart skipped at the thought of unleashing a fire between us that had been simmering for years. I wanted to tear through our patience, but I was grateful for Diego’s slow, careful movements that forced me to savor this.

He took the elastic band of my underwear between his teeth and tugged it down, murmuring, “*Jesucristo.*”

Calling for Jesus between my legs inspired thoughts of heaven and hell. As Diego discarded my panties, parted my thighs, and slid his tongue over my core, I was reminded of his brother’s hands threatening to trespass. No, I didn’t think of Jesus, or my Diego and his tender promises, but of the antichrist’s violent passion.

I thought of Diego’s brother.

I jerked my head to the other side as if it would rid him from my mind, and my eyes landed on the framed Virgin Mary over my dresser.

“Diego,” I said, shoving away thoughts that could only be blamed on the stressful events of the past few days.

“Hmm?” His response vibrated before he plunged his tongue inside me.

I gripped his hair with the unnerving sensation. It felt neither good nor bad, just new. A friend of mine in California liked to brag that her boyfriend ate pussy like he was trying to get all the meat off a chicken bone, and ever since, I’d been scared just at the thought of it—but Diego’s gentle tonguing wasn’t anything like that.

“Talia?” he asked.

“Hmm?”

“You shouldn’t be this ... quiet.”

“I’m not—I think I hear something,” I said.

He stilled, glancing up at me. “Really?”

I shook my head, putting a finger over my mouth to quiet him. Footsteps echoed in the hallway. Papá was unlikely to be anywhere but his bedroom or study this late, and since my mother, he’d never had overnight visitors. Nobody wandered the halls of the second floor except the housekeepers, Barto, or the security team.

“I don’t hear anything,” he whispered.

Neither did I.

Perhaps they’d been phantom footsteps, sleek dress shoes that’d followed me to the foot of my bed earlier that day. Cristiano had cleaned me, bandaged me—tended to me without my explicit permission. He hadn’t violated me, but if he had, he wouldn’t take care like Diego did. Cristiano would eat pussy like a wild animal feasting on its kill, fending off any other predator foolish enough to approach. *I’m scarier than any monster.* Twin threads of revulsion and desire pulled

sharply in my tummy, and I sucked in a breath at a visual that should've appalled me.

"There she is," Diego said. He slipped his arms under my hips and gripped them as he pulled me hard onto his mouth.

"*Ay*," I breathed on a moan.

"*¿Te gusta?*" he asked and then dove back in. He went from licking and sucking my most intimate spot to making love to it with his mouth. His tongue plunged deep and flicked over my clit. When he added one finger, and then another, my back bowed as I cried out.

"This is just the warm-up," he said, smiling at me from between my legs. "But no matter how wet I get you, or how careful I am, you might bleed."

"I know. The maids will think it's my period."

He climbed up my body and kissed my breasts again, sending spasms of pleasure through me with each pull of my nipple into his mouth. He took one between his teeth and pinched, and I bucked my hips into him.

"I think you might be ready for me, Tali."

"I'm ready," I said, nearly panting. A flush had worked its way up my chest; I was burning up for him.

I threaded my fingers through his hair, focusing on the way he dragged the tip of his tongue up my breastbone to the base of my neck. His fingers trailed down my side and over the curve of my hip. Just his presence made my head swim and my toes curl—what could lay ahead except more bliss as we fed a hunger we'd been forced to conceal for so long?

I lowered my hand between us, cupping my palm over his hardness. With just that simple touch, he was already pleading me with his eyes. "Don't stop there," he whispered. "Give me more."

He pushed his underwear down and kicked it off the bed. Finally, I held him, skin on skin, the full remarkable length of him in my hand. He was bigger than I'd imagined—not that I'd known what to expect or had anything to compare it with.

He would be my one and only. My forever.

The perfect first time with my perfect man.

Diego smiled down at me as if we shared the thought. “You’re glowing.”

His hair fell in a dark curtain around his face. I pushed some strands of it behind his ear. “I’m happy. I’m ready.”

He nudged my legs apart. “You’ll tell me if it’s too much?” he asked.

I nodded and glanced between us, taking him in for the first time. Pink, long, hard—and all mine. Perfect. And naked. There would be nothing between us, and as much as I wanted to feel every inch of him, seeing him prepare to enter me also forced me from my fantasy into reality.

“Wait,” I said.

He lifted up on one arm. “What is it?”

“We should get a condom,” I said.

He took himself in his hand, sliding the head over me in a way that made me bite my lip. “You have no idea how fucking good it feels without one.”

I moved onto my elbows. “I’m not ready for ... you know. I’m not taking the chance that I could—get pregnant ...”

“I want our first time to be pure.” He grazed his fingertips over my cheek and lowered his mouth to my ear. “Let me empty myself in you, just this time. Mark you as mine, first and always.”

A primal desire for the same rose inside me. I wanted that too, but with such uncertain days ahead of us, we couldn’t take the risk. “Then we’ll have to wait,” I said, and started to close my legs. “Once our future is more—”

“Wait.” He grabbed one of my thighs, staying it.

Was he forceful with you?

I hated that Cristiano’s unfounded accusation popped into my head. Maybe violence ran in their bloodline, but Diego

wasn't his brother or his father. He'd never pressure me as Cristiano had implied.

"I'm sorry," he said after a second, releasing my leg to get up from the bed. "You're right."

Though he tried to hide it, I sensed his frustration. I was disappointed as well. I drew a throw from the end of my bed over myself as he picked up his pants from the floor. "You're leaving?"

"*Leaving?*" He gaped at me. "Not unless you toss me over the balcony, and even then, I can't promise I won't climb back in." He took something from his pocket, made claws, and crawled with exaggerated movements over the bed to me. "I won't be deterred," he said, snatching the blanket and tossing it away. He tickled my sides until I squirmed. "I'll keep coming back for more."

I laughed, relieved that he wasn't angry. "I'm sorry, Diego," I said. "I don't want to stop, but—"

"Stop? Are you mad?" He flicked up two fingers. Between them, he held a foil packet. "*Nothing* will ruin our first time."

I flopped back onto my pillow as my anticipation returned. "Thank God."

"Thank *me* for being prepared. *El Señor* has *nada* to do with it." With a sexy grin, he used his teeth to tear open the packaging. "Still ready for me?"

I sighed happily up at the ceiling. "I've been ready."

"Get under the covers," he said, drawing back the comforter.

I slipped between the sheets. He rolled on the condom and climbed in after me. "Kiss me," he said from above.

I lifted my head to meet his lips. We each took a breath, and then he opened my mouth with his, running his tongue over mine, nipping my bottom lip. He grasped the side of my neck, his thumb caressing my throat as he deepened the kiss.

"Are you still wet?" he murmured, lowering a hand to touch me. I spread my legs for him, and he found his answer

there. “Good, my love. Very good. I love you, Natalia.”

I nodded, struggling to speak as I prepared my mind and body for what was to come. “I love you too.”

I held my breath as he lined himself up between my hips, then fisted the sheets as he began to press inside me. “Good?” he asked.

My body resisted at first, but with a push, he slid in partway, and I exhaled with relief. Any pain I might’ve experienced was non-existent under Diego’s care. “Yes, weird.”

His eyebrows rose. “Weird?”

I covered my mouth. I’d meant to agree with him. It *was* good, of course. I was exactly where I wanted to be. But in a way, it was also strange. I had dreamed of this moment, worried it might never come. Diego had always been around, watching over me, protecting and shielding me. I remembered looking up to him as a girl, too young to recognize I was falling in love with my best friend.

And then realizing he was more than a best friend.

He was a man, and I was head over heels for him. I hadn’t come down to Earth since; I was still floating on cloud nine.

In his green eyes, I saw everything—a *past* that consisted of pain and support and unconditional love. A *present* that added to the framework of our promising *future*. He’d looked upon me this same way many times, with hope and tenderness.

“We’ve known each other so long. We’ve talked about this and now we’re doing it—what I’m trying to say is ...” I glanced away. *Weird?* I felt silly I’d picked the wrong word to describe this.

He turned my face back to his and pecked me. “Keep going. Tell me every thought you have in that beautiful brain.”

I smiled a little as my muscles loosened, and I relaxed deeper into the mattress. “The weird part is that being with you now *isn’t* as strange as my friends said the first time would be. I’m ... I’m happy.”

“I know you are,” he said. “I recognize my own feelings in your eyes.”

He slipped his arms under me to cradle my shoulders as he nuzzled my cheek. He pressed his lips there, then to the corner of my mouth.

I wrapped my legs around him and urged him deeper.

“You’ve been one of the only constants in my life,” he said. “There were times even Costa overlooked me. But you, well ... your love continues to anchor me.”

“And me,” I said.

He relaxed on top of me, giving me more of his body weight—he finally let go. I wrapped my arms around his neck as he entered me completely. He stayed rooted there a moment as our breath synced, then drew back and drove inside me. I bit my bottom lip, expecting some kind of pain, but it only felt right. And his first plunge only made me crave the next.

As I picked up the rhythm of his lovemaking, I met his thrusts with my hips. Each move he made came with a tender caress or a look of askance, making sure I was comfortable. He was every inch the gentleman, but I sensed there was also a hunger for me he kept bridled so as not to hurt me. I looked forward to unleashing that passion in him.

His drives became hungrier, faster, harder. His hand slipped between us and he knew just the right place to touch me to bring me to the edge. He looked down on me, arresting my gaze. Any time I got shy or my lids started to fall shut with pleasure, he called me back. The electricity between us crackled, pulling me out of this world and into a deeper state of love with him. It was just us, nothing else existed, and suddenly my body was spasming, drawing him deeper, contracting around him as he shuddered and came along with me.

Neither of us moved for a while, and I didn’t want it any other way. My only desire was to stay in Diego’s embrace and receive the love he showered on me.

To be with him for as long as time would allow.

And to bask in the glow of knowing that in only two nights, I'd officially be a de la Rosa.

NATALIA

Bells pealed overhead as Pilar and I navigated our way to the church. We opened the gate, passed the garden, and found an unlocked door in back.

How Diego had secured the church so quickly, and on Easter, I had no idea, but he'd sent word that someone would come for me when it was time.

Inside, I found us an empty room with some chairs and a full-length mirror. I set down a garment bag and tote, disturbing a cloud of dust motes that sparkled in the light coming from gothic-style windows.

"Can you get out my dress?" I asked Pilar, unpinning my hair since I'd put it up to set.

"Why are we here?" She unzipped the bag.

My hair fell to my waist in large shiny black curls. I looked at Pilar in the mirror. "Because I'm getting married today."

She froze, her hand in the bag. Slowly, she withdrew a cream lace dress. "*What?*"

I turned and unzipped my Easter dress to shimmy out of it. "It's a long story, but Diego's in danger."

"And?"

"And a wedding will get him out of it." I reached for the bridal gown. "Hand me that."

“Get *him* out?” she asked, handing me the slinky lace. “Or bring *you* in?”

I waved a hand. “We have a plan.”

“Natalia ...” She made a noise akin to a whimper. “It’s just, I know how important marriage is to you, and that you’ve dreamed of having a beautiful ceremony with all of your family there. You can’t do it as part of a *plan*.”

I stepped into the long dress and slipped my arms into its full sleeves. “I *want* to marry him,” I said, walking over to take her hands. “It’s not just a plan. If it works, I’ll save Diego. If it doesn’t ...”

Pilar paled. “What?”

Then at least Diego and I would have this day together.

Heaviness weighed on my chest. I didn’t want today to be anything other than perfect, though. I took a cleansing breath and forced the thought away with a smile. “I’ll be Diego’s wife, Pila, and our two families combined will be too powerful to challenge.”

She frowned. “Exactly what kind of danger is he in?”

My body tightened, but I focused on survival. I needed to keep positive thoughts and prayers for all of us. I drew my hair over one shoulder and turned, then frowned at the black strappy heels on my feet. “Damn. I forgot to bring my silver shoes. Will you do me up?”

“Where’d you even find a gown this late?” she asked, moving behind me to start with the bottom button.

“It was my mother’s.” I admired the dress in the mirror. The high-necked ivory bodice was fitted but not tight, and the lace around my neck was intricately crafted. The dress had buttons all the way from my lower back to my nape.

“Costa doesn’t mind that you’re wearing this?”

“He doesn’t know. I had to sneak the dress out.”

Pilar touched her forehead. “*Dios mío*, if Costa finds out I helped, he’ll put me in the grave.”

“Don’t worry. You’ll be the last thing on his mind. He’ll be either too relieved to care, or he’ll kill Diego—which I hope he doesn’t, because we’re going through a lot of trouble to keep him safe from the Maldonados.”

“The *Maldonados*?” She muttered something and made the sign of the cross. “*That’s* who he’s in trouble with?”

“*Sí*. It’s scary, I know. That’s why we have to go to extreme lengths.”

“Hopefully they involve *una bruja*. He’ll need black magic to immortalize himself if he has upset them. Or to resurrect him from the grave.”

When she’d done the last button, I turned in the mirror. The dress just grazed the tops of my heels. I frowned. “It’s too short.”

Pilar squatted to inspect the hem. “I can let it out quickly. It won’t be perfect, but because of the lace, you won’t be able to tell much.”

Pilar got a sewing kit from my bag, squatted at my feet with a seam ripper, and did her best to lengthen it. “You won’t miss having Costa walk you down the aisle?” she asked.

I didn’t have to consider my answer. I would, of course. The thought of it had been plaguing me for days. “Yes,” I admitted. “But once Diego and I are safe and everything is as it should be, we’ll have a real wedding and a huge celebration, hopefully in California.” I could envision it perfectly, a cliffside resort where we could have an outdoor ceremony in late summer as the sun set on the water, then a reception on a dancefloor strung with lights. “You can be my maid of honor. I’ll throw you the bouquet so I can set you up with a handsome American.”

“A *gringo*?” she asked, incredulous.

“*Bueno, un chicano.*”

She smiled a little. “What about Manu?”

“You’re too good for him,” I said, but I knew there was slim chance of getting Pilar out of the marriage her parents

were hell-bent on arranging.

She waggled her dark eyebrows as she tugged on the lace. “Are you ready for your wedding night?”

I failed to suppress my smile. I shouldn’t tell Pilar what Diego and I had done, but I was too giddy. “We already had it.”

Her mouth fell open. “*¿En serio?* Really?”

I nodded hard. “Friday night, he stayed with me.”

Her eyes widened. She lowered her voice. “At your dad’s house? How was it?”

“Magical. He was such a gentleman, and made sure I enjoyed every second.” I searched her face for judgment. When she didn’t respond, I continued, “People say your first time is bad, but it didn’t hurt at all.”

“Well, that’s the most you can ask for.”

I agreed. There was a great deal of passion between Diego and me that we hadn’t even explored because he’d been holding back so as not to hurt me. I could only imagine that next time, we’d be tearing off each other’s clothes like animals. “It was perfect.”

Pilar sat back on her heels. “How’s that?”

The dress swung at the bottoms of my heels. “Better. What am I missing?”

“A bouquet.”

I gasped, covering my mouth. “I completely forgot.”

“Just take something from the garden,” she said.

I glanced out the window. “Do you think Father Rios will mind?”

“Without the money your family has donated, there’d be no garden at all.”

“There’s a flowerbed out there in my mother’s name.”

Pilar came up behind me and rubbed my back. “She’s here now. I’m sure of it. Anyway, without a bouquet, you’d be

offending the Virgin of Guadalupe.”

“Ah, *verdad*. I need an offering in exchange for her blessing.” I removed my shoes, gathered up my dress, and walked across the lawn behind the church. Sparrows chirped in the trees as I entered the garden that bore roses, lilies, marigolds, dahlias ...

I closed my eyes and breathed in their fragrance, curling my toes in the springy, freshly cut grass before I picked red roses and white lilies and arranged them into a small bouquet.

I glanced up at a hovering monarch butterfly. I’d never seen a rare, elusive white one, and likely never would, but nonetheless, I stopped to appreciate this one in all its colorful beauty. It passed over the roses and landed in a ray of sunshine atop a lone group of marigolds.

I smiled to myself until it hit me—marigolds were the flower of the dead. “Mami?” I whispered.

It wasn’t the season for monarchs, not like autumn. They’d been everywhere during my mother’s funeral, so close to *Día de los Muertos*. As a girl, I remembered each year when they’d migrate south from the States and Canada in awe-inspiring kaleidoscopes through town—especially dazzling in our yard where Mamá had planted milkweed. I regretted how she and I had captured them just to feel their wings flutter against our palms. How must it have felt to be trapped?

The same as my mother had in her final moments?

“*Lo siento mucho*, Mamá,” I said, my throat thick. “I’m sorry.”

I hated to admit that I understood what Diego had meant when he’d spoken of a deeply buried desire to avenge his parents’ deaths. It was the kind of thing I never poked at for fear of awakening a thirst for revenge only the life of my mother’s murderer could quench. And that was why I’d tried to leave this life behind. Family bonds, wealth, vengeance, and violence—it was a vicious cycle of sins and pain. I was still leaving, I told myself. Not now, not yet, but when things had

settled, Diego and I would have our fresh start anywhere but here.

The butterfly fluttered her wings. “What is it?” I asked.

What wish was she trying to deliver? Or was it a message? A breeze passed through the garden, ruffling leaves. I realized I was gripping the stems of my bouquet, and a thorn had pricked me. I sucked my fingertip and tasted metallic just as I got the sudden sensation I was being watched. I glanced around, but nobody was there.

Thoughts of my mother, and hope that she was looking down on me, should’ve brought happiness, but suddenly, a sense of dread permeated the fragrant air.

The wind picked up, blowing my hair into my face as the monarch flew off through the trees. I watched until she was out of sight. In the distance, the sky had darkened to a deep blue-gray, the way it only did in the desert when a storm approached.

I wished my mother was here to see me exchange vows today, but since she wasn’t, I would carry her with me into the church. I squatted down to add the marigold the butterfly had landed on, the most brilliant of the bunch, to my bouquet.

I didn’t doubt she’d bless my union with Diego or that she’d be at the church today in whichever form she took. She would have understood my urgency, my passion. She had loved deeply too and had given up a family to gain one.

She had known Diego was worth saving as a child and had taken him in. She would approve, I knew it.

The bird above my head stopped chirping and flew away the same instant a shadow moved over me. Two dirt-sodden boots stopped beside me, inciting a memory from eleven years earlier I often tried to forget. Blood-splattered boots and a Glock in the devil’s grip. I raised my eyes, hoping to finally meet Diego, but half-expecting Cristiano. I dropped my bouquet with a gasp.

A man with pockmarked skin, scraggly, graying hair, and an angry, diagonal scar across his face looked back at me.

“They’re ready for you in the church, Miss Natalia.”

He was hard to look at, ugly as sin, scowling even as he smiled—the stuff of nightmares. I swallowed dryly. “Who are you?”

In one hand, he held a gun at his hip. With the other, he ran a fingernail between two of his teeth and then inspected it. “I’m just s’posed to take you in.”

He leaned down, and I flinched, shooting out my hand to catch myself before I fell back in the dirt. He picked up my bouquet, dusted soil from the lilies, and held it out to me. “Don’t wanna forget this.”

I brushed off my hands, clutched the bouquet to my breast, and hurried back to the church. Pilar waited out front with my shoes and a lace *mantilla* veil, looking uneasy.

“Who is that?” she asked, helping me back into my heels. “He came looking for you.”

“I don’t know,” I answered.

She held up the veil and draped the ivory Spanish lace over just my hair and shoulders. “I’ve never seen him before,” she whispered.

I glanced over my shoulder to where he waited by the door. “Diego sent you?” I asked.

“*Da.*”

Da. Yes.

Did my father have any Russians on his payroll? It could’ve been, though I didn’t recall one.

The man stepped forward and held out a small black box with a white satin bow. “From your intended.”

I exchanged a look with Pilar, and the pit in my stomach dissolved. What was Diego up to? With renewed excitement, I took the present, slid off the ribbon, removed the top—and inhaled a sharp breath at the familiar rosary inside.

“What is it?” Pilar asked.

My eyes watered as I handed her the box and held up the gold chain of rubies and pearls. I ran my fingers over the Sacred Heart center and intricate gilt crucifix. “It’s an exact replica of my mother’s.” I shook my head as a tear threatened to fall. “How did he remember it so well?”

“And when did he have time to make it?” Pilar pointed out.

That was an equally impressive feat. Perhaps he’d known for some time he would give it to me on our wedding day. I held it to my heart. “Thank you,” I said to the man, who just shrugged his wide shoulders.

I looked over myself once more in the mirror. The beads spilled from my hand, and for the first time, I glimpsed the grace Barto had said I’d inherited from my mother. I could think of no better way to meet my groom.

We hurried to the front of the church, me with my head bowed, Pilar on one side and the Russian on the other. When we climbed the steps and reached the carved wooden doors, he pulled one open for us.

Bells began to chime. I had only an hour before Barto was supposed to pick me up to meet the helicopter. One hour to meet my fiancé, return with my husband, and break the news to my father.

“Are you coming in?” the man asked Pilar behind me.

“*Sí.*”

“If you insist.” He grinned. There was something funny about the eye with a scar over it. He closed the door behind us as we entered a small antechamber that opened to the grand, high-ceilinged church.

Light spilled through the stained-glass windows, and candles lit the aisle to the altar, which was surrounded by fresh flowers, including the red roses and white lilies of my bouquet. I passed into the nave slowly, taking it all in. I would’ve never thought Diego could pull this together so quickly.

My heels echoed off the empty pews as I walked deeper into the church. Father Rios stood at the altar, his head bent as he murmured to himself, reading from the book in front of him. I would have to remember to thank him later for ending his services early to perform this without notice.

Three men in suits stood around the priest with their backs to me. My stomach dropped. I flattened my hand against it to quell my nerves, welcoming the coarse lace under my palm as I picked up my pace. I looked for Diego but stopped after only a few steps. My betrothed wasn't amongst them. Two of the men had rifles strapped across their suit jackets. And the third, even from behind, was unmistakable. A constant presence in my nightmares, a monster even to monsters—the devil himself.

What was *he* doing here? I took a step back.

Cristiano turned his head over his shoulder, giving me his profile. His jaw sharpened as he paused there. I didn't realize I was holding my breath until I began to feel faint. Finally, he turned and faced me. "What a beautiful bride you make, Natalia," he said, meeting my eyes. "Not that I expected anything less."

He had no reason to expect me *at all*. How dare he show his face on my wedding day? The beads of my mother's rosary dug into my palm. He looked wrong next to the elderly, homely priest—and at the altar, where Diego should've been.

The heavy door to the nave closed behind me with a *click*, causing candle flames to flicker and sigh. The distinct, pungent smell of marigolds invaded my nostrils.

Perhaps the monarch hadn't come to deliver a wish or a message—but a warning.

Run.

NATALIA

Sunshine streamed through the archways on both sides of the church, but it didn't touch me in the center. The aisle that would lead a bride to her groom remained dim and candlelit.

The aisle that ended with Cristiano de la Rosa.

He stood in Diego's spot wearing a perfectly cut suit and a satin tie as sleek and jet-black as his styled hair. His eyes trailed from my lace-adorned neck, to the rosary and bouquet in my hands, to my ankles. Even in such a modest dress, his perusal stripped me bare. Heat warmed my cheeks. He acted as if he had every right to linger his gaze on the curves of my breasts and hips. As if he was deciding where to start. As if he owned me.

The room had gone still, not even a breath exhaled.

A pit formed in my stomach. There was a chance Cristiano had come to stand for his brother, but with the way he looked at me—possessively, but with more satisfaction than longing—I knew he wasn't here just to show support for the joining of our families.

“What have you done with Diego?” The panic in my voice reverberated off the pews around us.

Cristiano's eyes shifted over my shoulder. I turned. Diego stood at the door, sagging under the weight of something I couldn't name. It didn't matter. He was here. I ran to him and threw my arms around his neck, breathing in the heady fragrance of my bouquet and Diego's soapy scent.

He hugged me back until Cristiano barked a single warning that echoed off the high ceilings. “Diego.”

Diego moved his hands to my shoulders and peeled me off, separating us. He seemed to have aged years since I’d last seen him. “My dearest Talia,” he whispered, his green eyes searching mine. “My love. You know you are, don’t you? My only love?”

It felt like a good-bye. Since I’d stepped into the garden, dread had been slowly gathering in me like the dark clouds on the horizon—and a storm was about to hit. I moved back and stepped on the bouquet I hadn’t even realized I’d dropped. I held the rosary with both hands, as if in prayer. “Please tell me Cristiano is only here to see this merger through.”

Diego scrubbed both hands over his face, then smoothed back his hair. “Everything is gone, Talia. I can’t replace it, and I can’t pay for it. If the Maldonados aren’t already on their way, they will be soon, and they’ll come after *all* of us.”

“I know,” I said. “I *know*, but you said you had a plan—you said ...”

“Cristiano has admitted to the attacks. He sabotaged my deal with them.”

I knew it. It should’ve come as no great shock, but heat rose up my neck and cheeks as anger brewed inside me. I gritted my teeth. “Then let *him* pay for it.”

“I can’t prove it. I have no credibility or influence with them. But *he* does.” Diego nodded over my shoulder. “There’s only one way out, and it’s through him.”

The only way out was to form an alliance and stand against the Maldonados. We’d already figured that out, so what did Cristiano have to do with it? “What do you mean?” I asked.

“Cristiano will settle our debts and smooth things over with the Maldonados, but only if ...” He trailed off as if he couldn’t bear to say more.

“Only if *what*?” I asked. “What about our plan? By marrying and uniting our families, we’ll—”

I froze.

Make an unworthy man happy.

Meet me at the church this Sunday.

Diego had never actually proposed.

He went to touch my face but stopped himself at the last second. “I swear to you, Natalia,” he said so softly, I almost didn’t hear him, “I will fix this. Trust me. *Please.*”

I reached out for something to steady myself as I became light-headed, but there was nothing. “This ... you ...”

Cristiano cleared his throat. “My patience grows thin, *hermano.*”

Diego glanced over my shoulder and wiped sweat from his forehead with the butt of his palm. “I told you there’d be a union of families today—”

“No.” I was shaking my head—slowly at first and then harder. I ripped off my veil as it loosened. “*No.*”

Diego gripped my shoulders. “It’s the only option. Cristiano will throw us at the mercy of the Maldonados unless you agree.”

I breathed out a shuddering gasp, and a laugh of disbelief escaped. The space around us sharpened into a distortion of reality, as if I’d been hit with *déjà vu*. “Unless I agree to ... to what?”

Diego nodded once. “To marry Cristiano today.”

My heart thudded painfully. I dropped the veil and my rosary clattered on the wood floor. Marry *Cristiano*? I couldn’t. I *wouldn’t*. I shifted my gaze over Diego’s shoulder to Pilar, whose eyes flitted from the men at the altar to us to the armed Russian next to her—guarding the door. Had this been planned? When? How long had Diego known?

My limbs weakened. The church’s grim atmosphere said it all. I wasn’t here for my wedding but for something much graver. “I can’t,” I whispered. “You can’t ask this of me.”

“That’s his condition to help us.” Diego glanced at the ground, and his brown hair eased around his cheeks. “I can’t save us. But you can.”

“*Why?*” I asked.

He squatted to pick up my rosary, clutching the beads in a fist as he spoke through his teeth. “He covets you, but he knows he cannot command you, or it would make him like my father.” He lifted his eyes. “He has refused my money, servitude, power—everything.” Diego stood and pressed the rosary back into my hand. “I offered to leave town so he’d never see me again, but he’s determined to see me dead.”

“He has refused power?” I asked, raising my voice. I couldn’t look at Cristiano, but I’d make sure he heard me. “This *is* a power play. He unites two families, consolidating power for himself while stripping you of yours.”

“The only thing he wants is you—and for you to willingly go to him.”

I gaped at Diego, who wore a special-occasion gray suit as if he’d tried to look *nice*.

“This has *nothing* to do with me,” I said evenly. “There has to be another way.”

His jaw firmed as he swallowed. He pinched the inside corners of his eyes, and a tear escaped. “There *isn’t*, Talia,” he cried. “I’d never ask this of you if it wasn’t my last resort.”

“The Maldonados will come for us once they have their money,” I said, trying to get him to see. “*You* said they don’t forgive failure. That they’ll make an example of you.”

“They respect Cristiano. He can keep them at bay, and even if he couldn’t, they cannot come against him and your father.” His brows cinched. “Even they aren’t that powerful.”

I didn’t want to believe it, but I knew I hadn’t even begun to fathom the kind of havoc the Maldonados would wreak—not just on us, but those around us. I could almost sense them closing in now. I touched my throat as if *El Polvo* poured sand down it. *That’s* who I was to marry? I had to choose between

the lesser of two evils—to be married to a vicious murderer or face a mob of them.

I looked down and released my fist. The rosary beads had made indents in my palm. “The Maldonados ...” I said. “They’ll listen to Cristiano? You’re sure?”

“Yes. But not until he’s gotten what he wants.”

Me.

No. I couldn’t do it.

I took Diego’s hands. “You and I can get married. Cristiano will still be united with my father. We’ll leave. Let them have it all.”

I started to turn, but Diego pulled me back. “I tried. It won’t work. Walk down the aisle to him—or walk out. I’m desperate enough to beg you to do this for me”—his voice broke as his nose reddened—“but I will respect whatever you decide, Tali. I’ve always been willing to die for you. That hasn’t changed.”

“*Please,*” I said, looking at our intertwined hands. I held one up, showing him my initials on his ring finger, knowing it would say more than I could. “Please. There *has* to be another way.”

Diego didn’t speak, but another tear slid down his cheek. “We wouldn’t be standing here if there was an alternative,” he said finally, pulling his hands away. “This is it. The last option. To deny him what he wants is to put a bullet in all our heads.”

“Then let them kill us!” Frustration overwhelmed me, and a sob rose up my throat. If I left here with Cristiano, I’d be stripped of a future anyway. “What kind of life would I lead with him?”

Diego inclined toward me, speaking near my ear. “It’s only until I can get to you,” he whispered. “I’ll do anything to free you. I’ll build an army against him. He won’t hurt you, Tali. If he wanted that, he would’ve done it by now.”

“No. He wants to hurt *you*, and he’ll use me to do it. What do you think he’ll do with me once we leave here? We’ll be

married, Diego.”

He turned his face away, swallowing. “I can’t think of it. If I suspected he had any intention of hurting you, I’d die first. He won’t. I’m asking you to do this and hang on for me, Talia. Can you?”

Pressure built in my chest. I’d declared not days ago that I’d save him any way possible. This was what I’d been called to do to prevent us from meeting a gruesome death. “I ...”

“You must understand—you’ll be safe with him while we settle things with the Maldonados. More than you’ll be anywhere else.”

My jaw tingled. I was safest in the grip of a devil. Nobody was willing to budge, negotiate, or listen to reason. I pressed my hand to my chest as my anger gave way to fear for what Diego and Cristiano truly believed was about to happen. I wasn’t sure Diego understood that once I belonged to Cristiano, he wasn’t going to share. I would be his to do with as he pleased.

“Once he marries me,” I said quietly, “he’ll have only one use for me, if even that. I won’t be able to escape him.”

“That’s enough,” Cristiano said from the altar. I refused to turn and look at him. “Come to me now, Natalia, or I’m taking the deal off the table.”

“Life or death, Diego,” I begged. “I’m yours in either. Where you go, I will follow.”

“And they will hunt us like dogs.”

I swallowed through a painful lump in my throat. They would find us, but at least we’d be together. At least *I* wouldn’t be left at the mercy of Cristiano. He’d restrained himself around me so far, and hadn’t given me much reason to believe he’d hurt me—but I had no idea how he’d act once he thought he owned me like one of the women he kept behind Badlands’ gates. Except *I* would belong to the master himself. “Then we’ll face the Maldonados together,” I said.

“And Costa?” Diego asked.

My heart stopped. *Papá*. They would come for all of us. Me, Diego, my father. Tepic, Jojo, Pilar. My father's family. Maybe even my mother's, who were the only ones wise enough to stay far away from this life. And it would touch them anyway. Unless I did this.

I would do this for Diego, but I *had* to do it for the man who'd given me life, who'd loved and protected me always. If I didn't, maybe I would find my father dead on the cold tile floor before they killed me too. Or took me. Was I better off enslaved to them or Cristiano? I hated that the answer was obvious.

My nose tingled, and I shut my eyes as resignation set in.

"The Cruz cartel will cease to exist," Diego said. "They'll execute those at the top to warn others, keep the ones they have use for, and discard the rest."

My core seemed to have frozen. I wrapped my arms around myself as the cold hit, inciting a shiver deep inside me. "You can't put their lives on me," I said. "Maybe I can save them, but *you* did this. Father did this. Cristiano did this. I'm innocent."

"Be that as it may," Cristiano said from behind me, "I've named my price. Turn around, Natalia."

No. No. I wouldn't. I grabbed the lapels of Diego's suit and pulled him close. "Please," I implored one final time. "Find a better way. Don't ask this of me."

Defeat. That was what I'd seen in the slump of his shoulders earlier. I could name it now because he drew up, lengthening his spine. His resignation morphed into resolution. "Okay," he said. He hesitated, then slowly enveloped me in a strong hug. He looked over my head to Cristiano. "I'm sorry. She won't do it."

I waited for relief, but it didn't come. In the following silence, my insides tangled. Cristiano's menacing presence pervaded the church. With the reality of how I'd just changed the course of things, my head filled with visions of what came next. A massacre. Bloodshed. News stories that would never

be reported. Deaths that would stand for nothing and happen in vain.

“I never truly thought she’d go through with it,” Cristiano said finally. “You’ve asked too much of her love.”

Bastard. My teeth mashed together. My love wasn’t weak as he implied. Perhaps he didn’t know true love because he wasn’t capable of it. He was wrong. *Life or death.* I repeated it to myself, trying to bring my courage up to meet my indignation. *Life or death.*

“Put Natalia on her plane out of the country,” Cristiano continued. “Once Ángel Maldonado finds out, it’s out of my hands. I can’t protect even her, though I will try.”

Diego’s heart pounded against my cheek. “It’s all right,” he murmured in my ear. “I understand.”

“My offer is off the table,” Cristiano announced. “Max, pull the car around.”

I pressed my face into Diego’s chest as he smoothed my hair away and shushed my cries. I didn’t want to leave this spot, but I heard the resolve in Cristiano’s voice. In his footsteps down the aisle. These could be my last moments with Diego, and if I survived, I’d have to live with knowing I hadn’t saved him. I would rather die by Diego’s side than marry my enemy, but even death did not seem to be an option for me. Only for Diego.

Clutching the rosary, I lifted my head and asked in a watery whisper, “You’ll come for me?”

He spoke into my hair, only for me. “As soon as I can. I just need time, and this is the only way to buy it.”

What awaited me when I turned and faced Cristiano? What unspeakable things did he have planned once I left with him? At least with the Maldonados, there was a chance they’d kill me quickly. Cristiano and his bucket of sand wouldn’t rush his torture.

Cristiano’s footsteps neared.

“Wait,” I said into Diego’s neck. “*Espera.* Wait.”

Diego tensed, then loosened, and he breathed a loud exhale near my ear. “My girl,” he said, ghosting his lips over my temple. “My savior. Thank you.” He rubbed my back briefly, then slid his hands to my upper arms. “Turn and go to him.”

“I can’t.” I hiccupped. “I can’t do it.”

“Strength, *princesa*.” Diego squeezed my shoulders affectionately, then spun me around.

Cristiano stood halfway down the aisle, tall and imposing, not a hair out of place—and utterly lacking in any softness, understanding, or empathy for what he demanded of me.

I stared at him from under wet lashes heavy with mascara. What a farce, getting made up. And in my *mother’s* dress. It was profane, a sin against her sacred day with my father. “Why?” I asked Cristiano.

“I believe the words you’re looking for are ‘thank you.’” Cristiano walked closer to us. “Diego would be halfway to the grave if not for me.”

“His life is in danger *because of you*. And you don’t need me to pardon him. Look inside yourself for forgiveness, Cristiano. You were human once—he is your *brother*.”

“He ceased to be anything to me long ago—and now, he is nothing to you. He deserves to die. All I did was push fate along.”

“You can stop it.”

“My price is very, very steep, Natalia. I can’t be expected to let him go unpunished, can I? So he can make an attempt on my life?”

By Diego’s words pleading me to hold on just now, he did have plans. And Cristiano likely knew it.

Cristiano stuck his hands in his pockets, looking down on me. “Didn’t I warn you about him? You should’ve listened. At least with me, you’ll be safe.”

“Safe? With you? You’re forcing me into marriage.”

Even as I straightened up, Cristiano seemed to grow bigger. He filled the room, demanding everything of the space around him. “There’s always a choice, Natalia. If there wasn’t, I’d throw him to the wolves and take you anyway. Who’d stop me? Diego? He’s giving you up. Your father? He isn’t here. I can easily take you, but I’m offering a choice. Come with me willingly, or go and say your good-byes.”

Without moving from his post, Max said, “The car is here, boss.”

Cristiano checked his phone. “*Vámonos.*”

I shut my eyes and tears spilled down my cheeks. There was no more time, and no more I could say except my decision. “I’ll do it,” I said in darkness, then opened my eyes.

With slow, deliberate movements, Cristiano slid his phone in his jacket pocket and closed the space between us. “A lesser man would make you beg for another chance—I already took the deal off the table. But a simple ‘please’ would go a long way.”

I dug my fingernails into my palms until they throbbed. “I won’t beg.”

“Oh, you will, *mariposita*. But I can be fair. I’ll go first.” Our gazes met, and for a moment, it was just the two of us. “Marry me, Natalia. Please.”

“You’re mocking me.”

“I’m not.” He stared into my eyes, seeming almost unsettled, as if battling something inside himself. “I’ve not made this arrangement lightly. I would like very much to call you my wife.”

“Then you will. But I want to hear, from *your* mouth, what will happen if I don’t. Diego has said it. You should have to as well.”

He arched an eyebrow. “Now you’re being smart. It’s only good business to hear the terms of an agreement.”

“This is my term—promise me you won’t hurt my father.”

“I have no quarrel with him.”

“Swear it on my mother, who placed all of her faith in you.”

He pressed his lips into a line. “You have my word.”

Perhaps it was foolish to believe him, not that I had much choice, but I took him for his word.

One corner of his mouth rose into a crooked, sinister smile as he looked to Diego. “Now for the other terms you failed to mention to her.”

I glanced back. Diego’s shrewd green eyes were fixed on his brother. I could read the hatred in them. Cristiano wanted to torture him, and it was working.

Diego loosened his tie and turned his head out the window.

“At a loss for words? I’m happy to fill her in.” Cristiano rubbed his jaw and took a few paces to one side, stopping at the end of one pew. He turned to me. “Diego has confirmed what you shared with me the other night—that you’re waiting for marriage.”

Diego put a hand to my back, spreading his fingers between my shoulder blades, a warning to keep my silence. Cristiano thought I was a virgin. “Why does that matter?” I asked.

“Because I want to be your first. Your last. Your only. And because denying him brings me pleasure,” Cristiano said. “So there’s no question—the deal is contingent on the consummation of our marriage.”

My head filled with images of Cristiano’s massive arms trapping me to the mattress. An ache formed between my legs as his beautiful but cruel face hovered above mine, his broken soul taking what he wanted. His broad shoulders blocking out everything else. Everyone else. *Your first. Your last. Your only.*

Had Diego come to my balcony knowing any of this? He said he’d spoken to Cristiano but had decided against bringing me into their deal. My heart said Diego wouldn’t lie, but doubt formed in my mind, mingling with a tinge of humiliation over my complete faith in him. I hadn’t breathed in so long that I

gaped with an inhale. Had Diego taken my virginity after promising me to his brother?

Cristiano tilted his head at me, smoothing a hand over his jacket. “You *are* a virgin, aren’t you, Natalia?”

To admit the truth would mean Diego’s death. To lie, I feared, could mean my own—I would have to take the secret of my night with Diego to the grave. “Yes,” I said. “I am.”

He narrowed his eyes and took a step toward me that echoed around us. “You’re sure?”

I dipped my head in a firm nod. “Yes.”

“Then you, Natalia Lourdes King Cruz, and your virginity—are mine.”

Surrounded by people who stood by and did nothing as Cristiano imposed his will on me, my face burned. As he declared me *his* and promised to defile and abuse me, his men stood back. And Diego—he had *arranged* this.

You will die for him, your love.

“What’s your decision, Natalia?” Cristiano asked.

I inhaled a deep breath and exhaled the things I could not control. I had to trust that Diego wouldn’t accept a life without me in it. He had to have a greater plan that would put Cristiano in the ground—this couldn’t end any other way. Because I knew without being told that when Cristiano said till death do us part, he would mean that literally. Even when my use to him had run out, I wasn’t naïve enough to believe he would release me.

To save Diego, I could hold on until he and my father came for me. I had known strength and poise in my mother. She’d fought back and lost, but her determination would live on—in me.

“*Que será, será,*” I said. “My answer is yes.”

Cristiano stilled, his eyes dark, bottomless pits that stewed with plans—the games he would play, and the violent delights he would take. “Then it is done,” he said with a rumble. “I will make you a very good husband, Natalia. Come to me.”

I glanced back at Diego.

“I’m not leaving,” he said. “I’ll be right outside, waiting.”

“You’ll watch every moment,” Cristiano said to him, then turned to me. “And you will not look to him again. You’re finished with him. Now, come.”

NATALIA

Candles flickered along the aisle, burning a fiery path to the man watching me from the altar.

Cristiano de la Rosa—my future husband.

I picked up my bouquet and twined the rosary around the stems. As everyone around us looked on, I took one step toward him, then another, wobbling in my heels as the room tilted around me. I steadied myself on a pew. Cristiano tightened his shiny tie but didn't rush me.

Father Rios avoided my eyes, but when I reached him, I saw the tears in his. The suited men with guns flanked him—a bridal party from hell, hired to enforce Cristiano's will. To force fate's hand—and mine, in marriage.

I kneeled on the pillow before the priest. Organ music I hadn't noticed stopped.

"Pilar." Cristiano faced the back as his voice echoed around the room and vibrated in my chest. "*Trajiste un lazo?*"

"I-I ..."

I didn't have to look back at my friend to know she was scared—I heard the fear in her voice. "Yes," I answered for her. "There's a lasso in my bag."

"Bring it to me," Cristiano said.

Pilar's rapid but light footsteps sounded toward us. She handed him the shoulder bag.

“You can sit,” he told her, pointing to a pew behind me and said to no one in particular, “I like this tradition, this unification of man and wife.” He took out a black rope and inspected it, tossing the bag aside. “Where’d you get this?”

“It’s the tie from my curtains,” I murmured. “That was the best I could find on short notice.”

“It will do fine. Someone else lassoes us, no?” he asked the priest. “I haven’t been to many weddings.”

“The priest or a family member,” one of his men answered. “I can, *padrino*. I did it for my sister.”

Cristiano hummed. “I’d like to do it myself, if it’s acceptable to the reverend.”

As if anyone would stop him. Cristiano came to stand in front of me, waiting until I looked up. Even when I wasn’t on my knees, he towered. Now, he reached the sky. He ran the silken cord through his hands as if deciding the best use for it. He tied the ends of the lasso together to form a circle, then tugged to tighten the knot.

Cristiano squatted in front of me and looped the rope around my neck, letting his fingers brush my throat and collarbone.

My back ached from holding it so straight, but I couldn’t loosen if I wanted to. I avoided his gaze by looking at his suit. I’d never seen such fine tailoring in all my life, even though my father had benefited from my mother’s good taste.

Cristiano pulled the lasso taut enough that I could feel it when I swallowed. He lifted my face by my chin. With a rough touch, he used his whole hand to palm away my tears. “I wish my bride not to cry on our wedding day.” He kneeled beside me and handed me the remaining cord. “Now you.”

Finally, something I could happily agree to. I twisted toward him and coiled the *lazo* around his neck to form an infinity between us. To leash me to him. I gave the rope a tug, and he arched a dark, scolding eyebrow at me.

If I’d had the guts, I would’ve asked why he’d bothered with this charade at all. As “willing” as Cristiano demanded I

be, summoning tradition didn't make this anything more than an extravagant kidnapping.

As fresh flowers perfumed the space around us, and tall candles warmed it, the priest recited a prayer with a shaky voice and obvious trepidation. I had to keep myself from looking back at Diego.

Cristiano's shoulder touched mine, and only then did I realize I'd been shivering. Despite the way he bullied and intimidated, he had that kind of soothing touch, one that would still you, if not with serenity, then out of dread. It confused me now the way it had when he'd frisked me at the club, or when he'd bandaged me up after the warehouse fire.

The way he'd slid his hands up under my dress and then robe ... and I hadn't run away either time.

And his touch wouldn't end there. As Father Rios married us, my wifely duties were placed upon me. Cristiano hadn't hesitated to put his hands on me before, even knowing I was spoken for. That I was opposed to it. There was no question he would demand everything from me.

My trembling started anew, and he turned his head. I kept my gaze forward, even as the priest's speech slurred, or perhaps it was my mind that blended and muffled words to protect me from what I was hearing.

Father Rios went quiet, breaking me from my stupor.

After a moment, Cristiano said, "I do."

"Natalia," the priest said, "do you take Cristiano to be your wedded husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love, cherish, and obey till death do part you ..."

Obey. I hadn't heard a word of Cristiano's vows, but somehow, I doubted he was under any obligation to obey *me*.

They both stared.

My chest was tight from holding my breath. I couldn't bring myself to say the words. I looked to the guards on each side of the priest. One had a face tattoo, a wrinkled dress shirt,

and stood unevenly, but was dressed in the finest artillery. He gave me a close-lipped smile that made wrinkles around his eyes. The other wore a matching gun and restrained grin, with deep dimples and scars that peeked out from his collar.

I returned my eyes to Father Rios, who seemed to be whispering his own prayer while waiting for my answer.

Cristiano turned to me, laced our fingers together, and raised my hand between us. “He has asked if you’ll take me as your husband, Natalia.”

I can't. I can't say it.

After a moment, one of Cristiano’s men said, “She does.”

“I heard it too,” the ugly guard said.

“*Por favor*,” the priest pleaded. “I can’t proceed without her consent.”

“Nor can I,” said Cristiano. My palm perspired in his rough one. He squeezed it gently. “Tell him, Natalia Lourdes.”

Father Rios’ fallen expression took my heart down with it. He was as trapped as I was. I straightened my shoulders and looked at Cristiano. His dark eyes danced. The sharp lines of his angular face almost softened with something like happiness. “I do,” I said to him.

Cristiano stood and helped me up. He reached for my left hand. “I don’t have your ring yet.” From his pocket, he produced a considerable but simple diamond in a gold setting and slipped it on me. “For the sake of the ceremony, until we find one that suits you.”

“I don’t need one,” I said.

He glanced at the priest, who nodded for him to continue.

“With this ring, I thee wed. With my body, I thee worship.” Cristiano commanded my attention, and again, the others fell away. As his dark eyes drank me in, I only wondered how, if he’d not been to many weddings, he knew what to say. Or why he seemed to say it with such vehemence, as if he meant it.

It wasn't like he needed anyone in this church, not even the reverend, to believe it.

“With all my worldly goods,” he continued, “I thee endow —*en el nombre del Padre, y del Hijo, y del Espíritu Santo. Prometo amarte y respetarte todos los días de mi vida. Amén.*”

He hesitated, as if he half-expected me to repeat the words back to him.

I promise to love and respect you for all the days of my life.

My new husband was turning out to be a riddle.

But I wouldn't mock the church and say what he asked of me.

We were mercifully interrupted. Out of nowhere, a man in cowboy boots and a matching hat appeared and clomped down the aisle to us. “¡*Felicidades!*” he said. “Congratulations to the happy couple.”

“Remove your hat in the church,” Cristiano said.

“Of course.” The man did as he was told and held out a folder.

Cristiano opened it, looked over some paperwork, and rearranged the pages. Satisfied, he turned the file around for me. “Sign.”

I glanced at the sheet on top. “What is it?”

“To legalize the marriage with a civil ceremony.”

“Why all this trouble?” I asked, shaking my head. “You could take me to the Badlands and imprison me there whether we're legally married or not.”

“I have my reasons.” He nodded at the cowboy, who patted his pockets before producing a pen. “Sign.”

I started to protest, but what could I say? And what did it matter? Signing on the devil's dotted line was no more permanent than the verbal agreement I'd already given. I had lost, and I feared I'd need my strength to fight bigger battles later.

The man started to put his hat back on, then seemed to remember Cristiano's order and held it to his chest. "I'll need those medical records, *compañero*. They're supposed to be done weeks in advance."

"I'm grateful for all the concessions you've made for my wife," Cristiano said, returning the folder to the man once I'd signed. "You have a friend in Calavera."

"*Gracias*, de la Rosa," the cowboy said, slipping the paperwork under his arm. He bowed to me, replaced his hat, and returned from wherever he'd come.

I found myself staring at Cristiano like everyone else in the church. He thought himself a god and expected the same of others.

He'd called me his *wife*. My fingers and toes curled. I was what my mother had been to my father. In some ways, it was a stretch—the devotion between them had run deep, the love profound, and here I was marrying a man I knew little better than a stranger. Yet that wasn't true. Cristiano had been a constant presence in my life, even after he'd left. There were similarities to our marriages too. My mother and father had trusted Cristiano with their lives and now, I was putting that same faith in him.

Trusting him with my eternal life as we descended into hell.

Promising him my love everlasting while my heart belonged to another.

Cristiano turned to the priest. "Finish it."

Father Rios nodded. "You may kiss the bride."

Cristiano gestured for my bouquet. For strength, I called upon a moment in which I hadn't feared Cristiano. A sunlit afternoon many years ago when he'd carried baskets of daisies and morning glory. I'd held Mamá's hand on our way back to the house, turned, and caught him smelling the flowers. He'd winked at me. I'd laughed, thinking it funny back then that it was more unusual to see him toting flowers than it would've been a gun.

I prayed, for my sake, that man still lived in him.

He took the bouquet from my nerveless fingers, unwrapping the rosary from its stems. “What do you think of it?” he asked.

“What?” I looked between us. “The rosary is from you? But how did you know?”

“It’s not a replica. It was your mother’s.”

I could clearly remember her turning these beads through her slender fingers in this very church. The memory brought tears to my eyes. Now, I truly had a piece of her, but under such dire circumstances.

He pocketed it, then passed my bridal bouquet to a guard, who handled it with surprising care.

Cristiano cupped his hands around my jaw. He had to stoop a good deal to meet me, even as he lifted my face the rest of the way. He waited there, his unforgiving eyes boring into mine as if trying to read my mind. I had only one mounting thought, though.

Please, let this be another nightmare, for the darkness I’ve resisted welcomes me too easily.

Let Cristiano dematerialize into the black shadow that haunts my sleep.

Let him have mercy.

Let him release me.

He pressed his lips to mine, their yielding fullness a stark contrast to the firm hands that held me in place. He inhaled sharply, as if he’d surprised himself as well. My heart pounded. His mouth parted, and mine did the same, granting him access that he seized, plunging his tongue inside to find mine just as eager. I gripped his elbows as his fingertips dug into my cheeks, my knees threatening to give out. A kiss that promised lovemaking in one breath and fucking in the next.

He drew away, leaving me gasping. I kept my eyes closed as the silence grew weighty between us. Why did giving into his kiss feel like walking into darkness—a temptation I knew I

should resist? I half-expected a soothing whisper from him, maybe even something sweet.

I eased my eyes open. He kept my face in his hands but had his head turned toward the back of the church. “Envision me taking her with the same fervor on this, our wedding night, brother,” he said, then kissed me again.

I jerked away and slapped him. The sound of it echoed through the church—skin on skin, and Pilar’s loud gasp—whereas my regret was immediate.

Cristiano glared at me, working his jaw side to side, anger clearly building within him.

Even with the realization of what I’d done, rage burned in me. For the way he’d flaunted the kiss, something that should’ve been sacred no matter the circumstances. For how he’d used me to become even more powerful. For how he’d stolen my senses and tricked me into enjoying the kiss.

“You’ve ruined me,” I said to him, and turned to look down the aisle at Diego. “And you let him.”

I picked up my dress and strode down the aisle. If Cristiano didn’t like it, let him shoot me in the back.

“Talia,” Diego said, pressing his palms together in supplication. “Wait.”

I pushed by him. “Go to hell.”

Max blocked the door, stopping me with a curt shake of his head. There was nobody to help. Nobody but me.

I spun back and stood in front of Diego as my vision blurred with tears. “You were careless with my father’s business and careless with me. Now I’ll pay the price.”

“You saved my life,” he said. “I will forever be grateful to you.”

I grabbed the lapels of his suit to push him away, but I couldn’t. I didn’t want him to go to hell. I wanted him to stay with me. Diego took my wrists. I fisted the fabric and buried my face in his chest. “You *know* what he has planned for me.”

Without turning, I sensed Cristiano at my back before he spoke. “Take your hands off my wife, or I will add them to my collection.”

I squeezed my eyes shut. I would soon see Cristiano’s rumored museum of body parts with my own eyes.

“I’m sorry,” Diego said, and we released each other.

“She is mine,” Cristiano said. “Say it.”

The tie of Diego’s knot hung loose, defeated. I hated that he had put me in this position, but I hated how Cristiano rubbed it in our faces even more.

“She is yours in the eyes of God,” Diego said, “but in every other way, she is mine. Saying otherwise won’t change the fact.”

I turned to Cristiano to plead with him not to react to Diego’s baiting words, but he stood calm.

“As I told you before, brother,” he said, each word slow and clipped, “once this was done, there’d be no turning back. She is mine. If you, or anyone, touches her again, I will rain down a fury the likes of which not even the Maldonados have seen.”

Chills spread over every inch of my skin. He only said it to goad Diego, but his possessiveness gripped and thrilled me in ways that scared me.

Cristiano lowered his eyes and locked them on me. “Get out.”

Instinctively, I knew he wasn’t talking to me.

“Out!” Cristiano bellowed. He looked around, meeting eyes with each of his men and then Diego. “Everyone leave. You too, Max, and take the priest. I have business with my wife.”

The church emptied quickly—too quickly. I couldn’t even get a handle on my trepidation over being alone with him.

When it was just us, Cristiano walked forward until we were face to face. “Next time you slap me,” he said, “save it

for the bedroom.”

I let out a shaky breath. My only comfort was being in the church. I had to believe he wouldn't punish me for my insolence in God's house.

He looked me up and down. “Hit me, rage against me, call me names. But I have two rules you won't break twice. First, Diego will *never* touch you again. And second, you will not *ever* lie to me, even one more time.”

I racked my brain for what he might be referring to. “I didn't lie,” I said quickly.

“No?” he asked. “What did you think would happen when you came to my bed and didn't bleed?”

I swallowed my gasp and did my best to school my shock. He knew I wasn't a virgin—yet he'd gone through with the wedding anyway. “Not every woman bleeds,” I said, careful to speak honestly.

“Not with Diego, I'm sure. He treats you like you're breakable. I won't. With me, you'd have bled, and perhaps you still will in other ways.” He raised his chin. “Remove your dress.”

What? My jaw went slack. He couldn't mean for me to strip down *here*? I ceased to breathe or function in any way but to stare at him—and shake all over with the force and speed of my hammering heart.

“Y-you can't,” I said, my mouth completely dry. Even Hades would wait until he was back in the underground for this next part. “We're in a church.”

“White doesn't suit you, my lovely wife.” He circled me until he was at my back. I didn't even have the wherewithal to try to keep him in my sight. He wouldn't do this here. He *couldn't*.

He trailed a finger up my spine until he'd reached the top button of my dress, just under my hairline. He gripped the back of the collar with both hands, slipping his knuckles between the fabric and my skin. It was a warm caress that spurred panic in me as I realized what he was doing.

“Stop—”

He yanked the dress open, ripping my mother’s lace.

I opened my mouth, and my chin trembled. I thought I’d already known the worst of him, but he would prove me wrong. When his footsteps sounded again, I did my best to inhale back the urge to cry. My weakness would only spur him on.

Cristiano finished his circle and stood in front of me again with darkened eyes and lowered lids. “Now, take off your dress, Natalia—and let me see what my brother’s freedom bought me.”

* * *

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MOUNTAIN DARKNESS

By
Vanessa Vale

KIT

I stuck my arm out from beneath the covers and slapped at the top of my alarm clock to shut it up. God, it was too early. Even though the sun was peeking beneath my blinds, I wanted to snuggle deeper for a few more hours. Groaning, I kicked my legs out and sat up. Last night's wedding had gone smoothly; at least the bride and groom had thought so. Erin and I had been able to sober up the groom's uncle with two cups of coffee in time for family photos. They never knew the veggie medley on the sit-down meals hadn't been a medley at all, but solo broccoli.

While the couple had a wedding day, and most likely night, to remember, mine had been less exciting. For my wild Saturday night, I'd picked up the daily lottery ticket for my mother on the way home, kicked off my heels by the front door, then fell into bed like a tree being cut down and slept until... the annoying alarm.

We had a breakfast meeting with our new—and biggest—client, and all this work was why I'd returned to Cutthroat, but a few extra hours of sleep wouldn't have hurt.

I didn't smell any coffee brewing, which meant Erin was still asleep. She'd scheduled the early meeting, so the least she could have done was get up first and get the caffeine injection ready.

Already grouchy, I quickly made my bed, then padded out of my room and down the hall, tugging my sleep shirt down. I made it as far as the couch in the great room, then stopped. Stared. Blinked. I wasn't quite awake, my mind not firing on all cylinders, but seeing Erin sprawled on the floor, I went fully alert between one heartbeat and the next.

"Erin!" I shouted, dropping to my knees before her. Her blonde hair was matted to her head with blood. So much of it was soaked into the carpet. Her blue eyes stared up at me, vacant and empty. "Oh my god, Erin. Wake up!"

Rationally, I knew she was dead. Her eyes weren't moving. Her lips were gray. The side of her head... god, it was bad. Irrationally, I lifted it onto my lap, brushed her hair back, kept telling her to wake up. When I realized I was smearing the blood, I stopped. I started to shake, to look around to figure out how she'd ended up like this. *Help. She needed help.*

Carefully, I laid her back on the floor and ran to my room, grabbed my cell from the charger. With shaky fingers, I tried to swipe my screen for access. "Come on," I whimpered, but my fingers were covered in blood and it wouldn't work. I wiped them on my sleep shorts and tried again.

"9-1-1, what is your emergency?"

"I... my friend... she's dead. Oh god. You have to send an ambulance."

"Ma'am, what is your address?"

I told her, then answered all the questions she tossed at me in her efficient voice. I stayed on the line with her until I heard sirens, then hung up and ran outside. Erin's house was a custom build with all wood and glass, with more rooms than one person needed. It sat in a high-end enclave of homes with large lots and great views that would make a big dent in most people's bank accounts, but not Erin's. She was a Mills. I ran down the front walk in my bare feet to meet the fire truck and ambulance that had pulled into the circular drive and pointed toward the house.

“Are you hurt?” one of the paramedics asked, looking me over as the others went inside.

I shook my head. “It’s... it’s not my blood. I found her.”

I followed him back into the house where the other paramedic and three firemen stood in the two-story great room in front of river rock fireplace, but weren’t doing anything to help Erin. One was speaking into a walkie talkie, although I wasn’t paying any attention to what he was saying.

I looked down at Erin by the couch, just as I’d left her. The responders weren’t doing anything because they knew she was dead. She *looked* dead, even wearing her familiar black yoga pants and white tank top, the shirt stained with blood on the right side.

“Ma’am, can you tell me what happened here?” a firefighter asked, taking in my appearance. “Did you get in a fight?”

My mouth dropped open. “What? No. I... I just woke up. I found her like that.” I pointed toward Erin.

“Why are you covered in blood?”

I spun about at the voice. It wasn’t any of the first responders, but someone else. Someone I knew, just by the deep tone of his words.

“Nix,” I whispered.

The man who’d starred in the bulk of my late-night fantasies stood before me in all his six feet plus glory. He wore jeans and a button-down shirt, a prized rodeo belt buckle about his waist. A service pistol was in a holster on his hip right next to the badge, and right next to that... his *bulge*.

I blinked, looked away. God, my roommate was dead, and I was ogling Nixon Knight’s package. But it was *Nix*. Everything about him was familiar, like coming home, even though I hadn’t seen him in over a year. Even though he was one of the reasons I’d left Cutthroat. Even though he had *zero* interest in me. That had me glancing away, my cheeks flushing. Not from being caught, but from the shame from last year. My wasted imaginings. My misplaced love.

“Kit,” he replied, reaching out and settling his hand on my shoulder and bending at the waist so his dark eyes met mine. “You’re not hurt?”

His gaze was shrewd, assessing, taking in every inch of me.

“No. This is all hers.” I lifted my hands, then dropped them. “I... went to help her, but... but there was nothing to do. I called 9-1-1.”

I wanted to run into his arms, have him hug me tight and make all the bad stuff go away, but he wasn’t here as a friend, or even past almost-boyfriend. He was working. I was his job.

“I didn’t know you were back in town,” he said.

I bit my lip, glanced away from his scrutiny. “Um... last month.”

“You’re staying here with Erin?”

“Yes. I’m working with her at Mills Moments.” He looked confused. “Her event planning business.”

“Oh. Right.”

“I was saving up some money to get a place of my own. We’ve been really busy though, handling a few smaller events—like a wedding last night. Most of our time lately has been on a big client, handling all of the catering, the parties and marketing events for Eddie Nickel’s new movie. We were to meet him this morning.”

Eddie Nickel was a famous movie star, but had a house in Cutthroat. Had two kids. Shane, was a few years older than me, but Poppy had been in my high school class. Both of them grew up here with a nanny while Eddie had been in Hollywood or on location filming.

“On a Sunday?”

I shrugged. “They work every day when on location.”

“I’ll have someone get in touch with him,” he replied. Obviously, I wasn’t making that meeting. Neither was Erin. I

swallowed hard, realizing how awful that was. Tears threatened, but I willed them back.

He walked toward Erin's body, but not too close, squatted down, took in everything. I knew he was seeing things I couldn't.

After a minute, he stood and turned to me. "Tell me what happened."

"I don't know what happened to her. I... was sleeping and came out to make coffee. Found her, then called 9-1-1."

"Where's your bedroom?" He glanced around the space. The huge kitchen was open to the great room, a curving staircase was to the side of the fireplace.

I pointed down the hall and to the back of the house. "Behind the kitchen. Erin's room is upstairs. The second floor is pretty much a huge master suite."

He glanced the way I'd indicated, then back at me. "Why are you covered in blood?"

I looked down at myself, turned my hands palm up and saw how they were completely covered, then told him how I'd settled her on my lap, wondered how she'd hit her head, all of it. Which wasn't much, the first responders quietly listening. Only the walkie talkie voice cut through the silence.

I shivered, crossed my arms over my chest when I realized I was standing in front of Nix and five other men in just a skimpy tank top—without a bra—and little sleep shorts. Glancing down, I saw my nipples poking against the stretchy cotton, but then I saw all the blood on me. The yellow color was stained, my hands were covered, my arms smeared. There was even some on my blue striped shorts and thigh.

"When was the last time you saw her?"

I glanced up from my BFF's blood. "Last night, at the Red Barn. At the wedding we planned."

It was a familiar reception spot that was out of town on ten acres of land, a beautiful old barn renovated for a variety of functions.

“I left before she did, said she had plans after,” I added.

“What were they?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know. She didn’t share, but I’m guessing a guy.”

“Was the front door open?” He angled his head toward the currently-open entry. The morning was cool, like every summer morning in Montana, but it would heat up as the sun climbed higher.

I frowned. Thought. “No. I opened it when I heard the sirens.”

“Was it locked?”

“No.” I shivered again.

“I see an alarm pad there by the door.” He pointed to the high-end system. “It wasn’t armed?”

“She never set it that I know of. I don’t know the code. Can I... can I go get a sweatshirt or something?” The blood on my hands had dried, making the skin feel tight.

“I’ll go with you, but the crime scene team needs to do their job.”

“Crime scene?” I repeated.

His dark brow went up. “She didn’t trip, Kit.” He looked to Erin’s body on the floor. “She was murdered.”

NIX

Kit Lancaster.

Jesus, *Kit* fucking *Lancaster*.

Here. In Cutthroat. I'd wondered where she'd gone. Not gone. *Fled*. She'd literally left in the middle of the night, and I had no fucking idea why. One day she was coming over for dinner, the next she'd moved to Billings. No call. No text. Not even a fucking sticky note.

We hadn't dated, since meeting for coffee to talk about the Policemen's Ball didn't count. And kissing? A peck on her cheek *definitely* didn't count. I'd wanted so much more. Fuck, I'd wanted everything with her. I'd hoped she'd return to town because she was the one who'd gotten away. The one I still wanted, even after a year. Hell, she was *The One*.

And now? The woman of my dreams, of every one of my erotic fantasies, was mixed up in murder.

This morning, seeing Erin Mills dead on her living room floor had been a stunner, but seeing Kit covered in blood... fuck, I'd aged ten years seeing her like that, thinking she'd been seriously hurt. It had covered her hands, her forearms, even her sleep clothes and down her legs. I'd wanted to grab her, hold her, take her away from the horror she'd woken up to. But that was the last thing I could have done. I was a detective, and she was... in a fuck ton of trouble.

She'd been covered in evidence. Without realizing, she'd tampered with a crime scene when she'd gone to help Erin. Her DNA was not only all over the house since she'd been staying there, but all over a dead woman who'd been brutally murdered. It was my job to find out what had happened, to bring a criminal to justice. There was protocol. Steps to follow. One of them wasn't hugging a witness—a potential suspect—and messing with evidence.

Fuck. That had been twelve hours ago, and I was still thinking of her. My shift was over, and I was driving toward the Mills Moments' office. I didn't dare tell anyone my head hadn't been focusing on the victim, but the roommate. The co-worker.

Kit had been beautiful standing just inside the great room, even with her haunted eyes, the adrenaline surge of panic making her shake. Perfect. Her dark hair had been tousled from sleep. No make-up graced her round face. She'd looked girl-next-door perfect in her little sleep outfit. It had been sexy as hell, except for the fucking blood. The dead body. *That* was what had kept my dick from getting hard in front of the first responders.

I pulled up to a red light, shifted in my seat.

I'd been protective of Kit before, but now? Had someone meant to actually kill Erin Mills or had the murderer been there for Kit? Had Erin gotten in the way? Why hadn't Kit heard anything? So many questions unanswered.

"Think she'll be there?" Donovan asked, breaking into my thoughts. I had him on speakerphone, updating my friend on the case. As prosecutor in the District Attorney's office, it would be coming his way. Eventually. Once we had an arrest. But he wasn't asking after Kit because of the case. It was because she was back in town. Back in the middle of a total cluster fuck. After I left the crime scene team to their job at the Mills' house, I'd called Donovan, told him what happened. Told him that Kit was back, that she was in the middle of it. He hadn't known she'd been back in Cutthroat because he would have told me. We'd been waiting to get in front of her again. Get a chance to tell her how we felt, to make her ours.

That's right. *Ours*.

I flipped my blinker, turned down Main Street. For a Saturday night in Cutthroat, the street was busy, filled with tourists and townies enjoying the spectacular weather. There was nothing better than summer in Montana, except for winter when the black diamonds on Cutthroat Mountain had epic powder.

I thought of Donovan's question. Would she be at the Mills Moments' office? "No way she went to her mom's. As far as I know, Mrs. Lancaster hasn't left her house in years." Kit's home life had been a fucking disaster. Her dad left when she was six, and it had done a number on her mom. Depression and anxiety turned into extreme hoarding and agoraphobia. Kit had pretty much raised herself and taken care of her mom.

"From what Kit told me last year, grocery delivery and online shopping has helped with that. Obviously, Erin's a dead end." I sighed, rubbed a hand over my face. "Fuck, I didn't mean it like that."

Donovan chuckled. "She could be at a hotel."

I shook my head even though he couldn't see me. "I checked with the hotels. No room in her name." That was the perk of being a detective. "The office is left."

I flipped my visor down, the sun blinding me as it sank low in the sky.

With the town nestled between national parks and endless backcountry people came to Montana to enjoy, Cutthroat was a popular town. Innocently named for the local trout in the river that flowed along the east side of town, it might have been small, but it had crime. What town didn't? There was enough to keep me on the payroll. And busy. The last murder was back in 1984 when a woman killed her husband with a chainsaw after discovering he'd cheated on her with a nun from the convent on the way to Missoula. This case though, was different.

I'd put a request in for Erin's financials, phone records, the usual data. I discovered the Mills Moments' office was on the

second floor of one of the historic buildings on the east end of town. Loaded with ritzy shops and outfitter stores aimed at the rich outdoorsmen, that address meant her event planning business was doing well. Well enough to need a partner in Kit.

After the paramedics took Kit to the hospital—to ensure she wasn't hurt and to catalog her clothes and collect DNA samples—I'd waited for the crime scene investigators and coroner. It had taken hours to photograph the body, process everything, type up the reports, deal with my boss, the newspaper. News of a murder spread quickly, especially when it was Erin Mills.

The autopsy would take place tomorrow, and the evidence was being processed. There was nothing else to do tonight. Except find Kit.

“All I know is that they cut her loose from the hospital after a few hours,” I added.

“An officer took her to her car.”

“She was living with Erin, and she can't stay there since it's a crime scene. And with a murderer on the loose, it could be dangerous.”

“I have a deputy at Erin's house keeping an eye on things.”

“You mean keeping an eye out for the Mills family going in and tossing Kit's stuff to the curb for the trash pick-up.”

I gripped the steering wheel until my knuckles turned white. “That, too,” I practically growled.

The Mills family was one of the richest in town with a house that looked like a Swiss ski lodge that could house thirty. It was nestled on a bluff with only the best view their money could buy. The Mills were founding members of the town back in the silver rush. Besides the McMansion, they owned a huge ranch outside of town, plus a few buildings on Main Street... including the one where Erin's office was located. A Mills had been mayor back in the eighties. Hell, the family had even donated money for the cancer wing at the hospital.

I went to school with Erin's older brother, Lucas, so I knew both of them had trust funds from their grandparents. Knowing Lucas, no one would think he had money, but Erin? Her fancy house was something I'd never be able to afford on a detective's salary, even if I won the lottery. Not that I aspired to something so... big or blatant.

Giving Mr. and Mrs. Mills the news their daughter had been murdered—her skull bashed in by a glass Volunteer of the Year award... fuck, it had been bad. Not only were they distraught, but they were pissed. Out for blood. I had no doubt they'd rounded up their lawyers and began an investigation of their own because they doubted my abilities. I was born on the same side of the tracks as Kit. It didn't matter I had a degree in criminology or years of experience.

I also had no doubt if they found the killer before the police did, they wouldn't let the courts decide the case. They'd dish up some vigilante justice. This was Montana, after all.

Keith and Ellen Mills' comments today when I'd told them the news only confirmed what I'd already known. They didn't like Kit Lancaster. Never had. They believed she wasn't good enough for their daughter, a "bad influence" because of her crazy mother. I didn't doubt they'd railroad her for the crime.

Donovan had known Kit as long as I had. Middle school. Had wanted her just as long, too. Yeah, two twelve-year-olds eyeing the cute girl in braces. Total puppy love. We hadn't done anything with her in high school though, not when our hormones were running wild and we got hard-ons just seeing her smile. She hadn't given us the time of day. Not that she'd had any time. She'd gone to class and worked as a waitress at the local diner to make ends meet while dealing with her mom's mental illness. After, she'd gone to the local community college, but both Donovan and I had left Cutthroat for the state school in Missoula. I'd heard she'd been dating Erin's brother, Lucas.

Unlike his parents, he was a decent guy. Didn't give a shit about being born with a silver spoon in his mouth. I hadn't worried about him not being good to Kit, but I'd wished it had

been me instead. I'd been away at college and couldn't blame either one of them.

But they'd broken up when he'd gone into the National Guard. Been deployed. When he finally returned, he hadn't joined the family's real estate empire like his father wanted. He'd done his own thing and returned to Cutthroat to run a non-profit, using his money to help others, but he and Kit hadn't gotten back together.

I'd returned after graduation, got a job as a cop, but Donovan had stayed for law school. Only after he passed the bar did he return. Then, we started stopping into the diner to see her. We'd go together and on our own, sit in her section, talk her up.

We'd finally connected working together on the planning committee for the Policemen's Ball. I hadn't been thrilled with the task since a dance of any kind wasn't my thing, but it had been a fundraiser, the event supporting families of officers who had died or been injured in the line of duty. We'd gotten to know Kit, hoping she'd warm up to the idea of two men wanting her. Until she'd fled town without any notice.

Maybe we shouldn't have been so subtle. Or so slow.

Now she was back, and I wasn't losing the opportunity again, even with a fucking murder investigation in the middle of it all. Her mother was no support at all. The one friend we knew she had in town was dead. For someone so fucking sweet, she had enemies in the Mills, and that meant people all over town would hate her. Kit needed both of us now. And we weren't taking it slow any longer. We were letting her know how we felt. Tonight. Right fucking now.

I pulled into a parking spot, cut the engine of my police SUV, rubbed my eyes. "So far, she's the prime suspect."

"If it's not a crime of passion, next up on the list of usual suspects is family."

"I'm not telling Keith or Ellen Mills they're prime suspects," I told him, practically shuddering at the thought. "I'd be fired by morning. We'll investigate them, but I'll let

Miranski deal with them as much as possible.” The other detective on the force hadn’t grown up in Cutthroat and didn’t know the players like I did. She could deal.

“Smart. You don’t fucking think Kit did it, do you?”

I was insulted he even asked.

“Fuck, no. I doubt she had the strength to dent a skull like that.”

The memory of Erin’s skull bashed in would stick with me forever.

“Erin was almost a foot taller than Kit. Unless Erin was sitting on the floor or Kit stood on the coffee table to hit her, the angle is all wrong.”

I’d been on murder scenes before, but it was hard to handle it objectively when it was someone I’d known most of my life. I hadn’t been friends with her, but being Lucas’s sister, we’d all pretty much grown up together. Cutthroat was small enough.

“It’s your job to find someone else.”

I sighed because he was stating the obvious. It was my job to find and collect evidence, discover motive and means, then find a fucking killer. It was his job to see they were found guilty and spent the rest of their life behind bars. The case was in my hands now, but would—hopefully—be in his soon. He was the one with the pressure of having the mayor for a father. I was content for my dad to be a plumber.

Climbing from the vehicle, I took the phone off speaker. “Getting there. First, I’ve got to get our girl, keep her safe. I’m out front of her office now.” I looked up at the second-floor windows. “Light’s on.”

“I’ll meet you there in a few minutes,” he said.

“I want to put a ring on Kit’s finger and get her in my bed. Get her between us. The way it’s looking”—I ran my free hand over the back of my neck—“I might have to put cuffs on her and stick her in a jail cell.”

“As you said, fuck no. She’s got us now. I want to put the cuffs on her and secure her to my bed.”

Abso-fucking-lutely.

KIT

Everyone in Cutthroat had heard about Erin. With twenty thousand people, it was big enough that I didn't know everybody, but everybody knew Erin Mills, or at least the Mills family. Word traveled like a wildfire in a summer drought. Everyone was trying to get the inside scoop, the gossip. From me. They didn't care that it was gruesome, that Erin was my friend, that she'd had her head bashed in.

After I'd been cleared from the hospital and taken to my car—with the stern instructions not to leave town until the detective was able to take my official statement—I'd gone to the office.

I had nowhere else to go. Living with Erin had been temporary. I'd wanted to save up a little money, since almost every penny I had would go to a deposit and first month's rent. I didn't have much stuff; my mother's hoarding nature had taught me to be the opposite, keeping only what was vital. I had a TV and couch, even a bed, but they were in a storage unit until I found my own place. That wasn't going to happen now, at least not anything halfway decent or safe.

“It's all over the news.” Mom was anxious and that was not good. Her voice, usually wound up, had a shrill quality to it through the phone.

“Yes, I know,” I replied, pacing the space as I let her talk. I’d called to let her know I was fine, that she shouldn’t worry. Oh, she worried, but not about me.

“You don’t think they’ll come here, do you?”

I frowned. “Who? The murderer?”

She gasped. Shit, wrong thing to say. “I hadn’t thought of that. I am alone.”

I rolled my eyes. She was *intentionally* alone. Her mental illness didn’t allow for anything else. Her meds were balanced, but like a teeter totter, one tip in the wrong direction and she’d be in trouble. Her hoarding had gotten to the extreme where no one would even attempt to harm her since there was barely any way for someone to get to her. I didn’t worry about a crazed lunatic bent to bash her head in. I worried about fire.

“You’re safe. Really. It had to be someone who knew Erin and they had a fight.”

That’s what I was hoping for.

“The police won’t come here, right?”

“They have no reason to.”

“But you were there, you said.”

“Yes, I was.” I dropped onto the couch, tried not to let the image of Erin dead on the floor fill my mind. “Mom, nothing for you has changed, or will change.”

“Did you get my lottery ticket? What about the electricity bill?”

I blew out a breath as silently as possible. “Yes, to both. I’ve got to go. I’ll check in with you tomorrow.” I ended the call, dropped my phone on the cushion beside me. Wondered how I was going to pay mom’s light bill without a job.

Obviously, I couldn’t stay with my mom. It hadn’t been an option since just after high school. Her anxiety was too great to have me in the house, and her hoarding had buried my bedroom in junk. I couldn’t risk setting her off. If a murder

didn't bring out her motherly instincts to have me stay at the house, then nothing would.

Reaching into the desk, I found a hair tie and pulled my hair back into a ponytail, sighed. Hell, would someone even rent to me? I hadn't been questioned more than the few minutes with Nix at the house, but it was coming. I'd been just down the hall when she'd been killed. Why hadn't I heard anything?

The ER had taken samples from me for DNA. Photos taken. I'd been looked over to ensure I really hadn't been hurt beneath all the blood, then a kind nurse had led me to a shower and given me clean clothes. I looked down at the basic white t-shirt, sweats and flip flops. It wasn't stylish, but it was blood free.

The office phone had been ringing all day. At first, I'd worried one of our events was in trouble, but quickly discovered it was everyone from Erin's hair stylist to the city paper's crime desk trying to get the salacious details.

After that, I'd left the phone off the hook and had myself a good cry. I was used to being alone, but this... god, it was a whole new level.

I'd crash here tonight, the leather sofa was comfortable enough—Erin wouldn't have bought something that wasn't comfortable—and figure out the rest tomorrow. I'd have to salvage what was left of the events we had on the books. *If* people still wanted to work with us.

Not us. Me.

Fuck. Erin was dead. It was *her* company.

I jumped a foot at the knock on the door.

“Kit, it's Nix.”

My heart skipped a beat and I climbed from the couch, flipped the lock and let him in. He looked the same as this morning, his gaze still shrewd and assessing. Still handsome in that tall, broad and gorgeous sort of way. He had whiskers now on his square jaw and I wondered if they were soft or rough. God, how would they feel brushing against my thighs?

“You doing okay?” he asked, closing the door behind him. He looked me over, probably saw that I looked like total crap, that I’d been crying. At least I wasn’t covered in blood.

I laughed, partially from thinking about him going down on me, and partly because after the day I’d had, I was anything *but* okay. I sighed. “My friend is dead. I have no place to live. My paycheck is probably tied up in probate, and I’m definitely out of a job. The only way to make it worse is if you’re here to arrest me.”

His dark gaze held mine but he didn’t say anything.

“God, you are here to arrest me.” I licked my lips. Started to panic. While I’d been thinking about him going down on me, he’d been planning to—

“I’m not arresting you. But I’m not going to lie. You’re a suspect right now.”

I wanted to cry again, but I swallowed it down. No. “You’re here to take me in for questioning?” My voice was small, nervous. I didn’t have money for a lawyer.

He shook his head. “Tomorrow.”

“So no leads? No smoking gun?”

“Nope. Here. I brought you some of your clothes.” I recognized my small overnight bag he held out toward me. “I found this on the floor of your closet. I wasn’t sure exactly what you needed. This should hold you until the house is released and you can get everything.”

The thought of him digging around in my closet, god, in my panty drawer, had me blushing. Those big hands pawing through my silk and lace. None of it was fancy, and I always bought from the clearance rack, but I did like cute underthings.

“Thank you.”

“I’m also here to take you home.”

“I can just stay here. I’ve napped on the couch before. It’s comfortable.”

His shrewd gaze took in the space. “It’s not a crime scene, but we’ll be in here tomorrow working the case.”

I glanced around. “Oh.” Right. Of course. They had to investigate all aspects of Erin’s life. Her computer was here. Paperwork. It probably wasn’t good that I stayed here. It could only make things worse for me. Now what was I going to do?

Holding my hands in front of me, I said, “I’m not going to my mother’s. I talked to her, calmed her down. She was worried if I stay with her, people will call or come over. She can’t handle that. You remember what she’s like.” I downplayed it a bit because I didn’t need any more pity where Mom was concerned.

He nodded, but didn’t say anything.

“She’s worse now. Her world’s a house of cards, or a house of old newspapers, online purchases and rooms stuffed to the gills with... stuff. One slight change in her routine and she falls apart. I’ve visited a few times since I’ve been back, but not more than a few minutes because it kicks in her anxiety. Our only interaction now is me paying her bills online and talking by phone.”

I saw understanding more than sympathy in his eyes. School had been rough, kids picking on me because I had a crazy mom, a crazy house. Nix had never poked fun, not once. “Not your mom’s. You’ll come home with me.”

I stared at him, mouth open. I’d have been less surprised if he’d said he was arresting me. “Home... with you?”

He nodded.

I frowned, then turned away, walked over to the window and looked down on Main Street. The world was going by, no problems, enjoying the summer evening, the restaurants and cute shops. The idea of going home with him... god, it had been a fantasy of mine for years. But no. *No*. I had to stop thinking about silly things like that or him eating me out. He didn’t want to go there not on me or any woman. There had to be a better explanation, one that made sense.

“You’re worried I’m going to flee, is that it?”

I heard him sigh. “The murderer is out there. I don’t want you here all alone.”

I spun so fast, the world tilted for a moment. Met Nix’s dark gaze. “You think... you think the person was after *me*?” I set a hand on my chest. Holy shit.

He shrugged his broad shoulders. “We have no reason to believe so, but you *were* there. Hell, maybe he went to the wrong house. Until we know more, I want to keep you safe.”

He stepped close to me, *too close*, and tucked a stray lock of hair I’d missed capturing in my ponytail back behind my ear. A simple gesture, but not one a detective does to a suspect.

The idea of Nix keeping me safe was so appealing, I practically ached. I didn’t want to do this all alone. I would, I always had. I’d taken care of my mom instead of the other way around. I still did. But having Nix help me? Hold me? God, keep me safe and take away these troubles?

“Safe,” I repeated woodenly.

No. That wasn’t going to happen. Nix was a fixer. He solved problems. Made things right. That was his job. As detective, *I* was his job. I didn’t want that. I didn’t want *just* that. I wanted more from him. So much more. I’d had a crush on him in high school, practically drooled over him whenever he came home from college. We’d gone out a few times to talk about the Policemen’s Ball. Dinner. Coffee. He’d never taken me to his place, never even made out in a car. A kiss on my cheek at my apartment door was as far as we’d ever gotten, but I’d given him my heart—although he’d never known that. Unrequited love, at least on my part.

But I’d learned the truth, learned he’d never wanted me. I wasn’t his type and that had hurt. That had cut to the bone. Had pushed me to leave town.

While I appreciated his concern—I doubted he invited every suspect to stay at his house—I couldn’t accept. My heart couldn’t handle it. A year away should have lessened my feelings for him, but no. Fuck no. I still wanted those big hands on me. I wanted to feel the play of those strong muscles

beneath my hands. Wondered what those lips would feel like against mine, other places.

Pure fantasy and I should have been over it by now. He didn't want me. He didn't want me—or any other woman—at all. I'd hoped the year away would fix my emotions, but no.

Pulling my mind from the gutter, I said, "I'm fine here." I held my arm out indicating the couch. Erin's wealth showed in how she'd decorated the office. Shabby chic all in creams and soft pink. Modern glass mixed with the old brick walls and exposed wood beams. She even had a drink cart in the corner. High end, just like Erin.

"Kit," he said on a sigh, trying to reach for me again, but he must have seen something on my face because he let it drop. "That's not the only reason I want you in my house. I—"

"How's Donovan?" I asked, stepping back, cutting him off.

He frowned, clearly surprised by the question. "He's fine."

Donovan Nash was the other man who'd hit every one of my hot buttons. The opposite of Nix. Fair, built like a tank. Equally hot. And nice. And funny. And... lots of *ands*. He'd joined us on a few occasions planning the ball, but nothing had come of it, no matter how much I'd wanted it to. I'd been crazy to lust after two men. Hindsight was twenty-twenty and it was obvious why. It made me feel really stupid. Silly, for thinking not only one hot guy might be interested in me, but two.

"I can't let you stay here." I'd never seen him look at me like this before. Something dark and predatory. Possessive.

Still, it was misplaced and that was like a knife to my insides.

"I know you like to protect people—"

"I want to protect *you*," he said, cutting me off. "I thought... I thought we had something going. Before."

"Before I left town?" I asked, starting to get pissed. He was messing with me.

"Why'd you leave, Kit?" he asked.

As if he didn't know.

My eyes widened and my mouth dropped open. "Are you serious? You're asking me that *now*?"

"You've been back five weeks and the first I learn of it... the first I see you is this morning covered in your friend's blood."

"Like I said, now?" I was tired, scared, panicked and all that bled over into frustration and anger.

"I thought we were friends." He ran a hand over the back of his neck. "I thought we were more than that."

The office door opened and I jumped. Yup, scared. Nix turned and stuck his arm out, as if shielding me from whomever it was.

Donovan stuck his head into the office, grinned. My heart flipped. That panty-melting smile hadn't changed a bit since I'd seen him last, an instant reminder of why I'd left town and that I wasn't over him either.

I was interested in both of these men. Still. Crazy. Insane! One of the things I'd thought about during the year I'd been away. Why would I want *two* men? Why would I want two men who didn't want me? Who wanted each other?

"Kitty Kat," he said, coming into the room and pulling me into a hug. He felt hard... everywhere. Warm. Comforting. God, his scent. I thought I'd forgotten that, but no. It was engrained in my mind. And the nickname he had for me. None of it had gone away. "Nix said you were back, but Jesus, woman, when you come back, you don't go subtle."

He wasn't smiling when he said it. Of course, he knew what had happened. Working in the DA's office gave him direct access to whatever Nix and his team uncovered.

"I'm sorry about Erin," he murmured, looking me over.

No doubt he could tell I'd been crying. I was wearing hospital-supplied clothes and looked a disaster. I hadn't even been able to do more than finger-comb my hair after the hospital shower.

“Fuck, it’s horrible.”

He stepped back, stood beside Nix. The two of them—*gasp!*—together. One dark, the other fair. One serious, the other... playful. Nix had two inches on Donovan, but Donovan had the heft, the bulk of a college football player. Both of them had my heart and they were going to walk out the door, go off to the house they shared and leave me out of the middle. They didn’t want me there, didn’t need me. They had each other.

He tipped his head toward Nix. “He’ll find out what happened.”

“I know.” I did. Nix would discover the truth, would find the killer. “What are you doing here?” It was one thing for the detective on a case to show up and question a suspect, but the prosecutor? Oh. “God, do I need a lawyer?”

I looked to Nix.

“What?” Donovan asked, a little crease denting his brow. “Hell, no. I’m here with Nix to take you home. Let’s get going.”

“Going?”

“You’re coming home with us,” Donovan added, repeating exactly what Nix had said before he’d arrived. So they were living together now. *Just great.*

Yeah, that was *never* going to happen. I couldn’t stay under the same roof as the two of them. My heart couldn’t handle it.

“She hasn’t agreed,” Nix told him.

“Why the hell not? There’s a murderer out there. Fuck, just the thought of you sleeping just down the hall while he—” Donovan’s hands clenched into fists, but he didn’t finish his statement. He might be an attorney, but he wasn’t soft.

Anywhere.

“I was asking her why she left town,” Nix said.

“This isn’t an interrogation,” I countered.

“I think we deserve an answer.”

“Yeah, Kitty Kat, why did you leave?” God, when Donovan called me that...

I couldn't look at them. They were too perfect. Too much for my heart to take. This day had been horrible. My life was a nightmare. It couldn't get any worse by sharing the truth with these two. I didn't have them. They weren't mine and never would be. Saying it aloud wouldn't change a thing. They'd leave, I'd settle into the sofa for the night. Finally, perhaps, let them go.

“Fine.” I turned, put my hands on my desk, stared down at the glossy surface. “I left because of you two.”

“Us?” Nix asked, his dark brows winging up. “You should have *stayed* because of us.”

Tears filled my eyes as I shook my head. “I couldn't stay in town. I'd been stupid.”

“For wanting us?” Nix asked.

“Both of us?” Donovan added, sounding strangely hopeful about that.

I nodded, turned to face them. I tipped my chin up, met their gazes. “I wanted both of you, but you guys didn't want me. You don't need me. You have each other.”

The looked at each other, then back at me. “What the hell are you talking about?” Nix asked.

“You want me to spell it out for you?”

Donovan set his hands on his hips. Even though he worked in the DA's office, he wasn't wearing a suit, instead navy pants and a button-down shirt. Not quite a cowboy, but definitely not a city slicker. “Yes.”

“You're in love with each other, not me,” I shouted.

DONOVAN

What. The. Fuck?

Kit thought we were gay? She thought Nix and I were *together*?

I stared at her.

Nix stared at her.

She was serious. Out of all the possibilities she could have come up with, this one never, *ever*, entered my mind.

“Kitty Kat, I don’t know if I should spank your ass or kiss you,” I said finally.

She was so damned pretty. She’d always been a tiny package, not even coming up to my shoulders. Yet she had curves. Lots of them. Even in the drab sweatpants and white t-shirt two sizes too large—which didn’t hide the fact she wasn’t wearing a bra—she was perfect. From her hot pink toenails to her wild hair and every soft inch in between. And it was those soft inches I’d fantasized as I rubbed one out. For years.

Her chocolate colored eyes were red rimmed from crying, but it was what I could see in them, the honesty, the truth behind her words. She’d wanted us, but somehow, in some fucked up way, got the idea Nix and I were into each other and not her.

Words weren’t going to work here.

“Fuck it,” I said, stepping up to her, cupping her face in my hands and kissing her. This wasn’t a sisterly fucking peck. Oh no. I devoured her, swallowed her gasp, claimed that hot, sweet mouth as mine. There was no fucking way she’d think we were gay now.

Nix growled, an animalistic sound I could relate to. I lifted my head, stepped back, watched Kit sway. Her eyes were closed, her lips red and glistening. Nix nudged me out of the way and kissed her next. Seeing my best friend with Kit didn’t make me jealous. It made me hard. My dick could pound nails. She’d been ours for so long and now we could finally prove it.

There was no confusion now. I’d wanted her for so long, I was beyond sexually frustrated. I was just *frustrated*. A misunderstanding of fucking epic proportions had driven Kit to a different fucking state. Even worse, she’d been back in Cutthroat for five weeks. Five. Fucking. Weeks. Neither Nix or I had known. More time lost.

And now... fuck, now she was mixed up in a murder? A prime suspect because she had no alibi. She’d been covered in Erin’s blood. Her DNA was all over the body. Nix had shared this much with me, but I didn’t need the details to know she was innocent. What would be her motive? Money? Did Kit want Erin dead to take over the business for herself? Had Erin made her a beneficiary in her will? Life insurance? Erin had been twenty-five, not seventy-five. If there had been a blip on any of these questions, no doubt my office would have heard by now and put Kit behind bars.

But I’d heard nothing from the Mills family. Nothing from my boss, who no doubt played golf with Keith Mills. As prosecutor, it was my job to see the murderer put behind bars. Using evidence. Motive. Means. It was Nix’s job to find all that, mine to make a jury believe it without a shadow of a doubt.

Getting involved with the prime suspect of a murder investigation? Not a smart move. Ever since my mom had been hit and killed by a drunk driver—ever since the guy had gotten off with a slap on the wrist and a few points on his license—I’d made it my mission to see bad guys get the justice

they deserved. Everything I'd done since then had been to see that happen. It wouldn't bring my mom back, but it might give others the peace of mind, the ability to sleep at night, that I didn't get.

Besides all that, my dad would shit a brick if he knew I was getting myself in deep with Kit Lancaster. Since he was mayor, he was probably tugging at his shirt collar worrying that a killer in Cutthroat wouldn't be found. That wouldn't sit right with the voters. Oh, he loved having a son in the DA's office—to him our two jobs were like peanut butter and jelly for keeping the town safe—but not one who fucked the prime suspect.

Regardless of her being called that, Kit was innocent. Sure, if she were on trial, being with her would be a disaster, not only for the case, but for my job. The defense team would cite anything from conflict of interest to tampering with the defendant. The case would be thrown out. I'd be fired. Hell, I'd probably be disbarred.

But Kit *was innocent*. This wasn't some easy lay. Fuck, no. This was Kit Lancaster. I was marrying this woman. She wasn't a murderer. She was *mine*. *Ours*.

She wouldn't be arrested. She wouldn't go to trial. There was no conflict of interest. Nix would prove she wasn't involved, that she was innocent. That would come. Tonight? I was going to make sure Kit did. On my cock. On my tongue. All night long.

When Nix stepped back, he leaned down, picked her up and tossed her over his shoulder. Fuck, yes.

“Nix!” she squealed as she pounded his back, one of her flip flops falling off, but he didn't stop, carrying her out of the office and down the hall. “Your truck,” he called to me as he headed toward the stairs, not waiting. “And don't forget her bag.”

Grinning, I grabbed Kit's keys, the bag and the flip flop, turned off the lights, locked the door, then followed, shifting my dick in my pants so I could walk comfortably.

We didn't say anything as we drove to Nix's house, which was closer than mine. I wasn't sure how long I could last with her soft scent filling the cab. Kit seemed stunned into silence by the kisses, by the truth behind them. I got harder thinking about how she'd react when we did more than kiss her.

Nix's place was an old—as in serious fixer-upper—bungalow a few blocks off of Main, thankfully not more than a mile from the event planning office. He'd bought it a few years earlier and had been restoring it in his free time. The guest bedroom had no walls at the moment, which worked fine since we had no intention of using it. We'd be with Kit in Nix's bed.

Nix opened his front door, and I took Kit's hand, led her to the couch, tugged her into my lap.

“Donovan,” she breathed, trying to wiggle off.

I held her still with my hand at her belly, my fingers slipping beneath the t-shirt and pressing into the silky skin. Everywhere, she was soft, warm. So small, yet a perfect fit. “Kitty Kat, keep moving your ass like that and we won't be talking.”

It was then she felt my dick pressing against her hip, hard and thick and ready to fuck, and stilled.

I wanted her. I wanted her naked and beneath me. Above me. Between me and Nix. But I wanted answers first. She'd thought we were into each other, and that meant we needed to get some shit straightened out.

Nix grabbed a chair, slid it so it was directly in front of us. Sat. One of his knees bumped her thigh. Penned her in so she couldn't flee again. “Explain.”

I watched her swallow, look up from her lap to me, then Nix. Besides kissing her earlier, we'd never been this close before. Her eyes were dark, but a chocolate color. Freckles dotted her nose, her cheeks were flushed and her lips... I remembered just what they felt like now. Her hair, usually long and sleek, was a little wild. So were her emotions. Mine, too.

“Before I left, you invited me over to work on the Policemen’s Ball.”

Nix nodded. “I remember. Early December. We were on the committee together.”

“I... I was interested in you.” A blush crept up her cheeks. “A lot. Both of you actually.”

Hearing her say that had my dick throb. “Kitty Kat,” I growled.

“That’s why I volunteered, a reason to be with you. We’d met before for coffee and stuff to plan, but you invited me over... here.” She pushed an errant strand of hair that had escaped her messy ponytail away from her face, her elbow bumping my chest. “God, I was a mess. So nervous. I was going to tell you how I felt, that I was crazy because I was interested in both of you. I mean, two guys. I got here, went to the door and was about to knock, but I saw you guys through the window.”

She tipped her head toward the window to the right of the front door.

Nix frowned. “What did you see?”

She glanced up at me through those dark lashes. A hint of pain. Embarrassment. “You came out of Nix’s bedroom in just a towel.”

I thought back. Nix had called me, told me Kit was coming over. That it was the night to tell her how we felt. To hope she felt the same way. But she never came, and we never saw her again. Until now.

“I remember that,” I replied. “I helped someone with a flat tire on the way over. The weather had warmed up so the snow had melted some. It was sloppy. By the time I was done, I was muddy and wet. I got dirt and grease all over myself and my clothes. I took a shower to get cleaned up.”

“My guest bathroom was gutted then in the remodel,” Nix added. “He used the master.”

“But I saw you,” she said to me. “You said something to Nix. I couldn’t hear obviously since the windows were closed, but you were both smiling. Then you... you—”

“I what?” I asked, watching her blush furiously.

“You were hard. Even from the porch, I couldn’t miss it beneath the towel.”

I grinned. “I’m big, Kitty Kat.”

She rolled her eyes and smiled a little.

“I was hard for you. To finally tell you how I felt.”

“How *we* felt,” Nix clarified.

I sighed. “I’m sure we were talking about how we were going to get you naked and in bed. Which one of us was going to eat your pussy first.” Shifting my hips, I prodded her with my dick. “See? Just talking about it makes me even harder.”

“But then... then you went into the bedroom together,” she added. “What was I supposed to think?”

“That I pulled a pair of gym shorts and t-shirt from my clean laundry pile for him?” Nix asked.

I could see her mind starting to work, to doubt what she’d believed. “Besides that, there was the table.”

“Table?” Nix wondered.

She looked to him, pointed toward the dining room table. “Wine. Fancy plates. Like a date.”

“Exactly. Three place settings,” I said on an exhale, having set the table myself before I got in the shower.

“You invited me for chili!” she all but shouted at Nix, pushing off my lap.

I let her get up, let her pace. She was realizing the mistake had cost us all. I felt her frustration since it matched my own.

“Then there were candles! With Donovan in a towel and with a raging hard on, I thought you were into each other.”

I could see where she could have jumped to the conclusion.

“I figured you were going to tell me your secret, that you were... together. In a way, I was happy for you, that you found each other, that you were *together*; but sad because I’d misunderstood. I left because I felt like a fool, but also to give you space to do your thing.”

I glared at Nix. “I told you, fucker. Chili isn’t what you serve the woman you want to claim.”

Nix ground his teeth together. Took a moment before he spoke. “Donovan told me off about the stupid chili earlier in the day, that it wasn’t good enough for our first pseudo-date with you. He made me pull out the candles my mother insisted I have in the house. Donovan brought carry-out out from that Italian place you like.”

She looked between us. “Then you’re not... you don’t... you’re not gay.”

I grinned, pleased to see how relieved she was at the idea, that we knew now—from her very lips—that she was into both of us. Still.

“The only time I’m getting buck naked with Nix is if you’re between us.”

Her mouth fell open and she looked down at the two of us. Stunned. Happy. Something.

“Weren’t those kisses earlier enough proof?” I asked. We’d talked. We’d clarified. It was time to move on to more pleasurable things. My dick had been blue since the night she mentioned over a year ago. I’d wanted her then. I wanted her now.

She grinned then. So fucking beautiful. She shook her head. “No. I think I need more.”

Reaching out, I grabbed her hand, tugged her into my lap again, one of her knees settling on either side of my hips so she straddled me. “That can be arranged. Right, Nix?”

It was my turn to pick her up and carry her. This time to Nix’s room. To his bed. Nothing was going to keep us from making her ours now.

KIT

I hooked my legs around Donovan's waist, crossing my ankles.

God, they weren't in love with each other. They weren't a couple. I'd been mistaken. So very wrong that winter night. But what I'd seen... it looked like they were a couple. But perhaps it was my insecurities about myself that had had me fleeing. I could have knocked, asked. I could have congratulated them on their relationship. Anything that would have given them a moment to clear things up.

But no. That hadn't happened. We'd lost a year. God, I'd moved away!

I couldn't think about that now. We were together now. Here. That was what I could focus on, and it was easy to do so when I was in Donovan's arms. God, he felt good. So strong, so manly in comparison to me. He was hard muscled where I was soft.

He stopped in front of Nix's bed. Nix followed behind us, flipped on the light switch. The lamp beside the bed came on, set the room with a soft glow.

"We want you, Kitty Kat."

His hands were under my ass, holding me up. My ankles barely crossed behind his back he was so broad. I had to tip

my head back to look up at him, to see the heat in his eyes. The need. The *want*.

“I understand,” I whispered, glancing at Nix over his shoulder. Both of them were here with me. It was a dream come true. Definitely every one of my fantasies.

“Do you?”

I nodded, although perhaps not the depth of it. I’d been with Lucas Mills and one other guy back in college, but that had been it. I wasn’t wildly experienced and certainly never been with two guys at the same time before. While this was what I wanted, I was definitely jumping into new territory when it came to sex.

He lowered his head, kissed me. God, the kiss earlier had been fierce. Consuming. This was gentle, almost a brushing of his lips over mine. But I felt the heat of him, the hard press of his dick against my pussy, his hands spanning my bottom, gripping hard. He held me as if I weighed nothing, kissed me as if I gave him life.

He groaned.

“That night, we were going to tell you how we felt. We wanted you to know that you were it for us.”

Nix moved to stand at my side. While Donovan held me, Nix stroked my hair. “That’s right. We wanted you then, we want you now.”

I grinned, rolled my hips. I might be less than experienced, but it didn’t keep me from being eager. I wasn’t shy about my sexuality, I just hadn’t had tons of opportunity to use it. “I know; I can feel how much Donovan wants me.”

Though I wasn’t a virgin, I was pretty much a born-again virgin since it had been long enough. Could I handle both of them? I had a feeling they were big *everywhere*.

Nix shook his head, his gaze dropping to my mouth. “For keeps. This isn’t a one-night stand. This isn’t casual.”

“We take you tonight and you’re ours,” Donovan stated. “No going back.”

My heart was practically beating out of my chest. *No going back?* “You mean—”

“Forever, Kit,” Nix added.

“Oh my god,” I breathed. “Yes.”

Nix’s hand slid down my hair, tugged gently at the long length, tipping my head back. Angled it so he could kiss me. His tongue found mine, took my mouth like I knew his cock would take my pussy.

Donovan growled and Nix stepped back. He lowered me to the bed, leaned over and set a hand beside my head. The corner of his mouth tipped up as his gaze roved over my face. “I can’t believe you’re here. With us,” he murmured, as if in awe. “Fuck, we wanted you in bed like this that night. Now we have you.”

I nodded, bit my lip. Lifting my hand, I cupped the back of his head, felt the silky softness of his hair. His eyes fell closed, as if the simplest of touches pleased him. In that moment, I felt powerful.

“Yes?” he asked, perhaps to ensure I was okay with being with him, with both of them, one last time.

“Yes, Donovan.” I turned my head to Nix, who stood beside the bed, watchful and waiting. “Yes, Nix. I want this. I want both of you. I have for years.”

As if those words were all that held them back, Donovan’s fingers curled into the top of my sweatpants, slid them down my thighs.

“Oh fuck,” Nix murmured when he saw I wasn’t wearing any underwear. I’d only had on my sleep shorts and tank top this morning, and the hospital had given me the clothes, but no panties or bra. While Nix had brought me a bag of my clothes, they hadn’t given me any chance to change into them.

“Kitty Kat,” Donovan growled. He looked up at me from the foot of the bed. The sweatpants were on the floor, but his hands were on my ankles. His hold was gentle, but when I tried to close my legs, he didn’t allow it. “If I’d known your

pussy was bare underneath, I'd have blown my load back at the office."

I grinned at his situation, but I was also self-conscious. I wasn't tall, skinny and big boobed like Erin. I was short, curvy and had decent Bs. The only exercise I got was of the free variety. Walking. And I never passed a donut I didn't like. When the rubber hit the road, or my back hit Nix's bed, would I be enough?

"I want to kiss that mouth," Donovan began. "But now... fuck. I've got other things to kiss first."

I frowned, but gasped when he dropped to his knees, tugged my ankles right over his shoulders. "Oh my god."

Lifting my head just enough, I looked at Donovan between my parted thighs. *Right there*. He glanced up at me, his blue eyes darker than usual. His jaw was clenched, his hands, warm, yet firm on my inner thighs.

"I want this... but Erin. With all that's happened, is this right?" I asked, practically panting. "I mean, she's dead and we're—"

Nix set his hand on the bed, which made it dip. He reached out, brushed his fingers over my hair. It seemed it was something he *really* liked to do. I tipped my cheek into his palm. "Now is the exactly the right time. It just shows how much time we've lost. How we can't waste any more of it. How important you are. We want to make you feel alive."

I nodded, and he leaned down to kiss me. When I blinked my eyes open, he was studying me, his face so close. Erin would have been the first to cheer me on for a wild night with two hotties.

"Yes," I whispered as I felt Donovan's thumbs making circles on my inner thighs.

Nix pushed off, nodded to Donovan.

Donovan didn't say anything, just put his mouth on my pussy as he'd wanted. *Kissed* me right on top of my clit. Then licked, sliding down to my entrance and back up.

“How’s she taste?” Nix asked.

I blinked up at him, watched as he took his shirt off. I couldn’t miss the hard press of his cock as it angled up to the right of his belt buckle. Thick and long, it looked like a pipe in his jeans. My hips rolled as Donovan licked me again, distracting me. Somehow, he flattened and firmed his tongue so it rasped up every sensitive inch of me. My hips rolled into him wanting that again. Forever.

“Like fucking heaven.”

My eyes fell closed. I’d had a guy there before, but it had never been like this. Hell, he’d needed a map to find my clit. Donovan, though, knew what he was doing and seemed to revel in it. It wasn’t a chore to him, it was like my pussy was a feast and he’d been fasting. I was close to coming already. When he slid one finger, then two, inside me and curled them in some magical way, I cried out. Reached down and held on to his head. Squeezed my thighs into his ears.

“Donovan,” I gasped. Begged.

He must have translated that to mean, harder. Faster. Add another finger because he did all that. I came on a scream. My back arched. My fingers dug into his hair. Tugged. My head tipped back. I’d never come so hard in my life and when the pleasure waned and he gentled his actions, I slumped into the bed. A grin spread across my face.

“I like seeing our girl looking like that,” Nix said.

I had enough energy to tip my head down, to look at Donovan. He was wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, a sly grin on his face. Yeah, he was proud of himself. He should be. With skills like that...

“Got her all soft and ready for you,” Donovan told Nix, then kissed my calf and stood.

I blinked up at Nix, who tossed something to Donovan. A condom. He held another one in his hand, but I didn’t pay much attention to it. How could I when he was naked?

Wow. I turned so I wasn’t falling off the bed, propped myself up to look at him. I knew he was in good shape, but he

belonged on a fitness magazine cover. Bulging biceps, broad shoulders. A smattering of dark hair was on his chest, which tapered over his washboard abs and into a thin line that went straight to his dick. And what a dick! I licked my lips at the sight as he rolled a condom on. Long and thick, it was a darker shade than the rest of his body. It jutted up from dark curls and almost to his navel. My pussy clenched in eagerness, but would it all fit?

His thick thighs flexed as he moved onto the bed, reached out and pulled me so he was on his back and I was on half on top of him. His skin was so warm. Soft, but the hard muscles beneath reminded me of how manly he was. And the way his cock pressed against my thigh, how virile.

I wasn't just soft and ready, I was lust-crazed. Eager. A tongue-made orgasm was just a warmup. I wanted more, so I took. Straddling one of his thighs, I started to rub against Nix as I kissed him. His hand moved to my hair, held me in place. He took over, licking into my mouth as he flipped us. Only when I was whimpering and writhing did he move his head lower, finding a nipple, licking it then sucking on it. The rhythmic pull went right to my clit.

"Nix!" I cried, trying to shift my hips so I could get his cock in me.

Lifting his head, he looked down at me with a sexy smile. "Got a greedy pussy?"

I nodded, reached down and gripped his dick. I could barely close my fingers around him. He hissed out a breath and stiffened. "Fuck, Kit."

"Now," I whispered, rolling my hips up so he sank into me, just enough to tease us both.

He groaned, pushed forward. "Oh fuck."

He was big and taking him was hard, but I was so wet that he was able to push forward, pull back, a little bit at a time until he was in all the way. I felt his balls bump my bottom.

I exhaled, relaxed my hands which had been pressing against his chest.

He kissed me again as he began to fuck me. Deep strokes that hit my clit every time. I couldn't get enough air, and I turned my head to the side. Cried out his name.

I blinked my eyes open, saw Donovan beside the bed. Watching as he worked his dick.

In the moment, I'd forgotten about him. Knowing he was watching me get fucked by his friend made me wetter. Nix nipped at my neck when he felt it. This was so dirty. Filthy, getting fucked by two men. But this wasn't just *any* two men. This was Nix and Donovan. They would never hurt me. They'd take care of me. Make all of my worries slip away. Catch me when I fell.

And that pushed me over the edge, the knowledge I could let go and they'd be there, watching and keeping me safe. I came on a gasp, pulling my knees back so I could take even more of Nix. My inner walls clenched down on him. He groaned and fucked me harder, becoming wild in his motions until he thrust hard one last time, held himself deep and came.

His breath fanned my neck, our bodies were slick with sweat. It had been so good, my fingers tingled. I had thought about being with Nix as my vibrator got me off, but it had been nothing like this. Not even close. And I wasn't even done.

Nix reached between us, held onto the base of the condom as he pulled out, sat back on his heels. "Fuck, you're perfect." He grinned, his eyes sated and happy.

I smiled shyly up at him. My pussy throbbed, almost ached from the pounding. But I was ready for more.

"How do you want her, Donovan?"

"Hands and knees, Kitty Kat. Face the bathroom so when Nix comes out, he can watch you get fucked."

Nix moved off the bed and gave me a wink before he went to dispose of the condom. I rolled and looked at Donovan as I moved as he wanted. Compared him to Nix.

Donovan was bigger. Everywhere. He was just a larger man. Football big. Legs like tree trunks. Torso like a barrel.

Dick like a third arm.

“Like what you see?” he asked, giving himself another stroke.

I nodded, licked my lips.

“Fuck, Kitty Kat. You can suck me off another time. I tasted that gorgeous pussy. It’s time to fuck it.”

He stalked around the bed and I turned my head to watch him as he moved. Kneeling on the bed behind me, his hand slid down the length of my back.

“You wet for me?”

“Yes,” I whispered, as he slid a finger through my folds.

“Sore?”

I shook my head.

“Ready for more dick?”

I wiggled my hips. “Please, Donovan.”

Gripping the base, he slid the head over me. “Please, what?”

“Please give me more dick. Ahhhh!”

He didn’t wait, slid into me in one slow push. Where Nix had been big, Donovan was thicker, stretching me so much. Where Nix had been a touch wild, Donovan was controlled. Completely opposite of their personalities.

A big hand settled on my shoulder as he began to take me, keeping me from moving across the bed. His other hand cupped my breast, played with the nipple.

That was how Nix saw me when he came out of his bathroom. Being fucked from behind and taken hard.

“Shit, I’m hard again,” he swore.

He was. His dick was growing as I watched. My fingers clenched the blanket as Donovan wrung the pleasure from me, slow enough to be almost torture. Perhaps he was moving carefully because of his size, but it was so good. I pushed back as he thrust to get as much of him as I could. I’d never come

three times before, but I was ready to do so again. I'd never been so eager. So... hot for it.

"Nix, come here," I said, my voice sounding so unlike my own, all sultry and breathy.

He stepped close and I reached out, gripped his cock and pulled him closer. He didn't resist, not one bit. I was in just the right position to lick him, then take him into my mouth. He was clean tasting and smooth against my tongue. Yet hard and big enough to doubt I'd be able to take all of him.

"Kit," he moaned.

I was being bold. I'd never been like this before. Wild. Passionate to have one man fuck me while I sucked another one off. These two pulled it out of me, brought out a side I'd never known. They weren't complaining. In fact, they liked it. Liked me this way and that made me even hotter.

I sucked Nix as best I could as Donovan fucked me. All three of us together, giving each other pleasure. None of us lasted long, for it was just too good. Nix, who'd come just a short time ago, came first, his salty essence coating my tongue. He pulled out and I came, the pleasure like a rolling wave, taking me under. That finished Donovan off and he pulled me up and back so I was pressed against him, straddling his thighs. "Kitty Kat," he breathed into my ear as I felt him pulse and fill the condom.

I must have passed out in his arms because I vaguely remembered a washcloth between my thighs, a blanket being pulled over me. A hard body to nestle against. I just knew I was content. Sated.

NIX

I lay awake thinking about the case. Kit was tucked into my side, her arm over my belly, one leg tucked over mine. I was hard, again, but I ignored it as best I could. I'd come twice and while my balls should have been empty, I wanted her again. I didn't think it would ever stop, this need.

But now she was in my arms. Her scent filled the air, along with the tang of sex. And that made me even harder. She'd been wild. Passionate. Naughty. Just as I'd expected. She was so reserved, kept her emotions on lockdown all the time. I didn't blame her, not with her mom the way she was. The woman could be set off by anything. News. The weather. Hell, even the mailman knocking on the door. Kit had learned to hide any kind of intense emotions. Too much excitement or too much worry could destroy Mrs. Lancaster's perfectly balanced life. That was how Kit had worded it, and it made sense.

But it made it hard on Kit. No kid should have to mother a parent. No high schooler should have to work full time to make ends meet. She shouldn't be a mom to her own mom. But she was.

She'd gone it alone for so long. But now she had us. Donovan and I were in this with her. When we'd said there was no going back, we'd meant it. We would, though, need a bigger fucking bed.

While mine was king-sized, Donovan was too fucking big for the three of us to fit comfortably. Kit was practically draped over me, but we needed space. But that was an easy fix. We'd just move somewhere that fit all of us.

What wasn't so easy was the fucking murder of Erin Mills. How was I going to handle an investigation and a relationship with one of the suspects? It would have to be a secret, of course. It wouldn't matter once Kit was cleared, but until then... we had to be careful.

Kit stirred, mumbled. I stroked her hip with the hand that was wrapped around her, but she didn't settle.

"No," she cried, then sat up and gasped.

Doing so, she elbowed me in the crotch. I angled my thigh fortunately, which kept my dick from getting hit.

She sat there, gasping. Even in the dark, I could see her blink, trying to clear the nightmare. Tried to figure out where she was.

"Kit, shh, it's okay. You're here with us. You're safe."

Donovan stirred, came up on his elbow on the far side of the bed.

"Nightmare?" he murmured.

Kit's body was glorious with just the soft glow of moonlight. The sheet was about her waist, her breasts heaving as she tried to catch her breath. Her nipples were dark circles, soft and lickable. Yup, I was fucking hard.

"God, I had a nightmare," she said, brushing her hair back with a shaky hand. "All I could see was Erin. Dead on the floor." She looked at her hands. "I can still feel the blood."

I sat up, ran a hand up and down her arm, trying to soothe her, trying to get her mind on the here and now. "You're safe."

"But Erin—"

"I know. It's my job to find out what happened to her."

She nodded, turned to look at me. "Okay."

“It’s my job to take care of you.”

I meant it.

“That’s right, Kitty Kat,” Donovan said. His hand stroked her bare back. We were both touching her, both letting her know we were right here with her. “You’re not alone anymore.”

She dropped down onto my chest, tucked her face into my shoulder. “Hold me.”

Fuck, yes. I wrapped my arms around her, cupped her head with the back of my hand, cupped her ass with the other, keeping her as close to me as possible.

She breathed, and I felt her relax into my hold. But then she shifted so my cock was right at her entrance. Fuck, the heat of her on the tip made my balls ache. She was wet, too, coating me.

“Please, Nix.” She moved in my hold, pushing herself down on me. Who was I to deny a woman who needed my dick?

I groaned and let my hands roam as she settled on me so I filled her completely. “Kit,” I groaned, then somehow remembered. “Condom.”

“I’m on the pill. I want... need nothing between us.” She tipped her chin up, looked at me in the darkness. “Make me forget.”

That was all it took. I settled my hands on her hips, helped her lift and lower as I thrust up and into her. The feel of her, bare, had me close to coming and she’d barely moved. She was so hot, so wet. The feel of taking her with no latex barrier... the sweetest thing in the world. She sat up, put her hands on my chest, began to ride me. Her head fell back, her long hair tickling my thighs.

Donovan shifted so he could reach her, cupped and played with her breasts as she found her pleasure in me. Forgot everything but the feel of being possessed. Protected.

Of not being alone.

“This is happening so fast,” she said as she circled her hips.

“Fast?” I replied. Sweat dotted my brow. “Kit, this between the three of us, it’s been happening for years. It’s just intense. It’s never been like this before. Ever.”

She stilled, my cock buried deep as she looked down at me. At Donovan. “I know.”

“We’ll always be here for you,” he said, tugging on her nipple. That made her forget everything and ride me like the most perfect cowgirl until she came all over my cock. Until I filled her with my cum. Yeah, there was no going back now. She was fucking mine.

KIT

I stirred when Donovan kissed my forehead. I smiled, snuggled into the covers and opened my eyes.

“Hi,” he murmured. “I didn’t want to wake you, but I wanted to say goodbye.”

Lifting the blanket over my mouth, I said, “Don’t get close. I have awful morning breath.”

He grinned. “Nothing about you is awful.”

I rolled my eyes, but didn’t lower the blanket.

“I have to get to the office.”

I looked to the other side of the bed—empty—and then back at Donovan. “Where’s Nix?” I breathed in the scent of coffee and Donovan’s spicy aftershave. Definitely something I could get used to.

“He left early. You were out cold.”

“You guys wore me out.”

They had. I was relaxed in a way only several orgasms could achieve. I was also a little sore. To say they were vigorous and thorough lovers was an understatement. And two men? My body totally got worked. I was also exhausted. The nightmare hadn't helped at all.

He grinned, stepped back. "If I don't get out of here, I'll be getting back in bed with you."

Yes, please.

"I've got to go to my apartment, shower and get ready for work."

It was then I noticed he was in the clothes from the night before. I'd assumed—until last night—that Donovan and Nix lived together.

"Your car's in the driveway. We went and picked it up from your office."

"You went and got it for me?"

He shrugged. "Figured you'd need it."

Everything came back in a rush and my smile slipped. The good feelings slid away. How could I have forgotten?

Erin was dead.

I pushed myself up in bed, leaned against the pillows and the headboard, tugged the sheet up so I was well-covered. Murdered friends and sexy times didn't go together.

My eyes felt gritty with lack of sleep and I rubbed them. I needed coffee and soon. "I'll call Nix and find out when he wants me to give my statement."

"He told me to tell you nine."

I glanced at the bedside clock. Seven forty-five. "Sure."

"Be careful."

I remembered Erin's bloody body. "Should I be worried?"

He sighed. "The murderer's out there."

I didn't need that reminder.

“You have no idea how fiercely protective I am of you, but this situation is a mess. We finally get you... here”—he tugged gently at the sheet—“and Nix is off trying to get your name off the suspect list.”

“He’s worried about his job? How being with me will affect him?”

“He’s worried about *you*.”

“And you?” I asked.

He smiled. “Kitty Kat.” He didn’t say more on the subject. “We can’t call you since your phone records are being checked. While I’m not ashamed of us, I don’t need to screw up the investigation. I’ll get in touch with you later.”

With a wink, he was gone.

Screw up the investigation.

I had nothing to do with Erin’s murder, but I was tangled in it. Being with Nix and Donovan could screw not just with the investigation, but with their jobs. Fucking a suspect probably wasn’t a good idea. If I were cleared, then was us being together okay? I didn’t know the nuances of the law, but I knew they were the ones putting their careers on the line. Not me. I had no career.

I climbed from the bed, my earlier happiness about being in Nix’s bed pretty much gone. Alone, reality returned.

I found my overnight bag on the vanity in the bathroom. I showered, using the soap and shampoo that smelled like Nix, and pulled myself together. Nix had packed me jeans and two shirts, sandals, toothbrush and hairbrush. He’d included no makeup or hair products, so while clothed, I’d certainly be casual.

As for underwear, he’d found the sexiest and skimpiest silk panties and matching bra. Knowing how Nix felt about me, about what he liked to do to me, it only made my pussy clench in eagerness for him.

After making Nix’s bed, I sat at his kitchen table as I worked on my first cup of coffee—someone had left a full pot

for me—and called Eddie Nickel. He answered on the second ring. “Hi, Mr. Nickel, this is Kit Lancaster.” I tried to sound bright and cheerful.

“Kit! You caught me on a break between shoots.”

He sounded very upbeat for first thing in the morning. I was finishing my first hit of caffeine, but it sounded like he was on his fifth.

“Eddie, remember? No one calls me Mr. Nickel.”

He was casual. Far too casual for my liking, but I had a feeling that was the way of Hollywood stars. Everyone knew him, therefore everyone was a friend. In his forties, he hadn’t quite hit over-the-hill status in films. For men, they didn’t age, they *matured*. He was handsome, incredibly so. He knew it. Women flocked to him which gave him the validation he clearly craved. I’d never fawned over him. He wasn’t my type. Erin was—*had been*—friends with his daughter, Poppy. We’d all gone to school together.

I liked Poppy. As for Shane, he was a year ahead in school, but our paths didn’t cross that much. They were both really nice and well-adjusted considering their father’s ego and his being off shooting a movie more than he’d been at home, but I learned early enough to be jaded about rich parents. Money could buy pretty much anything, except love. Parents who actually gave a shit.

“Right.” I stirred my coffee with a spoon, even though it didn’t need it. “I’m sure you’ve heard the news.”

“A detective notified me yesterday morning. Awful.”

My mind flashed to finding Erin dead on her floor. I paused, swallowed, pulled myself together.

“Obviously, we missed our meeting with you,” I plowed on. “I know your movie will go on even with what happened to Erin.”

“Yes, we have a deadline to wrap up shooting here in Cutthroat in three weeks.”

“Right, that’s why I was calling. Did you want to meet later today to talk end-of-shoot party?”

“Kit, Kit, Kit.” His voice sounded as if he were scolding. “We can’t work with you now. I mean, there’d be bad press. The movie’s event planner was murdered. That’s what the tabloids would latch on to, not the movie itself.”

I set my elbow on the table, rested my forehead in my hand. “But—”

“You’ve done great work, but my assistant has found someone else.”

He had no clue what kind of work we’d done. It had been all behind the scenes tasks, planning a venue, caterers, band, for the party. He was full of shit. And he wasn’t going to change his mind. I knew his kind. Rich, self-centered, thoughtless. I felt sorry for Poppy.

“I hope they find out what happened to Erin. Good kid.”

He hung up. *Good kid?*

I groaned. Loud. Stood. Paced. Tried to rip my hair out.

Eddie Nickel’s production company had been Mills Moments’ biggest client. Our biggest money-maker that would have lasted almost a year in events and projects for the movie they were shooting now. We’d hoped they’d use us for future work as well. This work was why I’d returned to Cutthroat.

Now? Only one other client remained, a baby shower scheduled for next month. I looked up the hostess’s number, introduced myself when she answered. “I’ve got the invitations ready to go to the post office.”

“You can just drop them off, Kit, and I can take over.”

My stomach dropped and tears clogged my throat. I took a second, tried to keep my voice even. “Are you sure? That’s our job.”

“Our?” she replied. “Your partner’s dead... *murdered* and you’re carrying on as if it never happened.”

I shook my head but she couldn't see it. "No, no, it's not like that. Erin would want to ensure her clients' needs are being met, that their events go smoothly."

"They are," she snapped. "Leave the box of invitations on my front porch. You've been paid for work to date."

She, too, hung up without saying goodbye.

Mills Moments was officially out of clients. Out of business.

I had no trust fund. No rich parents. I needed to make money. So much for my dream job. My mind turned to the diner, where I'd worked all through high school and college. I'd made decent tips. Would they take me back?

I glanced at the clock on the stove, stood. I had to get to the police station for my statement. The only positive was that I'd see Nix.

KIT

“You said on the 9-1-1 call that Erin was dead.”

Detective Miranski sat at the table across from me. She was in her early thirties, dark hair pulled back in a ponytail. White dress shirt with a simple turquoise necklace. While I couldn't see beneath the table, she was wearing jeans and sturdy leather boots. She was pretty, but understated. Kind, since she'd introduced herself with a smile when I'd first arrived, but very thorough.

I had to guess Nix had asked her to do the interview, perhaps for impartiality, I wasn't sure.

She wasn't Nix's partner, but they were the two police detectives in Cutthroat County, assigned to different cases. Erin's murder was a big deal, and probably Mr. and Mrs. Mills had put the pressure on the department to find the killer. Detective Miranski seemed competent and put together, making me second guess what Nix saw in me. Why wasn't Nix into her? Smart, pretty. *Employed*. Probably had an alibi for Saturday night. I, on the other hand, was out of a job, currently homeless, living out of a travel bag and a murder suspect.

The interview room was just like on TV. White walls, industrial carpet on the floor. A metal table with four chairs. A one-way mirror.

I glanced up at Nix, who stood in the corner, leaning casually against the wall. He looked incredible in jeans and a dark blue golf shirt with the police department logo embroidered on the chest. I wanted to run my hands all over him, but folded them in my lap. Besides stating his name and job title for the video recording an hour ago, he hadn't said anything else. Barely moved.

I tried to block him out, for if I didn't, I'd think about how I knew exactly what he looked like beneath his shirt, that I'd pawed and licked every inch of those rock-hard abs. And other rock-hard places on his body.

"I guess I did. I was a little freaked."

"But you touched her. If you knew she was dead, why did you touch her?"

I frowned. "When I saw her lying there, my first instinct was to go to her and help. Wouldn't you do that?"

She didn't say anything, just waited.

"Her eyes were open," I continued, blinking back tears. "Staring. Her color was awful. God, I had no idea people turned that pale. I didn't want her to be dead."

I ran my hands up and down my arms. It wasn't cold in the room, but there was a huge air vent in the ceiling and it had a ridiculously strong breeze for such a small space.

"You didn't hear anything."

I took a deep breath, let it out. Sniffed. "I told you this already. No. I didn't hear anything."

"How is that possible?"

Shrugging, I said, "I don't know. Her house is big. My bedroom was on the first floor in the back. The kitchen, the laundry room and an exercise room are between my room and where she was found. I didn't usually hear her come in at night, and if she had someone with her, I wouldn't know. Unless they were shouting."

"Had that happened before? Erin shouting with someone?"

I thought back. “Loud voices one night. She’d brought a guy home. After a minute or two, they went up to her bedroom and then it was quiet. I fell back asleep. I met him the next morning in the kitchen. She’d said they’d been drunk.”

“What’s the man’s name?”

“Mark something. He was in my Econ class at the community college, but that was a few years ago.”

“You said you were working a wedding at the Red Barn.” The detective looked at her papers. “What time did you get home?”

“Around eleven thirty. On the way home, I stopped at the gas station on South Fourth to get my mom her lottery ticket.”

“Is this something you usually do?”

Nodding, I said, “Yes. My mother is agoraphobic. She hasn’t left her house in years. She hopes to hit the mega millions, although because she doesn’t leave the house, it’s not like she’ll buy a boat or something.” I sighed. “Anyway, yes. I’ve been getting her a ticket every day, even when I lived in Billings.”

She wrote something on her papers, then looked up at me. “How long have you been back in town?”

“Five weeks.”

“Anyone else in particular?”

“She mentioned a few guys. Shane Nickel.”

Her eyes widened. “Eddie Nickel’s son?”

“Eddie grew up in Cutthroat,” Nix told the detective. “His kids grew up here. I went to school with Shane.”

“Okay, so Shane Nickel,” Detective Miranski repeated.

“I don’t know much about it because I think she kept me out of the loop.”

I remembered her saying they’d been hanging out. I wasn’t sure if that meant they’d slept together or if they’d gone

bowling. With Erin, I had no idea. I just knew it had been casual since he hadn't been the only guy.

She arched a dark brow. "Why's that? You worked together, were even roommates."

I bit my lip. The list—and the short time frame—made Erin out to be kind of slutty. I didn't care what Erin did with guys. I was a little envious of her boldness, of her ability to put herself out there, but I always wondered if she were lonely. In the time I'd been back in Cutthroat, Erin and I hadn't been all that close. We'd worked together, but she went out every night. Partied. We hadn't done our nails together while watching movies. Nothing girlfriends did. It was clear, even though I had been staying in her house, we'd drifted apart while I'd been gone.

"Because I was gone for a year, maybe. She's always been more extroverted than me. Loved to go out. Have fun. Before I left, I worked too hard to date much. She was, well, gorgeous and could have any guy she wanted. Definitely out of my league."

Nix moved then, crossed his arms.

She offered a small smile, like girlfriend to girlfriend and pushed a notepad to me. "Here, you said she mentioned some guys. Write the names down."

I scribbled down the few names I knew. One or two I remembered from high school, but hadn't seen much of them after graduation. And not since I'd been back.

"Since you didn't hear an argument, or anything else the other night, she must have known her assailant."

I stared at the detective, then at Nix for a moment. "I have no idea."

"You lived in Billings for the past year?"

I nodded.

"Why did you leave Cutthroat in the first place?"

I didn't dare look at Nix. "I took a job at a hotel there in their events department." It wasn't a lie, just not all of the

truth.

“Right, Erin’s company is Mills Moments,” she said, picking up her pen and making a notation on the pad in front of her. She glanced up at me with her piercing green eyes. “Did you and Erin always want to do event planning?”

“I did. I like to be organized.” An understatement considering my mother. Nix knew about her. Most people I went to school with knew about her. It wasn’t a secret, but I wasn’t going to share my mother’s anxiety and hoarding to the detective. It had no impact on the case.

“You came back because Erin offered you a job.”

She didn’t state it as a question. “That’s right.”

“Had she gone out with a specific guy Saturday night?”

“Not that I know of. Like I said, she doesn’t do boyfriends. Never has.”

“But based on the list you just gave”—she tapped her finger on the paper with the names—“what were they then? One-night stands?”

“We didn’t talk about her sex life.”

“What do you think?”

I shrugged. “Back in high school, her parents would get on her for guys she dated. Doing high school stuff like a movie or a dance. They pretty much vetoed every guy as not good enough. As you can imagine, she didn’t like that. What teenager did? So she adapted to that, never got serious enough for her parents to get involved. Also steered clear of high school boys. Moved onto older ones.” I tucked my hair behind my ear. “These days, from what I can tell, she hung out. Fooled around. Did the casual thing. You could call them one-night stands, I guess.”

“It’s been said that you and Erin had a fight.”

I stared at her wide-eyed. Her topic switches were giving me whiplash.

“The other night?”

She opened a folder she'd set to the side, slid it in front of her and read something on the top page. "At The Gallows. Last week."

The Gallows was a bar downtown. It was popular with locals, had good food and a happening ladies' night. I'd been once with Erin, but I had only been there as her wingman, but obviously we'd been noticed.

"Yeah. We got into an argument about taking the Eddie Nickel account. Organizing events for the movie launch. It was a big deal. Big money. Erin wanted it because it would get the business name out there, to Hollywood."

"You didn't want that contract?" she asked.

"I did, but Erin and I, we have... had, different ways of thinking about some things."

"Like what?"

I gave a little laugh. "Money. She had it. Lots of it. While she was trying to make the business a success, I think it was just a pastime for her. She didn't *have* to work. I don't have money. You know that, I'm sure from your investigating. I need to have a job, need a paycheck to pay the bills. To cover some of my mom's expenses."

"I'd think the Nickel's account would be great for you then," she replied.

"If it worked out, yes. The money would have been great and the connections would have really pushed the business. But if it failed, if the contract fell through, then we'd be out of clients. It was her plan to have that be our only client. She didn't do anything *small*, including arguments."

"But Saturday night, before Erin was murdered, you were working a wedding the company planned. The last time you saw Erin?"

"Yes, even though we were ramping up work for the Nickel's movie, that event had been on the books for months, well before I returned. A baby shower, too, which fell through this morning." I thought of the phone call, frowned. "Erin had a cushion of cash to take big risks. I didn't. We fought about

that because I moved back here to work with her, and if it fell through...”

“Then you’d be out everything.”

“Exactly. In all the time we’ve been friends, she never once made me feel bad for having less, but she also didn’t understand.”

She looked at me pointedly. “Keith Mills said you were friends with Erin for her money.”

Wow, that hurt. Even though I knew that’s what he thought to be true.

“I’ve known that since the seventh grade when he told me that to my thirteen-year-old face.”

“Oh?”

I flushed hotly. “I’d been invited with a bunch of other girls to a sleepover at Erin’s. I got my period. First time.” I flicked my gaze to Nix. “Ruined my jeans.”

Fortunately, being a woman, she understood. I wasn’t too thrilled to share the story with Nix listening in.

“Erin had been cool, lending me a pair of her pants to wear. Mr. Mills noticed I was wearing her hundred-dollar bejeweled sweatpants and accused me of using her to get *better* clothes. I was crushed and left instead of spending the night. That was the first time he made his feelings known.”

After all these years, knowing Mr. Mills still felt that way, that he’d told that to the police...

“In college, I dated Lucas Mills for a few months. Erin’s brother,” I added, even though she probably already knew. Based on her questions—and the fact that she wasn’t familiar—I didn’t think the detective had grown up in Cutthroat. “We did dinner, movies, the usual stuff.”

“And his parents didn’t like it?”

I frowned, remembering. “He was twenty at the time and wasn’t living at home. His parents didn’t find out right away. We ran into them one night at a restaurant. Mrs. Mills pulled

me aside, called me trash. Said it was fine for her son to *sow his oats* with someone like me.” I used the little air quotes. “But he’d settle down with someone better.” I huffed out a laugh. “He was young and I doubt he was looking to settle down with me or anyone else. He left for the military shortly after that. While we hadn’t really broken up, we just... stopped. He stayed away for a few years. Got deployed. He’s not like his parents at all.”

“I see,” Miranski replied neutrally.

“Do I need to tell you more stories?” I asked.

She held up her hand. “Nope. Got the idea. Keith and Ellen Mills don’t like you.”

I offered a fake smile. “Pretty much.”

“Would Erin hire you just to make her parents mad?”

I stiffened, because it was definitely something she’d do. “She is... *was* twenty-six. I have no doubt she did things to snub her parents, and maybe having me work with her to mess with them was a side benefit. But that’s going a little far, even for her.”

I took a deep breath, set my hands on the table.

“Erin was the face of the company. She could sell ice to an Eskimo. What she couldn’t do was organize. That was where I come in. I’d say I’m a little OCD, liking things in the right place, which is great for an event planning business.”

The detective looked thoughtful for a moment. “If Mills Moments is shut down, what will you do now?”

I shrugged again, glanced up at Nix. “I’m going to go see if I can get my waitressing job back. Am I all done here?”

“For now,” she replied, standing.

I stood as well, tucked my hair behind my ear.

“You’d have arrested me if you thought I did it, right?”

Nix pushed off the wall. “If we had evidence that proved you did it, we’d arrest you.”

I frowned at his statement. “You think I did it but can’t prove it?”

God, I’d slept with Nix and he’d thought I’d killed Erin?

“Nix didn’t say that,” Detective Miranski replied. “We’re working all angles right now. So you’re aware, a judge has signed search warrants for your phone and bank records and the crime scene team went through your bedroom at Erin’s house yesterday.”

I had nothing to hide. They’d find that out soon enough, but I had no doubt they would look. Hard. I barely had cash in my bank and my phone was a pay-as-you-go plan and I didn’t use it much. Intentionally. As for my bedroom. I’d felt funny knowing Nix grabbed underwear for me. But crime scene techs pawing through it, or... god, my bedside drawer with my vibrator—”

I flushed just thinking about them finding it. I felt... violated. Judged. Like I was bad again. Trash. “I can’t be the only one you’re looking into.” I couldn’t be the only person whose panties were pawed over.

“No. We’re working—”

“All angles,” I finished for her, holding up my hand. “Got it.”

“I’ll walk you out,” Nix said, going to the door and opening it.

He followed behind me, through the station and with a hand on my elbow, stopped me in the hall front of the vending machines. Once I turned to look up at him, his hand fell away.

“You’re not the only person of interest, Kit,” he told me, tipping his voice low even though there was no one in the hall with us and the sounds of a busy station echoed off the utilitarian walls. “We’ve got warrants for Erin’s parents’ phone and bank records. Her brother, too. We’re looking at boyfriends, who she called, her credit cards. Everything. Okay?”

He offered probably more than he should.

“Okay.”

As we headed to the front entrance, a man’s shouting couldn’t be missed. “Why is my bank calling me? My daughter was *murdered* and you’re digging through my financials? What the hell is wrong here? You should be looking for the killer!”

Keith Mills’ voice was easily recognizable. So was his anger. We came around the corner and I saw Mr. Mills. The policeman at the front desk stood, hands tucked into his utility belt, unfazed. “Sir, calm down.”

He looked the same as always, perpetually tan, perfectly groomed salt-and-pepper hair, pressed khakis and a blue golf shirt. The only thing that ever changed in his appearance was the shirt’s color.

“My daughter was murdered and you want me to calm down?” Then he saw me and his face shifted from anger to disdain. “Well, well. Kit Lancaster.” He looked me over as if I were still wearing Erin’s borrowed sweatpants from seventh grade. “Why aren’t you behind bars?”

I froze, all the hateful things he’d said to me over the years coming back. But wanting me in jail? It was a new low.

Mr. Mills glanced over my shoulder at Nix. “My life’s being picked apart and the woman who was in the house when Erin was murdered is walking around scot-free?”

Veins stuck out at his temples and spittle flew as he pointed at me.

With a hand at the small of my back, Nix urged me into motion. “I’m walking Miss Lancaster to her car. When I return, I’ll talk with you about the case. But only if you calm down.”

Mr. Mills sputtered as we walked away, Nix’s pace quickened, and I was outside and across the parking lot to my car within a minute. I realized that Nix hadn’t contradicted Mr. Mills or stood up for me.

“Do you think I killed Erin?” I whispered, suddenly weary. The lack of sleep was catching up with me. My emotions were

like a rollercoaster.

“What?” His eyes widened. “No.”

“Then why didn’t you say that? Why didn’t you have my back in there?” I thought of the night before, being held in his arms. Holding me after my nightmare. God, I’d practically climbed him like a monkey after, desperate for him.

“With Keith Mills? Because I have to remain impartial.”

“Impartial?” I snapped. “He pretty much said I did it. And you didn’t tell him otherwise.”

He leaned forward so he could look me in the eye. “I want to go back in there and rip the asshole’s head off.” He stuck his arm out and pointed toward the station. “After what you said to Miranski about him, you think I *liked* letting him say that shit about you? Knowing he’s been doing it for years?” He raked his hand through his hair, his eyes filled with rage. “Punching a murder victim’s father in the face isn’t in my job description, Kit. In order to find Erin’s killer, I have to put up with guys like Mills. I’m just mad you do, too.”

“What about during the questioning? You barely said a word.”

His hand slid over his hair in obvious frustration. I’d held those silky strands between my fingers as he fucked me. “Because we were on record. Because what I said in front of Miranski is true. If we had evidence that proved you killed Erin, you would be in jail.”

I paused, waited for him to say more. “But...”

“But you didn’t fucking do it, therefore you’re free to go.” He took a step closer, all that dark intensity shifting to need. “Free to be in my bed.”

“Nix,” I murmured, checking out the embroidered police logo on his pec. I couldn’t look him in the eye. “I can’t do this hot and cold thing. I was in your bed all night and now you pretend you barely know me.”

“That’s right. *Pretend*. No one can know we’re together.”

That hurt. A lot. If they meant forever, then they should want to show me off, not hide me like a dark secret. But it wasn't about what they wanted. It was about their jobs.

“Mr. Mills would lose his shit.”

The corner of his mouth tipped up, barely, but it wasn't that much of a joke. It was actually true.

“The case could be compromised.” Yeah, that, too. What he didn't say was their jobs would probably be at stake, too. I didn't like the feel of that, the weight of that on our relationship. Their careers were at risk because of me.

“I want to kiss you,” he said, but didn't step close to do so. He had about four feet between us, far enough to keep anyone who might look our way from thinking we were anything more than detective and witness.

“What about your job?” I asked, voicing aloud what I'd been thinking.

“I'll worry about that. So... later?” He said that last word with so much intent, I knew it meant getting naked and screaming his name.

He growled and stepped close, set his hand on the roof of my car, penning me in. I loved the dominance of the moment. He didn't have to say anything for me to know he wanted me and wasn't planning on taking no for an answer.

“Nix,” I whispered, looking around. Standing like this wasn't a good thing. What if Mr. Mills saw us? Nix might say he would worry about his job, but I worried. I wasn't worth losing all he'd worked for.

“Later,” he repeated, this time not as a question. I took a deep breath, picked up his clean scent. I recognized the smell of his soap since I had it on me, too.

I nodded because I had a feeling he wouldn't step back until I agreed.

“I can't call you,” he said, pushing off the car and stepping back. “As I said, your phone records are being reviewed.”

“Right,” I replied, remembering what Donovan had said earlier. I dug my keys from my purse, turned to my car. I wasn’t sure if my hand was shaking because of his dominance or the reminder I was still a suspect. Reality was sinking in. My friend had been murdered. I was under investigation. If my pussy wasn’t a little sore, I’d have wondered if last night had actually happened.

“What are you going to do now?”

That was the question of the day. I glanced over my shoulder at him. I couldn’t believe a guy so hot was into me. I glanced at his hands, remembered what he could do with them. How gentle he could be. How skilled those fingers were. And I knew what was beneath that jeans and shirt. Knew every sinewy plane, every inch of his huge dick. Still, us being together was a dirty little secret. One that could blow the case, his career. Donovan’s too.

Was I as Mr. Mills had said? Trash? Was I ruining two men’s lives for a wild time? The night before, they’d said forever. But that was when I was naked. When faced with losing everything, was I worth it? I couldn’t rely on them. I *trusted* them, believed what they said, but couldn’t hold them to it. I needed to be able to stand on my own two feet, to support myself and my mom. I needed a paycheck.

“Eddie Nickel ended the big contract and the baby shower that was the only remaining client wants nothing to do with me.” I kicked a pebble on the pavement. “I’m headed to the diner to beg for my old job back.”

DONOVAN

“You wanted to see me?”

My father looked up from his desk, smiled. “Donnie. Come and sit.”

He extended his hand to indicate the chairs that faced him. He didn’t stand, didn’t give me a hug. We didn’t have that kind of relationship. Oh, I’d gotten manly slaps on the back and got the usual *Donnie*, which made me inwardly cringe. He’d said he was proud of me often enough. But not to me, Donovan Nash, but the prosecutor for Cutthroat County. I’d ensured some bad people were off the streets and he’d been pleased with my stats. I kept Cutthroat safe and that helped keep him mayor.

And who could be more satisfied with that than Anthony Nash, mayor?

Yeah, the fucking mayor.

He was sixty-two and had no plans to retire, unless he got voted out of office.

“What’s the latest on the Erin Mills’ murder?” he asked as I dropped into a chair.

I knew this was why he’d asked for me to take the elevator to the third floor of the city building that housed his office as well as the DA. Small time drug dealers and wife beaters

didn't affect his chances for reelection like a murder of the town's "It Girl" and daughter of his biggest campaign contributor.

He didn't give a shit that my summer softball league won the championship or that I'd bought a new car. He *would* care about Kit, but for all the wrong reasons.

"You'd have to ask the detectives about that. It hasn't hit our office yet."

He pursed his lips. People said we looked alike. His fair hair was mostly gray now, but he hadn't lost any of it, which boded well for me. He kept active, in the summer playing golf and the winter skiing on the slopes of Cutthroat Mountain, and it showed. He hadn't married again after Mom died, but I knew he'd been casually seeing Angela Martin on the side. Had been for years. Another thing we didn't talk about.

"You'll be trying the case," he commented, resting his elbows on the arms of his high-back chair and steeping his fingers together. "I'm surprised Nix didn't give you the latest over a beer or something."

I didn't answer. Instead of sharing a beer the night before, we'd shared Kit. Fucking her was much more fun than talking about the case.

He sighed, leaned forward and rested his forearms on his desk. "I've heard they're looking into the Mills family, men Erin may have dated, Erin's roommate, the house cleaners and even neighbors."

I nodded. "Autopsy is this morning. It all sounds like standard procedure," I replied, picking up a glass paperweight and tossing it from hand to hand.

"This shouldn't be standard procedure," he countered. "We need this killer found. And fast."

I stopped the juggling and looked at him. "Why? Because the election's in a few months?"

His jaw clenched. "It's not only my career on the line."

I frowned. "What are you talking about?"

He shrugged. “The District Attorney’s going to want the killer behind bars just as much as I do. That falls to your shoulders.”

“Meaning don’t fuck this up.” While the DA was in charge of the office and dealt with politics, like meetings with my father, I dealt with the actual cases, did the time in the courtroom. If things went south, it was on me.

This meant I shouldn’t have fucked a prime suspect’s pussy while she sucked the lead detective’s dick. And planned to do some other variety of that later tonight.

He lifted a hand in a stop gesture. “I didn’t say that.”

I stood, set the paperweight back down.

“You didn’t have to.” I was used to his passive aggressiveness.

“You’ll be the DA within five years if I have my way,” he said to my back as I made my way to his office door. He had aspirations for me that had never matched my own. If he were mayor and his son DA, the power he’d have. Nash and Nash, like some kind of TV show.

Whatever.

“Your way?”

He smiled, saccharine sweet. “Donnie, having power means you control lots of places in the government, not just one seat. Imagine what the Nash boys can do if we’re running Cutthroat.”

I hadn’t cared all that much about his aspirations for me, until now. But this was the first time he’d practically admitted being heavy handed in my career. Had he pushed cases my way to build up my resume? Did he know things about the DA to get him tossed out of office?

Fuck. I knew we weren’t close, but I’d never imagined being my father’s pawn.

I hadn’t thought about it much at all. Until now. Until there were more important things. I’d been going along for the ride because I’d been able to put bad guys away. I’d been content

with that, clearly not knowing what Pops had been up to. But there hadn't been much to stand up for. To protect. Now there was Kit.

I didn't want to throw away three years of law school because my dad was power hungry, but I didn't want any puppet strings either. I wanted to be the man Kit turned to. In the middle of the night, when she was sad. Happy. Horny. I needed her to be able to look me in the eye and be proud of me. And I needed to do the same with myself.

I turned, looked at the man I once looked up to. Now, I didn't like anything he stood for. "I want justice, Pops, not to be DA."

He looked at me as if he wondered if we shared the same DNA. "It's the same thing."

It was like talking to a fence post. No matter how many times I said it, he wouldn't understand. I'd gone into law for Mom, not for him. "It's not the same thing at all."

KIT

"Look who the cat dragged in," Dolly said, her usual smile on her face, a coffee pot in her hand as she walked by where I stood at the hostess stand. She didn't stop to say more, but worked her way down the row of booths by the front windows offering refills. I'd rarely seen her out of the diner's uniform of jeans and a T-shirt with a drawing of the building on the back and sturdy black shoes.

Once done, she turned on her heel and worked her way back to me.

"Give me some sugar," she said and I hugged her. Hard. She was taller than me by a few inches and bony, although she was strong from lugging heavy trays of food about all day. She

smelled like cooked onions and rose water. A familiar combination that had me blinking back tears. I'd missed her.

Dolly's Diner was one of the only places that was frequented by all of Cutthroat. Tourists and truckers passing through as well. Open twenty-four hours, everyone liked a greasy, late-night breakfast after hard drinking or an early morning business meeting. The rich liked good food in large portions as much as those on a budget. Her parents had started the place back in the sixties—and obviously named it after their only child—when the highway first opened. While they'd retired to Florida when I was a little girl, Dolly and her husband, Clyde, took over the running of it.

"I heard you were back." She walked around the lunch counter and put the coffee pot back on the warming plate. Reaching beneath, she pulled out a box of sugar packets and began tucking them into the plastic holders.

"I've been working with Erin Mills."

"Heard that, too." She shook her head. "I can't believe what happened to her."

"I... I found her."

Her hands stilled and her shrewd eyes met mine. "Kit."

I pasted on a fake smile and leaned against the counter. "I've been staying with her, saving up some money for a place of my own."

"You're the hardest worker I know," she commented. "Still taking care of your momma?"

I nodded. Nothing more to be said on that one. "I'm sorry I haven't come to say hi."

I was ashamed of myself. I'd hoped to get beyond waitressing, making a career out of event planning. The job at the hotel in Billings was my start toward that, but it was definitely over now. Murder took care of that. But Dolly had been more of a mother than my own, and I should have at least stopped in to visit. I'd started working for her in tenth grade, first bussing tables then waitressing. I'd had the job until last

year when I went to Billings. I hadn't given her notice, but I had called her, let her know where I'd gone.

Now I was eating humble pie and hoping she'd take me back. I'd always complained about the rich snobs in Cutthroat, but I realized, in this, I wasn't any better.

She looked over her shoulder at me, her dark eyebrow raised.

Seeing the mess she was making of the sugar packets, I sighed. "Here, let me do that." I stood beside her, grabbed the holders and rearranged the packets so they were tidy.

"You never liked things out of place," she commented.

"I can't imagine how the customers survived without me the past year," I replied sarcastically.

She chuckled. "We've muddled through as best we can. Especially since Melinda's out on maternity leave and one of the new night waitresses—Sally Jennings, I think you babysat for her younger sister back in the day—isn't the sharpest tool in the shed."

The bell that indicated an order was ready rang and Dolly went over to the pass-through window to grab the plates. She walked past me, the scent of greasy fries and burgers followed.

I bit back a smile. Things around here didn't change.

The bell rang again and Dolly called to me. "Get that, will you?"

I abandoned the sugar packets and went to the window. A cook I didn't know looked surprised to see me picking up a ticket. "What table?" I asked him.

"Twelve."

I nodded and stacked the plates up my left arm in a way that was second nature. "Got it."

Going to table twelve, I handed out the meals, ensured no one needed anything else and went back to the sugar packets. I needed something to keep my hands occupied, and Dolly would make a mess of them if she didn't let me finish them.

“I’m a disaster,” I admitted when she returned. “My friend was murdered. I no longer have a job. A place to live. I need money to cover my bills and my mom’s. Dolly, I’m a suspect in Erin’s murder.”

She set her hand over mine, stilling it. “*What?*”

I shrugged. “She was killed while I was sleeping just down the hall. I don’t have an alibi.”

“The truth will come out. It’s awful about Erin. She was a handful, but she didn’t deserve to have an end like that.” She shuddered, then looked to me. “We could use someone who knows her way around the menu and can do more than basic math with her fingers,” she said as she came to stand beside me again.

My hands stilled and I looked to her. “You’d take me back, after what I did?”

“All you did was leave town with a broken heart.”

She waved her hand as I stared at her, my mouth open.

“You knew?”

“I know heartbreak when I see it.” Her keen eyes looked me over. “And I know when that’s over.”

I blushed and made sure my shirt was in place—as if Donovan or Nix had been around to tug it up to cop a feel. I couldn’t help it because, well, this was Dolly. She didn’t have ESP or anything, but she could read people better than they wanted. Like right now.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Mmmhmm,” she murmured.

“What? Do I have a sign on me or something?” God, I hoped not because it would say Double Fucked. I had a hickey on my right boob, but I refused to lift my hand to my neck, worried there was on there I hadn’t seen. Total giveaway.

“Worked out your issues with those men of yours? By the dark circles under your eyes, I’d say all night.”

My mouth fell open. “Dolly!”

“Well?”

I leaned in and whispered, “You knew about... *both* of them?”

“They used to watch you all the time.”

I frowned. “What are you talking about?”

She sputtered, shook her head. “They didn’t come in for my coffee. They came here for you. *All the time*,” she repeated. “Whose section did they always request?”

I thought back. They used to come in frequently. And sit in my section. I’d thought, well, I hadn’t thought. I’d assumed it was one-sided.

“But... it’s Nix and Donovan.” I blushed, thinking about them. Smart, handsome, ridiculously virile. I’d been... so unlike myself with both of them. *Together*. I wasn’t a prude or anything and wasn’t ashamed about wanting sex, but *two* men was definitely pushing my sexual boundaries. “I mean, two men. One’s the detective on Erin’s murder and the other will prosecute the case.”

She pursed her lips. “That’s definitely a hot mess, but you’re innocent, so why not be with them?”

“They could have anyone. I mean, you’ve seen them.”

She fanned herself. “They aren’t hard on the eyes, that’s for sure. If I were thirty years younger. Why wouldn’t two men be interested in you?”

I glanced down at the box of sugar packets, then reached in and grabbed a handful, set them on the counter. Without looking up, I stuffed them—neatly—into the containers. “I’m nothing special.”

“Kittredge Lancaster, what happens when you talk about yourself like that?” she scolded in the mothering tone I’d known for a decade, and used frequently enough.

“I have to clean out the grease trap,” I replied sullenly. I felt fifteen again dealing with catty high school girls who made me feel less than important.

“And wouldn’t your time be better spent working the dinner shift?”

I whipped my head about to meet her shrewd gaze.
“Really?”

“Really,” she countered, and I hugged her something fierce.

NIX

“Kit.”

She spun around when I called her name. The back door of the diner slammed shut behind her, making her jump. The parking lot lights cast her face in sharp contrast, but I couldn't miss the panic in her eyes.

When I realized I was in shadow and she couldn't see me, I stepped forward.

She stumbled backwards, then froze when she recognized me.

“Nix,” she replied, on a breathy exhale, her hand going to her chest. Her purse fell off her shoulder and she shoved it back up.

“Shit, I'm sorry,” I said, stepping close, realizing I'd scared her.

She whacked me on the chest. “Don't *do* that!”

Her body shook and I grabbed her into a hug. She was all soft and warm, and she was all but vibrating with adrenaline.

“What kind of policeman are you, scaring the crap out of people?”

“Why are you out here by yourself?”

“My shift's over. My car is right there.”

I knew exactly where it was since I parked next to it.

“Have someone walk you to it if it’s dark. Okay?”

“Yes.” She tried to pull back and I let her. Only enough so she could look up at me. “What are you doing here?”

“I couldn’t call you, so I was going to have you follow me to Donovan’s. He’s waiting for us.”

“Oh,” she breathed. I could hear the sound of dishes clattering inside the diner. Her shift was done, but the place was open all night.

“I told you later, didn’t I?” Ever since the questioning this morning, I’d wanted her. It had been torture letting Miranski grill her. I’d wanted to yank her out of the chair, hug the shit out of her and tell the other detective to fuck off.

I liked Miranski. She was good at her job, which made my life easier. She could drink most guys under the table over happy hour and could ski the back bowls better than most locals on a good powder day. Being from Colorado, she wasn’t a *local*. She didn’t think Kit had anything to do with the murder any more than I did, but she knew nothing about Kit, hadn’t grown up with her like I had, so her questions weren’t just to mess with her.

Keith Mills, on the other hand... The fucker had a thing for Kit, and not the good kind. Hell, I didn’t even want him to know her. But he did and he thought she was bad news. I had no idea if he really considered her guilty or found her a perfect person to vent his anger toward. Kit had taken it for years. Why not dish a little more shit on her plate?

I’d calmed him down, a little. He was still out for blood, but I warned him from acting out and told him to let us do our jobs. I also gave him a piece of my mind for harassing Kit, although his hatred seemed to run deep. He’d left, but it wasn’t the last I’d see of him about the case.

“How did you know I was working here?”

I laughed. “I am a detective.” And she’d told me she was going to try and get her job back. I knew Dolly and Clyde and all those times I’d gone to the diner to talk with Kit, I’d seen

the way they doted on her. I knew they'd give her the job back. I didn't know she'd work tonight, but pulling into the lot and finding her car was easy enough.

“You thought we weren't going to connect with you.”

She was quiet for a one heartbeat, then another.

“Kit,” I said, drawing the word out.

She sighed. “I just... it's happening so fast. I wasn't sure.”

I grinned as I walked her backward until she was pressed into the cinder block wall. “Fast? It's been happening for *years*.”

I couldn't help myself. I kissed her. And nudged my knee between her legs. Our height difference had her practically riding my thigh. My dick pressed into her belly.

I wanted to flip her around and take her right here. Right now. But she deserved better than behind the diner. And no one saw Kit getting fucked but me and Donovan.

With a growl, I stepped back, looked down at her. Fuck, she looked good. Her lips glistened in the lights. Her eyes were blurry and she was all soft and pliant against me. I could even feel the hard tips of her nipples against my chest.

I wouldn't fuck her here, but that didn't mean I'd stop touching her. I stroked her hair back. “Where were you going?”

Her eyes darted away and even in the harsh lights, I could see her blush. “Dolly offered me her couch.”

I counted to ten, but it did nothing to ease my frustration with her. I wanted to shake some sense into her. I settled my hands on her slim shoulders, but didn't shake. “Kit—”

“It's eleven at night. I hadn't heard from you, so I thought —”

“Whatever you were thinking is wrong. You're ours now, Kit. If you didn't get that after what we did last night, then Donovan and I aren't doing it right.”

The corner of her mouth tipped up. She didn't believe we were in this all the way. I didn't like that, that she doubted us, but it was a trust thing. While we'd been into her for so long, she'd thought we'd been off limits for over a year. I stifled a smile. Donovan and me, *together*. Yeah, no. So maybe it would take her a little longer to get her head in the game, but we'd show her. Prove to her we meant every word. Every touch. *Everything*.

"Let's go." I slung my arm around her shoulder and led her to her car.

Thirty minutes later, we were in Donovan's apartment and she was in my arms again. "Finally," I murmured, kissing her neck. "Mmm, you smell like French fries."

She laughed pulled out of my hold.

"Let me see," Donovan said, grabbing her hand and spinning her around so she was in his arms. He kissed her, then nuzzled her neck. Sniffed.

"I need a shower," she replied.

He stepped back, but kept her hand and led her toward his bathroom. "That can be arranged."

I followed. If she was going to be naked, wet and have soap bubbles all over her, I wasn't going to miss out.

There was no seductive strip tease, just Donovan helping her out of the diner T-shirt and her jeans. Still, I was instantly hard.

"Oh shit."

Shyly, Kit turned to me. "Out of all the underwear in my drawer, you picked out this." She didn't sound too thrilled with the scraps of black lace and silk I'd selected when I packed her a bag the day before, but the way her nipples were hard beneath the flimsy fabric, I knew she wasn't really upset. I'd been right, she looked hot as shit in sexy lingerie.

Donovan grinned. "Nix is in charge of your bras and panties from now on."

Fuck, yes. I was all in when it came to finding sexy things for our girl to wear. *Just for us.*

I couldn't help but stroke a finger over the upper swell of her breast. The bra didn't cover much and my dick liked that just fine. And lower, those panties... just a triangle with little strings covered that sweet pussy.

"You look hot as shit in that. Now take it off," I said, pulling my service revolver from my holster and sitting it on the vanity. Donovan's apartment was in a new building downtown, modern and spacious. The bathroom, thank fuck, had a steam shower that easily fit three. No way could we fit together in my bathroom, let alone the clawfoot tub.

She must have caught on to the way we were watching her hands undo the front clasp of her bra, because she slowed down. A turtle could undo the clasp faster. And the impish little twist of her lips...

She was *teasing* us.

I looked to Donovan.

"You're getting spanked, Kitty Kat, for teasing your men," he growled. "I've spent all day with a semi. It's hard to get shit done... hell, it's hard to *walk*." As he spoke, he opened his pants, pushed them and his boxers down enough to grab his dick, pull it out and stroke it. It wasn't a semi at all, but ready to fuck. "I can still taste you and I want more."

"Oh," she whispered, finally letting the bra slide off her shoulders and to the tiled floor.

We stared at her perfect breasts. A handful and heavy, they were teardrop shaped with upturned plump nipples. Pretty pink nipples that were hardening as we watched.

"Fuck," I breathed. My mouth watered to get my lips on them.

Donovan made a grunting sound and stalked to the shower, fiddled with the various knobs and got the water going. Before either of us could get our clothes off, steam billowed out the open door.

It was her turn to stare. Clearly, she wasn't used to watching two men strip.

Donovan tugged Kit into the shower with him and grabbed the soap. I followed, then sank onto the bench seat. He handed me the bar before his lathered hands ran over her shoulders, down her arms and then to her breasts. He was taking high, so I'd take low. With her pussy right at eye level, I was content with the arrangement.

She had four hands on her, running over every inch of her, getting her nice and clean. I did her legs, then carefully washed her pussy, ensuring no soap remained on that delicate flesh before I began to play. She was wet, and not from the shower, my fingers sliding into her easily.

She went up on her tiptoes as I fucked her gently, my palm rubbing against her clit as I did so. Her head was angled back and Donovan was kissing her as he played with her nipples. Gorgeous.

She broke the kiss when she came, her breathy cries of pleasure echoing off the tile. Her inner walls clenched and milked my fingers as her body went soft and pliant. "Hold her up for me," I said to Donovan.

He was able to use her sated state to lift her up, his hands hooked behind each knee as she was pressed into him. She was wide open for me, her pussy lips parted and I could see every inch of her. Swollen, coated in her sweet arousal and ready for another orgasm. I could even see the hole continuing to clench from the remaining pleasure.

I leaned forward and put my mouth on her. Donovan had eaten her out the night before and I hadn't gotten the chance. Now I had her sweet flavor on my tongue. Her hips bucked but Donovan's hold kept her right where I wanted her. I flicked her clit, circled it, then took one lip into my mouth, then the other. I hardened my tongue and fucked her with it, then moved lower still, rimming the tight rosette of her ass.

"Nix!" she cried, her hand going to my hair. She tugged and I looked up at her. "Oh god, what are you two doing?"

This was probably the most erotic thing she'd ever done. If we wiped out every thought about any guy before us, then good.

We weren't vanilla. We *could* be, like the night before, where we were tame and gentle, but we liked things a little wild. Bold. We weren't going to curb our sexual appetites just because the things we liked to do were illegal in a few states. Hell, sharing her was pretty damned wild.

Unless she absolutely hated something, screamed some kind of safe word like "pineapple," we would push her, to get her off in ways she never imagined.

I grinned. She was spread wide, water beaded and rolled down her creamy skin. Her tits were upturned and ripe.

"We're loving you," I said.

"Yes, but that was... where you licked—"

"Your ass? It's virgin, isn't it, Kitty Kat?" Donovan said, licking up her neck.

"Yes," she breathed. She didn't try to wiggle out of his hold, but I knew Kit was vulnerable like this, even aroused. So I'd make her forget she was embarrassed, especially since there was nothing to be embarrassed about. We would take her ass, play with it, fuck it. But she'd be prepared first. A little warmup now would show her how much she would like it.

I didn't say anything more. Our girl had her thighs spread wide and I wasn't wasting the opportunity. I brushed my tongue over her asshole once more, briefly, then worked my way back up. I slipped a finger into her again, coated it with her arousal, then moved it to her back entrance. While I worked her clit with my tongue, I played with her ass, circled it, pressed in, circled some more, then eventually was able to get the tip past the tight ring of muscle.

She gasped and her eyes flared open. Hungry. Needy. Surprised. I smiled against her clit and carefully moved my fingertip, waking up all those nerve endings I knew would make her come so hard.

While I did all that, Donovan talked to her. Dirty. Filthy, even.

“I’m watching Nix finger your ass. You like it, don’t you? That little pussy’s ours to take. To fuck. That ass is going to be ours soon.”

He talked her up until she came, then crooned to her, how beautiful she was as she screamed, coated my chin in her juices. Her ass squeezed my fingertip and I knew it was going to be a tight fit, a death grip on my dick when I finally got in there.

“Put her on my cock,” I told Donovan.

He stepped forward and together, we carefully lowered her so she was straddling my waist, her pussy hovering over my dick, then onto it. Her eyes fluttered open.

There she was. My Kit. Her pussy was clenching, adjusting to be crammed full of dick. I wrapped my arms around her, kissed her. When she pulled back, she licked her lips and I knew she could taste herself.

“I guess you like a little ass play, huh?” I asked, stroking her wet hair back.

Her dark eyes met mine. “More,” she breathed.

Donovan swore and shut off the shower. I followed him into the bedroom, Kit still riding my cock, now with her legs about my waist.

I lowered her onto Donovan’s bed as I stood at the edge, began to fuck her. Donovan moved so he could take her hands, hold them over her head, pinning her in place again. If she wanted more, she’d get it.

KIT

“Obviously, Dolly took you back,” Donovan said, tearing off a bite of crust with his teeth.

Pizza had been delivered ten minutes ago and we were eating it sitting on Donovan’s bed. Before that, after Nix came inside me, Donovan took his turn, sitting on the edge of the bed and having me straddle him. Even though it was the three of us together, they were different lovers. They kissed differently, fucked differently. Even their dicks felt different when inside me.

There was no question of one versus the other, choosing. I wanted both, needed what each of them offered.

While they’d slipped on their boxers—and Donovan a pair of gym shorts to answer the door—they hadn’t let me get dressed and I sat cross-legged between them. Naked, except for the sheet that settled about my lap. It was strange to sit between them, my boobs right out there. But the looks they gave me as they ate, and the way my pussy felt after being with both of them, I felt... pretty.

And after what we’d done, well, sitting naked was the least of what I should be embarrassed about. Nix had put his finger in my butt. That sounded ridiculously clinical, but he had. And god, I’d liked it. My pussy clenched remembering how it had felt. I had no idea something so... dark would feel so dang

good. I'd gone off like a firework. What woman could resist one guy's mouth on her clit while another said very naughty things in her ear. Oh, and holding me open, like yoga-wide open.

I was a total slut. And I was loving every minute of it.

I forgot what Donovan had said. Dolly, right. "She did. After all she'd done for me, I wasn't very nice to her when I left for Billings. I'm surprised she was so cool about it."

"She cares for you," Nix said, grabbing another slice from the box.

"Not to be mean to my mom, but Dolly's been there for me." I glanced between the two of them. "She knew about you two."

They stared at me. "Oh?" Donovan asked.

I shrugged. "I guess she's known all along. She said you guys used to come in to the diner just for me."

"You didn't know that?" Nix asked.

"You really did?"

"Kitty Kat." That was all Donovan said, as if it had been obvious. For everyone but me, it seemed.

"Wow. Okay, well." I was flustered. The guys had stopped by the diner because they'd *liked* me. And I remember serving them, a lot. "Anyway, she knows we're together. She could tell by just looking at me."

Nix ran a finger down the side of my neck, then winked. "We didn't leave any hickeys."

I nibbled on my piece as I raised a hand to my neck. "Thanks for that, but I think she's been expecting it. Waiting."

"Us, too," Nix said.

"She's glad we finally got together." They looked a little unsettled. "Why? I thought... I'm naked in bed with you. This isn't together?"

I freaked a little and the pizza in my mouth tasted like sawdust all of a sudden. I'd said the wrong thing. Assumed too much. I dropped what was left of the slice back into the box and moved to get up. God, I'd been so silly!

Donovan gave my ass a swat and I spun about on my knees. "Kitty Kat, we're together. After what we just did, you question it?"

"I *always* question it."

He frowned. "Why? Haven't we made ourselves clear on where we stand?"

I gave a little shrug. "You just look a little uncomfortable or something."

"We're not ready to share you yet, that's all," Donovan said.

I believed that, but there was so much more baggage to the three of us than just us being together. There was the murder, which I wasn't even going to bring up now. Then the same other stuff I'd been dwelling on. I thought I had my shit together, but definitely not. As for them?

"Yes, but... look at you two. Big, mountain men. And then there's me."

Donovan grabbed my wrist and tugged me over his lap as Nix pulled the pizza box out of the way.

"What are you doing?" I asked, pressed into his sturdy thighs, looking over my shoulder at him.

"Spanking you. Like I've been saying."

His hand landed on my upturned ass, not too hard, but enough to have me squeak and my butt to sting. "Donovan!"

He did it again, then a third time. "Do you need more to know we're in this with you?"

I shook my head, my butt stinging. "No. No more spanking."

His hand nudged my thighs apart and he grinned. "Yeah, but you love it. So wet."

I pursed my lips. “That’s your cum. You guys have too much of it.”

Donovan growled. “Nix, in the drawer.”

Nix shifted to look in the bedside table. He pulled out a small package and grinned. He ripped it open swiftly, tossed the packaging on the floor and held up the item.

A butt plug. Instantly, I clenched down thinking about that shiny metal object going inside me. There.

Donovan grabbed it as Nix pulled out a small bottle of lube from the drawer.

“Guys,” I said warily, trying to squirm off Donovan’s lap.

“Don’t move, Kitty Kat. You liked it when Nix played with your ass earlier, so you’ll like this too.”

I wasn’t so sure about that, and when he got it all slicked up and pressing against my back entrance, I gasped.

Nix moved closer so he could play with my pussy as Donovan slowly worked the plug inside me. “I can feel all our cum in her.”

It was too much. I was so sensitive after coming earlier. Those awakened nerve endings fired back to life, and I squirmed now for an entirely different reason.

The plug slipped into place with a silent pop and I begged. Yes, begged. I was so close to coming and both of them were touching me. How did they know how to work my body so easily, giving me incredible pleasure? A finger brushed my clit as the plug was bumped.

I came, clenching down on the hard plug and the insistent finger. Sweat bloomed on my skin and I felt wantonly... incredible.

Their hands moved away when the feelings subsided. I was a panting, clenching, sweaty mess. Again.

Donovan picked me up and set me back between them so fast, my breasts bounced, the plug shifted deep inside me. He growled.

“What?” I asked.

His gaze was dark, intense. “Seeing that plug stretch you open, knowing our cum’s in you, filling you up, coming out...”

Nix shifted on the bed. “Finish your pizza. You’re going to need your strength.”

It was my turn to squirm because the plug was keeping me really aroused. They wanted me, again, and god, I wanted them. I reached for my piece and took another bite. I wanted the orgasms I knew they’d give me, but I also wanted to talk. “You’re worried that Dolly knows about us,” I said, circling back to their earlier unease.

Donovan went to the bathroom and I heard the sink come on. When he returned, he grabbed his glass of water from the bedside table, took a drink. “Do you know how long we’ve wanted to be with you? Fantasized fucking you, putting a plug in your ass? Hell, fucking your ass and pussy at the same time?”

“I...” I had to assume as long as I wanted them.

Donovan’s pale gaze held mine. “But the murder investigation is a problem.”

All pleasure evaporated. Oh yeah. The murder. “Because I’m a suspect,” I replied.

“Because if anyone finds out we’re together, the case could be compromised.” Nix went to the bathroom, washed his hands.

“Then why are we here like this?”

Nix came back out, grinned. “I could remind you, but the cum coating your thighs is doing the job.”

“Don’t forget that gorgeous ass with the plug deep inside,” Donovan added.

“Guys,” I moaned.

“We want you. Want to *marry* you, and we don’t want Erin’s murder to get in the way of that.”

The pizza got stuck in my throat. I crawled over to Donovan's glass and took a big swallow. "Marry?" I asked, finally.

They both looked at me. Big, brawny, their chests bare, washboard abs on display.

"You're not a one-night stand, Kitty Kat."

Since it had already been two nights, I didn't think so. But marriage?

"You mean it?"

Donovan's brow winged up and he patted his lap. "Do you need a spanking again to believe us? Maybe a bigger plug?"

Maybe a Monday night was quiet and that was why no one bothered me on my shift at the diner. But Tuesday's lunch crowd was brutal. Not because it was busy. Even though it had been over a year since I'd waitressed, I was used to it. What I wasn't used to were the whispers behind my back.

She's the roommate.

How could she have slept through a murder?

Maybe she takes after her crazy mother.

The buzz in the restaurant wasn't from the caffeine in the coffee. It was about me. The other waitresses weren't thrilled I'd been back a day and everyone wanted to sit in my section.

Not because I was an exceptional server, but they wanted to look me over. Ask me outright, then leave shitty tips.

"Who do you think killed Erin Mills?" a long-haul trucker asked me.

I topped off his coffee and pasted on a big smile. "I'm just your waitress, not the police."

A group of women who appeared to have just left a church Bible study, looked down their noses at me, even though they were sitting down. An older lady in the group took it upon herself to be their spokesperson. “Young lady, someone like you shouldn’t be reaching.” She glanced around to see her friends nodding and continued. “God gives us what we can handle, and it seems working here is all you can handle.”

I didn’t refill their iced teas or carry off their finished plates. I just spun on my sneakered heel and stopped by Dolly. “Table six is all yours.”

She glanced that way, made a humph sound, then nodded.

All the customers were doing was validating my weaknesses. Maybe it was because I was tired, not from being kept up late into the night by two men with strong sexual appetites, but from the two nightmares I’d had later on. They were the same thing: seeing Erin, feeling the blood, smelling the scent of it. I couldn’t escape it, not in my dreams or in reality.

I had been a waitress since high school to make ends meet. I still was. There was *nothing* wrong with it. Nothing. But while Dolly had been the mother I barely had and the diner was like a second home, I’d wanted to branch out. I wanted to be an event planner. Had for a long time. The idea of organizing a party or something fun and special... something meaningful made me feel good. Perhaps it was because I’d grown up in a house that was a complete disaster. I’d never had birthday parties or anything like that, but wanted to see others have pretty invitations and party favors and cute finger foods.

I’d even put that bee in Erin’s bonnet back in the day, that it would be fun... and pay the bills. She’d had the money to back the idea, and since she liked to party, it was a good fit for her.

And now, with Erin gone, her business along with her, I didn’t have the capital to start a company of my own. With having to support my mom, it was even harder to get ahead.

But extra shifts at the diner would help. I'd get the cash I needed to get back on my feet.

That was a goal that seemed pretty damned hard to obtain. That wasn't what my problem was. Something bigger, something worse, because there was no happy ending. The flare of hope I'd had for the past two days was being snuffed out. All the whispering and comments reinforced every doubt I had about being with Nix and Donovan. Oh, they told me, showed me, and even *spanked* me to let me know that they wanted it all with me. They'd even mentioned marriage, which was insane.

I *really* wanted that.

But they were thinking with their dicks. Good sex made brain cells fry. I could relate. Perhaps that was why I'd stayed with them for two nights. Listened to their vows of a long-term relationship.

It wasn't going to work out. It couldn't. I would only bring them down. How could I not? Nix was a detective on the fucking case. If anyone found out he was sleeping with a suspect...

And Donovan, when the killer was found, the entire case could be blown because of either witness tampering or conflict of interest. I wasn't a lawyer, but even I knew it wasn't right.

They'd both lose their jobs. Their careers. Cutthroat was a small town in the middle of Montana. They weren't going to find another police department for at least fifty miles or more. And the nearest DA's office was probably in Helena.

I considered all of that as I worked, as I listened to the gossip, deflected the most piercing of questions. My heart ached, because I'd *almost* gotten over the idea of Nix and Donovan being in love with each other. When that had been cleared up, I'd had hope that it could actually work between us.

Hope. Fuck, that could destroy anyone. And all that I had for the three of us to be together was crumbling.

I loved them. I loved them enough to let them go because I only wanted what was best for them. Obviously, it wasn't me.

The lunch rush had tapered off when the mayor came in, took the corner booth in my section. I knew him because it was a small town and he was involved in the community, but also because he was Donovan's dad. We'd just never been face-to-face before. Until now.

I set the menu on the table in front of him. "Hi there. Can I get you a drink while you look over the menu?"

Anthony Nash looked up at me and gave me his signature smile. He and Donovan looked so alike that it was easy to picture what he would look like in thirty years. When Donovan smiled at me, I felt it clear to my toes. It was genuine. Warm. Hot.

The mayor's smile was fake, pasted on because it was what he did. He needed to be friends with everyone in town who could vote. He was good, I'd give him that, but perhaps it was because I had the real deal from his son that I could spot the difference.

"I'll have a slice of Dolly's coconut cream pie and a cup of coffee."

I picked the menu back up and nodded. "You got it."

I returned with both a few minutes later.

"Thank you, Kit."

I paused when he said my name.

"Yes, I know who you are."

"That makes us even then," I replied.

He laughed then. "I can see why Donovan likes you."

I stilled. "Excuse me?"

"There's nothing wrong with having a little fun." His gaze dropped from mine and raked over my body. Even though I was wearing a T-shirt and jeans, I felt naked. I took a step back. "Fucking two men. It's always the quiet ones who are

the wildcats.” He glanced up at me, that creepy smile back in place.

“Maybe I underestimated you.” He looked me over again. “Fucking the detective and the prosecutor? Witness tampering. Possible evidence tampering. Conflict of interest. So many ways for you to get off scot free.”

I should have turned and left, but it was as if my feet were bolted to the floor.

“Nix is not my problem, but Donovan? He’s my boy. Scratch your itch with someone else.”

His crass words were a direct hit to my already weakened emotions. But I wasn’t going to let him see that. No fucking way would I let him know he was wounding me. Destroying me.

He was just like the Mr. and Mrs. Mills, making assumptions and protecting their children, as if I were going to destroy them. It was any wonder Erin, Shane and Donovan had turned out as well as they had.

Before I could even think of a response, he continued.

“Donovan’s going to be DA. He’s got all the backing he needs to be a success. But you? You’ll destroy him.” He leaned forward. “Do you want that? To ruin his chances at a career for a little dick?”

I sucked in a breath at his words, finally getting myself together to step back again. “Enjoy... enjoy your pie.”

I fled, went straight through the swinging doors into the kitchen. Leaned against the wall. God, I couldn’t stop shaking. The mayor knew about me with Nix and Donovan. Knew we’d been together the past two nights. If he knew, who else did? And the things he said. Did Nix and Donovan think I was with them so that I could get away with murder?

“You all right, hon?” Dolly eyed me as she walked by with a box of creamers.

“Can you handle table three for me?” I asked. No way was I getting near Mr. Nash again.

She frowned, looked me over. She hadn't missed all the whispering and gossip. "Sure."

When she left me alone again, I remained to hold up the wall. It was over with Nix and Donovan. While Anthony Nash was a total asshole, he was right. I *would* bring Donovan down. Nix, too. I'd been thinking that all along, but had avoided it because I hadn't wanted it to be true. I had nothing to do with Erin's murder, but that didn't matter. They didn't know who did and that meant they had to follow the rules.

Fucking me didn't follow those rules.

But now, with an enemy in the mayor, I didn't stand a chance. I could ruin Donovan. *And* Nash.

No, not could. Would.

Tears filled my eyes and I wiped them away with the back of my hand. I couldn't break down here. Everyone was watching me, assessing my guilt.

I knew what I had to do. Pushing off the wall and getting back to work, I had no choice but to move forward. Alone.

NIX

“Any word from the lab?” I asked Miranski as I walked by her desk. She’d just hung up her phone and glanced up after she scrawled something on her familiar notepad. Our desks were tucked in the back corner of the main police floor.

For the past two hours, I’d been at Erin Mills’ house with the head of the crime scene team. She’d confirmed that they’d collected everything they needed and the house could be returned to the Mills family. Since all of Kit’s things were still in the guest bedroom, I left an officer there to ensure her things weren’t thrown out. After Keith Mills’ scene the day before in the lobby, I wouldn’t put it past him to fuck with her.

“They’ll have everything for us at two,” she said. “Nix.”

I stopped and turned to face her. “This was dropped off for you.”

She held up a white envelope. I took it from her and saw my name written in neat handwriting on the front. “Thanks. Can you get in touch with Kit Lancaster and tell her she can get her things out of the Mills’ house?”

I could have called her myself about this since it *was* police business, but I didn’t dare. I wanted to hear her voice, which made me completely pussy whipped. I didn’t dare, though.

“Sure.”

I went to my desk, sat down and ripped open the envelope. I popped right back up when I read the note.

I'm sorry, Nix. It's not going to work out between the three of us. I know you said forever, but two days is all we get. Don't try to change my mind. It will only make things worse for you and Donovan.

Kit

“Hey, where are you going?” Miranski asked as I strode by.

“DA’s office,” I said.

“Don’t forget the lab at two,” she called as I cut through the other desks. I raised my hand in acknowledgement, but my mind wasn’t on the case. It was on Kit, on what she wrote.

I didn’t believe a word of it. She was *in* with us. All the way. I’d seen her when I said we wanted to marry her. Surprise, definitely. But she’d also been happy about it. She wanted forever. From what I’d heard of Erin Mills, the info Miranski had collected, she’d worked through quite a number of men in Cutthroat. I didn’t really give a shit if she had a different guy in her bed every night. A woman could do whatever the fuck she wanted. But Kit wasn’t like that.

She wasn’t a one-night stand woman. She wanted forever. Hell, she’d wanted it with us and have even left town to let Donovan and I be together. As I tugged open the door on my SUV, I rolled my eyes. Me and Donovan in love. I dialed his number on my cell.

“Where are you?” I asked.

“Office,” he replied.

“Meet me out front in five minutes.”

I hung up, turned the key in the ignition.

We weren’t in love with each other, we were in love with Kit.

And now she was dumping us.

I drove to the city building and pulled up at the curb. Donovan climbed in. He had on a tie, which meant he had to be in court. He looked at me, knowing something was up.

I handed him the note. He scanned it. Cursed.

His eyes met mine. “She’s protecting us.”

“The murder investigation,” I said, as answer.

He nodded. “Has she been cleared yet?”

“Miranski confirmed she got a lottery ticket at the convenience store at eleven ten. It fits with Kit’s statement that she got home—back to Erin Mills’ house—around eleven thirty. That means Erin was still alive then.”

“No time of death yet?”

“The coroner only offered a four-hour window. After midnight.”

“Fuck.”

“The killer’s going to be found and this will all blow over.”

“Except we’re the prosecutor and detective for the case. Our asses are on the line.”

“I’m not letting this get in the way of making her ours,” I said. “We’ve waited long enough. She had nothing to do with it.”

He ran a hand down his face. “I know it. You know it. But there’s no evidence to prove it.”

“Yet.”

“Yet,” he repeated.

I slapped my hand on the steering wheel. “Why the fuck can’t we have the woman we want? Why can’t it be fucking simple?”

He didn’t reply. “Let’s go talk to her.”

Now he was talking.

I put the SUV in gear and headed toward the diner. I had to assume she was working. “Being with us, she’s going to learn that we protect her.”

KIT

I knew they wouldn’t let it go. Knew the note wouldn’t have given them the answers they needed. There weren’t any answers, none that any of us wanted to hear. None that would let us work out.

I couldn’t let them lose everything. I knew what it was like, and I wouldn’t wish it on anyone. I wasn’t worth it.

When I saw the SUV pull into the parking lot—thank god I’d been doing a pass for coffee refills—I practically ran back to the coffee machine and set the pot down. Dolly came out of the kitchen and I walked right up to her, blocked her path toward the pie case.

“You have to cover for me.”

She frowned. “What?”

I glanced over my shoulder, saw Nix and Donovan headed toward the entrance. God, they looked good. Big, brawny, serious. And pissed.

Her gaze flicked behind me.

“I broke up with them.” She knew who.

“What? Why?”

The answer would take much longer than the twenty seconds before they came into the diner.

I grabbed her hand, squeezed it. “I’m not here. Please, Dolly.”

I didn't give her a chance to say no, just dashed behind the counter before they could see me and sat down on the floor, tucked my knees up.

Dolly came over to me, then stared down at me as if I'd sprouted a second head.

"Please," I begged. I couldn't face them or talk to them. It would be too hard to push them away, to do the right thing. The diner was the Grand Central Station of Cutthroat, and I wasn't going to have my love life front and center for everyone to see. To talk about. They could talk about me all they wanted, to spread idle gossip about my involvement in Erin's murder. I wouldn't drag Nix and Donovan into it.

That was the reason I'd left them in the first place.

Perhaps she could sense how frantic I was because she turned and faced out into the restaurant. I could see her arms moving, probably wiping down the salt and pepper shakers to appear busy.

"Gentlemen, you're looking mighty handsome today."

They were there. *Right there* on the other side of the counter. I wanted to pop up and throw myself at them. Have them wrap their arms around me and hold me and tell me everything was going to be all right.

"We'd like to talk with Kit."

I heard the deep tone of Nix's voice and my nipples went hard.

"She's not here," Dolly replied.

"Her car's in the lot."

Shit, it was.

"She took the van to the mega store. We're out of paper towels for the bathrooms." Dolly was an impressive liar. "You're not going to hurt my girl, are you?"

What was she doing? My mouth fell open and I gave her ankle a whack.

"That's the last thing we want to do," Donovan said.

She must have been satisfied with that, because she switched topics. “Any updates on the murder?”

“We can’t comment about an open case,” Nix said.

“Why not? Everyone else is,” she countered, referring to the non-stop gossiping among the patrons. “Some people are saying Kit did it.”

No one spoke for a moment. “Kit didn’t kill Erin Mills,” Nix told her. His voice was even deeper than usual.

“You’ve cleared her then?”

I held my breath.

“Not yet. The other detective should have called her, let her know she can get her things from Erin’s house.”

“I’ll be sure she knows.”

“Make sure she stays somewhere safe tonight,” Donovan told her.

“If you weren’t saying that because you’re worried about her, I’d call you out for sassing me, young man. She’ll stay with me and Clyde until she can find something.”

“Thank you,” Donovan murmured.

“You want to be with Kit, then clear her.” Dolly’s tone was one I knew well. It was her *don’t fuck with me* voice.

“Yes, ma’am,” Donovan replied. “When you see Kit, tell her we stopped by.”

“Will do.”

Thirty seconds later, Dolly turned, set her hands on her hips and looked down at me. “What did you do to those two? They looked fit to be tied.”

I assumed they were gone and pushed myself off the floor. “I broke up with them.”

She pursed her lips, studied me. “You never could do anything the easy way.”

That was for damned sure.

“Those men love you.”

My heart leapt at her words. Did they? They hadn't said as much, but it had been *two* days. I knew how I felt, but them? I didn't believe it. I *couldn't*. It would hurt too much. I shook my head and she held up her hand.

“They do. I know why you did it, why you pushed them away. I wish you could get what you want for once. And if it's two sexy mountain men, then so be it.”

I tried to smile, but it was hard. My heart walked out the door with Nix and Donovan. “Me, too, Dolly. Me, too.”

DONOVAN

Two nights with Kit and I couldn't sleep without her. My bed felt empty without her in it. I eased my hard dick in the shower with my hand, but it wasn't the same as her hot pussy and my balls were still blue as fuck. I wanted her. Needed her.

I glanced at my unmade bed, remembered what the three of us had done in it the other night.

It wasn't just the sex with her I craved, but her smile. Her softness that smoothed all of my rough edges. She was light where I was dark. I could sound like a fucking poet, but she was everything.

She'd been all *in*, been right there with us in this relationship. We hadn't lied, hadn't played any games. Only two days together, but the thing between the three of us had been simmering for over a year. Longer than that even. What kid saw a girl across the school and wanted her forever?

Me.

Nix, too.

It had taken for-fucking-ever to get to this point. When we'd told her we wanted to marry her, we'd meant it.

This fucking case was ruining everything. Sure, I sounded petty thinking about my love life when Erin Mills was on a

slab in the morgue, but what Nix and I had with Kit had nothing to do with the case, with what happened to Erin.

I put my empty coffee mug in the sink, turned off the kitchen light.

Fuck, the case was ruining everything. The one line of Kit's note, *it will only make things worse for you and Donovan*, told me all I needed to know.

She was sacrificing herself for us. That wasn't how this was going to work. No fucking way. Our girl didn't get to decide shit like that all on her own. She didn't get to decide what I did with my job, what Nix did with his. Yet, she had.

I grabbed my keys and headed out of my apartment. Nix leaned against his SUV out front.

"You look like you slept as well as I did," I grumbled, walking up to him.

His hair was a mess, as if he'd run his hands through it and dark circles were beneath his eyes. It went unsaid that while we'd spent two nights in bed with each other—naked—it had been because of Kit. For Kit. *With* Kit. I had no interest in Nix. I didn't play for that team. We had a shared interest in our woman. Making her happy, *keeping* her happy. And since two dicks were in her playbook, we stripped down and gave her what she wanted.

"You slept?" he asked, taking a sip of his to-go cup of coffee. "This isn't going to work."

"What isn't?" I practically growled. If he was going to agree with Kit, he was going to be sporting a black eye.

He held up a hand. "Hear me out, fucker. She broke up with us to protect us."

"Yeah," I said, waiting for something I didn't know. I was surly as fuck and didn't have time to wait for him to get his ass in gear.

"We should be together, no matter what."

That, I agreed on.

“But she’s trying to protect us,” I said. “Our jobs.”

“Exactly. We’ve known all along that being with her while working the Erin Mills case was not a good idea.”

“But we did it anyway,” I added. “Why should it tear us apart? It’s not fucking fair.”

Nix smiled, let it fall away. “This isn’t kindergarten. I think Miranski has an idea about the three of us, but she hasn’t let on. If my boss found out through channels... he’d shit a brick.”

I could imagine. “There’s epic conflict of interest on my part. Any case against Kit could be thrown out because of impartiality alone.”

“Which is why we shouldn’t be together,” he replied.

“Fuck that.”

A couple walking by eyed me funny at my vehemence. I ran my hand over my head, stepped closer to Nix.

“I’m resigning,” I said.

He froze. “You’re serious.”

I tucked my hands in my pant pockets. “Deadly.”

“Good.”

My eyebrows went up. “Not what I was expecting to hear.”

“I called my boss. Told him I was in a relationship with Kit, a suspect, that it had been going on for a while and that wasn’t going to change.”

“I thought you said he’d shit a brick when he found out.”

“If he found out from someone besides me. Kit’s worth whatever he wanted to do to me. I don’t want to hide what we have.”

“Holy shit. You got fired?”

“He wanted to fire my ass. He wanted to suspend me. But he can’t. Not with the murder case.” He laughed, rubbed the back of his neck. “He put Miranski on the Mills case. I’m tackling all others. He’s not happy, but he’ll survive. It’s only

been forty-eight hours since she was found. I handed over my notes. Miranski ran Kit's questioning. It's all recorded and legit. Keith Mills might have his panties in a twist, but it would only become an issue for your office... *if* she were actually under arrest for the crime."

I sighed, because that was never going to happen. "Which she won't be."

"You're quitting?" he asked, circling us back to my earlier announcement.

"I've been my dad's pawn in the DA's office all along."

"You didn't win cases because of your father."

"No, but I got the resume building cases because Daddy's mayor. He has plans for me."

He studied me and I waited for him to connect the dots. "The mayor and his future DA. Nash and Nash."

"Exactly."

"You don't want to be his right-hand man?" The words were laced with sarcasm. Nix knew Pops well, knew how slick he was.

"I'll start my own practice. He won't be happy, but his happiness is not my concern."

"Kit's is," he replied, pushing off the side of his SUV.

"That's right. I have to run. Time to watch the shit hit the fan."

I couldn't be happier.

KIT

I was going through the motions. I spent the night on Dolly's couch. I'd slept on there before, back in high school when my mom had either been in one of her manic moods or in the hospital on psych eval. But I hadn't ached for two men, nor had lusty thoughts about them that had me slipping my hands beneath my sleep shorts, still leaving me unfulfilled. I also hadn't had nightmares of my friend being murdered.

Between crying over what I couldn't have and waking up afraid I was next on the murderer's list, I'd barely slept.

Thankfully, makeup covered most of the puffy eyes and dark circles. I didn't have to think all too much working at the diner. Not that it was easy, but because, besides the one year I was in Billings, I'd been working there for a decade.

Never ending black coffee didn't hurt either. And while it offered the pick-me-up I needed, the lunch rush helped distract me.

Where I'd been bothered by the whispers and gossip from patrons the day before, now, I barely heard it. If I did, I didn't care. I'd discovered something that hurt worse than having people think I was a murderer. And that was saying a lot.

Like something out of a romance movie, I'd thought maybe Nix or Donovan would return. Sweep me off my feet and carry me away to a happily ever after. I loved to see the perfect happy ending in the movie theater and read about them in books, but they didn't happen in real life. Not for me.

"How are you holding up?" Dolly asked.

I shrugged as I closed out another ticket in the computer, tearing off the bill from the little printer.

"Thought so. Listen, Wendy and Sally have been talking."

"About me?" I asked, glancing across the restaurant at the other two waitresses.

One was taking an order and the other filling drinks at the soda machine.

"Not like that," Dolly scolded. "Wendy's sister got engaged over the weekend and she wants you to plan a party

for her.”

“What?”

“You are an event planner, aren’t you?” she quizzed.

“Not anymore,” I replied.

The ding from the bell went off. Silverware clattered, patrons chatted.

“You still are,” she told me. “You didn’t lose your skills with Erin.”

“Yes, but... but—”

“But what?”

But who would want to have a murder suspect plan your baby shower?

Wendy came over, a very hopeful look on her pretty face. “Please say you’ll do it.” She’d been four years behind me in school, but she’d been working at Dolly’s for a few years and we’d been friendly.

“You’re not worried?”

She frowned. “Have you met my mother? She wants to play hostess on her back patio with streamers and her crock-pot full of barbecue mini hot dogs beside a seven-layer bean dip with the football game on the TV in the background.”

I didn’t want to cringe and insult her mother, but yikes. “I can probably top that,” I said.

She beamed. “You’ve saved my life. And my mother’s because my sister would have probably killed her. I’ll catch up with you about the details and a time to meet my sister.”

A patron at one of her tables waved her down and she left.

“One event at a time, hon, and your company will take off. Just wait and see.”

Dolly patted my arm and got back to work.

My section for the shift was the lunch counter. Those who came in alone usually took a spot. I walked down the line handing out their bills and checking on beverage refills.

Working my way back, I spotted Lucas Mills settling into a spot.

Lucas.

I hadn't seen him in a long time, well before I left to go to Billings. We'd dated after high school. He'd been sweet. Kind. The first guy to actually *like* me. At nineteen, we'd been each other's firsts. I'd been surprised when he'd told me he'd never been with anyone. He had those boy-next-door good looks with his fair hair and killer smile, and I'd expected him to have gotten lucky well before me.

But he hadn't and while it had been sweet... yup, that word again, it had been awkward. And it had hurt. I had no doubt he'd worked on his technique since that long-ago night. He was even more handsome than ever, and I didn't doubt if he had a girlfriend.

I'd loved him once. Or thought I had. Maybe it had been a first love kind of thing, more surprise and giddiness, fizzy desire and breathy need. But it hadn't been deep. I could see that now.

Nix and Donovan had showed me not only what real sex was like, but what real love felt like, too. It was wonderful. And awful.

Lucas saw me and offered a smile. I made my way to him, realizing there was so much more than the counter between us. His sister had been murdered. I was one of the last people to see her alive. And I was a suspect. What was he doing here during such a terrible time for his family?

"Kit."

"Lucas. It's... I'm, god, I'm so sorry about Erin."

He gave me a sad smile. He and Erin looked so much alike. Fair, blue eyed. The same face shape even. Erin had been tall, but nowhere near the six-two of Lucas. He'd gone into the military—the reason why we didn't stay together—and that had bulked him up. He'd been back in town for a few years, but he hadn't lost a bit of the muscle.

“Yeah, I know. She was excited for you to come back and work together.”

A pang of sadness hit me. “It was good.”

“We weren’t that close, she and I,” he admitted. “Not since I came back. She was... different.”

I knew what he was talking about. While she hadn’t had tons of responsibility because of her money, she’d turned... reckless in the past few years. Lots of men. Partying. I hadn’t been able to keep up. I hadn’t wanted to. I knew Lucas, at least the younger version. I’d heard he’d been deployed to Afghanistan and had been injured. Had a rough go of it for a while before founding his non-profit. He’d been quiet and introverted before, but if he struggled with his deployment, he probably couldn’t keep up with Erin either.

“It doesn’t make it easier,” I offered. “She was special to a lot of people.”

It was true. Every word. I just didn’t know what else to say. *I didn’t do it* wasn’t going to work. His sister had been murdered. It wasn’t about me.

“Can I get you a cup of coffee?” I asked, remembering why he was here.

“Sure.”

I turned and grabbed a cup and saucer and the fresh pot. I was pouring it when the entry door was flung open. “Lucas!”

It was Keith Mills. Fuck.

He stalked over to his son. “What are you doing here?”

Lucas lifted his cup. “Having coffee.”

“With her? Are you insane? She killed Erin!”

You could hear a cracker snap in the restaurant. Everyone was staring.

“Mr. Mills, I didn’t—”

His gaze lifted to mine, filled with a hatred I’d never seen before. He looked as put together as ever with his pressed

pants and golf shirt, but he had a wildness about him. I knew people who lost their children went out of their minds with grief. Some went a little crazy. But this? All of his grieving and frustration at Erin's murder seemed directed solely on me.

"I don't want to hear it," he shouted. "It's lies, all of it. You've got people believing your sweet and innocent act, but I won't."

Lucas slowly stood, put himself between me and his father as if the counter wasn't enough.

"She didn't kill Erin," Lucas said.

Mr. Mills flashed his anger at Lucas. "You don't know that!"

"You don't know she did it," he replied calmly. His back was to me, but I could easily compare his calm stance to his father's tense one. "If you did, you'd have told the police and they would have arrested her."

"She's been a menace to our family for years."

Lucas shook his head. "She's been a friend."

"Friend? You're one to talk." Mr. Mills pointed at him. "She had you panting all over her, had a tight grip on your balls until you went overseas."

"Yes, Dad. I had to go to war to get away from her ruthless clutches."

Mr. Mills wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "She's a money grubbing—"

"Don't say it, Mills, or I'll have you arrested for slander." Detective Miranski stood behind Mr. Mills, hands on her hips. She was tall for a woman, but not as big as Keith Mills. But, if I had to put money on who'd win a fist fight, I'd back her. And the service pistol on her hip.

"She—" Mr. Mills began.

"She didn't kill your daughter," Miranski said, loud enough for everyone in the diner to clearly hear. She wasn't from Cutthroat. She was close enough in age that I would have

come across her often enough. Still, she knew how small towns worked, that the best way to get accurate information out was to spread it yourself, and the diner was the perfect place to do so. Because of his outburst, Keith Mills had given her the perfect opportunity.

My eyes widened at her statement. She'd been by the books until now. Making such a statement meant—

“You don't know that!” he shouted.

“Actually, I do. A man confessed to the murder. He's in jail right now.”

DONOVAN

“Donnie,” Pops said as he saw me.

He was walking down the hall with a man and a woman, but excused himself to join me. I was leaning against the wall outside of his office. The city building had been built in the late 1800s. Made of brick, it had high ceilings, large windows and wood floors. It had been renovated about a decade ago to historical preservation standards, but also to become energy efficient. The only outward change to the place was the addition of an elevator back in the sixties.

“You’re on the wrong floor.”

“I came by to tell you something.”

He looked at his watch. “I’ve got a few minutes.”

“Thought I’d give you the courtesy of telling you before you heard it from someone else.”

He arched a brow. “Oh?”

“I quit.”

His face went slack and he stepped closer. “You what?” he whispered.

“I quit.”

He looked both directions down the hall. “I heard you the first time. Why?”

“As a thank you.”

He frowned. “A thank you? What the fuck are you talking about?”

Ah, the swear words. He was pissed. Like I gave a shit.

“I figured you wouldn’t want the scandal of a prosecutor being in a relationship with a suspect, and when cleared, a witness in a murder trial.”

His eyes flared, catching on quick enough. “I know you’re fucking Kit Lancaster, but—”

“I am.” I wasn’t fifteen. While I didn’t kiss and tell, denying it wasn’t going to work here, especially when I knew my dad kept tabs on me, had people loyal to him even watching me, his own fucking son.

“For fuck’s sake, there’s pussy everywhere in this town. You’re my son. You’re a Nash. We can get any woman we want.”

I had no interest in reading into that statement or the women he slept with.

“I want Kit.”

“She can’t be worth chucking your career over?”

I nodded. “She is. I love her and I’m going to marry her.”

A vein popped out on his forehead.

“Ethically, I would have to recuse myself from the Mills case. I can’t be impartial when it comes to her. She didn’t do it.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Yes, I do.”

“You’re walking away from being DA.”

“I’m walking away from being your puppet,” I countered.

“Puppet? We’d be perfect together. Keeping the town safe.”

“You want the power. I want justice.”

He scoffed at that. Put his hands on his hips and paced in a circle. “What are you going to do now?”

“I’ll put out a shingle.”

“You’re making a huge mistake,” he replied.

It was very obvious he wasn’t going to be coming to our wedding.

Nix came down the hall at a fast clip, stopped in front of us. He nodded at Pops, then looked to me. “A man turned himself in and confessed to killing Erin Mills. Miranski and the chief questioned him. He did it.”

Relief coursed through me. Kit was safe. She was no longer a suspect. That meant we could be together. “Then we can go get our girl.”

Nix nodded. “That’s right.”

“What are you talking about?” Pops asked.

I looked to him, saw him differently for the first time. A weight had been lifted. Not because of the murderer being caught, but because I was no longer considering my dad in any of my decisions. I was excited about quitting. Cutthroat wasn’t a metropolis like New York, but I punched a clock, reported to a boss. And my boss reported to Pops.

I was free of that shit now. I was free of the politics that came with the DA’s office, with my dad.

“Oh, I forgot to tell you,” I told my dad. “You might have known about me and Kit, but Nix is fucking her, too. We’re both marrying her.”

The look on Pops’ face was priceless.

“What am I supposed to tell people?”

I laughed, slapped him on the shoulder. “As mayor of a progressive, modern town, I’d say you’re thrilled your son’s found love and that Kittredge Lancaster is quite the woman if she’s captured the hearts of not one man, but two.”

KIT

After Detective Miranski left, escorting Mr. Mills to his car and ensuring he pulled out of the diner's lot before leaving herself, I went into the storage room and cried.

Cried for Erin, who's end was because of some man who was now in custody. While Miranski blatantly shared that a man had been arrested for the crime, she hadn't shared the why of it all. Why had he killed her? Who was the man and what was his relationship to Erin?

It would all come out soon enough, but for now, I was relieved he was in jail. Relieved he hadn't really been after me, although that was still just an assumption. I grieved for my friend, for what could have been.

I also grieved for myself. For losing a friend. A job. For my mother who was still a hot mess, for what could have been with her if she wasn't so consumed by her mental illness. By finding love with Nix and Donovan and losing it. For giving it up.

For everything.

I was back in Cutthroat where I belonged. I could avoid Mr. and Mrs. Mills. I'd done it for years. Perhaps he'd only find me a money grubber now and not a murderer on top of it. And yes, I'd totally corrupted Shane by stealing his virginity, but he wouldn't see it that way. As for any other haters... they could fuck off.

I had Dolly. Clyde. The other ladies at the diner who'd I'd been friendly with but broke ties when I moved away. I had my first job as an event planner. All on my own.

It wasn't much, but it was something. I didn't need to go big, I just needed to keep moving forward.

As for Nix and Donovan? Fuck, it was going to be really hard to see them walking down the street, at a restaurant, moving on and dating someone else. Marrying her.

I swiped my tears away. I'd done the right thing. I had.

But it hurt like a bitch.

The storeroom door burst open. I jumped a foot.

It was Nix and Donovan, side by side, completely blocking my way.

"What... what are you doing here?"

"Claiming our woman," Donovan said.

Claiming—

"What?" I replied.

Donovan stepped into the room, Nix following. He closed the door, leaned against it, arms crossed. "We're here to get you back."

My heart was practically beating out of my chest. They wanted me. They came for me.

"But the murderer—"

"Is in jail. He confessed," Nix said.

"I know but why? How?" So many questions.

"The guy's name is Dennis Seaborn. Mid-thirties. They'd had a fling and she ended it for another guy. He was jealous. He describes the wedding, how he followed Erin home. When she didn't take him back, he hit her with the trophy in anger."

"But I didn't hear anything," I replied, confused as how it was possible.

Nix shrugged. "I don't know the details. Miranski and the chief are on it. All I know is everything ties in with what forensics says. The time of death, all of it."

"Now there's no excuse for you to push us away," Donovan said.

I shook my head. "No. God, please. Don't. It's too hard."

Donovan smiled, swiped a tear away with his thumb. “It’s easy, Kitty Kat. Just say yes.”

I swallowed down a lump in my throat. “I can’t.”

“Why not? You don’t want us anymore?”

I shook my head, realized that was the wrong thing. “No, I do. It’s just—”

“What, Kit?” Nix asked. He had on his cop face, hiding all of his emotions.

I was an ugly crier, a total mess with splotchy cheeks, puffy eyes and a boogie nose.

“I won’t let you risk so much for me.”

Nix pushed off the door. “Donovan’s the one who likes to spank your ass, but my palm’s feeling twitchy. Since when do you decide what Donovan and I do about our jobs? Our feelings toward you?”

“When you’d get fired!” I shouted. “You’ve worked so hard for what you’ve accomplished and I won’t have it taken away.”

“Why? Because you have?”

I tossed my hands up. “Yes!”

“So you’ll take away even more—us?”

I looked at the linoleum floor at my feet. “Yes.”

“No,” Donovan snapped. “Do you love us, Kitty Kat?”

I looked up at him, at his expressive eyes. I saw everything there. Heat, need, frustration. Love.

“Yes,” I whispered.

A smile spread across his face and his hand hooked behind my head, pulled me in for a kiss. God, his mouth felt so good against mine. Soft and warm, bold and wild.

When he pulled back, my mind was fuzzy and my fingers were curled into the front of his shirt.

“That’s all that matters,” he murmured, kissing my forehead. “Because I love you.”

“And if he’d get out of the way, I’d show you how much I love you, too,” Nix added, bumping Donovan’s shoulder to make him move.

I released my hold on Donovan and Nix swooped in, pulled me into his arms. Kissed me senseless.

“We haven’t solved anything.”

“I’d say loving each other is a pretty fucking good start,” Nix said.

It was, but the same problems remained.

“I quit my job.”

I met Donovan’s gaze after I processed his words. “Why? Oh, Donovan, no.”

“And I told my boss about us. I’m not on Erin’s case anymore.”

“But the murderer is in jail. Miranski said so.”

“He is,” Nix confirmed. “My quitting has nothing to do with the arrest.”

I frowned.

“I quit before the guy turned himself in,” Donovan said.

“Again, why?” I asked.

“Because you gave us up to protect us. It pissed us off to know you were protecting us from *you*.”

I looked away. “I was,” I admitted.

Nix practically growled, set his hands on my shoulders and made me look at him. “We. Protect. You.”

“You made us realize what’s important. I don’t want to be a pawn for my dad any longer. So I walked away.”

“I can be a meter maid if you’re by my side,” Nix added.

The image made me smile.

“There’s my girl,” Donovan murmured, cupping my cheek again. “We knew you were innocent. Now everyone else does, too.”

“Won’t you miss your job?” I wondered.

He shook his head. “I’ll start my own business. Know anyone who might be able to plan a grand opening celebration?”

With that, my heart opened back up. The misery lifted like morning fog in the sunshine. I loved these men. They loved me.

“We want everything, Kit,” Nix said. “No more sacrificing yourself. We’re in this together.”

I nodded. “Together.”

“Let’s go,” Donovan said, flinging the door open, taking my hand and leading me down the hallway to the back door.

“Wait! I have to finish my shift.”

He didn’t stop.

“Dolly’s covering for you,” Nix said, following right behind. “And with what we plan to do with you, a storeroom’s not going to work.”

NIX

“We’re going to need to buy a new house,” I said as I worked Kit’s diner T-shirt up and over her head.

I was impressed we’d made it all the way to my house without pulling over and fucking her.

I hadn’t been inside her in over a day. Way too long. I knew Donovan was just as desperate, but nothing loomed over us any longer. I hadn’t jerked off because I knew we’d get her back. It had only been a matter of time. And now my balls were full for her.

“This house is too small for the three of us,” Donovan added. “My apartment’s too sterile. Too small.”

As Donovan’s fingers worked on opening her jeans, she laughed and wiggled her hips to help him. “Your apartment is plenty big.”

“Not for the four kids we want.”

She froze.

“Four kids? You want... *four*?”

Donovan grinned. “Four.”

She looked to me. “Works for me,” I replied.

“Can we just, um, practice for now?”

Donovan glanced at me.

“Fuck yes, we can practice.”

She grinned, pushed Donovan’s hands away. “Good. Get your clothes off. Hurry,” she said as she used her feet to push her jeans down and tug them off. With deft fingers, she stripped off her bra and panties.

“Hurry,” she repeated when we stopped and stared at her gorgeous body. “I want your big dicks.”

We hustled then, naked in a matter of seconds.

Reaching out, she grabbed both of our dicks in her small hands, began to stroke them.

“Oh fuck,” Donovan said, grabbing her wrist and making her let go. “I’m too worked up and I want my cum in you, not on you.”

She looked up at both of us through those dark lashes.

I groaned when she released me too—not before she gave me one long, perfect stroke with her snug grip—and moved up the bed. Fuck me, she crawled on her hands and knees so we could watch her perfect tits sway and then see her upturned ass and wet pussy.

I snagged her hip before she could get far, leaned forward and licked her. I missed her flavor, that sweet honey.

“Nix!” she cried and I reveled in that sound. I’d hear that for the rest of my life.

KIT

Oh. My. God. Nix’s mouth on my pussy was incredible, his tongue was magical. I’d been wet for them ever since they said the word *love* back in the storeroom. Hell, I’d been wet for

them for years. But now, nothing stood in the way of us being together.

The murderer was behind bars. Donovan had quit because of me. Nix probably got demoted. They were adamant about the change. And they'd done it before the guy had confessed, meaning they hadn't done it because of the case, but because they'd compromised. For me.

As Nix continued to eat me out, Donovan flopped down on the bed, head on the pillows. My mouth was right by his dick, which was sticking straight up. Turning my head, I tried to take him in my mouth. I wanted to feel the silky hardness of him against my tongue, to have the burst of pre-cum coat my tongue. To get him so worked up he lost his mind.

"Nix, get her up here," Donovan growled, tipping my chin away from my goal. "If she gets that hot mouth on me, it'll all be over before we claim her together.

What? Together?

My pussy clenched at the idea and Nix groaned. He slapped my ass, not hard, but to get me moving. "Climb on Donovan's cock. Take it for a ride while I get all lubed up to take that ass."

I climbed up Donovan's body as Nix went to the bathroom, came back with a flip top plastic bottle of lube. He was all dark skin, rippling muscles and hard dick. When he saw me staring, he grinned. "Ready for me to get in your ass?"

I glanced at his dick again. Long. Thick. That head was so much broader than the plug they'd used the other night. Could he fit?

"Kitty Kat, we'll get you all hot and ready for him." Donovan turned my attention back to him. "Climb on and get my dick nice and wet."

I was apprehensive about Nix's intentions, but I trusted them. I remembered what it had felt like when he'd used his finger there. I'd come so hard and so fast. But that wasn't anything like the size of his dick.

“Come on, Kitty Kat,” Donovan said, hooking my hip and pulling me toward him. I straddled his hips shifted so he was at my entrance. He slipped in an inch or so, stretching me open. Looking down, I watched his jaw clench, his eyes flare with heat.

I bit my lip and lowered myself down, took him all the way in until I sat upon his lap.

“Good girl. Fuck me.”

I rode him then, hands on his chest, moving and feeling so damned good.

“That’s it. You’re right where I want you, right where you belong.”

Nix moved onto the bed, dropping the bottle of lube by my calf and within reach.

“Between us,” Donovan continued.

He was right. This was where I belonged. “I love you,” I whispered. “Both of you.”

A smile spread across his face and he pulled me down for a kiss. I clenched down on him and he groaned as his tongue found mine.

I gasped as Nix’s finger brushed my entrance. “It’s time, Kit, to make you ours.”

I couldn’t nod, but only relaxed, lying on Donovan’s chest and allowing Nix’s finger to slip into me. He’d slicked it with lube to prepare me.

Lifting my head, I gasped. “So full,” I moaned and glanced over my shoulder.

Nix’s gaze was on my ass, probably watching as his finger disappeared inside me. He could also see how Donovan’s cock filled me, stretched me wide.

“Not yet, Kit, but you will be,” Nix promised.

He slowly fucked my ass with that finger, adding lube and then a second finger to prepare me. Donovan lifted and

lowered me just a few inches so he rubbed over every delicious place inside me.

Finally, Nix asked, “Ready?”

I nodded.

“Good girl,” he replied.

“Kiss me some more, Kitty Kat,” Donovan said. “In just a minute you’ll belong to both of us. Nothing’s separating us again.”

DONOVAN

She was so fucking tight. Her pussy walls clenched and milked my dick. I had been close to coming before I ever got inside her, but now I was practically considering baseball stats not to blow my load too soon.

Nix had hooked her hip so her ass was tilted just right for him to get in her ass. As I kissed Kit, I could feel him press against her, then get the head of his dick into her. I felt every inch of it, only a thin membrane separating us. Kit stiffened in my hold, her lips stilled on mine as she moaned.

“I’m in. Fuck, Kit, you’re so tight.”

She was, like a fist. Hot. Wet. Perfect. And the feel of her, all soft, lush curves. Plump breasts pressed into my chest. The scent of her arousal and the musk of fucking filled the air around us.

I tried not to move, to give Nix time to work his dick into her no-longer virgin ass.

He kept dribbling more lube onto her, some of it sliding down to get on the base of my dick and I’d fuck it into her.

She was dripping.

“I’m so full,” she moaned, her dark eyes meeting mine. Her lips were red and swollen, her cheeks flushed.

“You did it, Kitty Kat. You’ve got both your men in you. You make us one. Whole. A family.”

She nodded, her sweaty hair falling around her face. “Want to come?”

“Yes,” she begged.

My hands slid from her hips to her ass, cupping those perfect cheeks and pulling them open for Nix.

As Nix pulled almost out, I thrust deep, then reversing direction so we alternated our in and out motions.

Kit moaned, begged, whimpered as we took her, slowly and carefully. It was too much for me. I gritted my teeth not to come, but she was too much. We’d been waiting too long. It was better than I ever imagined. Loving her.

I came on a shout, emptying myself deep inside her pussy. My mind was blown, but her pleas for something, *anything*, had me reaching between us, brushing my thumb over her clit.

Just a press and she came. I could feel her milking my cock, my cum slipping from her as she did so. I knew Nix could feel it as well, that he had superhero powers if he could keep from coming as her inner walls worked us over.

He couldn’t. He was a mere mortal when it came to Kit and came on a deep thrust. I felt him throbbing, filling her up.

Kit dropped her head to my chest, her breathing ragged. Her sweaty skin stuck to mine. Nix sounded as if he’d run a marathon as he carefully pulled out. Kit gasped and I stroked my hand up and down her damp back. My cock, softening slightly, was still inside her. It was a great place to be because as soon as she caught her breath, I’d fuck her again.

I wasn’t done with her. I never would be.

“Kitty Kat,” I said. She lifted her head and her eyes met mine. “Forever.”

She looked to me, up at Nix who'd just returned from the bathroom with a wet washcloth. "Forever."

"Fuck, yes," Nix added, making her laugh.

The sweetest sound in the world.

EPILOGUE

KIT

The past two days have been incredible. Donovan and Nix had let me out of bed... barely. I made it to my shifts at the diner on time... barely. I'd met with Wendy and her sister for the initial planning of her engagement party. Nix had filed paperwork to open his own business.

We'd stayed at Nix's, but he continued to talk about buying a bigger house. But it had been two days. Just two days. Two amazing days. I still had nightmares, but they were there to wake me, soothe me, hold me close until I fell back asleep.

Nix had said he'd pick up Chinese for dinner, so Donovan and I were in the kitchen, setting out plates, getting silverware and drinks. We'd also been kissing. A lot. When Nix came through the front door, I was on the counter with Donovan between my parted knees. His hands were under my shirt and cupping my breasts.

"I'm hungry for Kitty Kat right now. Chinese later," Donovan called to Nix while grinning at me.

I wasn't going to stop him. They were creative, gentle and also very dominant lovers. And we hadn't had sex in the kitchen. Yet.

When Nix didn't offer a witty reply about getting me out of my panties, we both looked to him.

“What’s wrong?” Donovan asked.

Nix looked pissed. His hair was messed up, his jaw clenched, his shoulders tense. He had his pistol on his hip right next to his badge.

“Seaborn lied.”

Donovan’s hands slipped out from under my shirt and he stepped back.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Donovan asked.

The arrest had been all over the local news outlets. TV, radio, internet, newspaper. People were relieved to know the murderer had been found, that it had been a crime of passion not random.

“They installed one of those red-light cameras on Main by the library,” he said.

Donovan nodded. “I remember. Pops promised it was a way to make crossing the street safer.”

“The photos and tickets are issued once a week. The technician went through the pile today. Guess who’s on it?”

“Seaborn?” I asked.

Nix shook his head as he went to the fridge to get a beer. “Erin Mills.”

“When?”

He popped the top, guzzled a third of the bottle in one go. “The night she was killed. Miranski said the photo was stamped at twelve-thirteen a.m.”

I’d gotten home around eleven-thirty and had been asleep at that time. “If she was in her car then, that means she wasn’t at the house.”

“Seaborn said he killed her at midnight.”

“Holy shit,” Donovan murmured.

“Wait.” I held up my hand. “If Seaborn said he killed her at midnight but the traffic camera captured her alive and downtown almost fifteen minutes later, that means—”

“He’s lying. He didn’t do it.”

My stomach dropped at what he was saying. “Then who killed Erin?”

Nix shrugged, set his beer on the counter. “He’s still out there.”

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TORMENTOR MINE

By

Anna Zaires

PART I

CHAPTER 1

5 Years Earlier, North Caucasus Mountains

Peter

“Papa!” The high-pitched squeal is followed by a patter of little feet as my son propels himself through the doorway, his dark waves bouncing around his glowing face.

Laughing, I catch his small, sturdy body as he launches himself at me. “Miss me, *pupsik*?”

“Yeah!” His short arms fold around my neck, and I inhale deeply, breathing in his sweet child scent. Though Pasha is almost three, he still smells like milk—like healthy baby and innocence.

I hold him tight and feel the iciness inside me melting as soft, bright warmth floods my chest. It’s painful, like being submerged in hot water after freezing, but it’s a good kind of pain. It makes me feel alive, fills the empty cracks inside me until I can almost believe I’m whole and deserving of my son’s love.

“He did miss you,” Tamila says, entering the hallway. As always, she moves quietly, almost soundlessly, her eyes downcast. She doesn’t look at me directly. From childhood, she’s been trained to avoid eye contact with men, so all I see are her long black lashes as she gazes at the floor. She’s wearing a traditional headscarf that hides her long dark hair, and her gray dress is long and shapeless. However, she still

looks beautiful—as beautiful as she did three and a half years ago, when she snuck into my bed to escape marriage to a village elder.

“And I’ve missed you both,” I say as my son pushes at my shoulders, demanding to be free. Grinning, I lower him to the floor, and he immediately grabs my hand and tugs on it.

“Papa, do you want to see my truck? Do you, Papa?”

“I do,” I say, my grin widening as he pulls me toward the living room. “What kind of truck is it?”

“A big one!”

“All right, let’s see it.”

Tamila trails behind us, and I realize I haven’t spoken to her at all yet. Stopping, I turn around and look at my wife. “How are you?”

She peeks up at me through those eyelashes. “I’m good. I’m glad to see you.”

“And I’m glad to see you.” I want to kiss her, but she’ll be embarrassed if I do it in front of Pasha, so I abstain. Instead, I gently touch her cheek, and then I let my son tow me to his truck, which I recognize as the one I sent him from Moscow three weeks ago.

He proudly demonstrates all the features of the toy as I crouch next to him, watching his animated face. He has Tamila’s dark, exotic beauty, right down to the eyelashes, but there’s something of me in him too, though I can’t quite define what.

“He has your fearlessness,” Tamila says quietly, kneeling next to me. “And I think he’s going to be as tall as you, though it’s probably too early to tell.”

I glance at her. She often does this, observing me so closely it’s almost as if she’s reading my mind. Then again, it’s not a stretch to guess what I’m thinking. I did have Pasha’s paternity tested before he was born.

“Papa. Papa.” My son tugs at my hand again. “Play with me.”

I laugh and turn my attention back to him. For the next hour, we play with the truck and a dozen other toys, all of which happen to be some type of car. Pasha is obsessed with toy vehicles, everything from ambulances to race cars. No matter how many other toys I get him, he only plays with those that have wheels.

After playtime, we eat dinner, and Tamila bathes Pasha before bed. I notice that the bathtub is cracked and make a mental note to order a new one. The tiny village of Daryevo is high in the Caucasus Mountains and difficult to get to, so it can't be a regular delivery from a store, but I have ways of getting things here.

When I mention the idea to Tamila, her eyelashes sweep up, and she gives me a rare direct look, accompanied by a bright smile. "That would be very nice, thank you. I've had to mop up the floor almost every evening."

I smile back at her, and she finishes bathing Pasha. After she dries him and dresses him in his pajamas, I carry him off to bed and read him a story from his favorite book. He falls asleep almost immediately, and I kiss his smooth forehead, my heart squeezing with a powerful emotion.

It's love. I recognize it, even though I've never felt it before—even though a man like me has no right to feel it. None of the things I've done matter here, in this little village in Dagestan.

When I'm with my son, the blood on my hands doesn't burn my soul.

Careful not to wake Pasha, I get up and quietly exit the tiny room that serves as his bedroom. Tamila is already waiting for me in our bedroom, so I strip off my clothes and join her in bed, making love to her as tenderly as I can.

Tomorrow, I have to face the ugliness of my world, but tonight, I'm happy.

Tonight, I can love and be loved.

* * *

“Don’t leave, Papa.” Pasha’s chin quivers as he struggles not to cry. Tamila told him a few weeks ago that big boys don’t cry, and he’s been trying his hardest to be a big boy. “Please, Papa. Can’t you stay a little longer?”

“I’ll be back in a couple of weeks,” I promise, crouching to be at his eye level. “I have to go to work, you see.”

“You always have to go to work.” His chin quivers harder, and his big brown eyes overflow with tears. “Why can’t I come with you to work?”

Images of the terrorist I tortured last week invade my mind, and it’s all I can do to keep my voice even as I say, “I’m sorry, Pashen’ka. My work is no place for children.” Or for adults, for that matter, but I don’t say that. Tamila knows some of what I do as part of a special unit of Spetsnaz, the Russian Special Forces, but even she is ignorant of the dark realities of my world.

“But I would be good.” He’s full-on crying now. “I promise, Papa. I would be good.”

“I know you would be.” I pull him against me and hug him tight, feeling his small body shaking with sobs. “You’re my good boy, and you have to be good for Mama while I’m gone, okay? You have to take care of her, like the big boy you are.”

Those appear to be the magic words, because he snuffles and pulls away. “I will.” His nose is running and his cheeks are wet, but his little chin is firm as he meets my gaze. “I will take care of Mama, I promise.”

“He’s so smart,” Tamila says, kneeling next to me to pull Pasha into her embrace. “It’s like he’s five, not almost three.”

“I know.” My chest swells with pride. “He’s amazing.”

She smiles and meets my gaze again, her big brown eyes so much like Pasha’s. “Be safe, and come back to us soon, okay?”

“I will.” I lean in and kiss her forehead, then ruffle Pasha’s silky hair. “I’ll be back before you know it.”

* * *

I'm in Grozny, Chechnya, chasing down a lead on a new radical insurgency group, when I get the news. It's Ivan Polonsky, my superior in Moscow, who calls me.

"Peter." His voice is unusually grave as I pick up the phone. "There's been an incident in Daryevo."

My insides turn to ice. "What kind of incident?"

"There was an operation we weren't notified about. NATO was involved. There were... casualties."

The ice inside me expands, shredding me with its jagged edges, and it's all I can do to force the words through my closing throat. "Tamila and Pasha?"

"I'm sorry, Peter. Some villagers were killed in the crossfire, and"—he swallows audibly—"the preliminary reports are that Tamila was among them."

My fingers nearly crush the phone. "What about Pasha?"

"We don't know yet. There were several explosions, and ___"

"I'm on my way."

"Peter, wait—"

I hang up and rush out the door.

* * *

Please, please, please, let him be alive. Please let him be alive. Please, I'll do anything, just let him be alive.

I've never been religious, but as the military helicopter makes its way through the mountains, I find myself praying, pleading and bargaining with whatever is up there for one small miracle, one small mercy. A child's life is meaningless in the big scheme of things, but it means everything to me.

My son is my life, my reason for existing.

The roar of the helicopter blades is deafening, but it's nothing compared to the clamor inside my head. I can't breathe, can't think through the rage and fear choking me from within. I don't know how Tamila died, but I've seen enough

corpses to picture her body in my mind, to imagine with stark precision how her beautiful eyes appear blank and unseeing, her mouth slack and crusted with blood. And Pasha—

No. I can't think about it now. Not until I know for sure.

This wasn't supposed to happen. Daryevo is nowhere near the known hotspots in Dagestan. It's a small, peaceful settlement with no ties to any insurgent groups. They were supposed to be safe there, far away from my violent world.

Please let him be alive. Please let him be alive.

The ride seems to take forever, but finally, we break through the cloud cover, and I see the village. My throat closes up, cutting off my breath.

Smoke is rising from several buildings in the center, and armed soldiers are milling around.

I jump out of the helicopter the second it touches the ground.

"Peter, wait. You need clearance," the pilot shouts, but I'm already running, shoving people aside. A young soldier tries to block my path, but I rip his M16 out of his hands and point it at him.

"Take me to the bodies. Now."

I don't know if it's the weapon or the lethal edge in my voice, but the soldier obeys, hurrying toward a shed on the far end of the street. I follow him, the adrenaline like toxic sludge in my veins.

Please let him be alive. Please let him be alive.

I see the bodies behind the shed, some neatly laid out, others piled together on snow-speckled grass. There's nobody around them; the soldiers must be keeping the villagers away for now. I recognize some of the dead right away—the village elder Tamila was engaged to, the baker's wife, the man I once bought goat milk from—but others I can't identify, both because of the extent of their wounds and because I haven't spent much time in the village.

I've barely spent *any* time here, and now my wife is dead.

Steeling myself, I kneel next to a slender female body, lay the M16 on the grass, and move her headscarf off her face. A chunk of her head has been blown off by a bullet, but I can make out enough of her features to know it's not Tamila.

I move on to the next woman's body, this one with several bullet wounds through her chest. It's Tamila's aunt, a shy woman in her fifties who'd spoken less than five words to me in the last three years. To her and the rest of Tamila's family, I've always been a foreigner, a frightening stranger from a different world. They didn't understand Tamila's decision to marry me, condemned it even, but Tamila didn't care.

She'd always been independent like that.

Another female body draws my attention. The woman is lying on her side, but the gentle curve of her shoulder is achingly familiar. My hand shakes as I turn her over, and white-hot pain pierces me as I see her face.

Tamila's mouth is just as slack as I imagined, but her eyes aren't vacant. They're closed, her long eyelashes singed and her eyelids glued together with blood. More blood covers her chest and arms, turning her gray dress nearly black.

My wife, the beautiful young woman who had the courage to choose her own fate, is dead. She died without ever leaving her village, without seeing Moscow like she dreamed. Her life was snuffed out before she had a chance to live, and it's all my fault. I should've been here, should've protected her and Pasha. Hell, I should've known about this fucking operation; nobody should've been here without informing my team.

Rage rises inside me, mixing with agonizing grief and guilt, but I shove it aside and force myself to keep looking. There are only adult bodies laid out in the rows, but there's still that pile.

Please let him be alive. I'll do anything as long as he's alive.

My legs feel like burned matches as I approach the pile. There are detached limbs there, and bodies damaged beyond recognition. These must've been the victims of the explosions.

I move each body part aside, sorting through them. The smell of stale blood and charred flesh is thick in the air. A normal man would've thrown up by now, but I've never been normal.

Please let him be alive.

“Peter, wait. There's a special task force on the way, and they don't want us touching the bodies.” It's the pilot, Anton Rezov, approaching from behind the shed. We've worked together for years and he's a close friend, but if he tries to stop me, I will kill him.

Without replying, I continue my gruesome task, methodically looking over each limb and burned torso before laying it aside. Most of the body parts seem to belong to adults, though I come across some child-sized ones too. They're too big to be Pasha's, though, and I'm selfish enough to feel relief over that.

Then I see it.

“Peter, did you hear me? You can't do this yet.” Anton reaches for my arm, but before he can touch me, I spin around, my hand curling automatically. My fist crashes into his jaw, and he reels back from the blow, his eyes rolling back in his head. I don't watch him fall; I'm already moving, tearing through the remaining pile of bodies to reach the little hand I saw earlier.

A little hand that's curled around a broken toy car.

Please, please, please. Please let there be a mistake. Please let him be alive. Please let him be alive.

I work like a man possessed, all my being focused on one goal: to get to that hand. Some of the bodies on top of the pile are nearly whole, but I don't feel their weight as I throw them aside. I don't feel the burn of exertion in my muscles or smell the sickening stench of violent death. I just bend and lift and throw until body parts are strewn all around me, and I'm drenched in blood.

I don't stop until the small body is uncovered in its entirety, and there's no longer any doubt.

Trembling, I sink to my knees, my legs unable to hold me.

By some miracle, the right half of Pasha's face is undamaged, his smooth baby skin unmarred by so much as a scratch. One of his eyes is closed, his little mouth parted, and if he were lying on his side like Tamila was, he could've been mistaken for a sleeping child. But he's not lying on his side, and I see the gaping hole where the explosion ripped away half of his skull. His left arm is missing too, as is his left leg below the knee. His right arm, however, is unscathed, its fingers curled convulsively around the toy car.

In the distance, I hear a howl, a mad, broken sound of inhuman rage. It's only when I find myself clutching the little body to my chest that I realize the sound is coming from me. I fall silent then, but I can't stop rocking back and forth.

I can't stop hugging him.

I don't know how long I stay like that, holding my son's remains, but it's dark by the time the task force soldiers come. I don't fight them. There's no point. My son is gone, his bright light extinguished before it had a chance to shine.

"I'm sorry," I whisper as they drag me away. With each meter of distance between us, the cold inside me grows, the remnants of my humanity bleeding out of my soul. There's no more pleading, no more bargaining with anyone or anything. I'm empty of hope, devoid of warmth and love. I can't turn back the clock and hold my son longer, can't stay behind like he asked me to. Can't take Tamila to Moscow next year, like I promised her I would.

There's only one thing I can do for my wife and son, and that's the reason I'll keep on living.

I will make their killers pay.

Each and every single one of them.

They will answer for this massacre with their lives.

CHAPTER 2

United States, Present Day

Sara

“Are you sure you don’t want to come out for drinks with me and the girls?” Marsha asks, approaching my locker. She’s already changed out of her nurse’s scrubs and put on a sexy dress. With her bright red lipstick and flamboyant blond curls, she looks like an older version of Marilyn Monroe and likes to party just as much.

“No, thank you. I can’t.” I soften my refusal with a smile. “It’s been a long day, and I’m exhausted.”

She rolls her eyes. “Of course you are. You’re always exhausted these days.”

“Work will do that to you.”

“Yeah, if you work ninety hours a week. If I didn’t know better, I’d say you’re trying to work yourself to death. You’re no longer a resident, you know? You don’t have to put up with this bullshit.”

I sigh and pick up my bag. “Someone has to be on call.”

“Yes, but it doesn’t have to be you all the time. It’s Friday night, and you’ve worked every weekend for the past month, plus all those nightshifts. I know you’re the newest doctor in your practice and all that, but—”

“I don’t mind the nightshifts,” I interrupt, walking over to the mirror. The mascara I put on this morning has left dark smudges under my eyes, and I use a wet paper towel to wipe them away. It doesn’t improve my haggard appearance much, but I suppose it doesn’t matter, since I’m heading straight home.

“Right, because you don’t sleep,” Marsha says, coming to stand behind me, and I brace myself, knowing she’s about to get on her favorite topic. Though she has a good fifteen years on me, Marsha is my best friend at the hospital, and she’s been increasingly vocal about her concerns.

“Marsha, please. I’m too tired for this,” I say, pulling my unruly waves into a ponytail. I don’t need a lecture to know I’m running myself ragged. My hazel eyes look red and bleary in the mirror, and I feel like I’m sixty instead of twenty-eight.

“Yeah, because you’re overworked and sleep-deprived.” She folds her arms across her chest. “I know you need a distraction after George and all, but—”

“But nothing.” Spinning around, I glare at her. “I don’t want to talk about George.”

“Sara...” Her forehead furrows. “You have to stop punishing yourself for that. It wasn’t your fault. He *chose* to get behind the wheel; it was *his* decision.”

My throat closes, and my eyes prickle. To my horror, I realize I’m on the verge of crying, and I turn away in an effort to control myself. Only there’s nowhere to turn; the mirror is in front of me, and it reflects everything I’m feeling.

“I’m sorry, hon. I’m an insensitive ass. I shouldn’t have said that.” Marsha looks genuinely regretful as she reaches over and squeezes my arm lightly.

I take a deep breath and turn around to face her again. I *am* exhausted, which doesn’t help the emotions threatening to overwhelm me.

“It’s all right.” I force a smile to my lips. “It’s no big deal. You should get going; the girls are probably waiting for you.”

And I have to get home before I break down and cry in public, which would be the height of humiliation.

“All right, hon.” Marsha smiles back at me, but I see the pity lurking in her gaze. “You just get some sleep this weekend, okay? Promise me you’ll do that.”

“Yes, I will—*Mom.*”

She rolls her eyes. “Yeah, yeah, I get the hint. I’ll see you Monday.” She walks out of the locker room, and I wait a minute before following her to avoid running into her group of girlfriends in the elevators.

I’ve had about as much pity as I can handle.

* * *

As I enter the hospital parking lot, I check my phone out of habit, and my heart skips a beat when I see a text from a blocked number.

Stopping, I swipe across the screen with an unsteady finger.

All is well, but have to postpone this weekend’s visit, the message says. Scheduling conflict.

My breath whooshes out in relief, and right away, the familiar guilt bites at me. I shouldn’t feel relieved. These visits should be something I want to do, instead of an unpleasant obligation. Only I can’t help the way I feel. Every time I visit George, it brings back memories of that night, and I don’t sleep for days afterward.

If Marsha thinks I’m sleep-deprived now, she should see me after one of those visits.

Slipping the phone back into my bag, I approach my car. It’s a Toyota Camry, the same one I’ve had for the past five years. Now that I’ve paid off my med school loans and accumulated some savings, I can afford better, but I don’t see the point.

George was the one into cars, not me.

The pain grabs at me, familiar and sharp, and I know it's because of that text. Well, that and the conversation with Marsha. Lately, I've had days when I don't think about the accident at all, going about my routine without the crushing pressure of guilt, but today is not one of those days.

He was an adult, I remind myself, repeating what everyone always says. *It was his decision to get behind the wheel that day.*

Rationally, I know the truth of those words, but no matter how often I hear them, they don't sink in. My mind is stuck on a loop, replaying that evening over and over again, and as hard as I try, I can't stop the ugly reel from spinning.

Enough, Sara. Concentrate on the road.

Taking a steadying breath, I pull out of the parking lot and head toward my house. It's about a forty-minute drive from the hospital, which is about forty minutes too long right now. My stomach is beginning to cramp, and I realize part of the reason I'm so emotional today is that I'm about to start my period. As an OB-GYN, I know better than anyone how powerful the effect of hormones can be, and when PMS is combined with long hours and reminders about George... Well, it's a miracle I'm not a blubbering mess already.

Yes, that's it. I'm just hormonal and tired. I need to get home, and all will be well.

Determined to get a handle on myself, I turn on the radio, tune in to a late-nineties pop station, and begin singing along with Britney Spears. It might not be the most serious music, but it's upbeat, and that's exactly what I need.

I won't let myself fall apart. Tonight, I *will* sleep, even if I have to take an Ambien to make that happen.

* * *

My house is on a tree-lined cul-de-sac, just off a two-lane road that winds through farmland. Like many others in the upscale area of Homer Glen, Illinois, it's huge—five bedrooms and four baths, plus a fully finished basement. There's an

enormous back yard, and so many oaks surround the house it's as if it's sitting in the middle of a forest.

It's perfect for that big family George wanted and horribly lonely for me.

After the accident, I considered selling the house and moving closer to the hospital, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. I still can't. George and I renovated the house together, modernizing the kitchen and the bathrooms, painstakingly decorating each room to give it a cozy, welcoming vibe. A *family* vibe. I know the odds of us having that family are nonexistent now, but a part of me clings to the old dream, to the perfect life we were supposed to have.

"Three kids, at least," George told me on our fifth date. "Two boys and a girl."

"Why not two girls and a boy?" I asked, grinning. "What happened to gender equality and all that?"

"How is two against one equal? Everybody knows girls twist you around their pretty little fingers, and when you have two of them..." He shuddered theatrically. "No, we need two boys, so there's balance in the family. Otherwise, Daddy is screwed."

I laughed and punched him in the shoulder, but secretly, I liked the idea of two boys running around raising hell and protecting their little sister. I'm an only child, but I've always wanted a big brother, and it was easy to adopt George's dream as my own.

No. Don't go there. With effort, I push away the memories, because good or bad, they lead to that evening, and I can't cope with that now. The cramps have gotten worse, and it's all I can do to keep my hands on the wheel as I pull into my three-car garage. I need Advil, a heating pad, and my bed, in that order, and if I'm really lucky, I'll pass out right away, no Ambien required.

Holding back a groan, I close the garage door, punch in the code for the alarm, and drag myself into the house. The cramps are so bad I can't walk without bending, so I head

straight for the medicine cabinet in the kitchen. I don't even bother turning on the lights; the light switch is inconveniently far from the garage entrance, plus I know the kitchen well enough to navigate around it in the dark.

Opening the cabinet, I find the Advil bottle by feel, extract two pills, and throw them in my mouth. Then I go to the sink, fill my hand with water, and swallow the pills. Panting, I grip the kitchen counter and wait for the medicine to kick in a little before I attempt to do something as ambitious as going to the master bedroom on the second floor.

I feel him only a second before it happens. It's subtle, just a displacement of air behind me, a whiff of something foreign... a sense of sudden danger.

The hairs on the back of my neck rise, but it's too late. One moment, I'm standing by the sink, and the next, a big hand is covering my mouth as a large, hard body traps me against the counter from the back.

"Don't scream," a deep male voice whispers in my ear, and something cold and sharp presses against my throat. "You don't want my blade to slip."

CHAPTER 3

Sara

I don't scream. Not because it's the smart thing to do, but because I can't make a sound. I'm frozen by terror, utterly and completely paralyzed. All my muscles have locked up, including my vocal cords, and my lungs have ceased functioning.

"I'm going to remove my hand from your mouth," he murmurs into my ear, his breath warm on my clammy skin. "And you're going to stay silent. Got it?"

I can't so much as whimper, but I somehow manage a faint nod.

He lowers his hand, his arm looping around my ribcage instead, and my lungs choose that moment to resume working. Without meaning to, I pull in a wheezing breath. Immediately, the blade presses deeper into my skin, and I freeze again as I feel hot blood trickling down my neck.

I'm going to die. Oh God, I'm going to die here, in my own kitchen. The terror is a monstrous thing inside me, piercing me with icy needles. I've never been so close to death before. Just an inch to the right and—

"I need you to listen to me, Sara." The intruder's voice is soft, belying the knife digging into my throat. "If you cooperate, you'll walk out of here alive. If you don't, you'll leave in a body bag. It's your choice."

Alive? A spark of hope cuts through the haze of panic in my brain, and I realize he has a faint accent. It's something exotic. Middle Eastern, maybe, or Eastern European.

Oddly, that detail centers me a little, provides something concrete for my mind to latch on to. "W-what do you want?" The words come out in a quaking whisper, but it's a miracle I can speak at all. I feel like a deer in the headlights, stunned and overwhelmed, my thought processes bizarrely slow.

"Just a few answers," he says, and the knife retreats slightly. Without the cold steel cutting into my skin, some of my panic subsides, and other details register, like the fact that my assailant is at least a head taller than me and packed with muscle. The arm around my ribcage is like a steel band, and there's no give in the large body pressing against my back, no hint of softness anywhere. I'm of average height for a woman, but I'm slim and small-boned, and if he's as muscular as I suspect, he must be almost double my weight.

Even if he didn't have the knife, I wouldn't be able to get away.

"What kind of answers?" My voice is a little steadier this time. Maybe he's just here to rob me and all he needs is the combination to the safe. He smells clean, like laundry detergent and healthy male skin, so this is not some meth addict or bum off the streets. A professional burglar, maybe? If so, I'll gladly give up my jewelry and the emergency cash George stashed in the house.

"I want you to tell me about your husband. Specifically, I need to know his location."

"George?" My mind goes blank as a new fear bites at me. "W-what... why?"

The blade presses in. "I'm the one asking questions."

"P-please," I choke out. I can't think, can't focus on anything but the knife. Hot tears slide down my face, and I'm shaking all over. "Please, I don't—"

"Just answer my question. Where is your husband?"

“I—” Oh God, what do I tell him? He must be one of *them*, the reason for all the precautions. My heart is beating so fast I’m hyperventilating. “Please, I don’t... I haven’t—”

“Don’t lie to me, Sara. I need his location. Now.”

“I don’t know it, I swear. Please, we’re—” My voice cracks. “We’re separated.”

The arm around my ribcage tightens, and the knife digs in a fraction deeper. “Do you want to die?”

“No. No, I don’t. Please...” I’m shaking harder, the tears streaming down my face uncontrollably. After the accident, there were days when I thought I wanted to die, when the guilt and pain of regrets were overwhelming, but now that the blade is at my throat, I want to live. I want it so badly.

“Then tell me where he is.”

“I don’t know!” My knees are threatening to buckle, but I can’t betray George like this. I can’t expose him to this monster.

“You’re lying.” My assailant’s voice is pure ice. “I’ve read your messages. You know exactly where he is.”

“No, I—” I try to think of a plausible lie, but I can’t come up with one. Panic is acrid on my tongue as frantic questions pop into my mind. How could he have read my messages? When? How long has he been stalking me? Is he one of *them*? “I—I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

The knife presses in a hair deeper, and I squeeze my eyes shut, my breath coming in sobbing gasps. Death is so close I can taste it, smell it... feel it with every fiber of my being. It’s the metallic tang of my blood and the cold sweat running down my back, the roar of my pulse in my temples and the tension in my quivering muscles. In another second, he’ll nick my jugular, and I’ll bleed out, right here on my kitchen floor.

Is this what I deserve? Is this how I atone for my sins?

I clench my teeth to prevent them from chattering. *Please forgive me, George. If this is what you need...*

I hear my attacker sigh, and in the next instant, the knife is gone and I'm flipped over onto the counter. My back hits the hard granite, and my head flops backward into the sink, my neck muscles screaming from the strain. Gasping, I kick out and try to punch him, but he's too strong and fast. In a flash, he leaps onto the counter and straddles me, pinning me in place with his weight. He secures my wrists with something hard and unbreakable before gripping them with one hand, and no matter how hard I struggle, I can't do anything to get free. My heels slide uselessly on the sleek counter, and my neck muscles burn from holding up my head. I'm helpless, pinned down, and a new kind of panic washes over me.

Please, God, no. Anything but rape.

"We're going to try something different," he says, and a piece of cloth drops over my face. "See if you're truly willing to die for that bastard."

Panting, I twist my head from side to side, trying to throw off the cloth, but it's too long and I can barely breathe underneath it. Is he trying to suffocate me? Is that the plan?

Then the faucet handle squeaks, and everything becomes clear.

"No!" I struggle harder, but he grips my hair with his free hand, holding me under the faucet with my head arched back.

The initial shock of wetness isn't so bad, but within seconds, the water travels up my nose. My throat clenches, my lungs seize, and my whole body heaves up as I gag and choke. The panic is instinctive, uncontrollable. The rag is like a wet paw clamped over my nose and mouth, squeezing them shut. The water is in my nose, in my throat. I'm suffocating, drowning. I can't breathe, can't breathe...

The faucet turns off, and the cloth is yanked off my face. Coughing, I suck in air, sobbing and wheezing. My whole body is a heaving, trembling mess, and white spots dance in my vision. Before I can recover, the cloth is slapped over my face again, and the water is turned back on.

This time, it's even worse. My nasal passages burn from the water, and my lungs scream for air. I'm heaving and gagging, choking and crying. I can't breathe. *Oh, God, I'm dying; I can't breathe—*

In the next instant, the cloth is gone, and I'm convulsively dragging in air.

"Tell me where he is, and I'll stop." His voice is a dark whisper above me.

"I don't know! Please!" I can taste the vomit in my throat, and the knowledge that he'll do it again turns my blood into acid. It was easy to be brave with the knife, but not this. I can't handle dying like this.

"Last chance," my tormentor says softly, and the wet cloth drops over my face.

The faucet begins to squeak.

"Stop! Please!" The scream is wrenched out of me. "I'll tell you! I'll tell you."

The water turns off, and the cloth is pulled off my face. "Speak."

I'm sobbing and coughing too hard to form a coherent sentence, so he pulls me off the counter to the floor and crouches to encircle me in his arms. To someone looking in, it might've seemed like a consoling embrace or a lover's protective hold. Adding to the illusion, my torturer's voice is soft and gentle as he croons in my ear, "Tell me, Sara. Tell me what I want to know, and I'll leave."

"He's—" I stop a second from blurting out the truth. The panicked animal inside me demands survival at all costs, but I can't do this. I can't lead this monster to George. "He's in Advocate Christ Hospital," I choke out. "The long-term care unit."

It's a lie, and apparently not a good one, because the arms around me tighten, nearly crushing my bones. "Don't fucking bullshit me." The soft croon in his voice is gone, replaced by biting rage. "He's gone from there—has been gone for months. Where is he hiding?"

I'm sobbing harder. "I... I don't—"

My assailant rises to his feet, pulling me up with him, and I scream and struggle as he drags me toward the sink. "No! Please, no!" I'm hysterical as he lifts me onto the counter, my bound hands swinging as I try to claw at his face. My heels drum on the granite as he straddles me, pinning me in place again, and bile rises in my throat as he grips my hair, arching my head back into the sink. "Stop!"

"Tell me the truth, and I'll stop."

"I—I can't. Please, I can't!" I can't do this to George, not after everything. "Stop, please!"

The wet cloth slaps over my face, and my throat seizes in panic. The water is still off, but I'm already drowning; I can't breathe, can't breathe...

"Fuck!"

I'm abruptly yanked off the counter and onto the floor, where I collapse in a sobbing, shaking heap. Only this time, there are no arms to restrain me, and I dimly realize he stepped away.

I should get up and run, but my hands are tied and I can't make my legs function. All I can manage is a pathetic roll to the side, followed by an attempt at a crawl. The fear is blinding, disorienting, and I can't see anything in the darkness.

I can't see *him*.

Run, I will my limp, shaking muscles. *Get up and run*.

Sucking in air, I grab at something—a countertop corner—and pull myself up to my feet. Only it's too late; he's already on me, the hard band of his arm wrapping around my ribcage as he grabs me from behind.

"Let's see if this works better," he whispers, and something cold and sharp stabs me in the neck.

A needle, I realize with a jolt of terror, and my consciousness fades away.

* * *

A face swims in front of my eyes. It's a handsome face, beautiful even, despite the scar that bisects the left eyebrow. High, slanted cheekbones, steel-gray eyes framed by black lashes, a strong jaw darkened by five-o'clock shadow—a man's face, my mind supplies fuzzily. His hair is thick and dark, longer on the top than the sides. Not an old man, then, but not a teenager either. A man in his prime.

The face is wearing a frown, its features set in harsh, grim lines. "George Cobakis," the hard, sculpted mouth says. It's a sexy mouth, well shaped, but I hear the words as though from a megaphone in the distance. "Do you know where he is?"

I nod, or at least I attempt to. My head feels heavy, my neck strangely sore. "Yes, I know where he is. I thought I knew him too, but I didn't, not really. Do you ever really know someone? I don't think so, or at least I didn't know *him*. I thought I knew, but I didn't. All those years together, and everyone thought we were so perfect. The perfect couple, they called us. Can you believe it? The perfect couple. We were the cream of the crop, the young doctor and the rising star journalist. They said he'd win a Pulitzer prize one day." I'm vaguely aware I'm babbling, but I can't stop. The words pour out of me, all the pent-up bitterness and pain. "My parents were so proud, so happy on our wedding day. They had no idea, no idea at all about what was come, what would happen —"

"Sara. Focus on me," the megaphone voice says, and I catch a hint of a foreign accent. It pleases me, that accent, makes me want to reach over and press my hand to those sculpted lips, then run my fingers over that hard jaw to see if it's bristly. I like bristly. George would often come home from his trips abroad, and he'd be all bristly and I liked it. I liked it, though I'd tell him to shave. He looked better clean-shaven, but I liked feeling the bristle sometimes, liked feeling that roughness on my thighs when he'd—

"Sara, stop," the voice cuts in, and the frown on the exotically handsome face deepens.

I was speaking out loud, I realize, but I don't feel embarrassed, not at all. The words don't belong to me; they

just come of their own accord. My hands act of their own accord too, attempting to reach over to that face, but something stops them, and when I lower my heavy head to look down, I see a plastic zip tie around my wrists, with a man's big hand over my palms. It's warm, that hand, and it's holding my hands pinned down on my lap. Why is it doing that? Where did the hand come from? When I look up in confusion, the face is closer, its gray eyes peering into mine.

"I need you to tell me where your husband is," the mouth says, and the megaphone moves closer. It sounds like it's right next to my ear. I cringe, but at the same time, that mouth intrigues me. Those lips make me want to touch them, lick them, feel them on my—wait. They're asking something.

"Where my husband is?" My voice sounds like it's bouncing off the walls.

"Yes, George Cobakis, your husband." The lips look tempting as they form the words, and the accent caresses my insides despite the persistent megaphone effect. "Tell me where he is."

"He's safe. He's in a safe house," I say. "They could come for him. They didn't want him to run that story, but he did. He was brave like that, or stupid—probably stupid, right?—and then the accident happened, but they could still come for him, because they do that. The mafia doesn't care that he's a vegetable now, a cucumber, a tomato, a zucchini. Well, tomato is a fruit, but he's a vegetable. A broccoli, maybe? I don't know. It's not important, anyway. It's just that they want to make an example of him, threaten other journalists who'd stand up to them. That's what they do; that's how they operate. It's all about greasing palms and bribing, and when you shed light on that—"

"Where is the safe house?" There is a dark light in those steely eyes. "Tell me the address of the safe house."

"I don't know the address, but it's on the corner near Ricky's Laundromat in Evanston," I say to those eyes. "They always bring me there in a car, so I don't know the exact address, but I saw that building from a window. There are at

least two men in that car, and they drive around forever, switch cars sometimes too. It's because of the mafia, because they might be watching. They always send a car for me, and they couldn't this weekend. Scheduling conflict, they said. It happens sometimes; the guards' shifts don't align and—"

"How many guards are there?"

"Three, sometimes four. They're these big military guys. Or ex-military, I don't know. They just have that look. I don't know why, but they all have that look. It's like witness protection, but not, because he needs special care and I can't leave my job. I don't want to leave my job. They said they could move me, have me disappear, but I don't want to disappear. My patients need me, plus my parents. What would I do with my parents? Never see or call them again? No, that's crazy. So they disappeared the vegetable, the cucumber, the broccoli—"

"Sara, hush." Fingers press against my mouth, stopping the stream of words, and the face moves even closer. "You can stop now. It's over," the sexy mouth murmurs, and I open my lips, sucking in those fingers. I can taste salt and skin, and I want more, so I swirl my tongue around the fingers, feeling the roughness of the calluses and the blunt edges of the short nails. It's been so long since I've touched someone, and my body heats from this small taste, from the look in those silver eyes.

"Sara..." The accented voice is lower now, deeper and softer. It's less of a megaphone and more of a sensual echo, like music done on a synthesizer. "You don't want to go there, *ptichka*."

Oh, but I do. I want to go there badly. I keep swirling my tongue around the fingers, and I watch the gray eyes darken, the pupils visibly expanding. It's a sign of arousal, I know, and it makes me want to do more. It makes me want to kiss those sculpted lips, rub my cheek against that bristly jaw. And the hair, that thick dark hair. Would it feel soft or springy? I want to know, but I can't move my hands, so I just take the fingers deeper into my mouth, making love to them with my lips and tongue, sucking on them like they're candy.

“Sara.” The voice is thick and husky, the face tight with barely restrained hunger. “You have to stop, ptichka. You’ll regret this tomorrow.”

Regret? Yes, I probably will. I regret everything, so many things, and I release the fingers to say so. But before I can utter a word, the fingers pull away from my lips, and the face moves farther away.

“Don’t leave me.” The cry is plaintive, like that of a clingy child. I want more of that human touch, that connection. My head feels like a bag of rocks, and I ache all over, especially near my neck and shoulders. My belly is cramping too. I want someone to brush my hair and massage my neck, to hold me and rock me like a baby. “Please, don’t leave.”

Something resembling pain crosses the man’s face, and I feel the cold prick of the needle in my neck again.

“Goodbye, Sara,” the voice murmurs, and I’m gone, my mind floating away like a fallen leaf.

CHAPTER 4

Sara

The headache. I first become aware of the headache. My skull feels like it's splitting into pieces, the waves of pain a drumbeat in my brain.

“Dr. Cobakis... Sara, can you hear me?” The female voice is soft and gentle, but it fills me with dread. There's worry in that voice, mixed with restrained urgency. I hear that tone in the hospital all the time, and it's never good.

Trying not to move my throbbing skull, I pry my eyelids open and blink spasmodically at the bright light. “What... where...” My tongue is thick and unwieldy, my mouth painfully dry.

“Here, sip this.” A straw is placed near my mouth, and I latch on to it, greedily sucking in the water. My eyes are starting to adjust to the light, and I can make out the room. It's a hospital, but not my hospital, judging from the unfamiliar decor. Also, I'm not where I usually am. I'm not standing by someone's hospital bed; I'm lying in one.

“What happened?” I ask hoarsely. As my mind clears, I become aware of nausea and an array of aches and pains. My back feels like one giant bruise, and my neck is stiff and sore. My throat feels raw too, as though I've been screaming or vomiting, and when I lift my hand to touch it, I find a thick bandage on the right side of my neck.

“You were attacked, Dr. Cobakis,” a middle-aged black woman says softly, and I recognize her voice as the one who spoke earlier. She’s dressed in nursing scrubs, but somehow she doesn’t look like a nurse. When I stare at her blankly, she clarifies, “In your house. There was a man. Do you remember anything about that?”

I blink, straining to make sense of that confusing statement. I feel like a giant cotton ball has been stuffed into my brain, alongside the beating drum. “My house? Attacked?”

“Yes, Dr. Cobakis,” a male voice answers, and I flinch instinctively, my pulse jumping before I recognize the voice. “But you’re safe now. It’s over. This is a private facility where we treat our agents; you’re safe here.”

Carefully turning my aching head, I gaze at Agent Ryson, and my stomach hollows at the expression on his pale, weathered face. Bits and pieces of my ordeal are filtering in, and with the memories comes a surge of terror.

“George, is he—”

“I’m sorry.” The creases in Ryson’s forehead deepen. “There was an attack on the safe house last night as well. George... He didn’t make it. Neither did the three guards.”

“What?” It’s as if a scalpel punctured my lungs. I can’t take in his words, can’t process the enormity of them. “He’s... he’s gone?” Then the rest of his statement sinks in. “And the three guards? What... how—”

“Dr. Cobakis—Sara.” Ryson steps closer. “I need to know exactly what happened last night, so we can apprehend him.”

“Him? Who’s *him*?” It’s always been *them*, the mafia, and I’m too dazed for the sudden change in pronoun. George is gone. George and three guards. I can’t wrap my mind around that, so I don’t try. Not yet, at least. Before I let the grief and pain in, I need to recover more of those memories, piece together the horrifying puzzle.

“She might not remember. The cocktail in her blood was pretty potent,” the nurse says, and I realize she must be with Agent Ryson. That would explain why he’s speaking so freely

in front of her when he's usually discreet to the point of paranoia.

As I process that, the woman steps closer. I'm hooked up to a vital signs monitor, and she checks the blood pressure cuff around my arm, then gives my forearm a light squeeze. I look at my arm, and a cold fist grips my chest when I see a thin red line around my wrist. The other wrist has it too.

Zip tie. The recollection comes to me with sudden clarity. There was a zip tie around my wrists.

"He waterboarded me. When I wouldn't tell him where George was, he stuck a needle in my neck."

I don't realize I spoke out loud until I see the horror on the nurse's face. Agent Ryson's expression is more restrained, but I can tell I shocked him too.

"I'm so sorry about that." His voice is tight. "We should've foreseen this, but he hadn't gone after the families of the others, and you didn't want to move away... Still, we should've known he wouldn't stop at anything—"

"What others? Who is he?" My voice rises as more memories assault my mind. *Knife at my throat, wet cloth over my face, needle in my neck, can't breathe, can't breathe...*

"Karen, she's having a panic attack! Do something." Ryson's voice is frantic as the monitors start to beep. I'm hyperventilating and shaking, yet I somehow find the strength to glance at those monitors. My blood pressure is spiking, and my pulse is dangerously fast, but seeing those numbers steadies me. I'm a doctor. This is my environment, my comfort zone.

I can do this. *Suck in air. Let it out.* I'm not weak. *Suck in air. Let it out.*

"That's good, Sara. Just breathe." Karen's voice is soft and soothing as she strokes my arm. "You're getting the hang of it. Just take another deep breath. There you go. Good job. Now another. And one more..."

I follow her gentle instructions as I watch the numbers on the monitors, and slowly, the suffocating sensation recedes and

my vitals normalize. More dark memories are edging in, but I'm not ready to face them yet, so I shove them aside, slam a mental door on them as tightly as I can.

“Who is he?” I ask when I can speak again. “What do you mean by ‘the others?’” George wrote that article by himself. Why is the mafia after someone else?”

Agent Ryson exchanges looks with Karen, then turns to me. “Dr. Cobakis, I'm afraid we weren't entirely truthful with you. We didn't disclose the real situation to protect you, but clearly, we failed in that.” He takes a breath. “It wasn't the local mafia who was after your husband. It was an international fugitive, a dangerous criminal your husband encountered on an assignment abroad.”

“What?” My head throbs painfully, the revelations almost too much to take in. George started off as a foreign correspondent, but in the last five years, he'd been taking on more and more domestic stories. I'd wondered about that, given his passion for foreign affairs, but when I asked, he told me he wanted to spend more time home with me, and I let it drop.

“This man, he has a list of people who have crossed him—or who he thinks have crossed him,” Ryson says. “I'm afraid George was on that list. The exact circumstances around that and the identity of the fugitive are classified, but given what happened, you deserve to know the truth—at least as much of it as I'm allowed to disclose.”

I stare at him. “It was one man? A fugitive?” A face pops into my mind, a harshly beautiful male face. It's hazy, like an image from a dream, but somehow I know it's him, the man who invaded my home and did those terrible things to me.

Ryson nods. “Yes. He's highly trained and has vast resources, which is why he's been able to stay ahead of us for so long. He has connections everywhere, from Eastern Europe to South America to the Middle East. When we learned that your husband's name was on his list, we took George to the safe house, and we should've done the same with you. We just thought that—” He stops and shakes his head. “I suppose it

doesn't matter what we thought. We underestimated him, and now four men are dead."

Dead. Four men are dead. It hits me then, the knowledge that George is gone. I hadn't registered it before, not really. My eyes begin to burn, and my chest feels like it's being squeezed in a vise. In a burst of clarity, the puzzle pieces click into place.

"It's me, isn't it?" I sit up, ignoring the wave of dizziness and pain. "I did this. I somehow gave away the safe house location."

Ryson exchanges another look with the nurse, and my heart drops. They're not answering my question, but their body language speaks volumes.

I'm responsible for George's death. For all four deaths.

"It's not your fault, Dr. Cobakis." Karen touches my arm again, her brown eyes filled with sympathy. "The drug he gave you would've broken anyone. Are you familiar with sodium thiopental?"

"The barbiturate anesthetic?" I blink at her. "Of course. It was widely used to induce anesthesia until propofol became the standard. What does—oh."

"Yes," Agent Ryson says. "I see you know about its other use. It's rarely utilized that way, at least outside the intelligence community, but it's quite effective as a truth serum. Lowers the higher cortical brain functions and makes the subjects chatty and cooperative. And this was a designer version, thiopental mixed with compounds we haven't seen before."

"He drugged me to make me talk?" My stomach churns with bile. This explains the headache and the brain fog, and the knowledge that this was done to me—that I was violated like that—makes me want to scrub inside my skull with bleach. That man didn't just invade my home; he invaded my mind, broke into it like a thief.

"That's our best guess, yes," Ryson says. "You had a lot of this drug in your system when our agents found you tied up in

your living room. There was also blood on your neck and thighs, and they initially thought that—”

“Blood on my thighs?” I brace myself for a new horror. “Did he—”

“No, don’t worry, he didn’t hurt you that way,” Karen says, shooting Ryson a dark look. “We did a full-body examination when you were brought in, and it was your menstrual blood, nothing more. There were no signs of sexual trauma. Other than a few bruises and the shallow cuts on your neck, you’re fine—or you will be, once the drugs wear off.”

Fine. Hysterical laughter bubbles up my throat, and it takes all my strength not to let it escape. My husband and three other men are dead because of me. My home was broken into; my *mind* was broken into. And she thinks I’m going to be fine?

“Why did you make up that lie about the mafia?” I ask, struggling to contain the expanding ball of pain in my chest. “How would that protect me?”

“Because in the past, this fugitive hadn’t gone after the innocent—the wives and children of the people on his list who weren’t involved in any way,” Ryson says. “But he did kill one man’s sister because that man confided in her and involved her in the cover-up. The less you knew, the safer you were, especially since you didn’t want to relocate and disappear alongside your husband.”

“Ryson, please,” Karen says sharply, but it’s too late. I’m already reeling from this new blow. Even if I could be forgiven for my drug-induced blabbing, my refusal to leave is solely on me. I’d been selfish, thinking of my parents and my career instead of the danger I could pose to my husband. I believed *my* safety was on the line, not his, but that’s no excuse.

George’s death is on my conscience, just as much as the accident that damaged his brain.

“Did he—” I swallow thickly. “Did he suffer? I mean... how did it happen?”

“A bullet to the head,” Ryson answers in a subdued tone. “Same as the three men guarding him. I think it happened too

quickly for any of them to suffer.”

“Oh God.” My stomach heaves with sudden violence, and vomit rushes up my throat.

Karen must’ve seen my face leach of color, because she acts fast, grabbing a metal tray off a nearby table and shoving it in my hands. It’s just in time too, because the contents of my stomach spill out, the acid burning my esophagus as I hold the tray with shaking hands.

“It’s okay. It’s okay. Here, let’s get you cleaned up.” Karen is all brisk efficiency, just like a real nurse. Whatever her role with the FBI is, she knows what to do in a medical setting. “Come, let me help you to the bathroom. You’ll feel better in a second.”

Setting the tray on the bedside table, she loops an arm around my back to help me off the bed and leads me to the bathroom. My legs are shaking so hard I can barely walk; if it weren’t for her support, I wouldn’t have made it.

Still, I need a moment of privacy, so I tell Karen, “Can you please step out for a moment? I’m okay for now.”

I must sound convincing enough because Karen says, “I’ll be right outside if you need me,” and closes the door behind her.

I’m sweating and shaking, but I manage to rinse out my mouth and brush my teeth. Then I take care of other urgent business, wash my hands, and splash cold water on my face. By the time Karen knocks on the door, I’m feeling a tiny bit more human.

I’m also keeping my mind blank. If I think about the way George and the others died, I’ll throw up again. I’ve seen a number of gunshot wounds during my residency stint in the ER, and I know the devastating damage bullets inflict.

Don’t think about it. Not yet.

“Have my parents been notified?” I ask after Karen helps me return to the bed. She’s already removed the tray, and Agent Ryson is sitting in a chair next to the bed, his craggy face lined with weary tension.

“No,” Karen says softly. “Not yet. We wanted to discuss that with you, actually.”

I look at her, then at Ryson. “Discuss what?”

“Dr. Cobakis—Sara—we think it might be best if the exact circumstances of your husband’s demise, as well as the attack on you, were kept confidential,” Ryson says. “It would save you a lot of unpleasant media attention, as well as—”

“You mean, it would save *you* a lot of unpleasant media attention.” A spurt of anger chases away some of the haze in my mind. “That’s why I’m here, instead of a regular hospital. You want to cover this up, pretend it never happened.”

“We want to keep you safe and help you move past this,” Karen says, her brown gaze earnest on my face. “Nothing good can come of blasting this story to all the papers. What happened was a terrible tragedy, but your husband was already on life support. You know better than anyone that it was only a matter of time before—”

“What about the other three men?” I cut in sharply. “Were they on life support too?”

“They died in the line of duty,” Ryson says. “Their families have already been informed, so you don’t have to worry about that. With George, you were his only family, so...”

“So now I’ve been informed too.” My mouth twists. “Your conscience is appeased, and now it’s cleanup time. Or should I say ‘cover your ass’ time?”

His face tightens. “This is still largely classified, Dr. Cobakis. If you go to the media, you’ll be stirring up a hornet’s nest, and trust me, you don’t want that. Neither would your husband, if he were alive. He didn’t want anyone to know about this matter, not even you.”

“What?” I stare at the agent. “George knew? But—”

“He didn’t know he was on the list, and neither did we,” Karen says, laying her hand on the back of Ryson’s chair. “We learned about that after the accident, and at that point, we did what we could to protect him.”

My head is throbbing, but I push the pain away and try to concentrate on what they're telling me. "I don't understand. What happened on that assignment abroad? How did George get involved with this fugitive? And when?"

"That's the classified part," Ryson says. "I'm sorry, but it's really best if you leave it alone. We're searching for your husband's killer now, and we're trying to protect the remaining people on his list. Given his resources, that's not an easy task. If the media is on our heels, we won't be able to do our job as effectively, and more people may die. Do you understand what I'm saying, Dr. Cobakis? For your safety, and that of other people, you have to let it drop."

I tense, recalling what the agent said about the others. "How many has he already killed?"

"Too many, I'm afraid," Karen says somberly. "We didn't find out about the list until he got to several people in Europe, and by the time we were able to put the proper safeguards in place, there were only a few individuals left."

I draw in a shaky breath, my head spinning. I'd known what George did as a foreign correspondent, of course, and I'd read many of his articles and exposés, but those stories hadn't felt entirely real to me. Even when Agent Ryson approached me nine months ago about the supposed mafia threat to George's life, the fear I experienced was more academic than visceral. Outside of George's accident and the painful years leading up to it, I'd led a charmed life, one filled with the typical suburban concerns about school, work, and family. International fugitives who torture and kill people on some mysterious list are so far outside my realm of experience I feel like I've been dropped into someone else's life.

"We know it's a lot to take in," Karen says gently, and I realize some of what I'm feeling must be written on my face. "You're still in shock from the attack, and to learn about all this on top of that..." She inhales. "If you need someone to talk to, I know a good therapist who's worked with soldiers with PTSD and such."

“No, I...” I want to refuse, tell her I don’t need anyone, but I can’t make my mouth form the lie. The ball of pain inside my chest is choking me from within, and despite my mental wall, more horrible memories are filtering in, flashes of darkness and helplessness and terror.

“I’ll just leave you his card,” Karen says, stepping up to the bed, and I see her give the beeping monitors a worried glance. I don’t need to look at them to know that my heart rate is spiking again, my body going into an unnecessary fight-or-flight mode.

My lizard brain doesn’t know that the memories can’t hurt me, that the worst has already happened. Unless—

“Will I have to disappear?” I gasp out through a tightening throat. “Do you think he’ll—”

“No,” Ryson says, immediately understanding my fear. “He won’t come for you again. He got what he wanted from you; there’s no reason for him to return. If you’d like, we can still look into relocating you, but—”

“Shut it, Ryson. Can’t you see she’s hyperventilating?” Karen says sharply, gripping my arm. “Breathe, Sara,” she tells me in a soothing tone. “Come on, honey, just take that deep breath. And one more. There you go...”

I follow along with her voice until my heart rate steadies again, and the worst of the memories are locked behind the mental wall. I’m still trembling, however, so Karen wraps a blanket around me and sits next to me on the bed, hugging me tight.

“It’ll be okay, Sara,” she murmurs as the pain overflows and I begin to cry, the tears like streaks of lava on my cheeks. “It’s over. You’ll be okay. He’s gone, and he will never hurt you again.”

CHAPTER 5

Peter

“Ashes to ashes, dust to dust...”

The priest’s droning voice reaches my ears, and I tune him out as I scan the crowd of mourners. There are over two hundred people here, all wearing dark clothes and somber expressions. Under the sea of black umbrellas, many eyes are red-rimmed and swollen, and some women are audibly crying.

George Cobakis was popular during his lifetime.

The thought should anger me, but it doesn’t. I don’t feel anything when I think of him, not even the satisfaction that he’s dead. The rage that’s consumed me for years has quieted for the moment, leaving me strangely empty.

I stand at the back of the crowd, my black coat and umbrella like those of the other mourners. A light brown wig and a thin mustache disguise my appearance, as do my slouched posture and the flat pillow padding my midsection.

I don’t know why I’m here. I’ve never attended any of the funerals before. Once a name is crossed off my list, my team and I move on to the next one, coldly and methodically. I’m a wanted man; it makes no sense to linger here, in this little suburban town, yet I can’t make myself leave.

Not without seeing her again.

My gaze travels from person to person, searching for a slender figure, and finally I see her, all the way at the front as befits the wife of the deceased. She's standing next to an elderly couple, holding a big umbrella over the three of them, and even in a crowd, she manages to look remote, somehow distant from everyone.

It's like she exists on a different plane, like me.

I recognize her by the chestnut waves visible under her small black hat. She left her hair down today, and despite the grayness of the rainy sky, I see the reddish glints in the dark brown mass that falls a few centimeters past her shoulders. I can't see much else—there are too many people and umbrellas between us—but I watch her anyway, like I've been watching her for the past month. Only my interest in her is different now, infinitely more personal.

Collateral damage. That's how I thought of her initially. She wasn't a person to me, but an extension of her husband. A smart and pretty extension, sure, but that didn't matter to me. I didn't particularly want to kill her, but I would've done what was necessary to achieve my goal.

I *did* do what was necessary.

She froze in terror when I grabbed her, her reaction the response of the untrained, the primitive instinct of incapacitated prey. It should've been easy at that point—a couple of shallow cuts and done. That she didn't crack instantly under my blade was both impressive and annoying; I'd had seasoned killers piss themselves and start singing with less incentive.

I could've done more to her at that point, worked her over with my knife for real, but instead, I went with a less damaging interrogation technique.

I put her under the faucet.

It worked like a charm—and that's when I made a mistake. She was shaking and sobbing so hard after the first session that I took her down to the floor and wrapped my arms around her,

restraining her and calming her at the same time. I did it so she'd be able to talk, but I didn't count on my response to her.

She felt small and breakable, utterly helpless as she coughed and sobbed in my embrace, and for some reason, I remembered holding my son that way, comforting him when he cried. Only Sara is not a child, and my body reacted to her slim curves with startling hunger, with a desire as primitive as it was irrational.

I wanted the woman I'd come to interrogate, the one whose husband I intended to kill.

I tried to ignore my inconvenient reaction, to continue as before, but when I had her on the counter again, I found myself unable to turn on the water. I was too aware of her; she'd become a person to me, a living, breathing woman instead of a tool to be used.

That left the drug as the only option. I hadn't planned to use it on her, both because of the time it required to work properly and because it was our final batch. The chemist who made it was recently killed, and Anton warned me it would take time to find another supplier. I'd been saving that batch in case of emergencies, but I had no choice.

I, who had tortured and killed hundreds, couldn't bring myself to hurt this woman more.

"He was a kind and generous man, a talented journalist. His death is a loss beyond measure, both for his family and his profession..."

I tear my eyes away from Sara to focus on the speaker. It's a middle-aged woman, her thin face streaked with tears. I recognize her as one of Cobakis's colleagues from the newspaper. I investigated all of them to determine their complicity, but luckily for them, Cobakis was the only one involved.

She continues going through all of Cobakis's outstanding qualities, but I tune her out again, my gaze drawn to the slender figure under the giant umbrella. All I can see of Sara is her back, but I can easily picture her pale, heart-shaped face.

Its features are imprinted on my mind, everything from her wide-set hazel eyes and small straight nose to her soft, plush lips. There's something about Sara Cobakis that makes me think of Audrey Hepburn, a kind of old-fashioned prettiness reminiscent of the movie stars of the forties and fifties. It adds to the sense that she doesn't belong here, that she's somehow different from the people surrounding her.

That she's somehow above them.

I wonder if she's crying, if she's grieving for the man she admitted she hadn't really known. When Sara first told me she and her husband were separated, I didn't believe her, but some of the things she said under the drug's influence made me rethink that conclusion. Something had gone very wrong in her supposedly perfect marriage, something that left an indelible trace on her.

She's known pain; she's lived with it. I could see it in her eyes, in the soft, trembling curve of her mouth. It intrigued me, that glimpse into her mind, made me want to delve deeper into her secrets, and when she closed her lips around my fingers and started sucking on them, the hunger I'd been trying to suppress returned, my cock hardening uncontrollably.

I could've taken her then, and she would've let me. Fuck, she would've welcomed me with open arms. The drug had lowered her inhibitions, stripped away all her defenses. She'd been open and vulnerable, needy in a way that called to the deepest parts of me.

Don't leave me. Please, don't leave.

Even now, I can hear her pleas, so much like Pasha's the last time I saw him. She didn't know what she was asking, didn't know who I was or what I was about to do, but her words shook me to the core, making me long for something utterly impossible. It had taken all my willpower to walk away and leave her tied in that chair for the FBI to find.

It had taken everything I had to leave and continue with my mission.

My attention returns to the present when Cobakis's colleague stops speaking, and Sara approaches the podium. Her slim, dark-clothed figure moves with unconscious grace, and anticipation coils in my gut as she turns and faces the crowd.

A black scarf is wrapped around her neck, shielding her from the chilly October wind and hiding the bandage that must be there. Above the scarf, her heart-shaped face is ghost pale, but her eyes are dry—at least as far as I can tell from this distance. I'd love to stand closer, but that's too risky. I'm already taking a chance by being here. There are at least two FBI agents among the attendees, and a couple more are sitting unobtrusively in government-issue cars on the street. They're not expecting me to be here—security would be much tighter if they were—but that doesn't mean I can let my guard down. As it is, Anton and the others think I'm crazy for showing up here.

We normally leave town within hours of a successful hit.

“As you all know, George and I met in college,” Sara says into the microphone, and my spine tingles at the sound of her soft, melodious voice. I've been watching her long enough to know that she can sing. She often sings along to popular music when she's alone in her car or while doing chores around the house.

Most of the time, she sounds better than the actual singer.

“We met in a chemistry lab,” she continues, “because believe it or not, George was thinking about going to med school at the time.” I hear a few chuckles in the crowd, and Sara's lips curve in a faint smile as she says, “Yes, George, who couldn't stand the sight of blood, actually considered becoming a doctor. Fortunately, he quickly discovered his true passion—journalism—and the rest is history.”

She goes on to talk about her husband's various habits and quirks, including his love for cheese sandwiches drizzled with honey, then moves on to his achievements and good deeds, detailing his unwavering support for the veterans and the homeless. As she speaks, I notice that everything she says has

to do with *him*, rather than the two of them. Other than the initial mention of how they first met, Sara's speech could've been made by a roommate or a friend—anyone who knew Cobakis, really. Even her voice is steady and calm, with no hint of the pain I glimpsed in her eyes that night.

It's only when she gets to the accident that I see some real emotion on her face. "George was many wonderful things," she says, gazing out over the crowd. "But all those things ended eighteen months ago, when his car hit that guardrail and went over. Everything he was died that day. What remained was not George. It was a shell of him, a body without a mind. When death came for him early Saturday morning, it didn't get my husband. It got only that shell. George himself was long gone by then, and nothing could make him suffer."

Her chin lifts as she says this last part, and I stare at her intently. She doesn't know I'm here—the FBI would be all over me if she did—but I feel like she's speaking directly to me, telling me that I failed. Does she sense me on some level? Feel me watching her?

Does she know that when I stood over her husband's bedside two nights ago, for a brief moment I considered *not* pulling the trigger?

She finishes her speech with the traditional words about how much George will be missed, and then she steps off the podium, letting the priest have his final say. I watch her walk back to the elderly couple, and when the crowd starts to disperse, I quietly follow the other mourners out of the cemetery.

The funeral is over, and my fascination with Sara must be too.

There are more people on my list, and fortunately for her, Sara is not one of them.

PART II

CHAPTER 6

Sara

“Darling, are you not eating again?” Mom asks with a worried frown. Though she was vacuuming when I dropped by, her makeup is as perfect as always, her short white hair is prettily curled, and her earrings match her stylish necklace. “You’ve been looking so thin lately.”

“Most people would consider that a good thing,” I say dryly, but to appease her, I reach for a second serving of her homemade apple pie.

“Not when you look like a chihuahua could drag you away,” Mom says and pushes more pie toward me. “You have to take care of yourself; otherwise, you won’t be able to help those patients of yours.”

“I know that, Mom,” I say between bites of the pie. “Don’t worry, okay? It’s been a busy winter, but things should slow down soon.”

“Sara, darling...” The worry lines on her face deepen. “It’s been six months since George—” She stops and takes a breath. “Look, what I’m saying is you can’t keep working yourself to death. It’s too much for you, your regular workload, plus all this new volunteering. Are you sleeping at all?”

“Of course, Mom. I sleep like the dead.” It’s not a lie; I pass out the moment my head hits the pillow and don’t wake up until my alarm goes off. Or at least that’s what happens if

I'm completely worn out. On the days when I have something approaching a normal schedule, I wake up shaking and sweating from nightmares, so I do my best to exhaust myself every day.

"How's the house sale going? Any offers yet?" Dad asks, shuffling into the dining room. He's using a walker again, so his arthritis must be acting up, but I'm pleased to see that his posture is a bit straighter. He's actually following his physical therapist's orders this time and swimming in the gym every day.

"The realtor is having an Open House next week," I answer, suppressing the urge to praise Dad for doing the right thing. He doesn't like to be reminded of his age, so anything having to do with his or my mom's health is off limits as far as dinnertime conversation. It drives me crazy, but at the same time, I can't help but admire his resolve.

At almost eighty-seven years of age, my dad is as tough as ever.

"Oh, good," Mom says. "I hope you'll get some offers from that. Be sure to bake cookies that morning; they make the house smell nice."

"I might ask my realtor to buy some and microwave them before the first visitors arrive," I say, smiling at her. "I don't think I'll have time to bake."

"Of course she won't, Lorna." Dad takes a seat next to Mom and reaches for a slice of pie. Glancing up at me, he says gruffly, "You probably won't be home at all, right?"

I nod. "I'm supposed to go to the clinic straight from the hospital that day."

He frowns. "You're still doing that?"

"Those women need me, Dad." I try to keep the exasperation out of my voice. "You have no idea what it's like in that neighborhood."

"But, darling, that neighborhood is precisely why we don't want you going there," Mom interjects. "Can't you volunteer

elsewhere? And going there at night, after you've already put in one of your long shifts..."

"Mom, I never carry cash or valuables with me, and I'm only there for a couple of hours in the evenings," I say, hanging on to my patience by a thread. We've had this argument at least five times in the last three months, and each time, my parents pretend like we've never discussed this before. "I park right in front of the building, and go straight in. It's as safe as can be."

Mom sighs and shakes her head, but doesn't argue further. Dad, however, keeps frowning at me over his slice of pie. To distract him, I get up and say, "Would anyone like some coffee or tea?"

"Decaf coffee for your dad," Mom says. "And chamomile tea for me, please."

"One decaf coffee and one chamomile tea coming up," I say, walking over to the fancy coffee machine I got for them last Christmas. After I make the requested drinks and bring them to the table, I go back and make a cup of real java for myself.

After this dinner, I'm going to be on call and could use the caffeine.

"So guess what, darling?" Mom says when I rejoin them at the table. "We're going to have the Levinsons over for dinner on Saturday."

I take a sip of my coffee. It's hot and strong, just like I like it. "That's nice."

"They've been asking about you," Dad says, stirring sugar into his coffee.

"Uh-huh." I keep my expression neutral. "Please tell them hello for me."

"Why don't you come over too, darling?" Mom says, as though the idea just occurred to her. "I know they would love to see you, and I'll make your favorite—"

“Mom, I’m not interested in dating Joe—or anyone—right now,” I say, softening my refusal with a smile. “I’m sorry, but I’m not there yet. I know you love Joe’s parents, and he’s a wonderful lawyer and a very nice man, but I’m just not ready.”

“You won’t know if you’re ready until you get out there and try,” Dad says while Mom sighs and looks down into her tea cup. “You can’t let yourself die alongside George, Sara. You’re stronger than that.”

I gulp down my coffee instead of replying. He’s wrong. I’m not strong. It’s all I can do to sit here and pretend that I’m okay, that I’m still whole and functional and sane. My parents, like everyone else, don’t know what happened that Friday night. They think George passed away in his sleep, his death the belated result of the car accident that put him in a coma eighteen months earlier. I explained away the closed-casket funeral as a way for me to cope with my grief, and nobody questioned it. If my parents knew the truth, they’d be devastated, and I’ll never do that to them.

Nobody except the FBI and my therapist know about the fugitive and my role in George’s death.

“Just think about it,” Mom says when I remain silent. “You don’t have to commit to anything or do anything that you don’t want to do. Just please, consider coming over this Saturday.”

I look at her, and for the first time, I notice the strain hidden under her perfect makeup and stylish accessories. My mom is nine years younger than my dad, and she’s so trim and energetic that sometimes I forget that age is taking a toll on her too, that all this worry about me can’t be good for her health.

“I’ll think about it, Mom,” I promise and get up to clear the dishes off the table. “If I don’t have to work on Saturday, I’ll try to come over.”

CHAPTER 7

Sara

My on-call shift is a blur of emergencies, everything from a five-months-pregnant woman coming in with severe bleeding to one of my patients going into labor seven weeks early. I end up performing a C-section on her, but luckily, the baby—a tiny but perfectly formed boy—is able to breathe and suckle on his own. The woman and her husband sob in happiness and thank me profusely, and by the time I head into the locker room to change out of my scrubs, I’m physically and emotionally drained. However, I’m also deeply satisfied.

Every child I bring into this world, every woman whose body I help heal, makes me feel a tiny bit better, alleviating the guilt that smothers me like a wet rag.

No, don't go there. Stop. Only it's too late, and the memories flood in, dark and toxic. Gasping, I sink down on the bench next to my locker, my hands clutching at the hard wooden board.

A hand over my mouth. A knife at my throat. A wet cloth over my face. Water in my nose, in my lungs—

“Hey, Sara.” Soft hands grip my arms. “Sara, what’s happening? Are you okay?”

I’m wheezing, my throat impossibly tight, but I manage a small nod. Closing my eyes, I concentrate on slowing my

breathing as the therapist taught me, and after a few moments, the worst of the suffocating sensation recedes.

Opening my eyes, I look at Marsha, who's staring at me with concern.

"I'm fine," I say shakily, standing up to open my locker. My skin is cold and clammy, and my knees feel like they're about to buckle, but I don't want anyone at the hospital knowing about my panic attacks. "I forgot to eat again, so it's probably just low blood sugar."

Marsha's blue eyes widen. "You're not pregnant, are you?"

"What?" Despite my still-uneven breathing, I'm startled into a laugh. "No, of course not."

"Oh, okay." She grins at me. "And here I thought you were finally living it up."

I give her a *get real* look. "Even if I were, you think I don't know how to prevent pregnancy?"

"Hey, you never know. Accidents happen." She opens her locker and starts changing out of her scrubs. "Seriously, though, you should grab a bite with me and the girls. We're heading out to Patty's right now."

I raise my eyebrows. "A bar at five in the morning?"

"Yeah, so what? We're not going to be boozing it up. They have breakfast twenty-four-seven, and it's way better than the cafeteria. You should try it."

I'm about to refuse, but then I remember I have next to nothing in my refrigerator. I didn't lie about not eating today; the dinner at my parents' house was over ten hours ago, and I'm starving.

"Okay," I say, surprising Marsha almost as much as I surprise myself. "I'll come."

And ignoring my friend's excited squeals, I put on my street clothes and walk over to the sink to freshen up.

* * *

When we get to Patty's, I'm not surprised to see many familiar faces there. A lot of the hospital staff go to this bar to unwind and socialize after work. I didn't expect the place to be this full at this time of night—or morning, depending on one's perspective—but if they serve breakfast as well as alcohol, it makes sense.

Marsha, myself, and two nurses from the ER make our way to a table in the corner, where a harried-looking waitress takes our orders. The moment she's gone, Marsha launches into a story about her crazy weekend at a club in downtown Chicago, and the two nurses—Andy and Tonya—laugh and tease her about the guy she almost picked up. Afterward, Andy tells everyone about her boyfriend's insistence on using purple condoms, and by the time our food comes out, the three of them are laughing so hard the waitress gives us all dirty looks.

I'm laughing too, because the story *is* funny, but I don't feel the joy that normally comes with laughter. I haven't felt it in a long time. It's as if something inside me is frozen, dulling all emotions and sensations. My therapist says it's another way my PTSD manifests itself, but I don't know if he's right. Long before the stranger invaded my home—before the accident, even—I've been feeling like there is a barrier between me and the rest of the world, a wall of false appearances and lies.

For years, I've been wearing a mask, and now it feels like I've become that mask, like there's nothing real underneath it.

“What about you, Sara?” Tonya asks, and I realize I zoned out, chowing down my eggs on autopilot. “How was your weekend?”

“It was good, thanks.” Putting down my fork, I attempt a smile. “Nothing exciting. I'm selling my house, so I had to clean out my garage and do some other boring stuff.” I was also on call for eighteen hours and volunteered at the clinic for five more, but I don't tell Tonya that. Marsha already thinks I'm a workaholic; if she heard I'm subbing in for some of the other doctors at my hospital-owned practice and helping at the clinic on top of my usual workload, I'd never hear the end of it.

“You should come out with us next Friday,” Tonya says, extending a slim brown arm to pick up a salt shaker. At twenty-four, she’s one of the youngest nurses on staff, and from what Marsha’s told me, she’s even more of a party girl than my friend, driving guys of all ages wild with her dimpled smile and tight body. “We’re going to grab some drinks at Patty’s, then head into the city. I know a promoter at that hot new club downtown, so we won’t even have to wait in line.”

I blink at the unexpected offer. “Oh, I don’t know... I’m not sure if—”

“You’re not working Friday night,” Marsha says. “I know, I checked the schedule.”

“Yes, but you know how it is.” I spear eggs with my fork. “Babies don’t always arrive on a schedule.”

“Come on, Marsha, let her be,” Andy says, tucking a red curl behind her ear. “Can’t you see the poor girl is tired right now? If she wants to go, she’ll go. No need to drag her anywhere.”

She winks at me, and I give her a grateful smile. This is my first time interacting with Andy outside the hospital hallways, and I’m discovering that I genuinely like her. Like me, she’s in her late twenties, and according to Marsha, she’s had a steady boyfriend for the last five years. The boyfriend—he of the purple condoms—is apparently a self-absorbed douchebag, but Andy loves him anyway.

“You moved here from Michigan, right?” I ask her, and Andy nods, grinning, then tells me all about how Larry, her boyfriend, got a job in the area, forcing the two of them to move. Listening to her, I decide that Marsha is not far off in her assessment of Andy’s boyfriend.

Larry does seem like a selfish douche.

The rest of the meal flies by in casual, friendly conversation, and by the time we pay the bill and head out of the bar, I’m feeling lighter than I have in months. Maybe my dad is right; getting out and socializing could be good for me.

Maybe I *will* go to that dinner with the Levinsons, and even to the club with Tonya.

My improved mood continues as I say goodbye to the three women and walk the two blocks to the hospital parking lot to get my car. Lady Gaga is singing in my headphones, and the sky is just beginning to lighten. It feels like the early dawn is speaking to me, promising me that at some point in the not-too-distant future, the darkness may dissipate for me too.

It feels good, that tiny ray of hope. It feels like a step forward.

I'm already in the parking lot when it happens again.

It starts off as a light prickle across my skin... a quiet pinging in my nerves. The blast of adrenaline is next, accompanied by a surge of debilitating terror. My heart rate spikes, and my body tenses for an attack. Gasping, I spin around, tearing off my headphones as I rummage in my bag for a canister of pepper spray, but there's no one there.

There's just that sense of danger, a feeling of being watched. Panting, I turn in a circle, clutching the pepper spray, but I don't see anyone.

I never see anyone when my brain misfires like this.

Shaking, I make my way to my car and get inside. It takes several minutes of breathing exercises before I'm calm enough to drive, and I know that despite my tiredness, I won't be able to sleep today.

Pulling out of the parking lot, I turn left instead of right.

I might as well go to the clinic. They're not expecting me until tomorrow, but they're always grateful for the help.

CHAPTER 8

Sara

“Tell me about this latest episode, Sara,” Dr. Evans says, crossing his long legs. “What made you think someone was watching you?”

“I don’t know. It was just...” I inhale, trying to find the right words, then shake my head. “It was nothing concrete. I honestly don’t know.”

“Okay, let’s backtrack for a second.” His tone is both warm and professional. That’s part of what makes him a good therapist, that ability to project caring while remaining detached at the same time. “You said you went out for breakfast with some coworkers; then you were walking back to your car, right?”

“Right.”

“Did you hear anything? Or see anything? Anything that might’ve triggered you? A car door slamming, leaves blowing... a bird, perhaps?”

“No, nothing specific that I can recall. I was just walking, listening to music, and then I felt it. I don’t know how to explain it. It was like—” I swallow, my heart rate quickening at the memories. “It was like that time in my kitchen, when I sensed him a second before he grabbed me. That same kind of feeling.”

The therapist's thin, intelligent face takes on an expression of concern. "How frequently is this happening now?"

"It was the third time this week," I admit, embarrassment heating my cheeks as he jots down something in his notepad. I hate this out-of-control feeling, the knowledge that my brain is playing tricks on me. "The first time was in a grocery store, then as I was entering the clinic, and now in the hospital parking lot. I don't know why this is happening. I thought I was getting better; I really did. I only had one small panic attack in the last two weeks, and I felt genuinely hopeful after that breakfast yesterday. It just doesn't make sense."

"Our minds take time to heal, Sara, just like our bodies. Sometimes you have a relapse, and sometimes the illness takes a different course. You know that as well as I do." He makes another note in his notepad, then looks up. "Have you considered speaking to the FBI again?"

"No, they will think I've gone crazy."

I talked to Agent Ryson after the first paranoid episode a month ago, and he told me that at that very moment, Interpol was tracking my husband's killer somewhere in South Africa. Just in case, though, he put a protective detail on me. After following me around for several days, they determined there was no threat of any kind, and Agent Ryson pulled them off with mumbled apologies about limited funds and manpower. He didn't accuse me of being paranoid, but I know he secretly thought it.

"Because the man you fear is far away," Dr. Evans says, and I nod.

"Yes. He's gone, and he has no reason to return."

"Good. Rationally, you know that. We'll work on convincing your subconscious of that, too. First, though, you need to figure out what triggers your paranoia, so you can learn to spot the triggers and manage your response to them. The next time it happens, pay attention to what you were doing and how you were feeling when you first got that sensation. Are you in a public place or by yourself? Is it noisy or quiet? Are you indoors or outdoors?"

“Okay, I’ll make sure to note all that as I’m freaking out and clutching my pepper spray.”

Dr. Evans smiles. “I have faith in you, Sara. You’ve already made tremendous progress. You can go near your kitchen sink again, right?”

“Yes, but I still can’t touch the faucet,” I say, my hands tightening on my lap. “It’s kind of useless without that.”

The sink in my kitchen is one of the many reasons I’m selling the house. At first, I couldn’t even go into the kitchen, but after months of intensive therapy, I’m at the point where I can approach the sink without a panic attack—though not yet turn on the water.

“Baby steps,” Dr. Evans says. “You’ll turn on the water someday too. Unless you sell the house first, of course. Are you still planning to do that?”

“Yes, my realtor is having an Open House in a few days, in fact.”

“Okay, good.” He smiles again and puts his notepad away. “Our session is over for today, and I’m away on vacation for the next week and a half, but I’ll see you later this month. In the meantime, please keep doing what you’re doing and take detailed notes if you have any more paranoid episodes. We’ll discuss that and tackle your feelings about the house sale in the next session, okay?”

“Sounds good.” I get up and shake the doctor’s hand. “I’ll see you then. Enjoy your vacation.”

And walking out of his office, I head to my car, forcing my hand to be at my side and not inside my bag, curled around the pepper spray.

* * *

I sleep well that night, and the night after. It’s because I work so much that I literally pass out. When I’m that tired, I can sleep anywhere, even in my big, oak-shielded house. The Feds couldn’t figure out how the fugitive got in without setting off the alarm or breaking any locks, so even though I’ve

upgraded my security system, I feel about as safe in my home as I would sleeping out on the street.

It's on the third night that the nightmares find me. I don't know if it's because I had another paranoid episode earlier that day—this time, on a busy street next to a coffeeshop—or because I only worked twelve hours, but that night, I dream of *him*.

As usual, his face is vague in my mind; I can only make out his gray eyes and the scar bisecting his left eyebrow. Those eyes pin me in place as he holds a knife against my throat, his gaze as sharp and cruel as his blade. Then George is there too, his brown eyes vacant as he comes toward me.

“Don't,” I whisper, but George keeps coming, and I see the blood trickling from his forehead. It's a small, neat wound, nothing like the gaping hole the real bullet left in his head, and some part of me knows I'm dreaming, but I still sob and shake as the gray-eyed man picks me up and carries me to the sink.

“Don't, please,” I beg the man, but he's relentless, holding my head over the sink as George continues shuffling toward me, his dead face twisted with hatred.

“For what you did to me,” my husband says, turning on the water. “For everything you did.”

I wake up screaming and wheezing, my sheets soaked with sweat. When I calm down a little, I go downstairs and make myself a cup of decaffeinated tea, using the water from the refrigerator filter. As I drink my tea, the microwave clock stares at me, the blinking green numbers informing me that it's not even three in the morning—far too early for me to get up if I'm to have any hope of making it through the upcoming day's extra-long shift. I have a surgery in the afternoon, and I need to be sharp for that; anything less would endanger my patient.

After a few moments of internal debate, I get up and get Ambien from the medicine cabinet. Cutting a pill in half, I swallow it with the remnants of my tea and go back upstairs.

As much as I hate drugging myself, there's no other choice today. I only hope that I won't dream of the fugitive again. Not

because I'm afraid of the waterboarding nightmare—it never comes twice on the same night—but because in my dreams, he's not always torturing me.

Sometimes, he's fucking me, and I'm fucking him back.

CHAPTER 9

Peter

I stand over her bedside, watching her sleep. I'm taking a risk by being here in person instead of watching her through the cameras my men installed throughout her house, but the Ambien should keep her from waking up. Still, I'm careful not to make a sound. Sara is sensitive to my presence, attuned to me in some strange way. That's why she's taken to carrying that pepper spray, and why she looks like a hunted doe each time I get near.

Subconsciously, she knows I'm back. She senses I'm coming for her.

I still don't know why I'm doing this, but I've given up trying to analyze my madness. I've tried to stay away, to remain focused on my mission, but even as I tracked down and eliminated all but one name on my list, I kept thinking about Sara, picturing how she looked that day at the funeral and recalling the pain in her soft hazel eyes.

Remembering how she wrapped her lips around my fingers and begged me to stay.

There's nothing normal about my infatuation with her. I'm sane enough to admit that. She's the wife of a man I killed, a woman I tortured like I'd once tortured suspected terrorists. I should feel nothing for her, just like I've felt nothing for my other victims, but I can't get her out of my mind.

I want her. It's completely irrational, and wrong on so many levels, but I want her. I want to taste those soft lips and feel the smoothness of her pale skin, to bury my fingers in her thick chestnut hair and breathe in her scent. I want to hear her beg me to fuck her, and then I want to hold her down and do exactly that, over and over again.

I want to heal the wounds I inflicted and make her crave me the way I crave her.

She continues to sleep as I watch her, and my fingers itch to touch her, to feel her skin, if only for a moment. But if I do that, she might wake up, and I'm not ready for that.

When Sara sees me again, I want it to be different.

I want her to know me as something other than her assailant.

CHAPTER 10

Sara

Over the next several days, my paranoia intensifies. I constantly feel like I'm being watched. Even when I'm alone at home, with all the shades drawn and doors locked, I sense invisible eyes on me. I've taken to sleeping with the pepper spray under my pillow, and I even bring it with me to the bathroom, but it's not enough.

I don't feel safe anywhere.

On Tuesday, I finally break down and call Agent Ryson.

"Dr. Cobakis." He sounds both wary and surprised. "How may I help you?"

"I'd like to talk to you," I say. "In person, if possible."

"Oh? What about?"

"I'd rather not discuss it over the phone."

"I see." There are a couple of beats of silence. "All right. I suppose I can meet you for a quick coffee this afternoon. Would that work for you?"

I glance at my schedule on my laptop. "Yes. Could you meet me at Snacktime Cafe by the hospital? Around three?"

"I'll be there."

* * *

I end up getting held up with a patient, and it's ten minutes after three by the time I rush into the cafe.

"I was just about to leave," Ryson says, standing up from a small table in the corner.

"So sorry about that." Breathless, I slide into the seat across from him. "I promise to make this quick."

Ryson sits down again. The server comes by, and we place our orders: a shot of espresso for him and a cup of decaf coffee for me. My jitters don't need the added caffeine today.

"All right," he says when the server is gone. "Go ahead."

"I need to know more about this fugitive," I say without preamble. "Who is he? Why was he after George?"

Ryson's bushy eyebrows pull together. "You know that's classified."

"I do, but I also know that this man waterboarded me, drugged me, and killed my husband," I say evenly. "And that you knew he was coming and never bothered to inform me. Those are the things I know—the only things I know, really. If I knew more—say, his name and motivation—it might help me understand and get over what happened. Otherwise, it's like an open sore, or maybe a blister that hasn't been lanced. It just festers, you see, and it's constantly on my mind. Someday, I might not be able to hold it in, and the blister might pop on its own. Do you see my dilemma?"

Ryson's jaw tightens. "Don't threaten us, Sara. You won't like the results."

"It's Dr. Cobakis to you, Agent Ryson." I match his hard stare. "And I already don't like the results. George's colleagues at the paper wouldn't like them either—if they were to catch wind of them. That's why you told me about the fugitive, right? So I'd keep my mouth shut and go along with the whole 'he died peacefully in his sleep' bullshit? You knew George's colleagues would've investigated the hell out of the supposed mafia hit, and you didn't need that. You still don't, am I right?"

He glares at me, and I see his internal debate. Share classified information and potentially get in trouble, or not share it and definitely get in trouble? Self-preservation must win out, because he says grimly, “All right. What do you want to know?”

“Let’s start with his name and nationality.”

Ryson glances around, then leans in closer. “He goes by many aliases, but we believe his real name is Peter Sokolov.” He pitches his voice low even though the tables around us are empty. “According to our files, he’s originally from a small town near Moscow, Russia.”

That explains the accent. “What is his background? Why is he a fugitive?”

Ryson leans back. “I don’t know the answer to that last question. I don’t have sufficient security clearance.” He falls silent as the server approaches with our drinks. After the server leaves, he says, “What I can tell you is that prior to him becoming a fugitive, he was Spetsnaz, part of the Russian Special Forces. His job was tracking down and interrogating anyone deemed a threat to Russian security—terrorists, insurgents from the former Soviet Union republics, spies, and so on. He was reportedly very good at it. Then, about five years ago, he switched sides and started working for the worst of the criminal underworld—dictators convicted of war crimes, Mexican cartels, illegal arms dealers... In the process, he came up with a list of names—people he believes have harmed him somehow—and he’s been systematically eliminating them ever since.”

My hand is unsteady as I reach for my coffee cup. “And George was on that list?”

Ryson nods and knocks back his espresso in one big gulp. Putting down the cup, he says, “I’m sorry, Dr. Cobakis. This is all I can tell you, because this is all I know. I have no idea what your husband or any of the others did to end up on that list. I understand you’d like more answers, and believe me, so would we, but a lot of Sokolov’s file is redacted.” He stops to let the server pass by again, then adds quietly, “You need to

forget about this man, Dr. Cobakis, both for your safety and ours. You don't want to attract his attention again, believe me."

I nod, my stomach knotted tight. I don't know why I thought that knowing a few details about the man who haunts my dreams would be better than remaining in the dark. If anything, I'm more anxious now, my hands and feet icy with anxiety.

"Are you sure he's gone?" I ask as the agent gets to his feet. "Are you certain he's nowhere near here?"

"Nobody can be certain of anything when it comes to this psychopath, but for what it's worth, a little over six weeks ago, he killed another person on his list—this one in South Africa," Ryson says bleakly. "And before that, he took out two more in Canada despite our best attempts to safeguard them. So yes, as far as we know, he's far from US soil."

I stare at him, rendered mute by horror. Three more victims in the last six months. Three more lives lost while I've been battling nightmares and paranoia.

"Good luck, Dr. Cobakis," Ryson says, not unkindly, and places a few dollar bills on the table. "Time really does heal, and one day, you'll move past this too. I'm sure of that."

"Thank you," I say in a choked voice, but he's already walking away, his stocky figure disappearing through the glass doors of the cafe.

* * *

That night, I dream of Peter Sokolov's attack again, and the nightmare takes the turn I dread the most. Instead of him holding me under the faucet, he has me pinned under him on a bed, his steely fingers shackling my wrists. I feel him moving inside me, his cock long and thick as he invades my body, and heat thrums under my skin, my nipples taut and aching as they rub against his muscled chest.

"Please," I beg, wrapping my legs around his hips as his metallic eyes stare into mine. "Harder, please. I need you."

I'm slick with that need; it burns inside me, hot and dark, and he knows it. He feels it. I can see it in the coldness of his silver gaze, in the cruel set of his sensuous mouth. His fingers tighten around my wrists, cutting into my skin like a zip tie, and his cock turns into a blade, slicing me open, making me bleed.

"Harder," I plead, my hips rising up to meet his knife-like thrusts. "Don't leave me. Take me harder."

He does exactly that, each stroke ripping me open, and I scream with pain and twisted pleasure, with relief and sweet agony.

I scream as I die in his arms, and it's the best death I can imagine.

* * *

I wake up with my sex slick and throbbing and my stomach churning with nausea. Out of all the tricks my brain's been playing on me, these perverted dreams are the worst. I can understand the panic attacks and the paranoia—they're a natural result of what I've been through—but there's nothing natural about the sexual slant of these nightmares. Just thinking about them makes me physically ill with shame.

Getting up, I pull on a robe over my pajamas and go down to the kitchen. My breathing is unsteady and my heart is racing, but this time, it's not from fear. I feel flushed and agitated, my body aching with frustrated arousal.

I almost came during that dream. Another few seconds, and I would've orgasmed—like I've orgasmed during these dreams twice before.

Self-disgust is a heavy brick in my stomach as I make my decaf tea. What kind of twisted person has sexual dreams about her husband's killer? How messed up does one have to be to enjoy dying in said killer's arms?

I've considered discussing this with Dr. Evans, but whenever I try to bring up the topic in our sessions, I shut down. I simply can't bring myself to form the words. Verbalizing the dreams would give them substance,

transforming them from a nebulous product of my sleeping subconscious to something I think and talk about when I'm awake, and I can't have that.

In any case, I know what the therapist would tell me. He'd say that I'm a young, healthy woman who hasn't had sex in a long time, and that it's normal to feel those types of urges. That it's my guilt and self-loathing that are transforming my sexual fantasies into something dark and twisted, and the dreams don't mean I'm actually attracted to the man who tortured me and killed George.

Dr. Evans would try to alleviate my guilt and shame, and that's not something I deserve.

When the tea is ready, I carry it over to the kitchen table and sit down. I'm about to take my first sip when I get the watched feeling again. Rationally, I know I'm alone, but my heart rate speeds up, and my palms dampen with sweat.

My pepper spray container is upstairs, so I get up and, as calmly as I can, make my way to the knife rack on the counter. I select the biggest, sharpest knife and bring it back to the table with me. I know it would be useless against someone like Peter Sokolov, but it's better than nothing. After a few deep breaths, I calm down enough to drink my tea, but the unsettling sensation of invisible eyes persists.

If the house doesn't sell soon, I'll just move out, I decide as I go back to bed.

I can afford a second residence, and even a crappy studio would be preferable to this.

CHAPTER 11

Sara

“So how did your Open House go yesterday?” Marsha shouts over the music as we wait for our fourth round of drinks at the bar.

“The realtor says it was good,” I shout back, trying not to slur my words. I haven’t done this in forever, and the alcohol is hitting me hard. “We’ll see if any offers come of it.”

“I can’t believe you own a house and are selling it,” Tonya says as the next song comes on and the music volume drops from deafening to merely loud. “I’d love to buy a house someday, but it’ll take forever to save up.”

“Yeah, if you spend half your paycheck on clothes and shoes,” Andy says with a grin, her red curls dancing as she sways her curvy hips in tune with the music. “Besides, Sara here is a doctor. She makes the big bucks, even if she doesn’t act as stuck up as the rest of them.”

Tonya giggles, her long earrings jiggling. “Oh, yeah, that’s right. You look so young, Sara, I keep forgetting you’re a real MD.”

“She *is* young,” Marsha says before I can respond. “She’s our own little Doogie Howser.”

“Oh, shut up.” I elbow Marsha, my cheeks flaming with embarrassment as I see the tattooed bartender grinning at me.

He's making our Lemon Drops with practiced motions, his brown gaze trained on me with unmistakable interest.

"Here you go, ladies," he says, sliding our drinks over, and Andy winks at me as she hands me one of the glasses.

"Bottoms up," she says, and we knock back the shots before going back to the dance floor, where the next song is already beginning to blast through the speakers.

I wasn't going to come out this Friday after the shitty week I had, but at the last minute, I decided that going out and getting drunk would be preferable to passing out early and risking another twisted sex dream. Luckily, I keep a pair of cute silver flats in my locker at work, and Tonya lent me a short black dress that fit surprisingly well.

"H&M, baby," she said proudly when I asked her where she got it, and I made a mental note to stop by the trendy store and get something similar for myself—in case I'm ever tempted to repeat this insanity.

We started off with a couple of drinks at Patty's, then got a car to take us to the club Tonya talked about. True to her word, the promoter was able to get us in without a line, and we've been dancing nonstop for the past two hours. I'm sweating, my feet hurt, and I'll probably have the mother of all hangovers tomorrow, but this is the most fun I've had in... well, years.

Maybe longer than five years.

The crowd at the club ranges from college kids to hot forty-somethings like Marsha, but the majority look to be in their late twenties, like myself. The DJ is outstanding, mixing the latest hits with hip-hop classics, and I sing along as we dance, belting out my favorite songs with abandon. I've always loved music and dancing—I did ballet all through elementary and middle school and took salsa classes in college—and with the buzz of alcohol in my veins, I feel sexy and carefree, for once like any other young woman at the club. Tonight, I'm not the serious student, the overworked doctor, the dutiful daughter, or the perfect wife. I'm not even the widow with paranoia and messed-up dreams.

Tonight, I'm just me.

The four of us dance by ourselves for a while; then a couple of guys join us, dancing up to Tonya and Marsha. Andy drags me away to the bathroom with her, and by the time we return, Tonya and Marsha are full-on flirting with the guys.

“You want to get another drink?” Andy yells over the music, and I nod, following her to the bar. The room is spinning around me, so I figure I'll just get some water.

The club has become more crowded in the last hour, the dance floor spilling over to the bar and lounge area, and when a group of laughing women cuts in front of me, I lose sight of Andy. I'm not particularly worried—I can catch up to her at the bar—so I go around the group to avoid the most dense parts of the crowd.

I'm within a few feet of the bar when strong fingers wrap around my upper arm, and a deep male voice murmurs into my ear, “Dance with me, Sara.”

I freeze, my blood solidifying in my veins.

I know that voice, that subtle Russian accent.

Slowly, I turn my head and meet the metallic gaze that stalks my dreams.

Peter Sokolov is in front of me, his sculpted mouth curved in a faint smile.

CHAPTER 12

Peter

She sways on her feet, her face chalk white, and I grip her other arm to steady her. She clearly knows who I am; she recognizes me.

“Don’t scream,” I say. “I’m not here to hurt you.”

Her hazel eyes look wild, and I know she’s not really processing what I’m saying. All she sees is a mortal threat, and she’s reacting accordingly. In another few seconds, she’ll either faint or become hysterical, and neither would be a good thing.

“Sara.” I make my voice hard. “I’m not here to hurt anyone, but I will if I have to. Do you understand? If you do anything to attract attention to us, people will die.”

The mindless panic in her gaze abates slightly, replaced by a fear that’s more rational, if not any less intense. I’m getting through to her.

It helps that I’m not bluffing.

“W-what do you want?” Even with the layer of lipgloss over them, her trembling lips are pale. “Why are you here?”

“I wanted to see you,” I say, pulling her with me through the crowd as I maneuver away from the cameras positioned around the bar. Sara’s bare arms are tense in my grasp, her skin chilly to the touch, but as expected, she doesn’t scream.

From everything I know about her, the little doctor would sooner die than endanger a bunch of strangers.

“Dance with me,” I say again when I have her where I want her—next to a wall in a dimly lit part of the dance floor, where the crowd forms a human shield around us. To facilitate her compliance with my request, I release her arms and clasp her waist, being careful to keep my grip gentle.

Her body is as stiff as a block of ice as I hold her close, but to everyone around us, we look like any other couple swaying to the music. The illusion is only strengthened when her hands come up and her palms splay against my chest. She’s trying to push me away, but she’s too shocked to put much strength behind it. Not that it would help if she put *all* her strength behind it.

I can overpower most men with minimal effort, much less a woman as slight as her.

“Don’t be afraid,” I murmur, holding her gaze. Even on a crowded dance floor, I can smell her scent, something delicate and flowery, and my body reacts to her proximity, my cock hardening at the feel of her slender waist between my palms. I want to pull her closer, feel her body against mine, but I force myself to keep a small distance. I don’t want to scare her with the intensity of my need. As it is, the look in Sara’s eyes is that of a small animal caught in a trap, all blind fear and desperation. It makes me want to pick her up and cuddle her against my chest, but that would just terrify her more. There’s no action of mine that wouldn’t terrify her at this point; I could invite her to sing karaoke, and she’d have a panic attack.

“What do you want from me?” Her breathing is fast and shallow as she stares up at me. “I don’t know anything—”

“I know.” I keep my voice gentle. “Don’t worry, Sara. That part is over.”

Confusion edges out some of the terror in her eyes. “But then why...”

“Why am I here?”

She nods warily.

“I’m not really sure,” I say, and it’s the absolute truth.

Over the past five and a half years, vengeance ruled my life. Everything I did was in pursuit of that goal, but now that I’m almost through with my list, the future lies dull and empty in front of me, the path ahead shrouded in a bleak fog. Once I kill the last person responsible for my family’s deaths, I won’t have a purpose. My reason for existing will be well and truly gone.

Or so I thought until I met her and saw the pain in her doe-like eyes. Now *she* consumes my dreams and haunts my waking moments. When I think of Sara, I don’t see my son’s torn body and Tamila’s bloodied face.

I only see her.

“Are you going to kill me?”

She’s trying—and failing—to keep her voice steady. Still, I admire her attempt at composure. I approached her in public to make her feel safer, but she’s too smart to fall for that. If they’ve told her anything about my background, she must realize I can snap her neck faster than she can scream for help.

“No,” I answer, leaning closer as a louder song comes on. “I’m not going to kill you.”

“Then what do you want from me?”

She’s shaking in my hold, and something about that both intrigues and disturbs me. I don’t want her to be afraid of me, but at the same time, I like having her at my mercy. Her fear calls to the predator within me, turning my desire for her into something darker.

She’s captured prey, soft and sweet and mine to devour.

Bending my head, I bury my nose in her fragrant hair and murmur into her ear, “Meet me at the Starbucks near your house at noon tomorrow, and we’ll talk there. I’ll tell you whatever you want to know.”

I pull back, and she stares at me, her eyes huge in her heart-shaped face. I know what she’s thinking, so I lean in again, dipping my head so my mouth is next to her ear.

“If you contact the FBI, they’ll try to hide you from me. Just like they tried to hide your husband and the others on my list. They’ll uproot you, take you away from your parents and your career, and it will all be for nothing. I’ll find you, no matter where you go, Sara... no matter what they do to keep you from me.” My lips brush against the rim of her ear, and I feel her breath hitch. “Alternatively, they might want to use you as bait. If that’s the case—if they set a trap for me—I’ll know, and our next meeting won’t be over coffee.”

She shudders, and I drag in a deep breath, inhaling her delicate scent one last time before releasing her.

Stepping back, I melt into the crowd and message Anton to get the crew into position.

I have to make sure she gets home safe and sound, unmolested by anyone but me.

CHAPTER 13

Sara

I don't know how I make it home, but somehow I find myself in my shower, naked and shivering under the hot spray. I have only a vague recollection of making some awkward excuse to Andy and stumbling out of the club to catch a cab; the rest of the trip is a blur of shock-induced numbness and alcoholic haze.

Peter Sokolov spoke to me. He *held* me.

My husband's killer, the man who tortured me and ripped apart my life, danced with me.

My knees fold under me, and I sink to the floor, panting. A wave of dizziness makes the shower stall rotate around me, and all the drinks I consumed threaten to come up.

Peter Sokolov was in the club with me. It wasn't my mind playing tricks; he was actually there.

I swallow convulsively as my nausea worsens. The water beats down on me, the spray almost painfully hot, but I can't stop shivering.

The monster from my nightmares is real.

He's coming after me.

My dizziness intensifies, and I lie down, curling into a fetal ball on the tile floor. My hair is all over my face, wet and thick, and my throat constricts as memories of that night press

in. For the first few days after the attack, I avoided washing my hair because I couldn't take the feeling of water streaming over my head, but eventually, the need to be clean won out over the phobia.

One breath in. One breath out. Slow and steady.

Slowly, the suffocating sensation recedes, leaving only misery behind. I feel drunk and sick, and it takes all my strength to struggle to my feet and turn off the shower.

Why is he here? What made him come back? What does he want from me?

The questions streak through my mind as I towel off, but I'm no closer to answers than I was back at the club. My mind feels like a swamp, all my thoughts sluggish and slow.

Wrapping the towel around my wet hair, I stumble to the bedroom and fall onto my king-size bed. The ceiling rocks back and forth, as though I'm on a ship, and I know I'm in for a brutal hangover tomorrow. I haven't been this drunk since college, and my body doesn't know how to handle it.

Taking small, shallow breaths, I curl up on my side, hugging the blanket to my chest. The alcohol is dragging me under, but for once, I'm fighting the lure of sleep. I need to think, to understand what happened and figure out what to do.

The killer who waterboarded me wants to meet for coffee tomorrow.

It would be comical if it weren't so terrifying. I don't understand what he's after. Why come up to me in the club? Why ask me to meet him in public again? He's wanted by just about every law enforcement agency out there; surely he has to know that. Why take that kind of risk?

Unless... unless he feels it's not a risk.

Maybe he's arrogant enough to think he can evade justice forever.

Anger ignites inside me, clearing some of the haze from my brain. I sit up, fighting a wave of dizziness, and reach for the corded phone on my nightstand. It's a dinosaur, clunky and

unnecessary in the age of cellphones, but George insisted on having a landline in the house.

“You never know,” he said in response to my objections. “Cell phones aren’t always reliable. If power goes out during a winter storm, what are you going to do?”

My eyes sting at the recollection, and I pick up the phone with an unsteady hand. I have a knack for remembering numbers, so I dial Agent Ryson’s from memory, pushing one button after another.

I have most of the number keyed in when a sudden thought freezes me in place.

Could Peter have bugged my phone? Is that what he meant when he said he’ll know if they set a trap for him?

My mind leaps to another possibility.

Could he be watching me right now?

My breathing quickens, my skin prickling with adrenaline. Before the club, I would’ve dismissed the idea as a manifestation of my paranoia, but it’s not paranoia if it’s real.

I’m not insane if it’s truly happening.

Peter has resources, Ryson said. Could he have access to high-tech spyware?

Are there cameras and listening devices inside my house?

My heart hammering, I drop the phone back on its cradle and grab the blanket, pulling it up to cover my naked breasts. I rarely bother putting on a robe in my bedroom; even in the winter, I sleep in the buff, covered only by my blanket. I’ve never been self-conscious about my body—George loved it when I walked around naked—but the thought that his killer might’ve seen me nude makes me feel violated and painfully exposed.

It also makes me recall my twisted dreams.

No. No, no, no. Panting, I wrap the blanket around me and stumble to the closet to grab a T-shirt and a pair of underwear. I can’t think of those dreams. I refuse to. I’m drunk; that’s the

only reason my mind went there in connection with that monster.

Except he doesn't look like a monster. Even with the scar cutting through his eyebrow, he's a stunningly good-looking man, the kind that women salivate over. If I'd met him at the club without knowing who he is, I would've danced with him.

I would've wanted his strong arms around me, his hard body grinding against mine.

My hands shake as I pull on the underwear, and I feel a spot of dampness where my sex touches the cotton fabric.

No. This isn't happening. I'm not turned on.

Putting on the first T-shirt I find, I stagger back to bed and collapse on it, wrapping myself in the blanket. The room is doing cartwheels around me, and my stomach roils along with it. I pant through the nausea and realize my lids are growing heavy as my thoughts start to drift.

Clenching my teeth, I force my eyes to open. I can't pass out until I decide what to do about tomorrow.

Staring at the spinning ceiling, I mentally go over my options.

The sane thing to do would be to tell Ryson about this and hope they can protect me. Except if my suspicions are right and Peter Sokolov is indeed watching me, he'll know that I contacted the FBI, and I might not survive long enough for the agents to reach me.

Of course, if he decides to kill me, I might not survive even with the FBI protection. The people on his list certainly didn't, and he said he'd come after me.

He promised to find me no matter where I go.

Still, it's probably worth the risk, because the alternative is going along with whatever cruel game Peter is playing. I don't know what he wants from me, but whatever it is, it can't be good. Maybe he hated George enough to want to torment his widow, or maybe, despite what he said, he thinks I know something—like the sister of that poor man he killed.

At this very moment, he might be devising some new, exotic torture for me, something spectacularly horrible that somehow involves coffee.

My eyelids droop again, and I rub my hands over my face, trying to keep my eyes open. I know I'm not thinking straight, but I can't go to sleep without making this decision.

Do I call the FBI or not? And if not, do I actually go to that Starbucks?

A violent shudder ripples through me as I try to picture meeting my husband's murderer for coffee. I don't think I can do it. Just the idea of it makes my insides somersault. But what would I do instead? Hide in bed all day and then go to my parents' house for dinner with the Levinsons as promised? Pretend the monster who destroyed my life isn't after me?

It's the thought of my parents that decides it. If I were on my own, I might chance the FBI's dubious protection, but I can't endanger my parents that way. I can't force them to leave their house and everyone they know on the unlikely possibility that Ryson and his colleagues would be able to protect us better than they've protected the others. And leaving my parents behind is out of the question; even if their age wasn't an issue, I can't risk Peter interrogating them like he interrogated me about George.

There's only one thing I can do.

I have to meet my tormentor tomorrow and hope that whatever he does to me won't extend to the rest of my family.

When I finally close my eyes and pass out, I dream of him again. Only this time, he's neither torturing nor fucking me.

He's sitting on my bed and watching me, his gaze warm and strangely possessive on my face.

CHAPTER 14

Sara

By the time I pull up to the Starbucks at noon, the stabbing pain in my skull has quieted to a dull throb, and my stomach doesn't threaten to revolt every second. However, my palms are damp with anxiety, and my hands shake so much I almost drop my keys when I come out of the car.

I cross the parking lot, feeling like I'm going to my execution. Fear pulses through me with every rapid heartbeat. He could kill me at this very moment, just take me out with a sniper rifle. Maybe that's why he lured me here: to murder me in a public place and leave my body to terrorize everyone.

But no bullet finds me, and when I come into the coffeeshop, I see him right away. He's sitting at one of the empty tables in the corner, his big hand wrapped around a paper cup.

I meet his gaze, and everything inside me jolts, as though I got shocked with a defibrillator. For the first time, I see him in the light of day without alcohol or drugs in my system.

For the first time, I fully comprehend how dangerous he is.

He's leaning back in his chair, his long, jean-clad legs stretched out and crossed at the ankles under the small round table. It's a casual pose, but there's nothing casual about the dark power that rolls off him in waves. He's not just dangerous; he's lethal. I see it in the metallic ice of his gaze

and the coiled readiness of his large body, in the arrogant set of his jaw and the cruel curve of his lips.

This is a man who lives and breathes violence, an apex predator for whom rules of society don't exist.

A monster who's tortured and killed countless people.

The surge of anger and hatred that comes with the thought cuts through my fear, and I take a step forward, then another and another until I'm walking toward him on almost steady legs. If he wanted to kill me, he could've already done it in a million different ways, so whatever he wants today must be something different.

Something even more evil.

"Hello, Sara," he says, rising to his feet as I approach. "It's good to see you again."

His deep voice wraps around me, his soft Russian accent caressing my ears. It should sound ugly, that voice from my nightmares, but like everything else about him, it's deceptively appealing.

"What do you want?" I'm being rude, but I don't care. We're long past politeness and good manners. There's no use pretending this is a normal get-together.

The only reason I'm here is because not showing up could endanger my parents.

"Please, sit." He motions to the chair across from him and sits down. "I took the liberty of ordering a cup of coffee for you. Black, no sugar... and decaf, since you're not working today."

I glance at the second cup—prepared exactly the way I would've ordered it—then meet his gaze again. My heart drums in my throat, but my voice is even as I say, "You *have* been watching me."

"Yes, of course. But you figured that out last night, didn't you?"

I flinch. I can't help it. If he saw me try to make that call, then he saw me stagger drunkenly into the bathroom and come

out naked.

If he's been watching me for a while, he's seen me in all sorts of private moments.

"Sit, Sara." He gestures at the chair again, and this time, I obey—if only to give myself a chance to calm down. Rage and fear are a tangle of live wires in my chest, and I feel like I'm one deep breath away from exploding.

I've never been a violent person, but if I had a gun on me, I'd shoot him. I'd blow his brains all over the trendy Starbucks wall.

"You hate me." He says it calmly, as a statement of fact rather than a question, and I stare at him, caught off-guard.

Does he read minds, or am I that transparent?

"It's okay," he says, and I catch a glimmer of amusement in his eyes. "You can admit it. I promise not to hurt you today."

Today? What about tomorrow and the day after? My hands form into fists under the table, my nails digging into my skin. "Of course I hate you," I say as steadily as I can manage. "Is that a surprise?"

"No, of course not." He smiles, and my lungs tighten, preventing me from breathing. It's not a perfect smile—his teeth are white, but one is slightly crooked on the bottom, and his lower lip has a tiny scar that wasn't visible until now—but it's magnetic nonetheless.

It's a smile nature designed for one purpose only: to lure in unwary women and make them forget the monster underneath.

My nails dig deeper into my palms, the bite of pain centering me as he says, "You have every right to hate me for what I did."

I gape at him. "Are you trying to *apologize*? Do you seriously think that—"

"You misunderstand." The smile disappears, and his silver eyes flash with sudden fury. "Your husband deserved it. If he

weren't brain dead, I would've made him suffer so much more."

I recoil instinctively, pushing my chair back, but before I can jump to my feet, his hand catches my wrist, shackling it to the table.

"I didn't say you could go, Sara." His voice is dark ice. "We're not done here yet."

His fingers are like a molten iron cuff around my wrist, his grip burning hot and unbreakable. I remain sitting and instinctively glance around. The nearest patrons are a good dozen feet away, and nobody is paying attention to us. Panic beats in my chest, but I remind myself the lack of attention is a good thing. I haven't forgotten how he threatened the others at the club.

Pushing my fear aside, I focus on slowing my breathing. "What do you want from me?"

"I'm trying to decide that," he says, his face smoothing out. Releasing my wrist, he picks up his coffee cup and takes a sip. "You see, Sara, I don't hate *you*."

I blink, caught off-guard again. "You don't?"

"No." He puts the cup down and regards me with cool gray eyes. "It probably seems that way, given what I've done to you, but I hold no ill will toward you. Just the opposite, in fact."

My pulse lurches before settling into a new frantic rhythm. "What do you mean?"

The corners of his mouth turn up. "What do you think it means, Sara? You intrigue me. You fascinate me, in fact." He leans in, his gaze pinning me in place. "You don't remember what you said to me when you were drugged, do you?"

A hot flush crawls up my neck and spreads over my face. I don't remember everything from that night, but I remember enough. Bits and pieces from my drugged confession surface in my mind at random times when I'm awake and pop into my dreams at night.

Into my *most twisted* dreams, the ones I try not to think about.

“I see you do remember.” His voice turns low and husky, his lids lowering halfway as his large, warm hand settles over my trembling palm. “I’ve been wondering what would’ve happened if I’d stayed that night... if I’d taken you up on your offer.”

His touch burns through me before I yank my hand away, clenching it into a fist under the table. “There was no offer.” My heart is pounding in my ears, my voice tight with mortification. “I was high. I didn’t know what I was saying.”

“I know. Drugs that lower inhibitions tend to have that effect.” He leans back, freeing me from the potent effect of his nearness, and my lungs drag in a full breath for the first time in two minutes. “You didn’t know who I was or what I was doing. You would’ve reacted similarly to any other reasonably attractive man who had you in that position.”

“That’s... that’s right.” My face is still blazing hot, but the rational explanation steadies me a little. “You could’ve been anyone. It wasn’t directed at you.”

“Yes. But you see, Sara”—he leans in again, his gaze filled with dark intensity—“my reaction *was* directed at you. *I* wasn’t drugged, and when you came on to me, I wanted you. I *still* want you.”

Horror ices my blood even as my sex clenches in response. He can’t be saying what I think he’s saying. “You’re—you’re insane.” I feel like I’ve been dropped from a plane with no parachute. “I’m not... This is just sick.” I want to jump up and run, but I press on, pushing through the panic. I have to make this clear to him, put a stop to this insanity once and for all. “I don’t care what you want, or what your reaction was. I’m not going to sleep with you after you killed my husband and God knows how many others. After you *tortured* me and—”

“I know, Sara.” His hand finds my knee under the table and rests on it. “I wish I could go back, because I would’ve found a different way.”

Startled, I push my chair to the side, scooting out of his reach. “You wouldn’t have killed George?”

“I wouldn’t have tortured you,” he clarifies, placing his hand back on the table. “I could’ve located that *sookin syn* some other way. It would’ve taken longer, but it would’ve been worth it not to hurt you.”

My freefall from the plane resumes, the air whooshing past my ears. What planet is this man from? “You think torturing me is a problem, but *killing my husband* would’ve been okay?”

“The husband who lied to you? The one you said you didn’t really know?” Rage ignites in his eyes again. “You can tell yourself whatever you want, Sara, but I did you a favor. I did the whole fucking world a favor by getting rid of him.”

“A favor?” An answering fury blazes to life inside me, burning away all caution. “He was a good man, you... you *psycho!* I don’t know what you think he did, but—”

“He massacred my wife and son.”

Shock paralyzes my vocal cords. “*What?*” I gasp out when I can finally speak.

A muscle pulses in Peter’s jaw. “Do you know what your husband did for a living, Sara? What he *really* did?”

A sick sensation spreads through me. “He was a... a foreign correspondent.”

“That was his cover, yes.” The Russian’s upper lip curls as he straightens in his seat. “I figured you didn’t know. The spouses rarely know, even when they sense the lies.”

My world tilts off its axis. “What do you mean, cover? He *was* a journalist. He wrote stories for—”

“Yes, he did. And in the process of getting those stories, he gathered information for the CIA and carried out covert missions for them.”

“What? No.” I frantically shake my head. “You’re wrong. You made a mistake. You had the wrong man. I *knew* you

must've had the wrong man. George wasn't a spy. That's impossible. He didn't even know how to change a tire. He—"

"He was recruited in college," Peter says flatly. "University of Chicago, which you both attended. They often do that, hit up college campuses to round up the best and the brightest. They look for certain things: few family ties, a patriotic bent, smart and ambitious but lacking focus... Any of that sound like your husband?"

I stare at him, my chest squeezing tighter and tighter. George's mother died in a car accident during his last year of high school, and his father, a Marine, had been killed in Afghanistan when George was just a baby. His elderly uncle helped put him through college, but he died too, several years back, leaving only distant cousins to attend George's funeral six months ago.

No. It couldn't be true. I would've known.

"Only if he told you," Peter says, and I realize I spoke my last thought out loud. "They teach them how to conceal their real job from everyone, even their own families. Didn't you find it suspicious how Cobakis discovered his passion for journalism overnight? How one day he was a biology major, and then he was interning at magazines abroad?"

"No, I—" My chest is so tight I can barely take a breath. "That's just college. You're supposed to discover yourself, find your passion."

"And he did: working for your government." There's no mercy in the Russian's silver gaze. "They trained him, gave him the focus he was lacking. Taught him how to lie to you and everyone else. When he graduated, they got him a job at the paper, and he had an excuse to go to every hotspot in the world."

I jump to my feet, unable to listen further. "You're wrong. You don't know what you're talking about."

He stands up too, his large frame towering over me. "Don't I? Think back, Sara. Think back to the man you married, to the life you *really* had together. Not the perfect one you showed to

the world, but the one you led behind closed doors. Who was he, this husband of yours? How well did you really know him?"

My insides feel like lead as I take a step back, my head shaking in nonstop denial. "You're wrong," I repeat in a choked voice, and spinning around, I run out of the coffeeshop, heading blindly for my car.

It's only when I stop at a red light near my house that I realize Peter Sokolov didn't do anything to stop me.

He just stood there and watched me go.

CHAPTER 15

Peter

I watch through the binoculars as Sara enters her parents' house; then I open my laptop and bring up the camera feed from inside the hallway.

Sara's parents live in a small, neat house that could use a few upgrades but is otherwise warm and cozy. Even I can tell it's a home, not just a place to live. For some bizarre reason, it reminds me of Tamila's house in Daryevo, though this suburban American home is nothing like a mountain village hut.

Sara kisses both of her parents in the hallway, then follows them to the dining room. I switch to the camera feed there, zooming in on her face as she greets the other guests—an older couple and a tall, lean man in his mid-thirties.

It's the Levinsons and their son Joe, the lawyer Sara's parents want her to date.

Something ugly stirs inside me as Sara shakes the lawyer's hand with a polite smile. I don't want to see her with him; just the idea of it makes me want to plunge my blade between his ribs. Yesterday, when the bartender was smiling at her, I wanted to smash my fist into his grinning mug, and the violent urge is even stronger today.

I might not have claimed her yet, but she's going to be mine.

Sara helps her parents bring out the appetizers and sits down next to the lawyer. I crank up the audio feed and listen as the two of them make small talk. For someone who just found out about her husband's double life, the little doctor is remarkably composed, her smiling mask firmly in place. Nobody looking at her would know that before coming here, she hid in her closet for hours and emerged less than forty minutes ago with her eyes red and swollen.

Nobody would suspect she's terrified because I want her.

It took everything I had to let her stay in that closet and cry on her own. She went in there to escape my cameras, and I let her have this time to herself. She would've been even more upset if I'd gone in and embraced her—if I'd tried to comfort her the way I wanted.

I need to give her more time to get used to the idea of us—and to trust I won't hurt her.

The dinner lasts a couple of hours; then Sara helps her mother clear off the table and makes an excuse to leave. The lawyer asks for her phone number, and she gives it, but I can see it's mostly out of politeness. Her cheeks are perfectly pale—there isn't even a hint of the color that floods her face in my presence—and her body language speaks of indifference. Joe Levinson doesn't excite her, and that's a good thing.

It means he gets to go home alive.

I follow Sara at a distance as she drives to the clinic, and then I wait in my car until she emerges, entertaining myself by watching her through the cameras I installed inside the clinic. I know what I'm doing is stalker behavior at best, but I can't stop myself.

I have to know where she is and what she's doing.

I have to make sure she's safe.

I could entrust the physical guard duty to Anton and my other guys—they already watch her when I can't—but I want to be here in person. I want to see her with my own eyes. With each day that passes, my need for her intensifies, and now that

I've held an actual conversation with her, my fascination is quickly morphing into an obsession.

I have to have her. Soon.

She comes out of the clinic some three hours later, and I follow her as she drives to a hotel. She probably thinks she'll be safer there than at her house with all the cameras, but she's wrong.

I wait until she checks into the hotel and goes up to her room, and then I get out of the car and go in.

CHAPTER 16

Sara

The clinic shift was particularly rough today. I had a fourteen-year-old patient who asked for morning-after pills because her brother raped her and another patient barely out of her teens who came in with her third miscarriage. I did what I could, but I know it's not enough.

Nothing I do for those girls will ever be enough.

I'm so emotionally drained it takes all my energy to shower and brush my teeth with the little toothbrush the front desk gave me. Coming here for the night was an impulse decision, so I don't even have a change of underwear with me. I'll have to stop by my house tomorrow morning before going to work, but it's better than being home and knowing that my deadly stalker might be watching me at that very moment.

Watching me and wanting me. Maybe even jacking off at the sight of my naked body.

It's sick, but heat licks between my legs at the thought.

Exiting the shower, I wrap a towel around my chest and stare at myself in the mirror. Visine eye drops did a good job of removing the redness from my eyes, but my lids still look swollen from my crying jag earlier today, and my face is reddened from the hot shower. I also have a tension headache that makes me disinclined to think, which is just as well.

I did too much thinking earlier as is.

George as a spy. George leading a double life. It seems impossible, yet it would explain so much. The FBI agents' protection that came out of nowhere. His long absences when he supposedly chased a story yet often came home without one. The moods that started shortly after our marriage six years earlier. Did something go wrong on one of his covert assignments?

Could his real job be the reason he changed so much in the years leading up to the accident?

My headache intensifies, and I realize I'm doing it again. I'm thinking about George, obsessing about the past I can't change rather than focusing on the future that's still within my control. I should be trying to figure out what to do about the killer who's stalking me, but my mind simply refuses to go there.

I'll think about him later, when I've had some sleep and my brain isn't so fried.

Wrapping a second towel around my dripping hair, I open the bathroom door, step out, and jump up with a startled scream.

Peter Sokolov is sitting on the bed, his hooded gaze trained on my face.

CHAPTER 17

Sara

“Don’t scream, Sara.” He rises fluidly to his feet. “No need to involve the other guests in this.”

I gasp for air, needles of adrenaline piercing my skin as he comes toward me, his large body moving with predatory ease.

“You... you followed me here.” My knees knock together as I instinctively back away, clutching the flimsy towel covering my body.

“Yes.” He stops a couple of feet from me, his gray eyes gleaming. “You shouldn’t have come here. Your alarm system at home poses at least a small challenge. Here, I can walk right in.”

“Why are you here?” My heart feels like it’s about to jump out of my throat. “What do you want?”

His lips twitch in dark amusement. “You’re a doctor who deals with the effects of this activity. You can probably guess what I want.”

Oh God. My skin feels both hot and icy, and my pulse jacks up even more. “Get out. I—I will scream, I swear.”

He tilts his head quizzically. “Will you? Why haven’t you done so yet?”

I take another step back, my gaze flicking to the room door for a fraction of a second. *Would I make it before he catches*

me?

“Don’t try it, Sara. If you run, I *will* chase you.”

I continue backing away. “I told you, I’m not sleeping with you.”

“No? We’ll see about that.”

He comes toward me, and I back up more, my stomach twisting. I know what sexual assault does to women; I’ve seen the aftermath, the physical and emotional wreckage left behind. I don’t know if I can survive that on top of everything else.

I don’t know if I can survive it from *him*.

My trembling hand touches the door, but before I can twist the knob, his palms slap against the door on each side of me, caging me between his powerful arms.

“You can’t escape me, *ptichka*,” he says softly, gazing down at me. “Not now, and not ever. You might as well get used to that.”

He’s not touching me, but he’s so close I can feel the heat coming off his large body and see a couple more tiny scars on his symmetrical face. The imperfections add a deadly edge to his magnetism, intensifying its impact on my senses. My heartbeat is a panicked roar in my ears, yet my body tightens in a way that has nothing to do with fear. I should be screaming my head off, or at least trying to fight him, but I can’t move. I can’t do anything but stare at the lethally beautiful killer holding me captive.

“Come, Sara.” His hand slides down to lock around my wrist in a familiar iron shackle. “I won’t hurt you.”

I inhale shakily. “You won’t?” Maybe he’ll be gentle. *Please, let him at least be gentle.* I’ve experienced violence at his hands, and it terrifies me even more than the specter of rape.

“No. Now come.”

He pushes away from the door, but instead of leading me to the bed, he takes me to the chair in front of the vanity

mirror.

“Sit.” He presses down on my shoulders, and I sink into the chair, trying to steady my ragged breathing. What is he doing? Why isn’t he just attacking me? My face in the mirror is deathly pale, my eyes wide as he steps behind me and pulls something from the inner pocket of his jacket.

It’s a small hairbrush wrapped in plastic—one of those cheap ones they sometimes give out in hotels and upscale airlines.

“This is all they had at the gift shop downstairs,” he says, removing the plastic wrap before meeting my gaze in the mirror. “I figured it’s better than nothing.”

Better than nothing for what? Some weird kinky game? My throat constricts, but before the panic can overtake me, he unwraps the towel on my head and drops it on the floor. His strong, sun-browned hands look huge next to my skull as he gathers my hair into a wet ponytail and begins working through the knots with the brush.

Shock steals all air from my lungs. My husband’s killer—the man who’s been stalking me—is *brushing my hair*.

His touch is gentle but sure, lacking any trace of hesitation. It’s as if he’s done this a dozen times before. He runs the brush through the ends first, getting them smooth and tangle-free; then he systematically moves up until the small brush can run through the entire length of my hair without snagging. And throughout the process, there’s no pain—just the opposite, in fact. The plastic bristles massage my skull with every stroke, and prickles of pleasure run down my spine whenever his warm fingers brush against the sensitive skin of my nape.

Fear or not, it’s the most sensuous experience of my life.

A strange sense of unreality seizes me as I sit there, watching him brush my hair in the mirror. In each of our prior encounters, I’d been so focused on the danger he poses I didn’t pay attention to less important things, like his clothes. So now, for the first time, I notice that he’s wearing a distressed gray leather jacket over a black thermal shirt and a pair of dark

jeans paired with black boots. The clothes are casual, something any man might wear during early spring in Illinois, but there's no mistaking my tormentor for a regular guy on the street.

Peter Sokolov is nothing less than a force of nature, ruthless and completely unstoppable.

He brushes my hair for several long minutes while I sit as still as I can, not daring to twitch a muscle lest I do something to make him stop. Each stroke of the brush feels like a caress, each touch of his rough hands soothing and thrilling at the same time. More importantly, while he's brushing my hair, he's not doing other things to me—things I'm dreading.

All too soon, however, he puts the brush down on the vanity table, and his eyes catch mine in the mirror. "Up," he orders, his hands curling around my bare shoulders and propelling me to my feet.

Swallowing thickly, I turn around to face him when he releases me, but he's already stepped away and is removing his jacket.

My heart sinking, I watch as he hangs the jacket on the chair and reaches for the bottom of his long-sleeved thermal shirt. In one smooth move, he pulls the shirt off over his head, and my breath hitches in my throat as he hangs it over the jacket.

His shoulders are wide, his arms roped with thick, clearly defined layers of muscle. More muscle covers his lean, V-shaped torso, and his flat, ridged abdomen lacks even a hint of fat. Like his hands, his chest and shoulders are tanned, as if he's spent a lot of time in the sun, and his left arm is almost completely covered by tattoos that extend from the top of his shoulder to his wrist. Amidst a dusting of dark hair on his chest, I see several more faded scars, and I catch myself staring at the sexy trail of hair that starts at his navel and disappears into the waistband of his low-slung jeans.

He reaches for the jeans next, unzipping the fly, and I force myself to look away. Despite his primal male beauty, a layer of cold sweat covers my body, and my pulse is sickeningly fast.

He might be a gorgeous beast, but that's all he is: a beast, a cold-hearted monster. It doesn't matter that under different circumstances, I would've been wildly attracted to him. I don't want what's about to happen. It would devastate me.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see him step out of his boots and push his jeans down his legs, revealing a pair of navy briefs stretched over a thick, long bulge, and powerful legs dusted with dark hair. He bends to remove the jeans completely, and my terror reaches a new peak.

Forgetting his warnings, I bolt for the door.

This time, I don't even get near my goal. He catches me two feet from the door, one strong arm looping around my ribcage and lifting me off my feet while his other hand slaps over my mouth, muffling my instinctive scream.

I claw at his forearms, my feet kicking at his shins as he carries me to the bed, but it's useless. All I achieve is having the towel unwrap in the back. His arm around my ribcage keeps it from falling to the floor, but my back, buttocks, and the right side of my body are completely exposed. I can feel his bare chest rubbing against my back, smell the clean male musk of his skin, and the unwanted intimacy intensifies my panic, making me struggle even harder.

"Fuck," he growls as my heel connects with his knee, and I feel a small flare of triumph.

It doesn't last long. A second later, he falls backward on the bed, dragging me with him, and before I can react, he rolls over, pinning me underneath him. I end up facedown on the blanket, my hands scratching uselessly at the soft surface and my legs weighed down by his heavily muscled calves. With his palm over my mouth, I can't do anything except make muffled noises, and tears of panic burn my eyes as I feel the hard log of his erection against the curve of my ass. Only his briefs separate us now, and I double my struggles despite the futility of it all.

It takes a couple of minutes for me to wear myself out—and to realize he's not moving.

He's restraining me, but he's making no attempts to take me.

"Are you done now?" he murmurs when I go limp, my muscles shaking from exertion and my lungs screaming for air. "Or do you want to wrestle some more? I can do this all night long."

I believe him. He's so much bigger than me that all he has to do is lie on top, and I can neither hurt him nor get away. The effort expended on his part is minimal, while I'm using all my strength with zero success.

"Will you behave if I remove my hand?" His lips hover just above my ear, his breath heating my skin.

My shoulders bunch up to protect my neck from those encroaching lips, and he lets out an audible sigh. "All right, I guess I'll gag you and get my handcuffs."

I make a muffled noise behind his palm, and he chuckles. "No? Will you behave then?"

I manage a small nod. Defeat is an acrid burn in my throat, but I don't want to be gagged and cuffed.

"Good girl." He shifts off me and removes his hand from my mouth, enabling me to drag air into my oxygen-starved lungs. "Now that you got that out of your system, how about we go to sleep? I know you have a long day tomorrow, and so do I."

"What?" I'm so startled I roll over onto my back, forgetting my nudity.

A slow, wicked smile curves his mouth as his gaze travels over my body before returning to my face. "Sleep, ptichka. We both need it."

I sit up and grab a pillow, holding it pressed against my chest as I scoot toward the headboard—as far away from him as the bed allows. What he's saying makes no sense. He clearly wants me; his huge erection is all but tearing through his briefs. "You... you want to *sleep* with me? *Just* sleep?"

The smile leaves his face, and his eyes gleam with dark heat. “Obviously, I want more, but tonight, I’ll settle for sleep. I told you, Sara—I won’t hurt you again. I’ll wait until you’re ready... until you want me as much as I want you.”

Want him? I want to scream that he’s insane, that I will never voluntarily have sex with him, but I swallow the retort. I’m too vulnerable right now, and he’s too unpredictable. Besides, when he’s asleep, I’ll have a chance to get away—maybe even smack him over the head and call the cops.

“All right.” I try to look even more helpless than I truly am. “If you promise not to hurt me...”

His lips quirk. “I promise.” Getting off the bed, he pulls the blanket from under me with one strong tug and turns it down before fluffing up the remaining pillows. Patting the exposed sheets, he says, “Come here.”

I scoot a few inches toward him, hugging my pillow to my chest.

“Closer.”

I repeat the maneuver, my heart thudding with anxiety. I don’t trust him one bit. He could be toying with me, lying about his intentions for some bizarre purpose.

“Get under the blanket,” he says, and I obey, glad to have something other than a pillow to cover me. Unfortunately, my relief is short-lived. As soon as I lie down, he turns off the overhead light and gets under the blanket next to me, his long, muscular body stretching out beside me like he belongs there.

“Roll over onto your right side,” he says and does so himself after turning off the bedside lamp—our last remaining source of illumination.

My ribcage tightens as I understand what he intends.

My husband’s killer wants to spoon with me.

Ignoring the disorienting darkness and the choking feeling in my throat, I turn onto my side and try to breathe evenly as one muscular arm stretches out under the pillow below me and the other one wraps possessively around my ribcage, pulling

me into the curve of his big body. However, breathing evenly is impossible. My naked butt nestles against the hard length of his cock, his warm, minty breath fans the fine hair at my temple, and his legs mold against mine from the back. I'm surrounded, completely overtaken by his size and strength. And heat. God, his body generates so much heat. Wherever his bare flesh presses against mine, I feel burned, as if he runs hotter than a regular human being. Except it's not him—it's me. I'm so frozen I'm shivering, the cold sweat having evaporated on my skin.

I don't know how long we lie there like that, but eventually, his warmth seeps into me and transforms into a different kind of heat, the treacherous one that invades my dreams and makes me burn with shame. Now that I'm not so terrified, I'm aware of his powerful body as something more than a threat... of his hard cock as something other than a tool of violation. His warm male scent surrounds me, and my breasts feel heavy and sensitive above the thick band of his arm, my nipples tight and my sex aching with slick, throbbing emptiness. How long has it been since I've been held like this? Two years? Three? I can't recall the last time George and I had sex, much less lay together like lovers, and despite the wrongness of the situation, the animal part of me enjoys being held like this, feeling the warmth of a man's body and the pulsing hum of arousal in my core.

It's a good thing I'm not planning to sleep, because there's no way I'd be able to like this—not with my heart racing a mile a minute and my mind outpacing it with a scramble of thoughts. Fear and anger, arousal and shame—it all blends together, spiking my heart rate and souring my stomach. What does Peter really want? What does he get out of this bizarre cuddling? That massive erection must be uncomfortable, if not downright painful, but he seems content to lie there, doing nothing more than holding me. Why? What's his deal? Why did he latch on to me?

And could it possibly be true, what he said about George? Could my husband have somehow harmed his family?

It's the worst idea in the world, but I can't stop myself. My mouth seems to operate independently of my brain as I whisper, "Um, Peter... can you tell me something about yourself?"

I can feel his surprise in the minute tightening of his muscles and the change in his breathing. I've never addressed him by his name before, but it would be strange to call him anything else when I'm lying naked in his arms. Also, a little emotional intimacy might make him more inclined to answer my questions—and less likely to hurt me for asking them.

"What do you want to know?" he murmurs after a second, shifting to fit me more comfortably against him.

Why do you think my husband massacred your family? That's what I'm dying to ask, but I'm not stupid enough to go there directly. I remember his rage the last time we touched on this topic. Instead, I say softly, "They told me you were born in Russia. Is that true?"

"Yes." His deep voice takes on a note of amusement. "You can't tell by the accent?"

"It's very mild, so no. You could be from pretty much anywhere in Europe or the Middle East. In general, your English is excellent." I'm speaking too fast from nervousness, so I make myself take a breath and slow down. "Did you learn it in school?"

"No, at my job."

The job where he tracked down and interrogated supposed threats to Russia? I suppress a shudder and try not to think about those interrogation methods. *Keep it light*, I tell myself. *Work up to the heavy stuff*. In an upbeat tone, I say, "As an adult? That's impressive. Usually, you have to learn a language as a child to be able to speak it as well as you do."

There, that's good. A little flattery, a little genuine admiration. That's what you're supposed to do when you're in a vulnerable position: establish a rapport with your attacker, make him see you as someone he can empathize with. Of course, that strategy hinges on said attacker's ability to

empathize—something I suspect the psychopath wrapped around me is missing.

“Well, I did learn a few English words and phrases as a child,” he says. “I suppose that helped.”

“Oh? Where did you learn them? In school, or from your parents?”

He chuckles, his muscular chest expanding against my back. “Neither. Just from American movies. They’re your main export, you know—that and hamburgers.”

“Right.” I inhale, trying to ignore the heavy arm slung across my ribcage and the hard evidence of his arousal throbbing against my ass. It bothers me in ways I don’t care to think about. “So what made you decide to go into your... um, profession?”

He buries his nose in my hair and inhales deeply, as if breathing me in. “What exactly did Ryson tell you?”

I tense at his casual use of the agent’s last name, then force myself to relax. Of course he’d know who Ryson is; he likely saw us talk at the cafe. “He said you were Russian Special Forces. Is that right?”

“Yes.” His voice sounds husky as he shifts behind me again, his cock like a steel pole pressed against me. “I headed a small off-the-books unit specializing in counterterrorism and counterinsurgency.”

“That’s... unusual.” Talking to him—and thus keeping him awake in this aroused state—is probably not such a great idea, but I can’t make myself shut up. “How does one get into something like that? Did you join the army and get recruited there?”

“No.” He continues to nuzzle his face against my hair. “They found me in what you would call juvie.”

“A prison for juvenile delinquents?”

“It was more of a labor camp, but yes.”

“What—” I swallow, trying to concentrate on his words rather than the effect his obvious desire for me is having on

my body. “What did you do to end up there?”

This has nothing to do with George, but I can’t suppress my curiosity. I suspect that whatever I learn will only frighten me more, but I want to know what makes my enemy tick.

I want to know his weaknesses, so I can use them against him.

“I killed the headmaster of the orphanage where I was raised.” There’s no trace of regret or apology in Peter’s words, no emotion beyond the lust thickening his voice. He could just as well have been relaying what he had for dinner. “I guess you could say I started on my career path early.”

“I see.” My skin crawls, but I do my best to sound calm. “How old were you?”

“Eleven, almost twelve.”

“What did he do to you?”

He sighs and pulls back slightly. “Does it really matter, ptichka? You’ve made up your mind about me, and no sob story from my past is likely to change it. Right now, you hate me too much to feel anything other than joy at whatever misfortune I might’ve endured.”

So much for building that emotional rapport. “Well, what did you expect?” I ask bitterly, dropping all pretense of sympathetic listening. “That you could torture me and kill my husband, and we’d be pals?”

“No, ptichka. Despite what you may think, I’m not delusional. Your negative feelings toward me are rational and expected. I’m just hoping to change them over time.”

He *is* delusional if he thinks I’ll ever feel anything but hatred toward him, but I don’t bother arguing. “What is that word you keep calling me? Ptee-something?”

“Ptichka.” He resumes nuzzling my hair, or smelling it, or whatever the hell he’s doing. “It means *little bird* in Russian.”

My hands fist in the blanket in front of me. “A bird?”

“Hmm. A small songbird, pretty and graceful like you.” He pauses, then adds softly, “Also caged, like you.”

The asshole. I clench my teeth and try to shift away from him as much as the restraining arm around my waist would allow. “That’s a temporary situation.”

“Oh, I don’t mean caged by me.” I can hear the smile in his voice as he tightens his grip on me, preventing me from squirming away. “I might be holding you at the moment, but you were imprisoned long before I entered your life.”

I freeze in surprise. “What?”

“Oh, yes. Don’t pretend you don’t know what I’m talking about, Sara. I know you’ve felt it: all the expectations from society, from your parents and your husband and your friends... The pressure to succeed because you were born smart and pretty, the desire to be perfect, the need to be everything to everyone at all times...” His voice is soft and dark, wrapping me in a silky, seductive web. “I saw it in the club yesterday: your longing for freedom, your desire to live without the restraints placed on you. For a few moments on that dance floor, you let the shackles fall away, and I saw the pretty bird exit her golden cage and fly free. I saw *you*, Sara, and it was beautiful.”

For a couple of seconds, all I can do is lie unmoving, my chest aching and my eyes burning in the darkness. I want to laugh and deny his words, but I’m afraid that if I try to speak, I’ll break down and scream. How could this man, this violent stranger, know something so private—something I’ve just begun to understand about myself?

How could he know that my nice, comfortable life no longer makes me happy... that maybe it never did?

Forcing down the swelling bubble in my throat, I let out a derisive snort and say, “So you’re going to... what? Liberate me from my restrictive life? Set me free and watch me fly?”

“No, ptichka.” His voice is filled with gentle mockery. “Nothing as noble as that.”

“What then?”

“I’m going to place you in a cage of my own and make you sing.”

CHAPTER 18

Peter

She shudders in my arms, and I feel the fear rippling through her. A part of me regrets my brutal honesty, but I can't bring myself to lie to her. My desire for her is nothing like the gentle affection I'd felt for Tamila or the straightforward lust I'd experienced with other women.

My need for Sara is darker, tainted by what passed between us and the knowledge that she used to belong to my enemy. I don't want to hurt her, yet I can't deny that her suffering appeals to me in some perverse way. Tormenting her cools my burning rage, satisfies my need to punish and avenge, even as I tell myself I want to heal her, to atone for the pain I inflicted.

When it comes to Sara, I'm a mess of contradictions, and the only thing I'm sure of is that a simple fucking won't be enough.

I want more.

I want to make her mine.

It's tempting to break my promise and take her now, to claim her and ease the hunger consuming me alive. She's completely naked in my embrace, her bare skin rubbing against mine each time she takes a breath. I can smell the flowery shampoo in her damp hair, feel the softness of her breasts resting on my arm, and my cock throbs painfully

against the curve of her ass, my body aching with the need to thrust inside her. She'd fight at first, but I could make her like it.

She's not immune to me. I know it. I sense it.

Before the dark impulse can take over, I draw in a breath and let it out slowly. As good as it would feel to fuck Sara, I want her trust as much as her body.

I want her to sing for me of her own accord.

"Go to sleep, ptichka," I murmur when she remains silent, all her questions choked off for now. "You'll be safe tonight."

And ignoring the hunger raging through my body, I close my eyes and sink into a light but restful sleep.

* * *

I wake up three times during the night, twice when Sara tries to free herself from my embrace—undoubtedly to escape and do something painful to me—and once when she wakes up from a bad dream. I hold her tighter in each case, and she eventually falls asleep again. After a while, so do I, though the lust gnawing at me only grows more intense throughout the night. By morning, I'm ready to explode, and it takes all of twenty seconds to jerk off when I go use the restroom.

She's still asleep when I come out of the bathroom, and I contemplate getting back under the covers with her. However, it's almost seven, and I want to catch up with Anton before he crashes for the day. I'm also not entirely certain of my self-control; the quick release barely took the edge off my violent craving for her.

If I climb into bed with Sara again, I run the risk of breaking my promise.

Deciding against tempting fate, I quietly dress and slip out of the room.

I'll see Sara again soon. In the meanwhile, there's work to be done.

CHAPTER 19

Sara

I have a scheduled C-section in the morning and an unscheduled one in the afternoon. In between, I see a woman who has painful menstrual cramps but can't tolerate the usual remedy of hormonal birth control—something I empathize with very much—and another one who's been trying to get pregnant for two years without much success. I schedule an ultrasound for the first one to check for endometriomas and refer the second one to a fertility specialist. As soon as I'm done with that, I get called to the ER to examine a six-months-pregnant woman who's been in a bad car accident. Luckily, I'm able to tell her that the baby is healthy and kicking—the best possible outcome in a head-on collision of that magnitude.

It surprises me that I'm able to focus on my work after last night, but for the first time in months, dark memories don't invade my mind at every turn, and the paranoia of the past month is absent. Perversely, now that I *know* I'm being watched, the idea doesn't fill me with as much anxiety as when I just had that unnerving sensation. I also feel well rested and alert with minimal caffeine consumption, and I suspect it's because I got a solid nine hours of sleep despite the hard body wrapped around me all night.

Or maybe *because* of it. No matter how hard I tried to stay awake last night, the animal warmth coming off Peter's skin

and his even breathing lured me to sleep. I woke up a couple of times throughout the night to try to extricate myself from him, but it was impossible. He held me with the intensity of a child clutching his favorite teddy bear, and eventually, I gave in and simply slept, my subconscious mind blissfully unaware that the source of my nightmares was right next to me.

In any case, whatever the reason, I remain calm and focused throughout my shift. It helps that I've managed to suppress all thoughts of Peter and his intentions, shoving them to the back of my mind while I concentrate on my patients. If I let myself dwell on his declaration, I would run out of the hospital screaming, and who knows what my stalker would do then? When I woke up alive and unharmed this morning, I decided that the best course of action is to take it one day at a time and avoid provoking him as much as I can.

Maybe he'll play nice for a while longer, and I'll have time to figure out what to do.

When my shift is over, I head to the locker room and run into Andy in the hallway. She must be just starting her shift, because her scrubs look perfectly pressed and her curly hair is drawn into a neat bun, without a single strand out of place.

By the end of a long shift, most nurses and doctors—myself included—look far more disheveled.

“Hey,” she says, stopping in front of me. “Everything okay?”

I blink. “Um, yeah.” She can't know about Peter, can she? “Why?”

“You said you weren't feeling well the other night,” Andy says, a small frown tugging at her forehead. “When you hightailed it from the club.”

“Oh, yeah, sorry about that.” I attempt an embarrassed smile. “I had too much to drink, and it hit me hard. I think I puked when I got home, but it's all kind of fuzzy now.”

“Ah, I see.” A relieved grin replaces the worry on her face. “I thought maybe you were upset about something. You looked like someone shot your favorite pony in front of you.”

I laugh and shake my head, though she's not far from the truth. "I'm afraid the only victim was my liver."

Andy laughs, then asks, "What are you doing next Saturday? Tonya and Marsha are planning another girls' night out, but I was thinking of just grabbing dinner and a movie with Larry—both at a reasonable hour, since I have an early shift next Sunday. Want to join us?"

"You and your boyfriend?" I give her a surprised look. "Wouldn't I be the third wheel?"

"Well..." An impish grin lights up her freckled face. "As it so happens, Larry has a very handsome—and very successful—friend who's dying to meet a nice girl. He's a real estate mogul, and he has an impossible list of requirements, but"—she lifts a finger when I'm about to interrupt—"you happen to fit all of them. If you're cool with it, Larry will invite him along, and we could have a nice double date."

I wrinkle my nose. "Oh, I don't know about that—"

"He's a good-looking dude. Here." She pulls a phone out of her pocket, swipes across the screen a few times, and shows me a picture of a guy who looks like a blond Tom Cruise. "See? You could definitely do much worse."

I chuckle. "For sure, but—"

"No buts." She holds up her hand when I'm about to argue. "Just come, and we'll have fun. No pressure to do anything. If you like Larry's friend, great. If not, you and I will bail to join the girls, and Larry can have a boys' night out—he's been hankering for one for ages."

I hesitate, then regretfully shake my head. "Thank you, but I can't." I don't know if Peter poses a threat to Andy or her boyfriend, but I don't want to risk it. With the Russian killer watching my every move, every person around me could become his target.

Until my stalker situation is resolved, it's best if I keep to myself.

Andy's face falls. "Oh, okay. Well, if you change your mind, ping me. Marsha has my number."

“I will, thanks,” I say, but Andy is already hurrying away, walking as fast as her white sneakers allow.

* * *

On my way home, I listen to Kelly Clarkson’s “Stronger” and fight the urge to keep driving until I’m in another state. Or maybe even in another country. Canada and Mexico both sound appealing, as do Antarctica and Timbuktu. Instead of going to my camera-infested house, I could drive straight to the airport and hop on a plane to somewhere—anywhere.

I’d go to the North Pole if I had a guarantee Peter wouldn’t come after me.

Unfortunately, I don’t have that guarantee. Just the opposite, in fact. If I run, he’ll come after me. I’m sure of that. He’s a hunter, a tracker, and he won’t rest until he finds me, just like he found all the people on his list. I could go to another hotel or another continent, and it wouldn’t make any difference.

He won’t leave me alone until he gets what he wants—whatever that is.

My palms feel slippery on the steering wheel, and I realize I’m breathing fast, my calm dissipating as thoughts of last night creep in. I’m still not certain what he’s after, but it seems to be something other than just sex.

Something darker and far more twisted.

Realizing I’m on the verge of another panic attack, I switch from Kelly Clarkson to classical music and start doing my breathing exercises. Maybe I’m making a mistake by not going to the FBI. There’s at least a chance they might be able to protect me, whereas on my own I stand no chance at all. The best I can hope for is that he’ll get bored with me and move on to his next victim, leaving me alive and with most of my sanity intact.

I’m already reaching for my phone when I remember why I didn’t call Ryson right away: my parents. I can’t disappear and leave them, and it would be selfish to uproot them on the slim chance the FBI would be able to protect us. To explain

the necessity for the move, I'd have to tell my parents everything, and I don't know if my dad's heart would survive that kind of stress. He had a triple bypass several years ago, and the doctors advised him to keep stressful activities to a minimum. Learning about a homicidal stalker who tortured me and killed George could literally kill my dad, and might even be dangerous for my mom.

No. I won't do that to them. Getting my breathing under control, I put Kelly Clarkson back on. My parents have a happy, normal life, and I'll do whatever it takes to keep it that way. If that means I have to deal with Peter on my own, so be it.

Hopefully, I'm strong enough to survive whatever he'll dish out.

CHAPTER 20

Sara

What he dishes out is food. Lots of deliciously smelling food.

Stunned, I gape at the spread on my dining room table. There is a whole roasted chicken, a bowl of mashed potatoes, and a big leafy salad—all of it prettily arranged between lit candles and a bottle of white wine.

I figured I might get ambushed in my house tonight, but I didn't expect this.

“Hungry?” a deep, lightly accented voice asks from behind me, and I whirl around, my pulse leaping as Peter Sokolov steps out from the hallway. The front of his hair is wet, as if he just washed his face, and though he's dressed in a blue button-up shirt and a pair of dark jeans, he's not wearing shoes, only socks.

He looks gorgeous—and more dangerous than ever.

“What—” My voice is too high, so I take a breath and try again. “What is this?”

“Dinner,” he says, looking amused. “What does it look like?”

“I...” The air in the room thins as he stops a couple of feet from me, the intimate look in his eyes reminding me that I slept naked in his arms. “I'm not hungry.”

“No?” He arches his dark eyebrows. “All right, then. Let’s go to bed.” He moves as if to reach for me, and I jump back.

“No, wait! I could eat.”

A smile curves his lips. “I thought so. After you.”

He gestures in a courtly semi-circle, and I walk over to the table, trying to swallow my heart back into my chest as he turns off the overhead light, leaving only candlelight as illumination, and follows me to the table.

He pulls out a chair, and I sit in it. Then he walks over to the chair across from me and takes a seat himself. I notice that the table is set with two plates and my formal silverware—the one George liked me to use only for holidays and parties.

Silently, I watch George’s killer expertly cut up the chicken and put one of the drumsticks—my favorite part of the chicken—on my plate, along with several spoonfuls of mashed potatoes and a generous portion of the salad.

“Where did you get all this food?” I ask as he loads his own plate.

“I made it.” He looks up from his plate. “You like chicken, right?”

I do, but I’m not about to tell him that. “You cook?”

“I dabble.” He picks up his knife and fork. “Go ahead, try it.”

I push my chair back and get up. “I have to wash my hands.” I just came in from the garage, and the OCD doctor in me won’t let me touch food without first washing off the hospital germs.

“All right,” he says, putting down his utensils, and I realize he intends to wait for me.

My stalker has excellent table manners.

I go into the nearby bathroom and wash my hands, scrubbing between each finger and around my wrists like I always do. By the time I return to the table, he’s already poured us each a glass of wine, and the crisp smell of Pinot

Grigio mixes with the delicious aromas of the meal, adding to the bizarreness of the situation.

If I didn't know better, I'd think we're on a date.

"How did you know I'd come here instead of going to a hotel?" I ask when I'm seated.

He shrugs. "It was an educated guess. You're bright, so you're unlikely to make the same mistake twice."

"Uh-huh." I pick up my fork and try a bite of mashed potatoes. The rich, buttery flavor is bliss on my tongue, jumpstarting my appetite despite the anxiety roiling my stomach. "That's a lot of cooking to do on an educated guess."

"Yes, well, no risk, no reward, right? Besides, I've seen how you think and reason, Sara. You don't do stupid, pointless things, and going to another hotel would've been precisely that."

My hand tightens around my fork. "Is that right? You think you know me because you've stalked me for a few weeks?"

"No." His eyes gleam in the candlelight. "I don't know you, ptichka—at least not nearly as well as I'd like to."

Ignoring that provocative statement, I focus on my plate. Now that I've had a bite, my mouth is watering for more. Despite what I told Peter earlier, I'm starving, and I gladly dig into the delicious spread on my plate. The chicken is perfectly seasoned, the mashed potatoes are generously buttered, and the green salad is refreshingly tangy with an unusual lemony dressing. I'm so absorbed in eating that I'm halfway done with my plate when a frightening thought occurs to me.

Putting down my fork, I look up at my tormentor. "You didn't drug this or something, right?"

"If I did, it would be too late for you," he points out with amusement. "But no. You can relax. If I were going to drug or poison you, I'd use a syringe. No need to spoil perfectly good food."

I try to not react, but my hand shakes as I reach for my glass of wine. "Great. Glad to hear it."

He smiles at me, and I feel a warm, melting sensation between my legs. To hide my discomfort, I take several gulps of wine and put the glass down before refocusing on my plate.

I am *not* attracted to him. I refuse to be.

We eat in silence until our plates are empty; then Peter puts down his fork and picks up his wine glass. “Tell me something, Sara,” he says. “You’re twenty-eight now, and you’ve been a full-fledged doctor for two and a half years. How did you manage that? Were you one of those child geniuses with a super-high IQ?”

I push my empty plate aside. “Your stalking didn’t tell you that?”

“I didn’t do a deep dive into your background.” He takes a sip of wine and puts down his glass. “If you’d rather I do that, I can—or you can just talk to me, and we could get to know each other in a more traditional manner.”

I hesitate, then decide it wouldn’t hurt to talk to him. The longer we sit at the table, the longer I can postpone bedtime and all that it could entail.

“I’m not a genius,” I say, taking a small sip of wine. “I mean, I’m not dumb, but my IQ is within the normal range.”

“Then how did you become a doctor at twenty-six when it normally takes at least eight years after college?”

“I was an oops baby,” I say. When he continues looking at me, I explain, “I was born three years before my mom went through menopause. She was almost fifty when she got pregnant, and my dad was fifty-eight. They were both professors—they met when he was her Ph.D. advisor, actually, though they didn’t start dating until later—and neither of them wanted children. They had their careers, they had a great circle of friends, and they had each other. They were making plans for retirement that year, but instead, I happened.”

“How?”

I shrug. “A couple of drinks combined with the conviction that they were too old to worry about a broken condom.”

“So they didn’t want you?” His gray eyes darken, steel turning to gunmetal, and his mouth tightens.

If I didn’t know better, I’d think he’s angry on my behalf.

Shaking off the ridiculous thought, I say, “No, they did. At least, once they got over the shock of learning about the pregnancy. It wasn’t what they wanted or expected, but once I was there, born healthy despite all odds, they gave me everything. I became the center of their world, their personal little miracle. They had tenure, they had savings, and they embraced their new role as parents with the same dedication they gave their careers. I was showered with attention, taught to read and count to one hundred before I could walk. By the time I started kindergarten, I could read at fifth-grade level and knew basic algebra.”

The hard line of his mouth softens. “I see. So you had a huge leg-up on the competition.”

“Yes. I skipped two grades in elementary school and would’ve skipped more, but my parents didn’t think it would be good for my social development to be meaningfully younger than my classmates. As it was, I struggled to make friends in school, but that’s neither here nor there.” I pause to take another sip of wine. “I did end up finishing high school in three years because the curriculum was easy for me and I wanted to start college, and then I finished college in three years because I’d earned a lot of college credits by taking Advanced Placement classes in high school.”

“So that’s the four years.”

I nod. “Yes, that’s the four years.”

He studies me, and I shift in my chair, uncomfortable with the warmth in his eyes. My wine glass is mostly empty now, and I’m starting to feel the effects, the faint buzz of alcohol chasing away the worst of my anxiety and making me notice irrelevant things, like how his dark hair looks thick and silky to the touch, and how his mouth is soft and hard at the same time. He’s looking at me with admiration in his gaze... and something else, something that makes my skin feel hot and tight, as though I’m running a fever.

As if sensing it, Peter leans in, his lids lowering. “Sara...” His voice is low and deep, dangerously seductive. I can feel my breathing picking up as he covers my hand with his big palm and murmurs, “Ptichka, you’re—”

“Why do you think George hurt your family?” I yank my hand away, desperate to douse my growing arousal. “What happened to them?”

My question is like a bomb exploding in the sexually charged atmosphere. His gaze turns flat and hard, the warmth disappearing in a flash of icy rage.

“My family?” His hand clenches on the table. “You want to know what happened to them?”

I nod warily, fighting the instinct to jump up and back away. I have the terrifying feeling I just provoked a wounded predator, one who could rip me apart without even trying.

“All right.” His chair scrapes across the floor as he stands up. “Come here, and I’ll show you.”

CHAPTER 21

Peter

She remains seated, frozen in place. A fawn caught in the crosshairs of a hunter's rifle. I know I'm scaring her, but I can't bring myself to care—not with the pain and rage tearing me up inside.

Even after five and a half years, thinking of Pasha and Tamila's deaths has the power to destroy me.

"Come here," I repeat, stepping around the table. Grabbing Sara's arm, I pull her to her feet, ignoring her stiff posture. "You want to know? You want to see what your husband and his cohorts did?"

Her slim arm is tense in my grasp as I reach into my pocket with my free hand and take out my old smartphone. I always carry it with me, though it's not on any network and can't be used to make phone calls. Swiping across the screen with my thumb, I navigate to the last set of pictures.

"Here." I thrust the phone into her free hand. "Take a good look."

Sara's hand shakes as she lifts the phone to her face, and I know the exact moment she lays eyes on the first picture. Her face turns white, and she swallows convulsively before swiping across the screen to view the rest of the photos.

I don't glance at the phone myself—I don't need to. The images are burned into my retinas, etched into my brain like a

gruesome tattoo.

I took these pictures the day after I escaped from the soldiers who dragged me away from the scene. They'd already relocated the remaining villagers, but the investigation was just starting, and they hadn't cleaned up the bodies yet. When I returned, the corpses still lay there, covered by flies and crawling insects. I photographed everything: the burned-out buildings, the dark blood stains on the grass, the decomposing bodies and torn limbs, Pasha's tiny hand curled around the toy car... There were things I couldn't capture, like the stench of rotting flesh that hung thickly in the air and the desolate emptiness of an abandoned village, but what I did record is enough.

Sara lowers the phone, and I take it from her bloodless fingers, slipping it back into my pocket.

"That was Daryevo." I release her arm, each word like sandpaper scraping across my throat. "A small village in Dagestan where my wife and son lived."

Sara takes a step back. "What..." She swallows audibly. "What happened there? Why were they killed?"

I take a breath to control the violent anger churning inside me. "Because of some people's arrogance and blind ambition."

Sara gives me an uncomprehending look.

"It was a sting operation designed to capture a small but highly effective terrorist cell based in the Caucasus Mountains," I say harshly. "A group of NATO soldiers acted on information provided by a coalition of Western intelligence agencies. Everything was done under the radar so they wouldn't have to share the glory with the local counterterrorist groups—like the one I headed for Russia."

Sara covers her trembling mouth, and I see she's beginning to understand.

"That's right, ptichka." Stepping toward her, I capture her slender wrist and pull her hand away from her face. "You can guess who was involved in getting the soldiers that false information."

Her eyes are full of horror. “The terrorist cell wasn’t there?”

“No.” My grip on her wrist is punishingly tight, but I can’t make myself relax my fingers. With the memories fresh in my mind, I can’t help thinking of her as my dead enemy’s wife. “Nothing was there but a peaceful civilian village, and if your husband and the other operatives on his team had checked in with *my* team, they would have known that.” My voice grows rougher, my words more biting. “If they hadn’t been so fucking arrogant, so greedy for glory, they would’ve sought help instead of thinking they knew everything—and then they would’ve learned their source was planted by the terrorists themselves, and my wife and son would still be alive.”

I can feel the rapid flutter of Sara’s pulse as she stares up at me, and I see she doesn’t believe me—not completely, at least. She thinks I’m mad, or at best, misinformed. Her doubt enrages me further, and I force myself to release her wrist before I crush her fragile bones.

She immediately backs away, and I know she senses the violence pulsing under my skin. When I first learned the truth of what happened, I couldn’t punish the NATO soldiers or the operatives involved—the cover-up was remarkably fast and thorough—so I took out my fury on the terrorist cell that fed them the false information, followed by anyone dumb enough to stand in my way.

My son’s death unleashed the monster within me, and it still roams free.

When there’s a meter of distance between us, Sara stops backing away and regards me warily. “Is that why...” She bites her lip. “Is that why you became a fugitive? Because of what happened back then?”

My hands clench into fists, and I turn away, returning to the table. I can’t discuss this for even a second longer. Each sentence is like a spray of acid over my heart. I’ve gotten to the point where I can go several hours without thinking about my family’s violent deaths, but talking about what happened

brings back the devastation of that day—and the rage that consumed me.

If we stay on this topic, I might lose control and hurt Sara.

One movement at a time. One task at a time. I blank out my mind like I do when I'm on a job, and focus on what needs to be done. In this case, it's clearing the table, putting the leftovers in the fridge, and stacking the dishes in the dishwasher. I focus on those mundane activities, and gradually, my boiling fury eases, as does the urge to do violence.

When I start the dishwasher and turn back toward Sara, I see her watching me warily. She looks like she's about to bolt at any moment, and the fact that she hasn't already means she understands her predicament.

If she runs right now, I won't be gentle when I catch her.

"Let's go upstairs," I say and walk toward her. "It's time to go to bed."

* * *

Her hand is icy in my grasp as I lead her up the stairs, her beautiful face pale. If I didn't feel so raw inside, I'd reassure her, tell her I won't hurt her tonight either, but I don't want to make promises I may not be able to keep.

The monster is too close to the surface, too out of control.

"Take off your clothes," I order, releasing her hand when we get to her bedroom. She's wearing skinny jeans and a loose ivory sweater, and though she looks phenomenal in the simple outfit, I want it gone.

I want there to be no barriers between us.

Instead of obeying, Sara backs away. "Please..." She stops halfway between me and the bed. "Please don't do this. I'm sorry about what happened to your family, and if George was in any way responsible—"

"He was." My tone is cutting. "It took years, but I got the names of every soldier and intelligence officer involved in the massacre. There's no mistake, Sara; my list came directly from your very own CIA."

She looks stunned. “You got it from the CIA? But... how? I thought you said they were involved, that George was one of them.”

“There are many divisions and factions within the organization. One hand doesn’t always know or care what the other one is doing. I know an arms dealer who has a contact there, and he—or rather, his wife—provided the list. But that’s neither here nor there.” I cross my arms in front of my chest. “Take off your clothes.”

Her eyes dart to the bed, then to the door behind me.

“Don’t. You don’t want to test me tonight, trust me.”

Her gaze returns to my face, and I can feel her desperation. “Please, Peter. Please don’t do this. What happened to your family was awful, but this won’t bring them back. I’m sorry about them, I truly am, but I had nothing to do with—”

“This is not about that.” I uncross my arms. “What I want from you has nothing to do with what happened.” Except even as I say it, I know it’s a lie. My actions are not those of a man courting a woman; they’re of a predator stalking its prey. If she weren’t who she is—if she were just a random woman—I wouldn’t be forcing myself into her life like this.

My desire for her would’ve been gentle and restrained instead of dangerously obsessive.

Sara gives me a disbelieving look, and I realize she understands that too. I’m not fooling anyone. What’s happening between us has everything to do with the dark past we share.

So be it.

I step toward her. “Remove your clothes, Sara. I won’t ask again.”

She backs away again, then stops, likely realizing she’s getting closer to the bed. Even with the thick sweater concealing her curves, I can see her narrow chest heaving as her hands clench and unclench convulsively at her sides.

“All right. If that’s how you want it...” I start toward her, but she raises her arms, palms facing me.

“Wait!” Her hands shake as she reaches for her sweater. “I’ll do it.”

I stop and watch as she pulls the sweater off over her head. Underneath, she’s wearing a tight blue tank top that bares her slender shoulders and highlights the soft curves of her breasts. They’re not the biggest I’ve seen, but they suit her ballerina-like frame, and my cock hardens as I recall how those pretty breasts felt resting on my arm last night.

Soon, I’ll know how they feel in my hands—and how they taste.

“Go ahead,” I say when Sara hesitates again, her gaze darting past me to the door. “Tank top, then jeans.”

Her hands shake as she obeys, pulling the top off over her head before reaching for the zipper of her jeans. Under the tank top, she’s wearing a utilitarian white bra, and I have to force myself to remain still as she pushes her jeans down her legs, revealing light blue panties. Though I felt her bare skin against mine last night, and saw her undressed several times on the cameras, this is my first time seeing her naked up close, and my heart rate jacks up as I hungrily take in every graceful line and curve of her body.

She’s only about average height, but her legs are long, with the lean, shapely muscles of a dancer. Her belly is flat and toned, her slim waist flares into gently feminine hips, and her skin is smooth and pale all over, with not a tan mark in sight.

She’s beautiful, this new obsession of mine. Beautiful and scared.

“Now the rest,” I say roughly when she kicks off the jeans and stands there trembling, clad in only her bra and panties. I know I’m being cruel, but the raw, aching wound she exposed sucks out whatever little decency and compassion I possess, leaving only lust edged with the irrational need to punish.

I may not want to hurt her, but at this moment, I need to see her suffer.

She reaches for her bra hook in the back, unsnapping it with jerky motions, and I suck in a sharp breath, the pain in my chest drowned by a wave of even more intense desire. I saw her breasts last night, so I know they're gorgeous, but the sight of her taut pink nipples and soft white flesh still punches me like a fist. My heart pounds in a fast, rough rhythm, and it's all I can do to stay in place and not reach for her as she takes off her panties. Her pussy is smooth and hairless—she either waxes regularly or had her pubic hair lasered at some point—and my mouth waters as I imagine dragging my tongue through those delicate folds.

I can't wait to taste her and make her come.

As I'm picturing that, Sara straightens and defiantly raises her chin. "Happy now?" Though her cheeks are bright red, she's making no attempt to cover her body, her hands clenched into small fists at her sides.

Perversely, her little show of bravery softens the dark lust beating at me, and my mouth curves in amusement.

"Not yet, but I will be soon," I say, taking off my own clothes. My movements are swift and economical, designed to accomplish the task as quickly as possible, but her face still flames brighter, her chest rising and falling as she stares at me.

"Come," I say, walking over to her when I'm fully naked. "I know you like to shower before bed."

She blinks, her eyes flying up to my face, and I realize she was staring at my cock—which is so hard it's curving up to my navel.

"You can touch it in the shower if you'd like," I say, my smile widening at her obvious embarrassment. "Come, ptichka. You'll enjoy this."

Clasping her wrist, I lead her to the bathroom.

CHAPTER 22

Sara

I try to maintain my composure—or at least the appearance of it—as Peter drags me to the bathroom, his long fingers wrapped firmly around my wrist. This is definitely not how I imagined this night going when I was walking up the stairs. Despite the lingering darkness in his eyes, my tormentor now seems to be in a light, almost playful mood—a stark contrast to the terrifying rage I glimpsed on his face earlier.

It's as if my forced little striptease calmed whatever demons those horrifying pictures had unleashed.

Nausea crawls through me again as I recall the images, the death and devastation depicted in such gruesome detail. I only looked at them for a few seconds, but I know I'll never be able to forget them. I can't imagine being there in person to take those pictures, much less knowing that it's my family lying there—that the decomposing corpses used to be people I love. The mere thought fills me with such agony that for one heartbreaking moment, I understand what drives my attacker.

I don't excuse it, but I understand it, and pity battles with terror in my chest.

If Peter believes my husband was responsible for those deaths, he had no choice but to come after him. That much is obvious to me. Even before he went rogue, the Russian's profession would've exposed him to the darkest parts of

humanity, taught him to embrace violence as a solution—and that’s not even taking into account whatever it was that turned him into a killer before age twelve. A man like that wouldn’t turn the other cheek; an eye for an eye would be more his speed. He wouldn’t care how many innocents he hurt in his quest for vengeance, and he certainly wouldn’t blink at torturing an enemy’s wife to get to him.

If George had *any* involvement in what happened, I’m lucky to be alive.

Stopping in front of the glass shower stall, my captor releases my wrist, steps inside, and turns on the water. As he plays with the faucet, trying to find the right temperature setting, I glance at the bathroom door. He’s wet and distracted, so I’m almost certain I can make it down the stairs and to my car before he catches me. But then what? Do I drive naked to a random hotel and hope he doesn’t find me tonight? Run straight to the FBI and beg them to hide me?

Before I can start that internal debate again, Peter steps out of the shower, water droplets glistening on his powerful chest. “Come in,” he says, reaching for my arm, and I almost stumble as he pulls me into the stall.

“Careful,” he murmurs, steadying me, and I look up to find him watching me with a mix of hunger and dark amusement. “It’s slippery in here.”

At his innuendo, the flush that hasn’t quite left my face blazes back to life. I hate it that he knows about my body’s reaction to him—that just moments earlier, he caught me eyeing his erection like a teenage girl seeing her first porn. Granted, he could star in porn with a cock like that, but that’s not the point. It shouldn’t matter to me that he’s a gorgeous male animal; his powerful body is something for me to fear, not desire.

He’s a dangerous, possibly mad murderer, and I should regard him as such.

And I do—rationally, at least. However, as he angles the shower toward me, letting the warm water spray hit my back, I realize I’m not nearly as terrified as I was last night—though I

should be, after seeing those pictures. If Peter believes what he's told me, then he has every reason to hate me, and whatever attraction he feels toward me is likely of the toxic variety. I don't know why he didn't rape me last night, but I'm almost certain he'll do it tonight. The thought should fill me with dread—and it does—yet the visceral panic I felt in that hotel room is absent. It's as if sleeping in his arms desensitized me to the sheer wrongness of what he's doing to me, to the violation that is his presence in my house and my shower.

For the second time in as many days, we're naked together, and I don't find it nearly as disturbing as I should.

“Close your eyes,” Peter says, picking up my shampoo bottle, and I obey, letting him pour the soapy liquid into my hair. Despite his earlier volatile mood, his strong fingers are gentle on my skull as he massages in the shampoo, and I realize he's pampering me again, further disarming me with his bizarrely caring ministrations. I have an incongruous desire to arch my head back, butting against his hands like a cat demanding a petting, but I remain still, not wanting him to know that I enjoy any part of what he's doing to me.

Whatever my tormentor's game is, I refuse to play along.

My determination lasts until he begins massaging my neck, skillfully working out the knots at the base of my skull. I didn't even realize how much tension I carried there until it melted away, the heat of the water combining with his touch to make me feel warm and relaxed in a way I haven't experienced in a very long time.

I try to recall if George has ever washed my hair like this and draw a blank. I can't even remember him showering with me outside of a couple of times early in our relationship, when we were still relatively adventurous in bed. By the time we'd been dating for a year, our sex life had become routine, and George rarely touched me in ways that couldn't directly get me off—and toward the end, he rarely touched me, period.

Over the past couple of days, I've had more physical intimacy with my husband's killer than with my husband during most of our marriage.

When my hair is clean, Peter guides my head under the spray, rinsing out the shampoo, and then applies conditioner to my strands. As he does this, he steps closer, his chest brushing against mine for a second, and my nipples tighten under the hot spray, my sex growing soft and slick as I feel the smooth head of his hard cock against my stomach.

He steps back a moment later, but it's too late. The warm, relaxed feeling transitions into arousal so quickly I have no chance to guard against it. Though he's barely touched me, I'm left breathless and trembling, aching for him. It's a purely physical reaction, I know, yet it fills me with shame. I shouldn't want him or this forced intimacy; nothing about this should appeal to me on any level.

Biting the inside of my cheek to distract myself with pain, I open my eyes and see him pouring body wash into his palm.

"Let me do it," I say tightly, reaching to take the body wash from him, but he shakes his head, a sensual smile curving his lips as he moves the bottle out of my reach.

"Not yet, ptichka. You have to wait your turn."

Stepping behind me, he starts washing my back, and even through the heat of the water, his touch burns me, each stroke of his rough hands intensifying the flames of arousal in my core. I try to focus on something else, anything else, but my heart is racing too fast, my body burning with equal parts shame and desire.

And fear. Though muted for the moment, it's an insidious presence in the back of my mind. I haven't forgotten what the man touching me has done or what he's capable of. Perhaps some other woman in my situation would fight instead of letting him do this, but I don't want him to truly hurt me. Yesterday, he subdued me with pathetic ease, and I know the outcome would be the same today. Except he might not stop once he has me stretched out underneath him.

He might give in to the darkness I glimpsed in his eyes tonight, and the game, whatever it is, would end in some horrible way.

So I stand still and stare straight ahead, watching the water droplets roll down the steam-fogged glass wall as his soapy hands slide over my back, my shoulders, my arms... my sides. It's torture of a different kind, and as his hands move to the front, spreading soap over my quivering stomach before sliding up my ribcage, I can't take it anymore.

"Stop," I whisper breathlessly, my nails digging into my thighs as his fingers brush the underside of my breasts. "Please, Peter, stop."

To my shock, he listens, lowering his hands to my hipbones. "Why?" he murmurs, drawing me against him. His chest molds against my back as his erection presses into my ass. "Because you hate it?" He dips his head, his stubble rasping against my temple as he traces the outer rim of my ear with his tongue. "Or because you love it?"

Either. Both. I can't think clearly enough to make up my mind. My eyes drift shut, and goosebumps pebble my skin as his tongue dips into the hollow behind my ear, turning my insides to liquid mush. I want to push him away, but I don't dare move in case I do something stupid, like tipping my head back toward the tantalizing heat of that wicked mouth.

"What is it you're afraid of, ptichka?" he continues in a soft, dark voice. "Pain?" He bites my earlobe gently. "Or pleasure?" His right hand inches diagonally along my stomach, moving toward the aching nook between my legs with insidious slowness. He's giving me every chance to stop him, but I can't—not even when I realize his destination. All I can do is take quick, shallow breaths as his callus-roughened fingers breach the top of my slit and leisurely part my folds, exposing the sensitive flesh within.

"No answer?" His breath is warm on my temple. "I guess I'll have to find out for myself."

The tip of his finger circles my clit, and my breath stutters in my chest, my mind going strangely blank. It's as if every nerve ending in my body has come to life all at once. I'm hyperaware of his big, hard body pressing against my back and his stubble rasping across my ear, of his large hand resting low

on my belly and the hot water spraying down on us. And that finger, that rough yet gentle finger. It's barely touching me, yet my whole body feels like a coiled spring, each muscle rigid with anticipation.

Dimly, I register a strange sound, and realize it's coming from me. It's a moan, mixed with a kind of gasping whimper. It fills me with shame, but the embarrassment only intensifies my arousal, all my senses centering on the pulsing ache in the bundle of nerves he's so cruelly teasing. I can feel the slickness between my thighs, and as his finger presses harder on the exquisitely sensitive flesh, the ache transforms into an unbearable tension, one that grows and intensifies with every second. It's both pleasure and agony, and it's so acute I'm vibrating with it, waves of heat rolling over my skin. I try to hold it off, to stop the tension from cresting, but it's as impossible as holding back the tide.

With a choked gasp, I come, my whole body clenching in a release so intense my vision goes white behind my tightly closed eyelids. It goes on and on, the pleasure radiating out from my core in pulsing waves that leave me dazed and shaking, barely able to stand upright. I try to push my tormentor away, to end the terrifying pleasure, but he tightens his hold on me, and I have no choice but to ride it out, feeling every shameful ripple he forces from my body.

"That's it, ptichka," he breathes when I finally sag against him, panting and drained. "That was so beautiful."

His hand leaves my sex, and I open my eyes, the post-orgasmic lethargy dissipating as the horror of what happened seeps in.

I came. I came at the hands of the man who ended my husband's life.

He starts turning me around to face him, and I finally find the strength to act. With a pained moan, I twist out of his hold and stumble back, nearly crashing into the glass wall behind me. "Don't!" My voice is high and thin, verging on hysterical. "Don't touch me!"

To my surprise, Peter remains still, though I can see he's still hard, still wanting me. Cocking his head to the side, he regards me silently for a few moments, then reaches over and turns off the shower.

“Come out,” he says gently, pushing open the door of the stall. “I think we're clean enough.”

CHAPTER 23

Peter

I dry myself off with a fluffy white towel; then I grab another one and wrap it around Sara as she steps out of the shower. She looks like she's on the verge of shattering, her hazel eyes glittering with painful brightness, and despite the lust consuming me, I feel something close to pity.

She must hate herself right now. Almost as much as she hates me.

I rub the towel up and down her body, drying her, then wrap it around her wet hair. I know I'm treating her like a child instead of the grown woman that she is, but taking care of her calms me, helps me keep the darker impulses under control.

Helps me remember I don't truly want to hurt her.

Bending down, I swing her up into my arms, and she lets out a startled gasp. "What are you doing?" She pushes at my chest. "Put me down!"

"In a second." Ignoring her attempts to wriggle away, I carry her out of the bathroom. She's light, easy to carry. It's as if her bones are hollow, like those of an actual bird. She's fragile, my Sara, but resilient at the same time.

If I'm careful, she'll bend for me instead of breaking.

Reaching the bed, I put her down, and she grabs the blanket, pulling it over herself to cover her nakedness. Her gaze is filled with desperation as she scrambles backward on the bed, away from me.

“Why are you doing this to me? Why can’t you find some other woman to torture?”

“You know why, ptichka.” Climbing onto the bed, I yank the blanket out of her grasp. “I have no interest in anyone else.”

She jumps off the bed, clearly forgetting the futility of running from me, and I leap after her, catching her before she makes it to the door. My blood is pumping thickly in my veins, the monster rearing up as she struggles in my arms, and it takes all of my self-control not to crush her against a wall and fuck her raw.

If it weren’t for the fact that I don’t want our first time to be like that, I would already be inside her.

“Stop fighting,” I grit out when she continues to writhe in my arms, trying to get away. I can feel my control unraveling, my cock reacting to her twisting movements as if to a lap dance. “I’m warning you, Sara...”

She freezes, comprehending the danger she’s in.

I inhale slowly, then release her and step back to minimize the temptation. “Get into bed,” I say harshly as she stands there, panting. “We’re going to sleep, understand?”

Her eyes widen. “You’re not going to—?”

“No,” I say grimly. Stepping forward, I take her arm to usher her to the bed. “Not tonight.”

No matter how torturous it will be, I’ll give Sara more time to get used to me. It’s the least I can do to make up for our violent beginning.

She’ll be mine soon, but not yet.

Not until I can be sure I won’t destroy her.

* * *

“Are you awake, Papa? Come play with me.” A small hand tugs at my wrist. “Please, Papa, come play.”

“Let your papa sleep,” Tamila chides, rising up on her elbow on the other side of the bed. “He got in late last night.”

I roll over onto my back and sit up, yawning. “It’s okay, Tamilochka. I’m up.” Leaning down, I pick up my son and stand up, lifting him at the same time. Pasha squeals in excitement, his small legs kicking in the air as I hold him above my head.

“You’re way too indulgent with him,” Tamila mutters, then gets up also, throwing on a robe over her pajamas. “I’ll go make us breakfast.”

She disappears into the bathroom, and I grin at Pasha. “You want to play, pupsik?” I throw him in the air and catch him, causing him to erupt in shrieks of excited laughter. “Like this?” I throw him again.

“Yeah!” He’s laughing so hard now he’s practically chortling. “More! Higher!”

I laugh, then throw him in the air a few more times, ignoring the pain in my bruised ribs. I spent the last week hunting down a group of insurgents, and we finally found them yesterday. In the resulting gunfight, I caught a couple of bullets in my vest. Nothing serious, but I could use a few slow days. Still, I wouldn’t miss this playtime for the world.

My son is growing up too fast as is.

I wake up with a bittersweet ache swelling my chest. I don’t need to open my eyes to know where I am, or to realize I was dreaming. The pain of losing Pasha is too sharp, too deeply embedded for me to mistake the dream-memory for anything else, though it *is* the first time I’ve experienced a pleasant dream so vividly.

Usually, my dreams about my family are soft and blurry—at least until they turn into graphic nightmares.

I lie still for a few moments, listening to Sara’s even breathing and absorbing the feel of her slender body curled up in my arms. She’s finally asleep, her overactive mind at rest.

She didn't talk to me this evening, just lay there rigidly for almost an hour, and I knew she was beating herself up over what happened in the shower. I thought about talking to her, distracting her from her thoughts, but with the memories fresh in my mind and my body hard and aching, I didn't want to risk the conversation venturing into painful territory.

If she started to defend her husband, I might've lost control and taken her, hurting her in the process.

Inhaling, I draw in the sweet scent of her hair and let the familiar surge of lust chase away the lingering tightness in my chest. It doesn't make a lot of sense, but I'm certain Sara is the reason why, for the first time in five and a half years, I dreamed of my son without also dreaming of his death. Though holding her naked body without fucking her is a form of self-torture, Sara's presence in my bed has the same effect on my dreams as her nearness on my waking moments.

When I'm with her, the agony of my losses is less acute, almost bearable.

Closing my eyes, I blank out my mind and let myself sink back into sleep.

If I'm lucky, I'll meet Pasha in my dreams again.

CHAPTER 24

Sara

Like yesterday, Peter is gone by the time I wake up. I'm glad, because I don't know how I would've faced him this morning. Every time I think about what happened in the shower, I die a little bit inside.

I betrayed George, betrayed his memory in the worst possible way. I met my husband when I was barely eighteen. He was my first serious boyfriend, my first everything. And even when things had begun going south, I remained loyal to him and to our marriage.

Until last night, George had been the only man I'd had sex with, the only one who'd ever made me come.

The pain slams into me, the grief so sharp and sudden it feels like a physical blow. Gasping, I bend over the sink, my toothbrush clutched in my fist. For the past six months, I've been so busy coping with my anxiety and panic attacks, with the guilt of knowing I caused George's death, that I haven't had a chance to truly grieve for my husband. I haven't processed the empty gap that is his absence in my life, haven't dealt with the fact that the man I'd been with for the better part of a decade is gone.

George is dead, and I've been sleeping with his killer.

My stomach roils with nausea as I stare at myself in the bathroom mirror, hating the image looking back at me. The

ease with which I orgasmed last night fills me with red-hot shame. Peter barely touched me, barely did anything. He didn't even restrain me that much. If I tried, I might've been able to push him away, but I didn't try.

I just stood there and gave in to the pleasure, and then I slept in my torturer's arms for the second night in a row.

The pain congeals into a thick knot of self-disgust, and I look away from my reflection, unable to bear the censure in the hazel eyes staring back at me. I can't do this, can't play this sick, twisted game Peter is forcing on me. It doesn't matter if he has his reasons, or thinks he does. No amount of suffering excuses what he's done to George, or what he's still doing to me.

My tormentor might be hurt and damaged, but that only makes him more dangerous—to my sanity as well as my safety.

I have to find a way out.

No matter what it takes, I have to get rid of him.

* * *

I spend most of my on-call shift on autopilot. Thankfully, I don't have any surgeries or anything else critical; otherwise, I might've had to ask another doctor to step in. For once, my mind is not on the needs of my patients, but on what I'm going to have to do to deal with my stalker.

It won't be easy, and it will certainly be dangerous, but I don't see any other choice.

I can't spend another night in the arms of a man I hate.

I'm almost finished for the day when I run into Joe Levinson in the hallway. I walk past him at first, but he calls out my name, and I recognize the tall, lean man with sandy hair.

"Joe, hi," I say, smiling. We had a good time chatting at my parents' dinner on Saturday, and pretty much every other time we've run into each other over the years thanks to the Levinsons' friendship with my parents. Under different

circumstances—say, if I hadn't been married, then violently widowed—I might've considered going out on a date with Joe, both to please my parents and because I genuinely like him. He doesn't make my pulse race, but he's a nice guy, and that counts for a lot in my book. "What are you doing here?"

"This," he says ruefully, raising his right hand to display a thickly bandaged finger.

"Oh, no! What happened?"

He makes a face. "I got into a fight with a food processor, and the food processor won."

"Ouch." I wince as I picture that in my mind. "How bad is it?"

"Bad enough that they can't put in stitches. I'm going to have to wait for the bleeding to stop on its own."

"Ooh, sorry. So you came into the ER with this?"

"Yeah, but I obviously overreacted. I mean, there was blood everywhere, and the tip of the finger is pretty much pulp, but they said it'll heal and I might not even have that bad of a scar."

"Oh, that's good. I hope it heals up soon."

He grins at me, his blue eyes twinkling. "Thanks, me too."

I smile back and am about to continue down the hallway when he says, "Hey, Sara..."

I cringe internally at the hesitant expression on his face. "Yes?" I hope he's not about to—

"I was going to call you, but since I ran into you... What are you doing this Friday?" he asks, confirming my suspicion. "Because there's this really great art exhibit downtown, and —"

"I'm sorry. I can't." The refusal is automatic, and it's only when I see the crestfallen look on Joe's face that I realize how rude I'm being. Feeling terrible, I backtrack. "It's not that I don't want to, but I might be on call on Friday, and I don't know if—"

“It’s okay. No worries.” He puts on a smile that I instantly recognize as fake. I often wear one just like it when covering up emotional turmoil.

Shit. He must like me more than I realized.

“Do you want to do something else instead?” I offer before I can think better of it. “Not Friday, but maybe in a couple of weeks?”

Joe’s smile turns genuine, his eyes crinkling attractively at the corners. “Sure. How about dinner the weekend after this one? I know this little Italian place that makes the best lasagna.”

“That sounds good,” I say, already regretting the impulse. What if I don’t manage to resolve my stalker situation by then? It’s too late to back out now, though, so I say, “How about we nail down the day and time closer to then? My schedule changes all the time, and—”

“Say no more. I completely understand.” He gives me a big grin. “I have your number, so I’ll just give you a call next week, and you let me know what time works best for you, okay?”

“Okay. I’ll talk to you then,” I say and hurry down the hallway before I can stick my foot in my mouth again.

I have one last patient to see, and then I can carry out my mission.

If all goes well, by tomorrow, I’ll be free.

CHAPTER 25

Peter

“Are you going to see her again tonight?” Anton asks in Russian, looking up from the laptop as I enter the living room. As usual, the former pilot is dressed in black from head to toe and armed to the teeth, even though our suburban hideout is as safe as it gets. Like the rest of my crew, he’s a lethal motherfucker, and though we often rib him about his hipsterish long hair and thick black beard, he looks exactly like what he is: a former Spetsnaz assassin.

“Of course,” I reply, also speaking Russian.

Stopping by the coffee table next to the couch where Anton is sitting, I take off my leather jacket and remove the arsenal of weapons attached to my vest. When I go see Sara, I only bring one gun and a couple of knives with me, all strategically hidden in the inner pockets of my jacket so she doesn’t spot them when I’m dressing or undressing. I don’t want to scare her or remind her of what I am; she’s too intimately acquainted with my skills as is. Besides, I’d be an idiot to trust her around real weapons.

Even a novice can fire a gun and score a lucky shot.

“Yan will be taking the first shift tonight,” Anton says, turning his attention back to the computer on his lap. “I have to work out some of the logistics for this Mexico job.”

I frown as I remove my bulletproof vest. “I thought we had everything ready.”

“Yeah, I thought so too, but it seems Velazquez got into a little altercation with your old buddy Esguerra, and he’s beefing up security like crazy. I think he’s expecting an attack from Esguerra. Has nothing to do with us, obviously, but still. Complicates matters.”

“Fuck.” Julian Esguerra’s involvement, however indirect, definitely complicates matters, and not just because he inadvertently spooked our target. The Colombian arms dealer holds a serious grudge against me. Though I saved the bastard’s life, I endangered his wife in the process, and that’s not something he’ll ever forgive. He’s not actively hunting me down, but if he catches word that I’m in Mexico, so close to his turf, he might make good on his promise to kill me.

Come to think of it, I’m close to his turf here in Illinois, too. His wife’s parents live in Oak Lawn, not too far from Sara’s place in Homer Glen. I doubt he’ll visit here anytime soon, but if he does, and our paths cross somehow, I may have no choice but to deal with him.

Oh, well. I’ll worry about that if it happens. There’s no way I’m leaving here until I’m done with Sara.

“Yeah,” Anton mutters, glowering at the computer. “Fuck, indeed.”

I leave him to it and head into the kitchen to grab a beer from the fridge. Today, I handled a local job personally, leaving Yan’s twin brother Ilya to watch over Sara, and I’m still hopped up on adrenaline, my senses extra sharp and my mind starkly clear. It’s strange that killing can make one feel so alive, but it does.

As anyone in my field of work knows, life and death are but a slice of a blade apart, and wielding that blade is one of the greatest thrills there is.

I gulp down half a bottle of beer, eat a handful of nuts from a bowl on the counter, and go back to the living room. In a little bit, I’ll head over to Sara’s house to make dinner for us,

and the snack should tide me over until then. Before that, however, Anton and I have to catch up.

The Mexico job is a big one, and we can't afford to fuck it up.

“So what's the latest?” I ask, sitting down next to Anton on the couch. Placing my beer on the coffee table, I peer at the computer screen. “How much of our plan are we going to have to scrap?”

“Pretty much all of it,” Anton growls. “The guards' schedules are a mess, there are new security cameras everywhere, and Velazquez is instituting patrols around the compound perimeter.”

“All right. Let's get to it.”

Over the next hour, we come up with a new plan of attack on Velazquez, one that takes into account the heavier security on his compound. Instead of coming in to assassinate him at night, as originally planned, we're going to go in at lunchtime because that's when only a few newbie guards will be on watch. It's stupid, but most people, including Mexican cartel leaders who should know better, feel safer in the daytime. It's one of the most common problems I've encountered during my security consultant days, and I've always advised my clients to have equally strong protections in place regardless of whether the sun is up or down.

“Did the transfer go through?” I ask when we're done, and Anton nods.

“Seven million euros as agreed, with the other half to come upon job completion. Should keep us in beer and peanuts for a while.”

I chuckle dryly. Anton and two other members of my old team—the Ivanov twins—joined me two years ago, after I got my list and approached them for help, promising to make them wealthy in return for throwing in their lot with me. They agreed, both out of friendship and because they'd been growing increasingly disillusioned with the Russian government. With the team in place, I switched from security

consulting to more lucrative—and flexible—wet work, using my connections to get high-paying gigs for us. I needed the money to finance my revenge and stay ahead of the authorities, and the guys needed a new challenge. While elimination of the people on my list took priority, we carried out a number of paid hits along the way and built up our reputation in the underworld. Now we specialize in eliminating difficult targets all over the world and get paid enormous sums of money for jobs everyone else is too scared to touch. Most often, our clients are dangerous, insanely rich criminals, and our targets tend to be that too—like Carlos Velazquez, head of the Juarez Cartel.

As far as my crew is concerned, there isn't much difference between tracking down terrorists and taking out crime lords. Or bumping off whoever gets in our way. We've all lost whatever passes for conscience and morality ages ago.

“Heading out?” Anton asks, closing the laptop when I get up and put on my jacket. “Going to be with her all night again?”

“Probably.” I pat my jacket, making sure my weapons are well concealed. “Most likely.”

Anton sighs and stands up, leaving the laptop on the couch. “You know this is nuts, right? If you want her so much, just fucking take her and be done with it. I'm tired of these local ten-grand gigs; the stupid thugs don't even put up a fight. If we don't have another real job before Mexico, I'll go out of my fucking mind.”

“You're always welcome to strike out on your own,” I point out, and suppress a chuckle when Anton gives me the middle finger in reply. Even if we weren't friends, he wouldn't leave the team. My connections are the reason we get all this lucrative business. In the process of obtaining the list, I've ventured deep into the criminal underworld and gotten to know many of the key players. As skilled as my guys are, they wouldn't be half as successful without me, and they know it.

“Have fun,” Anton calls out as I head for the exit, and I pretend not to hear as he mutters something about obsessed

stalkers and poor tortured women.

He doesn't understand why I'm doing this to Sara, and I'm not inclined to explain.

Especially since I don't understand it myself.

CHAPTER 26

Sara

The mouthwatering smell of buttery seafood and roasted garlic greets me when I walk into the house, my handbag hanging casually over my shoulder. As I hoped, once again the dining room table is set with candles, and a bottle of white wine is chilling in a bucket of ice. Only the food is different today; it looks like we're having seafood linguini for the main course, with calamari and a tomato-mozzarella salad for the appetizers.

The setup couldn't be more perfect if I tried.

Act normal. Stay calm. He can't know what you're planning.

"Italian night, huh?" I say as Peter turns from the kitchen counter, where he was chopping up something that looks like basil. My heart is thumping erratically in my chest, but I succeed in keeping my tone coolly sarcastic. "What's tomorrow? Japanese? Chinese?"

"If you wish," he says, walking over to the table to sprinkle the chopped basil on the mozzarella. "Though I'm less familiar with those cuisines, so we might have to order in."

"Uh-huh." My gaze falls to his hands as he brushes the remnants of the basil off his fingers. A warm, shivery sensation curls through me as I remember how those fingers

touched me with devastating pleasure, making me unravel in his arms.

No. Don't go there.

Desperate to distract myself, I focus on his outfit. Today, he's wearing a black button-up shirt with the sleeves rolled up, and my throat goes dry at the sight of his tan, muscular forearms, the left one covered by tattoos all the way down to the wrist. Inked guys aren't normally my thing, but the intricate tattoos suit him, emphasizing the power flexing under that smooth, hair-dusted skin. I've always been drawn to strong, masculine forearms, and Peter has the best I've ever seen. George worked out, so he had nice arms too, but they were nowhere near as powerfully cut as these.

Ugh, stop. Self-disgust burns in my throat as I realize what I'm doing. At no point should I be comparing my husband, a normal, peaceful man, to a killer whose life revolves around violence and vengeance. Obviously, Peter Sokolov is in better shape; he has to be, to kill all those people and evade the authorities. His body is a weapon, honed by years of battle, while George was a journalist, a writer who spent most of his time with his computer.

Except... if I were to believe Peter, my husband *wasn't* a journalist. He was a spy operating in the same shadow world as the monster puttering around my kitchen.

Bands of tension loop around my forehead, and I push all thoughts of my husband's alleged deception away, focusing on the rest of my stalker's outfit: another pair of dark jeans and black socks with no shoes. For a second, it makes me wonder if Peter has something against wearing shoes, but then I recall that in some cultures, it's considered disrespectful and unclean to wear outside shoes inside the house.

Is the Russian culture like that, and if so, is the man who tortured me in this very kitchen showing, in some very roundabout way, that he respects me?

"Go ahead, wash your hands or whatever you need to do," he says, dimming the lights before sitting down at the table and uncorking the wine. "The food is getting cold."

“You didn’t have to wait for me,” I say and go to the nearby bathroom to wash my hands. I hate how he acts like he knows all my habits, but I’m not about to compromise my health to spite him.

“Really, I mean it,” I say when I return. “You didn’t have to be here at all. You know feeding me isn’t part of your stalker duties, right?”

He grins as I take a seat across from him and hang my handbag on the back of my chair. “Is that right?”

“That’s what all the stalker job postings say.” I spear a piece of tomato and mozzarella with my fork and bring it to my plate. My hand is steady, showing nothing of the anxiety shredding me inside. I want to clutch my bag against me, keep it on my lap and within easy reach, but if I do, he’ll get suspicious. I’m already taking a chance by hanging it on my chair when I normally plop it carelessly on the couch in the family room. I’m hoping he ascribes that to the fact that I came straight to the kitchen/dining area instead of making my usual detour to the couch.

“Well, if that’s what they say, who am I to argue?” Peter pours us each a glass of wine before placing some of the mozzarella salad on his plate. “I’m no expert.”

“You haven’t stalked other women before?”

He cuts a piece of mozzarella, brings it to his mouth, and chews it slowly. “Not like this, no,” he says when he’s done.

“Oh?” I find myself morbidly curious. “How did you stalk them?”

He gives me a level look. “Trust me, you don’t want to know.”

He’s probably right, but since there’s a chance I might not see him after tonight, I feel a bizarre urge to find out more about him. “No, I actually do,” I say, drawing comfort from the handbag strap brushing against my back. “I want to know. Tell me.”

He hesitates, then says, “The majority of my assignments have always been men, but I’ve followed women as part of my

job, too. Different jobs, different women, different reasons. Back in Russia, it was often the wives and girlfriends of the men who threatened my country; we followed and questioned them to locate our real targets. Later, when I became a fugitive, I tracked a couple of women as part of my work for various cartel leaders, arms dealers, and such; usually it was because they posed a threat of some kind, or betrayed the men I worked for.”

The bite of tomato I just consumed feels stuck in my throat. “You just... tracked them?”

“Not always.” He reaches for the linguini, winds a fork in it, and brings a sizable portion of the pasta to his plate without spilling any of the buttery sauce. “Sometimes I had to do more.”

The tips of my fingers are starting to feel cold. I know I should shut up, but instead, I hear myself asking, “What did you have to do?”

“It depended on the situation. One time, my quarry was a nurse who sold out my employer—the arms dealer I mentioned to you before—to some terrorist clients of his. As a result, his then-girlfriend was kidnapped, and he was nearly killed rescuing her. It was an ugly situation, and when I found the nurse, I had to resort to an ugly solution.” He pauses, his gray eyes gleaming. “Do you want me to elaborate?”

“No, that’s...” I reach for my glass of wine and take a big gulp. “That’s okay.”

He nods and begins eating. I have no appetite anymore, but I force myself to follow his example, transferring some pasta onto my plate. It’s delicious, the seafood and the pasta perfectly cooked and coated in the rich, savory sauce, but I can barely taste it. I’m dying to reach into my bag and take out the little vial sitting there, but for that, I need Peter to be distracted, to look away from his wine glass for at least twenty seconds. I timed it back in the hospital, practicing with a vial of water: five seconds to open the vial, five more to reach across the table and tip the contents of the vial into the wine glass, and three more to yank my hand back and compose

myself. That's about thirteen seconds, not twenty, but I can't have him suspect anything, so I need the extra cushion.

"So, tell me about your day, Sara," he says after most of the linguini on his plate is gone. Looking up, he pins me with a cool silver gaze. "Anything interesting happen?"

My stomach contracts, knotting around the linguini I forced down my throat. Peter couldn't know about me running into Joe, could he? My tormentor hasn't said anything, but if in his mind, this weird thing between us is some kind of courtship, he might object to me talking to—and making plans with—other men.

"Um, no." To my relief, my voice sounds relatively normal. I'm getting better at functioning under extreme stress. "I mean, one woman came in with extra-heavy spotting and turned out to have miscarried twins, and we had a fifteen-year-old girl come in with a *planned* pregnancy—she's always wanted to be a mom, she said—but that wouldn't be all that interesting for you, I'm sure."

"That's not true." He puts his fork down and leans back in his chair. "I find your work fascinating."

"You do?"

He nods. "You're a doctor, but not just someone who preserves life and cures disease. You *bring* life into this world, Sara, helping women when they're at their most vulnerable—and most beautiful."

I inhale, staring at him. This man—this *killer*—couldn't possibly understand, could he? "You think... pregnant women are beautiful?"

"Not just pregnant women. The whole process is beautiful," he says, and I realize that he does understand. "Don't you think so?" he asks when I continue looking at him in mute shock. "How life comes about, how a tiny bundle of cells grows and changes before emerging into the world? Don't you find that beautiful, Sara? Miraculous, even?"

I pick up my wine glass and take a sip before responding. "I do." My voice sounds thick when I finally manage to speak.

“Of course I do. I just didn’t expect *you* to feel that way.”

“Why?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” I put down my glass. “You take life. You hurt people.”

“Yes, I do,” he agrees, unblinking. “But that only makes my appreciation for it stronger. When you understand the fragility of *being*, the sheer transience of it—when you see how easy it is to snuff something out of existence—you value life more, not less.”

“So why do it, then? Why destroy something you value? How can you reconcile being a killer with—”

“With finding human life beautiful? It’s easy.” He leans in, his gray eyes dark in the flickering light of the candles. “You see, death is part of life, Sara. An ugly part, sure, but there’s no beauty without ugliness, just as there’s no happiness without sorrow. We live in a world of contrasts, not absolutes. Our minds are designed to compare, to perceive changes. Everything we are, everything we do as human beings, relies on the basic fact that X is different from Y—better, worse, hotter, colder, darker, lighter, whatever it may be—but only in comparison. In a vacuum, X has no beauty, just as Y has no ugliness. It’s the contrast between them that enables us to value one over the other, to make a choice and derive happiness from it.”

My throat feels inexplicably tight. “So you what? Bring joy to the world with your work? Make everyone happy?”

“No, of course not.” Peter picks up his wine glass and swirls the liquid inside. “I have no delusions about what I am and what I do. But that doesn’t mean I don’t comprehend the beauty in *your* work, Sara. One can live in the darkness and see the light of the sun; it’s even brighter that way.”

“I...” My palms are slippery with sweat as I pick up my wine glass and surreptitiously reach into my bag with my free hand. As fascinating as this is, I have to act before it’s too late. There’s no guarantee he’ll pour himself a second glass. “I’ve never thought of it that way.”

“No reason why you should.” He puts his glass down and smiles at me. It’s his dark, magnetic smile, the one that always sends heat surging to my core. “You’ve led a very different life, ptichka. A gentler life.”

“Right.” My breaths are shallow as I pick up my glass and bring it to my lips. “I guess I have—until you came into it.”

His expression turns somber. “That’s true. For what it’s worth—”

My glass slips out of my fingers, the contents spilling out onto the table in front of me. “Oops.” I jump up, as if embarrassed. “So sorry about that. Let me—”

“No, no, sit.” He stands up, just as I hoped he would. Though he’s in my house, he likes to play at being a good host. “I’ll take care of this.”

It takes him only a few strides to reach the paper towel rack on the counter, but that’s all the time I need to open the vial. *Six, seven, eight, nine...* I do the mental count as I pour the contents into his glass. *Ten, eleven, twelve.* He turns back, paper towels in hand, and I give him a sheepish smile as I sink back into my chair, the empty glass vial dropped back into my bag. My back is soaked with icy sweat, and my hands are shaking from adrenaline, but my task is done.

Now I just need him to drink the wine.

“Here, let me help,” I say, reaching for a napkin as he mops up the spilled wine on the table, but he waves me away.

“It’s all good, don’t worry.” He carries my wine-soaked plate to the garbage and dumps the remnants of my pasta—that could’ve been another opportunity, I note with a corner of my brain—and then returns with a clean plate.

“Thank you,” I say, trying to sound grateful instead of gleeful as he swaps my wine glass for a new one and pours me more wine before adding some to his own glass. “Sorry I’m such a klutz.”

“No worries.” He looks coolly amused as he sits down again. “Normally, you’re very graceful. It’s one of the things I like most about you: how precise and controlled your

movements are. Is it because of your medical training? Steady hand for surgery and all that?”

Don't act nervous. Whatever you do, don't act nervous.

“Yes, that’s part of it,” I reply, doing my best to keep my tone even. “I also took ballet when I was a child, and my instructor was a stickler for precision and good technique. Our hands had to be positioned just so, our feet turned just so. She’d make us practice each position, each step until we got it completely right, and if we ever slipped from good form, we’d have to go back and practice whatever we got wrong again, sometimes for the duration of an entire class.”

He picks up his glass and swirls the liquid inside again. “That’s interesting. I’ve always thought you looked like a dancer. You have the posture and the body type.”

“I do?” *Drink. Please drink.*

He puts the glass down and fixes me with an enigmatic stare. “Definitely. But you don’t dance anymore, do you?”

“No.” *Come on, pick up the glass again.* “I quit ballet when I started high school, though I did a little salsa later in college.”

“Why did you quit ballet?” His hand shifts closer to the glass, as if he’s going to pick it up again. “I imagine you must’ve been good at it.”

“Not good enough to do it professionally, at least not without a lot of additional training. And my parents didn’t want that for me.” My pulse speeds up in anticipation as his fingers curl around the stem of the glass. “The earnings potential of a dancer is fairly limited, and so is the length of her career. Most stop dancing in their twenties and have to find something else to do with their lives.”

“How practical,” he muses, lifting the glass. “Did that matter to you or to your parents?”

“Did what matter?” I try not to stare at the wine glass as it hovers a few inches from his lips. *Come on, just drink it.*

“The earnings potential.” He swirls the wine again, seeming to derive pleasure from the sight of the light-colored liquid circling the glass walls. “Did you want to be a rich, successful doctor?”

I force myself to look away from the hypnotic movement of the wine. “Sure. Who doesn’t?” The anticipation is eating me alive, so I distract myself by picking up my own wine glass and taking a big sip. *Please mimic me subconsciously and drink. Come on, just take a few sips.*

“I don’t know,” he murmurs. “Maybe a little girl who’d much rather be a ballerina or a singer?”

I blink, briefly distracted from his non-drinking. “A singer?” Why would he say that? Nobody outside of my seventh-grade counselor knew of that particular ambition.

Even at ten, I knew better than to bring up something so impractical with my parents—especially after they told me their views on ballet.

“You have a beautiful singing voice,” Peter says, still toying with his wine glass. “It’s only logical that at some point, you might’ve considered performing. And unlike a dancer’s, a successful singing career doesn’t have to end early. Many older singers are highly respected.”

“I suppose that’s true.” I eye his glass again, my frustration growing. It’s like he’s torturing me, seeing how long I can take before cracking. To tame my impatience, I take a big sip of my own wine and say, “How do you even know what kind of singing voice I have? Oh, wait, never mind. Your listening devices, right?”

He nods, not the least bit remorseful. “Yes, you often sing when you’re alone.”

I gulp down some more wine. At any other time, his casual disregard for my privacy would’ve maddened me, but right now, all my attention is on the stupid wine. *Why isn’t he drinking it?*

“So you really think I have a good singing voice?” I ask, then realize I should probably sound more outraged. In a more

acerbic tone, I add, “Since I unwittingly performed for you, you might as well give me your honest opinion.”

His eyes crinkle at the corners as he lowers the glass again. “Your voice is beautiful, ptichka. I already told you so, and I have no reason to lie.”

Oh my God, just drink the fucking wine! To prevent myself from yelling that out loud, I take a breath and paste a pretty smile on my lips. “Yes, well, you *are* trying to get into my pants. Like any woman will tell you, flattery helps with that.”

He laughs and picks up his glass again. “True. Except I have a feeling I could compliment you from now ’till eternity, and it wouldn’t change a thing.”

“You never know.” I keep my tone light and flirty despite the cold sweat sliding down my spine. If he’s not drinking on his own, I have to force his hand.

We can’t end this dinner until he takes at least a few good sips.

Lifting my glass, I smile wider and say, “Why don’t we drink to that? To women’s vanity and you flattering me?”

“Why don’t we, indeed?” He lifts his glass and clinks it against mine. “To you, ptichka, and your gorgeous voice.”

We each bring our glasses to our lips, but before I can take a sip, his fingers loosen around the stem of his glass.

“Oops,” he murmurs as the glass tips forward, spilling the wine in front of him in the exact replica of my earlier goof. His eyes gleam darkly. “My bad.”

I cease breathing, my blood crystallizing in my veins. “You... you—”

“Knew that you added a little something to my drink? Yes, of course.” His voice remains soft, but I can now discern the lethal note within. “You think no one’s ever tried to poison me before?”

My pulse is in hyperdrive, yet I can’t make myself move as he stands up and circles around the table, approaching me

with the sleek grace of a predator. All I can do is stare at him, seeing the rage simmering in those metallic eyes.

He's going to kill me now. He's going to kill me for this. "I wasn't..." Terror is a toxic burn in my veins. "It wasn't—"

"No?" Stopping next to me, he reaches into my bag and pulls out the empty vial. I should run, or at least make an attempt at it, but I'm not brave enough to provoke him further. So I remain still, scarcely breathing as he brings the vial to his nose and sniffs it.

"Ah, yes," he murmurs, lowering his hand. "A little diazepam. I couldn't smell it in the wine, but it's clear like this." He puts the vial on the table in front of me. "You got it at the hospital, I assume?"

"I... Yes." There's no point in denying it. The evidence is literally in front of me.

"Hmm." He props his hip against the table and gazes down at me. "And what were you going to do when you had me knocked out, ptichka? Deliver me to the FBI?"

I nod, the words frozen in my throat as I stare up at him. With his big body looming over me, I feel like the little bird he compared me to: small and terrified in the shadow of a hawk.

His sensuous mouth twists in a parody of a smile. "I see. And you think it would've been that easy? Just knock me out and done?"

I blink up at him, uncomprehending.

"You think I don't have a contingency plan for that?" he clarifies, and I flinch as he lifts his hand. But all he does is pick up a lock of my hair and brush the ends of it against my jaw, the gesture tender yet cruelly mocking at the same time. "For you trying to kill or disable me in some way?"

"You... you do?"

His lids lower, his gaze dropping to my mouth. "Of course." The lock of hair brushes over my lips, the ends tickling the sensitive flesh, and my stomach contracts into a hard ball as he says softly, "At this very moment, my men are

monitoring your house and everything in the ten-block radius, as well as the little screen that displays my vital signs.” His eyes meet mine. “Do you want to guess what they would’ve done had my blood pressure dropped unexpectedly?”

I mutely shake my head. If Peter’s men are anything like him—and they must be, to do his bidding—I’d rather not know the specifics of what I just narrowly avoided.

His smile takes on a dark edge. “Yes, that’s probably wise, ptichka. Ignorance is bliss and all that.”

I gather the scraps of my courage. “What are you going to do to me?”

“What do you think I’m going to do?” He tilts his head, the smile darkening another fraction. “Punish you? Hurt you?”

My heart drums in my throat. “Are you?”

He looks at me for a few long moments, his smile dimming, then shakes his head. “No, Sara.” There is a strangely weary note in his voice. “Not today.”

Pushing away from the table, he begins gathering the dishes, and I sag in my chair, relieved yet drained of all hope.

If he’s not lying about his men—and I have no reason to think he is—I’m even more trapped than I thought.

CHAPTER 27

Peter

It shouldn't hurt, knowing that she wants to get rid of me. It shouldn't feel like blades of fire slicing across my chest. Any person in Sara's situation would fight back; it's only logical and expected.

It shouldn't hurt, but it does, and no matter what I tell myself as I lead Sara upstairs, the monster inside me snarls and howls, demanding that I do exactly as she feared and punish her for this transgression.

When we get to the bedroom, I don't make her take her clothes off in front of me again; I'm too close to the edge to guarantee my self-control. I already tested it too much during dinner, playing along with her innocent, *I didn't just drug your wine* routine. I knew what she did right away—the wine spill was too out of character for her—but I wanted to see how good of an actress she is, and so I continued to converse with her, to pretend I was clueless and gullible, an idiot about to fall for one of the oldest tricks in the book.

“You can take a shower,” I say, nodding toward the bathroom when she stops next to the bed, her gaze darting nervously from me to the bed and back. “I'll be here when you return.”

Relief flashes across her face, and she disappears into the bathroom. I use the opportunity to go downstairs and take a

quick rinse in one of the other bathrooms.

Though I showered after today's job, I want to be extra clean for her.

She's still showering when I return to the bedroom, so I carefully fold my clothes and leave them on the dresser before getting into bed. I gave myself a quick release with my hand earlier today, but my desire for Sara hasn't abated, and I know I won't be able to play this game much longer.

I'm going to take her and make her mine.

If not tonight, then very soon.

Sara's shower is long, so long that I know she's using it as a way to avoid me, but I don't mind. I use the time to empty my mind and cool the residual anger burning inside me. By the time she finally emerges from the bathroom, wrapped in a towel, I have the monster under control and can smile at her coolly.

"Come," I say, patting the bed next to me. I'm trying like hell not to think about how slick and soft her pussy felt yesterday, but it's impossible. I want to feel that silky wetness wrapped around my cock, want to hear her moan as I drive into her. I want to taste that plush mouth and see her hazel eyes go soft and unfocused as I bring her to her peak again and again.

I want her, and I can't have her.

Not yet, at least.

She approaches uncertainly, as wary as a wild gazelle, and just as graceful. I want to grab her and drag her into bed, but I remain still, letting her come to me of her own accord. This way, I can pretend that she doesn't hate me, that seeing me imprisoned or dead wouldn't give her the greatest joy.

This way, I can imagine that someday, she may *choose* to be with me.

"Take off that towel and come here," I order when she pauses half a meter away from the bed, but she doesn't move, her hands clutching the towel in front of her chest.

“Are we going to sleep? Just sleep?” she asks in an unsteady voice, and I nod, though I’m painfully hard just from seeing her. If I could be sure that I would maintain control throughout, I’d take her tonight, or at least give her another orgasm, but the best I can do is hold her and force myself to go to sleep. Even that will be torture, but I’ll bear it. I won’t force her when she’s expecting me to hurt her; no matter how difficult it is, I won’t live up to her fears.

“Just sleep,” I promise, and hope she can’t hear the raging hunger in my voice. “We’re just going to sleep.”

She hesitates for another second, then steps up to the bed, dropping the wet towel on the floor as she slips under the blanket. All I see is a flash of naked skin, but it’s enough for lust to punch me in the gut. Bracing myself, I pull her against me and bite back a groan as her soft ass nestles against my groin, her skin damp and extra warm from the long shower. She has a beautiful ass, my little doctor, tight and shapely, and my dick throbs with the need to be inside her, to feel those smooth cheeks pressing against my balls as I pound into her, taking her again and again.

Closing my eyes, I inhale the sweet scent of her shampoo and concentrate on controlling my breathing. After a while, I feel the tension in her muscles easing, and I know she’s starting to relax, to believe I won’t assault her despite the hard cock she must feel pressing against her.

Slow and easy, I tell myself as I breathe in and out. *Control and focus. Pain means nothing. Discomfort means nothing.* It’s a mantra I taught myself during my time in Camp Larko, and it’s true. Pain, hunger, thirst, lust—it’s all chemistry and electrical impulses, a way for the brain to communicate with the body. Wanting Sara won’t kill me, any more than the six months I spent in solitary did when I was fourteen. The torture of unfulfilled desire is nothing compared to the hell of being locked in a room barely big enough to be called a cage, with no one to talk to and nothing to do. It’s nothing compared to the agony of a shiv slashing through your kidney, or a giant fist nearly knocking out your eye.

If I survived juvenile prison in Siberia, I'll survive not having Sara.

For a little bit longer, at least.

CHAPTER 28

Sara

“How about you, Sara?”

“Huh?” I look up from my plate to stare blankly at Marsha, who must’ve just asked me something.

Andy rolls her eyes. “She’s in la-la land again. Leave her alone, Marsha.”

“Sorry, I’m just distracted,” I say, pushing back a lock of hair that escaped from my ponytail. I’m pretty sure my hair is a crooked mess today, but I keep forgetting to get to a mirror to fix it. In general, all I can think about this morning is that when I go home tonight, *he* will be waiting for me there.

Peter Sokolov, the man I can’t escape.

“I asked if you want to join me and Tonya this Saturday,” Marsha says, looking more amused than annoyed. “Andy just said she’s in; she’ll hang out with her boyfriend some other time. How about you, Sara?”

“Oh, sorry, I can’t,” I say, pushing my plate away. I ran into the nurses in the cafeteria while grabbing a quick breakfast, and they talked me into joining them for a sit-down meal. “I promised my parents I’ll go see them.”

That last part is a lie, but I figure it’s better than explaining that I don’t want to put my friends on the radar of a certain Russian killer—or whoever he’ll have watching me.

“That’s too bad,” Marsha says. “Tonya’s going to get us back into that club. You seemed to like it there, I recall. Tonya says that cute bartender has been asking about you.”

I frown. “He has?”

“Yep,” Tonya confirms. “He said something weird, though. He thought he saw some guy with you, acting all proprietary, like he was your boyfriend or something. I told him he must’ve been mistaken, because you definitely left alone that night. Right? You don’t have a secret boyfriend stashed somewhere, do you?”

Ice trickles down my spine even as my face turns uncomfortably hot. “No, definitely not.”

“Really?” Marsha says, sounding fascinated. “Then why are you blushing? And clutching that fork like you want to stab someone?”

I glance down at my hand and see that she’s right. I’m gripping the utensil so hard my knuckles have turned white. Forcing my fingers to relax, I give an awkward laugh and say, “Sorry. I was drunk that night, and I’m a little embarrassed about that. I think I must’ve danced with some random guy, and that’s what your bartender friend saw, Tonya.”

Andy frowns. “Is that random guy the reason you ran out of there like that? You looked almost... frightened.”

“What? No, I was just drunk.” I force another embarrassed laugh. “You know how it is when you think you’re going to puke at any moment? Well, that was me that night.”

“Okay,” Tonya says. “I’ll tell Rick—that’s the bartender—that you’re available. In case you ever join us at the club again, that is.”

“Oh, I...” My face heats up again. “No, that’s okay. I’m not really ready to date and—”

“No worries.” Tonya pats my hand, her slim fingers cool on my skin. “I won’t give him your number or anything. You can maintain your ‘princess in a tower’ mystique. Only makes them hotter, if you ask me.”

“What?” I gape at her. “What do you mean by that?”

“She means that you have the whole untouchable thing going on,” Andy says through a mouthful of eggs. “It’s hard to describe, but it’s like you give off this ice princess vibe, only not cold, you know? Kind of like if Jackie-O and Princess Diana decided to slum it by working among us regular folks, if that makes sense.”

“No, not really.” I frown at the red-headed girl. “You’re saying I come across as stuck-up?”

“No, not stuck-up, just different,” Marsha says. “Andy didn’t explain it well. You’re just... classy. Maybe it’s all that ballet you did when you were younger, but you look like someone taught you to curtsy and walk with a book balanced on your head. Like you know which fork to use at a formal dinner and how to make small talk with the ambassador of whatever.”

“What?” I burst out laughing. “That’s ridiculous. I mean, George and I had been to a few formal fundraisers, but that was his thing, not mine. If I had a choice, I’d live in yoga pants and sneakers; you know that, Marsha. For God’s sake, I listen to Britney Spears and dance to hip-hop and R&B.”

“I know, hon, but that’s just the way you look, not the way you are,” Marsha says, taking out a small mirror to reapply her red lipstick. Swiping on a coat with a practiced hand, she puts away the mirror and the lipstick and says, “It’s a good thing, trust me. Take me, for instance. I could try to class it up all I want, but guys take one look at me and decide I’m easy. Doesn’t matter what I wear or how I act; they just see my hair, tits, and ass, and figure I put out.”

“That’s because you do put out,” Tonya points out with a grin.

Marsha huffs and flicks back her blond waves. “Yeah, but that’s neither here nor there. My point is, *she*”—she jerks her thumb at me—“couldn’t look easy if she tried. Any guy looking at her knows—he just *knows*—he’s going to have to work for it. Like dinners with parents and ring on the finger kind of work.”

“That’s not true,” I object. “I slept with George long before we got married.”

Andy rolls her eyes. “Yeah, but how long were you dating before you slept with him?”

“A few months,” I say, frowning. “But I was just eighteen, and—”

“See? A few months,” Tonya says, elbowing Marsha. “And how long do *you* make them wait?”

Marsha chuckles. “At least a few hours.”

“Well, there you go,” Andy says. “And you wonder why those jerks never call you again. My mom always said, ‘The fastest way to lose a guy is to sleep with him.’ Sara’s got it right: act cool and distant, so when you so much as smile at a guy, he falls all over himself.”

“Oh, please.” I busy myself with the remnants of my breakfast. “It’s the twenty-first century. I think men know better than to—”

“Nope,” Marsha says cheerfully. “They don’t. If something comes easy, they don’t value it as much. I know that, and I’m okay with being a good-time girl. Most of the time, I don’t *want* those jerks to call me, and the couple of times that I do...” She sighs. “Well, it’s just not meant to be, I guess. In any case, life’s too short to waste it being something other than what you are. By the time you get to be my age, you figure that out.”

“Uh-huh, sure.” Tonya stuffs the last of her bagel into her mouth. “Tell us more, Oh Wise Old One.”

“Shut up,” Marsha grumbles, throwing a balled-up napkin at her. It hits Andy, who immediately retaliates with a napkin projectile of her own, and I duck, laughing, as the breakfast devolves into a full-on napkin fight.

It’s not until I’m walking out of the cafeteria, still chuckling over what happened, that I realize the nurses didn’t just lighten my mood and distract me from thoughts of Peter.

They also gave me an idea.

* * *

My on-call shift doesn't end until late evening, but I still go to the clinic afterward. It's open twenty-four hours, and they always need me. On my end, I want to delay going home for as long as I can. The idea brewing in my mind makes my stomach cramp, and the last thing I want is to face my stalker.

As usual, they're glad to see me at the clinic. Despite the late hour, the waiting room is packed with women of all ages, many accompanied by crying children. In addition to providing OB-GYN services to low-income women, the clinic staff often treat their children for minor illnesses—something the patients, and nearby ER departments, greatly appreciate.

“Busy night?” I ask Lydia, the middle-aged receptionist, and she nods, looking harried. She's one of the only two salaried staff members at the clinic; everyone else, including all the doctors and nurses, are volunteers like me. It makes for an unpredictable schedule but enables the clinic to provide pro bono care to the community while operating solely on donations.

“Here,” Lydia says, thrusting the sign-in sheet into my hand. “Start with the five names on the bottom.”

I take the sheet and go to the little room that functions as my office/exam room. Putting my things down, I wash my hands, splash some cold water on my face, and step out into the waiting room to call in the first patient.

My first three patients end up being easy—one needs birth control, another wants to get tested for STDs, a third needs a pregnancy confirmation—but the fourth one, a pretty seventeen-year-old named Monica Jackson, complains of prolonged period bleeding. When I examine her, I find vaginal tearing and other signs of sexual trauma, and when I ask her about it, she breaks down crying and admits that her stepfather assaulted her.

I calm her down, collect a rape kit, treat her injuries, and give her the phone number of a women's shelter where she can stay if she feels unsafe at home. I also suggest she contact the police, but she's adamant about not filing charges.

“My mother would kill me,” she says, her brown eyes red-rimmed and hopeless. “She says he’s a good provider, and we’re lucky to have him. He’s got priors, so if I say anything, he’ll get put away, and we’ll end up on the street again. I don’t give a fuck—I’d sooner turn tricks in an alley than live with that asshole—but my brother’s only five, and he’ll end up in a foster home. Right now, I take care of him when my mother can’t, and I don’t want him taken away from me.”

She starts crying again, and I squeeze her small hand, my heart aching at her plight. Though the paperwork Monica filled out says she’s seventeen, with her petite build and baby-round cheeks, she looks barely old enough to be in high school. I often see girls like her come through here, and it shatters me each time, knowing there’s only so much I can do to help. If she were on her own, it would be easy to extract her from this situation, but with the little brother in the mix, the best I can do is call Child Services, and that might lead to the very thing my patient dreads: having her brother in foster care without her.

“I’m so sorry, Monica,” I say when she calms down. “I still think going to the police is the best option for you and your brother. Isn’t there anyone else you could turn to? A family friend? A relative, perhaps?”

The girl’s expression turns hollow. “No.” Jumping off the table, she pulls on her clothes. “Thanks for seeing me, Dr. Cobakis. Take care.”

She walks out of the room, and I stare after her, wanting to cry. The girl is in an impossible situation, and I can’t help her. I can never help girls like her. Except—

“Wait!” I grab my bag and run after her. “Monica, wait!”

“She already left,” Lydia says when I burst into the reception area. “What happened? Did she forget something?”

“Sort of.” I don’t bother explaining further. Rushing to the door, I step out and survey the dark, deserted street. Monica’s small, dark-haired figure is already at the end of the block, walking fast, so I run after her, desperate to do something at least this once.

“Monica, wait!”

She must hear me, because she stops and turns.

“Dr. Cobakis?” she says in surprise when I catch up to her.

I stop, panting from the exertion, and rummage inside my bag. “How much do you need to tide you over?” I ask breathlessly, pulling out my checkbook and a pen.

“What?” She gapes at me as though I’ve turned into an alien.

“If you go to the police and they take your stepfather away, how much will you and your mother need to *not* end up on the street?”

She blinks. “Our rent is twelve hundred a month, and my mother’s disability check covers about half of it. If we could last until this summer, I’d get a full-time job and pitch in, but —”

“Okay, hold on.” I prop the checkbook against the side of a building and write out a check for five thousand dollars. I planned to use that money to send my parents on an anniversary cruise this summer, but I’ll come up with a less costly gift.

My parents won’t mind, I’m sure.

Tearing off the check, I hand it to the girl and say, “Take this and go to the police. He deserves to be in jail.”

Her rounded chin quivers, and for a moment, I’m afraid she’ll start crying again. But she just accepts the check with trembling fingers. “I... I don’t even know how to thank you. This is—” Her young voice breaks. “This is just—”

“It’s okay.” I put my checkbook away and smile at the girl. “Go cash it in, and put the bastard away, okay? Promise me you’ll do that?”

“I promise,” the girl says, stuffing the check into her jeans pocket. “I promise, Dr. Cobakis. Thank you. Thank you so much.”

“It’s okay. Go now. It’s late, and you shouldn’t be out alone.”

The girl hesitates, then throws her arms around me in a quick hug. “Thank you,” she whispers again, and then she’s off, her small figure bobbing between the streetlights before disappearing from sight.

I stand there until she’s gone, and then I turn to go back to the clinic. My bank account just took a serious hit, but I feel as jubilant as if I’ve won the lottery. For the first time since I’ve started working at the clinic, I’ve truly helped someone, and it feels amazing.

The cold wind slaps me in the face as I start walking back, and I realize I forgot my coat at the clinic. It doesn’t matter, though. I’m glowing with an inner joy that’s no match for the chilly March evening.

I can’t fix my own life, but maybe I just helped fix Monica’s.

I’m less than half a block from the clinic when a flicker of shadow on the right catches my attention. My heart jumps, and adrenaline floods my veins as two homeless-looking men step out from the narrow alley-like space between two houses, the light from the street reflecting off the gleaming blades of their knives.

“Your bag,” the taller one snarls, gesturing toward me with the knife, and even from this distance, I catch the nauseating stench of body odor, alcohol, and vomit. “Give it here, bitch. Now.”

I reach for the bag before he even finishes speaking, but my icy fingers are clumsy, and the bag falls off my shoulder.

“You fucking bitch! Give it here, I said!” he hisses, increasingly agitated, and I realize he’s on something. Meth? Coke? Either way, he’s unstable, and his partner—who started giggling like a hyena—must be too.

I have to pacify them. Quickly.

“Hold on, I’m giving it to you, I promise.” Shaking, I kneel to pick up the bag so I can hand it to them, but before I

can get up, a blur of motion cuts in front of me.

Gasping, I fall back, catching myself on my palms as a tall, dark figure rams into my attackers, moving with a speed and agility that seems almost superhuman. The three of them disappear back into the shadowed alley, and I hear two panicked cries, followed by a strange wet gurgle. Then something metallic clatters on the pavement. Twice.

Oh God. Oh God, oh God, oh God.

I scramble backward, barely noticing the asphalt scraping the skin off my palms as my rescuer steps out of the alley, and I see the two men behind him crumple like puppets with their strings cut off. A dark liquid spreads out from under their prone bodies, and the coppery tang of blood fills the air, mixing with something even more foul.

He killed them, I realize in dazed stupor. He just fucking *killed* them.

The blast of terror injects me with fresh adrenaline, and I jump to my feet, a scream rising in my throat. But before it can escape, the dark figure steps toward me, and the streetlight illuminates his face.

His familiar, exotically handsome face.

“Did they hurt you?” Peter Sokolov’s voice is as hard as his metallic gaze, and once again, I find myself paralyzed, terrified yet unable to move an inch as he comes toward me, his thick eyebrows drawn into a forbidding scowl. It’s the countenance of a killer, the visage of the monster beneath the human mask, yet there’s something more there too.

Something almost like concern.

“I...” I don’t know what I was going to say because in the next moment, I find myself enfolded in his arms, held so tightly against his powerful chest that I can hardly breathe. The heat of his large body surrounds me, shielding me from the icy wind and making me realize how cold I am, how frozen inside. The full horror of what I just witnessed hasn’t settled in yet, but already I’m starting to feel numb, my

thoughts scattered and sluggish as the cold burrows deeper into me, anesthetizing me against the trauma.

Shock, I diagnose on autopilot. I'm going into shock.

"Shhh, ptichka. It's all right. It's going to be all right." Peter's voice is low and soothing, his grip loosening until he's cradling me with startling tenderness, and I realize the odd gasping sounds I'm hearing are coming from me. I'm struggling to breathe, my throat closing up as though during a panic attack.

No, not as though—I *am* having a panic attack.

He must recognize it too, because he pulls away and gazes down at me, his gray eyes narrowed in worry. "Breathe," he commands, his hands tightening on my shoulders. "Breathe, Sara. Slowly and deeply. That's it, ptichka. And again. Breathe..."

I follow his voice, letting him act as my therapist, and gradually, the choking sensation fades, my breathing evening out. I focus on that, on just breathing normally and not thinking, because if I think about what just happened—if I glance at the alley to the right and see the puppet-like bodies—I might pass out.

"There, that's good." He pulls me against him again, his big hand stroking my hair as I stand with my face pressed against his chest. "You're okay, ptichka. Everything is okay."

Okay? I want to laugh and scream at the same time. In what world are two dead bodies in an alley "okay?" I'm shaking now, both from the cold wind and the shock, and I know I'm on the verge of losing it again. I'm no stranger to blood and injury, and I've seen death in the hospital as well, but the way those two men crumpled, like they're nothing, like they're just sacks of meat and bones—

I stop before my thoughts can veer too far down that path, but my throat already feels tight again, my shaking intensifying.

"Shhh," Peter soothes again, rocking me gently back and forth. He must feel me trembling. "They can't hurt you. It's

over. It's all over. Come, let's get you home."

I open my mouth to object, to insist on calling the police or an ambulance or someone, but before I can squeeze out a single word, he bends down and lifts me into his arms. He does it effortlessly, as though I weigh nothing. As though it's normal to carry a woman battling a panic attack away from the scene of a double homicide.

As though he does this every day—which, for all I know, he might.

I finally find my voice. "Put me down." It's a thin, hollow whisper, barely a sound, but it's better than nothing. My hands manage to move as well, pushing at his shoulders as he strides down the street. "Please. I—I can walk."

"It's okay." He glances down, his gaze reassuring. "We're almost there."

"Almost where?" I ask, but then I see his destination.

It's a black SUV parked on the corner a block away from my clinic. A tall man with a thick black beard is leaning against the side of it, and as we approach, Peter says something to him in a foreign language, his voice low and urgent.

The man responds in the same language—most likely Russian, I realize dazedly—and then pulls out a sleek smartphone, swiping across the screen with quick, furious gestures. Lifting it to his ear, he spews out more rapid-fire Russian as Peter opens the car door and carefully deposits me on the back seat.

My tormentor wasn't lying about having a team. This man must be one of his helpers.

"I'll be right with you, ptichka," Peter murmurs in English, brushing my hair off my face with that same bizarre tenderness, and then he backs out and closes the door behind him, leaving me alone in the warm interior of the car.

I sit still for a couple of seconds, watching him speak to the bearded man, and then I spring into action.

Scrambling across the backseat, I grab the door handle on the opposite side from where the two men are standing and push the door open, nearly tumbling out of the car in my haste to get away. My thoughts and reactions are still slow from shock, but I've recovered enough to comprehend one very important fact.

Two men were killed in front of me, and if I don't do something about it, I'm an accessory to their murders.

The cold wind bites at me, and my lungs burn as I sprint toward the clinic. Behind me, I hear a shout, followed by rapid footsteps, and I know they're chasing after me. My only hope is to get inside the clinic before they catch me. As a wanted man, Peter shouldn't be willing to risk exposure. Once I'm safe inside, I can catch my breath and figure out what to do, how to best inform the police about what happened.

I'm less than a hundred feet away from my destination when a hard arm loops around my ribcage, and a strong hand slaps over my mouth, muffling my scream. "You really like me to chase after you, don't you?" a familiar voice growls in my ear, and then I hear a car approaching.

I double my efforts to get free, kicking at Peter's shins and clawing at his hand over my face, but it's futile. I hear a car door open, and then Peter is stuffing me inside, much less carefully this time.

"*Yezhay*," he barks at the bearded driver, and then we're speeding away, leaving the clinic and the scene of the crime behind.

CHAPTER 29

Peter

“Yan and Ilya are on it,” Anton informs me in Russian as he takes a right onto the street leading to Sara’s house. “They got there before anyone stumbled onto the scene.”

“Good.” I glance at Sara, who’s sitting next to me in the backseat, silent and deathly pale. “Tell them to thoroughly dispose of the remains. We don’t want body parts turning up anywhere. Also, they need to bring her car back to her house.”

“Yeah, they know.” Anton meets my gaze in the mirror. “What are you going to do with her? You really freaked her out.”

“I’ll figure something out.”

I’m glad Sara can’t understand what we’re saying; otherwise, she’d be even more horrified. I shouldn’t have killed those methheads in front of her, but they were threatening her with knives, and I lost it. All I could see was Tamila’s body lying there, broken and bloodied, and the thought that it could’ve been Sara—that if I hadn’t been there, one of those strung-out vagrants could’ve killed her—made my blood turn to volcanic ice. I don’t even remember making a conscious decision; I acted purely on instinct. It took only seconds to disarm them and slice their throats, and by the time their bodies hit the ground, it was too late.

Sara saw them die.

She saw me kill them.

“Can you take Ilya’s shift for the rest of the night?” I ask Anton when we stop in front of Sara’s house. With the big oaks shading the driveway and the nearest neighbors a good distance away, the place is nice and private—great in a situation like this. It’s too bad she’s selling the house; I’ve grown to really like it.

“No problem,” Anton replies. “I’ll be around. You going to be here until morning?”

“Yes.” I glance at Sara, who’s still staring straight ahead, seemingly oblivious to our arrival. “I’ll be with her.”

Taking Sara’s hand, I tell her in English, “We’re here, ptichka. Come on, let’s get you home.”

Her slender fingers are icy in my grip; she’s still in shock. However, as I help her out of the car, she looks up at me and asks hoarsely, “What about the clinic?”

“What about it?”

“They’ll wonder what happened to me.”

“No, they won’t.” I dip my hand into my pocket and pull out her phone, which I got from her bag during our trip. “I sent them this.” I show her the text message about having to see to an emergency at the hospital.

“Oh.” She gives me a perplexed look. “You sent this?”

I nod, slipping the phone back into my pocket as I lead her away from the car. “You were a little out of it during the ride.” That’s actually an understatement; after I dragged her into the car, she stopped fighting and became almost catatonic.

She blinks. “But... what about the bodies?”

“That’s taken care of, too,” I assure her. “Nothing will tie you to that scene. You’re safe.”

Sara visibly shudders, so I quickly usher her into the house, opening the door with keys I fished out from her bag earlier. I have my own pair of keys—I had them made a month ago, when I returned for her—but I’d rather Sara not know

that. If she changes the locks again, it'll be annoying to go through the process a second time.

“Here, sit,” I say, leading her to the couch. “I’ll make you some chamomile tea.”

“No, I...” She twists out of my hold. “I have to wash my hands.”

“All right.” I remember she has a thing about that. “Go for it.”

She disappears around the corner into the bathroom, and I walk over to the kitchen sink to soap up as well. I was careful to keep out of the spray of blood as I sliced those men’s throats, but I still find a few small red stains on my forearms.

Hopefully, Sara hasn’t seen them.

I wash my hands and forearms, then turn on the electric tea kettle. When the water boils, I make two cups of tea and carry them over to the table. Sara is not back yet, so I decide to check on her.

Walking over to the bathroom, I knock on the door. “Everything okay?”

There’s no answer, only the sound of running water. Worried, I try the door handle but find it locked.

“Sara?”

No response.

“Sara, open the door.”

Nothing.

I take a calming breath and say in a softer voice, “Ptichka, I know you’re upset, but if you don’t open the door now, I’ll have no choice but to break it.” Or to pick the lock, but I don’t say that. Breaking the door sounds way more threatening.

The water turns off, but the door remains locked.

“Sara. I’m giving you to the count of five. One. Two. Three—”

The lock clicks.

Relieved, I push the door open—and realize I was right to be concerned. Sara is sitting on the floor, her back against the tub and her knees drawn up to her chest. She's not making a sound, but her face is streaked with tears, and she's shaking.

Fuck. I really shouldn't have killed them in front of her.

“Sara...” I kneel next to her, and she scoots to the side, away from me. Ignoring her reaction, I gently grasp her arm and pull her into my embrace. “I won't hurt you, ptichka,” I whisper into her hair when I feel her shaking intensify. “You're safe with me.”

A stifled sob escapes her throat, then another and another, and suddenly, she's clinging to me, her slender arms folding around my neck as she begins to cry in earnest. I rub her back in soothing circles as she shakes with uncontrollable sobs, and she grips me tighter, burying her face against my neck. I feel the wetness of her tears, and I'm reminded of that time in the kitchen, when I was trying to calm her after the waterboarding. The memory sickens me; I can't imagine doing that to her now, can't picture hurting her for any reason.

She's not just a person to me now; she's my world, and I will protect her from everyone and everything.

It takes a long time for her sobs to ease, so long that my legs feel stiff when I finally get up and gently pull her to her feet.

“Come,” I murmur, wrapping a supportive arm around her back as I lead out of the bathroom. “Let's have a little tea and get you off to bed. You must be exhausted.”

She snuffles and whispers hoarsely, “No tea.”

“Okay, no tea. In that case, let's get you to sleep.” I bend to lift her into my arms.

She doesn't object to me carrying her, just lays her head on my shoulder and loops her arms around my neck. Her breathing is still ragged from all the crying, but she's calming down. That pleases me, as does the needy way she's clinging to me. I don't know if it's the aftermath of the trauma, or if I'm finally wearing down her resistance, but her holding on to

me like this, with no trace of fear or mistrust, fills my chest with a special kind of warmth, one that lessens the icy hollowness around my heart.

With Sara, I'm coming alive again, and I want more of that feeling.

CHAPTER 30

Sara

He's gentle with me in the shower, his touch tender and incongruously platonic as he washes me from head to toe. I stand still; that's all I'm capable of at the moment—just standing. Nothing bothers me right now, not my nakedness and not even his. Now that my emotional storm has passed, I feel empty, a fog of exhaustion dulling all my thoughts and feelings. I'm beyond desire, beyond anxiety and fear; all that exists is guilt.

Terrible, soul-crushing guilt from the knowledge that two more men died because of me.

They died because I let a killer into my life and fed his obsession.

It's clear to me now, so perfectly obvious I don't know why I didn't see this before. I'm toxic—a danger to everyone around me. Today, the victims were two druggies; tomorrow, it might be my friends or family. Nobody is safe around me for as long as Peter wants me, and everything I've done has only fueled his obsession.

From the beginning, I've played the game wrong, and two men paid for that with their lives.

“Here, step out,” Peter commands, and I exit the shower, letting him wrap a thick towel around me. He dries me with it, once again treating me like a child, and I let him, because I'm

too exhausted to do anything else. Besides, all this—crying in his arms, clinging to him, having him take care of me—works well for the new strategy I’m going to implement.

Since he wants me, I’m going to let him have me.

It’s not a particularly brilliant strategy, nor is it in any way guaranteed to work. It might even backfire. But at this point, I have little to lose. I’ve tried pushing him away, and he’s still here, still a threat. So now I have to try something different.

I have to make him lose interest in me.

It was the conversation at breakfast that gave me the idea. What if the nurses are right, and I give off some kind of “ice princess” vibe, one that intrigues my stalker? What if, by refusing him, I’m making him want me more?

The fastest way to lose a guy is to sleep with him. It’s a stupid saying, but Andy’s mother isn’t the only one who believes that. I’ve heard that sentiment dozens of times, usually from the parents of teenagers who got pregnant because their families insisted on teaching them the values of abstinence instead of birth control. It’s an old-fashioned, sexist stereotype about the male/female dynamic, one that’s predicated on the insulting premise that women are like toilet paper, something to be used once and discarded.

I’ve always scoffed when I heard stuff like this, but at the same time, I know there are men who act that way, who pursue women until they get them into bed, and then quickly lose interest. But it’s not because they think women should be pure—at least, not usually. They just derive the greatest pleasure from the chase. They enjoy the anticipation more than the consummation, and once they score, they move on, seeking out fresher pastures.

I don’t know if my stalker falls into that category, but it’s possible—probable, even. He’s a stunningly handsome man, and he’s undoubtedly used to women falling head over heels for his dangerous alpha appeal. I’ve never known anyone quite like him, but I’ve seen shades of that arrogance in popular college athletes, Wall Street executives, and overpaid male surgeons. Men like that—the ones at the top of the food chain

—perceive any hint of reluctance as a challenge; it intrigues them, makes them more inclined to pursue a woman, not less.

If that's the case—and I'm desperately hoping it is—then the easiest way to get rid of Peter Sokolov may be to give him exactly what he wants: me, willing, in his bed. For whatever reason, the Russian killer seems to have drawn the line at rape, preferring to just force himself into my life, so it's up to me to give him the green light.

If I want this nightmare to end, I'll have to willingly have sex with my tormentor.

“Come on, lie down,” Peter urges when we get to the bed. Removing the towel around me, he gently guides me under the blanket. “You'll feel better in the morning, I promise.” Once again, his touch is platonic, almost clinical, but I know he wants me. I see how hard he is as he climbs under the blanket next to me, feel the tension rolling off him as he turns off the lights and pulls me into his embrace, tucking me against his big warm body in the familiar spooning position.

He wants me, but he won't take me—not until I give my consent.

I lie still for a few moments, trying to convince myself to do it. My stomach feels like a raccoon is battling a hamster inside, and exhaustion is a thick, smothering layer over my brain. With my eyes raw and my head aching from crying, the last thing I want is sex, but maybe that's why I should do it tonight.

Maybe I'll feel less awful about it if I don't enjoy it.

Bracing myself, I shift slightly, moving my ass an inch closer to Peter's groin. He stiffens, his breathing growing more labored, and I repeat the maneuver, rubbing against him as I shift back and forth on the pretext of getting more comfortable. With his thickly muscled arm folded across my ribcage, I have a very limited range of motion, but it doesn't matter. We're both naked, and the slightest brush of his skin against mine is electrifying, so filled with sensations that each of my nerve endings stands at attention. I can't see anything in the pitch-black darkness of the room, but I can feel the

crispness of his leg hair on the back of my thighs, smell his clean male scent, and my own breathing speeds up, my heart pounding furiously in my chest as his cock grows even harder, pressing against my ass like the barrel of a gun.

That's it, come on. Ignoring the anxiety constricting my throat, I shimmy my hips a little more. I can't bring myself to actually turn around and embrace him, but maybe with a little encouragement, his control will break, and he'll reach for me. I won't object; I won't do anything to stop him. I'll let him fuck me, maybe even pretend to enjoy it a little, so I don't pose a challenge in that respect. I'll just lie there and take it, and then it will all be over.

I'll be a willing but boring lay, and he'll get tired of me.

That's the plan, at least, but as I continue moving, I realize some of my exhaustion is fading, only to be replaced by a warm, liquid feeling that originates deep in my core. With the darkness veiling everything, it's easy to pretend that none of this is real, that I'm having another one of those twisted dreams.

"Sara, ptichka..." His hoarse whisper sounds strained. "If you want to go to sleep, you might want to stop moving."

I still for a second, then slowly and deliberately shift against him again. "What if..." I lick my dry lips. "What if I don't want to go to sleep?"

Peter's body turns to stone behind me, his arm tightening across my ribcage. For a brief, irrational moment, I fear that he might refuse, that despite all indications, he doesn't really want me, but then I find myself flipped onto my back, his heavy weight pressing me down as the bedside lamp comes on.

I blink, momentarily blinded by the light, and as his face comes into focus, I see that his gray eyes are narrowed, his jaw clenched tight as he holds himself up with one elbow. He looks furious, and for one horrible second, I wonder if I misinterpreted it all—if I made a huge error.

“Are you playing games with me, Sara?” His voice is low and hard, his accent stronger than usual as he captures my wrists and pins them to the pillow above my head with one big hand. “Trying to see how far you can push me?”

I stare up at him, a dark tingle crawling over my skin. This is so much like my dreams it’s uncanny. And at the same time, it’s different. My drug-fogged memory had painted him in harsh, cruel strokes, more monster than man, but that was wrong. There’s nothing monstrous about the lethally beautiful face gazing down at me. The dreams had underestimated the potency of his magnetic appeal, omitting the sensuous softness of his lips, the strong, noble line of his nose, the way his thick dark eyebrows pull together over those intense metallic eyes... He’s gorgeous, this terrifying stalker of mine, and as I lie there, pinned under his hard, warm body, I feel the dark tingle intensify, turning into something dangerous and forbidden. My nipples tighten, and a wave of heat rolls through me, my inner muscles clenching on a surge of aching need.

I don’t want this man. I *can’t* want him. Yet even as I tell myself this, I know it’s a lie, a falsehood born of wishful thinking. Whatever it is that draws him to me works both ways, the pull of connection between us as strong as it is irrational. I do want him. More than that, I *need* him. My body doesn’t care that he just killed two people in front of me, that I despise him with all my being. His touch doesn’t repulse me; it arouses me, my desire stoked by the intimacy he’s forced on me over the last few days and the twisted pleasure I’ve known in his embrace.

By the unnatural, perverse tenderness that has no place in our violent relationship.

He’s still waiting for my response, his eyes narrowed, and I know I can back out of this, pretend it was a big misunderstanding. But if I do, he’ll continue stalking me, undermining my resistance day by day until I cave, and in the meantime, everyone around me will be in danger.

“No games,” I whisper into the tense silence. “The condoms are in the nightstand drawer.”

He inhales, his fingers tightening around my wrists, and I see the exact moment he processes what I'm saying. His nostrils flare and his pupils dilate, the look of fury on his face transforming into one of dark, unbridled hunger. Reaching into the drawer with his free hand, he pulls out a foil packet, rips it open with his teeth, and rolls the condom onto his large, jutting cock.

My heartbeat jumps, anxiety tightening my ribcage, but it's too late.

Lowering his head, Peter captures my lips with his.

CHAPTER 31

Sara

I don't know why, but I never expected him to kiss me, to place his mouth on mine and feast on me as though he's starving. Because that's what it feels like: as if he's consuming me, taking in my essence, my very being. His lips and tongue ravage my mouth, devouring me, taking the air right out of my lungs. His free hand burrows into my hair, holding me still for the voracious kiss, and it's all I can do not to melt into the sheets. Because he doesn't just take; he gives. He gives so much pleasure I'm overwhelmed by it, overtaken by his taste and scent and feel.

He kisses me until I'm flushed and burning, until I can barely recall what it felt like not to kiss him, not to inhale his warm, minty breath. Until all thoughts of who and what we are are gone, and I'm arching against him, mindless with need, desperate for more of his touch, of this dizzying, scorching pleasure. My fingertips tingle from his tight grip on my wrists, and his body is heavy on top of mine, but I want more.

I want to lose myself in his merciless embrace, to dissolve in him and disappear.

He releases my lips to trail burning kisses over my face and neck, and I gulp in air, my heart racing and my skin pebbling from the electrifying pleasure. With each breath I take, my nipples rub against his muscled chest, and wetness slicks my inner thighs, my body preparing itself for him, for

this act I shouldn't want, shouldn't crave with such violent intensity.

Breathing raggedly, he lifts his head, and I see an answering hunger in his silver gaze, a dark need mixed with something disturbingly possessive. His hand releases my hair and moves down my body, cupping my breast. "Sara..." My name is a rough exhale on his lips as his thumb grazes across my aching nipple. "You are so beautiful, ptichka... everything I've dreamed of and more."

His fervent words sear through me, filling me with warmth that goes down to my core—and sets off alarm bells in my mind. This feels too much like the consummation of a loving romance, and as his knee wedges between my thighs, the sensual fog engulfing me lifts for a moment. With a jolt of clarity, I process what's happening, and horror douses my desire.

What am I doing? How can I be enjoying this on any level? It's one thing to stoically bear a monster's touch for the greater good, but to actually want him—to let him act as though we're lovers—is sick, utterly insane. Even with my wrists restrained, there's no use pretending I'm unwilling, that my body doesn't crave him in the most perverse ways.

The broad head of his cock nudges at my folds, and my breathing turns shallow, my muscles stiffening in sudden panic. I can't do it—not like this. It's too much like lovemaking. He's still looking at me, his gray eyes filled with burning heat, and I know I have to tell him to stop, to end this

He pushes into me in one hard stroke, and I forget what I was going to say. I forget everything but the stark, brutal sensation of his cock entering my body. His uncompromising hardness forces apart tight inner tissues, and despite my arousal, I feel a stinging burn as he presses deeper, ignoring the resistance of clenched muscles. It's been a long time for me, and he's big, both thicker and longer than George. My heart drums violently in my chest as my body yields reluctantly to the rough penetration, and with a mix of

disappointment and bitter relief, I realize my fears were for naught.

This is nothing like lovemaking.

When he's all the way in, he stops, his eyes glittering with dark hunger, and a different kind of tension invades my body, banishing the last of unwelcome arousal and stiffening my resolve. The sensual allure of his looks is still there, but I now see the monster behind the handsome face, the killer who tortured me and ripped apart my life. There's no longer any ambiguity in what I'm feeling, no ambivalence of any kind. My stalker, the man I hate, is violating my body, and I'm glad. I'm glad because his cruelty hurts less than his tenderness, his ruthlessness less frightening than his mercy.

Sucking in a bracing breath, I prepare to endure a hard, rough fucking, but he doesn't move. His face is taut with lust, his body so tense he's vibrating with it, but he doesn't thrust, and I realize he caught on to my discomfort and is giving me time to adjust.

In his own way, he's trying to be gentle—which is the last thing I want.

Gathering my courage, I run my tongue over my lips and watch the hunger in his eyes intensify.

“Do it,” I whisper, flexing my inner muscles. I can feel him throbbing inside me, hard and thick and dangerous. “Just fucking do it.”

He stares down at me, and I sense his struggle, feel the monster doing battle with the man. I'm not the only one with mixed emotions here. There is a part of Peter that hates me too, that sees in me a reminder of his tragedy. He wants me, but he also wants to hurt me, to make me pay for what happened to his wife and son. He might not realize this himself, but I know it. I feel it. Our connection was forged in loss and pain, our intimacy born in torture. There's nothing normal about his attraction to me; it's as twisted as my response to him.

His vengeance is what binds us, and no amount of gentleness can change that fact.

I see the exact moment the monster starts to win the battle. Peter's jaw tightens as he withdraws partway, then plunges back in with a hard thrust. "Is this what you want from me?" His voice is low and rough, his gray eyes filled with growing darkness. He flexes his hips, and I gasp as he spears deeper into me, his hand tightening around my wrists. "Tell me, Sara. Is this what you want?"

I can still say no, let the man restrain the beast, but I've chosen my path and I'm not backing down. Maybe this final act of vengeance is what we both need, the punishment required for my absolution.

Maybe if he unleashes his darkness on me, we might both finally be free.

"Yes," I whisper and brace myself. "That's precisely what I want."

CHAPTER 32

Peter

I don't know what I expected, but as I gaze into Sara's hazel eyes and see the hatred there, I feel my fantasies dissolving, the lies I fed myself evaporating in the harsh light of truth. Her body might respond to me, but I'm still her enemy—and she is mine. Even with her silky pussy clasp my throbbing cock, the desire thrumming in my blood is tinged with violence, my need for her darker than anything I've known.

I don't just want to fuck her; I want to break her open, to wreak my vengeance on her delicate flesh.

“Sara...” I claw for remnants of my sanity, for something to hold on to as a mindless red tide descends on me, the vicious lash of hunger undermining my control. “You don't know what you're—”

“Just fucking do it,” she whispers again, holding my gaze defiantly, and the last thread of my restraint snaps.

With a low, harsh groan, I pull back and surge into her, scarcely registering the way her pussy clenches in panicked resistance, the tender inner tissues giving way under my assault. She's wet, but she's tight, almost as small as a virgin, and even in a haze of lust, I realize what it means.

She hasn't had sex in a while—likely not since her husband.

The man whose arrogance killed my son.

My desire turns even darker, fueled by a surge of agony-born rage, and I lower my head, capturing Sara's mouth again. Only this time, I can't hold back, and the kiss is hard and savage, as violent as the emotions tearing me apart. The delicious feel of her, the sweet scent, the wet, silky texture of her mouth—it all drives me insane, and I taste the copper of her blood as my teeth sink into her lower lip, breaking the tender skin. It should stop me, or at least make me pause, but instead, it just whets my appetite. I need this from her: her pain, her suffering. It's as if a stranger has taken over my body, twisting my craving for her into a need to punish, to make her pay for her husband's sins. Possessing Sara this way is both heaven and hell, the violent pleasure of fucking her mixing with the bitter knowledge that I failed to keep my promise.

I'm hurting the woman I wanted to heal, the one who makes me feel so alive.

I don't know if it's that realization, or the tears I see on her face when I lift my head, but the surge of rage starts to fade, the red haze dissipating even as my desire reaches a new peak. My balls draw up, the pre-orgasmic tension curling at the base of my spine, yet I find myself painfully aware of the bird-like slenderness of her wrists in my grasp—and the terrified stiffness of her body as I violate her silky flesh.

Her eyes lock on mine, and I see pain in the hazel depths, mixed with perverse satisfaction. I'm making it easy for her, adding fuel to the fire of her hatred. This is what she expected from me all along, what she feared and wanted at the same time.

After tonight, I'll never be anything more than the man who hurt her, who abused her in the cruelest way.

No. Fuck, no. I clench my teeth and force myself to stop, fighting the rising swell of orgasm. Releasing her wrists, I withdraw from her and move down her body, ignoring the agonizing hardness of my cock. Settling between her parted thighs, I grip her knees and lower my head.

“What are you—” she begins dazedly, but I'm already licking her soft pussy, running my tongue between her pink,

swollen folds. She's wet, but not as wet as I'd like, so I set out to remedy that, using every skill I've learned over my thirty-five years.

"Wait, Peter, don't..." She reaches down, trying to push me away as I tongue her clit, and when that fails, she attempts to close her legs. "This is not—"

"Hush." I use my grip on her knees to keep her thighs open. "Just lie back and relax."

"No, I—" She gasps, clutching fistfuls of my hair as I pull her clit into my mouth. I begin sucking on it with strong, rhythmic motions, and the tension in her leg muscles slackens, her breath catching audibly in her throat. I can feel her growing slick under my tongue, and I take advantage of her distraction by moving my right hand up to her pussy.

"That's it, ptichka, just relax..." I blow cool air across her clit and am rewarded with a soft moan before her thighs tense again. She's trying to resist, to reject the pleasure, but I already have my elbow in place, preventing her from crushing my head between her legs. She's breathing hard now, her hands tightening in my hair as I resume sucking on her clit, and I push two fingers into her tight, wet opening, curving them inside her until I feel the soft, spongy wall of her G-spot. Her pussy clamps tight, quivering around my fingers, and her hips arch off the bed as I intensify my sucking. She's close, I can sense it. My heart is thumping heavily in my chest, my breathing coming fast as the ache in my balls grows unbearable, but I restrain myself until I'm certain she's on the verge. Then, and only then, I give in to my own need.

Pulling my fingers out, I move up, covering her with my body, and line my cock against her swollen entrance.

"Come with me," I say hoarsely, meeting her gaze as I penetrate her in one hard stroke, and her body obeys me, her tight, wet flesh clenching around me, milking my cock just as the orgasm hits me. Her beautiful eyes go soft and unfocused, her face twisting with ecstasy as her fingers dig into my sides, and I hear her choked cry as my seed spurts out. It feels like every muscle in my body is vibrating at the same time, my

lungs working like bellows as the pleasure blasts through me in scorching waves, and as I collapse on top of her, I know that this is it.

I'll never want another woman again.

I don't know how long it takes until the aftershocks die down, but by the time I find the strength to push myself up on my elbows, Sara has recovered enough to realize what happened, and horror creeps across her face. Like me, she's breathing hard, her cheeks flushed with post-coital glow, but there's no joy in her gaze, only the sharp glitter of tears.

She's regretting this, beating herself up again, and I won't stand for it.

"Don't." I dip my head to kiss her cheeks as the tears spill out, streaking down her temples. "Don't, ptichka. Don't feel bad. You did nothing wrong. It was all me. I hurt you, remember? I gave you no choice."

Her breath trembles on her lips as I rain kisses across her face, and I feel her shaking underneath me, her hands twisting in the sheets as the tears keep coming. I'm still inside her, my softening cock buried in her body, yet she's trying not to touch me, to curl in on herself and reject the connection between us.

I wanted her pain and I got it—and it's tearing me up inside.

I don't know what to do, how to calm her, so I just keep kissing her, stroking her as gently as I can. The thirst for vengeance is gone, and all that's left is regret. Once again, I'm the cause of Sara's suffering, and this time, it's infinitely worse. This time, I know her.

I know her, and I care.

She's still crying when I withdraw from her and get up to dispose of the condom in the bathroom. When I return with a wet towel, I find her curled on her side, with the blanket drawn up to her neck.

"Here, let me clean you up," I murmur, pulling the blanket off her naked body, and when she doesn't object, I run the towel over her soft folds, soothing the sore, swollen flesh and

wiping away the evidence of her desire. She's no longer crying, but her eyes are still wet, and the moment I'm done, she huddles back under the blanket, pulling it over her head.

I'm about to climb into bed with her when I hear the vibration of my phone on the nightstand, where I left it in case of emergencies.

Frowning, I pick it up and glance at the screen.

Change of plans, the message from Anton reads. *Velazquez is moving to the Guadalajara compound in 2 days. It's tomorrow or never.*

I bite back a curse, fighting an urge to throw the phone across the room. Of all the shitty timing... We just finished working out all the logistics of the plan and were going to strike in six days. But if our target is changing locations, we're back to square one in terms of planning. It might take several weeks to scope out Velazquez's Guadalajara compound, and our client, a rival drug lord, is already getting antsy. He wants Velazquez gone as of yesterday, and he won't look kindly upon a delay.

Anton is right. We have to act now.

Get the plane and the supplies ready, I text back. *We're flying out early morning.*

Got it, Anton responds. *I assume you want the Americans on her?*

Yes, I text. *Tell them to stay close near the clinic.*

The last time my team and I had to go out of the country on a job, I hired a few locals to watch over Sara in our absence and report to me on her movements. They're highly vetted, and though I don't trust them nearly as much as my guys, so far I've been pleased with their services.

They should be able to protect her while I'm gone.

Setting my phone alarm to go off in four hours, I climb under the blanket with Sara and pull her into my embrace, curving my body around hers from the back. She stiffens but

doesn't pull away, and as I close my eyes, breathing in her scent, a feeling of peace settles over me.

Nothing is resolved between us, but for some reason, I'm certain that it will be, confident that we'll make this work, whatever "this" turns out to be. It's the only way, because I can't picture my life without her.

Sara is mine, and I'd die before I set her free.

CHAPTER 33

Sara

A persistent buzzing drags me out of sound sleep. For a second, I'm so disoriented I think it's the middle of the night.

Rolling over onto my side, I blindly grope for the vibrating phone. "Hello," I croak, grabbing it from the nightstand without opening my eyes. My lashes feel glued together, my head so heavy I can barely lift it off the pillow.

"Dr. Cobakis, we have a patient going into premature labor, and Dr. Tomlinson was called away on a family matter. You're next in line to be on call. Can you be here soon?"

I sit up, a spike of adrenaline chasing away the worst of my drowsiness. "Um..." I blink the sleep out of my eyes and realize sunlight is seeping in through the cracks in the drapes. The alarm clock by the bed reads 6:45—less than an hour before I need to get up for work anyway. "Yes. I can be there in about an hour."

"Thank you. We'll see you soon."

The second the scheduling coordinator hangs up, I jump off the bed to rush to the shower—and stop dead, feeling the soreness deep inside. Memories of last night rush in, scorching hot and toxic, and all remnants of grogginess fade.

I had sex with Peter Sokolov last night.

He hurt me, and I came in his arms.

For a moment, those two facts seem irreconcilable, like an ice storm in July. I've never been into pain—just the opposite. The couple of times George and I explored kink, the light spanking he gave me distracted me from my orgasm instead of turning me on. I don't understand how I could've come after such rough sex, how I could've found pleasure when my body felt torn and battered.

And that orgasm wasn't the only one. My tormentor woke me up in the middle of the night by sliding into me, his fingers skillfully teasing my clit, and despite being sore, I came within minutes, my body responding to him even as my mind screamed in protest. Afterward, I cried myself back to sleep while he held me, stroking my back as though he cared.

No wonder I felt so groggy; with all the sex and crying, I only got a few hours of sleep.

Swallowing the ball of shame in my throat, I force myself to keep moving. I have to get dressed and go to the hospital. No matter how it feels right now, my life didn't end last night. I have no idea if I did the right thing by encouraging Peter to bed me, but what's done is done, and I have to move on.

The good news is that I don't have to see him again until tonight.

Maybe by then, the idea of facing him won't make me want to die.

* * *

The day flies by in a blur of work, and by the time I come home, I'm both exhausted and starved. I was so busy I skipped lunch, and though I'm dreading another night with my stalker, I have to admit that I'm looking forward to his cooking.

Peter Sokolov might be a psychopath, but he's an excellent chef.

To my surprise—and a small measure of disappointment—no delicious smells greet me as I walk in from the garage. The house is dark and empty, and I know without going from room to room that he's not there. I can feel it. My home seems

colder, less vibrant, as if whatever dark energy Peter Sokolov emits was giving it a vitality of sorts.

Still, I call out, “Hello? Peter?”

Nothing.

“Are you there?”

No response.

Could my plan have worked so quickly? Is it possible that one taste satisfied whatever sick craving my stalker had for me?

Puzzled, I walk over to the refrigerator and take out a frozen dinner to pop into the microwave. It’s the healthy, organic kind, Thai noodles and vegetables in some kind of not overly sugary sauce, but it’s still dinner in a box. Too bad it’s the only thing I have energy for tonight. I should’ve grabbed something from the hospital cafeteria, but I think I was subconsciously counting on being fed at home.

Shaking my head at the ridiculousness of it all, I turn on the microwave and go wash my hands.

My tormentor is gone, and that’s a good thing.

I just need to convince my stomach of that.

* * *

He’s still not there when I wake up, and though I have the vague sensation of being watched as I drive to work, I can’t detect anyone following me. Same thing when I get to the hospital and go about my day. I’m paranoid enough to feel eyes on me all the time, but the sensation is not nearly as intense as it used to be.

If I didn’t know I have a real stalker, I’d chalk it up to my imagination.

My parents call when I’m on my lunch hour and invite me over for dinner on Friday. I give them a noncommittal response—I don’t want to expose them to any danger either—and then I call the clinic.

“Hey, Lydia, how’s it going?” I ask, trying not to sound nervous. “How’s everything been?”

“Hi, Dr. Cobakis.” The receptionist’s voice turns extra warm. “Glad to hear from you. Everything’s going well. Not too busy for now, but it’s probably going to pick up in the afternoon. Will you be able to come in again this week?”

“Yes, I think so. Um, Lydia...” I hesitate, unsure how to ask her what I want to know. I haven’t seen anything on the news about the murders, but that doesn’t mean the bodies haven’t been found. “You haven’t seen or heard anything... unusual, have you?”

“Unusual?” Lydia sounds confused. “Like what?”

“Oh, nothing in particular.” To allay any suspicion, I add, “I was just thinking about that one patient, Monica Jackson... You haven’t heard from her, right? The young dark-haired girl I saw yesterday?”

To my surprise, Lydia says, “Oh, that. Yes, actually. She dropped by a couple of hours ago and left a message for you. Something along the lines of ‘thank you and he’s now behind bars.’ She didn’t explain, just said that you’d understand. Any of that make sense to you?”

“Yes.” Despite my tension, a big grin cuts across my face. “Yes, it makes perfect sense. Thanks for letting me know. I’ll see you later this week.”

I hang up, still grinning, and go scrub up for my afternoon C-section.

I have no idea how Peter made the evidence of his crime disappear, but he did, and now it seems like some good came out of that awful evening.

There might be no escape for me, but Monica is free.

* * *

My house is again dark and empty when I get home that evening, and as I get ready for bed, I’m aware of a peculiar melancholy. Having Peter in my house was terrifying, but he was still a human presence. Now I’m alone again, as I’ve been

for the past two years, and the feeling of loneliness is sharper than ever, my bed colder and emptier than I recall it being.

Maybe I should get a dog. A big one that I would spoil by letting it sleep with me. That way, I'd have someone to greet me when I came home, and I wouldn't miss something as perverse as my husband's killer holding me at night.

Yes, I'll get a dog, I decide, climbing into bed and pulling the blanket over myself. Once I sell the house, I'll rent a place closer to the hospital and make sure it's dog-friendly—maybe near a park of some kind.

A dog will give me what I need, and I'll be able to forget about Peter Sokolov.

That is, assuming he forgot about me.

CHAPTER 34

Sara

By Monday, I'm almost convinced that Peter left for good. Over the weekend, I scoured my house from top to bottom in an effort to uncover his hidden cameras, but either they're all gone or they're concealed in such a way that a layman like myself has no hopes of finding them. Alternatively, they might not have been there in the first place, and my stalker knew the things he knew in some other way. Either way, there's been no sign of him, no contact of any kind. I spent most of the weekend at the clinic, and though I felt eyes on me as I walked to my car, it could've been remnants of my paranoia.

Maybe my nightmare is finally over.

It's silly, but the knowledge that I drove Peter away with sex stings a little. I hoped that once I stopped being the unattainable "ice princess," he'd leave me alone, but I didn't expect the results to be quite so immediate. Maybe I'm bad in bed? I must be, if one time was all it took for Peter to realize I'd never live up to whatever fantasy he had in his mind.

After stalking me for weeks, my tormentor abandoned me after just one night.

It's a good thing, of course. There are no more dinners, no more showers where I'm cared for like a child. No more dangerous killers wrapped around me at night, fucking with my mind and seducing my body. I go about my days as I've

done for the past several months, only I feel stronger, less shattered inside. Confronting the source of my nightmares has done more for my mental wellbeing than months of therapy, and I can't help but be grateful for that.

Even with shame gnawing at me whenever I think of the orgasms he gave me, I feel better, more like my old self.

“So, tell me how you've been, Sara,” Dr. Evans says when I finally go see him after his vacation. He's bronzed from the sun, his thin face for once glowing with health. “How did the Open House go?”

“My realtor is fielding a couple of offers,” I reply, crossing my legs. For some reason, today I feel uncomfortable in this office, like I no longer belong here. Shaking the feeling away, I elaborate, “They're both lower than I'd like, so we're trying to play them off against one another.”

“Ah, good. So some progress on that front.” He tilts his head. “And maybe on other fronts as well?”

I nod, unsurprised by the therapist's perceptiveness. “Yes, my paranoia is better, and so are my nightmares. I was even able to turn on the water in the kitchen sink on Saturday.”

“Really?” His eyebrows rise. “That's wonderful to hear. Anything in particular bring it on?”

Oh, you know, just having the man who tortured me and killed my husband reappear in my life.

“I don't know,” I say with a shrug. “Maybe it's time. It's been almost seven months.”

“Yes,” Dr. Evans says gently, “but you should know that's nothing in the timeline of human grief and PTSD.”

“Right.” I look down at my hands and notice a rather ragged-looking hangnail on the left thumb. It might be time to get a manicure. “I guess I'm lucky then.”

“Indeed.”

When I look up, Dr. Evans is regarding me with that same thoughtful expression. “How is your social life?” he asks, and I feel a fiery blush creep across my face.

“I see,” Dr. Evans says when I don’t answer right away. “Anything you’d like to talk about?”

“No, it’s... it’s nothing.” My face burns even hotter when he gives me a disbelieving look. I can’t tell him about Peter, so I scramble for something plausible. “I mean, I did go out with some coworkers a couple of weeks back and had a good time...”

“Ah.” He seems to accept my answer at face value. “And how did it make you feel, having ‘a good time?’”

“It made me feel... great.” I think back to dancing at the club, letting the beat of the music thump through me. “It made me feel alive.”

“Excellent.” Dr. Evans scribbles down some notes. “And have you gone out again since?”

“No, I haven’t had the opportunity.” It’s a lie—I could’ve gone out with Marsha and the girls this past Saturday—but I can’t explain to the therapist that I’m trying to protect my friends by minimizing contact with them. Doctor-patient privilege has its limits, and disclosing that I’ve been in contact with a wanted criminal—and that I witnessed two murders last week—could prompt Dr. Evans to go to the police and endanger us both.

In general, coming here today was a bad idea. I can’t talk about the things I really need to discuss, and he won’t be able to help me work through my complicated feelings without understanding the full story. That’s why I’m feeling uncomfortable, I realize: I can’t let Dr. Evans in anymore.

My phone vibrates in my bag, and I eagerly pounce on the distraction. Fishing the phone out, I see it’s a text from the hospital.

“Please excuse me,” I say, getting up and dropping the phone back into my bag. “A patient has just gone into premature labor and needs my assistance.”

“Of course.” Unfolding his lanky frame, Dr. Evans rises to his feet and shakes my hand. “We’ll continue next week. As always, it’s been a pleasure.”

“Thank you. Same here,” I say and make a mental note to cancel my next week’s appointment. “Have a wonderful rest of the day.”

And leaving the therapist’s office, I rush to the hospital, for once grateful for the unpredictability of my work.

* * *

I don’t know if it’s the session with Dr. Evans or the better sleep in the last few days, but that night, I find myself tossing and turning, drifting off only to jerk awake, heart hammering from some undefined anxiety. The emptiness of my bed grates at me, my loneliness a painful hole in my chest. I want to believe that I’m missing George, that it’s his arms I’m longing for, but when the uneasy sleep claims me, it’s steel-gray eyes that invade my dreams, not soft brown ones.

In those dreams, I’m dancing, performing in front of my tormentor like a professional ballerina. I’m dressed as one too, in a light yellow dress with stiff, feathery wings in the back. As I twirl and fly across the stage, I feel lighter than fog, more graceful than a wisp of smoke. But inside, I burn with passion. My movements come from deep within my soul, my body speaking through dance with the raw honesty of beauty.

I miss you, this plié says. *I want you*, that pirouette confirms. I say with my body what I can’t say through words, and he watches me, his face dark and enigmatic. Red droplets decorate his hands, and I know without asking that it’s blood, that he took another life today. It should disgust me, but all I care about is whether he wants me, whether he feels the heat that devours me from within.

Please, I beg with my movements, hinging in a graceful arc in front of him. *Please give me this. I need the truth. Please tell me.*

But he doesn’t say anything. He just watches me, and I know there’s nothing I can do, no way I can convince him. So I dance closer, pulled by a dark attraction, and when I’m within his reach, he lifts his arms, his blood-splattered hands closing around my shoulders.

“Peter...” I sway toward him, that terrible longing twisting my insides, but his eyes are cold, so cold they burn.

He doesn't want me anymore. I know it. I see it.

Still, I reach for him, my hand lifting to his hard-edged face. I want him—I need him—so much. But before I can touch him, he murmurs, “Goodbye, ptichka,” and shoves me away.

I tumble backward, falling off the stage. My dress flutters in the air for a brief second, and then my wings crumple as I hit the floor. Even before the shock of the impact reverberates through me, I know that this is it.

My body is broken, and so is my soul.

“Peter,” I moan with my last breath, but it's too late.

He's gone for good.

I wake up with my face wet with tears and my heart heavy with grief. It's pitch black in the room, and in the darkness, it doesn't matter that I can't rationally miss a man I hate. The dream is so vivid in my mind it feels as if I truly lost him... as if I died from the rejection at his hands. I know what I'm grieving must be my real losses—George and the life we were supposed to have—but with my bed empty and my body aching for a hard, warm embrace, it feels like I miss *him*.

Peter.

The man I have every reason to despise.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I roll up into a small ball under the blanket and hug a pillow to myself. I don't need Dr. Evans to tell me that what I'm feeling can't possibly be real, that at best, it's a bizarre version of Stockholm Syndrome. One does *not* fall for one's stalker; it simply doesn't happen. I haven't even known Peter Sokolov that long. He's been in my life for what? A week? Two? The days since the club outing have felt like years, but in reality, hardly any time has passed.

Of course, he's been in my nightmares for much longer.

For the first time, I allow myself to really think about my tormentor—to wonder about him as a man. What had he been

like with his family? It should've been difficult to imagine such a ruthless killer in a domestic setting, but for some reason, I have no problem picturing him playing with a child or making dinner with his wife. Maybe it's the gentle way he took care of me, but I feel like there's something within him that transcends the monstrous things he's done, something vulnerable and deeply human.

He must've loved his family, to dedicate himself to vengeance so completely.

The pictures on his phone surface in my mind, making my chest squeeze with pain. False information, that's what Peter blamed for those atrocities. Is it possible that George had been the one to provide that information? That my handsome, peaceful husband, who loved barbecues and reading the newspaper in bed, had really been a spy who'd made such a terrible error? It seems unbelievable, yet there must've been a reason Peter came after George, why he went to such lengths to murder him.

Unless Peter made a huge error himself, George hadn't been what he seemed.

Tightening my grip on the pillow, I process that realization, letting the knowledge fully settle in. Over the past week and a half, I've avoided thinking of my stalker's revelations, but I can no longer push the truth away.

Between the FBI protection that came out of nowhere and the growing distance between me and George after our marriage, it's entirely possible that my husband had fooled me—that he'd lied to me and everyone else for the better part of a decade.

My life had been even more of an illusion than I'd known.

When I fall asleep an hour later, it's with the bitter taste of betrayal on my tongue and a fresh determination in my mind.

Come tomorrow morning, I'm going to accept one of the offers on my house. I need a fresh start, and I'm going to get it. Maybe in a new place, I'll forget both George's duplicity and *him*.

If Peter Sokolov is gone for good, I might be able to finally start living.

CHAPTER 35

Sara

On Thursday, I sign the papers, selling my house to a lawyer couple moving to the area from Chicago. They have two children in elementary school and a baby on the way, and they need the five bedrooms. Though their offer is three percent below market value and a couple of thousand dollars less than the other offer I received, I went with the lawyers because they're paying cash and can close on the house quickly.

If there are no issues with the inspection, I'll be moving out in less than three weeks.

Feeling energized, I ask another doctor to cover for me on Friday and spend the day looking for apartments to rent. I settle on a small one-bedroom within walking distance of the hospital, in a pet-friendly condo building. It's a little dated, and the closet space is almost nonexistent, but since I'm planning to get rid of everything that reminds me of my old life, I don't mind.

Fresh start, here I come.

My excitement lasts until the evening, when I get home and feel the emptiness of the house again. My dinner is another box from the freezer, and despite my best efforts, I can't help thinking about Peter, wondering where he is and what he's doing. It occurred to me yesterday that there could

be another reason why he's gone, and the thought has been gnawing at me ever since.

The authorities could've captured or killed him.

I don't know why I didn't think of this possibility before yesterday, but now I can't get it out of my mind. It would obviously be a good thing—I'd be truly safe if he were dead or in custody—but every time I think about it, my chest feels tight and heavy, and something bizarrely like tears prickles at my eyes.

I don't want Peter Sokolov in my life, but I can't bear the thought of him dead, either.

It's stupid, so very stupid. Yes, we had sex that night—and he gave me orgasms more than once—but I'm not some virginal teenager who believes sleeping together means eternal love. The only feeling between us other than hatred is animal lust, an attraction of the most basic kind. That much I can accept; as a doctor, I know how potent biology can be, having seen the evidence of smart people making stupid decisions in the throes of passion. It's disturbing that I wanted my husband's killer on any level, but to fear for his wellbeing is something else.

Something far more insane.

I do not miss Peter, I tell myself as I toss and turn in my empty bed. Whatever loneliness I'm feeling is a function of too much stress and not enough time with my friends and family. Once a little more time passes, and the threat of my stalker is completely gone, I'll go out with Marsha and the nurses and maybe even consider a date with Joe.

Okay, maybe not the latter—I turned him down when he called a few days ago, and I still can't work up any regret—but I'll definitely go out dancing again.

One way or another, my new life will start soon.

CHAPTER 36

Peter

She's sleeping when I enter the room, her slender body swaddled in a blanket from head to toe. Quietly, I turn on the lights and stop, my breath catching in my chest. During the past two weeks, as I lay recuperating from the stab wound I sustained in Mexico, I've entertained myself by watching her on the house cameras and devouring the Americans' reports on her activities. I know everything she's done, everyone she's spoken to, all the places she's gone. That should've lessened the feeling of separation, but seeing her like this, with her shiny chestnut hair spread over her pillow, steals the air from my lungs and sends a stab of longing through me.

My Sara. I missed her so fucking much.

I approach the bed, curling my hands into fists to contain the need to reach for her, to grab her and never let her go.

Two weeks. For two impossibly long weeks, I couldn't return for her because I'd missed the knife hidden in one guard's boot. Granted, I was dealing with another guard pointing an AR15 at me, but that's no excuse for sloppiness.

I was distracted on the job, and that nearly cost me my life. An inch to the right, and I'd have been laid up way longer than two weeks. Maybe permanently.

"What the fuck, man?" Ilya grumbled as he and his brother patched me up after the mission was over. "He almost nicked

your kidney. You have to watch your fucking back.”

“That’s what I have you two for,” I managed to say, and then the blood loss got the better of me, preventing me from explaining the reason for my distraction. It was just as well. The truth is, I missed the knife coming at me because, as I was staring down the barrel of the AR15, I thought not of my team or my mission, but of Sara and never seeing her again.

My obsession with her almost became my downfall.

Sitting down on the edge of the bed, I carefully pull the blanket off her. She’s sleeping naked, as always, and lust roars in my veins at the sight of her slim, graceful curves. She doesn’t wake up, just huffs like a disgruntled kitten at the loss of the blanket, and I feel something soft slither into my chest. My heart fills with a warm glow even as my cock stiffens further and my pulse picks up pace.

I have to have her. Now.

Getting up, I swiftly strip off my clothes and place them on the dresser, making sure my weapons are well hidden. The jerky movements pull at the fresh scar on my stomach, but I want her so much the pain scarcely registers. Putting on a condom, I climb into bed with her and roll her over onto her back, settling between her legs.

My touch wakes her up. Her eyelids fly open, her hazel eyes panicked and dazed at the same time, and I smile as I grasp her wrists and pin them by her shoulders. It’s a predatory smile, I know, but I can’t help myself.

Even with the warm feeling in my chest, my hunger for her is dark, as violent as it is all-consuming.

“Hello, ptichka,” I murmur, watching the shock creep into her eyes as her gaze clears. “I’m sorry I was gone for so long. It couldn’t be helped.”

“You’re... you’re back.” Her chest rises up and down in an uneven rhythm, her nipples like hard pink berries on her deliciously round breasts. “What are you—why are you back?”

“Because I’d never leave you.” I lean down and inhale her scent, delicate and warm, as captivating as Sara herself. Lightly nibbling on her ear, I whisper against her neck, “Did you think I would just walk away?”

She shivers underneath me, her breathing speeding up, and I know if I reach between her legs, I’ll find her hot and wet, ready for me. She wants me—or at least her body does—and my cock throbs at the knowledge, eager to fill her, to feel the tight, slick embrace of her pussy. First, though, I want an answer to my question.

Raising my head, I pin her with my gaze. “Did you think I’d leave, Sara?”

Her face is a mask of confusion as she blinks up at me. “Well, yes. I mean, you were gone, and I thought—I hoped...” She stops, frowning. “Why did you leave if you didn’t get bored with me?”

“Bored with you?” Does she not realize that I literally think about her all the time, even in the heat of battle? That I can’t go an hour without checking on her whereabouts or spend a night without seeing her in my dreams? Holding her gaze, I slowly shake my head. “No, ptichka. I didn’t get bored with you—nor will I ever.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see her slender fingers flex, and I realize I’m still holding her wrists pinned next to her shoulders, my grip as tight as if I’m afraid she would escape. She wouldn’t, of course—even with my recent injury, she’s no match for my reflexes or strength—but I like having her like this, restrained underneath me, naked and helpless. It’s part of my fucked-up feelings for her, this need to dominate, to have her always at my mercy.

“Don’t,” she whispers, but her tongue flicks out to wet her soft pink lips, and the hunger within me intensifies, my balls tightening as blood rushes to my groin. There’s something so pure about her, something so gentle and innocent in the graceful lines of her heart-shaped face. It’s as if she’s been untouched by life, uncorrupted by all the vileness I deal with

daily. It makes the things I want to do to her that much more dirty, that much more wrong, yet I know I will do them all.

Right and wrong has never been my strong suit.

Lowering my head, I taste her lips, keeping my kiss gentle despite the aching stiffness of my cock. Even with the dark urges gnawing at me, I don't want to hurt her today—not after the last time. I still can't define what she means to me, but I know she's mine to care for, mine to coddle and protect. I don't want her to fear pain from my touch—even if I sometimes want to inflict it.

I don't know what I want from her, but I know it's more than this.

She's unresponsive at first, her lips sealed against the probing of my tongue, but I keep kissing her, and eventually, her lips soften, letting me into the warm recesses of her mouth. She tastes delicious, like a hint of minty toothpaste and herself, and I can't suppress a groan as the head of my cock brushes against her inner thigh. I want to be inside her, to feel her hot, slick walls squeezing me tight, but I resist the temptation, focusing on seducing her, on giving her so much pleasure she'll forget the pain I caused.

I don't know how long I tease and caress her lips, but after a while, I feel the tentative touch of her tongue. She's responding to me, kissing me back, and as her body softens underneath me, my heartbeat spikes, the need to have her drumming in my chest. Breathing raggedly, I move from her lips to the tender skin of her neck, then her collarbone and the plush softness of her breasts. She moans as my lips close over her nipple, and I feel her arch underneath me, her hips rising off the bed to press her pussy against me.

Growling low in my throat, I turn my attention to the other breast, sucking on it until Sara's moans grow in volume, and she's writhing underneath me, her hands flexing convulsively as I hold her wrists. When I lift my head, I see that her face is flushed, her eyes squeezed shut and her head tipped back in sensual abandon.

It's time. Fuck, it's way past time.

Releasing her nipple, I move up, lining my hard cock against the entrance to her body.

“Do you want this?” I ask hoarsely as her eyelids flutter open, revealing eyes hazy with desire. “Tell me you want this, ptichka. Tell me you missed me when I was gone.”

Sara’s lips part, but no words emerge, and I know she’s not ready to admit it, to accept the connection that exists between us. I might have her body, but I’ll have to fight harder for her mind and heart. And I will, because that’s what I need from her, I realize: for her to be completely mine, to want me and need me as much as I need her.

Lowering my head, I kiss her lips again, then release one of her wrists to guide my cock into her hot, slick opening. She’s still incredibly tight, but this time, I manage to go slow, to work myself in inch by inch until I’m buried in her to the hilt. She clutches at my side with her free hand, her delicate nails digging into my skin as she pants against my ear, and I feel her inner walls flex as I begin to move inside her, sliding in and out in a slow, deliberate rhythm. My own desire is at a fever pitch, and it’s all I can do to keep my strokes steady, grinding against her clit each time I bottom out inside her.

“Yes, that’s it,” I groan, feeling her muscles tighten as her breathing speeds up. “Come for me, ptichka. Let me feel you come.”

She cries out as I pick up my pace, and I grip her hip, squeezing the tight flesh of her ass as I hammer into her, fucking her so hard the bed creaks underneath us. I can’t get enough of her, of her silky softness and sweet scent, and I drive deeper into her body, wanting to meld with her, to sink so far into her I’d be permanently etched inside her flesh.

Her cries grow louder, more frantic, and I feel her pussy clenching, her hips rising off the bed as she reaches her peak. Her contractions are the last straw; with a hoarse shout, I explode, grinding my pelvis against hers as my cock jerks and pulses in release, flooding the condom with my seed.

Panting, I roll off her and gather her against me, holding her tight as our breathing slows. With my hunger sated, I

become aware of the dull pulsing of the healing wound on my abdomen. The doctors warned me to take it easy for a few weeks, but I forgot about that, too consumed by Sara and the incandescent pleasure of possessing her.

After a minute, I get up to get rid of the condom, and when I return, Sara is sitting up in bed, her slim form wrapped in a blanket like the last time. Only today, there are no tears; her eyes are dry, her gaze locked defiantly on my face as I cross the room.

Maybe she's beginning to accept the reality of us, to understand there's no shame in wanting me.

"Why are you back?" she asks as I sit down next to her, and I hear the despair behind the bravado.

I was wrong. She's still far from accepting me.

Lifting my hand, I tuck a shiny strand of hair behind her ear. With the blanket wrapped around her and her chestnut waves in disarray, my pretty doctor looks young and vulnerable, more girl than woman. Seeing her like this makes me want to protect her, shelter her from the cruelty of my world.

Too bad I'm part of that world—and maybe the cruelest of them all.

"I never left," I answer, lowering my hand. "At least I didn't mean to leave—not for this long. I had a job to do, but it should've only taken a day or two."

"A job?" She blinks at me. "What kind of job?"

I consider not telling her, or at least glossing over some of the harsher realities of my work, but I decide against it. Sara's opinion of me can't get much worse, so she might as well know the full truth.

"My team carries out certain missions," I say carefully, observing her reaction. "Jobs that few others can handle with the same level of skill and discretion. Our clients generally operate in the shadows, and so do the targets we're paid to eliminate."

The post-sex flush on her cheeks fades, leaving her face starkly pale. “You’re an assassin? Your team... kills people for hire?”

I nod. “Not just anyone, but yes. Our targets tend to be quite dangerous themselves, often with multiple layers of security that we have to penetrate. That’s how I ended up with this.” I point to the fresh scar on my stomach and see her eyes widen as she takes it in—likely for the first time. I doubt she got a good look at me as I was fucking her.

“How did this happen?” she asks, looking up from my stomach. Her face is even paler now, her porcelain skin taking on a greenish tint. “Is that a knife wound?”

“Yes. As to how, a moment of inattention on my part.” It still pisses me off that I didn’t see the guard behind me reach for his knife while I was dealing with his gun-wielding partner. “I should’ve been more careful.”

She swallows and studies my scar again. “If it’s so dangerous, why do you do it?” she asks after a moment, her eyes returning to my face.

“Because hiding from the authorities isn’t cheap,” I say. So far, Sara’s taking my revelation better than I expected, though I guess seeing me kill those two druggies might’ve prepared her for something like this. “The work pays extremely well, and it’s a good fit with my skill set. I used to consult for some of our clients before this, but running my own business is better. I have more freedom and flexibility—something that became important to me when I got my list.”

Her lips tighten. “The list that my husband was on?”

“Yes.”

Her gaze drops to her lap, but not before I glimpse a flash of anger in the soft hazel depths. It bothers her that I feel no remorse about that, but I’m not about to fake it. That *ublyudok*—that bastard husband of hers—deserved a much worse death than he received, and the only thing I regret is that he was a vegetable when I came for him. That and the fact that, for a brief instant, I hesitated before pulling the trigger.

I hesitated because I thought of Sara instead of my dead wife and son.

The recollection fills me with familiar rage and pain, and I force myself to take a slow, deep breath. If I didn't feel so relaxed after fucking her, it would've been next to impossible to contain the agony flooding my chest, but as it is, I'm able to control myself—even when Sara gets up and excuses herself to go to the bathroom, still wrapped in the blanket.

She's giving me the silent treatment, but it doesn't bother me. It's already after midnight, and there will be plenty of time to talk tomorrow.

Stretching out on the bed, I wait for Sara to return. It's just as well she chose to cut short our little powwow. Though I barely exerted myself today, I feel as tired as after a mission. My body is still in recovery mode, a fact that frustrates me. I hate it when I'm not in battle-ready shape; weakness of any kind makes me feel antsy and unsettled.

Sara takes her time in the bathroom, but eventually, she reappears and lies down next to me, pointedly not sharing the blanket with me. Equal parts annoyed and amused, I pull the blanket off her and arrange it over both of us when I have her where she belongs: in my arms, with her tight little butt pressing against my groin.

“Good night,” I murmur, kissing the back of her neck, and when she doesn't respond, I close my eyes, ignoring the twitching of my hardening cock.

As much as I'd like to fuck her again, I need rest, and so does she.

I can be patient. After all, I'll have her again tomorrow—and every day after that.

CHAPTER 37

Sara

I wake up to the smell of coffee and bacon and the feeling of sunlight on my face. Confused, I open my eyes and see that it's a half hour before my alarm is due to go off. As I attempt to process that, memories of last night invade my mind, and I groan, pulling the blanket over my head.

My Russian stalker is back—and cooking breakfast in my house.

After a minute, I convince myself to get up and go through my usual morning routine. Yes, my husband's killer fucked me again last night—and made me come—but the world didn't end, and I have to act accordingly.

I have to ignore the self-loathing knotting my insides and go to work.

Ten minutes later, I go downstairs, dressed and freshly showered. It's strange, but I don't feel any differently about Peter now that I know what he does for work. I've been thinking about him as a killer for so long that knowing he and his team do it for money hardly fazes me. However, it does reinforce my conviction that he's dangerous—and that I need to tread carefully if I'm to avoid putting those I care about in his crosshairs.

"I hope you like bacon and scrambled eggs," he says as I enter the kitchen. Like me, he's fully dressed, minus shoes and

the leather jacket hanging on one of the kitchen chairs. Once again, his clothes are dark, and the sight of him by the stove, so powerfully male and lethally handsome, jacks up my pulse and makes my stomach clench with something unsettling.

Something that feels suspiciously like excitement.

Pushing the thought away, I fold my arms in front of my chest and prop my hip against the counter. “Sure,” I answer evenly, ignoring my racing heartbeat. “Who doesn’t?”

As good as it would feel to throw the food in his face, I don’t want to provoke him until I figure out a new strategy.

“That’s what I figured.” He skillfully plates the eggs and bacon, then pours us each a cup of coffee.

Deciding that I might as well help out, I pick up the cups and carry them to the table. He brings the plates, and we sit down to eat breakfast.

The eggs are excellent, flavorful and fluffy, and the bacon is perfectly crisped. Even the coffee is unusually good, as though he used some secret recipe with my Keurig. Not that I expected anything else; each meal he’s fed me has been outstanding.

If the assassin/stalker thing doesn’t work out, my tormentor could consider a career as a chef.

The thought is so ridiculous I snicker into my coffee, prompting Peter to look up from his plate, eyebrows raised in a silent question.

“I was just thinking that you could do this professionally,” I explain, shoving a forkful of eggs into my mouth. Maybe this is another betrayal of George’s memory, but I can’t help remembering that my husband had never once made breakfast for me. A couple of times while we were dating, he attempted a romantic dinner—takeout Chinese with some candles—but otherwise, I either cooked or we went out.

“Thank you.” A smile touches Peter’s lips at my compliment. “I’m glad you like it.”

“Uh-huh.” I focus on consuming what’s on my plate and trying not to flush as I recall how those sculpted lips felt on my neck, my breasts, my nipples... I want to believe that he caught me off-guard last night, that my response to him was the result of a sleep-clouded mind, but the excitement humming in my veins this morning belies that assumption.

Some sick part of me is glad to see him—and relieved that he’s alive.

Idiot, I chastise myself. Peter Sokolov is a wanted fugitive, a monster who took two lives in front of me after torturing me and killing George. A stalker whose presence in my life introduces innumerable complications and poses a threat to everyone around me.

It’s not just wrong to want him here; it’s downright pathological.

Still, as I finish my eggs and gulp down my coffee, I’m aware of a peculiar lightness in my chest. The house no longer feels huge and oppressive around me, the kitchen bright and warm instead of cold and threatening. *He* fills the space now, dominating it with his large body and the frightening force of his personality, and though he’s the last person I should want for companionship, I don’t feel the crushing pressure of loneliness when I’m with him.

A dog, I remind myself. *All you need is a dog*. And in the next breath, I realize there could be a problem with that—and with my new life plan in general.

“You know I’m moving out in a couple of weeks, right?” I say, putting down my empty cup. “I signed papers to sell the house.”

Peter’s expression doesn’t change. “Yes, I know.”

“Of course you do.” My hands curl on the table, my nails digging into my palms. “You probably had me watched while you were gone. Those eyes on me—that wasn’t my imagination, was it?”

“I couldn’t leave you unprotected,” he says with an unapologetic shrug.

“Right.” I take a breath and consciously relax my hands. “Well, I’m moving to an apartment soon, and I’m pretty sure you won’t be able to come and go like this—at least not without the neighbors seeing you every day. So you might as well find some other woman to torture and stalk. There are plenty who live in semi-rural areas.”

The corners of his mouth twitch. “I’m sure there are. Too bad I don’t want any of them.”

I drum my fingers on the table. “Really? What about the rest of the people on your list? Or did you murder them all?”

“There’s one left, and he’s proving elusive so far,” he says, and I stare at him blankly before shaking my head.

I’m not prepared to go there today.

“Fine,” I say in an attempt to regroup. “So what’s it going to take for you to leave *me* alone?”

“A bullet to the brain or the heart,” he answers, unblinking, and my stomach lurches as I realize he’s completely serious.

He has no intention of walking away from me. Ever.

All the lightness and excitement fade, leaving me with the stark terror of my reality. No amount of delicious meals, mind-blowing orgasms, or tender cuddling makes up for the fact that I’m a de-facto prisoner of this lethal man, a killer who doesn’t blink at violence and torture. His obsession with me is as dangerous as the man himself, his feelings as twisted as the dark past we share.

A monster is fixated on me, and there’s no escape.

My legs are unsteady as I get up, pushing my chair back. “I have to go to work,” I say tightly, and before he can object, I grab my bag and hurry to the garage.

Peter makes no move to stop me, but as I’m getting into the car, he comes to stand in the doorway, his darkly handsome face set in an unreadable mask.

“I’ll see you when you get back,” he says as I start the car, and I know he means it.

My tormentor is back, and he's not going away.

CHAPTER 38

Sara

True to his word, Peter is there when I get home from work that day, and I'm so tired and stressed that I'm tempted to just give in and eat the dinner he made—a savory-smelling rice pilaf with mushrooms and peas. But I can't. I can't keep playing along with this madness, acting as though this is somehow normal.

If my stalker is not going to leave me alone, there's no point in my compliance. I might as well make things as difficult for him as I can.

Ignoring the table he set, I go upstairs while he's pouring us wine. Entering the bedroom, I lock the door and go into the bathroom to splash cold water on my face.

I've tried everything except outright resistance, and I'm desperate enough to try that.

Face freshly washed, I come out and sit down on the bed, waiting to see what's going to happen next. I have no intention of unlocking that door and letting him in, or of cooperating in any way.

I'm done playing house with a monster. If he wants me, he's going to have to force me.

My stomach growls with hunger, and I kick myself for not eating before coming here. I was just so frazzled from thinking about Peter all day that I drove home on autopilot, my mind

occupied with my impossible situation. Now that I know about his team and their assassination missions, I'm even less convinced that the FBI would be able to protect me if I went to them.

I don't think *anyone* can protect me from him.

A knock on the bedroom door drags me out of my despairing thoughts.

"Come down, ptichka," Peter says from the other side. "Dinner is getting cold."

My whole body tenses, but I don't respond.

Another knock. Then the door handle rattles. "Sara." Peter's voice hardens. "Open the door."

I get up, too unsettled to sit still, but I make no move toward the door.

"Sara. Open this door. Now."

I remain standing, my hands flexing at my sides. Before coming home, I considered getting a weapon, but I remembered what he told me about his men monitoring his vitals and dismissed the idea. I don't know how the monitoring works, but it's entirely possible he's wearing some kind of device that measures his pulse and/or blood pressure. Maybe even an implant. I've heard of things like that, though I've never encountered them. In any case, if what Peter told me is true, I can't hurt him in any meaningful way without risking my own life and possibly the lives of those close to me.

Men who kill for money wouldn't hesitate to avenge their boss in the most brutal ways.

"You have five seconds to open this door."

Fighting a sense of déjà vu, I sink my teeth into my lower lip but keep still, even as my heart thuds sickly and cold sweat pours down my spine. As much as I don't want him to hurt me, I don't want to live like this either, too afraid to stand up for myself, meekly going along with a madman's demands. The last time I locked a door on him, I was in shock, so overwhelmed and terrified from seeing him kill those two men

that I acted on autopilot. Now, however, my action is deliberate.

I need to know how far he'll go, what he's willing to do to get his way.

He doesn't count out loud this time, so I count in my head. *One, two, three, four, five...* I wait for his kick to rattle the door, but instead, I hear footsteps heading down the hall.

The breath I'm holding escapes in a relieved whoosh. Is it possible? Could he have given up and decided to leave me alone tonight? I wouldn't have expected that, but he's surprised me before. Maybe his reluctance to force me still holds; maybe he's drawing a line at breaking down the bedroom door and—

The footsteps return, and the door handle rattles again before something metallic scratches against it. My heart skips a beat, then resumes its furious thudding.

He's picking the lock on the door.

The cool deliberateness of that action is somehow scarier than if he'd simply kicked down the door. My tormentor is not acting out of anger; he's fully in control and knows exactly what he's doing.

The metallic scratching lasts for less than a minute. I know because I watch the blinking numbers on the alarm clock on my nightstand. Then the door swings open, and Peter steps in, his gait radiating restrained rage and his face set in cold, hard lines.

Fighting the urge to run, I raise my chin and stare up at him as he stops in front of me, his big body towering over my much shorter frame.

“Come to dinner.” His voice is quiet, soft even, but I hear the pulsing darkness underneath. He's hanging on to his control by a thread, and if I had any hope left, I'd back down out of self-preservation. But I'm all out of strategies, and at some point, self-preservation has to take a back seat to self-respect.

Recklessly, I shake my head. “I'm not doing this.”

His nostrils flare. “Doing what? Eating?”

My stomach chooses that moment to growl again, and I flush at the unfortunate timing. “I’m not eating with *you*,” I say as evenly as I can manage. “Nor am I sleeping with you—or doing anything else for that matter.”

“No?” Dark amusement creeps into the gray iciness of his gaze. “Are you sure about that, ptichka?”

My hands ball at my sides. “I want you out of my house. Now.”

“Or what?” He steps closer, crowding me with his large body until I have no choice but to back up in the direction of the bed. “Or what, Sara?”

I want to threaten him with the police or FBI, but we both know that if I could’ve gone to them, I would’ve already done so. There’s nothing I can do to force him out of my life, and that’s the crux of the matter.

Ignoring the icy sweat trickling down my back, I lift my chin higher. “I’m done with this, Peter.”

“This?” He steps closer, cocking his head to the side.

“This sick relationship fantasy you’ve cooked up,” I clarify. He’s too close for comfort, invading my personal space like he belongs there. His masculine scent surrounds me, the heat coming off his big body warming my insides, and I step back again, trying to ignore the melting sensation between my thighs and the aching tautness of my nipples.

I can’t be this close to him without remembering how it feels to be even closer, to be joined with him in the most intimate of ways.

“A sick relationship fantasy?” His eyebrows arch mockingly. “That’s a little harsh, don’t you think?”

“I. Am. Done,” I repeat, enunciating each word. My heart slams anxiously against my ribcage, but I’m determined not to back down or let him distract me with a discussion of our messed-up relationship. “If you want to cook in my kitchen, go ahead, but short of force-feeding me, you can’t make me

eat with you—or do anything else with you of my own accord.”

“Oh, ptichka.” Peter’s voice is soft, his gaze almost sympathetic. “You have no idea how wrong you are.”

His lips curve in that imperfect, magnetic smile, and my stomach flips as he comes even closer. Desperate for some distance, I take another step back, only to feel the back of my knees press against the bed.

I’m trapped, caught by him once again.

Mercilessly, he steps closer, and my sex clenches as his hands curl around my shoulders. “Come downstairs with me, Sara,” he says softly. “You’re hungry, and you’ll feel better once you eat. And while you’re eating, we can talk.”

“About what?” I ask, my voice tight. The heat of his palms burns even through the thick layer of my sweater, and it’s all I can do to keep my breathing semi-steady as pernicious arousal curls in my core. “We have nothing to talk about.”

“I think we do,” he says, and I see the monster behind the dark silver of his gaze. “You see, Sara, if you don’t want to be with me here, we can be together someplace else. The fantasy can be made real—but solely on my terms.”

CHAPTER 39

Peter

She's shaking as I lead her downstairs, and I know it's as much from anger as fear. I suppose her reaction should bother me, but I'm too angry myself. Yesterday, and today at breakfast, I could've sworn she was glad to see me, relieved that I came back. But tonight, she's back to being cold and distant, and I won't stand for it.

It's time the gloves came off.

"Sit," I tell her when we get to the kitchen table, and she plops down in a chair, a defiant expression on her pretty face. She's determined to make things difficult, and I'm just as determined not to let her.

Taking a breath to steady myself, I turn off the bright overhead lights and light the candles. Then I plate the risotto I made and bring it over to her before getting my own food. I'm as hungry as she is, so as soon as I sit down, I dig into the food, figuring the discussion of our relationship can wait a couple of minutes.

Unfortunately, Sara doesn't share that opinion. "What did you mean, 'the fantasy can be made real?'" she asks, her voice tense as she toys with her fork. "What exactly are you saying?"

I make her wait until I'm done chewing; then I put down my fork and give her a level look. "I'm saying that you living

in this house, going to work, and interacting with your friends is a privilege I'm allowing," I say calmly and watch her blanch. "Other men in my position wouldn't have been nearly so accommodating—and I don't have to be either. I want you, and I have the power to take you. It's as simple as that. If you don't like our existing relationship dynamic, I will change it—but not in a way you'll enjoy."

Her hand trembles as she reaches for the glass of wine I poured earlier. "So you'll what? Kidnap me? Take me away from everyone and everything?"

"Yes, ptichka. That's precisely what I'll do if I can't make the current situation work." I resume eating, giving her time to process my words. I know I'm being harsh, but I need to squash this little rebellion, make her understand just how precarious her position is.

There's no line I won't cross when it comes to her. She's going to be mine one way or another.

Sara stares at me, the glass shaking in her grasp; then she puts it down without taking a single sip. "So why haven't you done this already? Why all this?" She sweeps her hand out in a broad gesture, nearly knocking over the glass and one of the candle holders.

"Careful there," I say, moving both objects out of her reach. "If I didn't know better, I'd think you're trying to drug me again."

Her teeth audibly grind together. "Tell me," she demands, her hand curling into a fist next to her untouched plate. "Why haven't you kidnapped me already? Surely you have no moral qualms about that."

I sigh and put my fork down. Maybe I should've promised her a discussion after the meal, not during. "Because I like what you do," I say, picking up my wine glass and taking a sip. "With babies, with women. I think your work is admirable, and I don't want to take you away from that—or from your parents."

"But you will if you have to."

“Yes.” I put down the glass and pick up my fork again. “I will.”

She studies me for a few seconds, then picks up her own fork, and for a couple of minutes, we eat in an uneasy silence. I can practically hear her thinking, her agile mind struggling to find a solution.

It’s too bad for her that one doesn’t exist.

When Sara’s plate is half-empty, she pushes it away and asks in a strained voice, “Did you stalk her too?”

My eyebrows lift as I pick up my wine glass. “Who?”

“Your wife,” Sara says, and my hand tightens on the wine stem, nearly snapping the fragile glass in half. Instinctively, I brace for the agonizing pain and fury, but all I feel is a dull echo of loss, accompanied by a bittersweet ache at the memories.

“No,” I say, and surprise myself by smiling fondly. “I didn’t. If anything, she stalked me.”

CHAPTER 40

Sara

Shocked, I stare at my tormentor, caught off-guard by that soft, almost tender smile. I fully expected him to explode at the question, and as I watched his fingers tighten on the glass stem, I was sure he would.

Instead, he smiled.

Chewing on my lower lip, I consider dropping the topic, but even with the threat of kidnapping looming over me, I can't resist the chance to learn more about him.

"What do you mean?" I ask, picking up my wine glass. The risotto is amazing, but my stomach is tied in knots, preventing me from finishing my portion. Wine, though, I could use.

Maybe if I drink enough, I'll forget his terrifying promise.

"We met when I was passing through her village almost nine years ago." Peter leans back in his chair, a wine glass cradled in his big hand. The candlelight casts a soft, warm glow over his handsome features, and if it weren't for the stress-induced adrenaline in my veins, I could've bought into the illusion of a romantic dinner, into the fantasy he's trying so hard to create.

"My team was tracking a group of insurgents in the mountains," he continues, his gaze turning distant as he relives the memory. "It was winter, and it was cold. Unbelievably

cold. I knew we had to crash someplace warm for the night, so I asked the villagers to rent us a couple of rooms. Only one woman was brave enough to do so, and that was Tamila.”

I take a sip of wine, fascinated despite myself. “She lived by herself?”

Peter nods. “She was only twenty at the time, but she had a small house of her own. Her aunt died and left it to her. It was unheard of in her village, for a young woman to live on her own, but Tamila was never big on rules. Her parents wanted her to marry one of the village elders, a man who could give them a dowry of five goats, but Tamila found him repulsive and was delaying the marriage as much as she could. Needless to say, her parents weren’t pleased, and by the time my men and I came to the village, she was desperate to change her situation.”

I gulp down the rest of my wine as he continues. “I didn’t know any of this, of course. I just saw a beautiful young woman, who, for whatever reason, welcomed three half-frozen Spetsnaz soldiers into her home. She gave her bedroom to my guys and put me into the second, smaller room, saying that she herself would sleep on the couch.”

“But she didn’t,” I guess as he leans in to pour me more wine. My stomach feels tight, something uncomfortably like jealousy roiling my insides. “She came to you.”

“Yes, she did.” He smiles again, and I hide my discomfort by drinking more wine. I don’t know why picturing him with this “beautiful young woman” bothers me, but it does, and it’s all I can do to listen calmly as he says, “I didn’t turn her down, naturally. No straight man would. She was shy and relatively inexperienced but not a virgin, and when we left in the morning, I promised to swing by the village on the way back. Which I did, two months later, only to learn that she was pregnant with my child.”

I blink. “You didn’t use protection?”

“I did—the first time. The second time, I was asleep when she started rubbing against me, and by the time I woke up

fully, I was inside her and too far gone to remember the condom.”

My mouth drops open. “She got pregnant on purpose?”

He shrugs. “She claimed she didn’t, but I suspect otherwise. She lived in a conservative Muslim village, and she’d had a lover before me. She never told me who he was, but if she’d gone through with the marriage to the elder—or if she’d turned him down and married someone else from her village—she could’ve been publicly exposed and cast out by her husband. A non-Muslim foreigner like me was her best bet at avoiding that fate, and she seized the opportunity when she saw it. It’s admirable, really. She took a risk, and it paid off.”

“Because you married her.”

He nods. “I did—after the paternity test confirmed her claim.”

“That’s... very noble of you.” I feel inexplicably relieved that he didn’t fall head over heels for this girl. “Not many men would’ve been willing to marry a woman they didn’t love for the sake of the child.”

Peter shrugs again. “I didn’t want my son exposed to ridicule or growing up without a father, and marrying his mother was the best way to ensure that. Besides, I grew to care for Tamila after my son was born.”

“I see.” Jealousy bites at me again. To distract myself, I drain my second glass of wine and grab the bottle to pour myself more. “So she trapped you, but it worked out.” My palms are sweaty, and the bottle almost slips out of my hand, the wine splashing into my glass with such force that some liquid spills over the rim.

“Thirsty?” Peter’s gray eyes gleam with amusement as he reaches over to take the bottle from me. “Maybe I should get you some water or tea instead?”

I vehemently shake my head, then realize the motion made the room spin a little. He might be right; I haven’t had much to eat, and I should probably slow down on the wine. Except my

anxiety is melting away with each sip, and it feels too good to stop.

“I’m fine,” I say, picking up my glass again. I might regret this at work tomorrow, but I need the warm buzz the alcohol brings. “So you grew to care for Tamila. And she continued living in that village?”

“Yes.” His face tightens; we must be getting close to the painful memories. Confirming my suspicion, he says roughly, “I figured she and Pasha—that’s what we named my son—would be safer there. She wanted to live with me in my apartment in Moscow, but I was always traveling for work, and I didn’t want to leave her in an unfamiliar city on her own. I promised I’d take her to Moscow for a visit when Pasha was older, but until then, I thought it would be better if she stayed close to her family, and my son grew up breathing fresh mountain air instead of city smog.”

The mouthful of wine I swallowed burns though my tightening throat. “I’m sorry,” I murmur, putting down my glass. And I *am* sorry for him. I despise Peter for what he’s doing to me, but my heart still aches for his pain, for the loss that led him down this dark path. I can only imagine the guilt and agony he must be feeling, knowing that he inadvertently made the wrong choices, that his desire to protect his family led to their demise.

It’s something I can relate to, having killed my own husband not once, but twice.

Peter nods, acknowledging my words, then gets up to clear off the table. I keep drinking my wine as he loads the dishes into the dishwasher, and the warm buzz in my veins intensifies, the candles in front of me attracting my attention with the hypnotic flickering of the flames.

“Let’s go to bed,” he says, and I look up to see him drying his hands with the kitchen towel. I must’ve zoned off for a bit, watching the candles. That, or he’s insanely fast with his cleanup. Most likely, though, I zoned off—which means I’m more buzzed than I thought.

“Bed?” I force myself to focus as he comes up to me and clasps my wrist, pulling me to my feet. Despite the wine-induced softness around the edges of my vision, I remember the reason I was upset, and as he tugs me toward the stairs, the tightness in my stomach returns, my pulse picking up pace. “I don’t want to sleep with you.”

He glances at me, his fingers tightening on my wrist. “I’m not interested in sleep.”

My anxiety grows. “I don’t want to have sex with you either.”

“No?” He stops at the foot of the stairs and turns me to face him. “So if I reached into your jeans right now, I wouldn’t find your panties soaked through? Your little pussy swollen and needy, just waiting to be filled by my cock?”

Heat climbs up my neck and blazes all the way up to my hairline. I *am* wet, both from before and from the way he’s looking at me now. It’s like he wants to devour me, like his dirty words are turning him on as much as they’re arousing me. The mental haziness from the wine isn’t helping, either, and I realize I made a mistake, trying to drown my sorrows.

Resisting him with my head clear is difficult enough; like this, it’s nearly impossible.

Still, I have to try. “I don’t—”

“Ptichka...” He lifts his hand, curving his big palm around my jaw. His thumb strokes over my cheek as he gazes down at me, his eyes like molten steel. “Do we need to discuss alternative arrangements again?”

I stare at him, ice crystals forming in my veins. For the first time, I comprehend the full extent of his ultimatum. He doesn’t just expect me to stop fighting him over meals; he wants me fully compliant, welcoming him into my bed as though we’re in a real relationship.

As though he didn’t murder my husband and forcibly invade my life.

“No,” I whisper, closing my eyes as he bends his head and brushes his lips over mine... softly, gently. His tenderness

tears me into pieces, juxtaposed as it is with the looming horror of his threat. If I fight him on this, he'll kidnap me, take away all remnants of my freedom.

If I resist him, I'll lose everything that matters, and if I don't, I'll lose myself.

* * *

I stumble as Peter leads me up the stairs, so he lifts me into his powerful arms, carrying me up the steps with ease. His strength is both terrifying and seductive. I know what it's like to have it turned against me, yet something primitive within me is drawn to it, attracted by the promise of safety it provides.

When we reach the bedroom, he lowers me to my feet and undresses me, pulling off my sweater and jeans in a calm, unhurried manner. Only the dark heat in his silver gaze betrays his hunger, the desire that he'll stop at nothing to satisfy.

Once I'm naked, he undresses too, and I spot a metallic glint inside his jacket as he hangs it on a chair. A gun? A knife? The idea of him bringing weapons into the bedroom should terrify me, but I'm too overwhelmed to react, my emotions already veering from shock to anger to icy fear. And underneath it all is a strange, illogical relief.

With all my choices gone, I can give in.

It's the only way.

A tear trickles down my cheek as he approaches me, fully naked and aroused, his large body a study of hard angles and sculpted muscles, of violent beauty and dangerous masculinity. Monsters shouldn't look like this, shouldn't be as mesmerizing as they are lethal.

It's too hard on one's sanity.

"Don't cry, ptichka," he murmurs, stopping in front of me. His fingers brush across my cheeks, wiping away the moisture. "I won't hurt you. It's really not as bad as you think."

Not as bad as I think? I want to laugh, but instead I just shake my head, my mind hazy both from the wine I consumed

and the heat his nearness generates. He's right: I do want him. I ache for him, my body burning with a need so strong I can scarcely contain it. And at the same time, I hate him.

I hate him for what he's doing—and what he's making me feel.

His fingers slide into my hair, cupping my skull, and I close my eyes as he kisses me again, his other hand gripping my hip to draw me closer to him. His erection presses against my stomach, huge and hard, but his kiss is gentle, his lips coaxing out the sensations instead of forcing them.

It feels good, so unbelievably good that for a moment, I forget I have no choice in this. My hands grip his sides, feeling the hard flex of muscle, and my lips part as the heat builds inside me. Taking advantage, he licks inside my mouth, his tongue bringing with it the dizzying taste of wine and sweet seduction. This isn't our first time, but in this kiss, there is a sense of exploration, of sensual discovery and tender wonder.

He kisses me like I'm the most precious, most desirable thing he's ever known.

My head spins from the bone-melting pleasure, and it's tempting to lose myself completely, to give in to the illusion of his caring. The way he holds me speaks of raw need, but also of something deeper, something that resonates with the most vulnerable corners of my heart.

Something that fills the well of loneliness left by the ruins of my marriage.

I don't know how long Peter kisses me like this, but by the time he lifts his head, we're both breathing raggedly, and the heat circling through my body is a full-blown conflagration.

Dazed, I open my eyes and meet his gaze as he bears me down to the bed. There's no coldness in the gray metallic depths, no seething darkness, nothing but that hungry tenderness, and as he settles between my thighs, covering me with his powerful body, I know it could be easy.

I could stop fighting and buy into the fantasy, embrace this darker version of the fairy tale.

“Sara...” His strong palm curves around my face, framing it with aching gentleness, and the pain that spears through my chest is as potent as it is perverse. He’s looking at me like I’m his everything, like he wants to make my every dream come true. It’s what I’ve always wanted, always needed—but not with my husband’s killer.

Gathering the crumbling pieces of my sanity, I close my eyes, shutting out the silvery lure of that hypnotic gaze. *No choice*, I remind myself as his lips descend on mine with another searing kiss. *No choice*, I chant silently as I hear the ripping of a foil packet and feel his hair-roughened legs press against the tender insides of my thighs, opening them wider to let his cock nestle against my sex. *No choice*, I cry out in my mind as he thrusts inside me, stretching me, filling me... making me burn with scorching need.

It’s wrong, it’s sick, but it takes less than a minute before I come, his hard, driving rhythm hurling me over the edge with an intensity that wrenches a scream from my throat and brings tears to my eyes. My body shudders in dark ecstasy, clenching around his thick length, and I cry out his name, raking my nails down his back as he continues fucking me, taking me to the peak twice more before he comes himself.

In the aftermath, I lie draped over him, our limbs tangled together as he lazily strokes my back. With my head pillowed on his shoulder, I hear the steady thumping of his heart, and the glow of sexual satisfaction gives way to the familiar tangle of shame and desolation.

I hate him, and I hate myself.

I hate myself because something perverse inside me was glad for his ultimatum.

It felt good not to have a choice.

“You won’t be moving in a couple of weeks,” he murmurs, not pausing in his gentle stroking. “The lawyer couple no longer owns this house—I do. Or rather one of my shell corporations does.”

I should be surprised, but I'm not. I must've expected this on some level. My fingers tighten, crushing the corner of the pillow. "Did you threaten them? Kill them?"

He chuckles, his powerful chest moving underneath me. "I paid them double what the house is worth. Same goes for your would-be landlord. He's well compensated for the lease you broke."

I close my eyes, so relieved I could cry. I don't know what I would've done if someone else had suffered because of me, how I could've lived with myself.

When I'm sure my voice won't shake, I pull back and meet his shadowed gaze. "So that's it? We're just going to go on like this?"

"We are... for now." His eyes gleam darkly. "Afterward, we'll see."

And tugging me back down to his shoulder, he drapes his arm around me, holding me as though that's where I belong.

PART III

Part III

CHAPTER 41

Sara

As the days pass, we fall into a bizarre pattern of domesticity. Every evening, Peter makes a delicious dinner for us, and the food is already waiting on the table when I walk in. We eat together, and then he fucks me, often taking me twice or more before we fall asleep. If he's there in the morning when I wake up—and he frequently is—he also feeds me breakfast.

It's as if I acquired a house husband, only one who does black-ops-style assassinations in his spare time.

“What do you do all day?” I ask when I come home after a particularly grueling day in the hospital and discover a gourmet meal of lamb chops and beet-based Russian salad. “You don't just stay here and cook, right?”

“No, of course not.” He gives me an amused look. “What we do takes a lot of logistical planning, so I work with my guys on that, and also take care of the business side of things.”

“The business side of things?”

“Client interactions, securing payments, investment and distribution of funds, acquisition of weapons and supplies, that sort of thing,” he replies, and I listen in fascination as he gives me a glimpse into a world where insane sums of money exchange hands and assassination is a method of business expansion.

“We do a lot of work for the cartels and other powerful organizations and individuals,” he tells me as we polish off the lamb. “The Mexico job, for instance, was a case of one cartel leader hiring us to eliminate his rival so he could move into his territory. Other clients of ours include Russian oligarchs, dictators of various flavors, Middle Eastern royals, and a few of the better-run mafia organizations. Sometimes, if we’re between jobs, we’ll take on some smaller gigs, dealing with local thugs and such, but those pay next to nothing so we consider them pro-bono work, a way for us to stay sharp in downtime.”

“Right, pro bono.” I don’t try to hide my sarcasm. “Like my work at the clinic.”

“Exactly like that,” Peter says, and grins. He knows he’s shocking me, and he’s doing it on purpose. It’s a game he plays sometimes, horrifying me and then seducing me into welcoming his touch despite the revulsion I feel—or should feel.

It’s part of the sickness of our relationship that almost nothing he says or does has any lasting effect on my desire for him. My inability to resist him is a bleeding ulcer in my chest, and I can’t heal it no matter what I do. Each time I eat the food he makes, each time I sleep in his arms and find pleasure in his touch, the wound reopens, leaving me sick with shame and crippled with self-loathing.

I’m living in domestic bliss with my husband’s murderer, and it’s not nearly as terrible as it should be.

Part of the issue is that after our first time, Peter hasn’t hurt me. Not physically, at least. I feel the violence within him, but when he touches me, he’s careful to control himself, to stop the darkness from spilling out. It helps that I can’t fight him outright; with his kidnapping threat hanging over my head, I have no choice but to comply with his demands—or so I tell myself.

It’s the only way I can justify what’s happening, how I’m beginning to need the man I hate.

If all he wanted from me was sex, it would be easy, but Peter seems determined to take care of me as well. From the romantic home-cooked meals to the nightly cuddling, I'm showered with attention, pampered and even groomed at times. We don't go out on dates—I assume because he doesn't want to show his face in public—but with the way he treats me, I could easily be his highly spoiled girlfriend.

“Why do you like doing this?” I ask when he's brushing my hair after washing me in the shower. “Is this some kind of weird kink of yours?”

He shoots me an amused look in the mirror. “Maybe. With you, it seems to be, for sure.”

“No, but seriously, what do you get out of this? You know I'm not a child, right?”

Peter's mouth tightens, and I realize I inadvertently hit a nerve. We don't speak about his family much, but I know that his son was only a toddler when he was killed. Could it be that in some twisted way, I'm a substitute for his dead family? That he fixated on me because he needed to care for someone... anyone?

Could my Russian killer need love so much he'd settle for its perversion?

It's a tantalizing thought, especially since by the end of the second week, I find myself growing addicted to the comfort and pleasure Peter provides. At the end of a long shift, I physically crave the neck and foot rubs he often gives me, and it's a struggle not to salivate each time I pull into the garage and smell the delicious aromas from the kitchen.

I'm not only becoming used to my stalker's presence in my life; I'm starting to enjoy it.

Or at least some parts of it. I'm still far from enthusiastic about the bodyguards who follow me wherever I go. I almost never see them, but I can sense them watching me, and it both unsettles and irritates me.

“I'm not going to run, you know,” I tell Peter when we lie in bed one night. “You can call off your watchdogs.”

“They’re there for your protection,” he says, and I know it’s something he has no intention of compromising on. For whatever reason, he’s convinced that I’m in some kind of danger, something that he, of all people, needs to protect me from.

“What are you afraid of?” I ask, tracing the hard ridges of his abs with my finger. “Do you think some madman might invade my home? Maybe waterboard me and kill my husband?”

I glance up to find him grinning, as though I said something funny.

“What?” I say, goaded. “You think this is a joke?”

His expression turns serious. “No, ptichka. I don’t think that at all. For what it’s worth, I’m sorry for hurting you that time. I should’ve found another way.”

“Right. Another way to kill George.”

Feeling sick, I push away from him and escape into the bathroom—the only place my tormentor lets me be alone. Sometimes, I almost forget how everything began, my mind conveniently skipping over the horrors of our early relationship.

It’s as if something inside me wants me to fall in line with Peter’s fantasy, to pretend that all of this is real.

* * *

“So you never told me what happened between you and George,” Peter says as we’re having a leisurely Sunday brunch some three weeks after his return. “Why weren’t you the perfect couple everyone thought you were? You didn’t know what he really did, so what went wrong?”

The piece of poached egg I’m chewing sticks in my throat, and I have to gulp down most of my coffee to wash it down. “What makes you think something went wrong?” My voice is too high, but Peter caught me totally off-guard. Usually, he tends to avoid the topic of my dead husband—probably to foster the illusion of a normal relationship.

“Because that’s what you told me,” he answers calmly. “While you were on the drug I gave you.”

I gape at him, unable to believe he went there again. Ever since our conversation about the bodyguards last week—and my subsequent crying in the bathroom—we’ve been tiptoeing around the topic of what he did to me, neither one willing to poke at that raw wound.

“That’s...” Suppressing my shock, I compose myself. “That’s none of your business.”

“Did he beat you?” Peter leans in, his metallic eyes darkening. “Hurt you in some way?”

“What? No!”

“Was he a pedophile? A necrophiliac?”

I take a calming breath. “No, of course not.”

“Did he cheat on you? Do drugs? Abuse animals?”

“He started drinking, okay?” I snap, goaded. “He started drinking, and he never stopped.”

“Ah.” Peter leans back in his chair. “An alcoholic then. Interesting.”

“Is it?” I ask bitterly. Picking up my plate, I walk over to dump the remnants of my breakfast in the trash and put the plate in the dishwasher. “You like hearing that the man I knew and loved since I was eighteen—the man I *married*—transformed after our wedding without apparent cause? That in a matter of months, he became someone I could hardly recognize?”

“No, ptichka.” He comes up behind me, and my breath catches as he pulls me against him, brushing aside my hair to kiss my neck. His breath warms my skin as he murmurs, “I don’t like hearing that at all.”

“I just... I never understood it.” I turn around in his arms, the old hurt welling up as I meet Peter’s gaze. “Everything was going so well. I finished med school, we bought this house and got married... He was traveling a lot for work, so he didn’t mind my residency hours, and in return, I didn’t mind

all the travel. And then—” I stop, realizing I’m confiding in George’s killer.

“And then what?” he prompts, his fingers curling around my palm. “What happened then, Sara?”

I bite my lip, but the temptation to tell him everything, to expose the full truth for once, is too strong to deny. I’m exhausted from pretending, from wearing the mask of perfection everyone expects to see.

Pulling my hand out of his grip, I walk over to sit down at the table. Peter joins me there, and after a moment, I begin talking.

“Everything changed several months after our marriage,” I say quietly. “In a span of a few weeks, my warm, fun-loving husband became a cold, distant stranger, one who kept pushing me away no matter what I did. He started having these strange moods, cut down on work travel, and”—I take a breath—“began drinking.”

Peter’s eyebrows lift. “He never drank before?”

“Not like that. He’d have a few drinks when we went out with friends, or a glass of wine with dinner. It wasn’t anything out of the ordinary—nothing I wasn’t in the habit of doing myself. This was different. We’re talking black-out drunk three, four nights a week.”

“That *is* a lot. Did you ever confront him about it?”

A bitter laugh rips from my throat. “Confront him? All I did was confront him about it. The first few times it happened, he explained it as stress at work, then a boys’ night out, then a need to relax, and then...” I bite my lip. “Then he started blaming me.”

“You?” A frown knits Peter’s forehead. “How could he possibly blame you?”

“Because I wouldn’t leave him alone about it. I kept nagging, wanting him to go to rehab, to attend AA, to talk to someone—anyone—who could help. I asked the same questions over and over again, trying to understand why this was happening, what caused him to change like that.” My

chest constricts with remembered pain. “Things were going so well before, you see. My parents, all our friends—everyone was overjoyed with our marriage, and we had this bright future ahead of us. There was no reason for this, nothing I could latch on to to explain his sudden transformation. I kept prying and pushing, and he kept drinking, more and more. And then I—” I drag in air through a tightening throat. “Then I told him I couldn’t live like this, that he had to choose between our marriage and his drinking.”

“And he chose the drinking.”

“No.” I shake my head. “Not at first. We ended up in the classic substance abuse cycle, where he’d beg me to stay, promise to do better, and I’d believe him, but after a week or two, things would go back to how they were before. And when I’d point out his moods and ask him to see a psychiatrist, he’d lash out at me, claiming *I* was the reason he was drinking.”

Peter’s frown deepens. “His moods?”

“That’s what I called them. Maybe it was clinical depression or some other form of mental illness, but since he refused to see a shrink, we never got an actual diagnosis. The moods started right before the drinking. We’d be doing something together, and suddenly, he’d seem completely out of it, like he’d mentally go into a different world. He’d get distracted and weirdly anxious—jumpy even. It was like he was on something, but I don’t think he was. At least, it didn’t look like drugs to me. He’d just go somewhere else in his mind, and there was no talking to him when he was like that, no way to get him to calm down and just be *present*.”

“Sara...” A strange expression steals over Peter’s face. “When did you say this all began?”

“Just a few months after we got married,” I answer, frowning. “So at this point, about five and half years ago. Why?” And then it dawns on me. “You’re not suggesting that —”

“That your husband’s transformation might’ve had something to do with his role in the Daryevo massacre? Why not?” Peter leans in, his eyes narrowing. “Think about it. Five

and a half years ago, Cobakis provided information that resulted in the slaughter of dozens of innocent people, including women and children. Whether it was out of ambition or greed or sheer stupidity, he fucked up, and he fucked up big. You say he was a good man? Someone who had a conscience? Well, how would a man like that feel about causing the slaughter of innocents? How would he live with all that blood on his hands?”

I recoil, the horrible truth of his words slamming into me like a bullet. I don't know why I didn't connect the dots before, but now that Peter said it, it makes perfect sense. When I first learned about George's deception, it occurred to me that his real job might've been behind his transformation, but I was so busy coping with Peter's invasion of my life—and trying not to dwell on his revelations—that I didn't pursue the thought to its logical conclusion.

I didn't consider that the tragic events that brought my tormentor into my life could be the same ones that ruined my marriage... that our fates have been intertwined for much longer than I thought.

Feeling like I'm about to be sick, I stand up, my legs shaking. “You're right.” My voice is choked and raw. “It had to be guilt that drove him to drink. All this time, I wondered if it was something I said or did, if our marriage disappointed him somehow, and it was this all along.”

Peter nods, his face set in grim lines. “Unless your husband caused multiple massacres throughout his career, this is the only thing that makes sense.”

I inhale raggedly and turn away, walking over to the window looking out into the back yard. The enormous oaks stand like guardians outside, their branches bare of leaves despite the hints of spring in the warming air. I feel like those oaks right now, stripped, bared in all my ugliness. And at the same time, I feel lighter.

The drinking, at least, was not my fault.

“The accident happened because of me, you know,” I say quietly when Peter comes up to stand next to me. He's not

looking at me, his profile hard and uncompromising, and though I know he's battling his own demons, his presence comforts me on some fundamental level.

I'm not alone with him by my side.

"How?" he asks without turning his head. "The report said he was alone in the vehicle."

"He drank the night before. Drank so much he puked several times throughout the night." I shudder, remembering the smell of vomit, of sickness and lies and broken hopes. Holding myself together by a thread, I continue. "By morning, I was done. I was done with his excuses, with the endless accusations sprinkled with promises to do better. I realized that George and I weren't special in any way; we were just another alcoholic and his too-stupid-to-see-it wife. It wasn't a rough patch we were going through. Our marriage was simply broken."

I stop, my voice shaking too much to continue, when a big, warm hand wraps around my palm. Peter's expression is unchanged, his gaze trained on the view outside the window, but the silent gesture of support steadies me, giving me courage to continue.

"He was still passed out when I went to work, so I confronted him when I returned," I say as steadily as I can manage. "I told him to pack his bags and get out, said I was filing for divorce the next day. We got into a huge fight, and both said hurtful things, and I—" I gulp down the lump in my throat. "I forced him out of the house."

Peter glances at me with mild surprise. "How could you have forced him out? He wasn't the biggest guy I've seen, but he must've outweighed you by at least fifty pounds."

I blink, distracted by the odd question. "I threw his car keys and his bag in the garage and yelled at him to get out."

"I see." To my shock, a faint smile touches the edges of Peter's mouth. "And you think you're at fault because he drove and got into an accident?"

“I *am* at fault. The police said he had double the legal amount of alcohol in his blood. He was drinking, and I forced him to drive. I threw him out and—”

“You threw his *keys* out, not him,” Peter says, the smile disappearing as his fingers tighten around my hand. “He was a grown man, both bigger and stronger than you. If he wanted to stay in the house, he could’ve done so. Besides, did you know he was drinking when you told him to get out?”

I frown. “No, of course not. I had just come from work, and he didn’t look drunk, but—”

“But nothing.” Peter’s voice is as hard as his gaze. “You did what you had to. Alcoholics can appear functional with a lot of drinks in their system. I should know; I’ve seen plenty of this in Russia. It wasn’t your responsibility to check on his blood alcohol levels before sending him packing. If he was too drunk to drive, he had no business getting behind the wheel. He could’ve called a cab, or asked you to give him a ride to a hotel. Hell, he could’ve slept it off in your garage and *then* driven.”

“I...” It’s my turn to stare out the window. “I know that.”

“Do you?” Releasing my hand, Peter captures my chin, forcing me to meet his gaze. “Somehow I doubt that, *ptichka*. Have you told anyone what really happened?”

My stomach twists, an unpleasant, heavy ache settling low in my belly. “Not exactly. I mean, the cops knew he was drinking, but...”

“But they didn’t know it was habitual, did they?” Peter guesses, lowering his hand. “No one knew except you.”

I look away, feeling the familiar burn of shame. I know it’s the classic spousal mistake, but I just couldn’t bring myself to air out our dirty laundry, to admit that the marriage everyone praised was rotten inside. Initially, it was pride, mixed with equal amounts of denial. I was supposed to be smart, a young doctor with a bright future ahead of her. How could I have made that kind of error? Were there warnings signs that I missed? And if not, how could this have happened to the

wonderful man I married, the golden boy everyone said had so much promise? Surely, it was a temporary situation, a fluke in an otherwise perfect life. And by the time I realized the drinking was here to stay, there was another reason to keep quiet.

“My dad had a heart attack about a year into my marriage,” I say, staring at the naked branches swaying in the wind. “It was a bad one. He almost died. After the triple bypass, the doctors told him to keep stress to a minimum.”

“Ah. And learning that his beloved daughter’s husband turned into a raging alcoholic would’ve been stressful.”

“Yes.” I could’ve stopped at that, let Peter think I was simply a good daughter, but some strange compulsion makes me blurt out, “That wasn’t all, though. I was afraid of what people would say and the judgments they’d make. George was good at hiding his addiction from everyone—in hindsight, I guess the acting skills should’ve been a clue about the whole spying bit—and I also became a pro at pretending. The nature of our work helped with that. I could always be ‘on call’ if we needed to cancel an outing last minute, and George could have an ‘urgent story’ come up if he was having trouble sobering up.”

Peter doesn’t say anything for a few moments, and I wonder if he’s condemning me for my cowardice, for not seeking help before it was too late. That’s another thing that weighs on me: the possibility that I could’ve done something if I’d been more open about our problems. Maybe I could’ve gotten George into rehab or under psychiatric care, and the tragedy of the accident would’ve been averted.

Of course, the man standing next to me would’ve killed him regardless, so there’s that.

Unable to deal with that thought, I push it away just as Peter asks, “What about his work? How could he continue to function like that? Unless... you said he stopped taking on foreign assignments?”

“Pretty much.” Taking a breath to calm the churning in my stomach, I focus on watching the hypnotic swaying of the

branches outside. “He traveled a few times after we got married, but mostly, he investigated local stories—like the one about the mafia bribing Chicago police and government officials.”

“The one they told you was the reason for his protection.”

I nod, unsurprised that he knows. He probably had some kind of parabolic microphones trained on me during my conversation with Agent Ryson. From what I’ve learned about my stalker in recent weeks, it’s entirely possible.

The millions he earns from every hit buys access to all kinds of equipment.

“He must’ve quit working for the CIA, then,” Peter says, and I glance over to see him watching the tree branches too. “Either because he was fired or because he couldn’t cope with the aftermath of his fuck-up. That’s the only thing that would explain the lack of foreign assignments.”

“Right.” My head throbs with a nagging tension, and my stomach continues churning and twisting, like my insides are being wound tighter and tighter. My lower back hurts too—a realization that makes me do some quick mental math.

Sure enough, my period is about to start.

We stand by the window for a few moments longer, watching the trees outside, and then I walk over to the medicine cabinet and take two Advils, washing them down with a glass of water.

“What’s the matter?” Peter asks, following me with a concerned frown. “Are you sick?”

“It’s nothing,” I say, not wanting to go into all the details. Then I realize he might find out later today anyway and add, “It’s just that time of the month for me.”

“Ah.” Unlike most men, he doesn’t look the least bit uncomfortable with that information. “Does it typically pain you?”

“Unfortunately, yes.” As I speak, I feel the cramps getting worse and thank the schedule gods that I’m not on call today. I

was going to volunteer at the clinic this afternoon, but I revise that plan in favor of huddling in bed with a heating pad.

“Why aren’t you on birth control pills?” Peter asks, following me as I head upstairs. “I haven’t seen you take anything all this time, and I believe that usually helps with painful periods.”

“An expert on female reproductive health, are we?”

Peter doesn’t bat an eye at my sarcasm. “Far from it, but I did get a pill prescription for Tamila because she had bad cramps. I assume you have a reason for not doing the same?”

I sigh, entering the bedroom. “I do. I’m one of those rare women who can’t tolerate hormonal birth control. I get migraines and nausea, no matter how small the dosage. Even hormonal IUDs give me headaches, so I have to choose between misery a couple of days a month or misery all the time.”

“I see.” Peter leans against the doorway as I begin to undress. I can see the heat in his gaze as he watches me strip down to my underwear, and I hope he doesn’t get any ideas about joining me in bed. He rarely passes up the chance to fuck me.

Ignoring his staring, I grab my heating pad from the nightstand drawer and curl into a fetal position, hugging it under the blanket as I wait for the Advil to kick in.

I hear a quiet patter of footsteps, and then the bed dips next to me.

No, no, no. Go away. No sex right now. I squeeze my eyes shut, hoping my tormentor gets the hint, but in the next instant, the blanket is turned down, and a rough male hand caresses my naked back.

“Do you want me to get you anything?” His deep, softly accented voice is low and soothing. “Maybe toast or some tea?”

Startled, I roll over onto my back, clutching the heating pad against my stomach. “Um, no, thanks. I’ll be fine.”

“You sure?” He smooths my hair away from my face.
“What about a belly rub?”

I blink at him. “Um...”

“Here.” He gently pries the heating pad away from me and places his warm palm on my stomach. “Let’s try this.” He moves his hand in a circular motion, applying light pressure, and after a couple of minutes, the tight, cramping sensation eases, the heat from his skin and the massaging motion chasing away the worst of the painful tension.

“Better?” he murmurs as I close my eyes in blissful relief, and I nod, my thoughts beginning to drift as drowsiness steals over me.

“It’s very nice, thank you,” I mumble, and as the soothing massage continues, I sink into a warm fog of sleep.

CHAPTER 42

Peter

I watch Sara sleep for a few minutes; then I quietly get up and leave the bedroom. I could sit by her bedside for hours, doing nothing more than watching her, but I have a phone call with a potential client at noon, and I have to discuss a few logistics with Anton before that.

It takes only a couple of minutes to clean up in the kitchen, and then I'm on my way, slipping out the back door to cut across a neighbor's yard. Ilya's armored SUV is parked on the street two blocks over, and as I walk, I pay attention to everything: the distant barking of a small dog, a squirrel darting across the road, the brand of sneakers on the jogger who just rounded the corner... The hyper-vigilance is as much a part of me now as my lightning-fast reflexes, and both have kept me alive more times than I can count.

Ilya starts the car as I approach, and as soon as I get in, he pulls out, heading down the quiet suburban street at precisely three miles above the speed limit.

He believes that blending in requires acting like a typical civilian, right down to minor traffic infractions.

"Any trouble?" I ask in Russian, and he shakes his shaved head.

"All quiet, like always."

Unlike his twin brother and Anton, Ilya doesn't sound disappointed as he says that. I think he's enjoying our little stint in suburbia, though he'd never admit it out loud. Out of the four of us on the core team, Ilya looks most like the quintessential thug, with his skull tattoos and a jaw thickened by a youthful flirtation with steroids. His twin Yan, on the other hand, could pass for a professor or a banker, with his neatly pressed clothes and brown hair cut in a conservative corporate style. Personality-wise, though, it's Yan who revels in our high-adrenaline lifestyle, while Ilya prefers to focus more on strategy and working behind the scenes.

I suspect if Ilya hadn't followed his brother into the army, he would've ended up as a computer programmer or an accountant.

"Anything from the Americans?" I ask as we stop at a stoplight. Since my guys are fairly busy, I've been using the locals as backup security. Their job is to keep an eye on Sara when she's not with me and alert us of any unusual activity in the neighborhood.

"No. Your girl doesn't deviate much from her routine, but I'm sure you know that."

I nod, scanning the row of neatly manicured lawns as we drive past them on our way to the safe house. Something is bugging me, but I can't place my finger on what it is. Maybe it's just that it's too quiet, with no big jobs on the horizon and minimal progress with locating the North Carolina general who's the last name on my list. The paranoid fucker disappeared along with his family, and he did such a good job of covering his tracks that even the hackers I retained are having trouble finding him.

I might have to go to North Carolina at some point, see what I can shake up in person.

"Tell them I want to review the next few reports myself," I tell Ilya as we pull into the driveway of our safe house. "And tell them to expand the perimeter to twenty blocks, not ten. If anyone so much as sneezes in Sara's neighborhood or around her hospital, I want to know."

“You got it,” Ilya says, and I jump out of the car.

Maybe I’m being paranoid, but I can’t let anything fuck up what I have with Sara.

I need her too much to risk losing her.

* * *

She’s lounging on the couch with a heating pad and a tablet when I get home, her slender limbs gracefully arranged and her shiny chestnut hair caught in a messy knot on top of her head. Even dressed in sweatpants and an oversized T-shirt, my little bird looks like she could star in a black-and-white movie, the delicacy of her features accentuated by the loose tendrils of hair waving around her heart-shaped face.

My lungs tighten as she looks up, her soft hazel eyes locking on my face. Each time I see her, I want her, my need for her a clawing hunger in my chest. Over the past three weeks, I’ve had her so many times the craving should’ve diminished, but it’s only grown, intensifying to an unbearable degree.

I want her, and I want this—the quiet pleasure of sharing her life, of knowing that I can hold her in the middle of the night and see her across the kitchen table in the morning. I want to take care of her when she’s sick and bask in her smile when she’s well. And sometimes, when my grief wells up, I want to hurt her too—an urge I suppress with all my strength.

She’s mine, and I will protect her.

Even from myself.

“How are you feeling?” I ask, approaching the couch. I didn’t have a chance to fuck her this morning, and I’m semi-hard just from being near her. However, my lust takes a backseat to my need to make sure she’s healthy and well.

Sara won’t die from menstrual cramps, but I don’t want to see her in any pain.

“Better, thank you,” she answers, laying her tablet next to her. It looks like she was watching some music videos on there—something I’ve seen her do to relax.

“You can keep on doing that,” I say, nodding toward the tablet. “I have to make dinner, so don’t stop on my behalf.”

She makes no move to pick up the tablet, just tilts her head and watches me as I walk to the sink to wash my hands and take out the ingredients for tonight’s simple dinner: the chicken breasts I marinated last night and fresh veggies for a salad.

“You know, you never answered my question,” she says after a minute. “Why are you really doing this? What do you get out of all this domesticity? Doesn’t a man like you have something better to do with your life? I don’t know... maybe rappel down the side of a building or blow up something?”

I sigh. She’s back on that topic. My ambitious young doctor can’t grasp that I just like doing this—for her and for myself. I can’t turn back the clock and spend more time with Pasha and Tamila, can’t warn my younger self to forego work in favor of what matters because it could all vanish in an instant. I can only focus on the present, and my present is Sara.

“My wife taught me to make a few simple dishes,” I say, placing the chicken breasts in the frying pan before starting to chop up the salad. “In her culture, women tended to do all the cooking, but she wasn’t big on tradition. She wanted to make sure I could take care of our son if anything happened to her, so to please her, I agreed to learn a few recipes—and found I liked the process of preparing food.” A familiar pain tightens my chest at the memories, but I push the grief away, focusing on the sympathetic curiosity in the warm hazel eyes watching me from the couch.

Sometimes, I’m convinced Sara doesn’t hate me.

Not all the time, at least.

“So you started cooking for your wife?” she asks when I’m silent for a couple of moments, and I nod, scraping the veggies off the cutting board into a big salad bowl.

“I did, but I didn’t learn more than the basics until she was gone,” I say, and despite myself, my voice is rough, raw with suppressed agony. “Two months after the massacre, I was

walking past a culinary school in Moscow, and on impulse, I walked in and took a cooking class. I don't know why I did it, but when I was done and my *borscht* was simmering on the stove, I felt a tiny bit better. It was something different I could focus on, something tangible and real.”

Something that cooled the boiling rage inside me, enabling me to strategize and plan out my vengeance like a recipe, complete with steps and measures I would need to take.

I don't say that last part, because Sara's gaze softens further. I guess my little hobby humanizes me in her eyes. I like that, so I don't tell her that I was in Moscow to kill my former superior, Ivan Polonsky, for participating in the massacre cover-up, or that an hour after the class was over, I slashed his throat in an alley.

His blood looked a lot like borscht that day.

“I guess you never know what you have until you lose it,” Sara muses, hugging the heating pad to her, and I feel a flicker of jealousy at the wistfulness in her tone.

I hope she's not thinking of her husband, because as far as I'm concerned, he's no big loss.

That *sookin syn* deserved everything he got and then some.

When the meal is ready, Sara joins me at the table, and we eat while I tell her about some of the cities where I've taken cooking lessons: Istanbul, Johannesburg, Berlin, Paris, Geneva... After describing the cuisines, I share a few stories about temperamental chefs, and Sara laughs, a genuine smile lighting up her face as she listens to me. To avoid spoiling the mood, I leave out all the dark parts—like the fact that Interpol found me in Paris and I had to shoot my way out of the building where the cooking school was located, or that I blew up a target's car in Berlin before going in for my lesson—and we wrap up the meal on a companionable note, with Sara helping me clean up before I shoo her away.

“Go relax,” I tell her. “Take a shower and get in bed. I'll be up soon.”

Her expression turns wary. “Okay, but just so you know, my period started.”

“So what? You think I’m grossed out by a little blood?” I grin at the look on her face. “I’m kidding. I know you’re not feeling well. We’ll just cuddle, like the good old days.”

“Ah, gotcha.” An answering smile, genuine and warm, flashes across her face. “In that case, I’ll see you up there soon.”

She hurries out of the kitchen, and I stand there, unable to breathe, feeling like I just got knifed in the gut.

Fuck, that smile... That smile was everything.

For the first time, I understand why I feel this way around her.

For the first time, I realize how much I love her.

CHAPTER 43

Sara

By Sunday morning, I feel better and decide to go see my parents. I've visited them only once since Peter's return, as I've been busy with my stalker and worried about exposing them to danger. However, I'm now increasingly convinced that Peter wouldn't arbitrarily hurt them. He values family too much to do that to me.

As long as I comply with his demands, my parents should be safe.

My mom is ecstatic when I call her, and we make plans to go out for a sushi lunch. When I inform Peter about that, he nods absentmindedly and types something on his phone.

"What are you writing?" I ask warily.

"Just telling my guys that I'll be in today, after all," he says, putting the phone away. "Why? Did you want me to join you?" His gray eyes gleam as he looks at me.

I laugh. "No, I think the bit where the FBI storm the restaurant to capture one of their most wanted might be a bit of an appetite spoiler."

Peter doesn't smile back, and I realize he's serious.

"You... you'd come out with me in public?"

"Why not?" He lifts his eyebrows coolly. "I met you at Starbucks, didn't I?"

“Well, yeah, but that was before. I mean—never mind.” I take a breath. “I guess you’re not afraid of being seen in public?”

“I wouldn’t parade in front of your local FBI office, but I can go out for an occasional lunch or dinner if the place is scoped out beforehand, and I can make sure there are no cameras.”

“Oh.” I chew on the inside of my lip as I pick up my bag. “Well, maybe we can go out for dinner later this week...”

“But not today,” he says, and I nod, feeling awkward but not knowing what else to do. There’s no way I’m introducing George’s killer to my parents.

It’s bad enough I just offered to go out to dinner with him.

“Okay, then. I’ll see you when you get back,” he says, and I slip away before he can suggest anything else—like matching tattoos or a beach wedding.

This is total madness, and the craziest part is that it’s starting to seem normal.

I’m getting used to having Peter in my life.

* * *

At lunch, I inform my parents that I decided not to sell the house. I already told them two weeks ago that the lawyers’ offer fell through, so they’re not particularly surprised to hear about my decision. In fact, they’re quite pleased, given that the house is only a twenty-minute drive from them while my new apartment would’ve been at least forty-five minutes away.

“It’s a lovely house,” Dad says, pouring himself a little platter of soy sauce. “I think the whole apartment thing was an overreaction. You’re young, but years go by fast, and at some point soon, you might want to think about starting a family. You know, get out there and meet a man—”

“Oh, stop it, Chuck,” Mom snaps at him. “Sara has plenty of time.” Turning toward me, she says in a softer voice, “You take as long as you need, darling. Don’t let your dad push you into anything. We *are* glad you’re keeping the house, but that

doesn't mean we expect you to produce grandkids anytime soon."

"Mom, please." It's all I can do not to roll my eyes like I'm still in high school. My parents are doing the good cop/bad cop thing with me, likely in the hopes of planting the "go out and meet a nice man" suggestion in my mind. "If I'm on the verge of producing grandkids, I promise you and Dad will be the first to know."

Mom gives Dad a beatific smile. "See? She'll go out there when she's ready."

"Right." I busy myself with prying apart my wooden chopsticks. "When I'm ready." Which, given what's happening in my life, might be never. Or at least not until Peter gets bored with me—something that looks increasingly unlikely to happen soon. If anything, I think he's even more fixated on me now, his gray eyes watching me with a peculiar light that sends warm shivers down my spine.

Before I can analyze why that is, the waiter brings out our sushi boat, and my parents *ooh* and *aah* over the artfully arranged fish, sparing me from more of their not-so-subtle machinations. I wish I could tell them the truth, but there's no way I can explain Peter without terrifying them out of their minds.

I'm still not sure how I'm dealing with the whole thing myself.

* * *

By the end of the week, my period is over and I'm back in the swing of things, with two on-call shifts early in the week and a three-hour stretch at the clinic on Wednesday on top of my usual office hours. I'm working so much I'm barely home, but Peter doesn't object, though I can sense he's less than pleased with the situation. Despite my period, we've had sex over the last few days—he wasn't lying about his lack of squeamishness—and each time, he's been unusually hungry, his touch unrestrained and borderline rough.

It's as if he's afraid of somehow losing me, as if he hears the ticking of some clock.

On Friday, I spend most of the day in my office, seeing patients, but just as I'm about to head home, I get an urgent message that one of my patients has gone into labor. Suppressing a weary sigh, I hurry to the locker room to scrub up and run into Marsha, who's coming off her shift.

"Hey," she says with a sympathetic grimace. "Just getting started?"

"Looks like it," I say, stuffing my clothes into the locker. "Are you girls going out tonight?"

"Nah. Andy can't make it, and Tonya is busy with that cute bartender. Remember him?"

I pull my hair into a ponytail. "The one from the club we went to?" At Marsha's confirming nod, I ask, "Yeah, why? Did they hook up?"

"You guessed it." Marsha grins. "Anyways, I see you're in a rush, so I'll let you go. Call me if you want to do anything this weekend. Andy is having a barbecue tomorrow night, and I'm sure she'd love for you to come."

"Thank you. I'll call you if I can make it," I say and hurry out of the locker room. I know I won't be calling her, and this time, it's not because I'm afraid for my friends.

As tempting as the barbecue sounds, what I'm most looking forward to this weekend is quiet time at home.

With Peter.

The man I'm finding hard to hate.

* * *

Several hours later, I trudge back into the locker room, exhausted. My patient's uterus ruptured, and I had to perform an emergency C-section to save her and the baby. Fortunately, both made it through okay, but I have a splitting headache from hunger and extreme tiredness.

I can't wait to get home, heat up whatever Peter might've prepared for dinner, and, if I'm lucky, get a massage as I'm falling asleep.

"Dr. Cobakis?"

The female voice sounds vaguely familiar, and I spin around, my pulse jumping. Sure enough, I see Karen, the FBI agent/nurse who was with Agent Ryson when I woke up after Peter's attack. Like the last time, she's dressed in nursing scrubs, though I know she doesn't work in this hospital.

She must be trying to blend in.

"Karen?" I try not to betray my nervousness. "What are you doing here?"

She approaches me and stops a couple of feet away. "I wanted to talk to you someplace we wouldn't be spotted, and this seemed as good of an opportunity as any."

I glance around the locker room. She's right: we're the only ones here at this time. "Why?" I turn my attention back to her. "What's wrong?"

"A couple of months ago, you reached out to Agent Ryson," she says quietly. "You said you felt you were being watched. At the time, we dismissed your concerns, but we've since received some new information."

My throat cinches tight. "What... what new information?"

"It has to do with Peter Sokolov, the fugitive who assaulted you in your home."

"Oh?" My voice is an octave too high.

"He was spotted in the area, just a few blocks away from this hospital. A hidden traffic camera caught his face at an angle, and our facial recognition program flagged the photo." She cocks her head to the side. "You wouldn't happen to know anything about it, Dr. Cobakis, would you?"

"I..." My heartbeat is roaring in my ears, my thoughts racing in panicked circles. This is it, the opportunity to get help without Peter knowing I spoke to anyone. The FBI are already aware he's here, and they won't rest until they find

him. I can improve the odds of their success, tell them he's most likely at my house, and if they succeed in capturing him and his men, it'll be truly over.

My life will be my own again.

"It's okay, Dr. Cobakis." Karen lays a gentle hand on my arm. "I know this is all very stressful for you, but we'll make sure you're safe. Just please think back to the past few weeks. Any chance someone might've been following you? Have you had any instances recently when you felt like you were being watched?"

All the time—because I am being watched. I want to tell her that, but the words won't come; instead, my breathing speeds up until I'm all but hyperventilating.

Peter won't go quietly when the agents come for him; he'll fight, and people will get killed. *He* could get killed. Nausea rises in my throat as I picture his powerful body riddled with bullet holes, his intense metallic eyes dull and faded with death. It should be an image that brings me joy, but I feel sick instead, my ribcage squeezing painfully tight as I try to picture what my life will be like without him in it.

How free—and how alone—I'll be again.

"I... No." I take a step back, shaking my head. I know I'm not thinking clearly, but I can't bring myself to say it. My mouth simply won't form the words. "I haven't noticed anything."

A frown creases Karen's forehead. "Nothing? Are you sure? To the best of our knowledge, you and your deceased husband are his only link to this area."

"Yes, I'm positive." It's as though a stranger is speaking these lies. My headache intensifies until it's a beating drum inside my skull, and I feel like I'm on the verge of throwing up. My thoughts skitter from one alternative to the next, my mind like a rat inside a maze. I don't even know why I'm lying. It's over. One way or another, it's over—because now that they know Peter is in the area, they *will* come for him, no matter what I say. And if they don't succeed in killing or

capturing him, he might think that I betrayed him and make good on his threat to take me away, maybe even punish people close to me to teach me a lesson.

I *should* help the FBI.

It's my best chance to be free.

"All right," Karen says when I remain silent. "If you think of anything, here is my number." She hands me a card, and I take it with numb fingers as she says, "We don't want to spook him in case he *is* watching you for whatever reason, so we're not going to take you into protective custody right now. Instead, we'll put a discreet protective detail on you, and if they see anything—and I do mean anything—out of the ordinary, they will act fast to ensure your safety. In the meanwhile, please carry on with your normal activities and rest assured that the man who killed your husband will pay for what he's done."

"Okay. I'll—I'll do that." Hanging on to my composure by a thread, I grab my bag from the open locker and slam it shut, then hurry out of the room.

I'm already next to my car when I realize I'm still wearing my scrubs.

Thanks to Karen's ambush, I forgot to change back into my clothes.

* * *

Heavy metal blares from the speakers as I pull out of the parking lot, castigating myself for my stupidity. Even with my headache, the music is somehow soothing, the violent beats more orderly than the mad jumble of my thoughts. I can't believe I didn't confide in Karen and beg for the FBI's help when I had the chance. Now I have no idea what to do, how to act or even where to go. Do I go home with the FBI watching me? And if I do, will they realize that Peter is there, or will the precautions he takes—such as not parking on my driveway—ensure they remain oblivious to his presence? Maybe I should go to my parents' house or a hotel instead, or simply crash somewhere in the hospital. But then what about Peter's men

who always follow me around? They'd realize something is wrong, and Peter might come after me, and who knows what could happen then? In general, will the FBI spot my bodyguards, or will they spot the agents first and warn Peter? If I come home, will I find him already gone, having evaded the authorities once again?

How badly did I fuck everything up?

My hands are white-knuckled on the wheel as my mind spins through my conversation with Karen, going over it again and again. God, I had so many opportunities to tell her the truth, to explain the full complexity of the situation and let the experts handle everything. Why didn't I do so? How could I have been so stupid? After I realized I forgot to change, I went back to the locker room, telling myself that if Karen is still there, I would do the right thing, but she was already gone.

She was gone, and I was relieved—because deep inside, I knew I wouldn't do it.

Even with Peter's threat looming over my head, I can't bring myself to hasten the confrontation that could result in his death.

With Metallica screaming in the background, I drive on autopilot, so caught up in my thoughts I don't realize my subconscious already chose my destination. Only when I turn onto my street does it dawn on me where I'm going, and by then, it's too late.

I'm home.

CHAPTER 44

Sara

I'm shaking as I enter the house from the garage, my throat tight with anxiety and my heart pounding in sync with the throbbing in my head. It's well past midnight and all the lights are off, but I can smell the appetizing aromas of whatever Peter made earlier. My stomach rumbles, my body demanding fuel despite the adrenaline shredding my nerves. I'll have to eat something soon, but first, I need to figure out where Peter is and whether he knows what's happening.

"Hungry?"

The familiar deep voice startles me so much I jump, a panicked squeak escaping my throat.

A light comes on, illuminating Peter's figure on the couch in the family room. Despite the comfortable temperature, he's wearing his leather jacket, his tall, powerful body arranged in a casual pose that reminds me of a predator's lazy sprawl.

"Um, yeah." *Oh God, does he know? Why is he sitting here in the dark?* "One of my patients went into labor, and I missed dinner."

"You did?" Peter rises to his feet in a fluid motion. "That's not good. Come, let's feed you before you pass out."

I follow him into the kitchen on unsteady legs. The fact that he's here—and heating up food for me—must mean that his men didn't spot my FBI tail. Does that mean the reverse is

true as well? Could the FBI agents assigned to my protective detail have missed whoever Peter has following me?

My hands and feet are icy from stress, and I know I must look like death warmed over as I wash my hands and sit down at the table. I'm hoping Peter will ascribe my paleness to exhaustion rather than the fact that the FBI might storm my house at any moment.

He puts a bowl of hearty vegetable soup and a slice of crusty sourdough bread in front of me, then sits down across the table at his usual place, his face expressionless as he watches me pick up my spoon and dip it into the soup. My hands are trembling slightly—a fact he can't miss, but hopefully chalks up to my tiredness as well. If not—if he suspects something—then things could go south, quickly. He could have me trussed up and on the way to some international hideout faster than my FBI watchdogs could call for reinforcements.

Fuck, why am I taking this kind of risk? Why didn't I just tell Karen everything?

Yet even as I kick myself, I know the answer to that question. It's sitting in front of me, his gray eyes trained on me with an intensity that both chills and warms me inside. I should want to be free of my tormentor, should do everything in my power to have him disappear from my life, but I can't. I'm not insane enough to warn him and risk getting kidnapped, but I can't bring myself to accelerate the moment when justice catches up with him, and he'll have to either run or fight.

It will happen anyway; all I have to do is survive it.

"You work too much," Peter murmurs, tilting his head as he studies me, and I exhale a shaky breath.

Thank God. He *is* ascribing my anxiety to tiredness.

"You should ease up, ptichka, take it easy on occasion," he continues, and I nod, looking down at my bowl to escape the intensity of his gaze.

"Yeah, I guess." I take a bite of the bread and swallow a spoonful of soup, focusing on the savory flavors to quiet the

mental clamor in my head. I'm only partially successful, but it's enough to enable me to eat another spoonful and then another.

I'm done with my slice of bread and almost halfway through my bowl by the time I work up the courage to look up again. "Why were you waiting here for me?" I ask, recalling how dark the house was when I walked in. "I thought you'd be in bed or taking a shower or something."

"Because I've barely seen you in recent days, ptichka, and I've missed you." His eyes gleam with that peculiar softness I've been seeing all week.

My stomach flips, a knot forming in my throat. "You... you have?" He's never told me this before; though we both know he's obsessed with me, he's never admitted to any kind of real feelings.

"Hmm-mm. Here, have some more." He pushes another slice of bread toward me. "You still look much too pale."

I pick up the bread and bite into it, looking down again to conceal my expression. The knot in my throat is expanding, my eyes prickling with irrational tears. Why does he have to choose today, of all days, to say these things to me? I need him to be awful to me, not nice. I need to remember that he's a monster, a killer, a man who's done things that would make Ted Bundy blanch.

I need him to jolt me out of the fantasy so I don't miss him when he's gone.

I manage to hold back the tears as I gulp down the rest of the soup while Peter watches me in silence. It's unsettling, the way he can just stare at me without doing anything, as if the mere sight of me fascinates him. I've caught him doing this more than a few times; once, I even woke up to find him looking at me like this.

It's disconcerting and flattering at the same time, like his seemingly endless hunger for me.

When my bowl is empty, I get up to put it in the dishwasher, but Peter takes it out of my hands.

“I’ve got this,” he says softly, dropping a gentle kiss on my forehead. “Go up and start getting ready for bed. I’ll be there in a minute.”

I nod, blinking to hold back a fresh surge of tears, and go up without objections. He often does this too: freeing me from all chores, no matter how small, when I’m tired. He must realize that putting a bowl in a dishwasher would not strain me, but he still treats me like I’m an invalid instead of a doctor exhausted by long hours.

He babies me and I love it, even though I shouldn’t. I should hate everything he does, because none of this is real.

It can’t be.

* * *

I’m already done with my shower by the time Peter comes upstairs, and he corners me in the bathroom, trapping me against the counter just as I finish brushing my teeth. My towel is wrapped around me, but he pulls it off, dropping it on the floor, and the sight of us in the fogged-up mirror—me pale and completely naked while he’s fully dressed in his dark clothes—makes my heart pound with nervous excitement.

He’s especially hungry tonight—and more than a little dangerous.

Sure enough, he wraps one big hand around my throat, and though he doesn’t squeeze, I feel the darkness behind the thin veil of his control, the threat implicit in the controlling gesture. At the same time, his other hand cups my breast, the rough edge of his thumb rubbing over my taut nipple. His eyes hold mine in the mirror, and I see a strange hunger in the silver depths, lust mixed with possessiveness and that intense something that makes my knees go weak and sends hot chills down my spine.

“Look at you,” he breathes in my ear, and I tear my eyes away from his hypnotic gaze to focus on the picture we’re presenting: him so big and lethally handsome, and me small and feminine, almost fragile in his dark embrace. “Look at how pretty you are, how sweet and soft and pure. That smooth

skin of yours, so thin and delicate, so easily bruised..." He caresses my throat as I swallow, my pulse accelerating even more at his words.

"You know what I wonder sometimes?" he continues softly, and I grip the edge of the counter as his hard fingers pinch my nipple, twisting it with cruel purposefulness. "I wonder if I should put a chain around this pretty neck, lock you to me and throw away the key. Would you cry then, ptichka? Would you rage?" He nips at my earlobe, his white teeth scraping across my skin as his hand moves down from my breast to cup my sex. "Or would you secretly like it?"

I suck in a breath, trembling, so hot I could burst into flames. The picture he's painting is both terrifying and arousing, as darkly erotic as the image in the mirror. With his arms around me, I can smell the leather of his jacket, feel the metallic zipper against my back, and a sense of acute vulnerability washes over me as his fingers part my wet folds and touch my clit, the sharp lash of pleasure exacerbating the feeling of helplessness, of being completely out of control.

"Please." My voice shakes. "Please, Peter..."

"Please what?" His fingers push in and hook inside me, pressing against my G-spot as his teeth graze across my neck again. "Please what, ptichka? Please touch me? Please fuck me? Please go away?"

I squeeze my eyes shut. "Please fuck me." I'm past embarrassment, past denial. It feels like every cell in my body is pulsing with need, burning with the dark craving he awakens in me. Maybe under different circumstances, I'd stay strong, try to hold on to whatever passes for dignity, but I'm too exhausted—and too aware that this might be it.

Tonight might be our last time together.

"Open your eyes," he growls, and I dazedly obey, fighting the drugging pull of pleasure.

Peter's gaze is dark and intense in the mirror, his face taut with violent need. And underneath, I sense that unsettling *something*, that softness I can't quite define.

“Tell me, Sara. Tell me how you want me to fuck you. Do you want it rough”—his fingers thrust viciously into me—“or gentle? Hard”—he grinds the heel of his palm on my sex—“or soft?” Tempering the pressure, he lowers his head to lick my earlobe, his warm breath heating my skin as he rasps into my ear, “Do you want flowers and pretty words, ptichka? Or would you rather have something raw and real, even if society deems it wrong... even if it’s not what you’ve always wanted?”

My breath hisses raggedly through my teeth as his thumb circles my clit, the heat thrumming under my skin making it hard to think. My inner muscles tighten around those rough, invading fingers, and I don’t understand what he’s asking, what he wants from me. I need more of that pain-edged pleasure, and at the same time, I need relief from the tension winding me tighter and tighter.

“Peter, please...” My heart is racing much too fast. “Oh God, please...”

His grip on my neck tightens as his fingers curl inside me, pressing against my G-spot again. “Tell me, and I’ll fuck you.” His teeth scrape across my neck, making me shudder from the sensation. “I’ll give it to you exactly how you want it, fill your tight little pussy until you’re begging for more. Tell me what you need from me, and I’ll give it to you, Sara. I’ll give you everything and more.”

“Hard,” I gasp out, my hands slipping off the countertop edge to grip the steely columns of his jean-clad thighs. My sex clenches around his fingers as I press my pelvis against his hand, desperate for firmer pressure on my clit. I don’t know what I’m saying, but I do know what I need. “Fuck me hard, Peter. Please...”

His jaw tightens, and I catch a glimpse of the darkness in the gray shimmer of his eyes. Abruptly, he releases me and sweeps his hand over the countertop, knocking off the toiletries. Spinning me around, he picks me up and sets me down on the cold granite, thighs spread wide. I blink at him, startled, but he’s already unzipping his jeans and pulling me forward until my ass nearly hangs off the edge.

“Peter—oh God.” I gasp as he spears into me, so thick and hard it feels like he’s bruising my insides. He hasn’t been this rough since our first time, but I’m so wet today the violent claiming doesn’t scare me, the threat of pain only adding to the pleasure. Instead of clamping up, I remain pliant and soft around his cock, and as he sets a hard, driving rhythm, his fingers digging into the soft flesh of my ass, I wrap my legs around his hips and wind my arms around his neck, clinging to him like he’s my anchor in a storm. And he might as well be. He fucks me with such fury I feel like a sliver in a hurricane, overwhelmed by his violence, tossed about by the waves of his lust. It’s too much, too intense, but the helpless feeling only adds to the tension twisting inside me. With a scream, I come, clenching around him, but he doesn’t stop. He keeps going until I come again, and then once more.

It’s only when I’m slumped against him, panting and dazed from my third orgasm, that he lets himself go. With one final hard thrust, he comes, his pelvis grinding against mine as a deep groan rumbles up his throat. I feel his cock pulse inside me as I cling to him, trembling, and my sex clenches one last time, squeezing one last shudder of pleasure from my oversensitized flesh.

Afterward, I’m so out of it I’m barely able to stand as he lifts me off the counter and sets me on my feet. Dimly, I realize I feel unusually wet between my legs—drenched, really—but it’s not until Peter steps back and I feel the wetness slide down my thigh that I understand where it’s coming from.

“Oh God.” My eyes drop to his cock—still semi-hard and glistening with our combined moisture. “Peter, we—”

“Forgot to use a condom? Yes.”

He doesn’t sound particularly concerned. Instead, as I watch in horrified shock, he casually washes himself, tucks his cock back into his jeans, and zips up the fly. Then he wets a washcloth and gently wipes the semen off my thighs.

“There, all set.” He drops the washcloth in the sink, his eyes gleaming as he turns toward me. “Don’t worry. You just had your period, so we shouldn’t be in the danger zone yet.

And I'm clean; I always use condoms and get tested regularly. I assume the same is true for you?"

"Right." I stare back at him, shaken both by the occurrence and his attitude. Theoretically, we should be safe, but the mere fact that it happened, with *him*... My head resumes its painful throbbing, and my exhaustion returns, multiplied tenfold. How could I have been so negligent? With George, I'd always gone out of my way to remind him to use condoms, and during the so-called danger zones, we often skipped intercourse altogether, not wanting to chance the fifteen-percent condom failure rate until we were ready to have a baby. However, with my husband's killer, I haven't been nearly as careful, having sex at all times of the month. And now this...

It's like some sick part of me wants me to be tied to him, to perpetuate this mockery of a relationship.

"We should be fine then," Peter says, stepping closer to me. "Though..." He pauses, staring down at me with a speculative expression.

"Though what?" I ask when he remains silent. My heart is hammering with a dull, fast rhythm. "Though what?"

"Though I wouldn't mind." His words are light, casual, but there's no trace of humor in his voice. "Not with you."

"You—what?" My headache intensifies, my skull feeling like it wants to implode. He can't possibly mean what he's saying. "Why wouldn't you—? That makes no sense!"

"Does it not?" A glimmer of amusement now appears in his eyes. "Why, ptichka?"

"Because... because you're *you*." My voice is choked with disbelief. "You drugged and tortured me before killing my husband and forcing your way into my life. I don't know what you're imagining here, but we're not dating. This is not some kind of love story—"

"No?" His expression hardens, all hints of amusement disappearing. "Then what do you think it is that I feel for you? Why can't I go a single hour without thinking about you, wanting you... fucking *craving* you? You think it's lust that

keeps me here, day after day, when the whole world is out for my head and my men are crawling up the walls from boredom?” He steps even closer, and my breathing speeds up as his palms slap against the counter on both sides of me, caging me against the sink. His eyes glitter fiercely as he leans in, his voice roughening. “You think I’m here instead of hunting down the last *ublyudok* on my list because I can’t get enough of your tight little pussy?”

My face burns as I stare up at him, the vulgarity of his words intensifying my confusion. I don’t know what to say, how to take it all in. He sounds angry, yet what he’s saying makes it seem almost as though—

“Yes, I see you understand.” His mouth curves in a dark, mocking smile. “It might not be a love story for *you*, *ptichka*, but as fucked up as it is, that’s precisely what this is for me. I started off hating you, but somewhere along the way, you’ve become the only thing that matters to me, the only person I still care about. And yes, that means I love you, as wrong as that may be. I love you, even though you were *his*... even though you think I’m a monster. I love you more than life itself, Sara, because when I’m with you, I feel more than agony and rage—and I want more than death and vengeance.” His chest expands with a deep breath, his expression turning somber as he says quietly, “When I’m with you, *ptichka*, I’m living.”

I’m not aware that I’m crying until his face blurs in front of my eyes. My chest is too tight, my breaths too shallow. I’ve known that Peter is obsessed with me, but I’ve never imagined that in his mind, that obsession equals love, that he wants some kind of real future with me... one where we’re together as a family.

A future where FBI agents aren’t about to storm through the door.

“Don’t cry, *ptichka*.” His thumb strokes over my wet cheek, and I see the mocking smile return to his lips. “This doesn’t change anything. You can still hate me. Just because I love you, I’m not any less of a monster—and I’m not going to disappear from your life.”

But you are. I want to scream out the truth, but I can't. I can't warn him, even though my heart feels like it's tearing apart. I don't love him—I can't—but it hurts as though I do, as though losing him will be the worst thing ever. A choked sob rips from my throat, then another, and then I'm in his arms, clasped securely against his chest as he carries me out of the bathroom.

When he reaches my bed, he sits down, holding me on his lap, and I cry, my face buried against his neck as he strokes my back, slowly, soothingly. He's right; his confession of love shouldn't change anything, but somehow, it makes things worse. It makes me feel like I'm losing something real... like I'm betraying him and *us*.

How can a monster hold me so tenderly? How can a psychopath love?

My skull feels like it's being sawed open from the inside, my headache worsened by my crying, and I push at Peter's chest, twisting out of his embrace—only to fall onto the bed, whimpering as I clutch my temples.

He leans over me, concern darkening his features. "What's the matter, ptichka?" he asks, stroking my arm, and I manage to mutter something about a headache before squeezing my eyes shut. What I'm feeling is more along the lines of a migraine, but I'm in too much pain to explain.

The bed dips as he rises to his feet, and I hear footsteps as he walks out of the room. A couple of minutes later, he returns with Advil and a glass of water. I pry open my swollen eyelids long enough to swallow the medicine, and then I close my eyes again, waiting for the violent drumbeat in my skull to quiet to a manageable roar.

I expect him to leave then, or to get in bed with me, or whatever he was planning to do, but instead, I hear the bathroom door open, and a minute later, a cool, wet towel covers my eyes and forehead, bringing with it a welcome sliver of relief.

Once again, he's taking care of me, giving me comfort when I need it most.

The tears return, trickling out from under the towel as he tucks the blanket around me and sits on the edge of the bed, his hand slipping under my neck to massage the tense muscles in my nape. It's torture of a different kind, this tender care of his. It soothes my headache but intensifies the searing pain in my chest. I've been fooling myself when I called what we have a sick fantasy. It might be sick, but it's real, and when he's gone, I *will* miss him, just like I missed him when he went to Mexico. It's not love I feel for him—love can't be this dark, this illogical and insane—but it *is* something.

Something other than hate, something deep and disturbingly addictive.

A dog barks in the distance, and I hear a car door slam. It's most likely my neighbors on the next block over, but my heart still jumps, my stomach churning as I picture a SWAT team busting through my door and gunning down Peter at my bedside. It plays like a movie in my mind: the black-clad figures rushing in, the bullets tearing through the bedsheets, the pillows, his chest, his skull...

Bile surges up my throat, my head all but exploding with agony.

Oh God, I can't do it.

I can't stay quiet and let it happen.

"Peter..." My voice trembles as I ball my hands under the blanket. I know I will regret this in a thousand different ways, but I can't stop the words from spilling out. "You've been spotted. They're coming for you."

His hand on my nape stills mid-stroke, then resumes its gentle massage.

"I know, ptichka," he murmurs, and I feel his lips brush against my wet cheek as something cold and hard pricks my neck. "I know they are."

Lethargy rushes through my veins, and with strange relief, I realize that this is it.

He knew about the FBI all along.

He knew, and I'll never be free again.

CHAPTER 45

Peter

“Hurry,” Anton hisses from the passenger-side front window as I approach the SUV, carrying Sara’s blanket-wrapped body against my chest. “Did you not get any of my messages? They’re less than ten blocks out.”

I tighten my grip on my human bundle. “I couldn’t leave until I learned what I needed.”

“What’s that?” Yan asks, opening the back door from the inside. He scoots over, and I climb in, being careful not to bump Sara’s head as I bring her into the car.

It’s bad enough she had a headache when I drugged her.

Ignoring Yan’s question, I settle Sara’s unconscious figure between us and shut the door before catching Ilya’s gaze in the rearview mirror. “To the airport. Make it fast.”

“On it,” Ilya mutters, slamming on the gas, and we torpedo forward, zooming down the quiet suburban street.

“What did you need to learn?” Yan persists, glancing at Sara’s face—the only part of her not wrapped in the blanket. With her thick lashes fanning out over pale cheeks, she looks like a sleeping Disney princess, and I don’t blame my teammate for the flicker of interest on his face.

I don’t blame him, but I still want to kill him.

“Something to do with her?” he continues, oblivious, then looks up at my face and blanches.

“Yes.” My voice is jagged ice. “Something to do with her.”

He nods, wisely looking away, and I wrap my arm around Sara’s shoulders, arranging her comfortably against me. In the distance, I hear sirens, accompanied by the roar of helicopter blades, but despite the approaching danger, I feel calm and content.

No, more than content—happy.

Sara warned me.

She chose me, when she had every reason not to. She might not love me yet, but she doesn’t hate me, and as I hold her tight, breathing in the delicate fragrance of her hair, I’m certain that one day, she *will* love me—that one day I’ll have all of her.

She warned me—she chose to be mine—and now she’ll stay that way.

I love her, and I’m going to keep her.

No matter what it takes.

* * *

Thank you for reading! Peter & Sara’s story continues in *Obsession Mine*. Please click [HERE to get the book](#). To be notified of my new releases, please sign up for my newsletter at <http://www.annazaires.com>

JACK OF SPADES

By
Renee Rose

CHAPTER ONE

Corey

Three kinds of gamblers spend big at my roulette table.

There's the guy who's all up in his head. He's quiet, body language closed. He sits with hunched shoulders and barely meets my eye. He plays odds, usually has a system he sticks to religiously. Like he always plays red and doubles his bet when he loses.

Then there's the reckless gambler. He's riding emotion, drugs or alcohol. He's the opposite of the first kind. No system, totally haphazard. He might ask the woman beside him for her favorite number and bet it.

Then, there's the gut gambler, my personal favorite. He carries an electricity with him that often carries the entire table away. It's the guy who's found the magic. Lady Luck, mojo, their stars aligning—who knows what it is, but they have an energy they're following. They stay in the flow, following their intuition and bet right every time.

Often they appear similar to reckless gamblers: they're outgoing, social. They engage with the people around them, including me, their croupier.

The whale—that's Vegas for big spender—at my table tonight is neither reckless, nor a gut gambler, although he has the personality and style of both. He's gorgeous with a finely tailored suit and European flair, like he stepped off the pages

of an Italian men's magazine. He flirts shamelessly with me and chats up the people around him.

I scoop and stack the chips and award the winnings with practiced finesse, doing a one-handed split and stack and moving with lightning speed.

“There she goes, beauty and talent.”

It's cheesy, but I flash him a smile. I like having him at my table, love his charm and flair, the big tips, yet my spidey sense keeps sounding. There's something off about him.

He's down two thousand at the moment. He slides his chips out onto the table at the last minute, right as I wave my hand and call no more bets. He sets them up sloppily, too. I can't tell if he wants them in the box for *Third Twelve* or *Odd*.

“Which one, sir?” I lean forward to get his attention as the wheel spins.

He's been drinking quite a bit, but he doesn't appear intoxicated. His eyes flick to my cleavage—which I still manage to work despite the masculine uniform—then back to my face before he gives me a slow, good-natured grin. “Odds, please. Sorry for that.”

“No slop,” I warn, and scoot the chips over as the ball settles.

He wins. He slides two hundred-dollar chips across the table to me as a tip. When I pull his chips in, I see he's embedded a ten dollar chip in the middle instead of a hundred. I flick my gaze up and see he's watching me. He winks.

Asshole.

I subtly signal for Security to come over.

It's not the first time I've been propositioned to cheat for a customer. It happens often enough. It sort of boggles my mind that he'd spend two hundred bucks paying me off to make ninety. But I suppose it was a test. Once he found out if I'd give him anything, he would've tried it again and again.

Vincent, the security manager on the floor tonight ambles over and stands close to me, dipping his head to listen.

“This guy’s playing slop and trying to slip low chips in his stack.”

Later, I would realize Vincent seemed a little too pleased with me, but it doesn’t register. I’m just ignoring the flutters in my belly as he walks around to escort the dude out. I’m not sorry. I did the right thing, for sure. I’m only disappointed because the guy was attractive and sort of fascinating to me, and I’d fantasized for just a moment about him asking me out.

But whatever. I’m not going to risk this job, not even for a sexy man in a sharp suit. Working at the Bellissimo is like a job, education and socialization all rolled into one glamorous package. It’s owned by the notorious Nico Tacone, of the Tacone Chicago crime family, who rules the place with an iron fist. I wouldn’t fuck with him. Even if he is in love with my cousin.

I finish my shift and head toward the employee locker rooms. When I pass the hallway toward the security offices, I stop short.

Vincent is standing in a relaxed posture, shooting the shit with none other than the sexy suit from my table.

“Corey,” he grins and beckons me closer. “Come here, I want to introduce you to someone.”

Oh Jesus. He was a secret shopper. Or whatever you call a security test. I don’t know why it pisses me off, but it does. My stomach tightens up into a knot as I stride over.

“Corey, meet Stefano Tacone, our new Head of Security.”

I lift my hand to slap Stefano’s face. I don’t know why I do it. Yes, I have a redhead’s temper and I grew up in a violent family. Still, I should know better.

He catches my wrist and uses it to pull me right up against him. “I wouldn’t.” His warning is less a growl than a low, smoky rumble. Like he’s dirty-talking me right here in the hallway.

My body responds immediately, my core turning molten. Of course, my damn cheeks heat, too. And believe me, on a redhead, there’s no mistaking a blush.

“No one strikes a Tacone without regretting it.” It’s a threat, yet it’s still spoken good-naturedly, with the same heart-stopping charm he used out on the floor, trying to get me to cheat for him.

Shit. Did I actually just lift a hand to a mob boss? A chill slithers down my back.

I’m so going to lose my job.

Except Stefano doesn’t look angry. He looks like he wants to eat me for lunch.

I figure my best bet is to own my mistake. “Forgive me.”

#

Stefano

The beauty in my arms—well, not quite in my arms, more at my mercy—meets my gaze with courage.

I see neither fear nor defiance in the bright blue eyes, merely bald curiosity, almost a hint of fascination.

Likewise, bella.

I picked her table for a reason, and it wasn’t because anyone suspected her of cheating. Quite the opposite. The floor manager says she always attracts a crowd of gentlemen, earns big tips. She’s fast and showy, exuding just the right balance of cool professional and warm invitation in any game she deals. I tested her because we need a dealer for private games upstairs.

Now, though, I want to play all kinds of private games with her and none of them involve a deck of cards or a roulette wheel.

“I don’t like being humiliated,” she says. For a moment, I think she’s speaking to my thoughts, and then I realize it’s her

justification for trying to slap me. She turns her wrist in my hand, attempting to get free.

I don't allow it, pulling her small hand up to my mouth to brush my lips across her knuckles. "I'll remember that," I murmur.

She goes still, throat working on a swallow. She's so close I sense the heat of her lanky body, notice the slight tremble in her fingers, despite the evenness of her gaze.

There goes the blush again, giving her away. I want to keep holding her tight against my body, watching those electric blue eyes dilate every time I speak, but if I do, I'll end up shoving her against the wall and having my way with the tits she wields like weapons.

No other female croupier looks like this one. The new uniform is a white oxford, crimson vest, and a bow tie, for God's sake.

Corey manages to make the outfit sinful, though. The short black skirt hugs every curve of her ass, hips and waist, setting off a pair of long slender legs. She has the blouse unbuttoned and open to the vest, the bow tie worn on the inside like a lover's collar. How I'd love to put a collar and leash on this beautiful creature and bring her to heel; she'd take some training, too. The *coupe de grace* of the outfit is her vest. She chose one two sizes too small, making it appear more like a bustier or corset, cinching below her breasts and pushing them in and up until they're begging to spill from her blouse. I can't tell with the vest if her nipples are hard, but judging from her parted lips and short breath, I'd guess they are.

I know I sprouted a chub just from getting rough with her. Which would probably be a good reason to let her go. I force a little self-control and release her.

"Come into my office, let's have a little chat." I wave my arm to indicate my new office.

Again, she holds her head high, tossing her long thick waves over her shoulder as she precedes me to the closed door.

She waits for me to open it, presumably because it's my office, but I take distinct satisfaction in reaching past her to hold it open, like we're on some kind of classy date instead of interview.

"Have a seat, Corey."

She shoots me a wary glance as she takes a seat opposite me at my desk. "Did Nico sic you on me?"

I arch a brow. "You're on a first-name basis with my brother?"

"Mr. Tacone," she amends with a slight flush. I love her blushes because they are so at odds with her natural confidence. "No, sorry, not at all. He's dating my cousin, so I just—"

"Ah, yes. *The woman*. The reason Nico called me back from Sicily."

Corey appears taken aback. "What do you mean?"

I wink. "I'm here because he was in danger of losing her—working too many hours. I haven't met her yet, this cousin of yours." I let my gaze travel across Corey's face, down to her enticing cleavage and back. "I can see why he might be enchanted."

No blush this time. In fact, I think she suppressed an eye roll. I really do like this girl. Taming her would be so fun.

"What's her name?"

She crosses her long legs, ease creeping into her posture. "Sondra. And you probably won't meet her. She's gone."

I knew this already. It's a good thing I arrived when I did because Nico's been completely off the rails since his woman walked out on him. I have yet to see the guy, but I know he's flown home to Chicago to figure out his arranged marriage and other shit with our father.

She tries to take back the lead in the conversation, "So why target me? I'm a good dealer. I keep my nose clean."

My lips twitch. I love her spirit. She's going to be perfect for upstairs. I'll just have to make sure no one touches her because I'm already starting to feel a bit proprietary over the looker. "Your supervisors like you, yes. The ones who aren't jealous." I noticed the female supervisor gave her much lower marks than the males.

The corner of Corey's lips tug up. I like the easy recognition she gives to my statement. She already has correctly interpreted my words and isn't bothered by them. I've already made up my mind—she's smart. Confident. Easy on the eyes. She's perfect.

"We're switching you to higher stakes games. Private ones." I'm not asking; I'm telling. This is the way Tacones do business.

Now I caught her off-guard. Her crimson lips part, and for a moment, no sound comes out. "That sounds dangerous." Her voice strangles slightly on the last word.

I raise a brow, both curious and impressed by her conclusion. "It's not. I'll be there for every game. I won't let anything happen to you." When she remains still, I say, "Or is it me you're worried about?"

Slight blush tells me she's definitely interested, but she shakes her head. "No. Yes. I guess I mean it sounds... illegal."

There it is. I so appreciate people who can be direct.

I spread my hands. "This is Las Vegas. We have a gambling license. It's the reason my brother moved here."

"Right. Of course." She nods, averting her eyes. I fucking love those little signs of submission on an otherwise alpha female. Like when she apologized for trying to slap me. She knows when to hold her own and when to roll over. It makes me want to flex my dominance in all kinds of filthy ways—put her on her knees and choke her with my cock. Tie her to my bed and keep her screaming all night long. Win her obedience with a whip and a carrot.

She doesn't believe me, which again, shows she's smart. Gambling may not be illegal, but there are all sorts of sordid,

underground things that happen around the fringe. Like the sometimes forcible collection of unusual bets placed by desperate men.

This is the game my brother Nico learned from *La Famiglia*. He was a genius to bring it to Vegas, where much of it is legal. Yeah, it means he pays taxes, but believe me, not as much as he should.

“It won’t be all the time. Three or four nights a week. We’ll double your base pay and the tips should increase, too.”

“You’re not giving me a choice.” It’s a statement, not a question.

I wink. “You noticed that, did you? I need you in the upstairs games, Corey. End of story.”

Anger flickers in her expression but she quickly hides it. “Why me?”

I lift my shoulders in a casual shrug. “You’re professional. Cool and reserved. Trustworthy. Beautiful. In short, you’re exactly what I’m looking for.”

The wariness in her gaze becomes more apparent. Her dislike of my offer shows on her face, but she says, “Well. I guess I don’t have a say in the matter.”

I’m slightly surprised. I knew she wasn’t a bimbo who’d fall all over herself, flattered, but I don’t think I’m giving her a bad deal. And if her cousin’s already in bed with Nico—literally—I can’t think she has major hang-ups about our family.

But maybe she does.

“Oh there’s always a choice, Ms. Simonson. You can walk out that door.”

Eh, I may be the young charming one, but can be as much of a *stronzo* as any of my brothers. Maybe more.

Her dark painted lips compress. “I’m not doing that, Mr. Tacone.” Her blue eyes blaze when she meets the challenge in my gaze.

“Good.” I stand up and hold out my hand. “Welcome to the big time.”

She stands and I note her brief hesitation before taking my hand, but I give her a warm smile as we shake.

“Tomorrow night. Be here by eight.”

“Yes, sir. Here—your office?”

I nod, even though it’s a terrible idea. I should foist her onto Sal or Leo, tell her somewhere else to meet, but I can’t turn down the idea of having her here, in my space. My personal croupier. “Wear a dress—something sexy.”

She pauses at the door and turns around, the wariness fully in place again.

“I won’t let anyone touch you.” I hold up three fingers. “Scout’s honor.”

Her eyes narrow, lips twist into a smirk. “You were never a Scout.” There’s a derisive note of knowing in her voice that makes something slide in my belly. The urge to fuck that scorn right off her face combines with the need to punch something.

She’s right. I’m no Boy Scout. Never have been. My big brothers were delivering beat-downs on Nico and I before we lost our first baby teeth. We learned the art of violence at the same time we learned our alphabet. Nico perfected the fine art of strategy—how to manipulate and win against the odds—by the time he hit puberty. He showed me the ropes, protected me. My life’s been easier than his and I’m not bitter, but I’m also not going to apologize, especially not to this mouthy piece of ass. These are the cards I was dealt, the family I was born into.

But I don’t allow any of this to show. Instead, I toss another wink and my lady-killer smile. “You found me out.”

I reach past her to open the door again. “Do as you’re told—wear the dress. I’ll see that you’re rewarded.” To put a finer point on it, I pull a five-hundred-dollar chip from my pocket and flip it into the air. She catches it, then holds my gaze as she slowly tucks it into her cleavage.

It's all I can do not to slam the door and push her against it, give her a thorough strip-search to see what else she's hiding between or around those perky breasts.

"I'll see you tomorrow, then." Her voice comes out a little breathy, telling me she's not immune to the heat of my gaze.

I clear my throat. "Tomorrow." I want to slap her ass as she sashays through the door, but I manage to find some self-restraint in time.

Tomorrow, though, she may not be so lucky.

I can't fucking wait to see her in a dress. I already know the sight of her is going to make my night.

#

Corey

I dial my cousin Sondra on my way out but she doesn't answer. She's with Nico in Chicago after a blowout fight that we all thought had ended things forever. But Tacone has a hard time taking no for an answer. I have to say—Nico Tacone may be a scary motherfucker, but he is totally in deep with Sondra.

When she left him four days ago, he flipped out. He cornered me, tried to make me tell him where she'd gone, put a guy outside my house, presumably to watch for her. Sondra thought he'd been cheating on her. But I talked to everyone close to him after Sondra left, and they all had the same story. He had a family-arranged marriage contract that he was trying to get out of and Sondra is the only woman Nico's ever been serious about.

So when I got her text yesterday with a picture of a diamond ring on her left hand, I knew they'd worked it out.

I really don't know what to think about Sondra marrying a known mobster. She's always had terrible taste in men—not that my last choice was any better.

But Nico Tacone is the real deal. He's dangerous and powerful. He made my ex disappear. Not that I'm not crying over it. Dean tried to rape my cousin.

But still. Ordinary guys don't have that kind of power.

I'm not judgy about the crime thing. As the daughter of a crooked fed, I have a very jaded sense of crime and law.

But that's why I didn't want to get involved in anything that puts me close to the seedy underbelly of the organization. And the high-stakes private games will definitely do that.

I haven't seen my dad in over ten years. When he left my mom for some skanky chick in Detroit, we all breathed a sigh of relief. Does Stefano know my dad's with the FBI? Somehow I doubt it, and if he finds out, things could get hairy fast.

I really don't know how much illegal activity goes on around here, but I'm guessing it's more peripheral. Why would they need to break laws when their casino rakes in millions a year? Still, I don't want to see any of it. I don't ever want to be in a position where they have to rely on or question my loyalty.

Dammit.

Should I have told Stefano?

And why in the hell am I thinking of him as *Stefano* and not Mr. Tacone? He reprimanded me for calling his brother by his first name.

Oh, maybe it's all the eye-fucking he did. Or the way he kissed my fingers after catching my wrist. A shiver runs through me remembering how quickly he caught and held my wrist without any trace of exertion or anger. Rather, he seemed bemused. As if he enjoyed the opportunity to show me his superior strength and hold me captive.

It's not because I want to be on a first name basis with him.

I definitely don't.

Why would I even think that? Especially after all my concerns for Sondra?

But something about that man has me squeezing my knees together every time he winks. Which is far too often.

I drive home to my small apartment. For the first time since Sondra moved into the casino and Tacone made Dean disappear, it feels too small. Even lonely.

But I'm not looking for company. I don't need to jump into another relationship.

Of course no one's chasing me for one, either. Stefano appears to be the polar opposite of my cousin's possessive and single-minded lover, Nico. He's definitely a player.

Which means sex—just once to get him out of my system—might be on the table.

CHAPTER TWO

Stefano

I walk through the Bellissimo like I'm king of the castle, fucking proud of the place and what Nico's built here.

I was with Nico when he talked our father into investing 1.2 million dollars to open a casino in Vegas. It wasn't enough. Hell, the gambling license alone cost over thirty grand. But Nico was smart. He knew better than to involve any investors who weren't family. Only Tacones were allowed to kick in and hold shares of the Bellissimo. And they did. He scraped together enough to get it open and built it from there.

Nico had the architects design the massive structure so it could be added onto in sections and he went classy right from the start: Italian tile, marble statues, beautiful rooms.

The first version of the Bellissimo was small, a boutique casino. Nothing cheesy about it—ever. And so it attracted high-end customers right from the start. Especially when word got out about the private games.

Nico had a business plan and a vision, and he convinced our family to invest. Still, I don't think anyone expected it would turn out like this. Now, it's a behemoth of a building—five different wings, twenty-eight stories high. Eight restaurants serve all kinds of food and it's still the classiest joint in Vegas. And the money? It fucking overflows.

Speaking of my *stronzo* brother, I've been in the Bellissimo for thirty-six hours and haven't seen the bastard. First he was out of hand looking for his woman. Now he's gone home to fix things. We've talked on the phone and already texted a dozen times, but he's too irritable to give me any good direction.

I dial his phone and he answers with the same impatience. "What is it?"

"Nice to hear from you, too. Did you get things straightened out?"

"I'm working on it."

Of course he's not going to tell me anything. He's not exactly a let's talk about our feelings kind of guy.

"You talk to Dad?"

"On my way now. Sondra's with me."

Sondra. The woman I want to meet. "Ah yes. I had to find out her name from a lovely red haired croupier last night."

"You met Corey."

"Yes. I enticed her to cheat and she tried to slap my face."

Nico snorts. "Sounds about right."

"What about Corey?" I hear the pleasant timbre of a female voice.

"Are you in the car? Put me on speaker."

"No—fuck off."

"Sondra," I raise my voice so she might hear me. "I met your cousin last night," I tell her. "I'm in love."

Her laugh is light and sweet. Nico must have put her on speaker because I hear her voice clearly. "I'm definitely hearing the Italian in you."

"No, it's true," I insist, but she's right—even before my six-month stint in Sicily with my great uncle, I'd adopted the over-the-top aggressive courting style of my parents' country of origin.

“He already got himself slapped,” Nico fills in.

“Uh oh.”

“*Almost* slapped,” I correct. “She tried. I didn’t allow it. We came to an understanding.”

“She’s under my protection,” Nico grumbles, but he knows I don’t hurt women.

“Nothing to worry about. I told you—I’m already in love.” As in, *I can’t wait to get those long legs wrapped around my waist so I can pound into her hard and dirty.*

Would she like it that way?

Somehow I think she would. But she’s not the type to go down without a fight, and I don’t have the time or attention to spare. I’m already up to my ears in work. I can see why Nico needed help running things.

“Listen, Stefano.” Nico takes the phone off speaker. He’s got a serious tone to his voice.

“Yeah?”

“If things go sideways, I need you to take care of...”

I understand what he’s saying—all too well. I think chances are slim he’ll die, but you never know. Our father’s in prison and Junior, our oldest brother, is a dick.

“I will protect what you love,” I say quietly, making the vow of it ring in my voice. I know that’s what he’s asking; he wants to know Sondra will be safe.

“Thank you.” Nico’s voice is gruff.

“Good luck, Nico. Let me know how it goes.”

“Yeah.” He hangs up and I shake my head.

My brother’s had a stupid marriage contract hanging over his head since we were kids. It was a way for our father to bind our family to another. Total stupidity, but signed in blood. Nico’s just been pretending it will never happen all these years, but now he’s in love. And she left him when she found out he had a fiancée.

Poor bastard. But if anyone can figure shit out when he needs to, it's Nico.

Look at what he did with this place.

It's bizarre to think of my brother in a committed relationship. I sure as hell hope he finds happiness.

Me? I don't do committed. Ever.

I'm a ladies man. I love sex, but the rest of it? A relationship?

No thanks.

#

Corey

I'm uneasy about working the private game tonight. I don't know if it's my spidey sense alerting me to potential trouble or if I'm being paranoid. It's the same uneasy feeling I had about Sondra dating Nico.

There's danger at the Bellissimo and until this point, I always managed to stay out of it.

Still, I'm going to be well-paid. And although this might not help me when push comes to shove, my cousin has the owner's ear. Of course, he didn't think twice about making Dean disappear.

I wear a clingy red dress—the one Sondra borrowed last week when she got herself into trouble flirting with another man to make Nico jealous.

It molds to my body, showing off my cleavage with a plunging neckline and my long legs with a provocative slit up the side.

I'm not dressing for Stefano. I'm *not*.

Okay, yeah, he might have been on my mind as I showered and dressed. I might have paid a little more attention to my makeup and hair tonight than usual.

But that's not because I hope anything will happen. Getting involved with Stefano Tacone is the last thing I'm interested in—the very last! But that doesn't mean I don't enjoy a little male attention, especially from a man who makes my body light up when he's nearby.

I park in the employee parking area and strut into the casino, my purse clutched under my arm. I put it away in an employee locker.

“What are you wearing?” Tad, one of the other croupiers asks. He's okay. Pretty into himself, but nice enough. He gives me an up and down look without much interest. I'm not sure the guy is interested in anyone other than the person he sees in the mirror.

“Don't ask,” I say as I pin my nametag on the dress and slam my locker shut.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa.” He catches my arm. “What's going on? Did you get transferred to another department?”

“You could say that. I'm dealing for a private game tonight.”

Tad's eyebrows shoot up to his hairline. “Wow. Be careful.”

I nod. Okay, I wasn't being paranoid. Even regular employees think this is a bad idea. “Thanks, I will.”

I head to Stefano's office, holding my head high, sinking into my croupier persona. It's an interesting one—more dominatrix than stewardess, but I still have to be approachable and friendly, especially when gamblers are warming up.

Stefano's door stands ajar and I hear him reaming out one of the floor managers. His style is different from Nico's. His body language is casual, not nearly so deadly, but the result is the same. The manager shakes in his wingtips. Which doesn't bother me a bit, because the guy is a douche.

Stefano flicks a glance at me and holds up a finger, so I take a step back to give them privacy.

A few moments later, the manager comes out, sweat dripping from his temples.

I step in and Stefano flashes his panty-melting smile, unfolding himself from where he was perched on the edge of his desk, presumably to tower over the manager in a power play.

“*Entra, bambina.* You look great.” He does the fingertip kissing gesture like I’m something delicious he’s going to eat. “*Perfezionare.*” He walks right up to me and reaches for my nametag, unpinning it from my dress. His fingertips brush the bare skin of my décolletage, sending a tidal wave of heat pouring between my legs.

It’s far too intimate a gesture between boss and employee. I’m overly aware of his proximity—the Henry Cavill good looks, the scent of soap and light cologne, the deft movements of his fingers so close to my breasts. The man is always so damn self-assured, which shouldn’t unnerve me. I’m the same way—usually.

“No, nametag, hmm?” I step back, struggling to regain my footing.

“Nah. It detracts from the, ah, view.” He lets his eyes shamelessly wander over my cleavage before tossing my nametag on his desk with the same casual grace he does everything.

I frame my breasts with my hands. “Are the girls what got me this new job?” I ask drily.

He gives me a crooked smile. “They didn’t hurt.” Another lingering look that makes me roll my eyes. He smirks. “The game won’t start for a couple hours. Walk around the floor and be my eyes. Find me at 9:30 p.m. and I’ll take you upstairs.”

“Be your eyes?”

He nods like I should know exactly what he means. “Check security, look for anything suspicious or off, report anything you find.”

I try to hide my surprise at this new duty. I'm a croupier, not a security guard, but I don't argue. At least it's a task that my tits didn't have to qualify for. Hell, it could actually be entertaining. I have a good sense for people. I can smell a rat a mile away. You might say I got it from my dad, but I try not to claim any traits of his, good or bad. And besides, he was the biggest rat of all—maybe that's how I know.

I amble through the casino, stopping to watch the bets and tables. I enjoy looking through the lens of Stefano's eyes. What would he want me to report?

He appears at my elbow an hour later. "Tell me."

I jump at the voice so close to my ear, then curse inwardly for startling. "Tell you what I saw?" I turn to face him, unnerved by how close he's standing to me.

"Mmm hmm. Your full report." He has this way of looking at me—with appreciation and warmth, but also the promise of something I know I should avoid.

I lick my lips. "Well, I'm not sure what you want to hear about. I didn't see anything big."

"What did you see?"

"I saw a cocktail waitress keep a chip when a customer dropped it. I saw a dealer slip a five dollar chip in his pocket that wasn't a tip, I saw a couple college kids attempting to count cards and failing."

"Which dealer?" All the friendliness has left Stefano's face, like stealing from the casino—even just five dollars—is an offense punishable by death.

A shiver runs down my spine when I realize how accurate that assessment might be. And I'm supposed to throw the guy under the bus.

I blink, hesitating for a moment.

Stefano's eyes don't leave my face, the intensity of his gaze ratcheting up.

"Andrew," I murmur, because I'm not sure how to get out of this without giving a name. I probably shouldn't have said

anything in the first place.

“I’ll tell you what I saw.” Ease has returned to his face.

“What?” I manage to say.

“I saw you rebuff six different men and attract the attention of nearly three dozen more. I saw a woman who knows how to handle herself with confidence and who pays attention.” He reaches out and puts a finger under my chin. I jerk away. He smirks again. “I like making you blush.”

“You don’t make me blush,” I snap. It’s an idiotic comeback since my blushes are impossible to hide. I sense one spreading across my chest and up my neck right now.

He at least has the decency to drop it. He takes my elbow. “Time to get you upstairs, *bella*. Let’s go.”

If anyone else took my elbow in such a bossy, controlling way, I would punch him. But it’s Stefano—a sex god in a thousand dollar suit—and his deft direction actually feels right. He’s like one of those ballroom dancers who can conduct a partner anywhere and everywhere simply with subtle changes in pressure of his hand at her back. I don’t pull away because I enjoy the sensation of being guided by him.

And that is just ten kinds of wrong, right there.

He takes me in the elevator to a private, key-card access only floor and lets me into a guest suite. It’s been set up for gambling. The bedroom door is closed and a horseshoe shaped table sits in the middle of the room with slim high top leather padded chairs around it. No chair for me. I take my spot behind the table and check the roly cart holding my chips and five decks of cards still in their wrappers.

“Same rules as downstairs. Only thing different will be the minimum and upper bids, *capiche?*”

I nod at Stefano’s clipped instructions.

He produces a water bottle, which he places beside me. “This is for you. Leo will be here the entire time. If any of them give you trouble, just signal him.”

“Where will you be?” I don’t know why I ask. It’s stupid. It’s not like I’m afraid without him.

Maybe I am, just a little.

“I have to run shit. With Nico gone, there are fires to put out. Don’t worry, no one’s going to touch you. If they do, I’ll have Leo break their fingers.”

#

Corey

Mr. Donahue. That’s how the guy is introduced, and I get an *off* vibe from him right away. For one thing, he’s late. I’ve been dealing poker for two hours with three other guys who showed up tonight and they’re not pleased with letting someone new into the game.

Two of them cash out. The third—Mr. Smith—stays but that’s because he’s down three hundred grand. He’s probably hoping to win something off Donahue.

“Where’s Nico Tacone?” Donahue demands once he’s sitting and his chips are in front of him.

“Mr. Tacone isn’t here tonight,” I say smoothly, dealing the cards.

Donahue looks pissed. “Why not? He invited me personally. I was told I’d be playing poker with him.”

My eyes narrow slightly. I doubt that’s true. I flick a glance to Leo, at the door. He’s not normal casino security or management. He’s an import from Chicago. Part of the Family, if you know what I mean. I’ve worked at the Bellissimo long enough to know the insiders.

Leo’s upper lip curls like he wants to shove his fist in the guy’s mouth, but he just gives me a small shrug.

“I don’t know who told you that, Mr. Donahue, but it won’t be happening. It’s your bet.”

The guy looks pissed off, but he plays.

“Stefano Tacone’s here,” Mr. Smith grunts after he places his bet.

Donahue turns on him. “Oh yeah? Who’s he? Another Tacone son?”

That should’ve been my clue—he referred to Nico and Stefano as *sons*, not brothers, but it doesn’t register as any more strange than the rest of the man’s behavior.

“Nico’s brother. I met him when I came in. He’ll be back,” Smith sagely provides.

Donahue sniffs and settles in to play. He’s a shitty player—distracted and impatient. Like Stefano last night, he doesn’t fit into the normal categories of big gambler, yet he’s betting thousands at a time. Is he just here to see Nico? Is that why he was so pissed he wasn’t here? Maybe he has some kind of *Family* business to take up with him and it has to be in person.

He’s lost three rounds to Smith when Stefano walks in.

“Ah. Here is Mr. Tacone now,” Smith says, pushing his chips across the table toward me. “I believe that must be my cue to take my winnings and go.”

I count him in and return a stack of eight ten-thousand-dollar chips as Stefano saunters in, a cigar box in his hand.

“Sorry I couldn’t be here for the whole game, gentlemen. I hope you enjoyed yourselves.” He offers a cigar to Smith, who takes one, but doesn’t stay to light it.

And that’s when all hell breaks loose.

Donahue knocks his tumbler of whiskey over and it rolls to the floor. He leans over to pick it up, placing the broken glass on the table as he stands. “So you’re one of the Tacone boys?” There’s malice in his face, and I realize his hand has been in his pocket since he stood up. I try to signal Stefano, but he’s already walking toward the man, answering him.

Stefano's signature charm is present, but he's guarded. "Yes, I'm Stefano. Do you know my family?"

Donahue pulls his hand from his pocket, holding a tiny pistol. "This is for my brother," he says, the gun wobbling in his shaking hand.

Two shots fire at the same time.

I throw the table I'm behind forward. A scream leaves my mouth.

Donahue goes down, a bullet between his eyes. Both Stefano and Leo have guns out, arms straight in front of them.

My ears ring with the sound of the shots.

For a moment, no one moves. I'm rooted to the floor, shock plunging through me like a bolt of lightning, rooting my feet to the floor..

Stefano swears in Italian and puts his pistol in a holster under his arm. "How did he get a gun in here? Wasn't he searched for weapons?"

My body shakes—teeth chatter. I can't tear my eyes from the dead man. "I-I think he pulled it from his boot, or pant leg," I provide, remembering he had ducked under the table.

"Who is he?" Leo asks.

"No idea." Stefano stoops and removes Donahue's ID and wallet. "Get Sal and Tony up here to help you rid of the body."

Leo lifts his chin in my direction. He still hasn't put his gun away. "What about her?"

Ice cold shoots through my veins like daggers. *What about me?* Oh God, I'm a witness. Is he asking if he should kill me, too?

Stefano examines me with an inscrutable look that seems to last a millennia. I don't breathe. "I'll take care of her."

"Yeah? You sure?"

Stefano doesn't take his gaze from me. He gives a single nod.

Leo mutters something and tucks what appear to be zip-ties in Stefano's jacket pocket.

The room swoops and spins.

I am so fucked.

#

Stefano

Vaffanculo. Why in the fuck did I let an outsider deal a private game? Bringing Corey Simonson up here was the worst mistake. Now I have a witness to murder on my hands.

Corey's smart enough to understand the position she's in. She takes a step backward, her normally shrewd blue eyes wide with shock. "W-wait. Why don't you just call the cops?" Her voice squeaks, a higher pitch than usual. "It was self-defense. I'm your witness."

"That's not how we're doing this." I keep my voice smooth, my face expressionless. I haven't figured out what in the hell I'm going to do with her yet. "Come here." I beckon to her with what I consider my take charge command.

She takes another step back, glancing around for exits. There aren't any, except the one I'm blocking.

Leo barks coded orders into his comms unit.

I don't want Corey to see any more of our men implicated in this scene.

"Corey, *now.*" I make my voice sharp and urgent.

It works. She skitters forward, around the table she so wisely upended. Amazing reflexes.

I catch her elbow and propel her out of the suite, moving swiftly toward the elevators. I don't really have a plan yet, other than to get Corey away from the scene of the crime.

When we get in, we both stand facing the doors, like we're strangers. "I don't understand why you don't call the cops." She's pulled herself together enough that her voice almost sounds normal.

"And I'm not going to explain Family business to you," I tell her curtly. Which is the only answer I have. Yeah, it was self-defense. But that *stronzo* who pulled a gun on me wasn't some wacko off the street. He had a beef with the Family—probably my father. I'm not going to open that can of worms with the local cops and trust them to sort it out with me coming out on top. No fucking way.

So it turns out Corey's not as pulled together as I thought because she suddenly lunges for the elevator control panel, smacking buttons.

I catch her wrist and wrap it around her waist, pull her back against me. "Stop. You're panicking."

Her body trembles against mine. "I won't tell anyone. I know it was self-defense." Her voice wobbles at the end and I curse, realizing she's crying.

And of course, the elevator has to stop at that moment and let people on.

I release her wrist and cup her nape, turning her to face me, so her face is angled away from the people who get in.

She stares straight ahead at my chest, eyes still swimming with tears. I pull a silk handkerchief from my suit pocket and slip it into her hand. That's when I notice the blood—tiny splatters stain the smooth column of her neck.

When she's finished wiping her tears, I take the handkerchief back and dab at the stains, using the moisture of her tears to get it off. If possible, she goes even more pale, probably realizing what I'm rubbing at.

The elevator stops on the first floor and everyone gets out, but I keep my hand at Corey's neck, not allowing her to move. I hit the button for the parking level.

I don't know what my plan is, really. Drive her home, have a talk. Make sure she knows bad shit's going to happen if she

ever opens her mouth about what she saw. It's not really well-formulated yet. I'm just responding to the sense of urgency to get her away from the dead guy.

When the elevator opens at the garage level, Corey panics again. She grasps the handrail inside the elevator and hangs on, digging her heels in when I try to escort her out. I tug her waist, but she doubles over. If I'm going to get her out, it's going to take some serious manhandling.

Which under different circumstances might be appealing.

"I'm not getting in a car with you! I know what's going to happen."

"Calm down. What do you think is going to happen? I'm not going to kill you—is that what you think?"

"Just let me go!" she splutters, pitching away from me and then whirling and kneeing me hard in the nuts.

I'd like to say I kept my cool. I don't hit women—*ever*. My ma raised me better than that.

But I'm not above spanking a girl's ass. Especially when it belongs to a beautiful woman. I yank one of the zip-ties Leo put in my pocket out—which I'd had no intention of using. Wrangling her wrists together, I cinch the plastic strip around them and tighten it up.

"You need to calm the fuck down," I grit through clenched teeth. I pin her hands against the elevator wall and bring my hand down to smack her ass.

I don't hold back. My balls are throbbing and each spank satisfies the part of me she unmanned with that low blow. Of course, now my cock starts swelling, renewing the pain.

The elevator doors close and it lurches into motion. I put my keycard in the elevator and hit the floor with my suite without releasing her wrists from the wall.

Then I resume her punishment. She gasps and twists as I lay down slap after slap.

"Okay!" she cries.

“I’m sorry I kneed you in the balls, Stefano,” I prompt with another slap.

“I’m sorry I kneed you in the balls, Stefano,” she mutters.

I turn her and slam my lips down on hers.

She freezes for one moment, probably taken aback by my change in tactics, but then she responds. Her lips move against mine, body softens. I hold her nape with one hand, her ass with the other.

The elevator doors open.

“All right, let’s try this again. You will walk out of this elevator nicely this time.” I propel her through the door.

She allows it. “Where are you taking me?”

“To my room.”

Her footsteps stall and I have to tug her toward my door. “Why? What are you going to do with me?”

The truth? I have no idea.

I key open my door and thrust her through, following and shutting the door. She immediately turns around and tries to tug the door handle back open despite the limited movement allowed by her bound wrists.

I reach around to catch the knob and she shoves her ass back. My cock goes rock hard at the contact.

“If you keep rubbing that sexy ass against me, you’re going to be in a different kind of trouble.”

She freezes, breath catching and holding. But when she speaks, scorn laces her words. “Are you saying you’re going to rape me?”

It’s meant to shut me down, but her bravado turns me on even more. I cup her throat with one hand, not squeezing tight enough to scare her, but enough to hold her head in place against my shoulder as my other hand slides down the front of her short dress. I don’t hesitate—it’s not in my genes. I find the skin of her thigh and trace it up under her dress to cup her mons.

“Soaking wet,” I breathe against her ear, triumph punching my cock out against my pants. “Is it rape if you want it?”

“I don’t want it,” she lies.

I slip my fingers under the gusset of her miniscule panties and stroke along her honeyed slit. “Then I won’t touch you,” I lie right back to her.

She bites her lip against a moan when I dip a finger into her ready entrance. “No,” she says, but it sounds more like a *yes* than anything.

“No?” My finger slides out, drags up and circles her clit. Her hips jerk against me, and my hand closes tighter around her neck. “You want me to stop, baby?”

“Yes,” she pants.

I stop moving my finger but keep it there, her clit pulsing against my digit, giving her away. But I’m not going on.

I don’t force women, and she told me to stop.

Regrettably. I would love the privilege of getting Corey off.

I pull my finger away. “You tell me when you want it, baby, and I’ll give it to you good.” I don’t release her throat.

#

Corey

My hips writhe in a circle like I’m seeking out his hand again.

Traitorous body.

I’m so fucking confused right now, I can’t think straight. A minute ago, I was sure Stefano planned to throw me over the Hoover Dam. Now I’m in a different kind of trouble, as he so eloquently put it.

It's a much preferred trouble, despite my protests.

"Come here." Stefano hooks his index finger through the zip-tie holding my wrists and tugs me further into his suite like a farmer leading his cow. It's the same style suite Sondra's been staying in here, with a kitchenette and living room area.

He doesn't bring me to the bedroom, but to the kitchen, leaving me at the table while he gets a bottle of water from the refrigerator. I lean my butt on the table because my legs are too wobbly to stand. Stefano returns and cracks open the bottle, holding it to my lips.

I lift my bound hands to take it myself and drink. "You got anything stronger?" I ask after I've downed half the bottle.

Stefano gives me that lazy grin and walks back to the kitchen, returning with a bottle of Glenlivet and two tumblers. He pours us each a couple fingers of scotch and holds one out for me. "*Saluti.*" He clinks his glass against mine.

I throw the scotch back, hoping the burn will scorch the memory of what happened upstairs right out of my mind.

"So, basically, I'm an accessory now." It hits me like a concrete block on my toes.

Stefano shrugs like accessory to murder means nothing to him. "That would never hold." He crowds into me, pushing my knees apart to stand between them. I still can't figure out if this is seduction or a scare-tactic.

"So you're not planning on killing me." He already said so, but I guess I don't believe him.

He reaches out to cup my face, his thumb brushing my cheek lightly. "*Cara*, if I was going to kill you, you'd already be dead."

I try to ignore the warmth his touch produces, the urge to nuzzle into his hand. It's just because I'm in shock and I've lost my mind. "Why let me live? Because of Sondra?"

Stefano shakes his head. "I don't want you dead." He drops his thumb to my lips and traces them. I hold still because despite his assurance, I'm still his captive. The zip-tie on my

wrists prove it. “I don’t kill innocents.” Something flickers behind his dark eyes. “Despite what you may think about me.”

I find my cheeks heating, which annoys me. “I don’t think about you.”

He smiles because we both know it’s a lie.

I wet my lips with my tongue and he tracks the movement, hunger flaring in his chocolate brown eyes. “So what are you going to do with me?”

He tilts his head to the side. “I’m figuring that out, *bambina*.”

“Th-there’s something I better tell you.” I don’t want to bring this up—I really don’t. But if he finds out another way, he may shoot first and ask questions later.

He arches a brow.

I lick my lips again. “I don’t talk to my dad. Like, we’re totally estranged, and that’s a good thing.”

Stefano’s eyes narrow. I’m sure he’s wondering where in the hell I’m going with this.

“But he’s a fed. An FBI agent,” I blurt.

Stefano curses in Italian, a long string of words I don’t understand but get the meaning. He tugs my ass off the table and starts searching me in quick, pissed off movements, running his fingers along the neckline of my dress, around the insides of my bra.

If I weren’t more than a little afraid of Stefano Tacone in warrior mode, I might remark at the similarity of my situation with Sondra’s. This was how she met Nico, after all. He strip-searched her for a wire when he found her cleaning his bathroom.

Stefano drags his large palms up my thighs, around to the back, sliding a finger over the G-string through my crack. He checks the gusset of my panties, sparing me any comments about how wet I am this time.

And yeah—my panties are damp again. I shouldn't be turned on by Stefano's rough and thorough search, but I am. He lifts my dress up to my waist, hikes it up to my armpits before he realizes it's not coming off. Not unless he removes the zip-tie.

He pulls me across the kitchen, where he grabs a pair of scissors from the drawer.

I think he's going to cut off the zip-tie, but instead the fucker slices through the fabric of my dress.

I shove at him, even though it's too late. "Jesus! You don't have to cut it, asshole. This is my favorite dress." The dress falls in shreds at my feet. I'm standing there in a black lace bra and matching G-string, a pair of black thigh-highs and my stilettos. It's quite an outfit, but he's apparently unaffected.

He yanks my bra cups down, searching visually as he runs his thumbs inside them for a second time. "Watch your mouth, I'm still your boss. I'll buy you another fucking dress if you're clean."

"I'm clean, dammit. Where else would I hide a wire? Why didn't you just cut off the zip-tie?"

He catches my jaw with grim determination. At first I think he's going to punish me for getting too mouthy, but he presses it open. "Maybe I like having you at my mercy." He flicks his brows and I register the return of his jaunty arrogance, a fraction of humor and enjoyment. Maybe that's what pisses me off. When he sweeps a finger inside to check my teeth, I bite down, hard.

"*Merda!*" He yanks his finger back and my teeth scrape over flesh. I pop them open at the taste of blood, instantly realizing I went way too far.

I tense, frozen like a rabbit, but Stefano doesn't move, other than to shake out his hand. His eyes lock on mine, blazing, but not with anger. No, with dark promise. Excitement. Like he's *glad* I bit him.

A shiver races up my spine.

“I think you must want another spanking.” His voice holds deadly calm.

I can't seem to move. Can't breathe.

I fear he's right.

In a flash, he whirls me around and pushes my torso over the table. He doesn't start spanking hard like he did in the elevator, though. He just runs his hand over my bare ass cheeks and whistles.

“*Bambina*, if I knew you were hiding *this* under your dress, I would've lifted your skirt for your last punishment.” He circles my ass again.

Anticipation races over my skin, flutters in my belly.

“You're still wearing my handprints.” There's a rumble of appreciation in his voice, almost a purr. “Are you sore?”

“Yes,” I say, infusing petulance into my words. I *am* still sore. In fact, now that he mentions it, my butt is hot and tingling. Of course, redheads register pain more than most people.

He rubs my ass. “Spread your legs, baby.” His voice is no more than a murmur.

I attempt to ignore the direction, like I didn't hear it, but he kicks my feet apart. To my utter humiliation, he starts spanking my pussy. Short, deliberate taps right over my clit. My inner thigh muscles jump and shiver as he puts a little more wrist into it.

“Stefano,” I gasp.

“That's right, *amore*. Say my name.”

My pussy clenches, more shivers run down my legs. He smacks one ass cheek, hard.

“Ouch!”

“Mmm hmm.” He slaps the other cheek, then picks up his pace, alternating one cheek then the other. The man doesn't know the definition of a light slap. Every time his palm connects with my flesh it sends shockwaves of sensation

jolting through me. Pain mingled with pleasure. It's too much, and yet I don't want him to stop. I'm tragically enamored with my situation. He increases the intensity and speed another notch and I cry out. "Ouch! Hey!"

Yeah, now I want him to stop.

Definitely.

"You might remember the words I need to hear, *bella*."

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry I bit your finger, Stefano."

He stops and spins me around. "Good girl. Quick learner." Like before, he ends the punishment with a kiss. His lips crash down on mine and he bends me backward on the table, following me down. I have no choice but to wrap my legs around his waist and cradle his hips against mine. His cock presses hard and insistent against my panties, but he doesn't rush. He kisses down my neck, yanks my bra down to scrape his teeth across my nipple.

I arch into him, grind my mons against the hard bulge in his pants. He draws my nipple into his mouth, sucks it until I feel the answering tug between my legs.

His movements are sure and confident, like he knows his way around a woman's body, yet there's also a crazy urgency, a passion behind every movement that carries me away. I can't help but respond to his touch, like he's the musician and my body's the instrument. The music he makes with me intoxicates us both.

He moves to the neglected nipple, sucking, biting, blowing air across it. Hot hands slide up my thighs. I think he's going to fuck me now. This time I'm not going to refuse.

But after he yanks my G-string down, he brings his face down to my pussy and licks into me. I cry out, my hips jacking up off the table. He holds them down and licks again, a long lick, from anus to clit.

Jesus. I didn't know that would feel so good. I've never had attention paid to my anus—never wanted attention paid there, but Stefano's unafraid.

He delves his tongue into my pussy, penetrating me, then shifts to suck my clit. He dips two fingers into me and curls them inside, rubbing my inner wall.

I tear at his hair, my juices flowing so freely I'm afraid they'll leak out of me. This is all too much and yet my body sings, glories in his touch. His thumb slides in my entrance and another finger, wet from my pussy, pushes at my anus.

Once again, my hips fly off the table. He holds me down, re-affixing his lips to my clit, sucking the nubbin hard. He penetrates my asshole with a finger.

I'm mortified.

Exhilarated.

The sensations flow through me too quickly to process. My body belongs to him. I have no choice but to surrender, to let go and let him play me, his instrument. And he does.

Within moments, I'm orgasming—*hard*. When I scream, he covers my mouth with his hand, still pumping his fingers in and out of me. It's miraculous and horrible. I'm undone.

And when it's over, vulnerability and a pinch of shame rush in like an ocean tide. I choke back a sob against his palm.

#

Stefano

Oh fuck.

I release my hand from Corey's mouth to see her face. She turns away from me, shoving her knuckles between her teeth. She's crying. Or trying not to.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. I was so sure she wanted it. Her body responded like I was its master. She never said no, never pushed me away.

My cockstand drops to nothing. I don't get off on rape. At all.

I quickly pull her up to sit, tugging her panties back into place. “*Cazzo*, Corey.” I search her face, trying to decipher the tears. Was it just too much? Sometimes chicks cry after orgasm, especially a big one. Or did she feel forced?

I fucking hope not.

“Are you—” I don't even know what I'm going to say, but she thumps me on my chest with her bound hands.

“Stop looking at me, Stefano.”

Relief washes over me. She's okay. I can tell by the familiarity she uses—calling me by name, smacking my lapel. She wouldn't do that if she were truly scared, truly felt forced. She's raw from the orgasm and the fucked up situation, that's all.

I cup the back of her neck with my clean hand and pull her against me. She hits my chest with her forehead and stays there, gulping and sniffing. I stroke my thumb along the tendrils of hair at her nape until her breath slows. Then I release her. “Sit tight,” I warn, pointing a bossy finger at her. “Don't move or I'll spank your ass again.”

She scowls at me, which I take as a good sign. She still has spirit. I have no interest in breaking her.

When I come back, she's pulled herself together. “Stefano,” she says, holding her bound wrists out to me. “Let me go. I'm not going to talk, I promise. My cousin, who's like a sister to me, is marrying your brother. I'm practically part of the family now.”

My eyebrows shoot up, because Nico—the *stronzo*—hasn't told me he's marrying the girl yet. I hope that means the shit with the Family is done. “That true? They getting married?”

She bobs her head. “She texted me a picture of the ring.”

I don't know why, but that makes me insanely happy for the guy. Nico is one seriously intense motherfucker. He's

never attempted to make himself happy, maybe because the marriage contract with Guiseppe Pachino's daughter's been hanging over his head all these years.

I crowd into her space again. It's hard to take her seriously when she looks like she stepped off the pages of a classy men's magazine. The thigh-highs and heels are pretty much blowing my mind. "What does that make us, then?" I unhook her bra in the back and slide the straps down, even though I know they'll catch on her zip-tied wrists.

"There is no *us*," she snaps, but doesn't resist my touch. "Stefano, let me go. Please."

I put a finger under her chin. "I can't," I tell her. *Won't*. "Not yet."

Her breath quickens, which makes her pink-tipped breasts bob with each inhale. "Why not? What are you going to do with me?"

"I haven't decided yet."

"Please." Her voice rises. "You can call Nico—Mr. Tacone..." she trails off, though, uncertainty flickering over her face. Which doesn't surprise me. I can count the number of people who are certain of what Nico will do or say on one hand.

"I will certainly talk to Nico," I say smoothly. "In the meantime, you're staying here." I tug the bra tangled around her wrists.

"Are you going to cut that off, too?" she snaps.

"Yes, I think I will." I pick up the scissors. It's not to be a dick, but because the idea of buying her new bras gets me harder than a rock. I'm going to enjoy having Corey Simonson at my mercy.

Very much.

She huffs as I snip the bra straps and free the fabric from her wrists.

"Come, *bella*." I take her tangled fingers and lead her toward the bedroom.

She balks, digging her heels in and pulling against me.

“Relax. I’m putting you to bed *to sleep*. It’s late and I need to get my ass back out on the floor.”

She shakes her head. “Stefano, please. This is fucked up. Just let me go. I don’t understand why I’m your prisoner.”

“I need to be sure of you, *bella*. So for now, you stay.” I nudge her toward the bathroom. “There’s the restroom. Use it if you need to, because you won’t have a chance while I’m gone.”

Panic flares in her eyes, but she tosses her long red hair on her way to the toilet. While she’s gone, I yank the casino phone out from the wall and stow it in the closet. Using more zip-ties from my pocket, I make a chain with them, affixing the top one to the solid metal of the bed frame. When she returns, I pat the bed, hiding the zip-ties. She eyes me warily but approaches and tucks herself under the covers, presumably to hide her state of undress.

I catch her wrists and attach the zip-tie chain to hers.

“Hey! What the fuck?” she tugs at them.

“*Stop*.” I make my voice sharp. “Take it easy, *bella* or this zip-tie will cut into your wrists.”

She glares up at me. “Oh, and you care because why?”

Because I don’t want to feel bad about the way I’m treating her. And I definitely should. She doesn’t deserve to be tied up to my bed. She’s done nothing wrong. But I’m thinking with my dick now, and there’s no way I’m letting her go. Not when I have her in such a delicious position.

I lift her bound fingers to my lips and kiss them softly. “I don’t want to see red marks here.” I trace my finger beneath the zip-tie, testing for tightness. “If I come back and you’ve worked your skin raw, I’m going to punish you again. *Capiche?*”

Her eyes fly wide, genuine fear flooding them.

“No,” I say, guessing at her panicked thoughts. “I’m not a psychopath. Although I’d love to play sex games with you

chained to my bed all fucking week. Be good”—I tap her nose —“or it can be arranged.” I head for the door.

“Stefano!” she screams my name through clenched teeth. It’s a good sign. I like her mad. I don’t want her terrified.

I turn and arch a brow. “Need anything? No?” I don’t give her a chance to answer. “I’ll get you a toothbrush while I’m downstairs. I’ll be back by dawn. Try to get some sleep.”

#

Corey

I’m ready to murder Stefano Tacone myself. I can’t figure out his game. Is he really worried about me talking? Or is he a crazy sex predator who saw an opportunity to take me captive and did so?

But no. If he was into sex crimes, he would’ve raped me on his kitchen table. And he didn’t. He didn’t even try to have sex with me. All he did was offer me pleasure.

He’s definitely attracted to me; he’s made that plain. But I really don’t think he’s going to force himself on me tonight.

With that thought, my confidence in making it through this situation takes an upturn. I witnessed a mafia murder, but I’m still alive. The man who captured me has not been cruel. In fact, other than keeping me captive, he was fairly attentive—offering me water, suggesting I use the bathroom. Blowing my mind with the orgasm of the century.

Oh fuck, what am I saying? Do I seriously already have Stockholm Syndrome? Am I bonding with my captor?

Then it hits me with a flash of cold. *Is that his intent?* How he’s going to be sure of me? Get me to bond to him so I won’t talk?

No, that's ridiculous. A man like Stefano Tacone does not rely on *wooing* women into silence. That's scoffable. He uses his fists. His gun.

And since he's used neither on me, I can probably assume I'm fairly safe.

I lean over the side of the bed to investigate where he attached the zip-tie. If it's to the leg of the bed, maybe I can lift it off.

No dice.

It's right to the metal frame beneath the mattress. Stefano's good. I shudder to think he's done this before.

My maneuvering twists the zip-tie around my wrists and I check my skin for marks. Yep, totally left some.

And that thought should *not* excite me.

But I could really get off on Stefano Tacone's punishments. What am I saying? I already have.

So yeah, tempting him into another one feels like a delicious danger I'd love to play with.

But despite my certainty I'd never sleep, I drift off.

I dream of mafia meetings: dangerous men with guns and tempers. My dad is there. He's the leader and he catches me spying on them. He holds me up by the hair and slaps my face like he used to when he was drinking.

I startle awake, sweating.

"Shh, *bambina*. You're safe here." Stefano Tacone appears in my dream, brushing my hair back from my face.

No.

Stefano Tacone is in the bed.

I blink my eyes open. The early light of dawn spills through the curtains.

"Go back to sleep, *bella*. It's too early to be awake."

I try to turn toward his voice, but plastic bites into my wrists and I whimper.

“Okay, okay. I’ll free you.” The mattress pitches and he climbs off. When he appears in my line of vision, he’s holding a deadly hunter’s knife. He crouches in front of me and slices the zip-tie holding my wrists. His stubble has grown overnight and weariness tugs down the corners of his eyes. “You stay in this bed, though,” he warns.

I rub the chafed skin, rolling over to face the middle of the bed where he lies down. He takes one of my wrists and strokes the marks with his thumb.

“Naughty, babe,” he murmurs, closing his large hand around my wrist as his eyelids close.

I stare at his handsome face in the dark, listen as his breath slows. He smells like the casino—like scotch and money and old leather. I consider trying to slip out of his grasp, but I can’t seem to find the motivation. I might have to admit to myself that I enjoy being his captive. Leaving now would be a disappointment. Eventually, my inhaled match his and I slide back into a dream. Only this time, I’m tied to Stefano’s bed.

CHAPTER THREE

Stefano

Oh, no you don't.

My hand closes around Corey's wrist. She's trying to sneak away from me.

Her electric blue eyes meet mine. They hold no trace of fear or remorse, which makes me want to kiss her senseless. I love her confidence. Her verve. I have her half-naked in my bed and she's not unnerved in the least.

"I have to pee," she says. "Did you get me that toothbrush?" Adorable. She treats this like a fucking slumber party.

"On the counter," I mumble, still coming awake. I release her wrist. She tugs the sheet off the bed to cover herself as she pads to the bathroom.

"Leave the door cracked open, *amore*. I need to hear what you're doing."

"Fuck you, Tacone," she calls back.

"Still your boss," I remind her.

Even though she's mouthy, she does as she's told.

Smart woman.

When she comes back, she walks straight to the dresser and pulls out a drawer.

They're all empty. I don't plan in staying in this guest suite, but I haven't bothered to kick Sal out of my suite on the top floor yet. He moved in there when I left for Sicily six months ago.

"You looking for something to wear?"

"Yeah," she says, turning to face me. "Where are your clothes?"

"Come back to bed. You'll get clothes when you earn them. Right now you have a punishment coming."

She has the nerve to roll her eyes and I have to suppress a grin.

"Now, *bambina*."

She examines one wrist. "How do you know you didn't do this putting them on?"

I shrug. "I know. Besides, you're getting punished no matter what." I cup my aching balls through my boxer briefs. "If my balls are still bruised, *bambina*, your ass is going to be raw. That's just casino rules. *Capiche?*"

She winces, glancing at my cock, which surges to attention. "Sorry?"

I climb off the bed. "You will be. Come here, *bella*." She darts for the door and my dick grows hard because I get to lunge for her, pick her up and carry her to the bed. I toss her down in the center of it and yank the sheet away.

She doesn't appear particularly frightened or pissed off, which bodes well for me finally getting my cock into her. Climbing into bed last night and not claiming her was an exquisite torture. I didn't sleep enough to dream, but if I had, I'm sure it would've been all about those pouty lips stretched around my length, those bright blue eyes gazing up at me.

"Let's see... what to do to my beautiful prisoner." I stare down at her, drinking in the sight of her lovely breasts, the way her red hair spreads out on the mattress like flames. Somehow her delectable stockings stayed on all night long.

Her cheeks are flushed, eyes dilated. I know she wants this, even if she won't admit it.

I reach to her thighs and grab one stocking in each hand to yank them down.

She kicks. "Jesus! You have to ruin those too?"

I roll her over and slap her ass, then twist her wrists behind her back and use one of the stockings to tie them together. "Too mouthy, *bella*. I like your spunk, but I require a little more respect."

"I'm sorry, Stefano."

A chuckle barrels out from me before I can stop it. "You do learn fast, don't you, *amore*?" I tug her hips up to bring her knees under her so she's on an angle with her face on the bed and her ass in the air. "Mmm, now that's pretty."

The fact that she holds still tells me she's all in. I slap her ass a couple times with my hand, then retrieve my belt from the closet. I use the last six inches of it to lightly slap her, warming her cheeks and backs of her thighs with gentle licks. Then I let out a little more length and slap it hard across the center of her ass.

She yelps and lists to the side. "Ow!"

"Two more just like that and we can get to your reward. Now hold your position. You don't want this belt hitting you somewhere that doesn't feel good."

"Who says it feels good at all?"

I give a dark chuckle. "Feels good to me." I whip her again, laying a neat stripe just below the first one. She gasps, but holds still. "Good girl." I swing a third time, then toss the belt onto the bed beside her. "Now for your reward."

I untie her wrists and roll her over. Her eyes are glassy, lips parted. "Do you want a reward, Corey?"

She nods, eyes locked on mine as I climb up onto my knees on the bed and slide my hands under her hips to cup her ass. She bends her knees up to accommodate me.

I lower my face to her cunt and nip her through the scrap of panties. “You have to say it out loud. I don’t want any misunderstandings.”

“I want my reward,” she says quickly.

I laugh and nip her again. “Tell me what you want me to do, *amore*. Be very clear.”

She swallows.

I know she’s full of bluster, but I’m actually not sure whether Corey Simonson knows how to ask for what she wants.

Turns out she does.

“I want your mouth on me—like last night. And...”

I pull her panties to one side and drag my tongue up her slit. “And?” I arch a brow.

“I-I want you to fuck me.”

Victory dance.

I knew we’d get here sooner or later, but I’m fucking thrilled she made it so easy.

I pull her panties off. They’re the only piece of clothing I haven’t ruined. I might need to remedy that. But I don’t have time to think about clothing when her pussy’s wet and waiting.

I cup her hot ass in my hands and lick into her. She tries to arch off the bed, but I shift my hands to pin her pelvis down, hold her still for the onslaught of my tongue. I trace her inner lips, penetrate her with my thumb. I flick and tease her clit until it’s swollen and the hood pulls back.

“Play with your breasts,” I order.

“Wha—” She lifts her head, looking beautifully befuddled. A surge of manly pride shoots through me. *I did that to her.*

“Pinch those nipples. Make them hard.” I wait until she complies before I return to pleasuring her. She arches her lower back from the bed, rocking her pelvis toward my face. I

go slowly, dipping two fingers into her and arcing them to stroke her inner wall.

She gasps and clenches around my fingers, inner thighs clamping down on my shoulders.

“Stefano.”

“That’s it, baby. Say my name.”

“I need it,” she says.

Oh, fuck me. *I need to give it to you so hard, baby.* But I also don’t want this to end. I enjoy having Corey trembling and gasping my name like I’m the only man in the universe who can give her what she needs.

I ease my fingers out of her and pick up one of her stockings. She watches me climb over her with heavy-lidded eyes, but they fly wide when I catch her wrists and quickly tie them together.

“You have a bondage thing, Stefano?” Her voice is soft and breathy, no trace of the harsh judgment she usually infuses.

“Only with you, *bambina.*” It’s mostly true. Sure, I’ve tied girls up before, smacked their asses, bossed them around. But with Corey it’s far more interesting. She’s not submissive by nature, so taking her power away gives her a far greater release. And frankly, I *want* to conquer her this way.

I hold her wrists down and work one of her nipples with my teeth and tongue. She writhes beneath me. “*Stefano.*” She pops her pelvis up to hit my aching cock. She needs it bad.

So do I.

“Beg for it.” It’s a challenge. I know it will piss her off and it does. She rolls her eyes.

“You want to hear you’re good?”

I cup her mons and stroke my middle finger slowly along her juicy slit.

“You’re fucking good. So damn good.” She rolls her head around on the bed with a wanton moan.

“Beg.”

“You’re also a cocky—”

I release her nipple with a pop and arch a warning brow.

“—arrogant, controlling bastard who’s keeping me prisoner.”

I remove all touch, backing up and pulling her wrists toward the headboard where I wind an end of the stocking around the post. “Badly played, *amore*.”

She pants, watching me with those bright blue eyes. Her legs swish restlessly on the bed.

I walk to the closet and rummage in my suitcase for the vibrator. Yes, I travel with it. You never know when you might need to pleasure a woman. I twist it to turn it on and saunter back to my lovely captive.

“Open your thighs, *bella*.”

She tugs at her bound wrists, eyes on the vibrator, legs still dancing.

I climb over her. “Don’t make me ask twice,” I murmur.

Her knees fall open the moment the vibe hits her clit. I stroke it slowly up and down her slit, feed it into her, then remove it and tease her clit. I continue this pattern until her pants become whines, her head rolls around with impatience.

Finally, I insert the vibrator into her and leave it, then I walk away.

“Hey!” she cries indignantly as I head to the bathroom.

I ignore her and wash my hands and face, brush my teeth.

“Stefano Taccone, you bastard. Get back here. *Please*.”

“Baby, I’m not going to warn you again—don’t call me names.” I come out of the bathroom, drying my hands.

It’s not really that I give a shit. But I have a reputation. I can’t have her disrespecting me in front of anyone else.

“I’m sorry.” She seeks my gaze with pleading one. “Please don’t do this. Please.”

“What do you need? Ask me sweetly.”

She grimaces, but lifts her chin. “I want your big Italian cock, okay? Are you going to give it to me?”

I can’t help but laugh. I pull the vibrator out of her and toss it on the bed. “I like you, Corey Simonson.” I slip my hand in my boxer briefs and pull out my cock. “Very much.” I snap open a condom and roll it on.

“I wish I could say the same, but you know—” She looks up at her tied wrists.

#

Corey

“Oh, you’ll like it, *bella*. I’ll make sure of it.” Stefano rubs the head of his sheathed cock over my swollen opening.

I moan, and my eyeballs roll back in my head. So help me God, I know he will. I’m freaking *dying* for Stefano to get me off. My whole body’s fevered and needy for him. And I have no doubt he’ll deliver everything I need.

I bend my knees up in offering.

The truth is, I’m enjoying my imprisonment with Stefano Tacone way too much. The man is far too sexy for his own good. For my own good.

He eases in, this thick member stretching me wide. Once seated, he withdraws, grips the tops of my thighs and plows back in, bumping my ass with his balls.

It’s exactly what my body craves.

Stefano lets out a growl of pleasure, holding me tighter as he increases his speed. “Yes,” I whisper, closing my eyes.

“Look at me, *bambina*.”

I don't know why he wants me to look, but I crack my lids and stare up at him as he thoroughly fucks me. It's more intense with our gazes locked—way more intense. Stefano's lids droop, but a muscle in his jaw ticks as he shoves in with powerful thrusts. His eyes blaze with dark heat, animalistic desire.

I find myself wishing he'd taken off his t-shirt so I could watch those bulging muscles on his arms and chest flex in naked glory. Fuck it; he made me ask for sex. I can ask for this, too.

“Take off your shirt, Stefano.” I don't even ask.

His eyes flare and a slow smile spreads over his face as he continues to pump in and out of me. He drags his t-shirt off and tosses onto the floor. “Better?”

My mouth waters, and I'm suddenly dying to drag my tongue over all that hard flesh. His chiseled chest is covered in dark curls with a happy trail that leads to his cock. Washboard abs. Ripped shoulders. No tattoos. That surprises me.

He drops to rest on his hands beside my ribs, bringing his face close to mine. “Like what you see?”

I pop my hips to meet his thrusts, take him deeper. “Yeah.”

He twists his lips over mine in one demanding kiss, then pushes back up to his knees and rolls mine up to my shoulders.

I gasp at the new angle, the intensity of sensation. And that's when he picks up the vibrator. He turns it on and pushes the tip up against my clit.

“No!” I wriggle, pre-orgasmic alarm flashing through me.

“Fucking give it to me,” he snarls.

I'm not even sure what he means, but he's relentless with the vibrator and his teeth-rattling thrusts. I explode. Shatter. Disintegrate. I'm nothing but bucking hips and screams while he wrenches the orgasm from me the same forceful way he demands everything.

My inner muscles clench around his cock, squeezing.

I realize he's making one long continuous growling sound. His nostrils flare and he bares his teeth. The sound peaks into a roar and he thrusts deep, ass bucking and jerking as he comes.

I come some more, another flutter of muscles clenching around his cock, milking it.

He drops down onto me and bites my shoulder, still rocking into me, but sweetly now. My body revels in every area of contact, post-coital pleasure spreading through me like an inkblot, making the whole fucked up night seem like nothing more than a prelude to this.

And that's just the sex talking. Pay no attention to this cock-inspired bliss. I am still a prisoner here. And he's still my keeper.

Even if he does know how to make my body sing.

He eventually pulls out and tosses his condom in the trashcan by the bed, then lies beside me, stroking his hand up my belly.

I have a huge birthmark, an ugly splotch of red that stretches across my side, and I grow suddenly self-conscious when he starts tracing it with his finger.

“Don't.”

“What? It's beautiful. You're beautiful. How do you not have a boyfriend?”

I wrinkle my nose. “What makes you think I don't?”

His sexy lips quirk. “I figured you would've said something the first time I kissed you.”

“Fair enough,” I concede.

“I don't get it—woman like you. How do you not have a whole legion of men around you who fall on their knees to worship you forever? I would think one taste and they'd be lost.”

Something twists in my middle, the sick feeling of betrayal and failure. “Yeah, well, my last boyfriend turned out to be a snake. And your brother made him disappear.”

Stefano arches a brow. “Permanently?”

A shiver runs up my spine at the confirmation of what could’ve been.

“No, I don’t think so.”

“What happened?”

Anger shoves up in my chest, hot and searing. “Apparently *one taste of me*, as you suggested, was not enough, and he thought it would be cool to force-fuck my cousin, too. He didn’t manage because Nico showed up.”

Stefano mutters something and rubs a hand across his mouth. “How is he not dead?”

Right. That was my assessment of what Nico’s capable of, too. “Sondra was there, screaming for him to stop. So he did. Told him to leave the state or he’d kill him.”

Stefano stares down at me. I think he’s going to tell me what an idiot Dean was, or how I’m better off, but he surprises me. “You’re still pissed,” he observes.

I frown because, *yeah*, of course I’m pissed. But I also realize what it means. I’m not over Dean. And I really want to be.

“You didn’t get to knee him in the nuts before he left.”

I’m surprised by the laugh that tumbles from my lips. “Yeah, that might’ve helped.”

“I could find him for you and haul him back,” Stefano offers. “Let you turn his balls blue like you turned mine.”

I laugh again.

“I’m serious. I would do that for you in a heartbeat.”

His brown eyes are warm now, flicks of gold and green glittering in the sunlight that filters through the curtains.

“Is that your version of a knight in shining armor?”

“Yeah. I guess.” He rolls away, off the bed and heads to the bathroom. I hear the shower turn on.

Did I offend him? Was that a slight against the type of man he is? A mobster?

No. That's impossible. Stefano Tacone is all confidence and swagger. Why would he care what I think?

Except I can't push away the nagging idea I somehow hurt him. Which for some reason kills the post-orgasm buzz I was floating on.

CHAPTER FOUR

Stefano

I order room service for breakfast and call down to the front desk to have work out clothes delivered in her size. It's one of the perks offered at the Bellissimo. I also call the clothing shop in the casino and ask for a fashion consultant to pick out a variety of red dresses to replace the one I cut and other clothing and to deliver them to the room.

Then I get with Al Sampson, the detective who does background checks on people for the casino and ask for everything on Corey Simonson.

"I already have a partial file on her," he tells me, "from when I ran her cousin, Sondra Simonson. I'll send over what I have and keep digging."

"You sending it electronically?"

"Yeah, you'll have it in two minutes."

"Thanks, Al. Appreciate it." I pocket my phone and straighten my tie.

I've ignored the naked redhead tied to my bed since my shower, which is pissing her off. I'll untie her when the food gets here, but for now she can stew.

I don't know why I'm pissed at her calling out the things that make me a Family man. It's like I'm that kid in Catholic school again. The one the others are afraid of. The one they

whisper about when I'm not there and go dead silent when I ask what's up.

I never wanted to be that kid. I didn't get into fist fights—not unless really provoked. As the youngest of five Tacone boys, proving myself was never necessary. And really, it's not my style. I was more of the class clown. The smart aleck who got sent to the principal's with a smirk on his face. I generally *like* people.

And Corey's like Tosha Davis. The one I wanted to entertain but was never good enough for.

Because her dad was a politician and mine—a mobster.

So now I have the daughter of a fed tied to my bed. One who saw me kill a man last night. It's not something I'm proud of, but I had no choice. And I want her to see me as something beyond a well-suited mafia man.

Which is stupid.

I shouldn't give a shit what she thinks anyway, and I'm not entering a relationship with her.

I mean, why would I even think this way?

Except I'm not willing to untie her and let her walk out of my room, either. And if I were totally honest, I'd have to admit only a small part of my reasoning for that has to do with her watching me pull that trigger last night.

I'm usually done with a woman the moment I come. I mean, I don't mind giving her a little cuddle afterward, but I definitely don't want to hang around and eat breakfast with her.

So why am I still in this suite? It's not like I don't have a shit ton to do out in the Bellissimo.

Jesus, it's like Nico's sudden attachment to a woman has me suddenly starting one, too.

Maybe it's catching. Heh. Maybe it's some biological attraction. Like the Simonson genes match well with the Tacones'.

Okay, I'm off my fucking rocker now.

"Room service." A tap sounds at the front door. I point in warning at Corey. "Not a word, *amore*." I shut the door to the bedroom to block any view of her.

Once the server is gone, I set her free and give her one of my t-shirts to wear. "I'm having workout clothes sent up and we'll work on replacing that dress this afternoon. Come on, I ordered us some food."

I actually hadn't planned on staying to eat with her, but it's like there's this magnetic pull, keeping me here in the suite with her.

She's unusually quiet as she eats.

"You okay?" I find myself asking as I sip my coffee and observe her.

She raises her brows. "Hmm, am I okay? I got some guy's blood splattered on me last night, witnessed a murder and now am some kind of prisoner to my boss, who happens to be the guy who pulled the trigger and is also into kinky games. I don't even know what *okay* is in this situation."

It's my fucking fault for asking. What did I think she would say? But her assessment—accurate though it may be—puts my hackles up. And rather than be an asshole, I decide it's time to leave.

"I gotta work. You'll stay here. I'm keeping you close until I figure out what to do with you."

She shoots to her feet. "What's to figure out?" She spreads her hands. "I promise I won't say a word."

"Thank you. I appreciate your word for it." I say as I walk to the bedroom and grab the phone out of the drawer where I stashed it. "As soon as I'm sure of it, I'll let you go."

She looks at the phone in my hand, wariness clouding her features. "Are you going to tie me up again?"

I arch a brow. "Do I need to?"

"Uh, no. Nope. Huh uh."

I'm pretty sure she thinks she's going to walk right out of here as soon as I leave. What she doesn't know is that I put a security guy on the door. She won't be going anywhere. Not unless I want her to.

"Good. Watch some TV. Relax. I'll be back to check on you."

She sucks on her lower lip as she watches me leave. I throw a wink from the door, but I'm not feeling as jaunty as it probably looks.

In fact, I'm uneasy about the whole thing. About leaving Corey prisoner. And also about letting her go. And I don't know what the hell's wrong with me, but I think I'm actually concerned about her state of mind—her happiness.

No, it's more than that.

I'm fucking worried she'll never forgive me for this.

And that is downright unlike me.

#

Corey

First thing I do after Stefano leaves is get in the shower and turn the water on hot. I need time to think.

Do I just leave? Is he testing me here? It seems like a mafia thing to test people. He's deciding if I'm trustworthy based on whether I follow his directions and stay put?

On the other hand, I'm his fucking prisoner! And if I have a chance to get away I should, right?

Only what then? I'm not going to the cops. I meant what I told him. I would never in a million years get on a witness stand against a Tacone. That's suicide. I don't care if there is a witness relocation program. Besides, Sondra's marrying his

brother. These guys really are about to become family by marriage. I'm not going to snitch on my family.

And yeah, Sondra's boyfriend would be more *family* to me than my own dad. Easily.

So yeah, let's say I bolt. Then what? I want to keep my job here. I have no desire to go to the cops. I also have no desire to have Stefano Tacone put me on his wanted list.

Sort of seems like I stay put. Besides my lack of freedom, I'm not suffering here. I've been fed. He said he's sending clothing. I've had my sexual needs tended in a blow-my-mind kinda way.

I shampoo and condition my hair. Unfortunately, there's no razor. I'm sure if I asked him for one, he'd bring it.

Which is sort of fun.

When I get over being freaked out about what's happening, it's actually quite fun. Thrilling, even.

I turn off the water and grab a towel.

A tap sounds at the door.

Shit. Must be the clothes. I wrap the towel under my armpits and open the front door a crack.

"Oh, sorry, ma'am." A security guard turns red in the face as he thrusts a Bellissimo bag toward me. "They brought this for you." He averts his gaze, staring past my shoulder instead of looking at me.

"Are you guarding this door?" I demand, suddenly outraged. I spent all that time deciding not to leave and it turns out I had no choice, anyway.

Fucking Tacone.

The guard turns even redder. "Mr. Tacone's orders, ma'am. I'm sorry." He drops the bag inside the suite and pulls the door shut in my face.

Harumph.

I pick up the bag and rummage through it. It's a tank top and yoga pants. No panties. It will have to do. I get dressed and make the bed, for lack of anything better to do. And because I'm one of those neat freaks who prefers things to be in their place.

Then I set back and do as Stefano suggested—watch TV. What the hell, there's nothing better to do.

At 1:00 p.m., room service arrives with a variety of lunch options. At 3:00 p.m., Stefano finally returns.

I bite back the "it took you long enough" in favor of something more amicable. "How are things out there?"

"Fine." He looks around the room as if for clues for what I've been up to. "What do you need here? Anything?"

Oh shit. He's just stopping in. Ready to head back out any minute. I don't want to stay cooped up here all day alone.

I clear my throat. "I, uh, could use some exercise. You know—I'm in the outfit, but nowhere to work out."

Stefano frowns and glances toward the door. Then he shakes his head.

"What?"

"Fine." A note of annoyance clips the word. "I'll take you to the fitness center." He stalks to the bedroom. When he returns, he's changed from his thousand-dollar gunmetal gray pinstriped suit into a soft hunter green t-shirt and black workout shorts. The worn t-shirt stretches around the muscles of his chest.

I resist the urge to paw the air.

"Come on, princess. I don't have all day."

I walk to the door. "Is it princess now? Funny, I'm not feeling much like a princess."

He pops my ass. "Stop sulking. Walk."

I flip him the bird over my shoulder, pushing my luck.

I push open the door and the guard steps out of the way, nodding to Stefano.

“Take a break. I’ll message you on the comms when I need you again.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, Mr. Tacone.”

Stefano answers his phone, responding to some casino business with short, decisive answers, then switches to a comms device, giving more orders as we step toward the elevator. He reaches past me and hits the elevator button for up instead of down.

“Where are we going?” I ask. The fitness center is on the tenth floor, below us.

“Private gym.” Stefano flashes me a model-worthy grin and holds an arm out to usher me into the elevator.

“Oh. I didn’t know there was a private gym here.”

“There are lots of things you don’t know about the Bellissimo,” he says, circling an arm behind my back like we’re on a date.

We get off on the 18th floor and Stefano leads me to a small but beautifully appointed, air-conditioned gym. Mirrors cover every wall and the floor is springy gym mat material. The smell of eucalyptus and pine lightly tickle my nose. I look around and zero in on the treadmill. The truth is, I’m not actually your work-out-at-the-gym type. I was just trying to get Stefano to let me out of the room. I don’t even know how to use anything here besides the stationary bike and the treadmill.

I climb on and hit the buttons until it turns on.

Stefano gets on the rowing machine and rows like he means business.

Oh damn—those muscles, flexing. Sheer beauty. Something flutters deep in my belly. Seeing the power in that body, the ease with which he uses it makes me remember every time he’s touched me. How gentle he’s been considering what that body’s capable of. I relive every moment of

struggling with him in the elevator in the parking garage. The first spanking. The second.

The orgasms he's delivered.

My nipples chafe against the inside of the tank top's shelf bra, hard as diamonds.

I don't know what it is about Stefano Tacone, but the raw animal attraction can't be denied.

So yeah, I guess he can keep me tied up in his room. For at least another day.

He finishes with the rowing machine and works his way around each weight-training station until I'm damp between the thighs and drooling for him. The last station is behind me, but I watch him in the mirror, closing my lips around the sighs that keep trying to slip out.

He finishes and walks right up behind me, stepping on the edges of the treadmill and reaching past me to turn it off. His body is flush against mine, the bulge of his cock hitting my lower back, his beefy arms caging me.

"Think you can just eye-fuck me for an hour without repercussions, *bella*?" He reaches around and cups my mons, pressing the heel of his hand against my clit the same way I do when I'm masturbating. Apparently not satisfied with the full handful he just took, he shifts to slip his hand inside my yoga pants. "*Fanculo*, baby. You're so ripe for me."

I catch sight of my face in the mirror, mouth open, abandon already creeping over my expression. When I realize he's looking, too, I snap my jaw shut, but he plunges a finger inside me.

"Stefano," I pant.

He dips two more fingers in, and I'm already on the edge, about to come. "What, baby?"

"Someone could come in."

"Nah, I locked the doors, beautiful. I'd never let you be seen like that." He pulls his fingers out and yanks my tank top

off. “That is, unless you’re into being seen. But I don’t think you are. Take those pants off.”

I obey. Apparently I’m getting used to being stripped naked for him. “What makes you so sure?”

He fishes a condom out of his gym shorts pocket—which means he planned this from the start—and rips it open. Without dropping his shorts, he pulls out his dick and rolls it on, then twirls his finger to tell me to turn back around. “You’re proud but you don’t seek attention. You like to control how you’re seen and when. You’re not a submissive.” He bends both my arms behind my back and pushes my chest down on the controls for the treadmill. He leans over, lips at my ear. “But you do like to be tied up and taken hard.”

“No, I don’t,” I insist but he’s inching into me. My mouth opens wide again, like a porn star. He retreats, inches in again—taking his sweet time. “Jesus, Stefano, are you ever going to start?”

He chuckles as he pushes in, but then he doesn’t move, just reaches around and diddles my clit. His other hand still loosely holds my forearms together at my back.

I arch back against him, desperate to take him deeper, to get satisfaction.

“You know why a woman like you wants to be tied up?”

“Fuck you, Stefano.”

“You mean fuck *me*, don’t you? Do you need another lesson in begging?”

“No,” I pant, need burning into anger, the fever licking between my thighs, up my neck, across my breasts.

He doesn’t move.

“Oh God,” I moan, already conceding defeat. “Please fuck me. Hard.”

“Of course, *bella*. Who would refuse you that?” He palms my breast and pinches my nipple. “Especially when you look so beautiful taking my cock.” He draws back and drills into me, hard.

I sigh in relief.

Using my elbows for leverage, he withdraws and slams in, again and again.

“You haven’t answered me.” Another brutal thrust. My inner thighs quiver. I go up on my tiptoes, thrust my ass back at him. “Do you know why you like to be restrained? And don’t say you don’t, because I’m inside your sopping pussy right now, baby. I know you’re three strokes from an orgasm.”

“Ugn.” I make an unintelligible sound and then whimper, closing my lids.

“Open your eyes, Corey. I want to see those baby blues in the mirror when I make you come. When I own you so completely you forget your name.”

God, it’s true. I’m already there.

“Why, Stefano?” I pant because I need to know the answer now. Whatever it is he thinks he knows about me.

“Because letting go of control would be wrong. And you like to get things right, don’t you, *amore?*”

I squeeze my eyes shut as pain spears my chest. He got it so right it burns. All my childhood I was made to feel wrong, never good enough. Always a fuck up.

My dad was an exacting bastard who liked to lecture, like to tell me what to do. Liked to slap us around if he was drinking.

The pain of that reality comes slamming through me at the same time as the pleasure of being rode hard by Stefano. I suddenly want to fight him, but it’s too late, my body’s already capitulated, cunt squeezing around his thick member, pulsing double-time with my heartbeat.

“Fuck,” Stefano grunts.

He drags me down to my knees on the sloped treadmill and pushes my torso down. He takes me from this angle until my teeth chatter and my G-spot’s numb and then he flips me to my back and finishes, pinning my forearms down to the frame of the treadmill.

I climax with him, hips lifting and bucking against his, my scream loud enough to echo off the mirrors.

I can't move afterward. I'm limp and boneless with the two releases. He'd have to scrape me off the treadmill if he wanted me up.

He gets up and throws his condom away in the trash by the door, which makes me cringe thinking about whoever might see it there.

Then he comes back and leans on the treadmill rail, staring down at me. "I want to keep you naked like this forever. Putting those clothes back on you—as hot as you looked in them—would be a goddamn travesty."

"You got a thing for pasty white skin and birthmarks?" I make fun of myself because I'm feeling too raw, like he stripped me emotionally when he named why I like his form of sex. And I'm starting to enjoy his praise way too much. Believe it, even, which is a huge mistake.

He frowns and shakes his head. "I fucking love that birthmark. I told you that before. I'm going to buy you a whole wardrobe of midriff shirts so you can show it off."

I turn my face away from him, which gets me nowhere since we're surrounded by mirrors.

"Stefano?" I ask the man in the mirror.

"Yeah?"

"What are you going to do with me? For real?"

He walks around to the other side of the treadmill, the side I've turned to and crouches in front of me. His pursed lips are soft and kissable, tangled fingers strong and calloused. "I'm keeping you close. You're going to be my shadow until I'm sure of you."

Relief cascades through me. It must show on my face, because Stefano frowns. "Were you worried I was going to kill you?"

"No," I snap, sitting up, letting my hair curtain my face. For some reason, tears catch in my throat.

Of course he must hear it because he surges around the treadmill and lifts me to my feet, pulling me up against his chest. His free hand brushes lightly over my cheek.

“Then what is it?”

One errant tear leaves my eye and I struggle against him to turn away. I don’t even know, myself, why I choked up.

He leans down and flicks it with his tongue. “Is it so awful?” His voice is barely above a whisper.

I find his gaze, surprised. Is it awful? Being Stefano’s shadow? His captive prisoner? No. Not at all. He was right; it’s wonderful in the *I’m not responsible for any of this so I can let go and enjoy* kind of way.

“I-I think I’m just relieved,” I admit.

Stefano’s shoulders relax, and he pulls my head against his chest, still holding my wrists captive. “You did still believe I was going to kill you.”

The words sound shocking out loud. I’m surprised he can say them so easily, but yes. He’s right. Even though he feels like nothing but safety now, some part of me was still scared for my life.

I nod against his chest, hot tears flooding my eyes now.

“That was never my plan,” he rumbles above me, his lips in my hair. “I told you that from the beginning.”

And I didn’t believe you.

He strokes the back of my neck, toying with the baby curls there. “I’m sorry you were afraid, *mi amore*.” He kisses my head. “I don’t want you afraid of me.”

Only at his mercy.

I push away. This still doesn’t add up. “And if you can’t be sure of me? What then?”

“I’ll keep you until I can.” He winks. He’s trying to tease me, but I’m not having it.

I shake my head. “What if I’m a problem? What then?” I’m pushing for the answer I don’t want to hear, but I feel like we need to be clear. He may have treated me to the most incredible sex of my life, but nothing changes what this is. I’m his captive. If I don’t cooperate, I’m dead.

He purses his lips. “*Bambina*, what are you trying to get me to say? I don’t want to do this.”

I put my hands on my hips, challenge clear.

I see the shadow of danger appear on his face. “*Are* you going to be a problem?”

I ignore the twist of fear in my gut. “What if I am?” I whisper, my mouth dry as the Sahara, and I don’t mean the casino.

He shoves his hands in his shorts pockets, regards me coolly.

“Then you kill me?” I don’t know why this is an argument I’m trying to win. Do I need to prove I have a right to be afraid? That I know what I’m messing with, here?

“No.” He shakes his head immediately and takes a step forward, but I step back. He stops. “I told you no already.”

“Then what?”

He scrubs a hand across his mouth. “Then I’d use your pressure points,” he finally admits.

It’s bizarre how much of a relief it is to hear him admit it. To know the score.

“I see. So that’s what this is. You tie me to your bed until you’re either sure of me, or know enough about me to keep me scared for the rest of my life.”

He frowns and lunges for me so quickly I can’t dart away. He grabs my arm and pulls me into him, my body tumbling against the hard planes of his large frame. “That’s *not* what this is. Don’t fucking define it like that.” He’s mad and I’m not sure why. Oddly, his wrath turns me on.

Does it mean he cares?

Stop it.

Don't think like that. Stefano Tacone doesn't *care* about women. He's a player. He loves women; he takes pleasure in watching women, enjoys their bodies, slakes his lust frequently and with gusto. That doesn't mean he develops feelings for them.

For me.

His lips crash down on mine. I respond before I even start to wonder if I should hold back. It's like my body was made to come alive any time he touches it. It doesn't matter if he was just threatening me, whether he's holding me captive or tormenting me. I'm his.

My pride tells me to push away, but I'm swept up in the moment. I want him to go on, to show me what comes next.

He walks me backward, lips locked until my ass hits a wall, then he keeps pushing, pressing his hard length against my belly as his tongue strokes against mine. He comes up for air and insinuates one solid thigh between my legs. "First of all, I wanted to fuck you the first moment I saw you standing behind that roulette wheel."

Pardon me? I give him a *what the fuck are you talking about* look and he puffs with impatience.

"Were you implying I'm fucking you to keep you quiet? Like I'm some manwhore who solves problems with sex?" He frowns and curses something in Italian.

"If the shoe fits?"

"Well maybe I am, but only with you." His dark gaze bores into me. "*Amore*, you're tangled up in something ugly. Something I never wanted you involved in. It's my fault, and I'm doing my best to fix it."

"Interesting way of fixing it." I can't stop the dryness from crumbling my words.

Stefano picks up my discarded tank and pulls it over my head.

Session over. Discussion ended.

Pretty sure I'm in the same place as when I started, except I have all kinds of happy sex hormones flowing through my veins taking all the bite out of being Stefano's prisoner.

CHAPTER FIVE

Stefano

I take Corey back to the suite, checking my phone for a message from Nico. I haven't heard from him since he called on the way to see our dad in prison, and I'm a little worried. Before we arrive, I get an urgent communication from Tony in the earpiece I'd shoved into my gym shorts pocket.

"We have a situation."

"What is it?" I bark, adjusting the device in my ear.

"Knife wound to one of the guards. A guy stole some lady's purse and he caught him."

"*Fanculo*. Did you call 911?"

Corey shoots me a worried look as the elevator doors open. I grab her elbow and usher her to my suite.

"Emergency vehicle's on the way."

"Who's the guard?" I key the door open. An entire rack of clothing for Corey has been delivered while we were gone, but she doesn't move to look at it, she's watching me, listening.

"Joey Spitazzi."

"*Merda*. You call his wife?"

"I'm about to. I'll get her number from HR. What do you want me to do with the bastard who did it?"

“You have him in hand?”

“Oh yeah.” There’s menace in Tony’s voice. He’s not a mean guy—doesn’t get off on inflicting pain—but he’s loyal as hell. And Joey’s part of the Family, albeit far removed. He’s a grunt, a young soldier. Someone’s cousin or other relation who wanted a job from us. Still, he’s one of our own. And we protect our own with our lives.

“No, you gotta turn him over to the cops. If an ambulance is coming, authorities will be involved. We can always handle things our own way if we’re not happy with how they come out.”

“True that. Okay, boss. You want me at the hospital after I talk to the cops?”

“You hold your position here. I’ll go to the hospital. Thanks, Tony.” I end the call and head into the bedroom to take a quick shower and change back into a suit.

Corey follows me in, standing in the bathroom door as I shuck my clothes, like we’re a married couple. “Someone’s hurt?”

“Yeah.” I climb in the shower and rub a bar of soap quickly over my body. “One of the guards got knifed by a purse-snatcher. I’m going to the hospital.”

To my surprise, Corey steps in. As much as I’d love to drill her against the tile, I don’t have time for this shit. But she doesn’t look like she’s trying to seduce me. “Want me to come along?”

I blink at her, water running down my face. Huh. “Yeah. Okay.” Why the fuck not? She might actually make things easier with dealing with the guy’s wife. Especially if Joey dies.

Then again, this could be her ploy to escape, and I definitely don’t have the bandwidth to keep a leash on her while I’m trying to deal with shit.

She holds her hand out for the bar of soap and I give it to her and step out, my mind already at the hospital, hoping to hell we don’t lose a soldier.

Fifteen minutes later, we head down to the parking lot. Corey's wearing an ivory blouse and a pair of black jean capris with her high heels. She looks like a model showing the summer daywear line. I lead her to Nico's black Mercedes and call Tony to find out which hospital Joey was brought to. Twenty minutes later, we enter the waiting area.

A young woman with two preschool-aged children stands up when we get there. Her face is tear-stained and pale, dark hair pulled up in a messy bun on her head. "Nico?" she asks tentatively.

"Stefano Tacone," I say. "Nico's brother."

"I'm Trisha. Joey's wife."

I pull her into an embrace because, well, that's how it's done in my family. A guy takes a knife for you, you're gonna hug his wife, even if you've never met her. "What's the word on Joey?" I ask when we come apart.

Tears pop in her eyes. "He's in surgery. I don't know. They said even when he comes out, I can't bring the kids back there." Her two little girls hide behind her legs and peek out at us.

"Well, they can stay out here with me," Corey offers. "Or do you have someone who can watch them? I could drop them somewhere."

Relief flickers on Trisha's face. "Yeah, my girlfriend can come when she gets off work, but if I can go see him before then, I need to."

"Of course. I will hang with the kiddos." Corey smiles at the little girls, who stare up at her like she's a princess. And who could blame them? With the heels, Corey stands almost five feet ten inches, and her flame-colored hair cascades in waves down her back like she's royalty. I have to push away the fantasy of wrapping it around my cock and jerking off to it.

"Mommy, I'm hungry," one of the girls says, eyeing Corey, like she's testing to see how sincere she is.

"Let's go find you a snack." Corey holds out her hand.

The little girl shyly takes it.

“Except I’ll need Uncle Stefano’s wallet because I don’t have my purse.” She slides me an almost teasing look.

I step to her side and touch her back. It’s not that I don’t trust she’ll come back. I can’t see her kidnapping or abandoning a kid. It’s that I’m too fascinated by her to want to let her out of my sight. “I’ll come along. Where are you headed; the Starbucks down the hall?”

“Yes.” She leans down to the look at the little girl. “Think we can find you something there?”

The girl nods gravely. It’s a bizarre feeling walking with Corey and a small child through the halls of a hospital. Both new and unique and yet strangely familiar all at once. It would be true of any experience under the sun—with Corey.

She’s that different. That right. I never in a million years would’ve guessed she’d be good with kids. She’s not the warm and fuzzy first grade teacher type, yet here she is with a small child wrapped around her finger.

We stand in line at the hospital Starbucks and Corey orders a latte for herself and Trisha and Ninja talks the little girl out of a donut and into a yogurt with fruit. I order a double espresso and drink it before we leave the counter.

“Anything you’re not good at, Corey Simonson?” I toss the drained cup in the wastebasket.

Surprise lights up her face. “What are you talking about?”

I lift my chin at the little girl, who is chattering away as she walks beside us, carrying the yogurt and two spoons so she can share with her sister.

Pink stains her cheeks. “I’m not good with kids.” She shrugs. “I just figure someone needs to step up right now.”

“I read your file. Bachelor in psychology, graduated summa cum laude. Why are you working as a croupier in Vegas?”

She slows her steps, a frown appearing between her brows. “First of all, what file did you read?”

“The one my brother put together when he started dating Sondra. I guess he already knew your dad’s a fed.”

Her expression clouds even more. ““Kay. I’m a little freaked out now. But maybe no more than I was falling asleep last night with my wrists zip-tied to the bed.”

Damn. My concern she’ll never forgive me for that seems valid.

She shakes her lovely hair. “Don’t respond to that.” We arrive back in the waiting area and she hands Trisha the coffee as the girls hunker down together to fight over who gets to hold the yogurt while they share.

Corey takes a seat and I sit beside her, still waiting for an answer. After a moment, she says, “I know it seems like I gave up on my career—my life. My parents definitely think so. I came here for grad school and ended up getting a job at the Bellissimo for shits and giggles. I dropped out three months later.”

I knew this much from her file, but I love hearing it from her. I stay quiet, hoping she’ll go on.

“The Bellissimo satisfies an itch in me. I always hated the mundane. I get bored quickly, you know?”

I nod, because it makes sense. She’s a smart woman—ordinary wouldn’t cut it.

“I mean, I grew up in Marshall, Michigan, for God’s sake. It’s the join the soccer team and mow your grass on Saturdays kind of place. Only I always knew I didn’t fit in. I had a dad who worked for the FBI for one thing. And for another, he was a functioning alcoholic and an asshole. Tragically, I probably get my impatience with the rest of the population from him. He was always tearing everyone down. He saw through every lie, destroyed every dream.”

She laughs, but it’s bitter and I already want to kill her dad. It wouldn’t be hard to do.

“Sondra and her family lived across the street—the model of what a family should look like. Cheesy, supportive parents, report cards pinned on the fridge.” She stares down at her

fingernails, the low-key French manicure making her fingers look even longer. “Sondra’s parents used to come to her soccer games with their faces painted in the team colors. They carried banners and signs cheering her on.

“I always prayed my dad wouldn’t come because he would stand on the sidelines and chew me out for every wrong move. He chewed the coach out, the other team’s coach. The other kids. It was a freaking nightmare.”

“Father of the year,” I mutter.

“Yeah.” She jerks her head up suddenly to look at my eyes. “Why am I even telling you all this?”

“You were explaining how you came to be a croupier.”

“Right.” She sighs and stares across the waiting area at the exit. “Why I hate normal. So yeah, I have a degree in psych because I’m interested in people. What makes them tick. But school was too ordinary, too boring. Too structured and delineated and confining. So I figured why learn from a textbook when I can study the Bellissimo clientele to my heart’s delight? And the money’s good.”

Something inside my chest rearranges. I can’t quite name the clawing need rising up. A desire to fix her pain? Protect her from more of it? Free her from all the bullshit of life? As if that could be done. No, life’s a shithole for most everybody. A few people rise above because they have that raw potency the rest of the population foregoes. I think that may actually be what Corey’s talking about with her rejection of normal. She’s not going to lie down and take it. She’s fighting back, even if being a croupier seems like she laid down to take it to the rest of the world.

“You ever think about going back?”

“To school?” She raises her eyebrows. “Nah. I often think I *should*. I won’t have any career to fall back on when my boss fires me for calling him an asshole one too many times.” She darts a glance under her lashes at me that makes my dick twitch in my pants. I might have been wrong about her not being submissive under all the bluster. “Or if I break my ankle

and can't stand behind the table for hours on end. Or when I get bored with categorizing gamblers. But I really can't get myself excited about it. Up until I dropped out of grad school I was still trying to prove my worth to my dad, who never saw it. And now that I finally realized my idiocy, I just can't make myself do things that conventional wisdom says I *should* do." She shrugs. "I don't want to be ordinary."

#

Corey

Oh shit. What in the hell made me overshare like this?

Stefano stares at me, his dark, curling lashes thick and beautiful against the backdrop of such a masculine face. I can't read him, but his attention makes me shift in my seat, change the crossing of my legs.

A nurse comes out and calls for Trisha. We all stand up and watch as Trisha rushes over. When she returns, she says, "They said he came out of surgery and is stable. He probably won't wake up tonight, so she said I should go home to rest and come back tomorrow." Her lip trembles.

Stefano reaches in his pocket and produces a business card. "My cell number's on there. Keep me posted, all right?"

She bobs her head, eyes filling with tears. "Yeah, okay. I will. Thanks so much."

He touches her shoulder. "The Bellissimo will take care of all the medical expenses and missed pay. All Joey needs to worry about is recovering."

Trisha surges forward and gives him a tight hug around his waist.

Stefano one-arm hugs her back. As we walk away, he interlaces his fingers with mine. My breath stalls a moment. After all the things he's done to me—we've done together—

it's odd that holding my hand is the gesture that feels most intimate, but it does.

It's tender. Sweet.

Things I don't associate with Stefano Tacone, royalty to the Vegas underworld.

I can't even imagine why he'd do it, and yet it also feels perfect. Exhilarating, even.

On the ride back, he calls into the casino for a report and lets them know the status of Joey.

I arrive back at the Bellissimo a changed woman. It's like I'm seeing things for the first time as I glide in with Stefano's hand on my lower back. Seeing them from his perspective, realizing how much he has to worry about with Nico gone.

And yet he doesn't ditch me straightaway, as I expected. I wasn't even going to complain. No, he asks me which restaurant in the casino is my favorite.

"Caffe Milano," I tell him, indicating the eatery modeled after a Italian sidewalk cafe. It has cute little tables nestled together and sprawling outside the restaurant in a lush patio. "They have the best Caprese salad."

His lips twitch and he leads me there, requesting the table out on the "sidewalk"—which really just means outside the pseudo-enclosure, with a view of the casino hustle and bustle.

"Is this so you can keep an eye on things?" I ask as he holds my chair for me.

"Yes. You keep an eye out, too."

I love that he recruits me like this, the way he did last night on the floor before the ill-fated game. He thinks I might have something to contribute to his efforts. It makes me want to please him, which is probably dangerous territory. I don't need to be working hard to impress a guy. I did that way too long with my dad. But maybe I purposely chose a loser like Dean because I didn't want to have to impress a guy.

"Tell me about the categories you put gamblers in." Stefano shifts his gaze from the passersby to me.

I curse the flush that hits my cheeks. Why did I ever tell him so much?

“Come on, don’t be shy.” He pours more wine in my glass. “I want to hear what you’ve learned. It could be useful for me working security.”

I tilt my head to the side. “Yeah, it probably could. It’s how I knew something was off with you that first night.”

His sensual lips spread into a slow grin. He leans forward, eyes glittering with intensity. “Tell me.”

I’d like to say I’m immune to having my every word hung onto by a sexy, powerful man, but it does something crazy to my insides. My nipples harden, but it’s beyond sexual. It’s more like energy swirling around me, whispering dangerous things in my ear. Things I want to believe.

I take a sip of wine. His attention remains riveted on me. “There’s three kinds of big gamblers,” I tell him. “The cerebral, the wild and crazy and the energetic, for lack of a better term.” I go on to explain each one and he hangs onto my every word.

“And so if someone’s spending big and he or she isn’t one of these three, you know something’s off.”

I nod. “Right. And I should’ve known last night because Donahue didn’t fit, either. I had a lot of signs things were off with him, but I didn’t put it together fast enough.”

Stefano covers my hand with his. “I’m sorry you had to see that. I really am.”

I don’t want to contemplate what it means that he didn’t say he was sorry it happened, or sorry a guy’s dead or any of that. I mean, I would’ve done the same thing in his shoes. The guy was going to kill him. But he’s taken it all pretty coolly.

His comms unit buzzes and he listens and speaks into it. Then he looks at our empty plates. “I need to get out on the floor. You want to come with me? Be my shadow for the night?”

It's a Stockholm Syndrome sign that I get excited by his offer, as if he's taking me out on the town for a fancy date, rather than letting me out of his room. Still, I nod eagerly, because it's what I want.

"Let me see you in one of those dresses they brought up to my room, then." He stands up and leads me to the elevator.

I ignore the fact that there's a little thrill at the idea of dressing for him, providing the visual stimulation he was looking for when he asked me to work the private games.

"So are you going to let me back on the floor, or am I still your private game dealer?" I ask in the elevator. What I'm really asking is—will my imprisonment ever end? Will I still have a job? When can we get back on familiar ground so I can recover from this insane ride?

He considers me. "I'm not sure, *amore*. What's your preference?"

"Back on the floor," I say without hesitation.

He nods. "Where you can observe the masses?"

"Exactly."

He shrugs his shoulders. "I think you're meant for more, *bella*. Your skill set goes way beyond flipping cards and counting chips, although you're damn good at it."

And just like that he upsets my cart—the stroke of my ego making me almost miss the fact that he's refusing my choice again.

His cell phone rings and something akin to relief flickers over his face. "Nico," he answers, "What the fuck?"

I hear Nico say something about his phone being dead.

"How'd it go?" Stefano asks in a low, serious tone.

We're in the suite now, but I don't move, wanting to hear. Stefano slaps my ass and lifts a chin at the rack of clothing. I scowl at him, but move away. For all I know, they're discussing something illegal. Lord knows I don't need to be implicated in any more crimes.

The clothes Stefano had sent up must cost a fortune. They're from one of the casino's luxury shops—a place for high-rollers to spend their winnings. It's all high-fashion couture, brand names and they make me look like a million bucks. Too bad I don't get to keep them.

As I change into one of the red dresses—a close-fitting dress with a strip of fabric around the neck, but a cutout across my chest to show off my cleavage—I hear Stefano curse in Italian. “And Sondra? She okay?”

I stand in the doorway to listen and Stefano doesn't shoo me away.

“Thank fuck,” he says, which I take to mean that Sondra's okay. Does Stefano's relief indicate she almost wasn't? He listens for another minute, then says, “All right, I'll see you tomorrow. Looking forward to meeting my future sister-in-law.” He winks at me, but the line between his brows make his expression appear serious. He ends the call and walks over to me, touching my waist. “It fits. Christ, you're beautiful.” He brushes my hair back from my shoulder and bites my neck.

“Yeah, this one will do as my replacement dress.”

“Keep all of them.” He waves his hand dismissively. I'm not sure if he realizes that rack probably encompasses over 10K in clothing. “Nobody should wear a red dress but you. You're a fucking knock-out in red.”

I snort. “Don't you know redheads aren't supposed to wear red?” I'm already calculating how much I can make selling them on Ebay.

“Oh, I know. But you're no *ordinary* redhead.” He emphasizes the word *ordinary* like he really heard me earlier, really gets what I meant. And I realize I'll never sell a single one.

“What happened with Nico and Sondra?” I demand.

Stefano shakes his head. “Just some shit Nico had to work out.”

“About getting out of his marriage contract?”

Stefano arches a brow. “You know about that?”

I put my hands on my hips. “I told you I’m practically family.”

He grins. “So you are.” He rubs his shadowed jaw. “Nico fixed it. Our brother made him sweat it, though. They scared the hell out of your cousin, but she’s fine. I would apologize, but if I took responsibility for the nasty things my family does, I’d never stop.”

My heart squeezes a little for Stefano. Like me, he can’t help who his father is. He hasn’t escaped the legacy of violence.

His comms unit buzzes again. “Let’s move, *bella*. We’ve got shit to do.”

CHAPTER SIX

Stefano

I walk around the casino with Corey at my side. People who don't recognize her assume she's my girlfriend. I'm sure we make a striking pair. Those who do know her, shoot her a range of stares, varying from jealous to concerned to bald curiosity.

On the way down, she complained about not having any cosmetics, so we stopped at the salon to have her makeup done, and then I had to take her to the in-house jeweler to buy a pair of diamond drop earrings.

I like spoiling her. The fact that Corey doesn't gush or purr when I do makes it all the more pleasurable. She plays hard to get, making me work for her smiles and make up for keeping her as my captive. But it's not just about the chase with her.

I'm fucking fascinated.

But I'd have to be out of my mind to get seriously involved with the daughter of a fed. A *crooked* fed, according to Nico's research. Which means an unpredictable, dangerous asshole. And Junior, my asshole brother who just put a gun to Nico's head for wanting to marry the woman of his choosing, would probably order me to off the guy if I wanted to keep seeing Corey.

And I'm not going to kill her fucking father. Even if they are estranged.

I lean into Corey. We're observing one of the blackjack tables, making the croupier nervous. "Tell me about who you see," I murmur.

"Cerebral spender. Probably trying to count cards. When he loses count, he runs his hand through his hair and shakes the ice in his drink. Which he hasn't drunk a drop from."

"Working alone?"

"Yes. He's up two thousand, but he's getting tired. The stress of it wears him out."

I stroke my hand up and down Corey's side. Being near her body electrifies me, but hearing how her brain works—witnessing her brilliance firsthand—that sets my soul on fire.

"What else?" I prompt.

"Jack is the croupier. He accidentally put a \$20 chip meant for him in the house pot, probably because we're freaking him out watching. Otherwise, he's a decent dealer."

"Anyone else interesting?"

"Nah. Young people who don't know what they're doing. People with money to lose. That's it."

"Next table." I guide her to another perch and order her a drink. The floor manager comes over to check in and when he's gone, she gives me an equally germane report on the three tables in her view.

If she were a beefy man, I would put her on my security team in a heartbeat. As it is, I can't decide the best use of her incredible talents. "I'm thinking I want you on every employment interview at the Bellissimo. You sure you don't want a job in HR?"

She wrinkles her nose at me.

Another idea strikes me. "Do you ever play poker, yourself?"

She changes the crossing of her long legs and memories of those legs spread on my bed gets me hard. It's a perpetual state

around this woman. “Croupiers aren’t allowed to gamble in their own casino.”

I grin. “You telling me the rules now, smarty-pants? I mean elsewhere.”

She shakes her head, but I watch something come to life in her. “I’ve always wanted to. I actually love to watch those championships; the ones that are televised on the sports channel? I swear to God, I could beat those guys. I’m serious; if I had money to burn, I’d totally enter.”

I sit back, satisfied. Corey Simonson just confessed something she wants in life.

I’ll be damned if I don’t make it happen.

Tony calls my cell at the same time Leo buzzes through the comms unit and the floor manager walks over with a whale he wants to introduce me to.

“Excuse me.” Corey slides off the barstool. “I’m going to the restroom.”

I nod distractedly and take care of all the issues at hand before I get that niggling feeling about Corey choosing that moment to excuse herself. I glance at the nearest restroom. She should’ve been back by now.

Fuck.

Well, if she was making a run for it, there’s a good chance she’d go to her locker to get her purse with her keys and phone. I walk briskly in that direction. As I round the corner, I see her leaving the employee locker room, heading for the nearest exit.

Sonofabitch.

#

Corey

I'm almost at the door when two beefy Guido security guards charge toward me from opposite directions. I break into a run. One of them lunges for me, and catches my arm, his iron grip bruising.

"Boss says don't touch her," the other relays with a note of panic in his voice.

The guy releases me like I'm a hot potato but they both jockey to block my exit. It's almost comical, like some birthday party game where you can't use your hands to pass an egg to your partner.

I use their abject fear of Stefano's wrath to my advantage and knee the guy in front of me in the balls. He goes over with a groan, clutching the family jewels. Yes. I'm at Knee-2, Balls-0.

"*Corey.*" Stefano's censuring bark comes from a few feet behind me.

I try to dart around the other guard, but Stefano catches my arm and yanks me back. The room spins as I'm upended over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

"Stefano," I protest as he carries me swiftly toward the bank of elevators. "You're making a scene."

"No, you made the scene, *bella.*" He hits the elevator button. "And you'll suffer the consequences." I'm glad he sounds so cool, calm and collected, because I'm trying to fight back panic over what he's going to do to me. What will the *consequences* be?

He gets in the elevator and flashes his ID to get to his suite level. The doors swish closed. Another couple is in the elevator, snickering over my predicament.

"*Stefano.*"

I really want him to put me down.

"*Corey.*"

The young woman giggles, whispering to her partner. It feels like ages before the elevator stops and they get off.

Someone else tries to get on, but Stefano clips, “Wait for the next one,” and hits the door close button.

Thank God.

When we get to his floor, he carries me off and still he doesn’t put me down. His movements are smooth and assured, like he always manages to open and close doors one-handed with a woman over his shoulder.

He carries me toward the kitchen where he opens a drawer and produces a roll of duct tape.

Oh shit.

Now I go down on my feet, but he maintains control of my body, pinning my hands to the wall and taping them down with a long strip of duct tape. He reinforces it with three more strips, then pulls my hips back and kicks my legs open. His intention is clear; my ass is out and presented. I’m going to get spanked again.

I should *not* be excited.

I’m freaking thrilled.

He leaves and returns with a pair of scissors.

“Again?” I complain. “You could just strip me before you tape my hands down next time. Ever think of that?”

“You are in no position to get smart with me, *amore*.”

I believe him. He’s definitely all business right now. I see none of the hot passion that sometimes motivates him. Nor any trace of bemusement.

At least he doesn’t seem angry, although maybe he’s just not the angry type.

The dress falls away in pieces and he uses the scissors to remove my bra and panties as well.

“You could’ve just taken those off,” I grumble.

“I could have,” he says, almost cheerfully. “But I wanted to cut them. I might not be so quick to replace your things this time, either.”

My pussy clenches at the thought of him keeping me taped to his wall, naked, for days.

I shake my head to erase the thought. I'm fuck-nuts crazy.

Stefano walks to the balcony door and fiddles with the curtain. At first I think he's going to draw them closed, but when he turns, he's detached the plastic rod used to pull them. He whacks it in his palm and I freak out.

I yank on my hands, trying to pull them off the wall, but they won't budge.

"*Tsk tsk*. You're not going anywhere, *bella*. Your ass is mine right now, and I'm not going easy on it."

"Stefano." I curse the waver in my voice. I also curse the wetness between my legs. Why on earth would the idea of being whipped with a curtain rod excite me?

"Legs apart. Ass out. Hold the position like a good girl and I'll consider lightening your sentence."

Oh shit. I am so in over my head.

I do as I'm told, because what's the alternative? I'm in no position to argue, and it could only get worse from here. I widen my stance and hollow my back to present my ass to him.

He taps it with the makeshift cane. "Good girl. I won't make you count. You can focus on breathing and holding your position." He swings the implement through the air.

I hear the displacement of air a moment before it strikes and I scream like I'm in a horror film.

Stefano's at my back, a hand wrapped around my mouth to stifle the sound. "*Shh, bambina*. No screaming. It's bad for business." He steps away.

I'm not so brave this time. I twist my ass away from him, hanging from the bonds with all my weight.

"That's cute, *bambina*, but I asked you to stay in position."

Fuck.

He sure did.

I reluctantly put myself back in the humiliating pose. Stefano swings the cane again and a second line of pure fire blooms directly beneath the first.

I choke on my cry.

“Hold still.” Stefano’s tone is sharp, like he’s run out of patience with me. Regrettably, it has the effect of freezing me in position.

He whips me again, and again, neat even lines down my ass that leave me moaning and trembling. Six in all.

And then he’s on his knees behind me, prying my twitching cheeks apart and licking a line from my pussy to anus.

I can barely stand, my legs are so shaky and weak, but it doesn’t matter, the duct tape holds me up against the wall. Stefano moves in front of me and he goes to town on my pussy. His strong hands hold my thighs as he sucks and nips my labia, flicks his tongue over my clit. A moment ago, he was my stern master, punishing me for my disobedience. Now he’s a servant, worshipping between my legs. He devours me like my taste is his ambrosia, like he’s dying of hunger and only my pussy will satisfy.

The burning, throbbing pain becomes only intensity as my flesh swells and blossoms under his ministrations.

“Stefano,” I moan, my hips dancing above him. I won’t last much longer, and he’s not even using his fingers to penetrate me.

He increases his fervor, the stubble on his chin scraping my inner thighs as he works me over.

Stars dance before my eyes and my head swims like I’m going to pass out.

“Stefano!” I scream again, and then I crest the peak, tumbling over the other side into pleasure, release, pleasure.

My pussy clenches on air, spasming around nothing. It’s both satisfying and not enough. I want his cock in me.

And then I'm too weak to stand, falling against the wall, against his body as he kisses my pussy reverentially.

#

Stefano

I love the sound of Corey calling out my name just before she comes.

This time *I'm* the one who feels like crying afterward.

Not that I know what it is to cry. I had that urge beat out of me before I hit the ripe age of six. But my throat and face are tight with what can only be described as sorrow.

I'm wrung out. Maybe it's guilt from the whipping I gave her. Maybe I can't stand that she tried to leave me.

I rise slowly, barely fitting between the wall and Corey's body. I cup her face. "What am I going to do with you?" I ask sadly.

She nuzzles her face against my hand. Her head's lolling like her neck can't work to hold it up.

I peer up at her hands and reach behind myself to pry the tape off. Then I tug her to a chair and pull her onto my lap. She comes willingly, leaning her head back on my shoulder as I caress her bare breasts, her inner thighs.

"Why did you leave, Corey?" I have to ask it. It's fucking killing me. Is she still afraid of me? Does she really still think I'm going to kill her?

"I don't know," she sighs. "It's just... too intense. I can't stay here locked up with you like this. I'm losing myself."

My heart stops beating. Then restarts at a jauntier pace. She isn't afraid of me. She's afraid of *us*.

Fuck, so am I, baby. So am I.

“I’m losing myself, too,” I admit, kissing her jaw, her slender neck. “But only cowards run.”

Corey chokes on a laugh and I smile, too.

“Come on, *bambina*. We’d better get something on your ass before you bruise. I know how delicate redheads are.”

I scoop her into my arms and carry her to the bedroom, where I arrange her on her belly. She’s docile as a child now, but a good whipping and orgasm will do that to a woman.

I search in my bathroom for a salve my cousin in Sicily made me and return.

Corey hasn’t moved. She lies prone with her face hidden in the bedspread. My heart shoots into my throat. Is she crying?

I stroke her hair back from her face, and my shoulders ease. Her expression is soft, relaxed. Almost blissful.

Thank fuck.

I take an ample amount of salve and rub it over the cane marks, working it into her skin.

“What is that?”

“It’s a salve I brought back from Sicily. Helps with bruising.”

“There’s a salve for bruising?”

“I got it from my cousin. She makes a salve for just about everything. She’s one of those natural healing types—you know, into essential oils and herbs.”

“And she gave it to you because you have a propensity for getting bruises or *giving* bruises?” Her dry question gets under my skin.

I screw the lid back on the salve and drop it onto the bed. “Why do you have to keep poking that wound, baby? You need to remind me I’m no good for you? That you’re better than me?”

“*What?* No.” She rolls over and props herself up on an elbow, a line folding between her brows.

“I know, I know. I’m the bad guy. I’m on the wrong side of the law and your father’s on the right side.”

Corey goes pale. “My dad definitely isn’t the good guy. Not by any means.” Her words come out rough.

I’m instantly sorry. She told me they weren’t on speaking terms. Now I’m the one poking wounds. I sink down beside her. “Yeah, neither is mine,” I admit.

To my surprise, her fingers seek out my hand and she curls them over it and squeezes. I stare down at our interlocked fingers. When’s the last time any woman offered me comfort? When’s the last time I *let* her?

Oh yeah, never.

But this woman’s different. Everything’s so raw between us. It’s the intensity she mentioned—why she had to bail.

But I’m not letting her.

My phone buzzes again and I almost lose patience with it. “What?” I snap.

“We have a situation down here,” Tony says in a low voice.

Fuck. What now?

I lean over and kiss Corey’s shoulder. “Tell me you’ll still be in my bed when I get back?”

I see the understanding flare in her eyes. I’m letting her go. Maybe it’s guilt over punishing her, maybe it’s that I want to reward her honesty. Or it’s just time; I don’t know.

She nods and I pull the covers back to help her in. I kiss her lips this time, softly. “Good. I’ll see you in the morning, then.”

“Yeah. See you.”

I start to leave, then turn back. “You need anything? Room service? A drink? Ibuprofen?”

“No, I’m going to sleep,” she says. “Come back soon.”

And that's when I know I'm fucked. Because the little backflip my heart does at those words is nothing I've ever experienced before.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Corey

I hear Stefano come in around 4:00 a.m. but I fall right back to sleep. I wake later to him palming my breast, teasing the nipple as his cock lurches against my ass. I'm still naked from our escapades the night before. And of course, he never got off. I'm surprised he let me sleep this long.

I turn and push him to his back, then climb over him to straddle his waist. His eyes darken as his cock tents his boxer briefs. I free it, moisten the head with my tongue.

He groans. "I give you thirty seconds to tease. Then I'm going to flip you on your back and pound you into oblivion."

My pussy clenches at the threat. "Oh yeah?" I slide my lips over his cock, taking him deeper as my fist works the base. His hips jack up and he thrusts into my mouth.

"Fuck, *bambina*. See what I mean?" He reaches for my head, and then, as if to keep himself from forcing me down on him, fists his hands in the air. Then he opens them and tears at his own hair instead.

I hum softly around his member, swirl my tongue on the underside as I pull out. A few drops of his salty essence rewards my efforts. I suck harder, hollowing my cheeks as I pull away.

Stefano growls and wraps a fist in my hair. "Fuck, yeah, baby. Take me deeper."

I do. I take him as deep as I can go, slowing down so I don't trigger my gag reflex.

"Bella, bella donna," he croons.

His breathing grows short, he starts using my hair to tug me down over him faster, deeper, thrusting up at the same time. "Enough. Enough." He pulls me off, his lip curling like the strain of holding back is killing him. "Roll over. Spread those legs."

I lay on my belly and spread my legs wide. He swipes his fingers over my wetness and puts them in his mouth. "You taste so good, Corey." He goes to the closet and returns with condoms and a bottle of lube. I didn't think I needed lube, but I have to defer. Stefano is definitely a sex god. He must have some plan.

He snaps on a condom and pulls my hips up until I'm on my knees, then eases into me at the same time he reaches around and rubs my clit.

I push back to take him, shivering on a long inhale through my teeth.

Stefano stops, buried in me and plays with my nipples. "You good?"

"I'm good," I moan, arching my back. "Go on."

He chuckles and tweaks my nipple a bit harder before he grips my hips and uses me the way I was hoping he would. Deeper and deeper he thrusts, my hips on the perfect angle to take his full length.

I'm on a rocket ship headed for the moon when he squirts lube onto my anus and starts rubbing it in.

I gasp, trying to tuck my tail and pull away, but he won't have it. With a few quick twists, he's sunk his thumb into my ass. His other fingers splay across my back, and I'm owned completely. The twin sensations, double penetrations spin me out into hedonistic pleasure—total sensation, vulgar and satisfying.

I start making guttural vocalizations, panting into the bed, my eyes rolling back in my head.

He starts making tiny thrusts with his thumb that match the thrusts of his cock, locking me into surrender.

I can't even speak to moan his name. I'm lost. Shattering, coming together. He rides me, handles me. His movements are sure and commanding.

"Uhn, uhn, uhn," I moan with each brutal thrust.

"Take it, *bella*. Take it like a good girl."

"Yes," I gasp.

He pounds even harder.

I whine.

"Come now," he roars and thrusts three more times before he thrusts deep and stays, pistoning his thumb in and out as my pussy grabs and releases his cock in quick bursts.

I sob with the release, utterly spent. The room spins, I can't see a thing. Oh yeah, that's because my eyes are closed and my face is in the sheets.

After a moment, awareness returns. Stefano returns from the bathroom with a washcloth, which he uses to clean me up.

Then he applies more salve on my ass and settles down beside me, kissing my shoulder.

#

Stefano

"Nico and your cousin come back today."

I don't know why I say it. I mean, I know she wants that information, which I got from Nico when he called late last night, but it's a piss-poor moment to share it. But I feel the

weight of what I've done to Corey settle too heavily on my shoulders.

I have to let her go today. Release her to her life. Keeping her prisoner forever wasn't a solid plan.

"Yeah?" Corey pushes up on her forearm, her pretty breasts shifting to hang sideways. I cup the lower one and run my thumb over the nipple. Such sweet, perfect-sized breasts.

"I'm looking forward to meeting the woman who stole my brother's heart." There's no lightness behind the words, even though it's true. I'm trying to control the caveman part of me that's stomping in a circle around my mind, demanding I tie her back up and never set her free.

I go for honesty.

"I want to keep you chained naked in my bedroom for the rest of my life, *bella*."

"But?" She already knows what's coming.

"But I'd prefer it be voluntary."

Her lips twitch once and then stretch into a full smile. "It's a bit late to ask for consent, my friend."

"I know. But I want you to stay."

She drops her gaze and I already know the answer she'll give. "I gotta get back to my place." She says it like she's sorry, but the words fall flat. She doesn't even offer up a reason, and I'm not going to push.

This is what she wants.

I purse my lips and nod. "I expect you back here at 8:00 p.m. for your shift."

Wariness flickers over her expression. "Private game?"

"No. Casino floor. Where you want to be."

I'm trying to give her something, but she only appears sad about it.

"I'll be here," she says, and pushes herself up to sit.

I sigh. “You can shower first. I’ll order room service. What do you want for breakfast?”

“Bacon and fruit. Too bad they don’t do Starbucks drinks for room service.”

“I can hook you up. What’s your drink?”

“Grande latte, hot?”

“You bet.” I get up and dial the front desk to send a bellhop over to the in-house Starbucks for me, then call room service. At least I can do this one small thing for her.

And she’s coming back.

In less than twelve hours she’ll be back in the Bellissimo. Calling me boss.

Things could be worse.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Corey

The moment I get home, I can't figure out what my hurry was. I hate my place. This is the stupid apartment I shared with Dean, after all. The lecherous asshole loser I picked. I can't even remember what I saw in him. I guess he let me live small. Slow myself down. His lack of ambition made my life choices shiny in comparison.

It's no surprise I returned to my place totally changed. It's like when you go on vacation and when you come back, you see things through fresh eyes, at least for your first day back. I've been living in the Bellissimo with Stefano Tacone for the past forty-eight hours. The second-hand furniture in my apartment now appears dingy and sad. The stained carpet moans to be replaced and nothing in the place even represents me.

Have I even been living a life here?

What was it?

I don't know who the fuck I am.

No, that's not true. I'm just exhausted. I was a *prisoner* for the past forty-eight hours. Except I know that's not really true.

I may have stripes on my ass that says it is, but it's not.

Or maybe it is, but I was a *most honored* prisoner. I mean truthfully? Stefano Tacone—for all his power and fearsome

capabilities, for all the mighty control he flexed—treated me better than Dean ever did. And Dean never raised a hand to me.

I had the best orgasms of my life. I ate good food and drank expensive wine. I came home with thousands of dollars worth of clothing, carried to my car by a most attentive bellhop. I'm still wearing twelve hundred dollar diamond earrings.

But I'd be a fool if I attached any meaning to any of it.

Stefano is a player. Fucking women and showering them with parting gifts is probably par for the course for him.

The doorbell of my townhouse rings and I frown. I'm not expecting anyone. I open the door a crack and look out. A large man in a suit immediately pushes it open and my stomach bunches up to the size of a nut.

It tightens so much it hurts, because the man pushing into my apartment is the *last* man I want to see on a normal day. But I especially don't want to see him today.

It's my goddamn dad.

Shit.

"Hey, Corey." His slow drawl belies the aggressive way he entered. "Is that any way to greet your dear old dad?"

I can't dignify that with an answer. I cross my arms over my chest. "What are you doing here?"

He walks around my place, his critical gaze probably cataloguing everything he sees to use against me in some way. "I've been transferred to Las Vegas."

Fuck.

"I'm working a possible murder case. Turns out my own daughter might know something about it."

My heart's in tachycardia but I curl my lip in a sneer. "How do you figure?"

"I heard you're the dealer for the private games now."

Now my heart stops. How in the fuck does he know this? How? Has he been casing out the Bellissimo this whole time? The Tacones?

Jesus, he's going to get me killed! Me and Sondra both.

“A man named Eric Donahue disappeared after attending a private game Saturday night. Were you dealing that game?”

I can't believe Stefano didn't go over alibis with me. Tell me what to say if I'm ever questioned. I'm a freaking accessory to murder, and there's no way my dad won't see through a lie. He's a seasoned federal agent. And he's my father.

I cross my arms over my chest. “I'm not discussing anything with you. You're not welcome in my home, and I need you to leave. Now.”

My father doesn't move from where his ass is perched against the arm of the couch. He studies me with gray eyes.

Yeah, I just confirmed everything for him. Whatever he wanted to know, he knows it now.

I'm so fucked.

“I'm sure you don't want to be uncooperative with a federal investigation.”

“I'm sure I do if it's led by you.”

“Okay, what is your problem, really? I didn't call enough after I moved to Detroit? Didn't pay for your college education?”

“I don't have a problem. I just don't want you in my life. It's quite simple, really.”

He stands and walks toward me, spreading his arms like he wants to hug me. “Corey, what is this all about? I never understood why you stopped talking to me.”

“I grew up, Dad. That's why. I grew up and realized you were a shitty dad, and I didn't want to have a relationship with you. It's not that hard to understand. Aren't you supposed to be a member of Mensa or something?”

“So are you,” he murmurs. “Maybe we’re just too similar.”

“Or maybe it’s because you’re a bully and you cheated on Mom and all you ever did was shove your judgments down my throat.” I’m getting myself worked up and—*fuck!*—I hate when I lose my temper. Especially because it *does* make me just like him.

“*Out,*” I snap, pointing to the door.

He shakes his head like he pities me. “Getting involved with the Tacones is a big mistake.”

My nostrils flare. Of course, every word of this upcoming speech is predictable, but I still can’t stand hearing it.

“I heard about Sondra’s engagement. Big. Mistake.”

“Yeah, well no one asked your opinion.”

“Her father did,” he corrects me.

Ugh. That sucks. Sondra doesn’t need the stress of having her parents oppose her marriage after talking to my dad.

“Nico Tacone will never hurt Sondra.” That was more than I wanted to blurt. I don’t need to convince him of what I needed convincing of myself. He doesn’t deserve a say in this. I sure as hell hope he’s not invited to the wedding.

I make a mental note to talk to Sondra about that. I’m sure she’ll agree, seeing as how her future husband could be harrassed by my dad.

“Yeah, I’m sure,” my dad drawls dryly.

“I told you to get out. I’m not discussing this or any other part of my life with you further. Don’t come back.”

He pulls an amused face, like I’m a silly toddler but saunters for the door.

Thank God.

I hold my breath until he shuts the door behind himself. Even then, I don’t know how long it takes me before I exhale. But as soon as I do, my stomach scrunches up under my ribs again.

What if Stefano's having me watched to make sure I don't talk about what happened? What if I just proved his suspicions about me are true?

I'm so fucked.

#

Stefano

"Fanculo. You look like shit."

Nico's face is covered in bruises, his lip's split and one eye is swollen shut. He texted me to say he's back and to meet him in his office. I can see why he's hiding up here instead of being out on the floor.

I make a mental note to bring him that salve from Lucia.

"Junior is such a *testa di cazzo*," I mutter as we give each other a back-slapping hug.

Nico shrugs like getting beat to a pulp by your own brother is no big deal. Which to us, it really isn't, considering how we were raised. "It's done. Settled. We're getting married in a month back in Chicago and the whole fucking lot can show up to kiss my ass."

"He just had to show you he's still boss, eh? Even though you're the Tacone who brings in the real dough? Who makes their shit legit?"

"The order came from Pops. Junior picked us up as soon as I hit Chicago. Whatever. I had to pay for defying orders. Now it's done."

I sprawl in one of the comfortable leather armchairs and prop my ankle over one knee.

"So tell me," Nico says.

“Tony didn’t already fill you in?” I ask but didn’t wait for his response before continuing. “His name was Eric Donahue. Junior says Pops strong-armed his brother out of his restaurant five or six years ago. The guy committed suicide not long after. Seems like this was a revenge attempt. Not sure why he wanted you, but I’m guessing it’s because your name’s in the press. Like you were easier to look up and find in a public place. So he shows up and finds out how to get a private audience with you. And when he finds out you’re not here, but your brother is, I’m just as good a target.”

Nico rubs his head. “*Cazzo*. You couldn’t make this wash out clean?”

“There was a connection to Pops. Nothing’s ever clean there, and when that shit shows up here in your casino? Fuck, yeah, I’m going to make it disappear. What would you have done different?”

Nico taps his desk, then shakes his head. “Nothing. You’re right. I just don’t want any kind of investigation here.”

“I know.”

“And the rest of it? What the hell are you doing with Corey?”

“I was keeping an eye on her. Until I could be sure. Her dad’s a fed, you know.”

“Yeah, I fucking know.” He gives me a searching look. “You fuck her?”

“Yeah.” I raise the end of the syllable like it’s a question. Like, why the fuck does it matter what I did with her?

He continues studying me. We’re tight, me and Nico. If anyone knows me, it’s him. I don’t know what the fuck he’s seeing now, because I don’t even know what I think about the Corey situation. “What do I need to know?”

“Nothing.”

He won’t drop it. Apparently, he still sees something. “You trust her now?”

I nod. “Yeah. But I got into her phone records and put a guy on her, just to be sure. The situation with her dad could be a pain in the ass.”

Nico tips his head to the side. “You have a thing for her?”

Not sure how he got that from me putting a guy on her. “Yeah,” I admit.

“You getting anywhere with that?” There’s doubt in Nico’s voice and I laugh, because he must know Corey’s a tough nut to crack. I don’t ever fail with women. Maybe that’s part of the attraction.

“I’m working it, still.” I spread my hands. “What about you? Where is Sondra? I want to meet my new sister-in-law.”

Nico smirks and it’s nice to see a smile on his face. My brother’s been wound tight for as long as I can remember. He definitely seems different now, underneath the bruises.

“Come on, she’s in her office.” He leads me out.

“Ah, she works for you.” Why hadn’t anyone told me that?

“Yes.”

“Yes? That’s it? What does she do?” When he doesn’t go on, I make an impatient *tell me more* motion.

“Sondra is curating the art wing in the Bellissimo. We can display all those masterpieces we’ve acquired from the whales over the years.”

Huh. Not a bad idea. When big gamblers get desperate, they start putting up all kinds of treasures: keys to their cars, vacation properties, and often the priceless art hanging on their walls. We take anything here and we always collect. Which means we have dozens of paintings by famous artists in our vault.

We get off the elevator and Nico leads me to a wing that had been previously used as additional conference area and I see it’s been transformed into a gallery.

“Very nice,” I murmur, looking around at the beginnings of intricate security systems designed to protect the masterpieces

that have not yet been placed. The placards are there, though. Titles, dates, artists, along with docent-like information about each painting.

“Sondra, meet my brother, Stefano.”

I don’t know what to expect. What kind of female would be the first to capture my driven brother’s heart. I guess I painted her in my mind as Corey’s twin—a tall, feisty redhead who doesn’t take shit from anyone but secretly loves a strong man.

When a cute blonde emerges from the director’s office, I realize I was way off. Oh sure, I see the resemblance. They both have the vivid blue eyes. But that’s where the similarity ends.

Corey’s the type who could pull off a Catwoman in black patent leather. Or wield a crop across some trembling businessman’s ass while he licks her thigh-high leather boots.

Sondra’s the girl next door. Petite, soft, blonde. She has dimples, for Gods’ sake! She’s youthful and sweet—probably submissive down to her gentle core.

Nico circles her waist with his arm and kisses her temple. It unnerves me to see my prickly brother so affectionate with someone but in a good way.

I reach for her hand and bring it to my lips.

“*Don’t.*”

I stop with her hand midway to my mouth. There’s enough danger in my brother’s voice for me to know he’s serious.

So. He’s the jealous kind. Who knew?

I drop it and give Sondra a bow instead. “*Piacere di conoscerti.*”

Her glance at Nico confirms my suspicion—definitely submissive. Their relationship is so fucking sweet it warms my heart.

“He said *nice to meet you*. He’s a goddamn show-off.”

“What?” I shrug. “I just came from the old country.”

Nico rolls his eyes.

“Well, I won’t intrude anymore. I just wanted to meet the woman who stole my brother’s heart.”

Sondra blushes, her gaze darting to Nico.

Unbelievable. The girl doesn’t know how lost my brother is to her. Well, maybe he wants it that way: like it’s a bit of a power or control thing. Nico is definitely as alpha as they come. Or maybe he’s just been too busy and now that I’m here, he can show her.

“I’ll see you both around. Or maybe I won’t. I think I’m supposed to be here so you can spend more time together.” I waggle my brows and Nico shakes his head.

“Get out.”

“Leaving,” I call over my shoulder as I walk to the elevator, a grin tugging at my lips.

CHAPTER NINE

Corey

I end up going into work an hour early. Call me crazy, it's like the Bellissimo is my addiction. Even after a weekend bender, I can't stay away.

It has nothing to do with not being able to stay away from Stefano Tacone. Nothing at all.

My stomach's still in a tornado over my dad's visit. What if Stefano finds out? Should I confess it outright, the way I did about his job?

But no, then it really will seem like I'm a rat. I mean, I swore to him I have no contact with my dad and then suddenly he's visiting me the minute I get home? It won't look good for me. Like swimming with the fishes bad.

I walk in through the parking garage entrance and stow my purse in my locker.

"You're early," the floor manager, Mac, says.

"Yeah, I can start now, if you want. Otherwise, I'm going to hit the Starbucks before my shift."

"You'll do neither. Mr. Tacone said he wanted to see you in his office the minute you got in."

My heart starts thudding hard. "Which Mr. Tacone?"

“Stefano. The new one.” Mac narrows his eyes at me. “Didn’t he pull you from the floor Saturday to deal a private game or something?”

My hands are clammy. “Uh, yeah.” I look past Mac, wanting to make my escape.

“Well what was it like?” he demands.

Really? This is what we’re doing now? Shooting the shit about private games? We aren’t even friends.

“It was fine. Kinda stuffy. I prefer the floor, if I had a choice.”

“Not sure you do. Whatever Mr. Tacone wants, right?” Now I think he’s leering at me, like he’s suggesting I slept with Stefano to get into the private games. If he only knew all the kinked-out crazy shit I did with Stefano, he’d have his chin on the floor right now.

“Yeah, well, I’d better get to his office, then,” I say, sidestepping around the guy and heading for the security offices.

My heart speeds up even faster as I walk, but I hold my head high. Whatever’s waiting for me there, I’ll face it. Maybe I can even talk my way out of it.

Or maybe he’ll take me as prisoner again. I wouldn’t even put up a fuss.

But no. I saw the cool precision with which Stefano Tacone drew a gun and fired at a guy, hitting him square between the eyes. He’s not going to fuck around if he thinks I’m a real problem.

I tap on his office door and open it a crack.

Stefano turns from where he’s leaning on his desk, talking down to one of the managers. There’s no wink. No smile. Just a hard look and a sharp beckon with his hand. “That’s it, Joe. Get back out there.”

Joe gets up and leaves. I enter.

Stefano locks the door. When he turns and stalks purposefully toward me, I have to work hard not to flinch.

Even when he snatches me up by the waist, I still can't tell the difference between passion and violence.

But then it's clear.

His lips are at my neck, breath hot against my skin. He deposits me at the edge of his desk and pushes me over it. "You're so fucking lucky you came to work early." His hands roam up and down my hips, sliding the fabric of my black mini-skirt up to my waist.

Shivers spread over my skin. "Oh yeah, why's that?"

He gives my ass a slap, then rubs away the sting as his other hand cups my mons. He slaps and soothes again, this time on my other cheek. I imagine the twin handprints he left and my pussy clenches. "Because if I had to watch you in this skirt all night without emptying my balls, the fucking you'd get at the end of the night would leave you incoherent." He rubs his fingers over the damp gusset of my panties.

I squirm into his hand. The sex we had this morning feels like so long ago. Or it could be all the tension of seeing my dad and then thinking I was in deep shit with the Tacones is morphing into sexual energy. It doesn't matter what it is, it's caught fire and is pooling in my core, peaking up my nipples.

He tucks his fingers under the gusset of my panties and strokes over my slick.

"What is this, Tacone?" I manage to pant. If I were smart, I wouldn't let this happen. I think I half-expected we'd both pretend nothing happened.

He's my boss. I like my job. This is a disaster waiting to happen.

He pinches my clit. "This is me bending you over my desk for a hard fuck." He sinks a finger into my wetness. "Any objection?" A second finger.

I buck against his skilled touch. Yeah, refusing this isn't an option. Not because I'm feeling coerced. Because I need

everything he's about to give to me. "No," I choke.

"Good." He works me over with his fingers, plunging them in me, rubbing my clit, slapping my ass. He keeps it up until I'm up on my tiptoes, thighs trembling with desire.

Then he drags my panties down to my thighs and unbuckles his belt.

For one brief moment, the fantasy of him whipping me with it flashes through my mind. I never thought I'd be into anything like that, but Stefano Tacone does it just right. My ass is still sore from the caning he gave me last night, and I still want him to spank me more.

But he's not interested in punishing me tonight. He rolls a condom on and presses the head of his cock between my petals, parting me.

My teeth sink into my lower lip to stifle a moan.

He eases in slowly, filling me, inch by inch.

I hollow my lower back, encouraging him to sink in deeper.

He tortures me by reversing direction, nearly coming all the way out before he pushes in, a little farther this time.

All I want is for him to spank me and use me roughly. Like a cheap Vegas whore who isn't worth anything more than her perfect Vegas body.

And I never let myself get used.

Ever.

But Stefano was right. Being tied up set me free. And now he doesn't even need duct tape or zip-ties for me to soar. My body responds to his commanding touch. I let him bend me over and tap my ass because it feels dirty and wrong and perfectly right at the same time.

He slams in harder and my hip bones grind against the hard wood of the desk. I brace my hands on the edge of the desk, try to hold my hips away. Stefano must see my dilemma

because he slides his arm around the front of my hips and uses it to cushion my pelvis.

The position puts him closer, makes this thing less demeaning. More intimate.

I can't decide if I like the change, but then he's pushing up into me with short, hard thrusts. My breasts bounce with each tormenting stroke, breath strangles.

"Ask me for permission to come."

"You ask me," I counter, just to be contrary. Just because I've already given way too much of myself up in this exchange.

He pinches one of my nipples and twists, making me gasp. One finger of his other hand settles over my clit and he rubs roughly. "If you come without asking, you're going to be dealing tonight with a hot, throbbing ass."

And that almost makes me come. "May I?" I blurt out because I seriously don't think I can hold it back.

"Come, *bella*. Come all over the cock that owns you."

And that was why I didn't want to beg. I really shouldn't let this man talk to me this way. But I'm already coming, my pussy squeezing and releasing his cock, milking it.

"You're an asshole, Stefano Tacone. How do you say *asshole* in Italian?"

"Still your boss, *bella*." He grips my hips and slams into me, slapping my ass with his loins, making his belt rattle in his dropped pants. He fucks me like a champion until he, too, finds his peak and crests it. Then he slams deep and stays there.

"*Stronzo*."

"What?"

"*Stronzo* is asshole in Italian. But I'm not giving you permission to call me that." He pulls out and tosses his condom into the wastepaper basket. I shudder, thinking every employee who comes in here tonight is going to see it.

He tucks his dick away and buckles his pants, then replaces my panties and skirt. I turn around and he picks me up by the waist and sits me on the desk. “You got a problem we need to talk about?”

I flush. No, other than that I’m shaky and vulnerable from the demeaning sex and I want to be held. But that’s not going to happen because Stefano isn’t my boyfriend, he’s my boss. And we weren’t making love, we were fucking. Over his desk. Right before my shift. So I need to pull my shit together and waltz out there in my stilettos to deal some cards.

He brushes my hair back from my face and cups one cheek, studying me.

My face heats some more.

“I am an asshole. For sure. But I mean no disrespect. I really don’t.”

I believe him. Maybe I was feeling disrespected for a minute there, but it was my own shit. My own fantasy of being used by him became a fear as well.

Still, I need to get the hell out of this office.

“I missed you today, that’s all.” He strokes my cheek with his thumb.

Goosebumps raise on my skin. He had to go and say *that*?

Someone knocks at the door and I try to hop off the desk, but Stefano won’t let me. “Not now,” he calls out sharply.

He pulls a keycard out of his pants pocket and tucks it in the inner pocket of my cropped dealer’s jacket. “I would love to find you in my bed when I go to my suite tonight.” He catches my surprised glance and holds it. His dark brown eyes are warm pools I want to dip into.

“You’re giving me the key to your suite?” It strikes me as pretty trusting, although there’s probably nothing to steal except for his thousand dollar suits.

“I promise handsome rewards.”

“Handsome, huh? Does that mean you?” He flashes his movie-star worthy grin. “Only if you want it to.”

So I do have a choice this time. No coercion, just an offer.

And it’s one I just might have to accept.

#

Stefano

It might be time to admit I’m obsessed.

Corey Simonson got under my skin in a big, bad way. I watch her all night—the deft movements of her hands with the cards and chips, her confident handling of the bettors. She charms them all: men, women, old, young. They pick her table because she’s beautiful and they stay because she’s magnetic.

And I want that magnet turned my way.

Forever.

I gave it about a forty percent chance Corey would be in my suite when I went to bed at 3:00 a.m. Usually when I want something I go after it, all guns blazing. But now is not the time to pressure Corey Simonson. Now is the time to give her some space, let her choose on her own. I know she’s attracted to me. I know she likes the sex. But she doesn’t like being pushed around. And I’ve already treated her to plenty of that.

Still, it nearly killed me not to seal the deal when her shift was over. I didn’t even follow her, or send someone else to follow her. I just let it ride.

The minute I come into my suite, I know she’s there. I don’t know how—her scent? Or just her energy? It doesn’t matter. I know. My nostrils flare with satisfaction. I kick off my shoes and tread softly into the bedroom. She’s curled up on her side, her hair falling back from her face and pooling on the pillow behind her.

I tug the sheet down, gently.

She's naked. *Grazie Dio*. I love this woman. She was fucking made for me.

I shuck my clothes and climb in beside her. My dick is hard but I'm not going to wake her. It's enough to know she's here. She *chose* to be here this time.

That's all that matters.

I fit my body around the back of hers and drape an arm over her waist, resisting the urge to cup her breast. If I go there, all bets are off. I'm going to be pinning her to her belly and thrusting until the sun rises.

She mumbles something that ends with my name.

I fucking love hearing her say it in her sleep.

“What's that, *bella*?”

“I'm sleeping with the boss,” she mutters on a laugh. “Big mistake, isn't it?”

My chest tightens. “Is it, doll?” I nibble her ear. “I thought you liked veering off the main road.”

Her eyelids flutter and lips tug into a smile. “Mmm.” She falls back asleep, but I'm glorying in the smile.

Because I know I said the right thing. I might be the wrong guy—a Taccone. Trouble. But she didn't want ordinary. She prefers exciting.

I can be all that, and more for her. All that and more.

CHAPTER TEN

Stefano

I stand out on the floor, scanning it for Corey. She's not late, but I'm impatient. I texted her and told her she wouldn't be out on the floor tonight and to wear a dress. She didn't respond. I probably should've given her a little more. She's thinking I'm going to make her deal another private game, I'm sure. But my big plans for her tonight don't involve her dealing or staying at the Bellissimo.

And then I see her. *Madonna*, every time the woman enters a room the heads turn and whatever's playing on the sound system becomes her own personal soundtrack. Right now it's some old Pat Benatar song and someone needs to grab a fan to run ahead and blow Corey's hair back. Strike that, her hair's moving on its own, bouncing and brushing her inviting tits.

It's been two weeks of mad sex. I let Corey set the pace, still making it clear I want a piece of her every chance I get. I find her in my bed at least three nights out of the week and I always make sure to reward her for it.

Multiple, blinding orgasms are just the beginning. I treat her to room service and book her appointments at the spa or salon. She's had mani/pedis, facials, massages, reflexology. I bought her a gold thumb ring and diamond studs for the second piercing in her ears.

Tonight she's in a sapphire blue dress, clingy around the hips with a deep V neckline.

I make a beeline for her and catch her hand. She darts a glance around.

"I don't give a fuck who sees us," I snarl. I'm on edge because it's been thirty-six hours since I've been inside her. Plus, I'm nerved up about my plans for the night. They may flop. And it's not like me to ever worry about a date with a girl, but hey, this woman's different.

"You may not, but I *work* here," she complains.

"Like they don't already know." I lead her to the jewelry shop in the casino because her neck looks bare.

"What are we doing?" She fingers the diamond earrings I bought her.

I saunter over to the case as the manager hustles over with a simpering smile. "That one." I point to a blue opal necklace set in white gold. It's a series of three descending pieces, the largest on top.

The manager takes it out and gives it to me. I put it around Corey's neck and hand her the mirror. "What do you think?"

She touches it dubiously. It's hard to know if she doesn't like it, or doesn't want to accept the gift. There's always a slightly suspicious air from her for anything I do, like I'm tricking her into something.

Maybe I am.

Her eyes slide to the glass cases. Okay. Not the right necklace. I take it off her, scanning the merchandise. Corey doesn't seem interested in anything. Maybe jewelry's not her thing. It's not going to stop me from trying to spoil her, though. I catch sight of an unusual piece in the corner. It's a collar. Not really, but thinking of it that way makes me sprout a chub. It's actually a beautiful piece with moonstones strung in a delicate daisy chain. But it's short. Slave collar short. And the tiny white gold chain hangs down in back like a leash. I point to it and the manager scrambles to get it out.

“This is the one,” I say as I put it around Corey’s neck. She doesn’t even get a say. I want her to wear my collar tonight, and she’s going to wear it.

She fingers one of the moonstones. “It’s beautiful.”

I kiss the place where shoulder meets neck. “You’re beautiful. Come on, we have plans.”

“Do you want me to box that up for you, Mr. Tacone?” the manager asks. Sue, according to her name tag.

I shake my head. “No, thanks, she’ll wear it out.” I guide Corey out of the shop and direct her toward the elevators.

“Is it another game?” Corey’s voice is tight, and it hits me like a two by four that she’s wound up. She has PTSD from the last game.

I stop and spin her to face me. “Baby, what happened last time? That’s never going to happen again. That was a one in a thousand chance—a problem I didn’t see coming. I’m sorry you had to see it. I’m sorry I put you in danger.”

She sucks on her cheek. She might believe me intellectually, but she’s still keyed up.

“There’s no private game tonight. Not here, anyway. And you’re not dealing.”

Surprise flickers over her face. “What are we doing, then?”

I wink and incline my head toward the elevators. “It’s a surprise. Come on, *amore*. I’m not going to last long with you in that dress wearing my collar.”

She allows me to lead her to the elevator and doesn’t say another word until we reach the parking garage. Then she touches the necklace. “I knew that’s why you picked this one.”

I tug the chain in back. “Of course you did.”

#

Corey

Stefano leads me to a black Mercedes and he drives to the Venetian. I shoot him a quizzical look as we get out of the car at the valet station, but he just smiles and escorts me in.

I'm still confused as hell when he takes me to the poker room, takes out a grand in chips and sits down at a no hold em table.

"What are we doing?" I lean over and whisper.

"I'm testing your poker skills," he murmurs back, nodding to the dealer.

"Oh." I sit up taller. I'm suddenly intrigued, challenged and revved up. This isn't some scary mafia deal he's pulling me into. He wants to see me play.

I'm not sure why that's a turn-on, but it is. His interest in me is always a panty-soaker, but knowing it goes beyond my good looks and extends to my brains, my skill, sparks more than just my libido. It lights up my tattered soul.

Stefano orders himself a whiskey, and I get tonic water with lime. I need to stay sharp. Stefano's a decent player, but he seems more interested in observing me. After a couple hands, he gives up his seat and stands over my shoulder.

It takes me a little while to settle into it. I lose fifty bucks (of Stefano's money, so who cares?) on the first three games. Then I stop trying so hard and just go with my first instinct on everything.

Turns out I'm the gut gambler. Who knew? I thought I would've been the cerebral guy.

Five games later, I'm up three hundred.

"Come on," Stefano touches my elbow. "Let's get you into a bigger game." He leads me to a hundred dollar minimum table where I promptly win the next two hands.

Now I feel the energy around me, the way I usually see it with the gut gamblers. It comes in waves: from the people around me, from the cards, from my opponents, from the dealer. I swear I even sense it coming up from the floor, from

the cards, and especially, from Stefano. His waves are constant. The others, they have dips and valleys. That's how I know when to bet. When to hold. The energy goes flat for me, I fold. It gets juicy, I bet high. And it works. Every. Fucking. Time.

The dealer pushes stacks of chips my way. I'm up three thousand dollars. I get the nudge to cash it in. I glance at Stefano. "Should we go?"

He nods and I push the chips to the dealer to change them for higher denomination. She pushes six \$500 chips my way.

"This is dangerous, Tacone," I say as we walk toward the money-changing station. I slip the chips in his suit pocket. He bankrolled me, after all, and I'm on the clock for him. I figure he keeps my earnings. Besides, he just dropped almost a grand on my necklace—which I absolutely love.

"How so, *bella*?"

"I like it way too damn much."

"Kind of like me?"

I can't stop the smile tugging at my lips. "*Just* like you—a bad bet."

"Mmm." He gets in the line to cash out, clinking the chips together in his pocket.

Once again, I have the sneaking suspicion I offended him. Stefano may be the bad boy, but he doesn't embrace it.

He cashes out and tucks the wad of rolled up hundreds in my purse.

"Thank you." I steal a glance at him from under my lashes as he leads me out. I haven't said thank you much to him. I've been a bitch, really. We got off on the wrong foot and now pushing against him has become a habit.

"Don't thank me. You won it."

I touch his arm as we stand at the valet curb waiting for the car. "I mean thank you for everything. For bringing me here. Showing me what's possible."

“Don’t go quitting on me to join the world-wide poker circuit.” He winks.

I smile back. “Not quitting. But I totally want to join the circuit.”

Stefano opens the passenger door of the Mercedes as it pulls up to the curb. “I can make that happen.”

My heart flip-flops in my chest. When he comes around to the driver side and gets in, I have to ask, “Stefano?”

He slides his warm brown gaze over to me as he pulls out. “Yeah, baby?”

“What are we doing?”

At first I think he’s not going to understand the question, but then I see a muscle tick in his jaw. He guns the car, zooming into the clogged traffic on the strip, the neon lights casting pink and blue hues across the tinted windows of the luxury vehicle.

“I don’t know.” His voice is tight—so different from his usual smoky notes.

Hearing that admission—because it sounds so much like truth—actually relaxes me. Stefano isn’t playing some game. He doesn’t have an ulterior motive.

He’s as lost to these forces as I am.

To the lust. The attraction. The magnetic pull to stick together, see how this thing turns out.

His hands grip the steering wheel too tight. It’s out of character for the suave, smooth-talking man I first met. He doesn’t speak the rest of the ride back, but when he pulls into the Bellissimo’s private parking area and turns off the car, he turns to look at me.

“I want you, Corey, all the fucking time. I need to be in you on a daily basis, but it’s not just that. I could sit and just *watch* you for hours. Hell, I just did! I want to know everything that goes on inside that beautiful head. So what is that?”

My breath comes in shallow pants, I can't seem to close my lips. No one—*no one's* ever said anything like that to me before. It's not sugary, not romantic. It's raw and plain and honest. My eyes sting for a moment until I recover. Stefano gets out of the car and slams the door. I can't seem to move until he comes around to open mine and offer his hand. I climb out of the car.

“I don't know. You try to define this; it's not going to fit right. I'm not the one who's gonna give you the white picket fence. I'm the guy who wants to pull your hair and slap your ass and spoil you rotten.”

It's almost too much to look into Stefano's face. The intensity there rocks me.

“But you don't want normal, right?” There's something fierce and compelling in Stefano's voice.

I fall into him. I hate my weakness, but being in the circle of his arms makes me strong again. Eases the tremors of uncertainty. He kisses my hair, his hand banding around the back of my neck and holding me.

“I want to take you upstairs and spank your ass red... fuck you until you scream. Then tie you up and do it all over again.”

“Well?” I lift my face to his. We're nose to nose, so close I'm inhaling his whiskey breath. “What are you waiting for?” I whisper hoarsely.

#

Stefano

I'm itchy as hell to get my dick into Corey but my goddamn phone rings and it's Leo.

“What's up?” I take Corey's hand and hustle her toward the elevator. Inside, I push her up against a wall and press my

body against hers, leaning in to nuzzle her neck.

“Feds are here. They want to question you and Corey Simonson.”

Fanculo. “Where are they?”

“Nico’s office.”

“We’ll be up in a minute.” I hang up. Corey’s eyes are the size of saucers. “You heard?”

She nods.

“Everything the way it happened. Donahue lost, he left after Smith, we haven’t seen him since. *Capiche?*”

She arranges her face quickly and nods, already appearing composed.

“You sure?”

“I’ve got it,” she says, staring straight ahead.

I curse under my breath. “I’m sorry you have to do this, Corey.”

A muscle in her cheek jumps. “Yeah, me too.”

The gap between us widens, then, like a goddamn crack in the earth. She’s on one bank, I’m on the other. We’re talking to the feds. People she gets. She relates to. *Is* related to. And I’m the criminal. She could fuck me over with one word here. I know she won’t. Still, we’re on separate teams. I’m asking her to betray her team. She’ll do it for me, because... I don’t know. I’d like to say she loves me, but I’m not sure that’s true. We have a bond, though, I’m sure of that.

We head into Nico’s office. We’re not touching anymore: no hand holding, no standing close. The physical space between us is nothing compared to the psychic space.

Corey’s eyes are alert, attentive. She takes in the agents, shakes their hands. I think I see relief register after she meets them, but that doesn’t make sense. She doesn’t know these guys.

They take her into a room and question her. It doesn't take long: ten minutes, tops.

When she comes out, it's my turn.

I go in and sit down across from the two yahoos.

"Mr. Tacone, we're investigating the disappearance of Eric Donahue. The last place he was seen was this hotel on the night of the 23rd. Do you recall seeing Mr. Donahue?"

I nod. "Yes. I met him as he was leaving. Kind of a douche."

Agent Spinelli raises his brows. "Oh yeah? How so?"

I shrug. "He thought my brother would be here playing with him. He wasn't thrilled it was just me and I only came in at the end. But what can you do?"

"So Mr. Donahue cashed out and left after you stopped in. And then what? Did you have any further contact with him?"

"None."

"Did your brother?"

"Not that I know of. Did you ask him?"

They ignore my question. "Did you know Donahue prior to meeting him on the night of the 23rd?"

I shake my head. "Never met him, nor had I heard of him, other than to see he was on the list for the private game."

"Anything else you can tell us about Donahue? His demeanor, anything he mentioned?"

"No. Average guy. Not a great player. He lost, but I wouldn't say he's the suicide type. But I guess you never know." I shrug.

"All right, that's all, Mr. Tacone. Thank you."

I leave the room. Corey's not in the offices, nor is she in the hallway. I head up to my room, but I already know she won't be there.

This investigation draws a line in the sand.

She's on one side of it, and I'm on the other.

#

Corey

I drive home after the questions from the feds because I'm too shaken up to stay. The hot sex with Stefano would've been tepid, at best.

Why were they questioning us at eleven at night anyway? Oh, maybe because that's when the staff who worked the night the guy went missing are in the casino?

My dad wasn't one of the feds asking questions, which was a huge relief. I seriously couldn't have handled him in the same building as Stefano. I think I could combust. But his absence is curious. Does it mean he's working undercover on this?

Or is it not his case and he just volunteered to question me because he knows I work here? Or more likely, because he heard about Sondra's engagement?

What a dick.

My phone buzzes while I'm unlocking my front door. It's a text from Stefano.

Stefano: *Grrr*

I standing just inside my door and stare at the screen, guilt splashing through me. We'd had an awesome date. I totally left him blue-balled.

I start to text *sorry*, but change my mind and hit the call button instead.

"Corey." He sounds relieved I called.

"I'm sorry I ran out. I just... was unnerved and needed to regroup." I drop my purse and keys on the table and kick off

my heels.

“Yeah, I get it. I’m sorry you had to do that for me.”

For me. Our relationship has shifted enough that all pretense of threats are gone. He knows things are personal now. I am doing it for him. For sure.

“Rain check?” I fill a glass with ice water in my kitchen.

“Of course. Tomorrow night?”

He’s asking me. For once, Stefano Tacone is asking, not telling. It’s nice, not that I mind the telling, either. It suits him to play bossman and he does it so well.

“I should probably get some shifts in so I can pay my rent.”

“You’re still on payroll, baby. And you just made three grand tonight.”

“Oh yeah,” I laugh. I had actually forgotten because the money didn’t seem real to me.

“Next week I’ll get you in a high stakes game. See if you can win big.”

Judging by the way my heart picks up speed and my whole body turns on, I’d say I want this. How Stefano knows, I have no idea. Or maybe I’m just excited *because* he’s a part of it.

“You really think I can do this?”

“I do,” he says without hesitation. “But it’s not about whether you win or lose. That’s not why I’m entering you.”

“Why, then?”

“I think you’ll enjoy it. Stretch yourself a bit. Use your talents in a new way. I think it could be fun.”

My chest has gone gooey and warm. Since when did Stefano Tacone care about my fun? About my sense of fulfillment?

I experience a stab of guilt and not giving him the same kind of thought. All I’ve been doing is keeping him at arm’s

length. Barricading my heart from the sexy playboy of the Bellissimo.

But he's not acting like a player.

He's acting like a boyfriend.

Now I wish I'd stayed the night at the Bellissimo.

"Thank you. It... it means a lot to me what you're doing."

I hear Stefano's exhale through the line. "Tomorrow night, *amore*. You can show me your appreciation."

My laugh sounds husky. I lie on my bed and bring my hand between my legs. "I can do that."

"And expect punishment. You don't leave me blue-balled without paying penance, *bella*."

My pussy clenches. "I'm sure you'll make it a good lesson," I purr.

Stefano curses softly in Italian. "You kill me, you know that?"

"It's mutual," I murmur. "See you tomorrow." I end the call and fall back on my pillow, working my fingers between my legs as I picture my sexy as hell lover.

It's definitely mutual, Stefano.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Corey

“Why don’t you just move in here?” Stefano asks me a few weeks later. We’ve been seeing each other most every day, either at work or when he takes me off the schedule and brings me out on the town with him instead. Thanks to his continued interest in showing me what’s possible, I won ten thousand dollars last week playing poker.

This morning, I’m leaving his suite to go home for the day and he’s grumpy about it. I spend the night in his suite three or four nights a week, but he’s starting to put the pressure on.

“What’s in your shitty little apartment that you don’t have here?”

“Don’t be a dick,” I mutter, hopping to put on my high heels from last night.

“No really.” He knots his tie, completing the male model look and nearly drawing a sigh from me. “What is it? I want to know.”

“Well, a fully stocked kitchen for one.”

His face clears. “You like to cook?” He looks so happy, I almost blush.

“Yeah. I like to know exactly what I’m putting in my mouth.”

He smirks. “Ah. I get it. You need to control what you eat.”

I pick up one of his balled up socks from the floor and throw it at his head.

“I’m right, aren’t I?”

“Shut up.”

He grins. “So you want a kitchen. We’ll kick Leo and Tony out of the top floor and move back into my place up there. Then would you stay?”

I flush some more. I’m still not ready to make that kind of move with Stefano. This is too intense. Too fast. I’m not someone who’s quick to trust and I definitely don’t give my heart away easy. In fact, I’m not sure I’ve ever given it up. I probably have my dad to thank for that, too.

Stefano’s smile fades. “Pack your shit, you’re moving.” His voice turned into Demanding Asshole Boss tones.

“You ordering it doesn’t make it happen,” I snip back.

“*Cuore mio.*” He walks toward me, his voice soft and dangerous, his tread like a panther’s. He picks me up by the waist and sits my ass on the desk. “It’s going to happen.” He pushes my thighs open and brings his thumb to my clit through my jeans. “The less resistance you provide, the greater the reward.” He pinches one nipple through my shirt and bra. His teeth graze my shoulder. “You give me trouble? There’s going to be punishment. The clock starts now. You have forty-eight hours to get your shit packed and ready. Every hour you delay after that? I’m going to make you pay.” He nibbles my earlobe. “Think about it, *amore.*” He cups my chin and kisses me, hard. “You need help packing, I’ll send some guys over. Just say the word. But this is happening.”

I blink up at him. Part of me wants to give in. What’s holding me back, anyway? But getting tangled up with Stefano feels way too scary. What happens when things go south? I won’t have my own place to live in. I’ll be out of a job.

He rubs my clit and tugs my nipple in time together and I spread my knees wider, needing more now. I reach for the

bulge in his pants and squeeze.

Stefano works the button of my jeans open and pulls me off the desk to shimmy my jeans and panties down below my butt. He presses a finger inside me, then a second. I squirm as he resumes his torture of my nipple, thrusting his digits at the same time. When he brings his thumb to my clit, I clutch his hand, trying to shove his fingers deeper.

He withdraws them and puts them in his mouth, tasting me.

I wait, panting. I'm sure he's going to fuck me now. Pull his cock out and give it to me rough and hard, like he always does, but instead he gives my pussy a slap. "No orgasm for you, and don't you dare try to give yourself one. This pussy belongs to me."

A spike of white-hot anger zips through me. Yeah, redhead. I glare as I yank my pants up. "Fuck you, Tacone."

"Hey." He catches my arm. I register alarm on his face, regret even, but I don't care. It's probably just the sexual frustration, but I'm pissed. Ready to knee him in the balls again, pissed.

Although I wouldn't do that to him again.

"*Hey.*" He matches my intensity, spinning me around and pinning my arms behind my back. He pushes my torso down over the desk and smacks my ass.

"Stefano," I grit through my teeth.

He smacks me again. "Yes?"

"You'd better fuck me now or I will seriously never speak to you again."

He doesn't answer, but starts spanking me, hard and fast.

It's exactly what I need, the sharp slaps matching my fire, meeting me, channeling my fury into something more sensual. More satisfying.

I struggle, not because I want to get away, but because he's right; I like to be held captive. I like to know I can't escape, to

feel his strength, to surrender to his will, which I know will leave me satisfied.

He doesn't stop—not until my ass burns, even with the protection of my jeans. A mixture of triumph and relief rushes through me when he finally releases my arms and works open the button of my jeans, the bulge of his cock pressed insistently against my ass.

Flutters bloom in my belly. Stefano shoves my pants and panties down a second time, then slaps me between the legs.

I groan. I don't even register the smack as pain. It's all a means to release, to satisfaction. "Please," I mumble. I guess all my bluster is gone. I'm his now—all it took was a spanking. Or the knowing I'll soon get what I need.

I hear the crinkle of foil as Stefano makes sure to protect me, and then he slams in all the way. I gasp at the sensation of being nearly split in two. Stefano shudders, staying buried in me. Whether it's for me to adjust or for him, I can't be sure. One thing I do know—when he starts, he's going to bring it.

He grips my hips and, as expected, backs up and slams in hard again. The rhythm he sets is fast and brutal. My hands fly to the desk to brace myself, lift my face off the desk before I get hurt.

I sink into the experience, surrender completely lost in the waves of sensation that cascade through me. The phone flies off the desk. A notepad, my phone charger. I both need to come and don't want it to end.

Stefano changes to quick up-thrusts, changing the angle to fill me even more.

I moan and whine, push my torso up so I'm leaning on my hands. I look over my shoulder at him, already sorry for my temper. Wanting to make sure he's not mad.

He is. His jaw flexes, eyes are black and unforgiving. He catches my hair in his fist and pulls my mouth back to his, dragging his lips across mine. I kiss him back, eager to give now, wanting to speed his satisfaction so I get mine.

Need.

Must.

Please.

“Stefano,” I pant when he breaks the kiss.

“Tell me you’re moving in.” His guttural tones are hard, more a growl than words. His loins slam into my smarting ass with thrust after forceful thrust.

“Okay!” I surrender. “Yes, I’ll move in.”

“Now,” he demands. He’s totally pissed.

“Now, yes.”

Tears spike my eyes for a reason I can’t fully comprehend, but Stefano comes and he pinches my clit and a nipple at the same time so I come, too. I toss my head back on a strangled cry, my body bucking against his, pussy milking his cock for all it’s worth.

Stefano gentles, stroking a hand up and down my throat while still buried inside me. He kisses the side of my face and I turn away.

“I’m keeping my apartment,” I say, like I’m a child who has to win one small point.

Stefano pulls out and throws away the condom while I pull my pants back up and zip them. When he returns, he spins me around and cradles my head. He kisses me once, sensually, his lips gliding over mine.

“Okay. I get it. You need to know you have somewhere to go if this doesn’t pan out.” He watches my face closely and must see confirmation there, because he nods. “Fine. You do what you need to do. But if you think I don’t want to burn that fucking place to the ground, you’re delusional.”

My lip curls. “Why?” I demand.

“You lived there with your *testa di cazzo* ex. I don’t like you being there.”

I admit I’m surprised. Stefano hasn’t shown jealousy before. I figure he’s confident enough, he doesn’t have to worry. Maybe I read it wrong.

“It was my place before he lived there. I paid the rent. I cleaned. He was just an asshole who lived there for a while.”

“Okay.” Stefano still doesn’t sound happy, but he’s conceding. He strokes my cheek with his thumb. “Are you okay?”

I give a wry smile. “Do you mean is my ass okay?”

“No, I mean us. Are we good?”

“Because you just railroaded me into what you want?”

He winces.

I inch closer to him, even though we’re standing toe to toe. “I don’t know. I feel a bit raw.”

He immediately wraps his arms around me and pulls me against his chest. “Yeah, me too,” he whispers against my hair.

I lean into his strength, wondering how I became the biggest coward on the face of the Earth. Why do I have so many barriers up? What am I afraid of losing—my heart? My pride? Are they so damn important?

“You want me to help you pack?”

“Like you personally? Or you’ll send someone over?”

“Me personally. Me and you—packing your shit together.”

It sounds great, actually. A pain in the ass, but great. “Yeah, I’d like that.”

He releases me from the hug to stroke my hair back from my face. “Okay. Let’s go.”

#

Stefano

I’m cheerful as hell packing Corey’s shit that afternoon. Yeah, I was an asshole about it and I feel bad, but I won. She’s

giving something more of herself to me.

And yeah, I still know our relationship is complicated as hell considering who our fathers are, but I don't want to worry about that now. All I care about is getting closer to Corey. Getting into her head. Having her near me at all times.

At four o'clock I get a text from Junior, my oldest brother.

Che due coglioni! I groan when I read it.

Corey twists from where she's standing. "What is it?"

"My fucking brother."

"What did Nico say?"

I growl and stuff my fingers through my hair. "Not Nico. Junior—the oldest *stronzo*. He says he's bringing all the guys to Vegas this weekend for Nico's bachelor party."

Corey straightens. "I didn't know Nico was having a bachelor party this weekend."

"Yeah, he wasn't," I grumble.

Fucking Junior.

"Ah. It's a surprise ambush."

I flick a glance at her, surprised she gets it. "Exactly. And I'm supposed to set everything up."

"This is the brother who tried to kill Nico when they were in Chicago?"

"Not tried," I correct. Junior doesn't try. He doesn't fail. He gets done whatever the hell he wants to get done, just like our father. "Threatened."

"I'm sorry," she says simply. "Family sucks."

"Understatement." My family lives and breathes by *La Famiglia*. Blood is important. Only family can be trusted.

Supposedly.

And it was family money that funded the Bellissimo, helped Nico generate millions. But when you're afraid for

your life just because you want to marry the woman of your own choosing?

That's just plain fucked up.

So Junior bringing everyone out for a bachelor party isn't to help celebrate with Nico. It's using him at best. They'll turn the wedding into every form of business tactic they need it to be. PR for the family, greasing wheels, a deadline for people who owe them money.

Nico will be expected to perform like a trained monkey. Act the jovial host to everyone, make a stand when needed. He'll take it fine. He'll do his part. And so will I, of course.

Because really—what other choice do we have?

CHAPTER TWELVE

Corey

I stand in one of my red dresses, shuffling cards, waiting for the party to start. We're in one of the conference rooms on the third floor, but it's been set up as a private lounge tonight, with couches and tables. A buffet table of party food is set up against one wall and a bartender stands at attention behind a bar.

Nico called me last night, after Stefano and I finished moving all my clothes and personal items into one of the penthouse suites.

"I need you to do something for me," he said, without any preamble. Stefano was out on the floor, working and I was still unpacking and arranging things. Nico hadn't called me before, except when Sondra broke up with him and went home to Michigan. Then he rode my ass non-stop trying to get me to tell him where she was.

"Okay. What is it?"

"I need you to deal for a private gig tomorrow night. A bachelor party."

"*Your* bachelor party?"

"Yes." He sounded exasperated, but I didn't think with me.

"Well, you're the boss. Tell me when and where and I'll be there."

“I’ll text you the details. I haven’t told Stefano yet, but I need you to be there.”

I try to read between the lines. Why does he need *me*? *Oh*. That’s freaking sweet.

“To put Sondra’s mind at ease?” I asked.

“Right. It won’t be pretty: strippers and prostitutes and cigars. I don’t want her worrying. *Capiche?*”

“No problem. I will be her eyes and ears. She can count on me.”

“Atta girl. Now just don’t let Stefano change your orders. I need you there, I don’t give a shit if he objects.”

He hung up before I could question why Stefano would object. It better not be because he wanted to party with strippers.

An uneasy sensation twisted through my belly because I could picture it all too easily. Stefano with an arm around a bimbo on each side. Stefano getting his dick sucked by one while he slapped the other’s ass.

But no. He was anything but excited about this bachelor party. And a man with his looks and personality wouldn’t ever have to pay for sex.

Nico was right, though. Stefano was pissed when he found out I’m dealing for tonight. Even now, as he walks briskly around, barking orders and getting things settled, I can see he’s uptight. He comes off as angry with me, but I’m trying not to take it personally.

I know how it is with family.

I’m never Miss Sunshine around my dad. Or my mom for that matter, even though I love her. Maybe I resent her for being a doormat to my dad—for marrying him in the first place. I don’t know what it is, but she drives me freaking bonkers, too.

The door bursts open and Nico comes in first, followed by a stream of Italian men—dozens of them. Most look older than Nico and Stefano, but there are some younger guys, too.

They've been drinking already. Maybe they started at a bar downstairs.

"Stefano, where are the girls?" a guy about ten years older than Nico demands. He pronounces Stefano's name with an Italian accent, so it's STAY-fano instead of STEH-fano.

"Ten minutes, Junior," Stefano calls back, his affable smile in place, even though I can tell it's fake. He cranks up the music, lowers the lights and flicks his gaze to me. He's been almost curt all evening, and now he scowls.

I give him a *what?* shrug and he shakes his head.

Two hours later, the party is totally out of hand. Topless girls in nothing more than G-strings straddle laps on the sofas and chairs. One of them got fucked right in front of the entire group.

"You put your dick in a girl, you're paying extra," Stefano shouted to raucous laughter. "I'm only paying for the strip tease."

Sondra will be relieved to know Nico hasn't even looked at a girl. She's not the jealous type, but she has a history with men who cheat, and then Nico failed to mention he had a marriage contract to another woman when they started dating, so it's a sore spot.

The visitors are all having a grand old time. The guys I recognize from the casino—the ones who live here in Vegas—they're unimpressed by the whole affair. They all appear to be working tonight rather than enjoying the event.

Nico's big bodyguard, Tony, stands at attention the door, stepping up to interfere every time a guy gets too rough or handsy with a girl. I notice nobody gives him any shit back. Of course, he is monster huge. Considering how protective he is of the women, I'm guessing he's actually a big softy. I've talked to him a couple times and he seemed like a stand-up guy.

I've been dealing for two hours straight and I'm ready for a break, but I don't think anyone's going to relieve me soon.

The guy at my right gets louder and handsier with each new drink, each passing moment.

“Hit me again, beautiful,” he slurs, and palms my ass. His groping is nothing new and I step back out of his reach. This time, though, he gets aggressive and lunges forward to slap my ass. “Don’t move away when I’m talking to you.”

I’m annoyed but not too worried. All I have to do is get Tony’s attention if the problem continues.

Fortunately, Nico appears behind the guy and grabs his shoulder. “Hey, hands off this one; she’s not a stripper.”

“Aw, come on. She’s perfect!” The jackass stands up and comes at me, grabbing both my breasts.

Nico pulls back on the guy’s collar, but Stefano arrives like a tornado, jerking the guy back and punching him with a wicked right hook.

I dodge his toppling body and he crashes into my side of the table.

“Whoa, whoa.” Nico throws an arm around Stefano’s chest and yanks him back. “Take it easy.” Stefano’s expression is a dark storm. His black gaze is laser-focused on my groper. He is nowhere near finished.

“Stefano!” I snap, hoping to bring him back.

He continues to fight for his freedom.

“Enough!” Nico counsels. “He didn’t know she belongs to you. Now he knows. Take a fucking breath.”

Belongs to you. That’s the way these guys think. Like a woman is a piece of property.

“This is your girl?” the guy sneers, pointing from me to Stefano. “Why in the hell would you have her as entertainment at a fucking bachelor party? She’s a whore?”

Stefano goes crazy again and Nico releases him. Stefano decks the guy, knocking him into the table again, then he holds his shirt and punches his jaw again. I swear Nico takes his time before he and Tony pull him off.

“Really, Bobby? That’s what you want to say to my brother when he already wants to shove your balls up your ass?” Nico says. He’s all calm and in control while Stefano’s a raging bull.

The guys all laugh.

“Apologize to her.” Spit flies from Stefano’s mouth.

The guy wipes blood with a stupid grin on his face.

Stefano lunges again. “I said—”

“Yeah, yeah, I heard you. I’m sorry, Miss—”

“Simonson,” Nico provides.

“Simonson,” Tony repeats it like the idiot should recognize the name. I mean, he should, but clearly he’s drunk and probably stupid to begin with, so I don’t think he’s going to. “She’s the bride’s fucking cousin, and now you know why she’s in here, *coglione*.” Tony fills in. “She’s spying on Nico. So put your dick away and act like a fucking gentleman.”

“Get her out of here,” Nico says, finally releasing Stefano.

Fury still knotting his expression, he reaches out a hand.

I take it and allow him to lead me out of the room.

#

Stefano

I’m too pissed to see straight. That *testa di cazzo* had his fucking paws all over Corey, and I still want to kill him.

And I’m pissed at myself for losing my shit.

I didn’t want Corey to see me like this. Ever.

This is a side of myself I’d prefer didn’t exist—the Tacone temper. An inheritance from my father’s side, or perhaps

simply nurtured into me through exposure to violence from a young age.

I've been trying to make Corey believe I'm something else. Something beyond a shady mafioso. Something sophisticated and trustworthy and fucking upstanding.

But Junior had to roll into town with the whole pack of *guidos* and expose me for what I am.

One of them.

Chauvinistic, paternalistic, low-class seedy bastards who grope prostitutes and act like assholes.

"Hey," Corey says softly when we get in the elevator.

I can't even look at her. I'm so goddamn ashamed. Ashamed and angry. I pace around the small elevator, stabbing my fingers through my hair.

"Hey," she repeats, grabbing the lapels of my jacket and stepping into my space. She drops her hand down to cup my balls and suddenly it's on.

Fighting already gives me a cockstand, so it's easy to switch gears from fight to fuck. My dick lurches into her hand and I spin her around and pin her against the elevator wall. The doors ding and open at our floor, but I hit the button for the rooftop, and they close again.

"Get those long fucking legs up around my waist," I growl like she's in deep trouble, when really, I'm the guy who ought to be on his knees right now.

She complies and I thrust into the notch between her legs, the damp heat of her pussy providing the beacon for my aching cock.

The elevator doors open and I carry her out, right onto the roof. The Bellissimo has a rooftop restaurant a few stories below, but this roof is utilitarian, with HVAC, mechanical systems and other equipment. I push her up against the HVAC unit and work my zipper open to free my erection.

I tear her panties off with a tug that makes her squeal and then I'm in her, sinking into her heat.

I'm mindless with need, thrusting like my life depends on it. Like if I just get deep enough, I can erase every hurt and anger I've ever suffered. Like her pussy is home base and if I can just get deeper, just claim it completely, I'll have won.

Corey wraps her arms around my neck, hangs on and rides me, her hips tilted to take me deeper, her little moans and cries the soundtrack to my lust.

"I need you, baby," I mutter, frantic to just fuck her harder, just get deeper.

"I know, I know," she pants.

I lean in and bite her neck, hang on with my teeth, making her whimper on the next thrust.

And then I'm gone.

Heat flashes at the base of my spine, my balls tighten up.

I lose my vision—or maybe I close my eyes, I can't tell—but everything goes black, stars burst from the periphery as I roar loud enough for all of fucking Las Vegas to hear.

Corey screams, too and I come, emptying into her, her pussy milking—

Oh fuck.

I yank out, coming on the wall between her thighs, on her dress, on my hand. Her feet drop abruptly to the ground

"Fuck, baby. I didn't protect you. I'm so sorry. I lost my head."

"It's fine; we're fine. I got on the pill last week."

I sag in relief. "I'm clean. I swear to you."

"I am, too. I just got checked."

"*Grazie Dio.*" I lean my forehead against hers. For a moment I stay there, just breathing her breath, keeping our connection. "I'm sorry you saw me like that. I'm embarrassed, Corey."

She wraps her arms around the back of my head, burrowing her fingers into my hair. "Are you kidding?" She

massages my scalp, gazes up at me with her electric blue eyes. “No one’s ever defended me before. I’m not the kind of girl who plays damsel in distress, in fact, part of me wants to tell you off for assuming I couldn’t handle it myself. But, Stefano, I’m pretty much swooning right now. You’re a knight in fucking shining armor.”

I stroke the sides of her waist, trying to contain my anger over her first words—*no one’s ever defended her before*. How can that be? Not a parent? A friend? “I guess people usually assume you *can* handle things on your own. Hell, I *know* you can. But that doesn’t mean I’m not gonna go in swinging for you every fucking time.”

She traces her fingernails down the sides of my neck. “Swoon,” she murmurs.

“Yeah, baby, I’ll make you swoon.” I curl my forearm under her knees and sweep her into the air, damsel style. “Let me take you back to my bed.”

She laughs—a husky sound—and kisses my neck.

I carry her to the elevator, and refuse to put her down. Even when we get into our suite, I keep holding her, bringing her to the balcony, where I sit on the wicker loveseat and arrange her on my lap.

I stroke her back, dismayed to discover it’s covered in tiny scrapes from the wall of the HVAC.

“No one ever defended you?” I ask. “Even when you were little?”

She sighs. “My mom’s a doormat. That’s why she married my asshole dad, I guess. Sondra’s parents stayed out of it. I think my dad intimidated them, too. Sondra would’ve stuck up for me, but I’m a year older, so I was always the know-it-all. I didn’t let her nurture me much. It was always the other way around.”

I kiss her shoulder.

“Who was that guy, anyway? Anyone you need to worry about pissing off?”

I scoff. “No. He’s some cousin. Nobody important. That’s why Nico let me get a few swings in.” Speaking of Nico, I’m an asshole to make him break up shit at his own bachelor’s party. I pull out my phone and text an apology.

Corey watches me. “You and Nico are close.”

“Yeah. Way closer than we are to our older brothers. Nico was my defender growing up. He protected me. We’re different from the rest of them, at least I like to think so. We didn’t take to family business, even though it was shoved down our throats. Honestly, I think Nico started hatching the plan for the Bellissimo way back in high school. Trying to scheme his way into a different future. And I’m lucky he took me with him.”

“Were you here from the beginning?”

I nod. I still remember breaking ground on this project—Nico and I showing up to supervise the contractors. “I got pulled back into family shit two years ago and had to go to Chicago. Then Sicily.”

“And are you back to stay now?” She shifts on my lap to catch my eyes.

Is she asking about our future?

Can we even have one?

“Yeah. If Nico needs help, no one else in the family can pull me away. Nico’s profits trump all else, so he can demand the soldiers he requires.”

My phone buzzes and I check the message. It’s from Nico. *I’m leaving. They’re too shit-faced to notice. Tony’s staying to keep an eye on things.*

I’m relieved he didn’t demand I come back. I should offer, but I don’t want to. I just want to hold Corey. Share secrets with her. Break in our new bed.

Corey climbs off my lap. “Do you have to go back down there?”

I stand and wrap my arm around her waist from behind, pull her back against me. “Nope. I’m staying right here with

you, *bella*.”

“Good,” she murmurs. “Let’s go to bed.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Corey

“Tell me this isn’t a surreal experience for you.” I straighten Sondra’s wedding gown in the back and pour two glasses of champagne. We’re in her bridal suite, waiting for the ceremony to begin.

“Out of body,” she confirms. “Why didn’t we elope? This is insane.” She looks beautiful in an open-back filmy affair, her hair in a loose up-do. The bouquet is champagne pink roses. I’m in a midnight blue cocktail dress, fitted over the hips with a flare at the calf.

Nico and Sondra’s wedding is an evening affair, on the top floor of one of Chicago’s ritziest hotels. Nico hired a wedding planner who consulted with Sondra, so we’re pretty stress-free, other than having to deal with the two sets of families who couldn’t be more different.

At least my dad wasn’t invited. Sondra’s parents leaned on her hard, but she didn’t budge. Of course, leaving him off the guest list wasn’t just for me. It’s for the entire Tacone family who wouldn’t appreciate the presence of a fed at any family gathering.

But even without that movie-worthy stressor, mixing Sondra’s midwestern family with the Tacone clan is pretty hilarious. If you have a sense of humor. Which we’re working on.

I hand her a champagne flute and clink it with mine. “Drink up. It will help. I promise.”

She gives a nervous laugh and we both drink. I guess we’re making up for her lack of a bachelorette party now. Nico attempted to head off the stereotypical Vegas girls gone wild by sending us to a spa week at the ritzy Miraval resort in Tucson. I have to say it was way better than anything I would’ve planned.

A knock sounds on the door and I answer it. Stefano’s leaning against the doorframe in a perfectly-fitted tux, looking GQ worthy. “Hey, *bella*.” He gives me a lazy smile. “Are you ladies ready? The show’s about to begin.”

I pick up our bouquets and hand Sondra hers. “Ready as we’ll ever be.” I toddle out on my dyed-to-match stilettos, which seem to be a half-size too small.

We head to the doors for our big entrance. There’s an adorable flower girl and two little ring bearers. Sondra said Mrs. Tacone nearly had a meltdown, wanting every member of the family to be in the wedding party, but Nico ran interference. His other three brothers serve as ushers, which, even in their tuxes, makes them look like bouncers or bodyguards.

I’m the maid of honor and Stefano stands as best man, which means he’s the guy who walks me down the aisle. I try to ignore the little voice in my ear telling me this could be us. We could be the bride and groom. It feels so easy. So possible.

But it’s really not.

The ceremony is blessedly short. My Aunt Susie, Sondra’s mom, is wiping tears from the minute Sondra walks down the aisle until they’re declared husband and wife.

Afterward, we suffer through the photo shoot and then a sit-down dinner. I position myself in a seat near my mother and Sondra’s mom where I can watch everyone. I’m fascinated by the Tacone clan, the boisterous talking and gestures, the dark-haired good looks. Stefano and Nico’s mom is still lovely

—clearly the source of Stefano’s beauty. And they have a younger sister, Alessia who is drop-dead gorgeous.

A full twenty-instrument band sets up and starts playing, and Nico leads Sondra out for the first dance.

Ugh, dancing. The thought of attempting anything but sitting in the damn bridesmaid shoes makes me grit my teeth. Fuck it. I’ll go find another pair. Who cares if they don’t match perfectly?

I leave for my hotel room. Outside the banquet room, a few people walk through the hallway, mostly hotel staff. But then a familiar figure appears and I stop in my tracks.

My dad smiles. “Hello, Corey.”

I’d like to say I remained cool and calm, but considering the chill that sweeps through me, I probably lose all the color in my face.

“What are you doing here? You weren’t invited.”

“I’m working.” Of all the things he might have said, this is the worst. He’s still working the murder case. Which means Stefano is still a suspect. Maybe there’s even more to it I don’t know. All of them could be under investigation: Nico, Leo, Stefano, Tony. Me.

I don’t care about me, though. Turns out I care about the Tacones.

A lot.

Whatever they’ve done—and I have to believe they’re not entirely innocent—I don’t want any of them to go down. In fact, I would do almost anything to keep that from happening.

“This is a fucking wedding,” I snarl. “Unless you have a warrant, you need to leave now.” I pull my phone out and let my thumb hover over the screen. “Believe me, I can call some guys who will be happy to throw you out.”

He grips my arm, way too hard. “What kind of idiot did I raise?” He’s been drinking. I smell it on his breath even though he seems perfectly in control. “You need to get away

from these criminals, before they take you down with them—you and your little cousin.”

Little cousin. For fuck’s sake! I yank my arm away, but it takes some doing. I’ll have bruises there tomorrow.

“You know your boyfriend is my prime suspect?”

“*Get out!* I’m calling security.” It’s a bluff, though. The last thing I want is for the Tacones to know my freaking father is here.

This is my fault. My relationship with Stefano probably prompted his investigation. It’s just like my dad to need to ruin my life just to prove I was wrong. He was right.

My head suddenly aches. My stomach feels like I swallowed an anchor.

My dad gives a humorless chuckle. “I’m leaving. If you were smart, you would too.”

I watch his back as he walks away. I hate the man.

If the force of my hate was combustible, he’d go up in flames right now.

And I do just want to leave right now. My entire body feels the effects of the meeting; my hands tremble, head pounds.

“There you are,” Stefano says, walking toward me, an affable smile on his face. It fades when he sees me. “What’s wrong?”

I rub my temples. “Uh, I have a migraine.” Not a lie. “I’m going to head to my hotel room to take something and change my shoes. I’ll be back in a few, okay?”

He scoops me up into his arms. “Are those shoes bothering you? I’ll have to carry you, then.”

My laugh is forced. He frowns, looking down at me. “Did something happen?” His voice is suddenly quiet. Almost deadly.

If I weren’t already tense, I would’ve gone stiff. “No, nothing.” I hate lying to him. It makes me feel like I’m going

to puke. “Hey, will you put me down? It hurts my head even more.” Now I feel like a bitch on top of it.

He stops and lowers me to my feet, his brows together.

“Just give me a few minutes. I need to regroup.”

He nods and shoves his hands in his pockets, looking at me thoughtfully. I ignore the chills racing up and down my spine as I walk swiftly to my hotel room.

Get it together, Corey. Get your shit together.

#

Stefano

Something happened to Corey, I’m sure of it. If one of my asshole family members roughed her up, I will fucking kill them. It’s possible Junior found out about her dad. Wouldn’t he say something to me first, though? Or to Nico?

Or is it her own family that has her off her game. Lord knows, I can sympathize with that plight.

I knew this wedding would be a fuck-all of family shit. Corey said her dad wasn’t invited. Maybe someone gave her a hard time about that.

I wish to hell she would just tell me!

All she ever does is push me away. Enough that I’m not even sure she feels the same way.

Not that I’ve come out and said I love her, or declared long-term intentions. I still haven’t figured my way around her dad and my family. I still don’t even know what long-term looks like for me and her. If I even know how to be in a committed relationship.

Hell, just getting her to move in with me was a major endeavor.

She probably won't be walking down that aisle with me as anything but best man for a long time.

If ever.

She's been wounded. Her dad did a number on her and she's gun shy now. But I'm going to show her what it's like to be with someone who has your back. Because if there's anything good I learned from my family, it's loyalty.

It's the willingness to die or go down for the people you love.

And eventually I'll teach her to trust me.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Corey

Nico flew us all to Chicago in a private plane, but we're on our own heading back because he and Sondra are taking the private plane to Fiji for their honeymoon.

Stefano and I head to the lobby at 7:00 a.m. the next morning to get a taxi to the airport. After the incident with my dad last night, I'd gone to my hotel room to pull myself together, and made it through the rest of the night.

Stefano dragged me back from the shitstorm of thoughts in my head at the end of the night by pinning me down—literally with my wrists clamped in his big paws—and forcing me to hold eye contact the entire time he fucked me raw.

It was brutal. And beautiful. By the time we both came—perfectly synchronized together, of course—I was fully present. In my body. With him.

We get to the airport, and Stefano hands the tickets over to the United agent. “Two to Memphis,” she confirms.

My head jerks up. “No—”

“That's right,” Stefano says.

I hide my confusion because I don't want to get punked in front of the ticket agent, but the minute we head for security, I grab his arm and pull him to a stop. “What in the hell is going on?”

He hides a smile. “The world poker tournament starts tonight. I entered you.”

My eyes must fill my whole face. “What?”

“You heard me, *bella*, you’re going to be on TV. An international poker star.”

My knees nearly buckle. “Stefano, are you nuts? It costs ten grand just to get in. I’m nowhere near ready for games like those.”

Stefano’s expression turns serious. “Bullshit.” He has a way of saying *bullshit* that is all street. All scary, in your face, I-dare-you-to-lie-again attitude.

I draw back, flushing.

“When are you going to let yourself out of the box?” he demands.

I’m trembling now, whether it’s from anger or fear, I’m not sure. “What box?” I raise my voice, because getting right back in his face is my defense mechanism.

“The box you put yourself in to keep you small. To keep you from shining. Who are you hiding your brilliance from? Your dad? Yourself?”

I slap his chest, because tears are shoving up in my throat and I’m pissed that he’s stripping me bare right here in the airport.

He catches my hand and brings it to his lips, kissing it with tenderness. “Because I see it in you every time I look, *bella*,” he murmurs. “Every goddamn time. And I want you to know what I know.”

Tears well up. “What’s that?” I mutter.

“There’s nothing you can’t do.”

“Damn you, Stefano.” I blink back the water in my eyes.

“Listen, *amore*. We’re going to Memphis. If you decide you don’t want to play, then we’ll go to Graceland and see the King. Or we’ll stay in the hotel room and you can punish me for springing this on you. ‘Kay?’”

A few tears spill and I let out a watery laugh. “Yeah. Okay. Asshole.”

“Still your boss, baby.” He gives me a mock-stern look that makes my toes curl.

I let him lead me through the security line and into our first-class seats on the airplane where my eyes start to water again.

My boyfriend.

Sheesh.

No one has ever been this sweet to me in my whole life.

And knowing that makes me even sicker thinking about my dad and his goddamn investigation.

I need to stop him.

And actually, this poker championship may give me the way.

#

Stefano

Twenty bucks will get you a long way with most any stranger. I have a clutch of them in my hand and I’m offering them up in what may be the craziest thing I’ve ever attempted.

I must be in love.

That’s the only explanation for this scene I’ve facilitated outside the room of Corey’s first poker match. I told her I needed to make a few phone calls and that I’d pick us up some coffee and meet her here.

She wasn’t thrilled about being left alone. I think her nerves were getting to her, but she didn’t seem suspicious.

Now, though, I'm starting to worry that she won't show. I did tell her she didn't have to if she didn't want.

What if she never comes down?

"How's this look?" A pretty millennial with a makeup pencil in her hand asks. She's written C-O-R-E-Y across her face. A group of her friends are working on the TEAM COREY banner. They're all wearing the Corey sashes I had pre-printed for the event. I recruited nineteen random strangers in all who are committed to being here to cheer Corey on when she comes. It doesn't hurt that most of them have been drinking and would be up for doing almost anything for twenty bucks apiece.

If she comes.

Merda.

I check my watch. She was supposed to meet me here five minutes ago. Come on, baby. Just then, a long pair of legs below a red skirt appears on the escalator coming down.

"Here she comes." I clap my hands and the rowdy crew snaps together in a cluster, holding up the sign and waving their flags as the rest of Corey's body comes into view. She's wearing one of the red dresses I bought her and looks like a million bucks. No, a billion. She looks like a winner. Definitely a champion.

"COR-ey, COR-ey, COR-ey," one of the crew starts chanting and the rest join in.

Corey's face comes into view, her hand across her mouth, eyebrows to her hairline. "Oh my god," she mutters as she stumbles off the escalator. I catch her in my arms. "What have you done?"

"I assembled a cheering squad."

Tears swim in her eyes. "Jesus, Stefano," she chokes. "You did this for me? Now you're making me cry." She waves her hands in front of her face, blinking rapidly as she laughs. "I never cry. Only you do this to me."

I slide my hands around her waist and nuzzle her neck. “You’re safe with me,” I murmur. I’ll take her tears. Guard her emotions with my life.

“Thank you,” she whispers. “You’re amazing.” Then she pushes me back and stares at her champions again. “Who *are* these people?” she demands.

I laugh. “Turns out, cheering squads can be hired, which doesn’t mean you don’t already have raving fans. They just don’t know you yet.” I wink and steer her toward the door for the competition. “You’d better get in there, it’s going to start in ten minutes.

She blows out a quick breath. “Stefano, you’re insane.”

No, just in love. I don’t say it, though. She’s too easily scared off and I’m still not certain she feels the same.

“Go in there and kick some ass.” I tap her hip because I don’t think she’d appreciate having her ass slapped in public.

She squares her shoulders and tosses her gorgeous hair as she marches in to take her seat at the table.

I find a seat in the audience. I only have a view of Corey’s back, but the giant screens all around the room televise the event, and the cameras are loving on Corey. Who could blame them? She’s about one thousand times easier on the eyes than the grizzled men she’s playing against. I’d be surprised if the cameras ever move from her face this entire tournament.

If only she knew how much everyone watching would love to root her on.

#

Corey

I get dealt the shittiest cards in the history of poker. I fold three hands in a row. Part of me is ready to just stand up and walk

out of here. I've seen enough of gambling to know that when luck isn't with you, you have to walk away.

But Stefano did so much to get me here. Surprised me with this trip, set up the cheering squad. How fucking sweet was that? He actually listened to the story I told him about playing soccer as a kid and tried to remedy it.

He's one in a million, this guy.

And that's why I have to keep playing. Not because he cares whether I win or lose. I believe him when he say he doesn't.

No, I need to win big, because I have a purpose for this money. And it could be a matter of life or death.

I'm not the praying sort, but I start asking Lady Luck, the angels, God, fairies, leprechauns and whatever the hell else might be out there to show up and help me out. And then I remember that desperation never wins. Control wins but not as big or with ease. No, the gut gamblers, they surrender.

So I sit back and imagine I'm tied to Stefano's bed. Imagine I'm surrendering to him. To pleasure. I have no choice but to receive.

A tingling starts between my legs and I have to press my inner thighs together to alleviate the slow throb of my clit. My nipples harden and I start to sweat. All the guys at the table start glancing over at me, like they sense the change.

And I get dealt four aces. Four freaking aces!

And that's when I start to feel the energy pulsing around me. With each hand I win, I get hornier and hornier, as if every win is a sexual gift, every dollar the stimulation I need to get off.

Five hours later, I'm nearly delirious with need and I'm up *one hundred thousand dollars*.

I play it safe until the end of the tournament. When it's finally over, the announcer gives my total winnings and I hear cheers behind me. I spin around and take in the audience. They are whistling and cheering for me. The sound catches on and

pretty soon, the entire place is clapping, including the men I was playing with.

Giddiness kicks in and I laugh, disarmed by the unexpected affection of strangers. Fortunately, Stefano appears at my side, because I'm not sure I remember how to walk, and then we're out of there, up to our hotel suite, where he takes me in every position imaginable until I pass out from utter delirium.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Corey

Getting away from Stefano these days isn't as easy a feat as it should be. I wouldn't call him controlling, but he definitely likes to keep tabs on me.

We flew back today and he went straight to work, but I had to make up a story about meeting a friend for dinner to get him off my back.

I quickly pack the suitcase of cash we brought back into a duffel bag and make the call. In a way, I'm still riding the wave from yesterday. It's like I can see all the possibilities and how they will shape up. I know just how to play each situation. I know just what to say to put Stefano at ease, and I know just what to say to my dad. I keep the call short, urgent and cryptic.

Then I get in my car to meet him.

I don't want to meet at my apartment, but I don't want him anywhere near the Bellissimo either, so it will have to do. The air inside my tiny one-bedroom smells stale, like I haven't lived there in years. Even though it's still my old furniture and my books are on the shelves, it feels nothing like home. I'm not the person I was when I lived here. I don't even like her much. She was closed off, barricaded into a confined existence. Afraid to love, afraid to live.

I take one bundle of cash out of the bag and stash it under the sofa cushion. It doesn't hurt to have a little emergency money.

A knock sounds on the door and my dad pushes it open before I respond. "What's going on? Are you in danger?" His gaze is sharp and he stands up like he's going to try to hug me or something.

Oh that's ripe. Like he ever cared about me. He's just hoping I want to give him the scoop on his case.

"No." I toss the duffel bag filled with my winnings on the couch and unzip it, giving him a nice view of the cash.

"Where did you get that?"

"I won it in a poker tournament."

My dad snorts; he doesn't believe me. That's because he doesn't think I'm good enough to win anything.

"There's a little over one hundred grand in here."

A small smile plays on his lips. He's figured out where this is going. Or he thinks he has. "You want to buy your boyfriend some safety."

I was right.

I always suspected my dad was corrupt. How could anyone who truly believed in justice be such an asshole?

I put my hands on my hips. "That's right."

He nods his head slowly. "All right. I can make his problems go away. But that doesn't mean there won't be new ones. And I may not be the one investigating next time. Is this really the kind of guy you want to keep company with?"

Yeah. I've had this conversation with myself already. It gnaws me up inside. Stefano is a product of his family and he can't get away from them, even if he and his brother are doing their best to rise above it all. So it's absolutely possible there will be another death. More violence. Illegal acts that could endanger Stefano.

But I can't even think about that. I'm just trying to find my way through this crisis, and if I have a way of protecting Stefano, I'm going to do it.

"That's for me to figure out," I say. "Not your problem."

My dad gives a humorless chuckle. "Right." He picks up the bag of cash. "I'll clean up the mess this time. But I suggest you get the hell away from the Tacone family. If I find myself investigating you next time, it won't be so easy for me to suppress evidence.

I want to ask him what evidence he has, just so I know, but I'm itchy to get away from him. I feel dirty and wrong having this conversation and I want it to be over.

"Got it, yeah." I walk to the door and hold it open for him.

He tips an imaginary hat and walks out. "You take care of yourself, Corey Jean."

Fuck you.

I don't say it because he's not worth the breath.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Corey

I may have been riding the wave of luck on my way over, but a growing sense of dread tells me my run is over.

The money's gone, boyfriend saved. I used up my mojo for the moment.

Time to lie low and recharge.

Nothing feels sweet or special anymore. My win in Memphis, Stefano's sweetness, all feel tainted by this exchange.

I drive back, hollowness stretching inside me, threatening to take over, drag me under. I want to go up to Stefano's suite and crawl into bed, pull the covers up over my head and block out life for a few hours. Instead, I stop in Stefano's office to let him know I'm back, or maybe it's because guilt about lying to him is gnawing at me.

Leo's in his office, but Stefano waves me in with a smile. Again, I have that sense of my luck going flat. The buoyancy that swept me through the tournament is dead still. Next time, I'll heed the prickle of warning, the knowing that everything is off. That something's about to go horribly wrong.

As it is, I push away the queasiness, sit down in the chair Stefano waves me into.

“Leo’s just showing me a new piece of equipment we got in for security.”

“Oh yeah? What is it?”

Leo produces a small wand-type instrument and flips a switch. Green lights illuminate the tip. “It scans for microdevices with signals in them.” He stands up and runs it over his own body. It beeps when it goes over his jacket pocket. “You see? That’s my cell phone.” He produces the phone and sets it on the desk.

He continues waving the wand around, bringing it over my purse, where it turns red and beeps again. “That’s your phone.”

I unzip my bag and produce the phone, setting it on the desk beside his. He continues scanning my purse and the device beeps again.

“That’s weird,” I say, digging in my purse again. “What else sets it off?”

Leo and Stefano go dead still. “Bugs.” Leo’s affable manner’s fallen away, his expression icy. “May I?” The words are polite, but the way he says them makes me shiver.

I shove my bag in his direction. Of course I know there’s nothing in it. I glance at Stefano, but he’s not looking at me, he’s intent on the bag.

Leo waves the wand inside the bag, setting it off again, and he turns the bag inside out. Attached to the lining is a tiny button that makes the device go wild.

Cold flushes through me. “What is that? I’ve never seen that before.” My voice is higher in pitch. I sound like a liar, even to my own ears, but it’s the damn truth.

Leo produces a gun and cocks it at my head, the sound loud in the silent office.

I fully expect Stefano to tell him to put it away but he doesn’t say a word. His face is pale, expression flat.

Panic surges and I scramble up to my feet. The muzzle of the gun follows me. “I-I didn’t know that was in there.”

Still keeping the gun trained at my head, Leo advances, waving the wand over me. It doesn't beep again. Stefano picks the bug up and crushes it between his fingers, then he smashes my phone on the side of the desk until it pops open. He examines the inside of it and sets it down.

Tears spear my eyes. "My dad," I choke. "My dad must've put it in there. But I never told him anything. I swear."

"Are you working with your dad?" Stefano's voice is eerily calm and detached.

I shake my head quickly. "No." Tears roll down my face. "But he's here in Las Vegas. He's investigating the disappearance of Donahue. I told him I didn't know anything, but maybe that's when he—" I swipe at my tears with the back of my hand. "When he put it in there."

Jesus, my story sounds stupid and implausible even though it's the stone cold truth.

"When was this?" Stefano clips.

"Right after it happened." My voice cracks. "He was at my apartment when I came home."

"And you kept that from me." Stefano says it like I've just forever damned myself.

"He was in Chicago, too." I admit, as if telling him now will make up for my earlier omissions. "At the wedding. He said he has evidence. I gave him the money from Memphis to suppress it."

Stefano surges to his feet, knocking his chair to the floor. I don't move, even though I'm shaking like a baby bird. He fists my hair and brings his face close to mine. A muscle tics in his cheek, but his eyes are dead. "You tell your father," he snarls, "he shouldn't get his family involved in business."

It's a bald threat and I'm full-on terrified. It's a wonder I don't piss myself.

"You broke my fucking heart, Corey Simonson."

I squeeze my eyes shut, because his expression is breaking mine, but he releases me abruptly and shoves me away. "Get

out. Don't ever come back here. Don't ever let me see your face again, *bella*. I won't show mercy a second time."

"Stefano," I whisper-plead. I want to explain—or better yet, go back in time and be more transparent from the beginning. Maybe I could avoid this betrayal of his faith in me.

But it's too late. Leo grabs my elbow and yanks me through the door, slamming it behind me.

I can barely see as I toddle out, tears blinding me. My purse is still in their office, so I have nothing: no keys, no money, no phone, nowhere to go.

I find my way outside and start walking, away from the Bellissimo, away from Stefano. Away from everything I loved.

#

Stefano

The minute she's gone, I throw the desk over. I want to smash everything in sight. She never loved me. She played me. Ruined me.

Leo watches, silent at first. "Want me to take care of her?"

"No."

Even as angry as I am, as broken and betrayed and fucking *insane* as I am, I could never harm Corey.

"I'm not sure you really have the perspective necessary to make this call."

I throw myself at Leo, cut off his air as I shove him up against the wall. "You don't *ever* question my judgment. Not on this. Not on anything. *Capiche?*"

"Yeah. Got it, boss," Leo says quickly.

I storm out, because if I stay, I'm going to kill the guy. I go up to our suite—*my* suite—*fuck!*—and I immediately know it was a mistake.

The place smells like her. Reminds me of her. Slays me.

I go on a rampage, throwing furniture, putting my fist through the wall.

All this fucking time I thought she was holding back because she was protecting her heart. But she wasn't. She was playing me.

I heard the warning bells about her fucking dad. I knew getting involved with her would bite me. I just chose to ignore it. I was too captivated by the enigma that is Corey Simonson. I wanted to be the guy who set her free. Wanted to know what it's like to get inside her shell. To be her man.

I am a fucking idiot.

I pace around the wrecked room, trying to remember every single thing I ever said in her presence. She saw me shoot Donahue. That's a problem, for sure. But what else—

I stop.

She saw me shoot Donahue and didn't go to the cops. If she had, why would they need a bug? Unless they want to take down Nico, too. Or just get as much info as possible.

I rub my bruised knuckles.

What if she told me the truth? Her dad planted it on her after the shooting. She didn't tell him anything. He's digging, using his in, but he has nothing.

Because Corey wouldn't betray me.

Hot emotion chokes me. My eyes burn.

Fuck! I slam my fist into the wall again.

I don't know what to believe.

Was Leo right? Is my judgment too off on this one to know what's happening?

Or did I just make the biggest mistake of my life?

#

Corey

I don't know how long I walk—until my feet are blistered and my calves are in spasm. I somehow end up back the Bellissimo—precisely where I'm not supposed to be. I take the elevator to the top deck of the parking lot and look over the edge.

No, I'm not thinking about jumping. I'm not stupid or suicidal. And while the pain in my chest is startling, I have a lot more to worry about right now than a broken heart. I need to worry about my immediate survival.

I am so fucked right now.

I think it's quite possible someone will come after me, despite the fact that Stefano let me go. Which means going to my place would be a mistake.

I could contact Sondra. I know she'd do anything in the world for me, but if Nico or any of his soldiers want to find me, she's going to be the first person they look to for answers. I don't want to put her in that position.

I do have the stash of money under my couch cushion. I need to get there and get it out without anyone seeing me.

I head back out to the strip and hail a cab. It's not a great plan, but it's a start. Once I have a place to stay I can contemplate what I've lost.

Stefano.

The only man who ever saw the real me.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Stefano

“Any sign of her?” I bark in my phone to Leo. I have him sitting in front of Corey’s apartment, in hopes she’ll show up. It’s been twenty hours since I threw her out and I’m going out of my fucking mind.

It took me the first six hours to pull my head out of my ass and realize Corey might not have been playing me. In retrospect, it seems obvious. Would she have just let Leo scan her purse without batting an eyelash if she’d been hiding something? If she knew she was carrying a bug? I’ve been looking for her ever since.

“No, none. No sign of life here at all.”

Fanculo.

The fact that her car’s still sitting in the Bellissimo lot and she’s not at her apartment absolutely guts me.

It means she’s hiding. She’s afraid.

Of me.

Because I’m the *stronzo* who tossed her out and told her to never show her face again like a fucking idiot. So much for *I will always defend you*. I let my fear of not being good enough, of a fed’s daughter never being able to be with a guy like me create some monstrous betrayal in my head instead of

just taking the time to *listen* to her. She doesn't even have a phone, or her wallet.

If it's true she gave the money from Memphis to her father, she has nothing.

Maybe she went to him.

It's an uneasy thought. Would he take care of her? The man who put a bug in his own daughter's purse, putting her life in jeopardy?

I need answers. I need fucking information. I head up to Sondra's office and barge in. Nico's in with her, sitting on her desk.

"Where's your cousin?" I demand.

She stands up, her blue eyes round. "What do you mean?"

I stalk around toward her, but Nico blocks my way. "Take a fucking step back," he warns. "What's going on?"

"Corey. Have you heard from her? At all?"

Sondra's brows pinch. "No. What happened? Did you have a fight?"

I stab my fingers through my hair. "You could say that." I turn and look out the floor to ceiling windows. "Tell me about her dad."

Sondra draws in a sharp breath. "He's an asshole," she says without hesitation. "I can't tell you how many nights she spent as a kid at my house because she didn't want to go home."

My chest tightens.

"Corey hasn't talked to him in years."

"You sure about that? He was or is here, in Vegas." I watch her closely.

Her expression sours like something smells bad in the room. "He was?"

"And in Chicago."

Fear flickers over Sondra's face and Nico curses. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

"He dropped a bug in Corey's purse. She says she paid him off to drop his investigation of me."

Sondra covers her mouth with her hand. "Oh no. So where is she? What happened?"

I pace around the room. "I fucked up." I jab an angry hand into the air. "I threw her out. I didn't know what to believe."

"Oh no," Sondra says again.

"Now she's missing. I have her purse and keys. She's not at her place. Her car's still in the lot. I don't know where the fuck she went or how to get ahold of her."

"How long has she been gone?"

"Since yesterday. Any ideas of where she would go? What she would do?"

Sondra's eyes well with tears. "No. She should've called me."

My phone rings and I pull it out. It's a Michigan number. I answer. "Tacone speaking."

"Special Agent Simonson, FBI."

I tense up, motion my brother over.

"I believe you're aware I'm investigating you."

I grunt an affirmative. My hand tightens so hard on the phone I fear it will crack.

"I'm willing to discuss dropping the investigation."

I am going to kill this man.

No wait, I can't. He's still Corey's fucking father.

"What are your terms?" I don't bother arguing that he already took money from Corey to drop it if her story is true, which I'm coming to believe it is.

"Five hundred grand in cash and I destroy the evidence. Deliver it at 8:00 p.m. tonight in the parking garage of the

Hard Rock Cafe.”

He ends the call without waiting for my answer.

“What evidence?” Nico snaps.

I shake my head. “It’s a bluff. Unless Corey’s working with him.”

“Corey’s *not* working with him,” Sondra cries, fingers balled into fists. “How could you even think that?”

I drop my chin to my chest in defeat. “I don’t. I really don’t. Would she go to him for help?” I ask Sondra. “Do you think she’s with him?”

“No way—never. I’m telling you, she’s not even on speaking terms with him.”

“So what’s the play?” Nico asks.

“I meet him. Find out if he knows where Corey is.”

“Then what?” Nico wants to know.

I shrug. No fucking clue. “I’ll figure it the fuck out.”

“Take Leo and Eddie. Are you bringing the cash?”

“No.” My voice is harder than stone. No fucking way I’m giving that man more money. He already robbed Corey of hers and he still thinks he can blackmail me? Fuck him. Dirty feds stink worse than the lowest of the underground.

“Good.”

Yeah good. But I’m still no closer to finding Corey. “Sondra, if Corey calls you...” I break off and rub my sternum because I don’t know what the fuck to say. Even if I tell Corey I believe her, is she really going to come back here with me?

After the way I treated her? Threatened her life?

She’s a smart, self-respecting woman. If she’s not in trouble right now, then she’s already as far from here as she can get.

The thing that kills me is that she might be in trouble. I left her with very few options.

And I know hundreds of unspeakable things that happen to women who run out of options in Vegas.

“If I hear from her, I’ll tell her you fucked up and you really want to apologize,” Sondra fills in.

I throw her a grateful look.

“Yeah, exactly. Thanks.”

Sondra’s eyes look haunted, though, and she can’t even be half as worried about Corey as I am.

Madonna help me.

#

Corey

It’s four in the afternoon and I’m still in the nasty motel bed. It’s not like I’ve slept. Well, maybe I drowsed a little, but every time I do, I dream of Stefano getting shot. Or shooting me.

I wake up with a pain in my chest like it really happened.

How did things get so messed up? How can I make it right?

I simply can’t allow Stefano to believe I used him. Why did I never tell him how much he meant to me? That he’s the only guy I’ve ever fallen for? How much I appreciate—no, appreciate isn’t deep enough—how he devastated me with his thoughtfulness. His love. I know he never said it, but only love would make a man work so hard to lift his woman’s belief in herself. If only I’d done something to show him my love, too. Then he wouldn’t have doubted me. Wouldn’t have believed I could betray him.

I stumble out of bed and take a shower in the dingy bathroom.

What's my plan?

I need a plan. Finding out where I really stand with the Tacones would be a start. I need to call Sondra. And maybe she can help me figure out a way to prove to Stefano I wasn't a part of my father's plan.

I put on my dirty clothes and walk to a Walgreens on the corner where I buy a pair of flip flops, leggings and a t-shirt so I at least have something to change into. I also get a burner phone to make calls.

I hardly have anyone's number memorized anymore, but Sondra and I have been close since before the dawn of cell phones. I still know her number by heart. I dial it, my nerves jangling as I wait for her to pick up.

"Hello?"

"Hey, it's me."

"Corey, thank God! Where are you? Where have you been? Stefano is looking for you."

"I was afraid of that. My dad—"

"Stefano told me about the bug and that you tried to pay your dad off. He's already called Stefano to blackmail him for more."

"What?"

Of all the possible scenarios, that one hadn't crossed my mind.

"Yeah, Stefano's meeting him tonight in the Hard Rock parking garage."

My heart thuds painfully against my chest. This is exactly what I need—my dad and Stefano in the same room—or garage, as the case may be. A chance to prove to Stefano I'm not a part of my dad's nasty schemes.

"Thanks, that's what I need to know," I say.

"Wait, Corey!" Sondra yelps into the phone to stop me from hanging up. "Where are you? What are you going to do?"

“I’m going to prove to Stefano I wasn’t a part of this shitstorm. Or at least make him believe I didn’t know I was bugged. I should’ve told him about my dad investigating him—that’s on me. But I had no idea my dad planted a bug.”

“Stefano’s worried about you.”

My chest constricts painfully.

He still cares.

I can fix this.

I can’t speak because my throat clogs with tears. “Thanks, Sondra. I’ll be in touch.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Stefano

I'm ready to chew up and spit out everyone around me. I need to get a grip on my aggression or I'm going to smash in Corey's dad's skull. I hope to fuck he knows where she is.

We put on kevlar vests under our shirts because I definitely don't trust this guy. All three of us also set our phones to record. Audio surveillance goes both ways. Having evidence against Mr. Crooked Fed could be useful.

I didn't like what Sondra said about Corey's childhood with this dickbag. I already knew it sucked, but now I want to make him pay for it. He damaged her. I want him to bleed.

Dial it back, stronzo.

We arrive at the Hard Rock and pull into the underground parking area. I get out with the suitcase full of nothing and we check our weapons. There are video cameras up in the corners, but it looks to me like someone already shot them out.

Okay, dickhead. Where are you?

I stroll through the garage like I'm going for a goddamn walk with my dog through the tulips until I spot him, leaning up against a pillar.

"Simonson."

"Tacone."

“Where’s your daughter?”

“She’s somewhere safe,” he says, simultaneously relieving me and ripping my heart out. She did go to him for help.

Is she working with him?

Fuck—I know she’s not. *She’s not.*

“She’s ready and willing to testify against you, but she doesn’t want to.”

My heart slows, drags like a lame horse in my chest.

“Oh yeah?” Now I’m just teenage bluster. I can’t even think. Can’t discern what’s what here. Dammit. Corey *is* my blind spot. I should’ve let Nico or Leo take the lead on this.

“That’s bullshit!”

I nearly drop to my knees.

Corey comes marching out from around the corner, looking like a fiery angel with her red hair spilling out behind her.

“Corey, get back,” her father barks, but she ignores him. She’s blazing toward *me*. Anger crackles all around her and my heart skips up to speed. I’m suddenly sure of her—I know this woman.

Fury crosses her father’s face. I should’ve paid attention, but I only have eyes for Corey. I need to apologize, let her know I believe her.

“Stefano, I’m not a part of his scheme. Not at all. Don’t believe a word he says.”

“Stefano,” Leo barks, drawing his weapon.

It’s too late. Simonson fires on Leo, hitting him in the chest.

Corey whirls. “No!” she screams and leaps in front of me. Her body jerks and crumples to the asphalt.

I draw my pistol and fire on Simonson. The bullet hits him right in the forehead but I don’t wait to see him fall, I’m running for Corey. “Call 911,” I shout at my men, scooping

her into my arms. Blood spreads rapidly across the top of her shirt. I ball it up and push on the wound.

No, please.

Don't let her die.

Not now. Not like this.

How could I have doubted her love?

She took a goddamn bullet for me.

And I failed her.

In every possible way.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Corey

My throat kills me, eyes feel gritty. The astringent smell of disinfectant hits my nose before I manage to crack my lids.

Oh God. I'm alive. I'm alive and Stefano thinks I betrayed him. I blink, trying to focus as my eyes adjust to being open.

A face comes into view, but it's not the one I want to see—the one I *need* to see. “Stefano?” I manage to croak through dry lips.

Sondra surges off the chair beside me, leans over. “She’s awake!”

“What...” I lick my lips. “Where is Stefano?”

“Get out.”

My heart surges at the harsh, clipped sound of his voice. He’s alive. Free. Here.

But he sounds angry.

“Watch how you talk to my wife.” It takes me a moment to place the angry growl before the figure of Nico looms into view.

“Will you *please* both get out?” Stefano’s normal easy-going charm is completely absent.

“You’re lucky I know what it’s like to be in your shoes with your balls hanging in the wind,” Nico remarks.

“Fuck off and get out.” Stefano looks like shit. His jaw is shadowed, expression haggard.

“I’ll be back,” Sondra promises me, but I hardly spare her a glance. I can’t look away from Stefano’s intense gaze, which is locked on my face.

“Stefano.” My voice is so hoarse I can hardly speak, but I have to get this out. I push myself up to sit and swing my legs over the edge of the hospital bed. Pain shoots down my left arm and I gasp.

“Back in bed, back in bed.” Stefano lurches to my side and scoops my legs back up onto the mattress. “What are you doing?”

“Stefano, I didn’t know about the bug—”

“Shh.” He puts his finger on my lips. “I know, *bella*. I know. I shouldn’t have doubted you. I’m so fucking sorry.” He pulls up the chair Sondra occupied and sits beside me, holding my hand. An IV is attached to my arm.

I rub my dry lips together. “Thirsty.”

Stefano jumps up and retrieves a water bottle, which he holds to my lips. I drink, liquid dribbling down my chin onto the thin hospital gown.

There’s suddenly too much to say and no words to say it. I stare up at Stefano, at a loss. “Are you still mad at me?” It’s all I can think to ask. It’s the only thing that really matters to me right now.

His brow furrows. “Hell yes, I’m mad.”

My heart plummets.

“Don’t you ever—*ever*—take a bullet for me again. I can take care of myself. *Capiche?*”

Tears spring to my eyes as I remember the moment of horror I experienced when I thought he would die.

“Hey.” He brushes my cheek with the back of his fingers. “*Perdonami*. Corey, I have to tell you something.” He looks

around the room like it will supply him with strength. “It’s bad.”

The tears well up again, even though I don’t know what he’s going to say.

“I know we have a lot to talk about. I don’t even know if you would’ve forgiven me for what I did to you—how I acted. But I’ve done something even worse.”

The anticipation makes it so much worse. Or maybe it’s the pain. I can’t stop the tears from spilling from my eyes, even though I don’t know what he’s going to say.

“Your father’s dead. I killed him.”

Oh.

I blink the remaining tears back.

“Okay.”

He lifts a brow. “Okay? Did you hear me?”

“I heard you,” I croak, my raw throat grating. “He killed Leo. He almost killed me.” I touch the bandage above my heart. “Of course you shot him.”

Stefano strokes my hair back from my face, cups my cheek, concern etched into his features. “Leo’s not dead; we were wearing Kevlar. The doctor says you’re going to pull through. You’ll need physical therapy for your shoulder, but it should mend.” He picks up my hand and brings my fingers to his lips, kissing them. “Corey, say you’ll forgive me. For your father. For throwing you out. I messed up. Big time. But I’ll never doubt you again, I promise. And if you give me another chance, I swear I’ll work my ass off to make it all up to you. I’ll spend the rest of my life trying.”

“I love you, Stefano,” I blurt, my cheeks wet with tears.

For a second there, I swear I see moisture in Stefano’s eyes, too, but then my tough guy blinks them back. “Baby, I love you, too. I’m fucking crazy about you. Say you’ll come back with me when they let you out of here.”

I nod through my tears. “Yes, of course. That’s where I want to go.” I sniff. “You’re the only one who ever saw the real me.”

Stefano grows serious, picking up both my hands. “I want to discover everything there is to know about you.”

“I’m sorry I held back. I was a coward. My fear of getting hurt is exactly what got me hurt.” I give a watery laugh. “Ironic, huh?”

“I’ll never hurt you again,” Stefano swears.

I squeeze his hands. “What happened with my dad? What did the police do?”

“Your dad turned up dead in an alley in Detroit where he was working a case.”

“He was still working in Detroit? He told me he’d been transferred here.”

Stefano shakes his head. “No, he lied about that, too. He was here on personal time, looking for ways to manipulate his daughter’s situation to make money. Your winnings from Memphis have been recovered, by the way. The police will want to talk to you about the purse snatcher who shot you in the Hard Rock parking lot just before we found you. I imagine they’ll be in as soon as they hear you’re awake.”

“Got it.” I reach for the water bottle and drink some more down. I’m not even worried about talking to the police. I don’t question Stefano’s methods.

Justice was served, in its own way. It doesn’t matter to me if it happened on the right or wrong side of the law. My father didn’t uphold those laws.

“A little bit of good news? Turns out your dad never took your mom off his life insurance as beneficiary. She’ll be getting a quarter million as soon as things are settled.”

I smile. Yep. Justice has definitely been served. My mom deserves that money after putting up with my asswipe of a dad for all those years before he left.

She can retire from her job as a school attendance clerk, figure out how to make herself happy.

Me—I already know what makes me happy, and he's sitting right in front of me.

EPILOGUE

Stefano

“You can’t keep me a prisoner in here forever,” Corey protests from where I have her tied to the bed.

“Mmm, isn’t this how our relationship started?” I work the knot on the silk tie securing her open and scoop her up into my arms. I’ve kept her prisoner in our suite since she returned home from the hospital two days ago. The doctors said she needed to rest and let her wound recover fully before she begins any activity and she hasn’t received the green light yet.

“I am capable of walking,” she protests as I carry her into the living room and settle her on the couch.

“No more TV,” she groans. “I’m bored. You can’t leave me alone here any longer. I’m going nuts.”

“I’m not leaving you. Nico’s got things covered tonight. I’m staying in with you.”

Her stubborn expression melts away, and the softness and affection replacing it takes my breath. She’s been showing me glimpses of this side of her since the hospital, and every time, it humbles me to my core.

I drag an end table in front of her and get a chair for me. “How about a game of cards?” I suggest, shuffling the deck.

She scoffs. “Are you serious?”

“Mmm hmm. We’ll bet clothing. Or”—I shoot her a wicked look—“sexual acts.”

Her lips twist. “You won’t let me walk from the bedroom to the living room, but you think I’m ready to suck your dick?”

I wink. “I’m sure we can find something that works for you.”

She grins and takes the cards out of my hand. “You’re on, buddy. You know you’re the one who’s going to find himself on his knees, right?”

I’m counting on it, amore.

She shuffles the deck and deals the first hand, which I promptly lose.

“So you wanted me on my knees?” I slide out of my chair and drop to my knees in front of her, pushing her thighs open. She’s in nothing but a short silk robe and a pair of panties. I run my fingertips up her inner thighs and she shivers.

“Stefano.” Her voice wobbles when I nip her inner thigh with my teeth. “I really don’t know if I’m for it. “I mean, I want it, but I’m afraid I’ll get too excited and—”

“Well, there’s other things to do on my knees,” I rumble, reaching in my pocket.

She watches me with a quizzical look until I produce a small ring box and pop it open. She gasps and covers her mouth with her hand. “Stefano.”

“I know you don’t like to rush into things, but there’s no way in hell I’m going to let you take a bullet for me without putting a ring on that finger,” I say in the world’s stupidest proposal speech. I clear my throat. “What I mean is... *stay*, baby. Stay forever. I need you by my side, lighting up my world. I know we don’t have our future figured out, but I want to figure mine out with you. I want to be a part of yours.” Fuck. I don’t know where I’m going with this speech. Are there issues I need to address? Or do I just ask her to marry me?

“Yes.”

It's like plunging into warm water. "Did you say yes?"

"Yes." She laughs, tears glistening in her eyes. "I'm done playing small, playing safe. We don't have time *not* to rush into this. We have our lives to start living—together."

"Yeah?" I laugh. "You're gonna wear my ring?"

She plucks the pink diamond from the box and slides it on her left ring finger. "I'm wearing it." She holds her hand up to show me and I kiss her palm.

"Good. Now I'm going to assert my manly rights." I kiss the inside of her leg.

Her fingers weave into my hair. "Stefano."

"I'll go easy on you just this once." I wink before I shove her panties to the side and lick into her.

* * *

[I hope you enjoyed Jack of Spades. Please check out the first book in Vegas Underground series, King of Diamonds now >](#)

SWEET CAPTIVITY

By

By Julia Sykes

PROLOGUE

“You don’t want to do this,” I choked out past the lump of terror that clogged my throat. I kept a wary eye on the wicked hunting knife Cristian Moreno held naturally at his side, as though it were an innocuous extension of his arm rather than a threat to my life. “Let me go.”

He threw back his head and laughed, his perfect white teeth flashing as the booming sound assaulted my eardrums. My hands shook violently, causing the ropes that bound my arms behind me to chafe against my wrists. The burn of the rough fibers against my skin and cold bite of the metal chair beneath me were peripheral; my entire focus was centered on Moreno and the way the gleam of the spare overhead light bulb made his dark eyes glint as sharply as the knife in his hand.

“No, Samantha,” he corrected me calmly, his light Colombian accent making his deep voice almost lyrical when he spoke my name. “You’re never leaving this place. Not alive, at least. If you answer my questions, I might be inclined to mercy. Otherwise...” He left the unspoken threat hanging in the air, the implication clear. I would experience agony before he finally disposed of me.

No. Don’t think like that.

I gasped in several deep breaths so I could manage to speak again.

“My friends will find me,” I asserted, knowing Dex wouldn’t leave me to die here. My best friend would do

whatever it took to rescue me.

“If they do, they won’t find more than what’s left of your body.”

Ice crystallized in my veins. He took a step toward me, raising the knife. I tried to shrink away, but the unyielding metal chair behind my back kept me immobile.

“You can’t hurt me,” I said desperately, twisting against my restraints. “If you kill me, my friends will hunt you down.”

His dazzling smile illuminated his darkly handsome features with cruel amusement.

“I want them to know what I’ve done. Your death will be a warning. We’re going to send a little message to your friends.” He gestured behind him, and for the first time, my gaze darted away from the threat before me.

A man loomed a few feet away, the light on his smart phone indicating that he was recording me. A wicked scar puckered his tanned cheek, deepening his fearsome scowl. His black gaze bored into me, his dark glare penetrating my soul. I shuddered and tore my eyes away, unable to bear looking at him.

Moreno laughed again. “What, you don’t like my little brother?” He cocked his head at me. “Maybe I’ll give you to him to play with, after I’m finished with you. He has... very *unique* tastes.” He reached for me, his long fingers trailing down my cheek. I cringed away, my stomach churning. “I think Andrés will like you. Such pale skin. It will mark up nicely.” He shook his head slightly, still smiling. “But I’m getting ahead of myself. He can have you when I’m done. I’m going to extract my answers first.”

The cool tip of the knife kissed my throat, and I choked on a scream as horror overwhelmed me.

CHAPTER 1

One Day Earlier

I sat at my computer, my mind completely absorbed in the task before me. The fact that I was staring at the screen didn't register; I'd fallen into my work, as though I was *inside* the code, surrounded by information. I was in my element. I might not be physically kicking ass, but I was powerful in this technological world.

Truthfully, I wasn't all that good at kicking ass. I'd transferred from tech analyst to field agent a few months ago, and I was coming to realize it hadn't been the best life choice. It had been a reactionary thing, a desperate cry for attention. I'd thought that maybe if I put myself in the line of fire, Dex's protective instincts would kick in and he'd finally realize what had been right in front of him for years: me, hopelessly in love with him.

Despite a very small voice in my mind telling me I shouldn't, I diverted from my mission and hacked into the webcam on Dex's computer. He was seated only a few desks away from me in the FBI field office, but I couldn't allow myself to be caught shooting furtive glances in his direction. This was much more discrete.

Some people might classify my activity as *stalking*, but I'd never quite been able to wrap my mind around unspoken social boundaries. Besides, how else was I ever supposed to work up the courage to look the man I loved in the eye?

Dex was frowning at something on his computer screen, deep in thought. With his chiseled features and piercing, pale blue eyes, he was painfully perfect. Not to mention his blond hair that made him appear like a fierce avenging angel when he was intent on protecting those closest to him.

But he'd never seen me as more than a buddy. I wasn't even sure if he saw me as a woman at all.

I really shouldn't have been surprised. With my skinny figure, shockingly orange hair, and decidedly tomboy-ish sense of style, my feminine side was all but invisible. Maybe if I'd put in more effort, he'd have noticed me. But *seductress* wasn't exactly my M.O., and I'd probably trip in high heels.

I sighed. I was certainly the polar opposite of the brunette bombshell Dex had fallen for: perfect, gorgeous, sensual Chloe Martin. No wonder he was smitten with her instead of me.

Cruelly familiar pain knifed through my chest at the thought of them together, perfectly gorgeous and perfectly happy. Grimacing, I closed the connection to his webcam and threw myself back into my work.

"What are you doing?" I recognized the masculine voice, but I still jolted at its proximity.

I whirled in my office chair to face Jason Harper, the agent I'd been working for over the last few weeks.

Working with, I internally corrected myself, even though it didn't feel that way. Jason tended to bark orders, and I tended to comply. We were supposed to be equals, even if he did have seniority as a field agent. But Jason had a commanding presence about him, and when his green eyes flashed, I jumped to obey.

"Sam," he prompted me in that stern tone that made my insides quiver with unease. I snapped to attention, my gaze fixing squarely on him rather than darting around the room in my familiar nervous pattern. "What are you doing?" he asked again, somewhat impatient. He peered behind me at my computer, squinting at the code scrolling across the screen.

He'd have an easier time reading it if it were Cyrillic script, and Jason didn't know a word of Russian.

"Nothing," I said quickly, knowing he wouldn't approve of my activities. I mean, he wouldn't like the stalking thing, but he'd be more annoyed at my personal distraction from my work. Jason and I were supposed to be working a case together, off the books. We were tracking the shadowy Division 9-C, a branch of a clandestine organization we knew little about. Well, we knew they were bad guys, and they needed to be taken down. That was enough for me.

Jason was the muscle on the ground, and I was the brains behind the operation. Or the tech goddess. I'd take either title, really.

Jason's dark brows rose up to his neatly-styled black hair. "Nothing," he mimicked me in a reproving monotone. "Do you want to try that again? The truth this time, Sam."

I shifted on my chair and cut my eyes away. My gaze landed on the water cooler, the worn navy carpet, the shiny spot where the fluorescent lights caught on Jason's highly polished leather shoes; anywhere but meeting his steady stare.

"You don't want to know," I mumbled. "Anyway, don't we need to get out and run surveillance on Moreno? I can fill you in on the other thing on the way."

The *other thing* was our Division 9-C investigation. Our official assignment with the FBI was hunting notorious drug lord Cristian Moreno, who had moved his business into Chicago in recent months after withdrawing from New York. He'd been pushing the date rape drug Bliss, and he was using it to start a human trafficking ring.

Division 9-C might be bad guys, but Moreno was his own special brand of evil.

The toe of Jason's shoe tapped against the carpet in a condemning, staccato rhythm, but he decided not to press me. "Fine," he allowed. "Let's go. We can talk in the car."

I blew out a relieved breath. I hated having all that alpha male power focused on me. It was bad enough dealing with

men on a normal basis, much less working alongside walking testosterone like Jason. He was nice, but that didn't mean he didn't intimidate the hell out of me.

At least he kept a respectful distance while we walked across the field office and toward the elevator that would take us down to the parking garage. Once we were trapped inside the confines of the tiny metal box, I shifted my body into the corner to keep as much space between us as possible. It was a matter of habit. I wasn't afraid of Jason, but I never allowed anyone into my personal space if I could help it. I didn't do *people*. I much preferred to sit behind my computer screen, where I was a safe distance from everyone on the web, not to mention completely anonymous.

Now that I was a field agent, I had to actually interact with people. Talk to them. Look them in the eye.

Moving into the field had been a stupid idea. Reckless. And my involvement in this secret mission for Jason was even more reckless.

But it was too late to go back now. As the FBI's best tech analyst, I had a special skill set that Jason needed. I might have transferred to field agent six months ago, but that didn't mean I'd forgotten all my hacking skills. There was no one else who could do this job for Jason, so I'd step up and be the hero. Heroine. Whichever. Was it sexist to apply gender to the term? Probably. I couldn't keep track of social norms.

When the elevator finally came to a stop and the doors opened, Jason gestured for me to exit first. I knew he was trying to be a gentleman, but I'd have preferred to follow him. As it was, I had to scoot past him, my body almost making contact with his.

He didn't seem to notice my discomfort. Or if he did, he was accustomed to it and didn't really think much of what most people would term *Sam's odd behavior*. Well, that was the nice term.

Weirdo. Freak.

The derogatory name-calling didn't faze me. Not one bit.

“Talk,” Jason ordered when we were safely in the privacy of the car. I hadn’t trusted anyone in the field office. Well, no one but Jason. If we were overheard discussing our secret operation, we could be betrayed.

Dex wouldn’t betray us. I knew the truth, but I wasn’t willing to pull him into this. For one, I was still struggling with the personal sense of betrayal he’d inflicted when he’d fallen in love with Chloe instead of me. For another, Jason had insisted on keeping our op as under-the-radar as possible. This wasn’t an official investigation. That meant limiting our manpower. Womanpower. Person-power.

God, this sexism thing was hard.

“Sam,” he said my name sharply, calling my attention back to him. I could tell he was getting impatient with my wayward thoughts.

“Right,” I said quickly. “Division 9-C has their own hacker. They set up false identities for Natalie. There’s an electronic footprint somewhere. I’m working on tracing it, and that will lead us to more information on the organization they represent. Their hacker is good, but I’m better. I just need a little more time.”

“And how do you know you’re better?” Jason challenged.

“Because I’m me,” I said coolly, utterly confident in my capabilities. “You focus on protecting Natalie, and I’ll focus on getting us a new lead.”

His hands tightened on the steering wheel, his knuckles going white. No doubt, he was remembering the terrible things that had been done to Natalie, the woman he loved. He might have finally rescued her from the people who had tortured her and twisted her mind, but that didn’t mean she was safe. The people who had so ruthlessly used her—the clandestine Division 9-C and the organization they represented—were still out there. There might not be physical leads, but there had to be traces of them buried deep in the web somewhere.

We finished driving to our destination in heavy silence. I wished I knew what to say to alleviate some of Jason’s

tension, but I didn't really know where to begin. So I twisted my hands in my lap and tried to calm my whirring thoughts. Per usual, they were firing in several directions at once. I had the Division 9-C hacker to consider, Jason's feelings to fret over, and our current investigation into Cristian Moreno.

We pulled up outside a nondescript townhouse, positioning our sedan half a block back from our target. This fieldwork was actually kind of boring a lot of the time. We settled in to wait and watch. I'd so much rather be behind my computer, but at least I wasn't having to interact with anyone but Jason. And he was content to focus on our investigation instead of idle chatter.

We'd gotten a lead that this townhouse was being used by Cristian Moreno in his Bliss trafficking. He seemed to have smaller distribution centers set up all over town. It would have been so much easier to raid a massive warehouse, but Moreno wasn't stupid enough to keep his product all in one place.

Chicago police had arrested a man for dealing Bliss in this neighborhood two days ago, and he'd directed us to this townhouse as the place where he picked up his product. We could have raided the building, but we wanted to monitor the situation for a few days first. Taking out one small distribution center would be a win, but we might be able to find the larger network if we identified Moreno's people coming and going and tracked them from the premises.

Overall, it was a pretty boring day. Watching people and taking notes wasn't all that interesting. By the time Jason dropped me off at my own townhome, I was eager to get back online and do something that was actually mentally stimulating.

I dropped into my ergonomic chair and blew out a long sigh. It felt damn good to be back in front of my personal computer. Away from people.

I was so eager to get back to my coding that I didn't even bother to change out of my work clothes and into comfy sweats before turning on my computer. Unfortunately, a chat box popped up as soon as I logged on.

Dex Scott wants to video chat.

I frowned and hit the *ignore* button. I didn't have time to talk to Dex. I had to find the Division 9-C hacker.

Besides, I didn't want to talk to Dex. I was too fried, too raw to face him. He'd barely paid attention to me since I'd made the reckless decision to become a field agent. Sure, he still contacted me to play an online game from time to time. When he wasn't fucking Chloe. Otherwise, he barely interacted with me at all. Especially not in the office, where he'd made it clear he didn't approve of my choice to transfer into the field.

He was a damn good agent. Far better than I would ever be. I'd longed to train with him when I'd transferred to field agent, to feel his huge body against mine when we sparred.

But he'd refused to help train me.

My cheeks heated and my sex clenched at the thought of him *training* me. After hacking into his internet search history and tracking his sexual predilections for years, I knew my gentle giant of a friend harbored decidedly darker fantasies: domination, bondage, discipline.

I'd never thought I'd be interested in such depraved acts. Truthfully, before I met Dex, I hadn't thought much about sex at all. The girls in my dorm at college had teased me for being an asexual, socially awkward geek. It hadn't bothered me.

Really. Not one bit.

A part of my brain acknowledged the silent lie in my mind.

I'd also tried to lie to myself about Dex for years: that he would come to care for me; that he'd finally realize I was hopelessly in love with him. I craved to be the object of his darker desires.

The beeping emanating from my speakers became incessant.

Dex Scott wants to chat.

I turned off the chat app. Talking to him hurt too much. I needed space to avoid the pain.

Shoving him from my mind, I threw myself back into my work, sinking into the deep web.

I was so absorbed in my task that I didn't hear the lock click back or the soft sound of my front door rubbing across the carpet as it opened. I was jolted out of my work when the back of my neck tingled, an animal response to a lurking threat. A gloved hand clamped over my mouth, muffling my shocked gasp. A sharp sting penetrated my neck as the needle sank in.

The world turned surreal as the drugs instantly cocooned me in soft, dark clouds, and I floated into nothingness.

CHAPTER 2

The safety of my home had been shattered. Someone had drugged me, taken me. My memories of how I'd fallen into Cristian Moreno's clutches were hazy, but there was no denying my terrifying new reality: I was in the hands of the vicious Colombian drug lord, and his knife was at my throat.

Toxic fear engulfed me, freezing the scream that had escaped me for mere seconds. Cristian stepped behind me so his brother's camera could get clearer footage of the horror I was enduring. His big fist tangled in my hair, jerking my head back so I had no choice but to stare up into his cruel black eyes.

The cold tip of the knife scraped upward from the center of my throat, grazing over my skin as it traced a path under my chin. I stopped breathing when the flat of the blade swiped across the line of my lips. A high whimper slipped through them, the resultant vibration threatening to make the knife pierce my skin. As it was, the tightly packed nerve endings on my lips sparked as the cool metal kissed them.

The knife left my mouth, but I didn't have time to suck in a panting breath before the frigid blade returned to my throat.

"You were in my territory today, watching my people. One of my men followed you home. Who are you working for?" he demanded.

"I'm FBI," I said, my voice barely more than a whisper. With the knife at my throat, I could scarcely draw the breath I needed to speak.

He frowned at me. “A sniper made an attempt on my life a few days ago. The feds wouldn’t assassinate me. Who are you really working for?” The blade sliced a thin, stinging line across my throat.

“I really am FBI,” I said in a rush, the truth spilling from my lips. If he knew I was a federal agent, he wouldn’t dare hurt me. “My name is Samantha Browning. I’m a tech analyst. Well, I was. I’m a field agent now. I’m not trying to kill you. We’re investigating you. You have to know you’re on our radar. Please, I swear I’m FBI.” I was aware that I was babbling, but I couldn’t stop pleading for my life.

He considered me for a long, terrifying moment, weighing my fate. “You’re a tech analyst? That means you have access to all the evidence the feds have on me. If you’re telling the truth about who you are.”

“I am,” I said quickly. “You can’t hurt me. If you do, my friends will come after you.”

“I think I’ll give you to my brother, after all,” he mused. “He’ll make sure you’re telling the truth. I’d rather not mutilate you, if you’re going to be useful to me. Andrés has more creative ways of breaking women. And I’ll keep our little video to ourselves. If you are who you say you are, I’d rather your friends at the FBI didn’t know I have you.”

The knifepoint pressed against my cheek, just below my left eye. The pressure increased slightly, and I felt warmth bead on my skin. It slid down my cheek like a crimson tear. My eyes watered, and Cristian’s handsome face wavered above me.

“Maybe I’ll give you a scar to match my brother’s first,” he mused.

A deep growl sounded from a few feet in front of me, and I knew it came from Andrés. I couldn’t so much as glance in his direction; Cristian’s long fingers in my hair kept me immobile.

A sharp grin lit his features with amusement. “Apparently, he wants you mostly intact. Should I give him what he wants?”

The fearsome growl sounded again, a wordless warning. I shuddered, equally as frightened of the prospect of his desire to *have me* as I was of the knife piercing my cheek.

“Not the face, then,” Cristian said decisively. “But I think I’ll let Andrés see what he’s getting to work with.”

The knife left my face, but the blade instantly hooked beneath the top button of my shirt. It gave way easily as the sharp steel tore through thread. He continued to move the blade downward, trailing a sickening path between my breasts, over my navel, down to the top of my slacks. The fabric fell open with a flick of the knife, leaving me exposed in my white cotton bra.

A plea for mercy locked in my throat. I couldn’t speak, could barely breathe. My mind began to shut down, the adrenaline created by fear clouding my brain.

Cristian’s fingers tightened in my hair, giving me a bite of pain. “Stay with us, Samantha,” he ordered smoothly.

The world sharpened around me with cruel clarity just before pain sliced into me. The tip of the knife grated a torturously slow line along my right collarbone. The cut was shallow, but blood welled up as the blade scraped bone. The scream that had been trapped inside me burst out as pain seared through me. He hooked the blade beneath the little strip of cotton at the middle of my bra, parting the fabric and exposing me.

My scream choked off on a sob as terror mingled with humiliation.

“What do you think, *hermanito*?” Cristian asked with mild interest. “Is she pretty enough for you? She’s not a great beauty, but her nipples stand out nicely against her pale skin.”

My skin turned frigid, my flesh pebbling as ice sank into my veins. I vaguely recognized that I was going into shock as my entire body began to shake violently.

“And her eyes are quite lovely,” he continued in detached observation. “So much fear there. You like when they’re frightened, don’t you, Andrés?”

His low grunt in reply rolled around my mind, but my capacity for conscious thought had been ripped to shreds. The knife left my breasts to slice through the ropes that bound my wrists behind me. I slumped forward, my watery muscles incapable of holding me upright.

Strong arms closed around my shoulders, bracing me before I slid to the floor. I was dimly aware of my body being lifted. My head lolled back, and the last thing I saw before my mind short-circuited was Andrés' fearsome, scarred face looming over me.

Stinging pain on my chest yanked me back to awareness, and I bolted upright with a gasp. Panic blinded me, but firm hands gripped my upper arms, pressing me back down against something soft that cushioned my body. I was no longer sitting on the unyielding metal chair. I recognized the feel of a mattress beneath me, and my torso was pinned down against it by a strong, masculine hold.

I squirmed and kicked, instinctively trying to fight my way free. I became aware of cool air against my breasts, and I realized I was still exposed. My heart hammered against my ribcage, and I doubled my efforts to fight off the man holding me down, my fingers clawing blindly. His hands easily encircled my wrists, trapping them at either side of my hips.

“Calm down, *cosita*, or I'll have to restrain you.” I recognized the soft Colombian accent.

Moreno had me. He'd hurt me, stripped me...

Oh god. He'd given me to his terrifying brother. Andrés.

And now I was half-naked and helpless in his steely hold.

I couldn't stop thrashing, my muscles rippling with effort to break free. My stomach twisted, nausea rising as the full horror of my situation came down on me.

A low sound of disapproval grated against my mind. His grip instantly shifted, tugging my arms over my head. He secured them there with one big hand. Something cool and

supple encircled my right wrist. Metal jingled against metal as he buckled the cuff into place.

I twisted my entire body, trying to angle myself so I could kick out at him. Desperation clawed at my insides, and all my training left my head as animal terror took hold. My awkward attempts to resist him made no effect, and he quickly secured my other wrist.

Working in silence, he caught my left ankle, pulling it diagonally toward the bottom corner of the bed. My eyes finally focused and I watched in helpless horror as he bound my legs to either side of the four-poster, spreading me wide. I still wore my slacks, but I felt terribly exposed and vulnerable.

I thrashed against the restraints, but he pressed his big palm against my bare abdomen, pinning me down against the mattress and effectively ending my struggles. All I could do was jerk uselessly against the cuffs. Fear coursed through me. My fight-or-flight instincts had settled on flight, but there was nowhere for me to go. That didn't stop my body from twisting like a wild thing, panic beating against the inside of my chest.

His dark eyes watched me with calm certainty as he simply waited. I wasn't sure how long it took for my muscles to burn with exertion, and I finally gave up, my limbs trembling where they were stretched above and below me, laying me out before him.

“Are you done?” he asked coolly.

“Fuck you,” I seethed, my acid tongue the only weapon left to me.

Keeping me pinned in place with one hand, his other swiftly came down and cracked across the outer swell of my breasts, one after the other in rapid succession. My sensitive flesh instantly began to burn, and I cried out. I couldn't escape the pain; I was trapped in place for the harsh censure.

Tears leaked from the corners of my eyes, and he finally stopped.

“I won't tolerate insults,” he said, still unnervingly calm. It almost would have been less disconcerting if he'd shouted.

“You will speak to me with respect. Do you understand?”

“No.” The refusal came out as a horrified moan.

“You will understand soon,” he said, utterly confident. “You’re frightened, but you will learn. For now, I’m warning you not to curse at me again. Tell me you’ll obey.”

The tears came faster, spilling down my temples and falling into my hair.

His face shifted to a forbidding mask. “Tell me.”

I couldn’t manage more than a fearful whimper, but I nodded shakily. I didn’t want him to slap me again, and I recognized that there was nothing I could do to prevent him from doing it if he decided he wanted to.

His countenance softened, his scar easing so it wasn’t as pronounced. “In the future, I will expect a verbal answer. You belong to me now, Samantha. Defiance will lead to punishment. Obedience will be rewarded. You choose whichever you want. I might seem like a harsh Master, but I’m fair. Your behavior has consequences, either painful or pleasurable for you.”

“Please,” I forced out past the lump in my throat. “I can’t... I don’t... Don’t...” I began to pant out the fragmented words as my breathing turned shallower, until I was gasping but not drawing in air.

His hands bracketed my face, shockingly gentle. “Breathe,” he ordered, his accented voice low and soft, as though trying to soothe a frightened animal.

I certainly felt like a panicked, primal thing; trapped and terrified.

His fingers threaded through my hair on either side of my head, massaging gently.

“Breathe with me,” he cajoled. He drew in a slow, deep breath and then blew it out on a long exhale. “Again,” he commanded, and I vaguely recognized that I’d obeyed and matched his breathing, my lungs too desperate for oxygen to resist. I sucked in another shaky breath, mirroring him. We

repeated the process several more times, until I was able to breathe almost normally. I sank down into the mattress as my body went limp, all the fight going out of me as exhaustion sapped my mind.

“Better.” He nodded his approval. His gaze finally diverted from my face, and he reached for a damp cloth that he’d placed beside me on the bed. “You’re still bleeding,” he told me. “I’m going to clean you up. This will sting a little. Stay still.”

I couldn’t have moved away even if I still possessed any willpower to do so. One of his hands remained bracketed at the side of my face, his thumb hooking beneath my jaw to hold me steady.

The cool cloth gently touched my cheek, and I hissed in pain. Just as he’d warned me, the solution that soaked the cloth stung, and I knew it was more than water.

“Good girl,” he said, the warm praise in his tone fucking with my addled mind. I only recognized the comfort in it, unable to process the twisted nature of how he was manipulating me. Anything was preferable to the unrelenting terror that had utterly sapped my will and smothered all thought of resistance.

He continued his gentle ministrations, his dark eyes completely focused on his task as he cleaned the cut on my collarbone. Keening sounds eased up my throat, and he softly shushed me.

When he finished, he sat back and considered me for a long moment, his black eyes searching mine. Instinct urged me to look away, to escape his probing gaze. The intensity with which he watched me made it impossible for me to break eye contact. I shuddered violently, unable to bear his scrutiny.

His grip on my face shifted, and his calloused fingertips smoothed over the furrow in my brow.

“You’re hurting,” he remarked. “You didn’t do anything to deserve this.”

He reached for something else on the bed beside me, and I cringed when my gaze fixed on it: a syringe. I didn't want to be unconscious again, helpless and unable to defend myself.

“My brother gave me this in case I needed to subdue you, but it will take away your pain. I told you, I'm a fair Master. I won't hurt you if you don't earn a punishment.”

“I don't want it,” I managed to whisper.

“I decide what's best for you from now on,” he declared calmly.

“Please,” I begged uselessly as he carefully slid the needle into my arm.

“Hush now, *cosita*,” he murmured. “You'll feel better when you wake up.”

“No,” I slurred, the drugs making my tongue heavy within seconds.

His long fingers smoothed over my hair, petting me as I fell into darkness.

CHAPTER 3

A pleasant, warm weight pressed against my chest. I snuggled into it, finding comfort in the weighted blanket that helped calm my anxiety. I'd bought it three months ago, and I'd found that it helped soothe my racing thoughts enough so I could actually sleep through the night.

I certainly felt rested, even if my mouth was too dry. Like the time I'd binged on Smirnoff Ice and woken up with a wicked hangover. This time, the headache was mercifully absent.

Although my eyes were still closed, my brow furrowed. I didn't remember drinking last night. What did I...?

My eyes snapped open, and my body jerked bolt upright. Andrés' corded arm fell from my chest, where it had been draped across me. I gasped and scrambled away from him, tumbling over the edge of the mattress to fall on my ass. Terror ripped through me as reality slammed back into place.

I pushed up onto my feet and backed away from the bed, desperate to put distance between us. His dark gaze fixed on me, but he didn't so much as lift his head from the pillow. I expected him to come after me, to attack. But he simply watched me with mild curiosity, as though interested to see what I would do next.

I became very aware of his eyes on me, and I realized cool air kissed every inch of my skin. I instinctively covered my breasts and sex before my mind fully processed the fact that I was completely naked. I remembered the needle sliding

beneath my skin while I was bound to his bed, helpless. He'd drugged me, stripped me when I was unconscious.

Then he'd *spooned* me.

And I'd cuddled closer.

Tears burned the corners of my eyes as panic overwhelmed me. I was naked with my captor. He'd touched me while I was drugged and unable to defend myself.

I shuddered at the thought of him *touching* me. He could have done anything to me, and I wouldn't know.

How could I have rested comfortably beside the monster for even a moment?

"I thought you were my blanket," I blurted out, needing to justify my actions to myself but not meaning to speak the words aloud.

One corner of his lips twitched upward. "Excuse me?" he asked, his accented voice colored with amusement. He propped up on one elbow, his gaze sharpening with interest that had become something more than idle curiosity.

I took a hasty step back, clutching my hands tighter against my most vulnerable areas. Fear spiked, instinct driving me to keep as much space between us as possible while trying to cover myself.

"I have a weighted blanket. At home. It helps with anxiety," I babbled, the words spilling out of me as panic addled my mind. "Your arm was heavy. I thought it was my blanket. That's why I... Stop looking at me!" I shouted the last, unable to bear the intensity of his black eyes studying my naked body.

"I like looking at what's mine," he said, his voice deep and even, as though he wasn't saying something abhorrent.

"I'm not yours," I countered, my voice high and thin.

His eyes darkened to flat black as his pupils dilated. He finally stood, the sheets falling from his powerful form. Every inch of him was sculpted, every muscle defined. He wore only sweatpants slung low on his hips, so I got a clear view of just

how hulking and strong he was. More than a dozen raised, pale scars crisscrossed his torso and abs, standing out against his tanned skin. They weren't as deep and puckered as the wicked furrow that had been carved into his cheek, but they were no less intimidating. How many times must he have fought and won to bear so many marks of violence on his skin?

I shrank back, feeling small and horribly vulnerable. I might be a field agent, but I wasn't equipped for this. No one had trained me for this terrifying scenario; where I was naked and outmatched by at least a hundred pounds of muscle, facing off against a man who was clearly a ruthless fighter. A man who'd easily wrestled me down and bound me to his bed. A man who had slapped my bare breasts and said I belonged to him.

My flesh tingled with the memory of his harsh rebuke, and a light tremor raced over my skin, making it pebble.

"My brother was right," he said, still studying me intently. "Your eyes are lovely when you're frightened. Wide and blue. Like a pretty doll." He took a step toward me. "Am I so terrifying, *sirenita*?"

I dodged back, and my bare butt hit cool glass. I glanced behind me at the shock of cold, and my stomach instantly dropped at the view. The Chicago skyline stretched out before me, and the people dotting the sidewalk below were far too small. Familiar fear twisted my gut at the sensation of being too high up, adding a fresh layer of terror to my overloaded system. I tried to push away from the floor-to-ceiling window, the only thin barrier between me and a long fall to my death.

I smacked into a wall of warm, hard muscle. Andrés had closed the distance between us swiftly and soundlessly, trapping his prey with ruthless intent. And just like a small, cornered animal, I lashed out at the threat in an attempt to save myself.

My training kicked in without thought, and I swung my fist at his granite jaw. The blow connected, sending pain radiating through my knuckles. He barely flinched. I didn't pause, intent

on inflicting as much damage as possible. I brought my knee up, desperate to hit him where he was most vulnerable.

He shifted, his rock-hard thigh blocking my knee before I could make contact. I had a split second to register his disapproving frown before my entire world tilted and spun. His big hands were on my naked body, taking me down to the plush carpet. My hips hit his thighs, and the air rushed from my chest as his palm pressed down between my shoulder blades, pushing my breasts against the floor to the point of pain. My fingernails scrabbled against the carpet, struggling for purchase as my flight response kicked in again.

A high, feral sound left me when his hand left my back, only to catch my wrists. He encircled both with his long fingers, pinning my arms behind me so all I could do was thrash wildly, gasping and kicking my legs at nothing. I was trapped again, unable to fight, unable to flee. My heart fluttered against my ribcage, and I gasped for air as panic clogged my throat.

I heard the *crack* resound against the high ceiling just before the shocking sting bloomed on my upper thigh. I shrieked and writhed, trying to escape the burn of his palm. A twin hit landed on my other leg, and my shocked cry turned to a furious scream. Impotent rage seared through my veins alongside white-hot mortification. He was *spanking* me.

“Don’t ever try that again,” he admonished in even tones as he delivered another cruel blow, just beneath the lower curve of my ass. “You will not fight me.” Another burning hit. “You belong to me. You will accept your place.”

“Stop fucking saying that!” I shouted, tears of frustration and pain pricking at the corners of my eyes.

“I get to say what I want. I get to do what I want.” Each statement was punctuated by a slap. “You will learn to mind your tongue. You will learn to behave. You’re mine, *cosita*. Mine to play with. Mine to punish. Just *mine*.”

“No.” The refusal came out on a low moan. My flesh was on fire, my mind flooded with fear and humiliation. My naked body was draped over my captor’s lap, and he was making it

clear that I didn't have a hope of fighting him. I didn't realize that I'd stopped thrashing, but a harsh sob tore from my chest.

The blows stopped, and he smoothed his palm over my heated skin. It prickled with awareness, every nerve ending on fire.

"There," he said, his voice rich with satisfaction. "Isn't that better? Don't try to hurt me again, Samantha."

He continued to stroke my aching ass, and I groaned in relief. The light caress helped soothe away some of the pain.

Fresh shock tore through me when he touched two fingers against the seam of my sex.

"You're wet," he said in a low rumble. "We are going to get along, *sirenita*."

I stiffened in his hold. He was touching me *there*. No one touched me there. Not even me.

Horror washed over me, smothering awareness of what he'd said. I couldn't focus, couldn't think. Fear clouded everything, seeping into my mind like dense fog.

"Don't," I squeaked out, renewing my struggles. I became very aware of the hard rod pressing into my belly. His erection throbbed and jerked as I twisted on his lap.

He hissed out a breath, and his hand tightened around my wrists, holding me securely in place. "Stop grinding against me," he said tightly. "You want me to touch your little clit, greedy girl?"

You want me to touch your secret place again, don't you, dirty little girl? a long-forgotten, phantom voice whispered across my mind. Terror and shame mingled in a sickening cocktail, making my stomach clench and my head spin. I couldn't think; I couldn't think about the voice. All thought blanked out, overtaken by pure, icy panic. The cold sank into my bones, and I shuddered violently.

Warmth enfolded me. Slowly, the ice ebbed away. I became aware of a low, lilting voice saying words I couldn't comprehend. A few seconds later, I realized they were spoken

in Spanish, but I still didn't understand more than a word or two dotted within the comforting litany.

"You're okay. Don't be afraid," he finally said in English as he continued to smooth his big hands over my body, warming my frigid skin. I realized I was cradled in Andrés' strong embrace, but I couldn't bring myself to try to fight my way free anymore. I felt wrung-out, weak. Small and helpless.

Tears streamed down my face, and my brain whirred back to life. I was naked and crying into my tormentor's chest. The voice in my head was gone; wiped away, forgotten. All I knew was that my captor had tried to touch me sexually, and I'd freaked out. I didn't want to be raped.

"Let me go," I whispered brokenly.

"That's not going to happen" he told me in that same sure, calming tone.

"Stop touching me," I begged. I couldn't bear the feel of his hands exploring my naked, vulnerable body, stroking me like he was soothing a frightened animal. Or a favorite pet.

"I will touch you whenever and however I want." He paused and sighed. "We will work on this later," he declared ominously, but he released me.

I shoved up onto my feet, willing my shaking knees to support me as I put several feet of space between us. My eyes flicked to the closed door across from the bed, which I presumed was the way out.

"No," he said sternly, noticing the direction of my gaze. "Don't try it, or I'll spank you again. Go wash away those tears." He gestured at an open door to my right, which led into a bathroom.

I became suddenly, acutely aware that my basic needs hadn't been met for long hours, and I darted into the bathroom without any further thoughts of defiance. As I moved, I noticed the slickness between my thighs.

You're wet. We are going to get along, sirenita.

Mortification burned through me at the memory of Andrés' words. I might not have considered myself a sexual person, but I wasn't completely naïve. I knew that a woman got wet when she was aroused, so her body would be prepared to accept a man. It wasn't the first time I'd gotten wet, either. Watching Dex's BDSM porn had aroused me, even though I hadn't been brave enough to act on my desire. Whenever I'd gotten too turned on, I'd thrown myself into a particularly challenging task, usually involving hacking. Using the analytical side of my brain helped cool my animal physical responses.

My stomach roiled. Had my obsession with becoming the object of Dex's darker needs twisted me so thoroughly? I'd just been spanked by an evil man who claimed to own me, who wanted to rape me. And I'd gotten wet, my body responding to his harsh dominance.

My tears spilled faster as shame heated my cheeks, and I hastily finished my essential business so I could wash my hands and face. I pressed my palms against my flaming cheeks, turning the water colder to help chase away the heat of my humiliation. A few broken sobs heaved from my chest, but I gulped in air and forced myself to calm down.

In the calm, a single imperative took over: *escape*.

I couldn't wait around for my friends to find me, for Dex to come to my rescue.

I'm not the damsel in distress, I told myself. I'm the hero. Heroine. Whatever. I'm a badass FBI agent/hacker goddess. I can get out of this.

I couldn't take down Andrés without a weapon—something he had made painfully clear. My bottom still ached and stung from his punishment, but that wasn't enough to deter me. He'd stripped me. He'd touched my sex as though he had every right. I refused to sit around and do nothing to defend myself when he clearly intended to rape me.

So, I'd have to find a weapon. Or make one.

I cast my eyes around the opulent bathroom, searching. There, hanging beneath one of the multiple showerheads: a razor.

I quickly crossed the tiled floor and retrieved it. I glanced at the closed bathroom door, knowing I didn't have long before Andrés would start banging on it. Possibly even breaking it down. I'd locked it behind me, but that wouldn't stop him. He'd already proven how strong he was, how relentless.

Turning my attention back to my task, I tamped down my anxiety and applied pressure to the razor's plastic casing. After a few seconds, it snapped. I gripped the flat of one of the blades between my thumb and forefinger, careful of the wickedly sharp edge. If I bloodied my fingers, I wouldn't be able to hold on to my only weapon.

I went to the bathroom door and turned back the lock, knowing he'd hear the metallic click in the bedroom. I didn't open the door. I needed him to come to me, and then I'd catch him by surprise. He'd seen a broken, frightened woman dart into the bathroom to hide from him. He wouldn't expect me to attack again now.

I'm not broken. And I'm not frightened. Okay, maybe that last part was a lie. My hands trembled, and I focused on steadying the fingers that gripped my blade.

"Samantha?" he asked, his rumbling voice emanating through the closed door. "Come out of there."

I made a little sniffing noise to encourage the illusion that I was crying, weakened. Not a difficult feat, considering my tears still mingled with the water droplets that wet my face.

"Come out here. Now, *cosita*." There was warning in the last, a clear threat that he'd come in to retrieve me if I didn't comply.

Come on, then, I mentally urged him, my body vibrating with anticipation.

A heavy sigh sounded through the door. "You will regret this," he said. "You must learn to obey me, even if you're

scared or upset. I'm giving you one last chance. Come," he commanded firmly, like he was speaking to a particularly difficult puppy he was trying to train.

I straightened my spine. I wasn't going to be trained. I wasn't going to obey. And I certainly wasn't going to walk out into his scary, strong arms and allow him to violate me.

The door swung open, and I launched myself at him. I had the barest moment to register his dark eyes widening with surprise as I slashed, aiming for his throat. I'd never killed a man before, but I had to escape before something terrible happened to me. I tried to find a cold, calm place in my mind, but instead, I attacked with a furious, desperate shriek.

Maybe my roiling emotions made me sloppy. Maybe I just didn't have it in me to tear open a man's throat.

Or maybe Andrés was simply accustomed to people trying to kill him, and his instincts kicked in.

He managed to dodge back, and my blade cut a long, shallow furrow into his chest. I paused, shocked at the sight of his blood welling up.

I'd done that. I'd hurt him.

I didn't feel any sense of heroic triumph. Instead, horror washed over me. Violence might be ingrained in him, but it turned out, killing wasn't in my nature.

In my moment of hesitation, he grabbed my wrist. He barely had to squeeze before the razor slipped from my fingers. I'd lost my only weapon, and now I was faced by a hulking, bleeding madman.

Only, he didn't look mad. He looked... disappointed? What kind of man faces an attempt on his life with such mild emotion? He could have attacked me. He could have killed me and eliminated the threat.

But the laughable truth was, I wasn't a threat.

Keeping his hold on my wrist, he took a slow step toward me. I dodged back as far as I could, watching him warily. I didn't understand his calm response.

“I cut you,” I blurted, trying to comprehend why he wasn’t responding to my violence in kind.

“You did,” he said coolly, completely unconcerned by the little rivulet of blood dripping down over his defined abs. “Are you really so eager for another spanking already? Did you enjoy it so much? I’ll have to devise more clever punishments for you.” The ghost of a smile flickered over the corners of his lips. “We are going to get along very well.”

“Stop saying that,” I forced out, my voice trembling. His calm was beyond unnerving. “I don’t want you to spank me. I don’t want you to touch me.”

He moved with lightning speed, and his body suddenly pressed against mine. My back bumped against the wall, and he captured both my wrists in his big hand again, pinning them above my head. He caged me in, his powerful body too close for me to defend myself.

My breath caught in my throat, fear fluttering at the center of my chest.

“Liar,” he said smoothly. “I won’t tolerate that, either. You enjoyed your spanking.” His thigh wedged between mine, forcing my legs apart. He reached between us with his free hand and lightly slapped my sex.

A strange, strangled sound left my chest. It felt... weird, being spanked there. It stung, but the rebuke went deeper than physical discomfort. The punitive touch to my most secret, sensitive area was a causal demonstration of ownership. Something inside me clenched. A shadow of the toxic fear that had overtaken me the last time he’d touched my sex made me shudder.

He stared down into my eyes, his black gaze penetrating my soul. He spanked my sex again. This time, a wet sound accompanied the slap.

I bucked in his hold, struggling to escape. My writhing caused his palm to rub against my bud of sensitive nerve endings. I gasped and shivered, my body alight with sensation

that was utterly foreign to me. My toes tingled, and warmth curled low in my belly.

But fear persisted, fogging my brain.

“What are you so afraid of, *cosita?*” he asked, his voice low and silky smooth. “The pain or the pleasure?”

“What?” I managed. *Pleasure?* Nothing about what was happening was pleasurable in any way. My situation was horrifying, disgusting.

He studied me for long, torturous seconds, his hot palm resting against my sex in an obvious proprietary gesture.

“Do you really not understand?” he finally asked. His long fingers played through my sensitive folds, and I felt the slickness of my flesh under his touch.

I pressed my lips together, refusing to contemplate what was happening to me.

Something like a growl rumbled from his chest, and his dark eyes burned into me. “How innocent are you, Samantha?”

“I... I don't like when you touch me there,” I whispered the truth.

“*There?*” he repeated. “You mean, your wet little pussy?” He rotated his palm against me, and something strange crackled through my system, making me cry out.

“Stop,” I moaned. “I don't like this.”

“Liar,” he accused again, delivering another stinging slap against my labia. I tried to close my thighs, but he kept me securely pinned in place.

“I don't want you to touch me,” I pleaded. Despite the unfamiliar electric current that was coursing through my body, fear still sapped my mind.

Wrong. Dirty.

Dirty little girl.

You want me to touch your secret place again, don't you, dirty little girl? The low, masculine voice whispered across

my mind. I stiffened, my horror creeping up my throat to choke off my air supply.

The heat of his hand left my sex, and his palm came up to cup my cheek, his thumb hooking below my jaw to tilt my face up to his. “Look at me,” he ordered in soothing tones.

I blinked, and my eyes focused on his face. His scar was deeply pronounced, drawn downward by the twist of his frown. The sight of his displeasure might have made me flinch with fresh fear, but I detected only concern in his dark eyes. He watched me with such intensity that I was unable to look away.

“You will learn to accept my touch,” he said. As though to prove his point, he rubbed his thumb along the line of my lower lip. My sensitive nerve endings crackled and danced, and I sucked in a sharp breath. My body quivered, my skin pebbling. “You will learn to crave it,” he continued, imbuing the words with command.

“Please, let me go,” I begged, unravelling. All my earlier bravado had been torn away as swiftly and as easily as he’d disarmed me. I was left in a fog of fear and confusion. Trapped by Andrés’ powerful body, I had no hope of escape. All I could do was plead with him. I struggled to gather my wits, clinging to the final weapon that remained: my mind.

“You have to let me go,” I said, with a little more strength. “You can’t... hurt me.” I couldn’t bring myself to say *rape me*. “My friends will find me. Do you really think the FBI won’t do whatever it takes to get one of their own back?”

“My brother isn’t so sure of that,” he countered, still studying me intently. “It’s my job to ensure your honesty. He wants the truth from you, and I will have the truth.”

“I’m telling you the truth,” I insisted.

He cocked his head at me, then nodded. “Yes, I think you are.”

“Then you’ll let me go?” I asked, hope swelling in my chest.

His fingers tightened around my wrists, and he scowled, his first true show of anger since Cristian had cut me. “No,” he declared. “That’s my brother’s decision to make. Until he does, I’m keeping you.”

I glowered up at him, righteous rage rising. “Dex is going to find me,” I warned, an absolute truth. “And if you hurt me before he gets here, he will tear you apart with his bare hands.”

“No one will find you,” he swore. “You belong to me now.”

“You’re insane,” I flung back at him, twisting against his harsh hold. “I don’t belong to you.”

He rubbed his fingers over my lips, and I could smell my lingering desire that had coated them. “Your pussy says otherwise,” he told me. “You nearly came all over my hand, just from a spanking. Your body knows its Master. Your mind will follow.”

I snapped my teeth at his fingers. That was his fucking mistake for putting them so close to my mouth.

I barely managed to nip at him before he pulled back. His hand settled around my throat, applying the barest pressure. My eyes went wide, and my mind blanked. Something primal within me surrendered on instinct, my animal brain recognizing the show of dominance, the subtle threat. I was powerless against him, small and fragile in his grip.

“Good girl,” he said with approval. “Don’t try to bite me again, or I’ll find a better use for your pretty mouth.”

I sucked in a small gasp. He couldn’t mean... I’d never... I didn’t want...

His touch shifted, his hand leaving my throat so he could stroke his fingertips down the column of my neck. “Breathe,” he coaxed. “You spook very easily, *cosita*. But you will learn to crave me. All of me. My hand, my mouth, my cock. You will accept me.”

“I won’t,” I forced out on a whisper.

He frowned and opened his mouth to say something else that was probably equally terrifying. But a knock on the bedroom door interrupted whatever he was going to say. A masculine voice penetrated the door, speaking in rapid-fire Spanish. Andrés barked something back that I couldn't understand.

Then his gaze fixed on me again. "I have business to attend to," he told me. "We will work on this later."

Work on this. Not talk about this. Whatever Andrés' plan for me entailed, it didn't involve my consent.

CHAPTER 4

He stared down at me, considering. I barely breathed. If I did, I'd inhale his purely masculine, purely intimidating scent. As well as the smell of my own confusing arousal. I didn't understand why my body was reacting to his harsh treatment in this twisted way. Maybe it was a defense mechanism, an instinctive response designed to prevent damage to my sex if he did decide to take me against my will.

But that didn't explain the strange tingling in my flesh, the way the blood pumped faster through my veins as I waited for his next move.

He blew out a sigh. "I need to get dressed," he told me. "Can I trust you not to try to attack me again once my back is turned?"

I scowled at him, lifting my chin in defiance. I'd never stop trying to get away from him, even if I knew that physically besting him was next to impossible. I'd had a slim chance with my puny weapon, and now the delicate razorblade lay useless on the carpet.

But I wasn't about to admit meekly that I'd be a good girl and stop trying to fight my way free.

His full lips twisted in a slight frown, dragging his scar down in a fearsome slash across his face. I dimly noted that he would be handsome, otherwise. Beautiful, even. His stubble-covered square jaw was strong and masculine, his cheekbones high and defined. Heavy dark brows drew together over his

onyx eyes, and his black hair curled softly to frame his rugged features.

But the scar that marred his cheek... It was difficult to look at; vicious and violent.

Instinct urged my gaze to flit around the room in its familiar anxious pattern. But his eyes. I couldn't look away. His pupils were dilated, fixed on me. A slender ring of rich chocolate brown surrounded them, nearly swallowed by the darkness of his stare.

A light shiver raced across my skin, but I remained locked in his steady gaze.

His frown eased, one corner of his lips ticking up in a perverse smile. In a shockingly tender gesture, he tucked a stray lock of hair behind my ear. "So frightened, but so defiant. I'm going to have to restrain you, aren't I?"

I jerked against his hold, but his grip remained iron around my wrists. "No."

"So you won't try to attack me as soon as I release you?" he asked, the twist of his smile letting me know the question was purely rhetorical.

I struggled again, and a frustrated noise that sounded a little like a growl slipped between my teeth. He laughed; a low, rumbling chuckle of dark amusement.

"Such an angry *gatita*. Maybe I should keep you in cage. Would that tame you?"

"I don't need to be *tamed*," I shot back, my anger bleeding over fear. "I told you the truth. I'm a federal agent. You said you believe me. If you do, then you know you can't risk hurting me. My friends at the Bureau won't stop looking for me, and if you've..." I couldn't bring myself to say *raped me*. "If you've hurt me when they find me, they won't show you any mercy. You have to let me go."

His frown returned. "That's up to my brother to decide. Until he does, you're mine." His fingers tightened around my wrists as he made the perverse declaration.

“You keep saying that,” I hissed out. “You’re fucking crazy, you know that, right? You’re—”

My next insult didn’t make it past my lips. He pressed his hand firmly against my mouth, his frown twisting with disapproval.

“You will learn to mind your language when you’re speaking to me,” he said coolly. “I need to get dressed, and you need to be quiet and behave while I’m gone. How comfortable you are while I’m out attending to my business is up to you. I can gag you and cage you, or I can leave you free to move around the suite. Make your choice.”

My eyes flew wide, finally leaving his face to search the room. *Cage me?* Surely he couldn’t be serious.

I sucked in a sharp breath through my nose. I’d been too distressed to notice before. Beneath the enormous four-poster bed were bars. Cushions and a blanket made it look like a second bunk beneath the big bed, but that was just my mind struggling to comprehend what I was truly looking at.

What kind of man had a cage under his bed? One that was clearly waiting to trap a frightened, unwilling woman?

“Choose,” he said, his voice gravelly. “Are you going to be a good girl for me, or am I going to have to cage you beneath my bed like a naughty *gatita?*” His cock jerked against my belly, and I shuddered.

I shook my head as best I could, but my movement was restricted by his firm hand on my mouth.

He studied me for a moment longer, then gave a small nod. The weight of his body finally left mine when he took a step back, and my shaky legs nearly collapsed without his support. He maintained his hold on my wrists above my head, keeping me upright until I managed to find my footing. Once I regained my balance, he lowered my arms, but he didn’t release them. He kept them trapped in one of his big hands as he moved back toward the bed, pulling me along in his wake.

“Please,” I gasped out, my eyes fixing on the cage as panic churned in my gut. “I don’t want to go in there.”

“I’m not going to put you in the cage,” he told me calmly. “You’ve already been punished for your transgressions. I told you: I might seem harsh, but I’m fair.”

“So you’re not going to lock me up?” I asked tentatively, my steps faltering as we reached the bed.

He smirked at me. “I didn’t say that.” He directed me to sit on the mattress and pressed my hands into my lap. “Put your hands on your knees, and keep them there. If you try to fight me again, I think you understand what the consequence will be.”

He finally released my wrists, and I slowly directed my trembling hands to my knees, pressing my palms against them and locking my fingers around my kneecaps. He curled two fingers beneath my chin, applying light pressure. I had no choice but to lift my head and straighten my spine.

“Shoulders back,” he ordered.

I complied, too intimidated to do otherwise. I’d been hunched over in a last-ditch attempt to protect my most vulnerable areas, but he demanded that I sit upright. In this position, my small breasts were exposed, and his eyes flared as he studied my naked body.

“*Qué bonita,*” he murmured. His fingers left my chin, and I started to slump again. He simply clicked his tongue at me and lightly gripped my jaw, returning me to the position he desired.

“Stay,” he commanded firmly, using the puppy-training voice again.

The ire that had burned through my veins earlier in response to that tone was utterly absent. Instead, a light shiver raced across my skin. He released my jaw, but I didn’t move. He didn’t have to touch me in order to restrain me. He’d thoroughly brought me to heel. He might have spanked me, but it was his unnerving calm and gentle but firm touches that were fucking with my mind. If he’d responded to my violence in kind, I might have maintained the determination to fight. As

it was, his iron will kept me trapped as effectively as his strong hands.

He stepped back from me, but he didn't take his eyes off me as he crossed the short distance to a chest of drawers set against the wall a few feet away from the bed. He was right to watch me. If he'd taken his steady gaze off me, I would have bolted for the door. As it was, it took nothing more than his dark, stern stare to keep me locked in place where he'd left me.

He opened the top drawer and retrieved a thin strip of black leather, three small silver padlocks, and a length of delicate chain. My breath stuttered as he slowly withdrew the items, allowing me to clearly see what was in store for me.

"I don't want that," I managed breathlessly, my gaze locking on the collar. I'd longed for Dex to give me a collar, to love me and mark me as his own. I knew what it meant in the context of consensual BDSM: commitment, devotion.

With Andrés, it would be a symbol of subjugation. Everything I'd craved would be perverted the moment the leather touched my throat.

A single dark brow rose, and he lifted the collar for me to examine. "Does this scare you? It won't hurt."

"I know it won't," I began to babble. "But I don't want it. Not from you."

He closed the short distance between us. I didn't budge from the position he'd dictated, even though I wanted to shrink away.

He studied me with renewed curiosity, his gaze sharpening on my features. "Not from me? Someone else has collared you before? Maybe you're not so innocent."

"No. He hasn't. I just wanted... I don't want this from you," I finally managed to curtail the words that threatened to spill out of me. Andrés didn't need to know about my heartbreak and secret longings for my best friend. No doubt, he'd find some way to use it against me.

His black eyes narrowed. “You lost the right to make demands when you tried to kill me,” he told me. “I can’t trust you not to attack as soon as my back is turned. So, I’m going to chain you to my bed, where you’ll wait for me like a good girl while I attend to my business.”

“I don’t want this,” I begged, still not daring to make a move against him.

“And I don’t want to have to punish you more severely than I already have. Not so soon. This is for your own good, Samantha.”

With that ominous declaration, he brought the collar up to my throat. I shuddered as the cool leather encircled my neck, but I remained in position, trapped by the looming threat of further punishment.

The collar tightened slightly as he slid the small padlock through the hasp at my nape, and the soft *click* as he secured it in place made my stomach clench. A single tear rolled down my cheek. This was all wrong. I’d fantasized about accepting a collar for years, and now one was being forced on me. I wasn’t willingly ceding my trust and promising my obedience; I was being conquered, rebuked.

He tenderly brushed the wetness from my face with his calloused thumb. “It’s not so bad, *cosita*,” he cooed, tracing the line of the collar with his free hand. “It’s very pretty on you.”

I closed my eyes, no longer able to look at him. This violation went somehow deeper than the sting of his hand on my sex. He was taking my most closely-guarded fantasies and twisting them into something dark and abhorrent.

I heard him sigh, and his touch left my face. The chain clanked, and a light weight tugged at my neck. Behind my closed lids, I could envision him locking the chain to the metal ring at the front of the collar. I didn’t have to see what he was doing to know what was happening to me.

His heat finally receded, but I could still feel his presence bearing down on me.

“Look at me,” he commanded softly.

My wet lashes fluttered open.

“This is what’s best for you,” he told me with that same calm assurance that so unsettled me. “While you’re with me, you’re my responsibility. I will take care of you, even if that means protecting you from yourself.”

“You’re not protecting me,” I hissed. “You’ve violated me. You’ve stripped me. You’ve *spanked* me.”

His lips thinned, and his scar deepened. “And if you knew what my brother had planned for you instead, you’d be worshipping at my feet right now and begging to be mine. But we’ll get to that later. For now, know that I’m the merciful alternative.”

“Rape isn’t merciful,” I flung at him.

He stared at me, his black eyes glinting with fury. Despite the ire in his gaze, he didn’t move to strike me or even raise his voice. Instead, it came out low and rough with a strange mix of emotions I couldn’t quite identify. “I haven’t raped you. I won’t rape you. You won’t be rewarded with my cock until you beg me to fuck you.”

“That will never happen,” I asserted, my eyes clashing with his. I’d already told him he was insane, but I didn’t bother saying it again. He was clearly too far out of his mind to care if I thought he was crazy.

His head canted to the side, considering. “Your pretty little pussy has already wept for me. Your body craves to be touched. To be marked and owned. I think you are innocent, Samantha. You don’t know what I’m capable of. What I can make you feel. Has any man ever made you come?”

My cheeks flamed, and my eyes dropped to the carpet. His words were shameful, and they shook me to my core. Because my body *had* reacted to him. The sensations might have been foreign to me, but I had to acknowledge that they’d been... intense. And not all unpleasant.

What is wrong with me?

“I see,” he said, reading the truth in my shamed silence. “Your first real orgasm will belong to me.”

I shivered, the air suddenly far too cool against my heated skin.

“Later,” he said, and I got the sense he was speaking to himself more than to me. His fingers trailed through my hair, but I cringed away, completely overwhelmed and at a loss for words. He withdrew his touch, and I heard his footsteps whispering across the carpet as he moved away. When I heard the bathroom door shut behind him, I gasped in a sharp breath and finally looked up from the floor.

Just as I’d suspected, he’d locked the length of chain to the front of my collar and affixed the other end to a ringbolt set into the bedpost. I again wondered what kind of man had such tools of depravity in his bedroom, waiting to restrain and punish an unwilling woman.

A dangerous man, I reasoned. A sadistic man.

Andrés didn’t strike me as sadistic, though. He’d spanked me and humiliated me, but he hadn’t truly hurt me. Remembering Cristian’s knife slicing into my skin, I glanced down at my injured collarbone. The cut had been cleaned and sealed with a clear, shiny substance. I realized Andrés must have glued the shallow wound closed after he’d drugged me. To spare me further pain.

I didn’t understand him at all. The way he touched me was sick, perverted. But he wasn’t slashing me to ribbons as his brother had intended. Should I be relieved that I’d been saved from torture and a gruesome death at Cristian’s cruel hands?

I shook my head sharply. Of course not. Despite Andrés’ claim that he wasn’t going to rape me, he’d still locked a collar around my throat and chained my naked body to his bed. There was nothing merciful about his promise of punishments if I didn’t *behave*.

Dex will find me, I reasoned desperately. Or Jason. They’ll work together. They’ll come for me. Of course they would. My friends wouldn’t rest until I was rescued.

But what would I have to endure before they arrived?

The bathroom door opened again, tearing me from my whirring thoughts.

Andrés stepped back into the bedroom, wearing nothing but a white towel slung low on his hips. His body was even more clearly on display than it had been in his sweatpants. I could see the dark trail of hair leading from his navel down to...

I sucked in a breath and tore my eyes away from the glimpse of his erection, straining against the towel.

“You can look at me,” he invited. “There’s nothing to be afraid of.”

A shrill, maddened giggle bubbled from my throat. “Right. Nothing to be afraid of. Only the huge, scarred, scary man who’s chained me to his bed.”

“Do my scars bother you so much?” he asked, his voice dropping and becoming rougher. “Am I so terrifying to look at?”

I pressed my lips together, locking in a stream of frightened babbling. Every time I allowed myself to speak in fear, I revealed too much. Better to not say anything at all.

He let out a low, rumbling sound of displeasure. I cringed and kept my eyes trained on the floor, not daring to look at his terrifying arousal.

He didn’t speak again. I listened to the soft padding of his feet against the plush carpet as he moved through the room. The whisper of fabric against fabric told me he was getting dressed, but I still didn’t glance up in his direction.

After a few minutes, silence stretched between us, and I could feel his eyes on me. It finally ended when he grunted once and started walking again. I glanced through my lowered lashes and watched his shiny black leather shoes retreating across the room. When he opened the door that I’d assumed was the exit, I finally looked up in time to see his suit-clad form filling the threshold. Behind him, I got the brief impression of a lavish sitting room, and I realized there was

more to his living quarters than this bedroom. He'd mentioned a *suite*. How many rooms would I have to get through before I reached freedom? What obstacles would stand in my way, once Andrés was gone?

Well, for one, there was the collar around my throat and the chain that locked me to the bed.

My short period of speculation for escape routes abruptly ended when he turned to look at me one last time. One corner of his lips ticked up in a satisfied smirk, and his dark eyes raked over me.

“Good girl,” he praised, his tone warm with pleasure and lilting with gentle mockery.

I realized I was still sitting exactly as he'd left me: hands on my knees, back straight, breasts thrust out. My jaw dropped, and he chuckled before closing the door behind him.

Too late, I crossed my arms over my chest and huffed out an angry breath. My show of defiance was wasted; Andrés was no longer there to witness it. And would I have dared to defy him if he were still in the room with me?

With a little exasperated growl, I fisted the chain and jerked at it. My only reward was an aching palm where the metal links bit into my skin. I reached for the padlock that kept the chain tethered to the ringbolt in the bedpost. I pulled down sharply, trying to break it.

I didn't have a hope of snapping the lock on my own. I might have been able to pick it, but I'd need tools for that. I stood and tested my range of movement. I could walk exactly two steps away from the bed before the collar tightened around my throat. Even if I stretched and reached my arm out to the point of discomfort, I couldn't touch the chest of drawers. There was no guarantee that the keys to the locks were kept in there, but it was my best bet.

After a few minutes, I sat back down on the bed, frustrated. I might as well be in the cage, for all the freedom I had.

I shivered and pushed that thought away. My situation was dire, but at least I hadn't been caged like an animal.

Gatita. Andrés had called me a kitten. I might not be familiar with much Spanish, but I knew that word from elementary classes in the language when I was young.

Did he really see me as some sort of unruly little pet he could train into obedience?

The way he'd touched my body made it very clear that he saw me as a woman.

But I fully suspected he still intended to *train* me. He'd claimed that I belonged to him. At least, I would until Cristian decided to let me go.

He *had* to let me go. He'd given me to Andrés to get the truth out of me, and I'd convinced Andrés that I was a federal agent. He'd said he believed me. Surely he'd talk to his brother, and Cristian wouldn't be so reckless as to keep me captive?

I'll get out of this, I thought desperately. I might not currently be able to escape on my own, but my friends would either locate me, or the Moreno brothers would see reason and release me before the full power of the FBI came down on them.

How had it come to this? Before yesterday, I hadn't really stopped to think about how dangerous the Moreno brothers were. I'd been focused on Division 9-C. They were the big, scary bad guys I was targeting.

I hadn't realized how big and scary Andrés was. I hadn't even considered him at all. I'd known Cristian was dangerous, but I'd only been peripherally aware of his little brother.

But I'd been taken from my home, captured. And given to Andrés.

I shuddered at the thought of his scarred face and hulking body, my heartbeat ticking up as panic rose. He'd return at some point soon. I'd need to be prepared, to either route my escape or reason through how I'd convince him to release me.

I took several deep, calming breaths and continued to assess my prison. Turning to my analytical brain was much easier than facing my animal emotions.

The floor-to-ceiling windows that made up one bedroom wall revealed a stunning view of the Chicago skyline. It was beautiful, but unsettling to be so high up. Even if I somehow got free from the collar, I couldn't escape through a window. No doubt, plenty of Andrés' men stood between the suite and the building's exit. I hadn't been able to fight off the single man who was holding me captive, so the prospect of facing down an unknown number of adversaries didn't exactly sound like a good plan.

That non-plan was pointless, anyway, because I was chained to the fucking bed.

The click of the door latch disengaging made me scramble for cover. I hastily snatched up the tangled bedsheet and barely managed to clutch it to my chest before the bedroom door swung open.

A girl stood at the threshold. No, not a girl. A woman, although barely. The too-thin blonde couldn't be more than twenty, but her dull green eyes belonged to a much older woman. If she gained a few pounds, her body would have been model-perfect, a fact which was made clear by the plunging neckline of her skintight red dress. As it was, her breastbone stood out at the center of her chest, and her cheeks were nearly as hollow as her deadened stare. There was no emotion in her eyes whatsoever. If she'd been afraid, I could have assumed she was a fellow captive here. If she'd been hopeful, maybe she might have been an ally here to rescue me. Even disdain would have indicated something useful; it would have identified her as an enemy.

But there was nothing behind her eyes. They were a lovely, forest green, framed in long, dark lashes. No matter how physically striking she may be, it was difficult to look at her.

"Who are you?" I asked, watching her warily.

"Lauren," she replied, as though her softly-spoken name were all she had to offer in response. She hesitated in the

doorway, staring at me. I shifted and pulled the sheet up to my chin.

“What do you want?” I pressed. She wasn’t attacking me, but she wasn’t helping me, either.

“He told me to bring you breakfast,” she said, finally moving. She half-turned and directed a small cart into the bedroom. It looked like fancy room service, only, this wasn’t a luxury hotel, and Lauren wasn’t dressed for the service industry.

“Who is *he*?” I had a good idea whom she meant, but I needed to know the person responsible for sending the food. I doubted Andrés would poison me. He’d been very clear that he wanted to *keep* me. But I wasn’t at all certain of Cristian’s intentions.

She finished pushing the cart up to the edge of the bed, but I didn’t move toward the food, even though I could smell the delicious scent of bacon.

“Master Andrés,” she explained in the same deadpan voice.

My hand shot out, and I gripped her wrist hard. “So you’re captive here, too,” I said quickly. She must be, if Andrés had broken her and forced her to call him *Master*. Wasn’t that exactly what he wanted from me?

“Help me,” I urged, tugging at the chain that bound me to the bed. “Do you know where he keeps the keys? They’re probably in that drawer.” I nodded in the direction of the piece of furniture that held the literal keys to my freedom. “I’m a federal agent. If you get this collar off me, I can get us both out of here.”

She blinked at me, then tugged her wrist free from my desperate grip.

“There’s no way out,” she said flatly.

“Of course there’s a way out,” I tried to reason with her. “How do we leave this suite? How many men are guarding the building? You know what, scratch that,” I said quickly, noting her nonplussed expression. I might have trained as a field

agent, but I couldn't get the two of us past multiple guards without a weapon. "If you could just get me a phone, I can call my friends, and they'll come in and get us," I hastened on.

"I can't do that," she said, her refusal devoid of any emotion. "I'll get into trouble. Besides, you don't want to leave this room. You're safest in here."

"What?" I spluttered, beginning to question the woman's sanity. "You see what he's done to me. This isn't safe. I have to get out of here."

"Master Andrés won't let them dose you with Bliss and pass you around," she said, something finally flickering in her haunted eyes. "He doesn't like it."

"He's not your Master," I said vehemently, trying to get through to her. She'd clearly been tormented, warped. If she'd been dosed with Bliss, she would have no control over her body while under the influence. She'd do anything she was told, including begging to be violated. My stomach turned at the knowledge of Andrés' involvement in trafficking the sick drug. He was ultimately responsible for Lauren's fractured state of mind.

"All the girls call him *Master*." She shrugged. "He used to take care of us. But that was before the Bliss. He doesn't like it," she repeated, as though that explained everything.

I reached for her again, but she dodged back.

"Please," I begged. "I can tell he hurt you. But it doesn't have to be this way. Give me a phone. I just need—"

"Master Andrés didn't hurt me," she said with shocking fervor. "He's nice to me. And he will be very angry with me if I help you. He told me to bring you food, and I brought it."

With that, she turned on her heel and stormed out of the bedroom.

"Wait!" I called after her as the door slammed shut.

I threaded my fingers through my hair, tugging at the coppery strands as I struggled to curb my mounting panic.

Master Andrés.

He'd claimed he was my *Master* now. And he'd proven how commanding and relentless he could be. Did he want to twist me into the same broken, fucked-up state as Lauren? She clearly felt some sort of perverted affection for him, even though she'd obviously been victimized.

I pressed my palms against my closed eyes and struggled to breathe normally.

I'll get out of this. I have to.

I couldn't end up like Lauren. I wouldn't.

CHAPTER 5

I wasn't sure how much time passed. Hours, surely. There wasn't a clock in the bedroom, so my only concept of time was the sun intermittently peeking through the overcast clouds.

I'd never been forced to sit without mental stimulation for so long. Usually, if I wasn't on my computer at home, I was at work. Even during my short commute, I passed the time on my smart phone. I rarely even watched TV or movies without also playing a game at the same time. My brain fired in too many different directions at once for me to focus on any one thing for long. Only digging deep into a case for the Bureau or a little side hacking just for shits and giggles could fully occupy my mind.

Now that I was forced to think about it, I doubted I'd gone longer than a waking hour without some sort of contact with technology in years. Possibly not since I was nine and got my first Gameboy.

I'd exhausted all avenues of possible escape from the bedroom within a very short time. Without Lauren's help, I was powerless to free myself from the collar that kept me tethered to the bed. Quite literally, on a short leash.

The breakfast—now stone cold—taunted me from the tray. I hadn't been provided with any utensils, likely because I would have devised some way to fashion them into weapons. Or possibly find a way to break my chains.

As it was, I had freaking bacon and breakfast potatoes. Like that would do me any good.

Well, my rumbling stomach told me I certainly could use the food, but I didn't trust it. While I doubted Andrés would poison me, he'd proven he had no qualms about drugging me. I didn't want to be unconscious and helpless again. Especially considering the fact that it had cost me my clothes the last time he'd drugged me. My only semblance of modesty now was the bedsheet, which I'd managed to wrap around me in an awkward toga. Maybe it would've been neater if I'd ever attended those fraternity parties in college, but I hadn't been invited.

I hadn't been interested in going, anyway.

I blew out a long breath and rubbed my forehead. Why was I thinking about college? Those weren't my best memories, and I much preferred to sink into my work and my online persona rather than remembering those difficult years.

All my years before joining the Bureau and meeting Dex had been difficult, really. When I joined the FBI, I found a community where I was valued and respected. And I'd found a best friend who never judged me or pushed me to talk about personal, unpleasant things. Dex and I shared a special companionship, even though I wanted to be more than his *companion*.

But pursuing that path had been a mistake. My obsession with my friend and his darker sexual predilections had obviously fucked me up. I'd spent too many hours watching his kinky porn. I'd even followed him to a BDSM club on one particularly desperate Valentine's Day, but he hadn't noticed me watching him from the bar. He never noticed me, not the way I wanted him to.

My yearning for Dex was the only explanation for why my body reacted to Andrés' twisted treatment with signs of desire. Fear might still grip my mind when he touched me, but my body didn't seem to care that I was afraid.

I jolted when the bedroom door opened again. So annoying that Andrés hadn't even bothered to lock it, but I couldn't get

close to it with this damn collar around my neck. It was like he did it to taunt me. Or to demonstrate his absolute power over me.

If that was his intention, I had to admit to myself that he was doing a pretty good job at it.

I scrambled upright from where I'd been laying dejected, staring up at the pretty crystal chandelier. I braced myself for the sight of Andrés' hulking body and scarred face, but a different man appeared at the threshold. He was nearly as tall as my captor—a few inches over six feet—but his frame was wiry. He appeared to be as young as Lauren, a downy attempt at a dark blond beard only making him seem younger rather than more mature.

Also like Lauren, he behaved oddly. He didn't so much as glance in my direction as he wheeled a cart of cleaning supplies into the room and headed for the bathroom.

"Hello," I said tentatively.

He didn't respond in any way; he just kept going about his business, which I assumed was to tidy the suite while Andrés was out.

"Um, hey." I made an awkward wave to catch his attention.

No response. He disappeared into the bathroom. I heard the sounds of scrubbing, but no words.

Was the man mute? Surely, he wasn't blind.

So why was he completely ignoring me?

"Hey," I called out. "I'm Sam." I felt like an idiot introducing myself when I couldn't even see him from my perch on the bed, but maybe if I made an attempt at normal conversation, he'd pay attention. There was a chance he was frightened, another captive who had been twisted like Lauren. I needed to get through to him.

My efforts were ridiculous and ineffective.

"What's your name?" I asked loudly.

He reappeared in the bedroom, wheeling his cart back toward the exit. He still didn't look at me or respond in any way.

"Wait," I said desperately. "I need your help. Talk to me, please. You don't have to be afraid."

His gray eyes finally riveted on me, narrowed in anger. "Of course I do," he hissed. "Do you know what he'd do to me if I helped you? I have a future to think about. I'm not about to fuck it up by pissing off the boss. Especially not for some whore."

I flinched at the word *whore*, but I plowed on. "I can help you. If he's threatened you, my friends can—"

He barked out a laugh. "You think I'm being threatened into staying here? I'm paying my dues, you stupid bitch. Don't fucking talk to me ever again. And don't you dare tell him I spoke to you, or I'll—"

"You'll what?" Andrés interrupted the man, his voice deadly calm.

My captor had approached far too quietly, appearing in the open doorway out of nowhere. The man paled and swallowed hard before slowly turning to face Andrés.

"She was asking for help," he said quickly, his voice hitching. "I was just saying—"

Andrés took a menacing step toward him. "You were threatening her. You were looking at her. I told you not to look at her. You're lucky she's covered. Do you know what I do to men who look at what's mine?"

The boy shook his head and retreated back into the bedroom, moving toward me. He didn't make it two steps before Andrés' hand closed around his upper arm, vise-like. He jerked the boy's body toward his, getting into his personal space.

"Look at her again, and you'll lose an eye," Andrés said softly. "Threaten her again, and it'll be the last thing you ever do. You're relieved of your duties. Never come into my quarters again."

He nodded, but he couldn't seem to manage to speak. Andrés released him, pushing him away in disgust.

"Leave," he bit out.

The boy hastened to comply, practically tripping over his feet to get to his cart and out of the bedroom. He disappeared further into the suite, Andrés' imposing form blocking my view.

I couldn't have watched him leave, anyway. All my focus was on the terrifying man who'd just threatened to mutilate and murder one of the men who worked for him. Lauren had said Andrés was *nice*. The woman was obviously even more warped than I'd imagined. My captor radiated cold fury, his scarred face twisted in anger.

I shrank back, scooting across the bed until the chain jerked at my collar.

He sucked in a deep breath, and his fierce countenance eased as his eyes focused on my fearful expression. He took a step toward me, and I tried to move farther away. But all I accomplished was pulling at the leather around my neck. There was nowhere to go, no way to escape.

He reached for me, and I flinched. That didn't seem to concern him. He cupped my cheek in his big hand, hooking his thumb beneath my jaw so I couldn't look away.

"Calm, *cosita*," he murmured, stroking my hair with his free hand. "You're safe. He won't hurt you."

"I'm not worried about *him*," I said shrilly. "You're the one who just calmly threatened to cut out someone's eye. And I'm chained to your bed. Naked. I'm freaking afraid of *you*." I brought my hands up to push him away, but he caught my wrists and pinned them behind me at the small of my back. He held them there with one hand and resumed stroking my hair.

"He's lucky I didn't kill him for threatening you," Andrés responded. "I ordered him not to speak to you or look at you. He did both. I can't have a man in my organization who thinks he can disobey me."

“So you murder anyone who defies you?” I asked, my voice shaking. *I’d* defied him. I’d tried to kill him.

“I will never harm you, Samantha,” he said in reassuring tones as he continued to pet me. “No matter how defiant you may be.” A smile ghosted around his lips.

“But you spanked me,” I argued. “You said you want to punish me.”

“Only to correct your misbehavior,” he said, sounding as though it were the most rational response in the world. “I’d never do anything that would damage you. But yes, I won’t hesitate to punish you when you deserve it.”

“I don’t *deserve* any of this,” I countered hotly, struggling uselessly against his grip.

His gaze turned inward, his lips thinning. “Maybe not. But you’re mine now, and there’s no going back. I’m keeping you, and you’re my responsibility.”

“I’m not yours,” I insisted. “And you’re not *keeping* me. You said that’s your brother’s decision. Did you tell him you believe I’m FBI? Have you both seen reason and decided to let me go before the Bureau comes for you?”

“I’ll let him discuss this with you,” he replied.

He released my wrists and wrapped one hand behind my nape, pulling me toward him. I was forced to scramble across the mattress and get to my feet.

“Behave,” he ordered, squeezing my neck slightly in warning. Then he called out in Spanish.

Cristian Moreno appeared in the doorway, flanked by two men who were nearly as massive as Andrés.

My stomach dropped, and a horrible memory of Cristian’s knife slicing through my flesh flashed across my mind. I took a small step back, not realizing I was positioning myself closer to Andrés.

His grip on my neck eased, his fingers threading through my hair to massage my scalp. It helped ground me in the

present, saving me from being thrust back into panic and choking terror.

Cristian's dark eyes—so like his brother's—watched my movements, coldly calculating. It occurred to me that I'd moved away from one tormentor to find shelter with another, and I eased away from Andrés. His fingers tightened in my hair, holding me firmly in place. He waited a few seconds, then released the tension and resumed massaging me once he was certain that I wasn't going to struggle.

“You are Samantha Browning,” Cristian announced. “Andrés is convinced, and I had my people look into your story. You're a fed.” He sneered the last.

I lifted my chin. “So you'll let me go?”

“No.”

“But you have to,” I insisted in a rush. “If you keep me here, my friends—”

“They won't find you here,” he cut me off with cool certainty. “One of my shell corporations owns this building. They won't trace it back to me.”

“They know I was investigating your organization before you took me,” I said. “They'll suspect you're behind my disappearance. They'll follow you until you lead them to me.”

“Then it's a good thing I don't come here often. This is my little brother's home.”

Home? I thought, baffled. This entire freaking building was Andrés' *home*? How much money did the Moreno family have at their disposal?

“Besides,” he continued. “It's not like I'm stupid enough to get out of my car out on the street. And your people don't have surveillance cameras in our private garage for this building. Which, I'll remind you, they have no idea I own. So, Samantha Browning, no one is going to find you.”

My heart sank. If anyone could hack into Cristian Moreno's life and trace his financials and properties, it was

me. And I was trapped here, isolated from the Bureau and completely cut off from technology.

“You’re going to kill me,” I surmised, my blood running cold. There was no reason to keep me around anymore. He’d checked into my story, confirmed my identity, and he still didn’t care that I was FBI. He wasn’t intimidated in the least.

“No,” he said again. “You’re going to work for me from now on.”

“What?” I asked, all the air leaving my lungs.

“You’re going to erase all the evidence the FBI has on me. You will protect me and my business from them. If you do, I’ll let you live.”

A staunch refusal teased at the tip of my tongue, but I held it back. If he wanted me to log into the FBI database, that meant he’d have to give me access to the internet. I could get a message to Dex.

“Okay,” I agreed quickly. “I’ll need a computer.”

Too quickly.

He laughed, a hard, cold sound. “Do you think I’m a fool? You’ll contact the feds as soon as you get online. Now, I could just threaten to kill you if you try, but then you’d be useless to me if you’re dead. So, I’m going to leave you with my brother for a while longer. I’m sure he’ll break you in for me. He’s so good at that.”

Andrés growled, and his fingers tightened in my hair. He bit out something in Spanish, too fast for me to catch a single word.

Cristian smirked. “All right, *hermanito*,” he drawled. “You can keep this one. Just make sure she’s useful to me, and we won’t have any problems.”

“Give me a month,” Andrés replied, resuming the calm, assured demeanor that so unnerved me.

“You can have three weeks,” Cristian countered. “I don’t have time for you to play with your new toy. Break her, or I’ll find another way to ensure her cooperation.”

Andrés nodded his agreement, as though their discussion of my fate wasn't horrifying enough to make nausea curl in my stomach.

"You can't do this to me," I managed faintly.

Andrés' fingers hooked through the back of the collar, pulling it tight around my throat. I could still breathe, but I was very aware of his control.

"Quiet, *cosita*," he commanded softly. "It's done."

The world blurred with my tears, and I could barely make out Cristian's suit-clad form retreating from the suite, his guards in tow. When they were out of sight, my tormentor pulled me against his hard body, and I sobbed into his chest.

CHAPTER 6

“You haven’t eaten, *sirenita*,” he murmured as he stroked his big hand up and down my back.

I sniffled against him, collecting my thoughts as my wits returned. I tried to push away from him, but his arms firmed around me, trapping me against his hard body. He allowed me just enough space so I could lift my face to glower up at him.

“I didn’t want to be drugged again,” I said hotly, a clear accusation.

“I don’t need to drug you to keep you compliant.” His lips twisted in distaste. “I wouldn’t do that.”

“You drugged me last night,” I reminded him.

He frowned at me. “You were hurting. I was sparing you more pain. Would you have preferred to suffer?”

“Yes,” I defied him. “Then I could have at least kept the dignity of my clothing. You stripped me as soon as I was unconscious.”

His brows rose. “Do you really think you’d still be wearing clothes if I didn’t want you to? You can’t hide from me, Samantha.”

His fingers fisted in the sheet at my lower back, and he pulled at the soft fabric until it loosened and slid down my body. I twisted in his hold, struggling to cover myself. But my movements only made the sheet shimmy down my legs, leaving me completely bare against my captor. He still wore his sharply-tailored suit. The dichotomy of power was

painfully obvious: he was fully dressed, while I was writhing naked in his arms, a collar still locked around my throat in a sign of his ownership.

“You shouldn’t have covered yourself,” he reprimanded.

“So you would have paraded me naked in front of everyone? In front of your brother? How fucked up is your family?”

His jaw firmed. “I would have covered you before I invited Cristian in. I don’t let other men look at what’s mine.”

I shoved at his chest, accomplishing nothing. “I’m not your property.”

His hand fisted in my hair at my nape, tugging my head back and trapping me beneath his black stare. “You could be,” he said smoothly. “I could make you my plaything, my eager little fucktoy. And I think you would be eager, Samantha. Your body aches to be touched.”

I squirmed against him, my blood pounding through my veins. “I don’t want to be your...” The words died on my tongue. They were so vile and vulgar, I couldn’t bear to repeat them. “I don’t want you to touch me,” I managed.

“You do,” he countered coolly. “But you’re still afraid. You’re so innocent, you’re scared for me to touch your little pussy. That ends now. Your innocence is mine. Your pleasure is mine. You will accept my touch.”

“I won’t,” I hissed. “I won’t invite you to rape me.”

“I will never rape you,” he replied calmly. “And I won’t fuck you at your invitation. You will beg and weep for my cock before I give you what you want.”

I shuddered in his arms, completely overwhelmed. In the space of a day, I’d been stripped of my rights, my dignity. And the way he spoke about breaking me with such calm assurance rocked me to my core. In his mind, my surrender was a foregone conclusion.

Fuck. That. He might spank me, but I could handle it. A little sting on my flesh wasn’t going to break me. I glared up at

him, defiant.

“Go ahead and *punish* me, then,” I challenged. “You can spank me all you want, but I’ll never beg you to violate me.”

One corner of his lips ticked up with perverse amusement. “I do enjoy a challenge,” he purred, his pupils dilating. I felt his cock stiffen against my belly. He leaned down, his lips skimming across my cheek before tickling the shell of my ear. “You enjoyed your spanking, so it’s hardly a punishment,” he said, the whispered words threading through my mind, reaching deep inside and revealing the truth that I didn’t want to acknowledge. “But that’s not what I have planned for you. You owe me an orgasm. Your first. I want it. I’m going to make you come hard, so your body has no doubt that I’m your Master. I can give you pleasure. I can give you pain. Obedience is taught through discipline: punishment and reward. It’s time you learned exactly what that means.”

I trembled, my heart hammering in my chest. I hadn’t realized that I’d stopped struggling. He was too strong, too powerful. And his crass words overwhelmed me more effectively than any physical show of force.

His erection pressed against me, thick and hard. “Do you feel what you do to me, *sirenita*?” he asked, his voice rough with lust. “You are so beautiful when you’re like this; your little body shuddering in my arms. Are you frightened? Or aroused?” His teeth nipped at my ear, and I sucked in a sharp breath. “Or both?” His hand slid down the length of my spine, caressed the curve of my bare bottom, and dipped between my thighs. He hummed his approval when I whimpered. “Both,” he concluded with dark satisfaction as he found the slickness on my labia.

He pressed a tender kiss against my neck, just below my ear. My nerve endings crackled with awareness, and my skin pebbled.

“Stay,” he murmured before finally releasing me.

I remained frozen where he’d left me, my body tingling with fear and something else I didn’t want to acknowledge. I watched him with wide eyes as he crossed to the chest of

drawers and retrieved a few items. This time, he slipped them into his pocket before I could make out what he'd selected.

When he approached me once again, he held a length of black cloth wrapped around his fist. I took a step back, wariness making the fine hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

"I like watching your lovely eyes when I'm playing with you, but this will make you more aware of what I'm making you feel," he told me.

"What?" I asked faintly, but I didn't have long to wonder what he meant.

He lifted the cloth to my face and pressed it over my eyes. I closed them automatically, and I felt him knot the material firmly at the back of my head. Panic spiked as soon as the darkness closed around me, and I lifted my hands to rip the blindfold away.

He caught my wrists immediately, guiding them back down to my sides.

"Settle, *cosita*," he cooed. "This isn't going to hurt."

"I'm scared," I admitted on a shaky whisper, the words leaving me without thought.

A low, rumbling sound rolled over my skin. "If I were a good man, I'd tell you not to be frightened. But I'm not a good man." He pulled one of my hands forward, pressing my palm against his bulging erection. "I like having you at my mercy, Samantha. I like when you tremble and whimper for me."

"Please," I whined, trying to tug my hand away from his hard length.

He held me fast. "Just like that," he said with rough approval. "But soon, you'll be begging me to touch you, not to release you."

He finally, mercifully guided my hand away from his terrifying arousal. He released my wrists and gripped my waist, lifting my body as though I weighed nothing. The dark world spun around me as he moved my body and positioned it

where he wanted. My back settled onto the soft mattress, and I instantly tried to roll away, disoriented and frightened. I could hear my blood rushing in my ears, and I was very aware of the heat of his hands on my flesh. His masculine scent infused the air I desperately breathed, until I thought I would drown in it.

His steady grip kept me pinned to the bed. He grasped my wrists again, tugging them above my head. Cool metal snapped in place around them, a sensation that wasn't entirely unfamiliar to me; we'd trained with handcuffs at the FBI academy. As soon as his grip left my wrists, I tried to pull my arms down to cover my exposed body. They jerked against the unyielding metal, and his hands returned to my forearms, pressing them down into the mattress.

"Don't struggle," he ordered. "You'll only bruise yourself. I'm interested to see how easily your pretty skin marks up, but not like this."

His words made my fear spike, and I twisted beneath him. His palm settled over my throat, his long fingers wrapping around my neck.

"*Cosita*," he said, warning imbuing the word. "I gave you an order. Settle down. I'm not going to hurt you."

"But you want to," I whispered tremulously, going utterly still. "You want to break me."

His hand remained at my throat, but his other stroked my hair. "I won't break you. But I am going to tame you."

"I don't want to be tamed. I want to go home." Tears sank into the black cloth that covered my eyes.

"You're scared," he said softly, still petting me while holding my neck in a gentle grip. "That's natural. But it will pass. You have to trust me, Samantha."

"Trust you?" I asked on a maddened laugh. It was impossible, insane.

"You will trust me. You will give me everything. Trust that I will take care of you. I will give you pain, but you don't yet understand the pleasure I can offer. Now, be a good girl and don't pull against the cuffs."

“Fuck you,” I hissed, my terror morphing into rage. It was too intense to bear, so my mind redirected the fear into anger.

“Mind your language,” he rebuked. His hand tightened around my throat. I could still breathe, but he pressed down just hard enough to restrict the blood flow to my brain. I’d trained in how to choke a man out, so I knew what was happening to me. If he squeezed too hard, I’d slip into unconsciousness. Maybe even die.

Just as panic began to sap my mind, he released the pressure. Blood rushed back to my head, and a strange high I’d never experienced soared through me. I let out a long sigh, and my entire body relaxed as a pleasant buzz quieted my mind. All my fear, my conflicting emotions, melted away, and I floated for a few ecstatic seconds.

“That’s better,” he praised, his fingertips skimming along the line of my vulnerable artery at my neck. My skin felt electric beneath his touch, *alive*. A low moan left my chest, and I arched my head back, further exposing my throat to him in mindless invitation for more.

“Stay just like that,” he commanded. His touch left my throat, his heat receding as the mattress shifted beneath me. I was aware of his hands on my ankles, one after the other. He spread my legs wide, and supple leather cuffs wrapped around my ankles to lock them in place. I didn’t tug against the restraints this time. I lay perfectly still and relaxed, relishing the quiet in my mind. This was much preferable to unrelenting terror.

Then he touched my sex, and instinctive fear surged back. My entire body jerked, but the restraints he’d used to secure me kept my body stretched out for him.

He gently shushed me, continuing to lightly caress me despite my struggles. “This part will be over soon,” he said, his voice almost tender. There was something slick on his fingers, a thicker substance than my own arousal. He carefully coated my labia, his fingers dipping between them before circling around my clit. I gasped and shuddered as he teased around the tightly-packed little bundle of nerves, pleasure

lighting up my system despite my mounting fear. The longer his touch lingered directly on my sex, the more intense my terror grew. My entire body was shaking by the time he finally withdrew his hand, leaving a strange heat behind, as though he'd branded my sensitive flesh with his touch.

It wasn't an unpleasant heat. In fact, it tingled rather than burning. I squirmed and tried to press my legs together to stop the sensation. The cuffs held my ankles fast, and I was left quivering and helpless to stop what was happening to my body.

"What are you doing to me?" I asked on a throaty whisper.

His fingers trailed beneath my breasts, spiraling upward and inward until they reached my peaked nipples. The same slick substance coated the tight buds.

"This is arousal cream," he told me. "Not that you need it to feel pleasure. You've already soaked my hand when I've spanked you. This is to help you get past the fear. Soon, you'll be desperate for me to touch your pretty pussy. You'll beg for me to grant you release. Need will outweigh fear. Then we can move forward with your training."

"I don't want to be trained," I protested on a whine. The same tingling had set in around my nipples, making me squirm as my body instinctively sought stimulation.

He chuckled. "Most wild things don't. And you are a wild thing, aren't you? You're innocent, untouched. But your body hungers to feel pleasure. Once we get past your fears, I suspect you'll be a very greedy girl. You'll crave my touch. You've already responded so well to your spankings. You'll learn to respond to positive reinforcement, as well."

"You make it sound like I'm an animal," I forced out, trying to ignore the heat that flared between my legs. "I'm not."

"No, you're not," he agreed, his hands skimming down my sides, tracing the slight flare of my hips. "You're a woman. But you're *mine*. That means you're whatever I want you to be. My plaything, my pet. Your sole purpose is to please me,

to serve me. I'm your Master now, and it's time you understood what that means."

"But I—"

"Shhh." He blew a stream of cool air over my nipples as he shushed me, and my protest ended on a soft cry as the tight peaks lit up with sensation. My back arched, offering my breasts up to him. His approving rumble vibrated against my skin as he pressed his lips against the soft swells, leaving feather-light kisses in a random, scorching pattern across my flesh. A strange, strangled sound left my chest, and rational thought evaporated.

"Has any man ever touched your breasts?" he asked before flicking his hot tongue against my tight, aching nipples.

A rough shout tore from my throat, and I thrust myself toward the delicious heat of his mouth. But my cruel restraints held me in place, and he moved away to blow another torturously cold stream of air over them. I whined and writhed, acting like the wild thing he claimed I was.

"Answer me," he prompted. "Be honest, and I'll kiss your pretty pink nipples."

"No," I said, the confession leaving me in a rapid-fire stream. "Not really. Not like this. I went to a convention once. I dressed up like The Dark Phoenix. From *X-Men*. Cosplay, you know? So this guy was Wolverine. I met him at an after-party. He kissed me and copped a feel. But it was over my costume. So I guess that doesn't really count. Does it? I used to think so. But I—" My lust-addled speech ended on a sharp cry when his lips touched my nipple, his tongue swirling around it before flicking the peak.

Keening, animal sounds left me in a steady stream as he continued to stimulate my breasts, alternating between plucking at my nipples with his fingers and kissing the sting away with his soft lips. My head thrashed against the pillow, and I began to lift my hips up in wanton invitation. My core pulsed to the point of aching, my clit throbbing in time with my heartbeat.

His palm rested on my belly, below my navel and tantalizingly close to my heated sex. His fingers traced little circular patterns just above my clit, teasing.

“And your pretty little pussy,” he prompted. “Has any man ever touched you here?”

“No,” I whimpered, my mind too far gone to worry over confessing my most embarrassing secrets.

“Poor little virgin,” he murmured. “You need to be touched, don’t you?”

“I... I want...” I bit my lip, barely holding back.

“Tell your Master what you want,” he cajoled. “Tell me how you like to be touched. Do you put your fingers inside your tight pussy? Or do you rub your little clit?”

“I don’t. I can’t. It’s...”

Dirty. Wrong.

Dirty little girl.

Something awful stirred at the edges of my mind. I shied away from it. Instead, I focused on the heat that was consuming me, the tingling in my flesh, the gentle brush of Andrés’ fingers against my hypersensitive skin.

“You don’t touch yourself?” His deep voice was colored with surprise. “You’ve never made yourself come?”

“I... No.” Shame made my cheeks flame, but the heat in my sex kept me distracted. I couldn’t see, couldn’t think. All I could do was feel and listen to Andrés’ lilting voice as he asked me the most devious questions.

“So you’ve never had an orgasm at all?”

I shook my head and tried to lift my hips again, but his palm on my belly kept me pinned down.

“Then let me show you what your body is capable of,” he said, the words distorted by his hungry growl. “In the future, you will beg me for this.”

His hand finally shifted down to where I craved it most. One thick finger parted my wet folds, and my entire body tightened as he slowly slid it inside my channel. He felt huge as my inner muscles gripped him, torn between welcoming him in and pushing him out. Emotion swelled along with sensation, fear and pleasure crackling through my system. A harsh sob tore from my chest, and my tears wet the blindfold.

“Too much,” I gasped out, twisting against my restraints. “It’s too much. Please—”

“Don’t fight it,” he commanded, finding a secret spot at the front of my inner walls. He crooked his finger against it. At the same time, he brought his thumb down on my clit and rubbed in a demanding rhythm. “Come for me, *sirenita*.”

Pleasure lit up my entire being, tearing through me with the force of a tidal wave. A raw scream echoed through the room as all my muscles tensed and shook. Bliss wracked my body, my mind. The world fell away as unrelenting bliss sang through my veins, sweeping away my lingering fear. All that existed was Andrés: his touch, his scent, his *power*. He’d wrung this unknown ecstasy from my soul, ruthlessly subjugating my being with earth-shattering pleasure.

My sex tingled as he continued stroking me. Little lightning strikes of residual pleasure tormented me, making me tremble. I fully surrendered to sensation and sank back against the mattress, utterly sated and thoroughly conquered.

CHAPTER 7

Andrés pressed tender kisses against my slightly sore wrists when he removed the handcuffs that kept me bound to the bed. I didn't move once I was free, and I didn't stir when he unlocked the collar from around my neck. My eyes remained closed when he unknotted the blindfold; I wasn't ready to face reality yet.

I continued floating in quiet bliss as he unbuckled the cuffs around my ankles and carefully lifted my body up into his strong arms. He cradled me against his chest as he carried me, taking long, sure strides toward an unknown destination. I remained carefully cocooned in warm darkness, clinging to pleasure so I didn't have to face the horror of my defeat.

I noted that his chest was bare against my skin, his dusting of dark hair tickling my cheek. He must have removed his clothes while I lay boneless and mindless in my post-orgasmic haze.

The world tilted, and my eyes fluttered open when my feet touched cool tiles. I watched with detached interest as Andrés reached around me and turned the knob for the shower. Water sprayed from every direction, multiple showerheads raining down. It seemed awfully decadent compared to my low water pressure, single showerhead setup at my shabby townhouse.

My heart squeezed, and I quickly smothered my thoughts before they could start firing again. I didn't want to think about my townhouse. About how far I was from home, even

though I was located just across town. I might as well be on another planet.

Andrés gripped my hips and guided me into the glass-fronted shower stall. The water was uncomfortably hot, and my pale skin turned pink almost instantly. He seemed to notice everything about my body, so he immediately turned the temperature to something more bearable.

He stayed positioned behind me, and I was grateful for that. If I didn't have to look at him, I didn't have to process the fact that he was fully naked in the shower with me. I'd felt his erection, and that had been terrifying enough.

He didn't allow me much of a reprieve. His hands closed around my waist, pulling my body back against his so I could feel his hard length pressing into my ass. I tried and failed to swallow a whimper as some of my fear resurfaced, despite my best efforts to remain lost in lingering pleasure.

"You're still afraid of my cock," he surmised, but he didn't move away at the sound of my distress. "But you're not afraid when I touch you anymore, are you?"

To prove his point, he pumped soap into his hand from a dispenser on the wall before returning his touch to my breasts. He massaged them gently, and I moaned as his slick palms grazed my nipples. They were still tender from the arousal cream, and he made sure to tease the tight buds as he washed away the substance that lingered on my skin. My flesh tingled, but not as intensely as it had when he'd first applied the cream.

One hand skimmed down my belly to carefully wash my sex, his other remaining at my breasts to play with my nipples. I shuddered and leaned back against him for support as pleasure flooded my body again, the tension at my core building.

"You are a greedy girl," he said, his voice heavy with satisfaction. "I knew you'd be like this. But you don't deserve a reward. Not yet."

A humiliating whine slipped through my lips when he stopped touching me intimately. He grasped my shoulders and

turned me to face him. My eyes darted around the bathroom, avoiding looking at his imposing body.

He caught my chin between his thumb and forefinger, lifting my face to his. I made the mistake of glancing up, and I found myself trapped in his steady black stare.

“You don’t like looking at me,” he said, an acknowledgement of fact. “My scars frighten you.”

“It’s not that,” I admitted, the words tumbling out of me in my nervousness. “I mean, you’re scary. But your scars aren’t why you scare me. Well, kind of, because they mean you’re violent. But this is just a tic I have. I don’t really like looking at anyone. I have to for work, sometimes. It takes effort. It makes me uncomfortable. I mean...” I finally managed to end my rambling confession. Why was I telling him all this?

Because I babbled when I was nervous, that’s why. Especially around alpha males, and especially when they turned their full, potent attention on me to impose their will. I did it with Jason, and I definitely did it with Dex. I could barely look at my best friend under normal circumstances, even when I didn’t have a reason to be intimidated. I was always nervous around him, in that butterflies-in-my-stomach kind of way.

Not the way Andrés made me nervous. *Nervous* wasn’t an intense enough word to express the enormity of what he made me feel. It was why I couldn’t look away once he captured me in his dark gaze. I never maintained eye contact with anyone like I did with him. He didn’t give me a choice in the matter.

He considered me for a long, tense moment, his jaw tight. “Would it make you more comfortable if I told you I didn’t get these scars in a fight?”

I blinked at him. “What?” That didn’t make any sense. “Then how—?”

“That’s enough questions,” he cut me off. “I am a violent man, but I won’t harm you. I’ll never let anyone harm you. You’re mine, which means you’ll be protected. It also means you’ll accept my touch and my cock. Look at me.” When he

said it this time, I knew he wasn't ordering me to look him in the eye. "All of me," he prompted when I hesitated. "Now, *cosita*." The last was dark with warning, and my eyes flicked down his body before I could contemplate further defiance.

Once my gaze landed on his cock, I couldn't look away. I might not have been with a man in real life, but I watched porn. And, despite his scarred body, Andrés could have starred in some of the most depraved videos I'd seen. He was huge, long and thick. His cockhead was purple with arousal, and a feminine part of me marveled that this reaction was for *me*.

"Touch me," he bit out, his control slipping. I gasped when his cock bobbed, straining toward me.

I reached out and tentatively brushed my fingertips along his shaft. His skin was soft and smooth, but he was hard beneath my touch. He hissed in a sharp breath, and I felt him pulse under my fingers. I stared in fascination. I was doing this to him, affecting him the way he'd affected me. A strange sense of heady power teased at the corners of my mind, and I struggled to resist the perverted satisfaction. I shouldn't enjoy my captor's lustful reaction to me.

But it was undeniable that my body instinctively reacted to him, so the knowledge that the balance of power wasn't entirely stacked against me gave me some courage. I wrapped my hand around his length and stroked him from base to head.

"Good girl," he said, his voice more ragged than I'd ever heard it. He was at the edge of his control. I wanted to push him over that edge, to break him the way he'd broken me.

He reached between us with his soap-slicked hand and applied a liberal amount. When I slid my fist back, it glided across his flesh, and he groaned.

"Do you know how hot it is watching you touch me?" he ground out. "Knowing I'm the first man you've touched. The only man you will ever touch. Your first and only, my sweet virgin." A bead of moisture formed on his cockhead, quickly washed away by the cascading warm water.

Emboldened by his words, I used my free hand to cup his balls, gently exploring their shape and weight.

He rasped out something in Spanish that I suspected was a very dirty word. A sly smile tugged at the corners of my lips, and I struggled to smother it. He was coming apart beneath my touch, losing control. The heady sense of power that I'd been resisting finally settled over me, and I handled his shaft with greater confidence.

“Naughty *gatita*,” he said hoarsely. His hand fisted in my wet hair, tugging hard enough to make my scalp light up with awareness. “Very naughty.” He cursed again, and his grip on my coppery strands increased to the edge of pain. It only served to spur me on.

“Make me come, *sirenita*,” he ordered in an obvious effort to take back control with a command.

But the way he pumped his hips toward me to increase my pace let me know who truly held the power in this moment. He came apart on a harsh shout, his hot seed lashing out to coat my stomach, the heat of it lingering on my flesh even as the water washed it away.

His body pressed against mine, backing me up to the tiled wall as he braced his hands against either side of me. He leaned his forehead against mine, breathing hard.

“That’s enough,” he said with a shudder.

I finally moved my hand away, satisfied at the sight of his undoing.

A sharp grin suddenly lit his features. “Time for your reward, *gatita*.”

“What?” I asked, disconcerted by his jovial mood. I'd expected his anger at being broken under my inexperienced hands, maybe even shame.

“Good girls get positive reinforcement.” He tenderly stroked my cheek. “Remember, my pet?” He leaned in so his hot breath played across my neck as he whispered in my ear. “Your Master is training you to please him. You did very well. You’ve earned a reward.”

“No,” I said, shaken. How had this turned against me? I’d been riding high, triumphant. He twisted my victory into yet another defeat.

“You don’t get to refuse, pet.”

“I’m not your pet.”

“Aren’t you? You wanted to act like a naughty *gatita*. You will be tamed, Samantha.”

“I won’t.”

“Your little pussy wouldn’t get so wet for me if you didn’t want this. You wouldn’t have come so hard while you were bound and at my mercy.”

“That’s so fucked up. You’re—”

His hand clamped over my mouth, his long fingers pressing into my cheek almost to the point of pain.

“We’re going to have to work on that tongue of yours. I have a pretty gag that I think will suit you well until you can learn to mind your language when you speak to me.”

My eyes flew wide, and I tried to shake my head. His hand firmed on my face, stilling the sign of my denial.

“Hush now, *gatita*. It’s time for your reward.”

I brought my hands up and wrapped them around his forearm, clawing at his flesh with my fingernails in an attempt to free my mouth from his cruel hold.

He growled and released me, but only long enough so he could roughly turn my body to face the wall. His weight pressed against my back, pushing my breasts hard against the cold tiles. I yelped and tried to push back, but my hands slipped uselessly against the slick wall. He wrapped one hand around my throat, squeezing. This time, he applied enough pressure to restrict my airflow. I thrashed on wild instinct, but his weight kept me pinned and powerless.

Please, I tried to beg him to release me, but the word couldn’t make it past his hold on my throat, and a strangled sound emerged instead.

“Breathe, *cosita*,” he urged, not letting up.

I barely managed to suck in shallow breaths. My head began to spin, and I stopped fighting as the strength seeped out of my body. His free hand dipped between my legs, gathering up the slick arousal that inexplicably coated my inner thighs. He moved his touch farther back, trailing his slick forefinger over a sensitive patch of skin between my sex and asshole, then...

No. My lips formed the word, but I wasn't capable of wasting any air to make a sound of protest.

His finger pressed against my tight ring of muscles. I clenched, resisting. He nipped at my earlobe, and the little jolt of pain sizzled through me, reaching my core and making it throb. As it contracted, his finger slipped inside me. He barely penetrated me, but I felt horribly full and utterly trapped. My knees began to tremble as I continued to struggle for oxygen.

“Are you sorry for scratching me?” he asked calmly, as though he wasn't degrading me in a way I'd never wanted to experience.

I managed a thin whine and nodded slightly.

He kissed the hollow beneath my ear. “Good girl. Don't do it again.”

He pressed forward, sealing the rebuke by sliding his long finger all the way inside me. My muscles rippled around him, burning as my body tried to resist the intrusion. Something dark stirred low in my belly, tension coiling at my core.

He finally released my throat, and I gasped in a desperate breath. The rush of oxygen went straight to my head, and the world spun around me. Remaining seated deep inside my most forbidden area, he caught my falling weight with his other strong arm around my waist. I sagged back against him, sucking in air. His hand splayed beneath my bottom, bracing me as a second finger found my wet channel. He eased inside my sex, and I could feel him filling me everywhere.

It was too much to bear, too humiliating. Too stimulating. Rational thought had been obliterated in the wake of the

primal imperative to breathe, to survive. My body could only shake and submit to what he was doing to me. All my sensitive nerve endings lit up, and the tension that had been coiling deep inside me released, leaving me on a ragged shout. My muscles clenched around his fingers as I found shameful ecstasy under his ruthless touch. He gently pumped in and out of me, making my nerve endings crackle and dance. Sparks of pleasure raced up my spine to flood my mind, overwhelming all my senses.

The spinning world flickered around me, darkness sliding across my vision. I surrendered to it, closing my eyes as he continued to hold my weakened body upright.

His fingers finally slid out of me, leaving me feeling strangely empty; hollowed out and utterly defeated. The water stopped falling around us, and he lifted me up in his arms again as though I weighed nothing. He was so strong, so hard and unyielding. A fine tremor raced through my exhausted body, the only movement I was capable of.

He wrapped a warm, fluffy towel around me. I snuggled into it, hiding my face between the soft fabric and his sculpted chest, as though I could simply sink into the warmth and disappear. Anything would be preferable to facing the shame of what he'd just done to me.

I'd thought I'd regained some power over him when I'd made him come, but he'd quickly demonstrated how powerless I truly was. His punitive touch had brought me pleasure, pleasure I hadn't wanted but had been wrought from my body by his masterful hands regardless of my wishes.

He'd claimed he wasn't going to break me, but in that moment, I felt completely shattered.

CHAPTER 8

Andrés carefully dried my body, rubbing the soft towel over every inch of my sensitized skin. My nipples and sex ached, and my bottom burned slightly, a constant, cruel reminder of how he'd subjugated my entire being.

When he was satisfied that I was dry, something tugged at my damp hair. I registered the rhythmic pull of brush bristles through my hair, massaging my scalp. It made my head tingle, a pleasant sensation I tried to deny.

"I'm not a doll," I mumbled, keeping my eyes closed to avoid facing reality. I remained still and compliant where he'd placed me in his lap. I couldn't muster up the will to fight.

"Hmmm," he mused, continuing to run the brush through my hair in methodical strokes. "You're not a pet. You're not a doll. Is there anything you do want to be, *sirenita*?"

"What does that mean?" I asked instead of answering his question. He was teasing me, and I refused to rise to it. If I did, he'd likely devise another devious way to prove to me that I would be whatever he wanted me to be.

"A literal translation would be *little mermaid*," he said.

I finally opened my eyes to study his face. Was he mocking me?

"You mean, like the Disney princess?" I asked.

He chuckled. "It's an endearment. It means I find you beautiful." He traced the line of my lower lip with his thumb. "Sensual."

I blinked at him. No one had ever called me beautiful. And definitely not sensual. I was the awkward geek who was barely worth noticing, unless it was to make fun of me.

“You don’t believe me,” he said, reading my confusion. “Do you think my cock would get so hard for you if I didn’t want you? You are lovely, *sirenita*.”

“You’re trying to manipulate me,” I accused, not quite believing him. Maybe he got turned on by dominating women, and my physical appearance had nothing to do with it. That made much more sense. “It won’t work.”

“It already is working. I’m not lying when I say I find you beautiful. But everything I do to you is a manipulation, and I won’t pretend otherwise. You’re being very sweet and well behaved right now. If I’d known how obedient you’d become when I played with your ass, I would have filled it sooner. You came so hard for me. I thought you were going to pass out. I think you enjoy being manipulated, being shaped into my good girl.”

I scowled at him. “You’re a bastard.”

“That might be true. But you will learn to speak to me with respect. There’s a consequence coming for that, but right now, you need to eat.”

I almost said I wasn’t hungry, the urge to defy him automatic. But my stomach was very aware that I hadn’t eaten in over twenty-four hours. I still didn’t know what time it was, but it was now dark outside. That meant I hadn’t eaten since dinner the night before, because I hadn’t trusted the breakfast Andrés had sent up for me.

“Okay,” I agreed, trying to sound resentful and failing. I was far too hungry.

Now that I’d finally opened my eyes, I noted that Andrés was seated on the edge of the bed, with me perched on his lap. He reached around me and tugged at the small food cart. A silver dome covered the plate, and when he removed it, I realized that my wasted breakfast had been removed and replaced with a mouthwatering steak.

My cheeks heated even as my stomach growled. That meant someone had come into the bedroom while we were in the shower. Had they heard my lustful scream?

I didn't have much time to worry over it, because my basic needs were too insistent. A jug of water sat on the cart beside two empty glasses. I reached for it and filled one, immediately gulping it down.

"You didn't drink anything today, either?" Andrés asked, his voice heavy with disapproval.

"I thought you might drug me again," I reminded him.

"And you believe I won't now?"

I shrugged. "I figured that steak is huge enough for two people. There are two glasses, one water jug. So I'm assuming that you're not going to drug yourself too, you know?" I poured another glass and drank half of it before moving to pick up the utensils. I was so famished, all I could think about was cutting into the steak and getting some food in my system. No wonder I'd been so weak in my attempts to fight my captor.

He caught my hand before I could touch the silverware and guided it back to my lap. He also took the water glass from me and set it down beside the plate.

"Do you really think I'm going to let you handle a fork and knife?" he asked drily.

I glowered at him. "I just want some fucking food. I'm starving."

He frowned, his scar deepening to a disapproving slash. "I will train your tongue later," he warned. "And I'm sure you're hungry, which is more pressing than your punishment. I will always see to your wellbeing, Samantha, but don't continue to test me."

"I wasn't going to use the knife on you," I said honestly. "I just want to eat."

"I'm going to take care of you, *cosita*. Trust me."

I snorted. “You’re not really giving me a choice. Is it trust if you don’t have a choice? Probably not. No, I don’t think it is. Nope. Definitely not.”

He studied me for a moment, something like a smile tugging at the corners of his lips. “Do you always speak this way?”

“What way?”

“You talk very fast. Like you’re speaking every thought that comes into your head as it comes to you. Are you doing it because you’re nervous around me? Is this the same as why you don’t like looking at people?”

“I mean, I guess,” I admitted. “But I don’t talk like this because I’m nervous. Well, I guess it’s worse when I’m nervous. I just have a lot of thoughts, and they kind of pop out, like you said. My brain is really busy all the time. Like, my thoughts never slow down. I can’t focus on only one thing at a time, unless it’s really challenging.”

“You focus on me quite intently,” he said, grinning with smug satisfaction. “Does that mean you find me *challenging*?”

“It means I find you terrifying,” I shot back, but there was less malice in my tone than I’d intended. There was something odd about speaking to him so earnestly. I’d never been able to hold back vocalizing my thoughts when pressed by a domineering male, but this was different. I didn’t feel particularly nervous at the moment. I was too concerned with my need to eat, and Andrés’ arms were relaxed around me. He wasn’t threatening me.

At the moment.

He laughed. “Such a feisty *gatita*. You’re not terrified. Not like you should be. Then again, I suppose I haven’t shown you what I’m fully capable of yet.” His smile somehow seemed to show all of his teeth, and I shrank back a little. That just made him laugh again, a sound of pure, arrogant amusement. “I promised to feed you, and it’s getting cold,” he effectively ended the disconcerting conversation.

His arms surrounded me on either side as he reached forward and picked up the knife and fork. He cut the steak into several small pieces, then shifted the utensils into one fist. I supposed he was smart not to set them down where I could reach them, but I really was too hungry and weak to try to stab him at the moment.

He picked up a piece of steak between his fingers and lifted it to my lips.

I looked up at him, confused. “What are you doing?”

“Feeding my pet.” He was still smiling, but something darker stirred in his black stare. “Aren’t you hungry, *gatita*?”

I blew out a sigh. “Fine. But only because I’m hungry, not because I’m your pet.”

“Can’t you be both?”

“No.”

He chuckled, but he didn’t argue with me again. “Eat.”

Too hungry to continue resisting, I parted my lips and reached for the morsel with my tongue. I probably should have bitten him just for being a bastard, but I really wanted to eat. Besides, he’d mentioned another punishment and warned me not to test him. Biting him probably counted as worse than *testing*.

As soon as the steak hit my tongue, rich flavors exploded in my mouth, and a soft moan of appreciation left my chest. I loved a good steak, and this one was cooked to perfection. I wrapped my lips around his fingers without thinking, sucking the juices from them as I sought more of the delicious flavor.

“You like *carne asada*?” he asked, his voice rougher than the simple question should have called for.

I pulled back from his fingers, and they left my mouth with a small *pop*.

“I like meat,” I said. “All kinds of meat. If it used to *moo*, I’ll definitely eat it. This is so good. I want more.”

“Greedy and savage,” he remarked, his voice lilting with laughter. “You can have as much as you want.”

“I’m not savage,” I grumbled. “I couldn’t even kill you properly.”

“No, you couldn’t,” he said calmly, obviously remembering my pathetic attempt to attack him with his razor. “I don’t think you have it in you. That doesn’t mean I’ll give you access to a knife anytime soon, though.”

“I’m a trained field agent,” I said, feeling defensive, mostly because I *should* have been capable of fighting him more effectively than I’d managed so far.

“Not a very good one.” He said it like a simple observation, not an insult.

And honestly, was it an insult if it was the truth?

“I shouldn’t have transferred from tech analyst,” I lamented aloud. If I hadn’t tried to go into the field, I wouldn’t be in this shitty situation.

“Probably not,” he agreed. “My brother has his own tech team. They looked into you. By all accounts, they were very impressed. It’s why Cristian let you live.”

“Because he wants me to protect him from the FBI,” I said glumly. “He wants me to save his miserable life.” I tensed, suddenly worried that Andrés might not take kindly to me insulting his brother.

“He does,” he responded in a monotone. I couldn’t read any particular emotion in it. “And you will. It’s my job to make sure you do. You won’t do it for Cristian, but for me. I want you to stop thinking about my brother and start thinking about pleasing me. And you can start by finishing your meal.”

“You’re the one who insists on feeding me one tiny piece at a time,” I complained.

“If you’d stop sassing me, this would go faster,” he drawled.

I narrowed my eyes at him to communicate my lingering displeasure with the entire weird scenario, but I allowed him to

continue feeding me. I ended up eating well over half the steak before he actually used a freaking fork to deliver mouthfuls of the most delicious seasoned rice I'd ever tasted. I might have felt a little guilty that I ate most of the food, but he seemed content for me to have as much as I needed. When I finally turned my face away, he ate what was left.

He finished and lifted me off his lap to place me on the mattress.

“Stay.”

He didn't have to restrain me to ensure that I didn't follow as he wheeled the cart out of the bedroom and out into what I now assumed was a sitting room. By the time he shut the door and returned to me, I lay back on the mattress, exhaustion and a pleasant sense of finally being well-fed making me sleepy.

“Go brush your teeth and wash your face,” he ordered, grasping my hand and pulling me upright.

I made a little grumbling noise, which morphed to a yelp when he swatted my ass.

“Go on,” he said sternly.

My feet dragged across the carpet as I crossed to the bathroom. Moving seemed much harder than it should, my body aching in places I'd never imagined could feel tired and sore.

I shut the bathroom door behind me and took care of my essential needs. An unopened toothbrush waited for me on the sink, as well as feminine face wash and moisturizer. I wondered when Andrés had gotten these items for me, and I concluded that the boy who'd come in to clean the bathroom must have stocked the place for me.

I glanced at the shower. I hadn't noticed before, but a brand new razor hung from beneath the showerhead, replacing the one I'd broken this morning.

“You got a new razor,” I said when I re-entered the bedroom, puzzled as to why he'd let me near a potential weapon again.

He met me with a level stare. “And you didn’t break it apart and attempt to cut my throat. I don’t need to worry about you trying that again, do I?”

My cheeks heated, and I dropped my gaze from his. I could still see the angry red line of the shallow cut I’d inflicted across his chest. He was covered only in the towel he’d slung around his hips after our shower, his powerful form clearly on display where he lounged on the bed.

“No,” I admitted, my voice small with shame. I wouldn’t try it again. Not because I didn’t want to get spanked, but because I had to acknowledge that I truly didn’t have it in me to rip open a man’s throat. Besides, it had been a stupid, reckless plan, anyway. Where did I think I was going to go after I took out Andrés? There had to be dozens of men between me and freedom. And I didn’t think they’d like it if they found me with their boss’ blood on my hands.

“Smart girl,” he said with satisfaction. “Come over here.”

He stood and pulled back the covers, gesturing for me to get in.

I didn’t move toward him.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Putting you to bed,” he said, as though this was completely normal.

“I’m not a little girl. I don’t need you to tuck me in.”

A smile flitted around his lips. “Must you be so difficult about everything? You seem to love contradicting me.” He patted the mattress. “Do you want a spanking before bed, or are you going to be a good girl for me?”

I huffed out a frustrated breath and closed the distance between us. The sad reality was, I was too tired to keep fighting. I’d managed to get some much-needed calories back in my system, but my mind had been sapped with terror for most of the day. Not to mention the other new, intense experiences he’d forced upon me.

“Only because I’m tired,” I said as I slid beneath the sheets.

“If that’s what you need to tell yourself,” he allowed. “One way or another, you obeyed me, Samantha. That pleases me.”

I rolled onto my side, facing away from him, and curled my knees up close to my chest in a protective position. He didn’t comment on my small show of resistance. He simply pulled the covers over me and tucked me in like a child. It was weird. Fucked up.

Warm and soft.

And I was so tired.

“Go to sleep, *sirenita*.” His long fingers played through my hair, and my eyes slid closed.

Without meaning to, I obeyed yet another of his commands and surrendered to my exhaustion.

CHAPTER 9

The mattress shifted beneath me, rousing me. For a moment, I panicked. I wasn't accustomed to sleeping with anyone else, so the instinctive knowledge that I wasn't alone in my bed startled me.

Then I remembered that I wasn't in my bed. I was in Andrés' bed. The bed where he'd bound me and made me have my first orgasm.

My cheeks colored in the darkness. Shades had been lowered over the huge windows, hiding the Chicago skyline. But no light peeked around them, so I assumed it wasn't morning yet. I hated not having a fucking clock. This room was absolutely devoid of even that level of technology. I'd go mad in here without access to a computer.

I'm going to get out of here, I promised myself. Maybe it wasn't likely that my friends would find me. Maybe there were dozens of men standing between me and freedom. Not to mention my massive, scary captor.

But that wasn't going to stop me from trying. It was nighttime. Most of the building's inhabitants would likely be asleep.

That included Andrés, who was snoring lightly on the other side of the massive bed. I'd awoken when he'd rolled away from me, and his arm no longer weighed me down. If I could slip out without disturbing him, I might be able to make my way out of the suite and get to the exit before he woke up.

Once I was in the street, I could shout for help. I could borrow someone's phone.

It occurred to me that I'd have to go out in public naked, but I couldn't risk taking time to rummage through Andrés' drawers for something to cover myself. That would also make noise, and I couldn't afford that, either.

Naked, it is, I told myself, reasoning that I'd attract help faster this way, once I got out into the street.

If I didn't get killed on the way out.

Summoning up my courage, I carefully eased out of the bed, wincing when the mattress shifted ever so slightly beneath me. I paused, barely breathing.

Andrés continued to snore.

I exhaled and began to tiptoe across the plush carpet, making my way toward the door that led out into the rest of the suite. I squeezed my fist open and closed a few times to stop my fingers from trembling, then carefully turned the knob. The softest *snick* sounded as the latch disengaged.

Andrés didn't stir.

I slipped out the door and cracked it behind me, not daring to shut it all the way in case it thudded closed.

City lights flooded the adjoining room, shining through another wall of windows. As I'd suspected, it was set up like a lavish sitting room. Finally, I spotted a clock. Of course, it was an ornate grandfather clock rather than something modern. Analog. Ugh.

Still, at least I now knew it was three thirty-five AM. Hopefully everyone really was asleep at this hour.

My gaze swept over the room, looking for the exit. Another closed door was set into the opposite wall from the windows. I started to make my way toward it when the shifting lights caught on something silver: an elevator. My way out.

I raced toward it on tiptoe, trying to move silently even as I rushed to freedom. I pushed the call button, which was

illuminated in blue.

I nearly jumped out of my skin when a loud buzzer sounded.

Fuck!

I hadn't heard that sound when anyone else had come and gone from the suite. Why now?

Desperate, I punched the button again, knowing I had precious seconds before Andrés' strong arms closed around me. The angry buzz echoed through the suite.

"It won't work for you," he drawled.

I yelped and spun, backing up until my butt hit the cold silver doors behind me. Andrés stood in the doorway to the bedroom, the city lights reflecting stars across his black eyes. He didn't move toward me.

The doors didn't open behind me. Desperate, I hit the call button again.

Buzz.

His teeth flashed white through the darkness. "That elevator is accessed through thumbprint recognition. The only people who can come and go from this suite are those who have my permission. You don't have permission, my curious *gatita*." He finally began prowling toward me. "Did you want to explore my home?" he asked, the innocuous question made terrifying by the silky smooth tone of his voice. "Were you so eager to see the rest of it? I'm more than happy to show you."

I shook my head wildly. "I didn't... I don't... I just want to go home," I forced out past the lump in my throat. Whatever he was about to show me, I was certain it was terrible. I could read it in the hungry glint of his eyes, the sharpness of his smile. Dark anticipation pulsed around him like a palpable thing. It pressed against me, making me shudder.

"This is your home now," he said when he finally reached me. There was nowhere for me to run, nowhere to hide. All I could do was press my body back against the cold metal doors and tremble.

His hand closed around the back of my neck, his fingers tangling in my hair at my nape as he pulled me against him. He was naked, and his huge cock pressed into my belly.

“You weren’t really asleep,” I accused, knowing the truth. He was toying with me, testing me.

His grin sharpened. “Clever and curious,” he remarked with satisfaction. “No, I wasn’t asleep.” He leaned in, his cheek whispering against mine as he spoke low in my ear. “You can’t escape me, Samantha. There’s only one way out of this penthouse, and it’s barred to you. I don’t have to keep you collared and chained to trap you here. I just like it. I like knowing you’re naked in my bed, waiting for me.”

“You’re sick,” I said shakily.

He laughed softly. “You’ve called me worse already. Do you really think your little insults wound me? I’m going to tame your barbed tongue because I enjoy training you, not because it’s capable of hurting me. If you continue to defy me in this, the only time you’ll be allowed to use your tongue is when you’re worshipping my cock.”

My stomach churned, fear clogging my throat. I didn’t have any words, anyway. What was there to say in response to such a horrible declaration?

“But you wanted to see the rest of my home,” he continued smoothly. “Let me show you.”

“I don’t want to,” I squeaked out. “Please. I’ll go back to bed.”

He clicked his tongue at me. “The time for being a good girl has passed. You’ve been a curious *gatita*. You know what happens to curious kittens, don’t you?”

Curiosity killed the cat. “You said you wouldn’t kill me. Your brother wants me alive.”

His hand tightened around my nape. “This is about what I want,” he growled. “I don’t want you dead. I want you crying out and begging for mercy. *My* mercy. Don’t talk about my brother. Don’t think about him. He’s not your concern. I am.”

Keeping his grip on my nape, Andrés pulled me along in his wake, moving toward the closed door I'd noticed opposite the wall of windows. Dread settled in my gut, and my feet dragged on the carpet in token resistance. I could have clawed at him, at the very least. But my body remembered the punitive feel of his finger invading my bottom, and I didn't even half-formulate a plan to fight before he'd managed to drag me to the door.

"Please," I begged. "I don't want to go in there."

"You don't even know what you're scared of," he said, his voice colored with amusement.

"Whatever it is, I don't want it. You wouldn't want to take me in there if it were anything good. You're scaring me."

"You should be scared. You've been very naughty, trying to escape from me."

"But you just said I can't escape. I can't use the elevator. You don't have to hurt me to keep me from using it," I babbled on, desperate to stay on this side of that closed door. Even though the words tumbling from my lips made my heart sink as I recognized the truth in them, I had to press on. I didn't want to be punished.

He reached for the knob and pushed. The door swung open into darkness. The city lights shining behind us barely penetrated the blackness, as though refusing to illuminate the ominous space. The light had no place here. The scent of leather and something deeper teased through the air that drifted through the open door.

"Don't," I gasped out as he propelled me forward, into the darkness.

The soft click of a light switch being flipped registered in my ears, just before panic seized my senses.

It was like something out of the scariest corners of the internet. I'd seen some fucked up dungeon porn. Andrés might as well use this room as a set for the most depraved, disturbing videos I'd ever glimpsed before quickly clicking the back button on my browser.

Creepy crimson lights illuminated the space so I could clearly see every object that waited to torment me. It reminded me of the time I'd ventured to the BDSM club Dusk on my particularly misguided Valentine's Day mission to seduce Dex.

"This isn't like Dusk," I told myself softly, not realizing I was speaking the words aloud. "It's not. Dusk is Safe, Sane, Consensual." I knew the tenets of BDSM, even if I'd never practiced it myself. "This isn't. I don't want this. Not like this."

"You've been to a BDSM club?" Andrés' voice penetrated my mounting terror. He kept his grip on my nape, but he stepped in front of me. His angry black eyes filled my vision, botting out the horror that surrounded me. "I thought you were my innocent little virgin. Did you lie to me, Samantha? I wondered when I didn't feel your hymen intact. But those can be broken in other ways, and I thought your surrender was genuine." His scar deepened to a furious slash. "I wasn't the first man to touch you. If you think you've suffered under my hand before, that's nothing compared to what's about to happen to you."

"No!" I half-sobbed. "I wasn't lying. I am a virgin, I swear."

"Then how do you know about Dusk?" he demanded.

"I went there one time," I gasped out. "I was looking for Dex. I followed him there. I wanted to see him. I wanted him to see *me*. But he didn't. He never does. I got drunk and left. I didn't do anything but drink at the bar. I promise, I didn't do anything. I didn't lie to you. Please, don't hurt me."

His eyes softened, his scar easing as the tension left his mouth. He didn't release me, but his grip shifted so his fingers rubbed the back of my neck.

"All right, *sirenita*. I believe you. I don't think you could lie convincingly if you tried. You will explain more about this later. For now, you have a lesson to learn."

"I just want to go back to bed." A tear slid down my cheek, and he wiped it away with his thumb.

“I’ll put you to bed when we’re finished in here. You must be punished for trying to escape. You need to understand that your behavior has consequences.”

I started crying in earnest, harsh sobs wracking my chest as fear seized my system.

“Come here.” He pulled me against his hard body, wrapping his arms around me in a firm embrace as he continued to rub the base of my scalp in little circular patterns. “It won’t be so bad,” he cooed. “I’m not angry with you.”

“It will be,” I insisted, my voice hitching. “Just because it would be worse if you were angry doesn’t mean it won’t be bad. This place is... It’s not right. I don’t want to be in here.”

I shuddered against him, and his big hand stroked up and down my back in a reassuring motion.

“You’ll get used to it,” he said, his voice deep and calm. “We are going to spend a lot of time in here. I think you might even enjoy it, in a way.” His soothing tone was so at odds with the horrible things he was saying that my mind couldn’t quite process it. I felt comforted, even though my heart hammered against my ribcage.

“Take a deep breath,” he said, a softly-spoken order. “Good girl. Another.”

I hadn’t realized I’d complied, but my addled mind couldn’t keep up with what was happening to me. My body obeyed, and my roiling emotions began to subside enough that I was no longer shaking and sobbing against my captor.

“Come with me,” he commanded, finally releasing my neck to take my hand in his.

It was a sweet gesture, and he held my fingers so gently that he might have been my caring, kind boyfriend.

A caring, kind boyfriend I’d never had. A caring, kind boyfriend with a scary, scarred body and wicked gleam in his eye. A caring, kind boyfriend who was leading me toward...

I dug in my heels. “No.”

“You don’t get to say no,” he told me, his voice still calm and even. “This is your punishment.”

“You said you wouldn’t hurt me,” I said, trying in vain to jerk my hand out of his suddenly vise-like grip.

“I said I wouldn’t harm you,” he corrected me. “This won’t leave any permanent marks. Although I’m interested to see how easily your pretty skin bruises. I do like seeing my marks on my pet.”

I shook my head in wild denial. “Stop it! Stop. I’m not your pet. I don’t want be marked or bruised.”

“How else will you learn?” he asked, as though the question were completely reasonable.

“I don’t need to learn anything. I just need you to let me go.”

“You don’t know what you need. I know what’s best for you.”

“You don’t know shit,” I railed at him, fear morphing to anger. “You’re fucked up. You’re so fucking messed up. Fuck you.” I continued cursing at him, even as he pulled me inexorably forward. Mostly, I hurled the f-bomb at him. For once, he didn’t rebuke me. He didn’t say anything at all.

Which scared the shit out of me.

So I cursed at him some more.

He barely looked at me when he gripped my waist and positioned my body over the spanking bench. I knew what it was from years of indulging my perverted curiosity online.

But knowing what it was didn’t prepare me for the full blast of terror that slammed into me when he pressed my torso down against the padded surface, forcing me to bend at the waist over the edge so my bottom was thrust up shamefully.

He handled my body with an almost detached air. There were no lingering touches, no reassuring strokes of his fingertips along my skin. He didn’t even touch me with violent hands. Even that would have been preferable to the methodical

way he captured my wrists and secured them with black leather cuffs.

I tried to push up off the bench, even knowing that I couldn't free my hands. He didn't make a sound as he buckled a thick strap around my waistline, pinning me down against the padded surface. I almost wished he'd click his tongue at me in disapproval. Now, that seemed like almost an affectionate act. This man who so callously arranged my body for torment made my insides quake.

I couldn't stop cussing. I wasn't sure if I was even insulting him directly anymore. A stream of curse words tumbled from my lips in nonsensical, half-formed sentences.

He grasped my legs and guided them apart, securing them with another set of leather cuffs. I was bent over and spread wide, my sex and asshole fully on display and at his mercy.

But I suspected he didn't have any mercy for me.

"Fu—" My final f-bomb was abruptly smothered when something rubbery pressed deep into my mouth, pushing my tongue down as it settled between my lips. He buckled the ball gag closed at the back of my head. I thrashed, as though I could somehow push it out of my mouth.

He gripped my hair, wrapping it around his fist and pulling back sharply. My shocked cry caught against the rubber ball as pain lit up my scalp, commanding my attention.

My head was bowed back, my neck stretched to the point where breathing was difficult. I focused on sucking in air through my nose, my impotent rage and fear finally muffled by the imperative to obtain enough oxygen.

His black eyes stared down into mine, and my mind went oddly blank. I couldn't fight, I couldn't shout obscenities at him. I couldn't do anything but draw in shallow, careful breaths.

"That's better," he said softly, trailing his fingers over my lips, tracing the line of them where they surrounded the red rubber ball that filled my mouth. "Very pretty," he praised.

A fine tremor raced across my skin as a strange sense of relief settled over me. He was looking at me again, touching me. He wasn't treating me like an object. The impersonal way he'd been handling me had scared me more than Cristian's knife cutting into me. The Andrés who held me and promised to protect me in his own messed up way was back, and I was relieved to see him. Fresh tears pooled in my eyes as my toxic fear leaked out of me.

"You're so beautiful when you cry," he murmured, stroking the wetness on my cheeks almost reverently. "Don't you feel better now? You don't have to yell. You don't have to fight. Your Master is in control, and you don't have to pretend otherwise. Not when you're strapped down and spread wide for me to play with. All you have to do is submit. All you *can* do is submit."

Keeping his grip on my hair, he held my face in place as he leaned down and pressed a tender kiss against my forehead.

"Time for your punishment, *gatita*," he said, his soft lips brushing across my skin. "You've more than earned it."

I shivered, but not entirely out of fear. A shadow of it resurfaced, but I couldn't be terrified anymore. There was no point. As he'd said, I wasn't capable of fighting him in my current predicament. Surrendering was so much easier than panicking, especially when panicking was pointless.

He won't harm me, I reminded myself, playing it over and over again in my head like a soothing mantra. *He won't harm me.*

I'd survived his spankings, his violations. Whatever he had planned for me, I'd survive this, too.

He finally released my hair, and my head dropped forward, my cheek resting meekly against the padded bench.

His palm skimmed across my lower back, the heat of his body sinking into mine.

"Good girl. I'll be right back." He said it like the sweetest reassurance, almost as though he was reluctant to leave my side.

Or maybe I was just delusional, and I was hearing what I needed to hear in order to cope with what was happening to me.

He disappeared behind me, his heat receding. I tried to crane my head back to watch him, but he had walked outside my range of sight. Bound as I was, I could only move my head so far.

Giving up, I settled my cheek back against the smooth leather and closed my eyes. The darkness behind my lids was peaceful. Far preferable to examining the torture chamber that surrounded me.

Silence enfolded me. I couldn't hear Andrés moving, but I could practically feel his eyes on me. My skin prickled with awareness, but my body remained limp against the bench. I breathed in deeply through my nose, taking in long draws of oxygen.

I tried not to think, but my brain began firing again, wondering what he was going to do to me. Several horrible possibilities occurred to me at once, terrible images of torment flickering across my mind.

Just as I began to tense with mounting anxiety, something cool and smooth tickled my spine. My shocked yelp was muffled by the gag, and my eyes flew open to assess what was happening to me.

Andrés stood behind me, looming over my helpless form. His black eyes glinted in the eerie crimson light as he studied my reaction. He held a flogger in one hand, allowing its multitude of thin black leather falls to kiss my back.

My eyes widened, and I squirmed in my restraints.

I wasn't entirely trying to get away. I'd been curious to know what it would feel like to be flogged. I'd fantasized about it more than a few times.

But this wasn't the scenario I'd envisioned. For one, Dex had always played the hero in my mind. The man standing behind me was no hero. He was my own personal villain.

And he was staring at me as though I was the most fascinating thing he'd ever seen.

"You know what this is?" he asked, trailing the leather falls down the length of my spine.

A small whimper slipped past the gag as my nerve endings crackled to life. I managed a slight nod in response to his question, never even considering refusing to answer. I couldn't have any secrets from Andrés when I was like this: stripped bare and put on display for him. I couldn't hide from him. He wouldn't allow it.

"But no one has ever flogged you before," he said. It wasn't a question. He already knew how innocent I was.

"Kinky little virgin," he mused. "When I decide to allow you to speak again, you'll tell me every depraved thought you've ever had." He smiled down at me with genuine pleasure. "I knew we'd get along."

He took a step back and swung the flogger down in a slow arc. The falls slapped against my bottom, but it didn't hurt. He was going slow with me, watching me with the careful, focused attention of a predator as he monitored my reactions. The heavy strips of leather slid down over my cheeks. They were cool and smooth against my heated skin.

"This is going to hurt," he warned. "It's supposed to hurt. One day, I'll show you how good it can feel. But not tonight."

I couldn't do anything but shiver and wait for him to begin. The fantasy I'd harbored for so long—Dex lovingly giving me a hit of pain to drive me into a blissful headspace—faded away. This wouldn't bring me to subspace. That was attained through trust and honest surrender. It was something I'd longed for, and it had never been farther from my grasp.

I had to surrender to Andrés, but he wasn't giving me a choice. The restraints around my body weren't part of a kinky game, designed to help me let go of my inhibitions. They were punitive, a means of subjugating me, just as the collar had been. Everything I'd ever secretly longed for was being twisted. As perverted as it was to fantasize about my best

friend tying me down and whipping me, that fantasy was sweet and practically vanilla compared to my horrific reality.

I didn't have a safe word. I couldn't do anything to stop this.

When the first hit landed, I shrieked into the gag, my entire body jerking against my restraints in an instinctive effort to move away. The cuffs held fast, and the belt around my waist kept me trapped against the bench.

I stared back at him, silently pleading.

Don't. Not again. I don't like this.

The initial sting of the falls striking my bottom was morphing into a deeper burn, leaving my skin smarting.

"Your eyes are so lovely," he said, studying me with purely masculine appreciation. My wide, shining eyes did nothing to dissuade him. If anything, he was getting turned on. His cock began to stiffen as I shook my head, my pleas muffled by the gag.

A hash cry tore from my throat when he brought the flogger down twice in rapid succession, hitting one cheek and then the other, leaving a scorching path where the thin leather falls raked across my skin.

He paused as I heaved out a sob, but he wasn't looking at my face anymore. He studied my bottom, lightly running his fingertips over my enflamed skin. The contact tingled and stung, and I whined in protest.

"So pretty and red," he observed. He gripped my cheek hard, his fingers digging into my tender flesh. I tried to wriggle away, but there was nowhere to go. "I want to see my fingerprints on your ass tomorrow," he said, as though explaining his actions made them rational. "The bruises from the flogger will remind you of your punishment, but this marks you as mine." He increased the pressure of his cruel hold, and my breath stuttered as tears began to stream down my face.

Finally, he released my cheek. I didn't have time to sag in relief before he brought the flogger down on me again, swift and merciless.

I threw back my head and screamed into the gag, but I couldn't do anything to stop him. He spread the burn of the stinging falls across my bottom and down my upper thighs, painting my flesh with hot red pain.

My entire body began to quiver as my muscles started to give out. I'd been twisting and tugging against my restraints on animal instinct, but I couldn't keep up even that much resistance. I went limp against the bench, trembling.

"Good girl," he said, his voice deeper than I'd ever heard it. "Accept your punishment. You know you've earned it."

My tears came faster. I didn't deserve it. I didn't deserve anything that was happening to me.

But the gag kept my protest locked inside. I couldn't do anything but surrender.

I drew in a shuddering breath, submitting to the pain. As soon as I did, my mind entered a quiet, resigned space. Each blow still stung, but I noticed the heavy thud permeating deeper into my flesh. It was rhythmic. Hypnotic. My breathing began to even out as I focused solely on the sensation of harsh leather hitting my burning skin, the *whoosh* and *smack* of the flogger moving through the air before making contact. Everything else faded: thought, worry, emotion.

I barely registered when the blows stopped. I'd retreated to a protective place in some deep corner of my mind I'd never found before. My rapid-fire thoughts and volatile emotions couldn't touch me here.

I was dimly aware of Andrés' deep voice murmuring a soothing litany in Spanish as his calloused hands traced the contours of my motionless body.

The gag slipped from my mouth and the restraints fell away, but I didn't try to get up. I couldn't have moved a muscle, even if I wanted to. And resistance didn't even occur to me. That defiant line of thinking had been thoroughly obliterated.

He lifted me up and tucked me against his chest. My tears wet his skin as he carried me away from the bench where I'd

been bound and whipped.

I was too exhausted and wrung-out to even register relief. I passed out in his arms before we made it back to the bed.

CHAPTER 10

I rolled onto my back and jolted awake with a gasp when my bottom throbbed. Wincing, I immediately positioned myself on my side. Something tugged at my neck as I moved. I reached up and touched my throat, finding smooth leather beneath my fingertips. Andrés had collared me again. I must have been totally passed out not to have woken up when he was locking around my neck.

I don't have to keep you collared and chained to trap you here. I just like it. I like knowing you're naked in my bed, waiting for me.

His sick words played through my mind as I remembered our terrifying encounter in the middle of the night. I closed my eyes as the full shame and horror of everything he'd done to me washed over me. He'd toyed with me, allowing me to try to escape just so he could punish me for it. He'd taken me to that awful room, strapped me down, gagged me; he'd rendered me completely powerless and flogged my helpless body.

Gingerly, I touched my bottom and winced again as pain flared. I twisted my head back so I could look down at myself. My breath caught at the sight of mottled purple bruises marring my pale skin. Five smaller marks formed a rough circular pattern on my left cheek.

I want to see my fingerprints on your ass tomorrow, he'd said. The bruises from the flogger will remind you of your punishment, but this marks you as mine.

I cringed and tore my eyes away from the brand he'd left behind. I didn't need the physical reminder of the pain for the punishment to be burned into my mind.

I wouldn't try to use the elevator again.

It would be stupid and pointless, anyway. If I had access to a computer, I could hack into the building's security system and override the thumbprint recognition, no problem. But without technology, I was powerless. Andrés had made it painfully clear that I wasn't cut out to be a field agent. Months of training in hand-to-hand combat hadn't helped me at all when it came to facing him.

He hadn't needed to collar me and chain me to his bed to keep me from trying to access the elevator. Even though I was alone in the bedroom, I wouldn't have tried to escape that way in his absence. The security system probably logged failed attempts to press the call button. He'd know if I touched it without him here to witness my transgression. I didn't want to risk another punishment for nothing.

My stomach rumbled, rousing me from my dejected state.

Survive, my body reminded me.

I had to keep going, keep fit. I'd never get out of here if I let myself waste away into weakness. I needed to keep my calorie count up and stay hydrated in case an opportunity to escape did present itself.

I sat up in bed and hissed when my weight settled on my bruises. Even the soft mattress was almost too hard to bear.

Grimacing, I glanced around the room. As I'd hoped, the food cart was waiting for me, the fancy platter covered to keep my meal warm.

I wasn't sure how long I'd been alone, but when I removed the cover, the bacon beneath was still warm, at least. I glanced out the windows and noted that the sun was up pretty high. Was that like, ten AM?

I wasn't sure. I wasn't exactly a nature girl, and surviving in the wild with the sun as my only clock wasn't a skill I'd ever had to acquire.

Even the nearly obsolete grandfather clock in the sitting room would have been preferable, but the bedroom door was closed again. Hell, I'd settle for a freaking sundial at this point.

Sighing, I bit into a particularly crispy piece of bacon. I nearly moaned at the rich, salty flavor.

Andrés might be a sadistic madman, but he was a sadistic madman with a great chef.

I tore my way through five strips of bacon before moving on to the most delicious spicy sausage I'd ever tasted. The breakfast was protein-heavy, and I wondered if Andrés had remembered what I'd said about being a meat lover.

Or maybe he was just trying to keep me slow and sleepy with all this heavy, salty food, because by the time I'd devoured everything and downed a jug of water, I lay back on the bed and closed my eyes.

I was so tired, my brain weirdly fuzzy and slow. My thoughts were still firing, but not in as many directions as usual. My emotions—which should have been spinning in response to my dire predicament—were oddly subdued.

Idly, I wondered if Andrés had decided to drug the food, but I didn't believe he'd do that. No, he much preferred physically demonstrating my helplessness. As he'd said, he didn't need to use drugs to keep me compliant.

I wasn't sure how long I lay there, stray thoughts gliding across my mind from time to time as I settled into a state on the edge of sleep.

The click of the bedroom door opening roused me, and I sat bolt upright. I let out a little yelp at the sudden weight on my bottom, and I scrambled to cover my body with the sheet when I saw Lauren standing at the threshold.

"I just had breakfast," I said when I saw the cart she was pushing into the room. "I'm not hungry."

"I'm not here to bring you food," she said, her voice a hollow monotone. She was looking right at me, but her deep green eyes didn't spark with any emotion whatsoever. I might

as well have been a statue she was talking to rather than another woman. She wasn't here to help me, even if she was a victim. She worked for my captor, regardless of whether or not she'd been brutalized and broken.

"Then what's that?" I asked warily, eyeing the items on the cart. There was a small silver pot and a stack of cloth strips, as well as what looked like cleansing wipes. I had no idea what I was looking at.

"Wax," she replied.

"Wax?" I repeated, still not following. Why would she have wax?

Something sparked in her eyes for the briefest moment. My stomach twisted when I registered it as pity.

"For your pussy," she replied bluntly.

I pulled the sheet all the way up to my chin and squeezed my thighs together, ignoring the flare of pain as I shifted my weight.

"No," I refused, sharp and immediate.

"I'm really good at it," she said, something like kindness softening her tone. "It will barely hurt. I do it all the time."

"Nope. Uh-uh. Not happening. You can leave now."

Her brow furrowed. "I can't do that."

"You totally can. Because I'm not getting my... I'm not getting waxed down there."

"You mean your pussy," she said, eyeing me strangely.

"I mean my lady parts, yes," I replied, my voice higher than usual. "They're not getting waxed. So you can go now, and take that shit with you." I gestured at the cart.

"Master Andrés doesn't like cussing," she said, setting the cart next to the bed.

"I know," I said bitterly, shifting my weight off my aching bottom. Something awful occurred to me. If Lauren wasn't my ally, was she my enemy? "You won't tell him, will you?" I

asked desperately. I didn't want him to take me back into that scary room and hurt me again.

"No," she promised, her gaze softening with sympathy. "Just don't do it again, please."

I nodded, knowing she would probably get into trouble if he ever discovered she was keeping my transgression a secret. He was cruel, insane. What would he do to her if he found out she was showing me the smallest kindness? After my punishment last night, I was beginning to understand why Lauren was so compliant.

"Does he hurt you?" I asked quietly. "I don't want him to hurt you because of me."

She blinked at me, surprised. "Master Andrés is nice," she asserted for the second time.

"Okay," I said slowly, trying to wrap my mind around her warped headspace. "But does he hurt you? You can tell me. He hurt me, too."

"I wish Master Andrés would take care of me like he's taking care of you. You're lucky."

"Are you listening to me?" I demanded, my patience slipping. "I said he hurt me. He's not taking care of me."

She glared at me. "Do you want to be downstairs with the rest of us? Where they dose you with Bliss and make you beg them to rape you? Master Andrés is honest. He's fair. He's kind."

I bit my tongue to hold in a frustrated tirade. Lauren had obviously been driven mad. Through my frustration, guilt and pity twisted my gut. Piecing together what she'd revealed, Lauren was being regularly drugged and violated, but not by Andrés. I knew from my investigation that Cristian Moreno was involved in trafficking Bliss and using the sick drug to capture and sell women.

My stomach roiled. Andrés had claimed I'd beg him to fuck me, but at least he wasn't drugging me. We were locked in a battle of wills, and even though he'd won every round so far, I still had my wits about me to keep fighting. He might

have forced me to surrender to punishment and wrung pleasure from my untried body, but I still had my mind.

“I’ll help you get out of here, Lauren,” I swore. “I’m going to get you out.”

She stiffened. “I’m not going to help you escape.”

“I didn’t expect you to,” I replied sadly. She was obviously too far gone to defy Andrés. She’d been broken a long time ago. “But that doesn’t mean I’m not going to help you. We’ll get out of here.”

She started at me, nonplussed. “I have a job to do,” she announced after a few seconds of silence, as though I hadn’t just made a passionate oath to set her free. “Lie on your back, please.”

I blew out a long breath and complied. I could physically resist Lauren, but I didn’t know what Andrés would do to her if I prevented her from following his orders. I remembered how he’d frightened the young man who’d defied him yesterday. Andrés had threatened to cut out his eye for looking at me.

I didn’t want him to hurt Lauren because of my defiant choices. I’d choose another battle to fight with him, one that only involved the two of us and didn’t risk collateral damage.

I stared up at the ceiling as she slid the sheet off my body, leaving me bare. I did my best not to squirm with discomfort at being stripped. I’d always been painfully modest, even around other women. I hadn’t grown up with sisters or even female cousins, so I wasn’t accustomed to anyone seeing me naked.

My cheeks heated, and I resolutely fisted my fingers into the sheet beneath me, preventing myself from slapping Lauren’s hands away as she began to work.

The wax was almost painfully hot, but she was as practiced as she’d claimed. Every time she pulled a wax-covered cloth free, she’d apply pressure to my enflamed skin to alleviate the horrible sting that followed. There was nothing sexual about the way she touched me. She was almost clinical in the way

she handled my most secret area, her eyes assessing her work rather than studying my sex.

“Done,” she announced after a few uncomfortable minutes. She pulled away from me and started tidying everything on the cart.

“Thanks,” I said automatically. “I mean. No, thanks. I mean, I didn’t mean to thank you. That was totally fucked up. I mean, fuck. I didn’t mean to cuss. Damn it. I just—” I stopped rambling before my social awkwardness could get me into more trouble.

Her hand settled over mine, squeezing gently. “I won’t tell,” she promised. “But you need to be good for Master Andrés.”

“Why?” I challenged. “Because he’ll beat me if I’m not?”

“Because he needs it.”

I gaped at her. “He needs me to be good for him,” I said flatly. “I don’t know what kind of psycho world you’ve been living in, and whatever’s happened to you, I really am sorry. And I am going to help you get out of here. But I’m not going to roll over and give up just because you told me to. I’m not going to behave for my sadistic captor who gets off on torturing women, no matter what you say.”

She shook her head, her shining blond hair waving around her delicate face. “You don’t understand him. You don’t know him.”

“And you do? Just how well do you know *Master* Andrés? What did he do to you, exactly?” Ugly emotions clawed at my insides: anger, bitterness, fear.

She lifted her chin. “He’s nice,” she insisted, as though that was the only way she was capable of thinking of Andrés.

Ice crystallized in my veins. What had he done to her to warp her so thoroughly?

“Thank you, Lauren,” his accented voice rolled through the room. “You can go now.”

I jolted and grabbed the sheet, jerking the fabric over my body. Andrés smirked at me as he stepped into the bedroom.

“You know you’re not allowed to cover yourself, *cosita*,” he said, more amused than stern. “Show me your pretty pussy. I want to see it.”

Lauren hurried out of the room, but I couldn’t focus on her retreating form. All my attention was riveted on the threat posed by Andrés. My body became very aware of his proximity, remembering the pain he’d inflicted the night before. My heartbeat picked up, my pulse racing. I wanted to pull the sheet all the way up over my head and hide like a child seeking protection from a monster.

But my bottom throbbed, a cruel reminder of what he was capable of if I disobeyed him. I’d already been naked around him pretty much since I’d gotten here. Why risk another punishment just to cover myself now? He’d look at me, one way or another.

Slowly, I curled my fingers into the sheet and forced myself to drag it off my body. His eyes went straight to my bare sex, and they darkened with hunger.

“Very pretty.” He made a little rolling motion with his forefinger. “Turn over. I want to see my marks on you.”

I glared at him.

He met me with a steady stare, waiting.

I huffed out an angry breath and rolled onto my front. It felt nice not having my weight on the bruises, anyway.

“On your hands and knees,” he commanded. “Spread your thighs. I want to see my marks and my pussy.”

My eyes narrowed farther, and I didn’t move to comply. That was too much. He couldn’t honestly expect me to present myself to him so wantonly. Not without putting up a fight.

Only, I didn’t have time to fight. His arm snaked beneath my hips, pulling me up onto my knees.

“Hey!” I cried, indignant.

His hand cracked across my bruised thigh, and I shrieked.

“You will learn to obey me,” he said calmly. “Spread your legs. Now,” he added, the word imbued with warning.

My cheeks burning hotter than my thigh, I slowly eased my knees apart while he kept me in place with his arm braced beneath my stomach.

“Beautiful,” he remarked, his voice a low rumble. He touched his fingers to my labia, stroking over my bare skin. My sensitive flesh danced and quivered. It was strange to feel so smooth down there, his touch gliding over my sex in a gentle caress. His fingertips grazed over my clit as he stroked me, and I couldn’t quite manage to smother a small gasp as pleasure crackled through the little bundle of nerves.

He chuckled. “I think my kitten likes when I pet her pretty pink pussy.”

“Stop,” I begged, not daring to say I didn’t like it. That would be a lie. I couldn’t deny that it felt good when he touched me like this. But that didn’t mean I had to admit it aloud. I didn’t want to like his touch, but my body betrayed me.

“But I like petting your pussy, *gatita*,” he said, not stopping his tender exploration of my bare flesh. It still stung slightly from the waxing, but my core fluttered as he continued to stroke me. “You were very well behaved for Lauren, weren’t you? I think you’ve earned another reward.”

“Is this what you did to her?” I hurled at him, my fury rising at the mention of the broken woman. “Beat her and manipulated her until her mind warped? Did she used to hate you before she started worshipping the ground you walk on? Did you—?”

My tirade ended when he abruptly flipped me over and settled his hand around the front of my throat. He didn’t apply any pressure this time, but the warning was clear.

“I’ve never harmed Lauren,” he said, his voice rough with his own anger.

A maddened laugh bubbled from my throat. “You’ve never *harmed* her? Just like you didn’t harm me when you strapped me down and whipped me after mindfucking me into thinking I had a chance to escape? How crazy are you?”

Something cold and scary settled over him, his features shifting to a blank mask. “I never claimed to be sane. Do you think a normal man wants to take an innocent woman and turn her into his plaything? Do you think a good man wants to bend her will and shape her into his obedient little fucktoy?”

“So you...” I swallowed down the lump of horror in my throat. “You did do this to Lauren.”

“No,” he said, still frigid. “The Bliss broke Lauren, not me.”

Tears burned at the corners of my eyes. “So you do want to break me,” I whispered.

A frown tugged at the corners of his lips, and some of the ice melted from his gaze. “I told you, I’m going to tame you. I’m going to make you mine and teach you to obey. I don’t want to see you broken.”

“You told your brother you’d break me for him,” I countered, fear pooling in my gut.

His frown deepened to a scowl. “My brother likes to break things. He likes to take things that aren’t his and shatter them. If I left you with him, he’d torture you until he discovered what you love most in the world. Then he’d make you watch while he destroyed it. Is that what you’d prefer? That I hand you back over to him?”

Dex. Dex was the only person left that I cared about. My parents had died in a car crash when I was twenty-three. They’d been the only family I had, until I’d met my best friend.

“No,” I said faintly, a vision of Cristian’s knife slicing into Dex’s throat flashing across my mind. I couldn’t let that happen, no matter what it cost me.

Andrés wiped away the horrified tears that had spilled down my cheeks.

“I’m not going to let him break you,” he promised. “He’ll never touch you again. You’re mine now. I will be harsh with you. I will hurt you sometimes. And I will enjoy your pain. But I will never cause you harm, not to your body and not to your heart. Do you understand?”

I closed my eyes and turned my face away from his touch. He was basically telling me that I had to sacrifice myself to save Dex. It was a sacrifice I’d make without a second thought, but that didn’t mean despair didn’t swallow me up as I chose to do so.

“I can see that you don’t understand,” he said with a sigh. “But you will. It won’t be so bad, *cosita*. I’m not so bad.” He murmured the last so softly, I barely heard it.

The mattress shifted, and I listened to him moving away from me. I waited until the door closed behind him before I started crying in earnest. I’d do anything to spare Dex pain, but this? Whoring myself out to a man who admitted he enjoyed hurting me? I wasn’t sure my mind wouldn’t break in the process, no matter what Andrés said.

I can do this, I told myself. I can be the hero. Heroine. I can keep Dex safe.

I’d find a way out of here somehow. If I got to safety, Cristian couldn’t hurt me. He couldn’t threaten Dex. I’d save myself and my best friend. I just had to survive whatever Andrés had in store for me until I was able to devise a way to escape. I had to avoid being turned over to Cristian at all costs. Dex’s life depended on it.

CHAPTER 11

“You’re sad,” Andrés observed, tucking my hair behind my ear in a perversion of affection.

“I’m not sad,” I countered. “I’m pissed.”

“You’re not angry.” He cupped my cheek so he could study my expression more carefully. “My angry *gatita* is cute and fierce. You’re sad.”

I huffed out a breath. “I’m bored,” I admitted. I’d spent the entire day alone, with nothing to do but mull over my desperate situation. It hadn’t exactly been good for my headspace. Lauren had returned briefly to bring my lunch, but other than that short visit, I’d been on my own. It had been dark outside for ages before Andrés had finally returned.

“You keep me chained up. I can’t even use the freaking bathroom. Do you know how fu—” I caught myself before the curse word left my lips “—messed up that is?” I finished.

One corner of his lips tilted in a crooked smile. “There’s my angry *gatita*,” he said with satisfaction, ignoring my accusations. “I was worried about you.”

“If you were worried about me, you wouldn’t leave me alone for hours with nothing to do. I’m going crazy here. Solitary confinement drives people crazy, you know that, right? Especially people like me.”

He frowned slightly. “What do you mean, *people like you*? The purpose of leaving you like this is so you’ll wait for me.

You'll depend on me for everything. It helps you feel my control, even when I can't be here with you."

I shoved at his chest, but of course I couldn't push him away. It was more a token show of anger than anything else. I'd already given up on physically besting him.

"Do you know how many thoughts I have? Like, all at one time? If I don't have something to focus on, they overwhelm me. I can't live like this."

"It's only been two days," he pointed out. "You'll adjust."

"I won't," I asserted. "You don't know me at all. I'll go nuts if you keep leaving me like this."

His frown deepened. "If you're trying to manipulate me into letting you walk freely around the suite, it's not going to work. That's a privilege you have to earn."

"I'm not trying to manipulate you," I asserted, although now that he said it, I realized it would have been a good try. "That's what you do, right? Manipulate people. Mindfuck them. Well, I'm not like you. I'm telling you the truth. I can't handle this." I tugged at the collar for emphasis. I was no longer chained to the bed, but he'd left the collar locked around my throat while he held me in his lap for this maddening conversation.

He studied me for a long moment, then his frown finally eased. "No. You're not like me. I'll take this into consideration." He brushed a feather-light kiss across my forehead. "I think I have a way to calm that busy brain of yours. You were so good accepting your punishment last night and behaving for Lauren today. I never did give you your reward."

"I don't want it. Having you touch me is not a reward."

"You're still upset," he noted. "This will help you calm down. And before you keep arguing with me, I'll promise that I won't make you come, unless you ask me to. Does that make you feel better?"

I eyed him warily, not trusting him for a second. "What are you going to do to me? I don't want to go back into that

torture room.”

“It’s not a torture room,” he said calmly. “But no, we won’t go in there. I want you to relax, not get more worked up. No more questions,” he announced before I could come up with another rebuttal. “Come with me.”

It wasn’t like I really had a choice, because he simply picked me up and carried me. He kept doing that, like I weighed nothing more than a doll. I was a toy he could pick up when he wanted to play with me.

I crossed my arms over my chest and scowled up at him.

The bastard laughed. “You really are cute when you’re angry.”

“You think I’m cute when I’m angry. You think I’m pretty when I cry. You’re messed up, you know that, right?”

“Yes, so you’ve told me,” he said, still amused rather than disturbed by my barbed comments. “I’d like to see you smile, too, but I don’t think that will happen for a while yet.”

I gaped at him. “You think I’m going to *smile* for you?”

“I think you’ll settle down and find a way to be happy with me. Once you adjust and accept your place here.”

“*Accept my place?*” I demanded, slapping his chest in a burst of anger.

He clicked his tongue at me. “That wasn’t very nice. But you’re not trying very hard, either. You’re upset, and I’m going to make you feel better.”

“Short of releasing me, that’s not going to happen,” I informed him. “Do you really think I’m going to *feel better* about being trapped with a sadistic psycho?”

“Mind your tongue,” he said sharply. “I’ve indulged you too much. You will speak to me with respect.”

“Right,” I said, unable to bite back the sarcasm. “You’ve been so indulgent with me. Beating me, violating me, chaining me up. You’re so *nice*,” I finished spitefully, using Lauren’s description of him.

He set me on my feet and stared down at me, his dark eyes curious rather than reproofing. “You really can’t stop yourself, can you? You’re not capable of holding in your thoughts, even knowing they could get you into trouble. I think a little discipline will be good for you. You can learn some self-control over these tics of yours.”

I instantly clapped my hands over my bottom. “I don’t want you to punish me again.”

He smoothed his hand over my hair, reassuring. “Discipline doesn’t necessarily mean punishment. Now, try your best to be quiet and stay right here.”

He stepped away from me, and I finally was able to assess where he’d placed me. We were in the sitting room, and he’d positioned me in the farthest corner from the door to the torture room. Relief washed through me, strong enough to make my fingers tremble. I hadn’t realized just how much fear was building in my chest until it finally released. He really wasn’t going to take me in there.

But what was he going to do to me? He still hadn’t said, and I knew he wouldn’t. I’d just have to watch and wait and hope it wouldn’t be too painful.

He was a few feet away from me, drumming his fingers on the highly polished mahogany desk. On the desk was...

I lunged for the laptop without thinking. I caught sight of his sharp grin just before he caught me around the waist and manhandled me down onto the carpet. He placed one hand between my shoulders, easily pinning me down on my front while he opened one of the desk drawers. I thrashed and cursed, but he quickly secured my arms behind me by locking handcuffs around my wrists.

“Do you just have kinky shit stashed everywhere?” I demanded on a growl. I’d thought I was safe from his perversions in this room, but I’d been wrong.

“Of course,” he replied coolly. “Settle down. This won’t hurt.”

“You think I’m going to *settle down* when you basically just taunted me with a laptop? Do you know how starved I am for the internet? For technology? You don’t even have a real clock, for god’s sake, and you’ve been hiding a *laptop* from me?”

His hand curled around my nape, pressing my cheek down against the carpet and stilling my shaking head.

“I need my laptop for work,” he said calmly. “I’m going to take care of some business, and you’re going to be quiet and look pretty for me while I do.”

“Work,” I said scornfully. “You mean drug trafficking and selling women.”

His fingers tightened around my neck. “Be very careful what you say next, Samantha,” he warned. “I know you struggle to control your tongue, but I’m warning you to try very hard. I don’t want to punish you now, but I will.”

“But it’s what you do,” I said, truly unable to stop myself. “You and your brother. That’s your *business*.”

“I take care of a lot of things for my brother,” he said, his voice still rough with anger, but his grip on my neck didn’t tighten. “I do all the things he’d rather not bother with; I deal with the boring details. I keep things running. And yes, what you’ve accused me of is part of it.”

“But you don’t like the Bliss.” The words popped out of me as I remembered what Lauren had told me. Now that I thought about it, Andrés had seemed almost regretful when he’d told me Bliss had broken Lauren. And he’d expressed distaste for drugging me to make me more cooperative.

He was silent for a moment, his hands unmoving on my body.

“What I like or don’t like about my business isn’t your concern,” he finally said. “I need to work, and you need to be quiet. Your runaway mouth is very distracting.”

“But—” My rebuttal was smothered when the now-familiar rubbery taste of the ball gag hit my tongue. I tried to

twist my face away, but that only pressed it deeper into my mouth as he buckled it in place.

His hand settled against the side of my head, pressing my cheek back against the carpet as his fingers massaged my scalp.

“This isn’t to punish you,” he said gently, as though it made a difference. I was still rendered silent and helpless, no matter what his intentions. “You can’t control your tongue, so I’ll control it for you. You’ll be much calmer now.”

I tried to tell him there was nothing calming about being gagged, but my words were nothing but a garbled growl.

“There’s no need to keep arguing with me,” he said in a reassuring tone, running his fingers over my hair. “There’s no point trying to fight. Surrender. You’ll feel much better. We’ll calm that busy brain of yours.”

I wiggled beneath him, but with my arms bound, there was little I could do to escape.

His touch left me, and he retrieved something else from the desk: a huge coil of rope. “I think you’ll like this, my kinky virgin.”

He grasped my right thigh and lifted it off the floor, wrapping the rope around it. I tried to kick out at him, but he grabbed my flailing ankle and forced me to bend my knee. He wound more rope around my calf and connected it to the bindings around my thigh, pulling tight so my heel touched my bottom.

When one leg was fully restrained, he grasped my shoulders and pulled me into a kneeling position. I would have tried to push to my feet, but with my leg bound securely beneath me, that was impossible. He continued to bind me, drawing the rope around my waist and looping it between my thighs, framing my sex. I shuddered as he teased around my bare flesh, trying to ignore the growing wetness on my labia.

He tied off his work and moved up my body. More rope wound around me, passing beneath my breasts, wrapping behind my back, and coming back over my chest. He looped it over my neck and back through the lengths that framed my

breasts. He pulled it taut, and the rope tightened around my sensitive flesh, squeezing my breasts lightly and making them stand out from my body on lewd display.

They rose and fell rapidly as I began to draw in panting breaths. My skin tingled everywhere the slightly rough fibers trailed across my flesh, and my nipples tightened to hard buds as the pressure of the rope made my breasts feel heavy and full.

He lightly brushed his fingertips across the soft swells, and electricity danced across my skin. I groaned, and my head dropped back as I mindlessly arched into him, pressing toward his touch.

I found myself caught his black stare. He loomed over me, a darkly amused smirk tilting his lips.

“You like being bound, don’t you, kinky virgin? Has anyone ever tied you up before? Of course not,” he continued before I could even shake my head in response. He traced the line of my lower lip with his thumb, and I shivered as my sensitive nerve endings jumped to attention. “So innocent,” he rumbled. “And so beautiful in my ropes.”

I blinked hard, struggling to maintain my wits when my entire body was singing with awareness. I should be struggling, at the very least. Not leaning into his hands. I should...

Oh!

He fully cupped my breasts and caught my tight nipples between his fingers, gently pinching them. My eyes practically rolled back in my head, and I moaned as pleasure washed through me.

“That’s better,” he praised. “You don’t have to fight me. You don’t have to worry or think.”

I shook my head, trying to clear it. Of course I had to worry. My captor had me bound and at his mercy again. If he chose to hurt me, there would be nothing I could do to stop him.

But he wasn’t hurting me.

God, his hands on my breasts felt so *good*...

I was barely aware that he'd unlocked the handcuffs with one hand while continuing to play with my nipples with the other. The cuffs fell away, and he directed me to bend my arms behind me, so I grasped my elbows. He tied my hands in place, somehow threading the rope around my arms through the chest harness so it drew even tighter around my breasts.

My breathing stuttered, and my clit began to throb in time with my heartbeat.

His hands closed around my shoulders, and I realized I'd been swaying. I felt dizzy and warm, disoriented. It should have been disconcerting, but I was having trouble focusing on anything but the feel of the braided ropes caressing my skin, manipulating my blood flow to the most sensitive parts of my body.

He placed one hand on the top of my head, lightly gripping my hair to steady me. With the other, he pressed a button that was set beneath the desk. A soft whirring sound caught my attention, and I looked up, past Andrés.

A large metal ring slowly lowered from the ceiling, dangling from a thick cable. I put two and two together from my time spent on the darker corners of the internet and recognized it for what it was.

Of course he has a retractable suspension point built into his penthouse. Why wouldn't he? The thought skittered across my mind, and I giggled. I was feeling lightheaded, and everything seemed a little surreal and silly.

"That's a lovely sound," he said, touching my lips again. "I'm almost sorry I gagged you so I can't see that pretty smile." His grin sharpened. "Almost. You're very sweet when you can't do more than moan and whimper."

My brow furrowed. I should be mad. The most I could summon up was frustration, and even that wasn't as strong as it should be. I didn't understand this weird detachment from my thoughts and emotions, but I couldn't muster up enough concern to fully examine it.

He tapped my nose with his forefinger in light reprimand. “Stay just like you are,” he ordered. “Focus on me.”

What else could I do? I was completely under his power, bound and gagged. Only, where the same sensations had brought me misery while he whipped me, now they felt pleasurable. There was no pain this time. Just the soft, sure touches of his masterful hands and the slightly rough caress of the rope. My core ached, and slickness coated my inner thighs. My breasts were growing heavier, my nipples tingling with awareness.

The metal ring came to a stop, dangling a few feet above my head. Andrés picked out another coil of rope and began looping it through the harnesses he’d created around my chest and hips, focusing on the right side of my body. He then fed the ends through the ring and pulled. He braced one arm beneath me as my body tilted and lifted. A strangled cry left me as the ropes shifted and pressed into me. Andrés had arranged them so they held my weight evenly, cocooning my body as he pulled me higher. When I was fully horizontal, he tied off the rope to secure me in place. He wrapped one final length around my left ankle, causing my knee to bend. Gravity kept that leg dangling beneath me, while the restrictive tie around my right leg kept it lifted. My thighs were spread wide, and cool air teased along my exposed, swollen sex.

I drew in shallow breaths as my entire body pulsed with awareness, my world narrowing to focus on the man who’d so thoroughly bound me. His soft smile was at odds with his hungry eyes. I stared into them, fascinated by the black striations that darkened the chocolate brown of his irises.

His hand cupped my cheek, supporting the weight of my head. I realized it was taking effort to hold it upright in this position. My hair dangled toward the floor, weighing me down.

“I’m going to take care of a few things now,” he murmured. “You look very pretty, *sirenita*. I think I’ll keep you like this more often.”

He finally withdrew his touch and sat at the desk. I was positioned at his side, so I could watch him in profile. My heart gave a little twinge when he opened the laptop, and a high whine slipped past the gag as longing tugged at me. I couldn't formulate concrete ideas about escape, but I knew I wanted to get to that computer.

"Hush now," he commanded, not looking in my direction. "The sooner I finish, the sooner I can play with your wet little pussy."

Lust surged through me, redirecting my longing to other, darker things. I did want him to touch me. My sex pulsed and fluttered, desperate for him to stroke me. I whined again, but he ignored me.

His long, elegant fingers began flying over the keyboard. The light, rapid tapping sounds were comforting, familiar. The room started to go hazy, and my body melted into the ropes that held me aloft. I was floating, euphoria settling over me. The world started fading around the edges. I vaguely realized that my head was lolling forward, my eyes drooping closed. But it was so hard to hold upright, so hard to keep my eyes open. After a while, I surrendered to the velvety darkness, sinking into it. I sighed, relishing the comfort of the pitter-patter of his fingers on the keyboard. I was one of my favorite sounds in the world, and it filled my consciousness, lulling me into a quiet, peaceful headspace.

"Is my pet sleepy?" His low, accented voice rolled over me. "Or horny?" I could feel the heat of his words on my exposed neck as he leaned in.

A pitiful, needy keening reached my ears, but I didn't register that I was the one making the sound.

"I have a few questions for you, kinky virgin," he said, his warm breath teasing across my sensitized skin. "If you're honest with me, I'll let you come."

The tension of the gag eased, and the rubber ball slipped from my mouth. I swallowed several times, my tongue feeling thick and unwieldy.

“I’m the first man to touch you, is that true?” he asked.

“Yes,” I answered softly, still cocooned in warm darkness. I could feel his heat pulsing against my body, and I ached for him to touch me. If I answered his questions, he’d grant me the release I so desperately needed.

“But you know about BDSM. You’ve been to a club. You knew what the flogger was when I used it on you, even though no one has disciplined you before, correct?”

“Yes,” I confirmed again.

“I want you to tell me how you know these things.”

“Porn,” I responded. “I watched Dex’s porn.”

“And who is Dex? You’ve mentioned him a few times.”

“He’s my...” I fumbled to find the right words. “My best friend.”

“Why did you watch your friend’s porn?”

“I wanted to know what he liked. So I hacked into his browser history.”

“Why would you care what kind of porn your friend watches?”

“I love him,” I slurred, the words leaving me without thought.

Hard fingers gripped my jaw, lifting my face almost violently. “Look at me,” he snarled.

My eyes snapped open, instantly focusing on his burning black glare. Fear stirred in the back of my mind, and I tried to scramble away. The ropes around my body twisted and tugged, and a fresh hit of bliss washed through my system. I moaned softly, and my eyelashes fluttered closed.

His fingers tightened on my face. “No,” he said, the command low and rough. “Look at me.”

I focused on him again, my entire world centered on his dark gaze.

“You’re *mine*,” he growled. “From now on, you don’t think about other men. You exist to please *me*.” He reached between my legs and grabbed my sex, thrusting two fingers into my wet channel and cupping his palm over my clit in a possessive hold. I cried out at the sudden, rough intrusion, but his fingertips curled against the sensitive spot at the front of my inner walls, and his palm ground against my clit. “You’re mine,” he said, the words almost savage. “Your body, your mind. All of you. Your pain, your pleasure, they belong to me.” He twisted my nipple, and I cried out, even as my core contracted around his fingers.

“Come for me,” he demanded. “Come for your Master.”

He continued to pinch and pull at my nipples as he pumped his fingers in and out of my pussy and rotated his palm against my clit. Pain and pleasure entwined, tormenting me with the cruelest bliss. Tears spilled down my cheeks, and I screamed as my orgasm claimed me.

My scream was abruptly muffled when he crushed his lips against mine in a brutal kiss. His teeth sank into my lower lip, and his fierce growl vibrated into my mouth as his tongue surged inside. I whimpered and opened for him, completely overwhelmed and stripped down to my most basic, animal self. Rational thought was long gone. All I could do was feel the pain of his fingers torturing my breasts, the pleasure of his hand wringing ecstasy from my pussy, the mind-blowing intensity of his mouth subjugating mine. The kiss was raw, primal; an act of force and dominance. I couldn’t do anything but submit to the sensations he inflicted upon me, submit to his power over me.

My orgasm went on and on, ecstasy lashing through me. My body jerked and writhed, making the ropes shift around me. It only increased my pleasure, heightened my sense of helplessness. He continued pumping his fingers in and out of my pussy even as my orgasm began to subside. I became overly sensitive, his touch too much to bear.

I whined into his mouth, and he finally showed mercy. He withdrew his hands from my sex and my breasts, but his lips

lingered on mine, the kiss slowing to a deep, thorough claiming of my mouth.

When he finally released me, I gasped for air, my head dropping toward the floor. I didn't have any strength left in my body. The world was surreal, and I was still floating; blissed out and buzzing.

I watched with detached interest as he retrieved a pair of shears from the desk. He braced my body with one strong arm while he used the shears to cut away the ropes that bound me. I sagged against him, boneless. He dropped to his knees and cradled me in his arms, holding me close. I closed my eyes and snuggled into him as he stroked me and murmured in Spanish. I couldn't understand the words, but the lilting cadence and low rumble of his voice were comforting.

Without realizing what I was doing, I pressed my lips against my captor's neck, tasting the salt of my own tears on his skin.

CHAPTER 12

The next morning, I awoke to the feel of leather being wrapped around my throat. I sighed and opened my eyes as Andrés locked the collar in place.

“Do you have to do that?” I complained.

He chuckled. “The fact that you still take that tone with me means yes, I definitely have to.” He took my hand and pulled me upright. “Go brush your teeth and come back here.”

“And then you won’t chain me to the bed?” I asked with asperity.

“With that attitude, of course I will,” he laughed. He seemed to be in a very good mood this morning. After he’d cut me down from suspension last night, he’d bathed me and fed me before putting me to bed. I’d been too strung out to think about complaining or resisting, but now my spirit was back in full force after a night of the deepest sleep I’d ever had.

I grumbled under my breath about being kept like an animal, but I went into the bathroom to take care of my daily needs. As I splashed warm water on my face, my mind began piecing together my hazy memories of the night before.

He kissed me.

My captor had actually kissed me. That was a surprise. He’d touched my most intimate areas with propriety, but a kiss was... unexpected. It certainly hadn’t been tender and loving. But it hadn’t been sloppy and awkward like my few other experiences with men.

From now on, you don't think about other men. You exist to please me.

I gasped and braced my hands on the sink.

I'd told Andrés about my feelings for Dex. That put him at risk. I'd made him a target for the Moreno brothers. They would go after him to make me cooperate. I couldn't let them hurt him.

I stormed back into the bedroom, going straight for Andrés. His brows rose in surprise, but my unexpected ire didn't slow his reaction time when I launched myself at him.

He dodged to one side, catching my fist where it had flown past his face. His other hand caught me in the center of my chest, knocking the air from my lungs as he shoved me away. I fell, my back hitting the mattress. His weight settled over me as he straddled my hips and pinned my arms above my head with one hand. My legs kicked out uselessly as he locked the chain to the front of my collar, tethering me to the bed again.

He gripped my jaw, stilling my wild thrashing. "What's this about?" he demanded.

"You leave Dex alone," I shouted at him, jerking desperately against his hold. "I'll kill you if you do anything to him. I swear, I'll kill you."

His fingers tightened around my face to the point of pain, and he snarled down at me. "I have no interest in this man. And from now on, neither do you."

"But you said Cristian would kill him if he found out," I said, panic seizing my senses. Oh god, I'd betrayed Dex for an orgasm. How could I do that?

"I am *not* my brother," he growled, the words so garbled I could barely discern them. "I won't torture you or threaten the people you care about to get what I want out of you." He leaned in close, so I could feel the heat of his anger slapping against me. "I don't need to torture you to get what I want."

"And what do you call tying me down and whipping me until I scream? Is that not torture?"

“If you knew what torture really was, you wouldn’t have to ask,” he said roughly.

“And how would you know?” I challenged. “It’s not like you’d ever let anyone whip you until you cried.”

“You think I don’t cry when I’m hurt? You think I don’t bleed when I’m cut? You think I don’t scream just like any other man in pain? I might not be sane, but I’m still human, Samantha. Don’t talk about things you don’t understand.”

I stared up at him, wide-eyed. “Is that how your face...” I trailed off when he bared his teeth at me in feral rage, his scar twisting into something terrifying.

“Don’t talk about things you don’t understand,” he repeated, enunciating every word. “And don’t say your friend’s name ever again. I don’t want you to even think about him. I’m the only man you should be concerned with, the only one you should think about. Your purpose is to serve me, to please me. No one else.”

“Please,” I forced out, my eyes watering. “You’re hurting me.” His fingers were digging into my face, hard enough that I thought I might bruise.

He instantly released me and rolled off me with a curse. He didn’t look at me as he stiffly crossed the bedroom to his wardrobe and started getting dressed.

“Andrés?” I asked timidly.

He didn’t respond.

I decided I believed him when he said he wouldn’t go after Dex. He seemed furious that I’d even think he’d hurt someone I loved in order to hurt me.

I will never cause you harm, not your body and not your heart. I remembered the promise he’d made me. Maybe he did hurt me when he flogged me. And maybe he did enjoy my pain. But he’d never lied about what kind of monster he was.

Guilt nipped at me. Someone had hurt him. That should have been obvious from the very beginning, given his scars. But I’d been so focused on how scary they were that I hadn’t

stopped to think about the pain he must have endured when he got them. Not to mention the reminder of it when people cringed away from looking at his ruined face. I hadn't been able to bear looking at him when I'd first seen him. What must it be like to have people flinch at the sight of you?

"I'm sorry," I said quietly.

He stiffened further, and he stopped in his tracks. After a few tense seconds, he spoke, but he still didn't turn to look at me.

"I got something for you," he said. "It's on the tray next to your breakfast."

I glanced at the food cart that must have arrived while I was still sleeping. A large, gift-wrapped box sat beside the covered tray.

"What—?"

"I'll see you tonight," he cut me off and strode out of the room.

Curiosity spiking, I went straight for the gift rather than the bacon. I tore off the iridescent white paper and pretty blue bow to find a plain cardboard box. When I opened it, my jaw dropped.

"Wow," I whispered, running reverent fingers over the laminated, first edition X-Men #101 comic book. The first one featuring The Dark Phoenix. It must have cost a fortune. Not to mention acquiring it so quickly. I'd confessed my geeky cosplay kissing session to Andrés like, two days ago. And only yesterday I'd appealed to him about my boredom. How had he managed to get this for me?

He managed with all his drug money, I reasoned. But that didn't stop me from picking up the comic.

Another first edition of the following book lay beneath it.

And another beneath that.

I carefully, lovingly removed each one and laid them out on the bed beside me so I could stare at them in awe. In all, there were twenty collectable comic books that told the entire

Dark Phoenix story arc. It was any nerd's wet dream, including mine.

Okay, maybe I wasn't actually wet from looking at them, but the knowledge that Andrés had been paying such close attention to the little things I'd told him touched me somewhere deep inside. He might be a sadistic psycho, but he could be thoughtful. Kind.

God, I'm going to turn into Lauren, I rebuked myself.

Still, there was no denying that giving me the comics was a small act of mercy. Apparently, Andrés didn't want me to go completely insane from being left alone with nothing but my own racing thoughts.

Even though I was almost hesitant to touch them, I was desperate enough for reading material that I eventually opened them. I knew the stories already, but being able to handle these precious editions in person rather than reading reproductions of them on my computer screen was an entirely new experience.

I barely paused to talk to Lauren when she brought me lunch. She didn't seem keen on talking, anyway. And after hearing her disturbing take on Andrés—how *nice* she thought he was—I didn't really want to discuss it with her any more.

Despite taking my time with them, I'd been finished with the final book for quite a while before Andrés returned for the evening. I'd actually started re-reading #101 and was almost done for the second time when he came into the bedroom.

I beamed at him, high on nerd-endorphins. "Thanks," I said, genuinely grateful.

He blinked at me, momentarily stunned. Then he grinned. "You are even more beautiful when you smile than I imagined."

My smile faded at the reminder of our real relationship dynamic. He wasn't some nice boyfriend who'd bought me a cool gift. He was my captor.

"You're manipulating me again," I accused.

“So you don’t want the comic books?”

“No,” I said quickly, clutching #101 to my chest. “I mean, I want them. I um, actually already read all of them. But I’ll read them again,” I babbled on, not wanting him to take them away if I sounded ungrateful.

His brows rose. “You read all of them today?”

“I tried to go slow, but they’re so good,” I said. “And I process things really fast. I usually do more than one thing at a time to stay occupied. But this was good,” I hurried on. “Way better than staring at the ceiling.”

“I’ll have to get you more, then,” he said, smiling again.

“You don’t have to get first editions,” I replied. “I like newer stuff, too. Graphic novels are awesome. Works by Frank Miller and Alan Moore are great.”

“I’ll get those for you, then,” he said. “And more first editions.”

“But I just said you don’t have to. I’ve read most of them online, anyway.”

“But they made you smile. So you’re getting more. Don’t argue with me, Samantha,” he said sternly before I could protest further. “I’ll put in an order tonight, and they’ll be here in the morning.”

“How did you get them so fast?” I asked. “These had to be really hard to find.”

“There was a store in New York that had them in stock. I sent someone to go get them.”

“But I just told you I was bored last night.”

He shrugged. “It’s not a long flight.”

I gaped at him. “You flew someone from Chicago to New York and back again overnight to get me some comic books?”

“Yes, and it made you smile. So the fifteen minutes it took me to set it all up was more than worth it.”

The full power of what his dirty money could get him came down on me like a hammer, deflating the last of my joy.

“What’s wrong?” He sounded a little strained.

“I don’t want anything you bought with your Bliss money,” I said quietly.

His jaw firmed. “You’ll get the books, anyway.”

“I won’t read them.”

“That’s your choice. You’ll still have them.”

I glared at him. “You’re trying to manipulate me again. You know I’ll go out of my mind and end up reading them if they’re in here.”

A small smile tugged at the corners of his lips. “If you already know this, then why bother fighting me on it?”

“Because you’re a smug bastard, that’s why.”

He shook his head at me, but his smile didn’t waver. “I’m going to find a better use for that dirty mouth.”

He crossed to the bed and unlocked the chain from the bedpost. He kept the length of it attached to my collar.

“Come,” he commanded, coiling the chain around his fist and tugging gently. The pressure on my neck forced me to scramble to my feet.

“Where are we going?” I asked, having no choice but to follow him as he walked out of the bedroom.

“What was it you so charmingly called it?” he mused. “Oh, yes.” He shot a wicked smirk at me. “My *torture room*.”

I tried to stop in my tracks, but he kept walking. The chain pulled taut, and I stumbled forward. I fisted the metal links in both hands and yanked. His arm barely tugged back toward me, but he stopped and turned to face me.

My chest rose and fell rapidly, my breaths coming too fast as my heart raced.

“I don’t want to go in there,” I said, my voice higher than usual. “I won’t cuss at you again. I won’t.”

He shook his head, but the tilt of his lips was almost indulgent. “You will. You can’t seem to help yourself.”

“I’ll try really hard,” I promised. “Just don’t take me in there. Please.”

He took a step toward me. I flinched back. He frowned and pulled on the chain, forcing my body to tumble against his. I clutched at his shoulders for balance, but his hands had already closed around my waist to prevent me from falling.

“This is part of your training,” he said calmly. “It will feel good. Not everything in that room is meant to cause you pain.”

“It scares me,” I admitted on a shaky whisper, remembering my helplessness when he’d flogged me.

Shock obliterated my growing fear when he leaned in and softly pressed his lips against mine. I tried to jerk away from him, but his hand curved around the back of my head, holding me in place while he continued the kiss. It was gentle, coaxing. My lips began to shape to his, and he increased the pressure of his mouth on mine, turning more demanding. My body softened against him, even as my fingernails curved into his shoulders, clinging on tight.

He growled and nipped at my lower lip. I opened for him on a gasp, and his tongue invaded my mouth, sweeping in to claim me hard and deep.

This kiss was different than our first. That one had been punishing, branding. This one wasn’t tender, but it was more careful. A slow, thorough seduction.

He didn’t stop until I was desperate to draw breath, and when he finally pulled away, I gasped for air, my knees going weak as oxygen hit my system. He held me tightly against him, supporting my sagging weight with one strong arm around my lower back. His erection pressed into my hip, straining against his slacks. He still wore his suit, and I was still naked. The power dynamic should have been disconcerting, but my head was spinning from his scorching kiss.

“Are you still scared?” he asked, running his fingers through my hair.

I leaned into his touch without thought. “No,” I said, my voice strangely husky.

“I promise this isn’t going to hurt,” he swore. “Only pleasure today.”

“But I cussed at you.” I didn’t understand. “I called you a bastard.”

“I heard you the first time,” he said drily. “We’re going to train your mouth. From now on, every time you curse at me, you’re going to make it up to me by using your tongue another way.”

I trembled against him, knowing exactly what he meant. “I don’t... I haven’t ever...”

He continued to stroke my hair. “I know you haven’t,” he said, his tone low and soothing. “I’m going to teach you. And I’ll make it feel good for you, so you associate my cock in your mouth with pleasure.”

“You’re trying to condition me again.” My accusation came out more shakily than I’d intended. “I don’t like when you do that.”

“You’ll like this.” His arm slipped from my lower back, his hand skimming over my bottom before dipping between my legs. He cupped my sex, his fingers playing through my soft folds. Pleasure began to pulse at my core. I couldn’t help but respond to his touch.

“Did you know your body is capable of having multiple orgasms?” he asked as he played with me. “I wonder how many you’ll have before you can’t take any more.”

“Please...” I wanted him to stop, before I couldn’t stop myself. Heat coiled in my belly, and my lower lips grew slick with my arousal.

“Please make you come?” he asked, lightly mocking. He sensed my internal struggle, and it seemed to amuse him. “Not yet, *sirenita*. You have to come into my playroom first.”

“It’s a torture room,” I countered breathily.

“It’s where I play with my fucktoy. That makes it my playroom.”

“I’m not your fucktoy.”

“It’s not an insult, so there’s no need to look so spiteful,” he said, still amused. “You’re my toy, my plaything, my pet. And you love when I play with you and pet you. See? You’re creaming all over my hand.”

“Just because my body feels one way about it doesn’t mean I like it.”

“Don’t lie, *cosita*. You wouldn’t have watched all that kinky porn if you didn’t like it. If you didn’t long for it.”

“I longed for—” I cut myself off before I said Dex’s name. I wouldn’t risk that again. “I don’t want this with you.”

“Then why am I the only man who’s ever touched you? You were so skittish at first. Do you really think you would have found pleasure with someone else? They wouldn’t have understood how to handle you. Not like I do. You need a firm hand.”

“I don’t,” I protested weakly. I really was getting embarrassingly wet as he spoke, responding to all the twisted, crass things he was saying about me.

He brushed a kiss over my lips. My head tipped back in response.

“No more lies,” he murmured against my mouth. “You don’t have permission to speak. I’m not going to gag you, but know that there will be other consequences if you defy me. The next time you use your mouth, it will be to suck my cock. Once I come down your throat, you’ll be allowed to talk again.”

I gaped at him, and he traced the *O* of my lips with his fingertips.

“Just like that,” he said with satisfaction. “I’m not going to force your mouth, but you will accept me before we leave the playroom.”

I shook my head in denial, not daring to utter another word when I knew he was about to take me into the torture room, whether I wanted it or not. But no way was I going to take his cock in my mouth of my own volition. Just the idea was dirty.

Dirty. Wrong.

Dirty little girl.

“*Cosita,*” he said firmly, his fingers threading through my hair. The light pull against my scalp grounded me. “Don’t be afraid.” It was an order. “This is new for you, but I’ll guide you through it. You’re safe with me.”

Safe.

I felt myself nodding, even though that didn’t make any sense. All I knew was the fear that had been creeping at the edges of my mind had subsided, and I was grateful for Andrés’ commanding touch.

Inexplicably, I felt secure in his firm arms. When he finally released me and began to walk toward the playroom, I followed him without further protest.

CHAPTER 13

A shudder rolled through me when Andrés flipped on the crimson lights. My gaze went straight to the spanking bench, and I took a small step back toward the sitting room.

“No, *cosita*,” he said soothingly, wrapping his arm around my waist and guiding me forward. It might have been a sweet gesture, but the way his fingers curled around my hip communicated his control. “We’re not using the bench today,” he promised, leading me past it. “Do you know what this is? You have my permission to speak.”

I blinked and looked down where he pointed. I recognized the black device that curved up in a half-sphere, the flat side resting on the floor. It was built to be straddled. If I went down on my knees, the curve would fit between my thighs as I lowered my weight onto it.

“A Sybian,” I answered breathily, knowing exactly what it was.

“Such a clever, kinky virgin,” he said with pleasure.

“But I can’t... There’s not a dildo attached.” In all the porn I’d seen, women rode huge dildos as they bounced up and down on the vibrating machine.

“My fingers and my cock will stretch your tight little pussy before I put anything else inside you.” His hand tightened possessively on my hip. “The vibrations will be strong enough that you’ll feel it everywhere. Your clit, your pussy, your ass. I don’t need to fill you with a fake cock to make you scream in pleasure.”

“That... That sounds... intense,” I said, fumbling over my words. It certainly didn’t sound painful. Quite the opposite. But it also sounded like I’d come unraveled if the pleasure was as intense as he claimed. I’d confessed my deepest secrets to him in exchange for orgasms already. What would I do when subjected to this?

Suck his cock.

That was what he wanted from me.

I glanced at the bulge of his erection, which stood out clearly against his slacks. The knowledge that he wanted me made something warm unfurl in my chest; a pure, feminine satisfaction.

The rational part of my mind noted his size, and I remembered how big he’d felt in my hand when I’d touched him in the shower for the first time.

“I won’t be able to fit... It won’t fit,” I mumbled, my cheeks flaming. I couldn’t say *your cock won’t fit in my mouth* aloud. It was far too shameful.

“We’ll go slow,” he promised. “You can take me. You will learn.”

He was talking about it like my surrender was already a foregone conclusion.

“And if I say no?” I asked quietly.

“Are you saying no?”

“I... I’m nervous. I mean, you’re so big. And I’ve never... I don’t know...” I was babbling, my sentences unfinished and incoherent.

He leaned in and captured my lips with his, taking my mouth slow and deep, until my mind quieted. The anxiety that had started churning in my stomach subsided, giving way to warmth that spread down between my legs.

“You don’t have to talk anymore,” he murmured, pressing a sweet kiss against my cheek. “It’s okay to be nervous. I’ll be right here to tell you what to do.”

I nodded, almost grateful that he'd forestalled the words that had started spilling out of me. I didn't like when my mouth ran away with me out of nervousness. It felt... comforting, knowing I didn't have to say anything else. That I wasn't allowed to say anything else. His command for my silence freed me from my nervous tic, and it was kind of nice. Liberating.

His grip shifted to my upper arms, and he applied pressure to guide me down. "On your knees."

I sank down far more gracefully than I ever could have managed on my own. When he moved my body, I didn't have to worry about being awkward or ungainly.

"So beautiful," he praised when I fully lowered myself onto the Sybian, my wet pussy coming to rest against the hard, cool surface.

He leaned down and moved my left ankle closer to the device. Supple leather closed around it, and he buckled the cuff closed to secure me in place.

Why? The word teased at the tip of my tongue, but I swallowed it back. I wasn't supposed to talk. It was so much easier than questioning him, anyway.

He cuffed my right ankle on the other side. Testing my range of movement, I tried to push up on my knees, but I couldn't rise up off the Sybian with my legs bound beneath me.

He wasn't done restraining me. He grasped my wrists and directed them above my head. Another set of cuffs dangled from a chain that hung from the ceiling. I didn't resist as he buckled them around my wrists. There was no point. I was already bound to the Sybian, and fighting would have only earned me a punishment.

I didn't want another one of those, especially not with the reminder of the spanking bench looming in front of me.

He's not going to hurt me, I told myself. *He's not going to*

“Oh!” I cried out as the machine began to vibrate beneath me. My fingers and toes curled as ecstasy rolled through my entire body in a shockwave.

Andrés smirked down at me and fully removed the small black remote control from his pocket.

“You like your new toy, *gatita*?”

I moaned and nodded, not even thinking about forming a verbal response.

He stroked my cheek, communicating his pleasure with me. “Greedy girl. I want you to keep count of how many orgasms you have. Can you do that for me?”

I swallowed another moan and nodded again. The vibrations rumbled through me, just as he’d promised. I should have been ashamed at the pleasure I was finding in the stimulation, but all I could focus on was how good it felt. I started to roll my hips in wanton abandon. As I did, the vibrations concentrated on my clit, then my pussy, then my ass. I really should have felt ashamed of the particular pleasure I found in that, but I couldn’t stop myself once I started.

“You’re going to be so beautiful when you’re riding my cock like that,” he said, his voice rough with need. He traced the line of my lower lip with his thumb before pushing inside. I opened for him, and he rubbed his calloused fingertip over my tongue. The sensation of his rough skin against my sensitive nerve endings was wickedly decadent. I groaned and pressed my tongue against him, licking and exploring the slightly salty taste of his skin. He started to gently pump his thumb in and out, pushing a little farther in each time, until he neared the back of my throat. I had to focus on breathing and suppressing my gag reflex. It felt so good, and I didn’t want to ruin it.

“Good girl,” he ground out, his own desire riding him hard.

My sense of feminine satisfaction intensified, and my eyes went to his erection. I started rocking faster on the Sybian, moving on instinct as I sought more pleasure. The chains that

held my arms above my head clanked as I undulated my body. Even though I was bound, I felt powerful, beautiful, blissful. The need in Andrés' voice and the evidence of his hard cock sent me flying high. He wanted me. And I wanted...

With his free hand, he reached down and pinched my nipple, rolling and pulling it gently. "Come for me," he commanded.

The little bite of pain sent me over the edge. Heat shot straight from my tormented nipple to my clit, and I ground against the Sybian, rotating my hips as I screamed around his thumb. He continued stroking my tongue as I came undone, and I started licking his finger like it was my favorite candy. I couldn't get enough of the sensation of his firm touch inside my mouth. It made me tingle everywhere: my mouth, my pussy, my ass. Dark ecstasy raced through me, and I shuddered in my chains as my orgasm claimed me.

His thumb popped out of my mouth, and I whimpered at the loss.

"Don't forget to count for me," he said as he turned off the machine, his crooked smile filling my chest with warmth. The expression tugged at his scar, but it didn't scare me anymore. He looked... powerful where he loomed above me in his sharply-tailored suit. Dark and definitely dangerous, but utterly masculine and confident. He wanted me, but he found pleasure in giving me pleasure. It was evident in the hungry way he watched me, the way his cock strained toward me.

He chuckled and touched two fingers beneath my chin, redirecting my gaze to his face. "You were supposed to count your orgasms," he reminded me.

"What? Oh. One," I said faintly.

He tilted his head at me. "That's not nearly enough for my greedy *gatita*, is it? I want more, too."

For a moment, I thought he meant he wanted to come himself, but he turned the Sybian on again, obviously intent on giving me more pleasure.

My gaze riveted back on his erection, and I couldn't help imagining what it would be like to feel his cock with my tongue instead of licking his thumb. My surrender was inevitable. Why fight it? Especially now that I knew how good it felt to have something filling my mouth. I'd never have imagined that it could feel so deliciously sensual.

"You want to see me?" he asked huskily, noting the direction of my gaze.

I nodded and started rolling my hips against the Sybian again, moving without thought. Pleasure was already building at my core, my entire body tingling as little sparks crackled through my system.

A low, feral sound slipped through his teeth, and he quickly freed himself from his slacks.

My eyes widened, and trepidation made my stomach clench. I already knew he was huge, but seeing him from this perspective was much more intimidating. I shrank back slightly, my sensual haze beginning to clear in the face of reality. His thumb had felt good in my mouth. This was something entirely different.

He fisted the base in his hand, squeezing slightly. "You're going to make me lose control," he growled. "Do you have any idea how delicious you are? So innocent and nervous about pleasing me." His fingers touched my chin again, lifting my face so I was captured in his dark gaze. "You do please me, Samantha. Very much."

Something warm buzzed through my veins, something more than physical pleasure. He trailed his fingers over my heated cheek.

"You're perfect. So pretty with your body bound and shaking for me. Do you want to come again?"

"Yes," I gasped out, rolling my hips against the machine.

"You can come when you kiss my cock. Show me how much you want to come. Show me how much you want me." He ground out the words, and a bead of moisture formed at his cockhead.

He shifted his hips toward me, and I pressed my lips against him in a soft kiss. The salty flavor of his pre-cum hit my tongue, and I whimpered against him as my need began to crest.

“Come,” he ordered, pinching my nipples, alternating between them with one hand as he continued to fist his cock in the other.

I shrieked as my second orgasm claimed me, and he rubbed his cockhead around my parted lips, spreading his pre-cum on them. I started to come down, panting against his shaft, but he didn't turn off the machine beneath me.

“Please,” I begged, my legs beginning to tremble. “It's too much.”

“Count,” he reminded me.

“Two,” I whined, trying to push away from the torturous vibrations.

His fingers left my nipples to twine in my hair. “You're going to have another one. You're going to cry out in pleasure while your mouth is full of my cock. I want to feel you scream.”

A small whimper eased up my throat, but my discomfort eased. My core contracted with fresh need, and the vibrations began to stimulate me again rather than torment.

“Taste me,” he commanded. “You can come as many times as you want.”

I flicked out my tongue, barely touching the underside of his purple head. He hissed out a breath through clenched teeth.

“More,” he demanded.

I obeyed, craving more of his unique flavor. His skin was soft, so different from his thumb. It felt velvety smooth as I glided my tongue down his length, traced the underside, and swirled around his cockhead.

“Very good. Just like that.” He was breathing hard, his accent thicker than I'd ever heard it.

I pressed my tongue flat beneath his shaft and cried out as another orgasm wracked my system. It started deep inside me, building until the pressure was impossible to bear. I started licking him in earnest, tasting every inch of him as I reveled in the decadent feel of his hard cock under my sensitive tongue. He bit out a curse, and I moaned in satisfaction. Knowing I had such an effect on him was heady. This powerful man who craved control was struggling to hold back his lust for me. I wanted him to come undone, to feel the same wild abandon that had completely overtaken me.

“How many?” he asked roughly as my orgasm finally started to subside.

“Hmmm?” I hummed against his shaft, and his fingers tightened in my hair.

“You know, *gatita*. Don’t toy with me. How many?”

“Three,” I sighed, rubbing my cheek against him.

“That’s it,” he encouraged. “Worship my cock. Just like that.”

The vibrations continued to torment me, but I didn’t bother begging for him to turn off the machine. I knew he wouldn’t, and truthfully, I didn’t want him to. I was as greedy as he’d claimed I’d be. I wanted more: more pleasure, more power, more *Andrés*.

“Suck me,” he ordered, on the edge of his control.

I opened my mouth and invited him in, stroking him with my tongue as he slid inside. He stopped me with his fist on my hair when I tried to take him all the way to the back of my throat.

“Slowly, *sirenita*,” he corrected me, his accent so heavy it took me a moment to discern what he’d said.

Using his grip on my hair, he eased my face back so only his cockhead remained inside my mouth. I rolled my tongue around it and stared up at him. His nostrils flared and his eyes turned flat black. He bared his teeth in an expression that was almost vicious. It made my pussy flutter, and another orgasm

shuddered through my body. I screamed around his cock—just as he'd ordered me to do.

He thrust forward, hitting the back of my throat. I gagged, and he immediately pulled back so I could gasp in a breath.

“Relax,” he growled, but there was no menace in the word, only desire. “I’m going to come down your throat.”

I moaned, the only sound I was capable of with him filling my mouth. He pressed farther back, testing me. I breathed through my nose and focused on suppressing my gag reflex.

“Good girl.” His hold eased on my hair, and he massaged my scalp as he pushed into my throat. He threw his head back with a roar and finally released, his cum lashing into me. He pulled back so it coated my tongue, filling my mouth.

“Swallow,” he snarled. “Take everything I give you.”

As I did so, pleasure claimed me again, the vibrations of the machine beneath me relentless. My entire body twisted against the restraints, mindless with ecstasy. He finally pulled free of my lips, but I continued to lick him, cleaning off the last of his desire.

He started murmuring in Spanish, running his fingers through my hair as he praised me.

Finally, he turned off the Sybian, and I collapsed in exhaustion as all my muscles melted. He freed my wrists from the cuffs and bent to catch me before I could fall. He went down on one knee and captured my lips with his.

Surprise sparked through me that he'd kiss me after coming in my mouth, but he didn't seem to care. If anything, he seemed hungrier for me than ever.

When he finally pulled away, he freed my ankles and lifted my sated body up in his arms.

“How many times did you come?” he murmured as he carried me out of the playroom.

“Oh. Um... Like, five? Maybe?” I was too sleepy to really think about it. I pressed my face against his hard chest, enjoying the way it rumbled as he laughed.

If that was what giving a blowjob was like, I wasn't sure why I'd waited so long.

Because I needed Andrés, I realized, recognizing the truth in what he'd said to me earlier. I'd needed him to push past my fears and my weird tics and show me what my body was capable of.

I should be upset at the realization that I needed my scary captor in order to experience intimacy with a man, but he wasn't all that scary, really. His scars might look mean, but he hadn't forced me to suck his cock. He could have beaten me until I broke down and did anything he wanted, but he'd ensured that I enjoyed the experience, possibly even more than he did. He'd come once. I'd come... How many times?

I decided I was too tired to worry about it. Sighing in post-orgasmic contentment, I snuggled against Andrés' chest and drifted in warm bliss.

CHAPTER 14

Somehow, everything started feeling routine. Andrés fed me, bathed me, teased me, and gave me the most mind-blowing orgasms. With the occasional spanking if I got too sassy. He still kept me chained to his bed while he was gone, but the stacks of comics he brought me every morning helped me pass the time.

It had been a week since he'd taken me into his playroom and taught me how to give him a blowjob. I'd had to suck him off several times since due to my penchant for cursing, but I didn't hate the experience, so it wasn't much of a deterrent, really.

For long stretches of time in the evenings, he'd tie me in various positions from the suspension point next to his desk. He claimed that he liked having something pretty to look at while he worked.

Pretty. I'd never thought of myself that way. Despite my fucked up situation, Andrés made me feel beautiful, desirable. And that made me feel powerful in a way I'd never known before. I'd always been confident in my hacking abilities, in the sharpness of my mind. But physically, I'd always felt out of place. Awkward and weird.

I didn't have to worry about being awkward with Andrés. He simply moved my body where he wished, and with his guidance and instruction, I didn't trip all over myself. I couldn't get stuck in my own head and in my own insecurities when he handled me. His strong arms and dark eyes grounded

me, keeping me focused on him rather than getting swept up in my racing thoughts.

But I wasn't a fool, and no matter how much Andrés tried to condition me to want to be his pet, I wouldn't cave. Maybe I did like the way he touched me, but that didn't mean I wasn't still intent on escaping him. I had a life to get back to, and I refused to spend my days as the plaything for an evil drug lord.

Evil. I often had to remind myself of what Andrés did for his *business*. He petted me and doted on me, and it would have been much easier on my psyche if I'd just allowed myself to fall into a fantasy of being his cossetted, kinky girlfriend.

But I couldn't forget that all the expensive nerdy gifts he brought me had been purchased with drug money. Money that came from trafficking Bliss and selling innocent women like Lauren.

Not to mention that all of it was a manipulation to *tame* me. To make me docile and obedient so I'd work for his brother without trying to get a message back to my friends at the Bureau the second I had access to a computer.

I'd certainly become docile, despite my best efforts. He kept me drunk on pleasure, and if I did start getting too bold, a sound spanking or his cock in my mouth would subdue me.

For a few days, I'd internally railed at myself that I should have been stronger than this. But beating myself up about enjoying Andrés' kinky games wasn't going to help me escape. I needed my full wits about me, and self-loathing was a distraction I couldn't afford. I could give him my body, as long as I kept my mind. Submitting kept me safe from being punished again. It was the smart thing to do, not weakness.

I didn't bother to look up from reading *Watchmen* when the door opened. Most days, I tried my best not to look at Lauren directly. Her eyes were so disturbing, and the only time anything sparked in them, it was resentment. She clearly would have preferred to be *Master* Andrés' pet to being drugged and whored out to dozens of men.

After facing the reality of captivity with Andrés, I suspected I'd prefer my situation, too.

And that realization was so disturbing, I'd rather ignore Lauren than face it head-on.

I gasped when strong fingers fisted around the collar at my nape, pulling me up off the pillows.

"Andrés," I forced out, struggling to speak with the collar tight around my throat. "What are you doing here?"

Lauren hadn't brought me lunch yet, so it couldn't be past midday. He never returned this early.

I looked up at him, alarmed at the almost violent way he was handling me. His dark eyes were fixed on his task: unlocking the chain from my collar. As soon as it fell away, he lifted me up and tossed me over his shoulder, knocking the air from my chest.

"Put me down!" I demanded, twisting in his hold as panic spiked.

He hadn't spoken to me, he wouldn't look at me. Anger was evident in the stiff way he held me, the too-sharp smack of his hand against my upper thigh.

Fear fluttered in my chest, my heartbeat picking up speed. This wasn't my indulgent captor who cradled me against his chest and kissed me. This man who held me so dispassionately scared the shit out of me. It reminded me of his cold detachment the night he'd strapped me to the spanking bench and flogged me.

"I didn't do anything wrong," I protested, squirming against him as we entered the playroom.

No. *Torture room.*

Because we were headed straight for the spanking bench.

I beat my fists against his lower back, thrashing like a wild thing. "No! Please."

He ignored me, handling me roughly as he pinned my body down on the bench and strapped me in place. Tears

dropped down my cheeks as the false image of him I'd built in my mind shattered. He wasn't doting. He wasn't nice.

He was unstable, insane.

And every small kindness he'd shown me had been a lie, a manipulation.

"What did I do wrong?" I heaved out on a sob as terror took hold of my mind. He'd been harsh with me, but he'd always been fair, in his own way. "I didn't do anything. I didn't. Please."

Once I was fully bound beneath him, he paused and finally looked down into my eyes. His face was drawn, his scar puckered and twisted as he clenched his jaw tightly. He stared down at me for several agonizing seconds, then he drew in a deep, shuddering breath. He trailed his fingers over the leather restraints that held my body at his mercy, and his fierce expression eased. He reached out and brushed at the wetness on my cheeks. I tried to cringe away, but there was nowhere to go.

"Please," I whispered brokenly. "I promise I didn't do anything wrong. Don't hurt me."

"I'm not going to hurt you," he promised, his accent thick. "Much," he amended. "Hush now," he said in his usual soothing tones as he stroked my trembling body. "This isn't a punishment."

"But you're angry," I said tremulously. "You're going to hurt me."

"I'm not angry with you," he replied, calm settling over him as he continued to pet me. "My brother..." His fingers firmed on my skin, pressing too hard. He drew another deep breath and resumed stroking me, concentrating his attentions around the leather straps that held me down, as though seeing me helpless and at his mercy comforted him in some perverted way. "I need to accelerate your training," he said. "My brother is not a patient man."

I tensed. Andrés continued stroking me, his focus shifting to my hair.

“I’ll protect you,” he promised. “But I’ve been too indulgent with you. You must learn your place.”

“So you’re going to beat me,” I said in soft accusation.

“I’m going to train you,” he countered. “You will experience a little pain, but you will enjoy it. I know you will. You like your spankings. You’ll like this, too.”

“I don’t want you to flog me again,” I whispered.

“I don’t want you to be scared of me, *cosita*,” he said instead of responding directly.

“I thought you like it when I’m frightened,” I said bitterly, remembering all the fucked up things he’d said about my lovely eyes when I was crying from fear.

His lips firmed, and he cut his gaze away from mine. “That doesn’t mean I want you to fear *me*. But yes, a part of me likes your fear.”

“Please let me up,” I begged. “You don’t have to do this.”

His gaze snapped back to mine, hard with determination. “Yes, I do. It’s for your own good.”

I didn’t dare say how crazy that statement was. I was too intimidated, and he held all the power. He could do anything he wanted to me, and there would be nothing I could do to stop him.

He placed his hand on the back of my neck, lightly squeezing. In his messed-up world, this was a comforting gesture. At least, it seemed to comfort him. It was a demonstration of control, of ownership.

“You’ll like this,” he said. “You’ll see. You have to trust me.”

I bit back the retort that I’d never trust him. He might be calmer, but his mood was precarious, violence lurking just under his skin. No matter what he said about me enjoying whatever he was about to do, he needed to hurt me. I could see it in his eyes; I could see the all dark things that stirred in their black depths: desire, anger, pain.

Something about what had happened with his brother had triggered him, and he needed me to soothe him. If he were a normal man and we were in a normal relationship, I'd hold him and kiss him and tell him everything was okay.

But this wasn't normal. He was my captor, and right now, he was on the edge of sanity. There was only one way the madness inside him would be soothed: my complete subjugation. Already, just having me bound and crying beneath him seemed to have quieted his more volatile emotions. Next, he'd extract pleasure from my screams.

I shuddered, my teeth chattering as cold terror settled into my bones.

He dropped to his knees beside me, his face leveling with mine. Through my watery vision, I saw his brow furrow with concern.

"Samantha," he said my name almost hoarsely. "You're okay. You're safe with me."

"I'm not," I said, my voice hitching. "I'm scared. You're scaring me. And you like it."

"I don't. Not like this. Please. Don't be afraid."

Please. I'd never heard him utter the word.

"I don't want to be in here," I whispered.

"All right, *cosita*. It's all right. You're safe." He started murmuring to me in a stream of soothing Spanish, running his fingers along my chilled skin as he released me from the cuffs that trapped me against the spanking bench.

A relieved sob heaved from my chest when he lifted me in his arms and cuddled me close. My hand fisted in his shirt, and I turned my face against him as I wept and shook.

He carried me back into the bedroom and settled me on his lap when he sat on the edge of the bed. He held me while I cried, all the fear and pain that lingered inside me from the night he'd flogged me spilling out to soak his chest with my tears.

“Lo siento.” I caught the words several times as he continued to speak to me in low, calming tones.

I’m sorry. I knew what it meant.

That helped bring me back to my senses more than anything. My big, scary captor was apologizing. Blinking up at him, I studied his taut features. He seemed truly distressed, and when my sobs finally quieted, he pressed a tender kiss against my forehead.

“I was worried about you,” he rumbled, his arms tightening around me to pull me closer to his warmth. “I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“You did,” I countered quietly. “You wanted to see me cry. You wanted to hear me scream.”

His eyes flicked away from mine, and he tensed beneath me. “I do want those things from you, Samantha,” he admitted, his voice strained. “But not like this. I won’t break you. I won’t.” He still wasn’t looking at me, and he seemed to be speaking to himself as much as he was reassuring me.

“I don’t want this,” I said, my voice small. “I don’t want to be here. I don’t want to be tamed. I don’t want to work for your brother.”

“You don’t have a choice in that. Neither of us do.”

“What do you mean?” I didn’t understand. Of course Andrés had a choice. He could hurt me, he could beat me, he could savor my pain. He could choose to do anything he wanted with me.

But he chose to cuddle me close and run his hands over my cool skin, imbuing my body with his steady warmth.

He didn’t answer my question. Instead, he suddenly crushed his lips to mine in a fierce, hungry kiss. Every stroke of his tongue dominated my own, his mouth caressing mine hard enough to leave my lips swollen and tingling. I finally softened against him as my body warmed, the last of the chill of terror leaving my system as I found comfort in my captor’s desperate kiss.

CHAPTER 15

Andrés stayed with me for the rest of the day, holding me until Lauren brought lunch. She seemed surprised to see us together, and she had to come back a second time with more food for him. I wondered what had happened with Cristian to drive Andrés back to me in such a black mood, but I didn't dare press him on the subject. I didn't want the scary, violent man to resurface. I much preferred the sweet, caring man who petted me and draped my body across his chest while he leaned back against the headboard and read *Watchmen* with me.

I went back to the beginning of the story since Andrés had never read it before, and I found a strange joy in sharing it with him, almost as though I were able to experience it again for the first time myself. Only better than that, because he wasn't jaded by years of warring fandoms. There was a weird innocence in watching him begin to enjoy the story, his lips curving with satisfaction as he turned the pages faster and faster.

He glanced down and noticed me watching him.

"Am I more interesting than your superheroes?" he asked, ruffling my hair.

"Anti-heroes," I corrected him. "Well, some of them, anyway. That's what makes them interesting."

"Then why are you looking at me?"

I shrugged. "I already read it. I know the story."

He set the book aside. “Then I’ll get you a different one. I don’t want you to be bored.”

“I’m not,” I answered honestly. “You can keep reading it.”

His smile twisted. “I don’t want to read right now. Not when you’re watching me like that, my curious *gatita*.” He took my hand and pressed it against his growing erection. His suit was rumpled from laying on the bed with me for hours, but he still looked powerful. Magnetic. The feel of his desire for me through his slacks made power pulse through my veins. This was for *me*. I wasn’t scared of him when he was like this, even though a part of my brain acknowledged the fact that my captor’s arousal should definitely terrify me.

But he’d never used me against my will. He’d never forced me to take his cock. He might have conditioned me to like it, but the knowledge that I’d been conditioned didn’t make his training any less effective.

My core fluttered and heated, my lower lips growing slick with my own arousal.

His hands closed around my waist, and he shifted my body off his. “On your hands and knees,” he ordered, his voice dropping deeper with desire.

I got into position without argument. After the intense fear and vulnerability of our scene in the playroom that morning, I was feeling particularly clingy. I wanted to be close to him, for him to touch me and tell me I was safe. Even though he had been the one to scare me in the first place. It was fucked up, but I ached to please him, to make him laugh and look at me with pleasure in his dark eyes.

I told myself that my weird feelings were a survival imperative; if my captor was happy with me, he wouldn’t hurt me.

But I’d seen the pain that lurked alongside the rage when he’d strapped me down to the spanking bench. I’d seen the calm that came over him once he had me bound, unable to escape him. He needed this from me.

“You are so beautiful,” he murmured as he traced the line of my spine. “Stay.”

He left me briefly to retrieve a few items from the chest of drawers where he seemed to stash a multitude of kinky toys. I waited, trying to remain calm without his touch to ground me. It was unnerving, this... *need*. I craved physical contact with Andrés, and even in those few seconds of separation, a hollow sensation began gnawing at my gut.

Subdrop. I’d read about it online. Submissives could go into a depressive state after an intense BDSM scene, and they needed to be cuddled by their Doms until the feeling passed.

Only, Andrés wasn’t some dreamy Dominant partner I’d willingly gifted with my submission.

My animal brain warred with my rational mind.

Rational mind: *resist, fight, escape*.

Animal brain: *pet me, hold me, kiss me*.

“Settle, *cosita*,” he ordered, smoothing a hand down my back when he returned to my side. He’d read the mounting tension in my body, and it was soothed away as soon as he touched me.

My animal brain won. With Andrés so close, it was impossible to cling to rationality. I was too fragile from my breakdown a few hours ago, and neediness obliterated my brittle willpower to maintain emotional distance from him.

“I’m not going to restrain you, so you’re going to have to be very good for me,” he said, continuing to pet me. I sighed and relaxed under his hand, enjoying the sensation of his skin on mine. “Just like that,” he approved. My heart squeezed at the pleasure evident in his twisted smile.

“I want you to trust me,” he said. “So I’m going to trust you, too. I’m going to trust you to stay in position for me. I wanted to tie you down so you wouldn’t be able to move away from me. It’s safer for you if you stay still. That way, I won’t inflict pain unintentionally.” He shushed me before I could question him about *inflicting pain*. “You’ll like this,” he

continued. "I'll make sure you do, I promise. But you have to trust me. Can you do that for me?"

Fine lines of strain appeared around his eyes. He was asking for my trust, not demanding it. He was leaving me free to resist, to fight. It was my choice to submit or not.

And the fact that he gave me a choice made the decision for me.

"Yes," I said softly. "I can trust you."

His grin dazzled me, knocking the air from my lungs. There was no dark satisfaction in it, no triumph at my defeat; only pure joy at my willing surrender.

His touch eased down my back, over the curve of my bottom, before tracing the line of my soft folds. I moaned and pushed back into him, welcoming him to press inside me. Two fingers entered me, slowly penetrating my tight channel. I'd adjusted to taking him like this, so there was no pain as he stretched me, sliding his fingers in and out as I rocked my body in a rhythm to match.

I stilled with a soft whine when something hard and wet touched my asshole. I craned my head back to find him watching me carefully. He captured me in his warm gaze.

"Trust me," he urged. "This will feel good."

His fingers withdrew from my sheath to play with my clit, and he increased the pressure of the small red anal plug against my tight ring of muscles. It glistened with lubricant, and I knew he was going slowly so he wouldn't hurt me. As his calloused fingertips traced teasing circles around my clit, my muscles relaxed. The tip of the plug slipped inside me, reminding me of how he'd penetrated my ass with his finger for the first time in the shower. That seemed so long ago now. It had been scary, and he'd done it to demonstrate his complete ownership of my body.

This was different. It wasn't a power play, even though the power dynamic was definitely shifting between us. The farther he pressed the plug in, the more I submitted. He made it pleasurable for me, taking care to ensure that I enjoyed every

deliciously deviant second of my virgin hole being stretched. I surrendered to the pleasure, surrendered to *him*. Dark bliss sizzled through forbidden places, lighting up my body in ways I'd never imagined I'd accept. Anal play had always seemed too taboo, too humiliating to contemplate.

With Andrés staring down at me with such intensity, I certainly didn't feel humiliated. I felt precious. Revered. His hands might be masterful, knowing exactly how to make my body flower open for him, but there was also something worshipful in his touch.

A light burning sensation threatened to erode my pleasure, but he rubbed my clit more firmly, giving me a hit of ecstasy to mitigate the discomfort.

“Almost there,” he assured me. “You're doing so well. You're going to love taking my cock in your ass, once you're properly prepared.”

The widest part of the plug sank past my tight ring, and my muscles closed around the slender base as it settled deep inside me. I drew in short, panting breaths, struggling to adjust to the sensation of being filled.

His thumb stayed at my clit, and his forefinger returned to my sheath, sliding inside with aching care. I cried out, and my fingers clawed at the sheets beneath me as twisted pleasure washed over me. I could feel him stroking along the length of the plug through the thin barrier inside me. Although I'd learned to accommodate two fingers inside me, I felt almost unbearably full with the added pressure of the toy in my bottom.

“Come for me,” he urged, increasing the pressure on my clit as his forefinger found my g-spot. At the same time, he gently tugged on the plug. All my pleasure centers lit up at once, and I screamed as my orgasm claimed me. I felt my body clamping down on his finger and on the plug, and the sensations of my inner walls undulating around them heightened my release. I couldn't push him out, could only submit to being penetrated and played with as he wrung the final drops of bliss from my shuddering system.

I gasped against the sheets, breathing hard. He finally pulled his hand away, but he didn't remove the plug.

"Stay just like that," he ordered, his voice thick with his own desire. "Don't move."

Before I could turn my head to see what he had planned, a small *pop* reached my ears and fresh sensation assailed me. A light sting bloomed on my bottom, and my inner muscles tightened and danced around the plug. I looked back at him as I cried out at the shock of pleasure.

I groaned at the sight of Andrés towering over me, dressed in his suit, a crop in his big hand. It was like something out of one of my dirtiest dreams. I'd never before envisioned a man like him—dark and unquestionably dangerous—but desire flooded my entire being as he smirked down at me.

He touched the tongue of the crop beneath my chin, letting me feel the buttery soft leather as he lifted my face. "I like when you look at me like this," he said, his accented voice lilting with his own pleasure. "My kinky virgin."

He slid the crop up to my lips, and the rich, slightly salty scent of leather intoxicated me. Without thinking, I kissed it, the same way I'd worship his cock.

A low growl left his chest, the sound rumbling through me to heat my core.

"You please me, Samantha. Very much."

I hummed in response and licked at the length of the crop, words escaping me. My rational mind had utterly receded, leaving my base instincts to rule me.

"You like the crop?" he asked, the question light with arrogant amusement. "You're not scared of it? You're not scared of me?"

"No," I moaned, lifting my ass in wanton invitation. "Please."

"All right, greedy *gatita*," he chuckled. "Don't move."

He tapped my bottom with the crop. My flesh jiggled slightly, making my asshole contract around the plug. More

sparks of pleasure crackled inside me, heating my empty pussy. I let out a long sigh, and my head dropped forward as I submitted fully, waiting for more.

He struck me again on the opposite cheek, a little harder. The sting of the leather hitting my flesh made my skin heat with pleasant warmth. When I didn't protest or move away, he increased the intensity of the next blow, then then next. I groaned as my entire body relaxed. Everything tingled, and I started to float. It felt like he'd suspended me, but no ropes held me aloft. The harder the crop landed, the higher I flew. The world was beautiful and dark and warm, and all that existed were the sensations being inflicted upon my body and the man who was inflicting them.

"Andrés," I moaned his name, needing... more.

The hits stopped, and his heat washed over me. "I could fuck you right now, couldn't I, kinky virgin?" he asked, his silky voice threading through my mind. "Your tight little pussy would welcome my cock."

"Andrés, please..." I wasn't sure what I was begging for. Just... *more*. More pleasure; more connection; more of his power washing over me, taking me high and setting me free.

"You shouldn't say my name like that, *sirenita*. You really shouldn't." He sounded breathless, hoarse.

He bit out a curse. "Open your mouth."

My lips parted, and my eyes fluttered open just in time to watch his cock surge between them. I whimpered around him as he slid all the way to the back of my throat, but I accepted all of him. His fingers tightened in my hair, and he held himself deep for a few seconds before easing almost all the way out.

"I'm going to fuck your mouth," he told me roughly, surging forward again. "The way I want to fuck your little pussy. But not today. Not when you're like this."

I didn't understand what he meant, and I was too high to care, anyway. I didn't have to think when he was in control. I didn't have to worry.

He held my face and worked his cock in and out of my mouth as I sucked and swirled my tongue around him, lost in a sensual haze. All I wanted was to connect with him, to bring him the same bliss he'd given me.

He kept one hand in my hair and picked up the crop from the bed beside me. He tapped it against the plug in my ass, sending vibrations rumbling through my core. I came apart, my scream of release muffled around his thick cock. He followed me, throwing his head back on a rough shout as his cum coated my mouth. I swallowed it all down, just as he'd trained me to do.

He withdrew, and he caught me as my trembling limbs gave out, no longer able to support my weight. The mattress dipped as he collapsed beside me. He pulled my body tightly against his, kissing the top of my head as his hands roved over my sweat-slicked skin.

I remained cocooned in warm darkness, reveling in the blissful headspace I'd found in finally, fully submitting to Andrés.

CHAPTER 16

Andrés stayed with me late into the following morning. The sun was already high when I finally awoke. The last few nights, I'd been getting the deepest, most peaceful sleep of my life with Andrés' corded arm draped over me, his hard body shaped around mine. I wasn't accustomed to sleeping so many hours, or to feeling so well rested. It helped calm my buzzing brain.

Trapped in my captor's strong arms was probably the last place in the world I should get a good night's sleep. That definitely would have been my attitude when he'd first captured me. He'd been huge and scarred and scary, and his claims that I belonged to him had terrified me.

I was still being kept here against my will, but I was coming to understand Andrés a little better. He might be violent and mercurial, but he'd always been completely honest with me. He planned to train me to accept his touch and even come to crave it—something he'd managed with almost laughable ease.

But he'd also promised never to harm me, and I was coming to truly believe that. I was starting to trust him, despite everything. He might be harsh, but he had his own code. There were lines he wouldn't cross, and he'd proven that to me when he'd freed me from the spanking bench and taken me into the safe haven of his arms, holding me and apologizing for scaring me.

He'd wanted to hurt me. He'd needed it. I'd seen it in the wildness of his eyes.

But he'd held himself back. He'd put my needs before his own. And considering he could do absolutely anything he wanted to me as his helpless captive, that meant more to me than was probably healthy.

I mulled all this over while I went through my morning routine, separated from my captor by the flimsy barrier of the bathroom door. Since he was still in the suite with me, I was allowed to leave the bed and see to my needs.

Andrés hadn't yet collared me for the day, and I found myself touching my fingers to my bare throat. It was a little weird, not feeling the soft leather there. I was becoming accustomed to it, and its absence made me feel...

I shook my head sharply, deciding to stop contemplating it. I should definitely resent the collar, even if I couldn't bring myself to hate Andrés the way I should. He'd taken my freedom from me. And no matter how kind and caring he might seem at times, he still wanted to keep me as his pet, his plaything. He didn't respect me as a woman, as a fully-functioning human being with a mind of her own.

"*Sirenita*," he called out, his stern voice emanating through the bathroom door. "Your breakfast is getting cold. Come."

I blew out a long breath and tried to quiet my whirring thoughts. Like a puppy being called to heel, I had to go back into the bedroom. If I didn't, he'd just come in here and retrieve me. And then he'd probably punish me for defying him.

I was feeling particularly brittle after the intensity what had passed between us last night, and I didn't think I could handle his rebuke at the moment. Even though part of me got turned on by his discipline, I much preferred when he praised me and cuddled me. My nightmare scenario of being held captive was so much easier to bear when he was being nice.

Nice.

God, I am turning into Lauren, I thought bitterly, but I made my way back into the bedroom without complaint.

Andrés was seated on the edge of the bed, fully dressed. That meant he was going to leave soon. A pang shot through my chest, and the irrational reaction only darkened my mood further.

“What’s wrong?” he asked as I walked toward the bed, going to him without thought of resistance.

“Nothing.” I waved him off, not willing to further examine my conflicted feelings, especially not with my captor.

His brows drew together. “Don’t lie to me,” he warned

He reached for me, grasping my waist and positioning my body so I was seated in his lap, the way we usually shared meals. He didn’t bother trying to keep the cutlery from me anymore. I eyed the knife and fork where they sat on the tray beside my huge plate of bacon. I could just grab the knife and...

My stomach turned before I could even begin to visualize Andrés’ blood spilling onto my hand.

“*Cosita?*” he prompted, waiting for my honest response.

I tore my eyes from the knife and focused my gaze on him. “I am a little upset this morning,” I admitted. “But I don’t want to talk about it.”

He cupped my cheek in his big hand, his dark eyes studying mine intently, as though he could see straight into my soul.

“You don’t have any secrets from me,” he said, but his tone held a note of strain. He wanted me to share with him, even though he was trying to command me to open myself up and give him everything.

I was starting to understand him, but it seemed he might be coming to some revelations of his own. He was beginning to realize he couldn’t force my devotion, even if he could condition my obedience.

“Please,” I whispered. “I don’t want to think about it right now.”

That was the truth. When I saw pain stir in his eyes, an illogical yearning to erase it rose up within me. Laying all my tangled emotions bare for both of us to see would only cause more hurt and confusion.

“You do have a very busy brain,” he said, pressing a tender kiss against my forehead. “If your thoughts bother you, let me put them at ease.”

I knew Andrés was capable of making my mind go quiet. I’d found peace in his ropes, under his masterful hands.

And that power he held over me scared me, even as his touch aroused me.

He leaned in to capture my lips with his.

I turned my face away. “Wait.”

He frowned and lightly gripped my jaw to hold me in place. “No. I know what’s best for you. You’re upset. I’m going to make you feel better.”

“You can’t just kiss me and make everything okay,” I told him, even as my head tipped back slightly, my body already surrendering despite my protest.

“I can. But I don’t have to. I can distract you from your thoughts in other ways, if you don’t want me to kiss you.”

He shifted my body in his lap, turning me so my back pressed against his chest. He hooked my ankles around his calves and spread his legs, opening my thighs wide. One hand tangled in my hair and tugged to the side, exposing my neck. His teeth sank into my sensitive flesh, the flare of pain making my sex clench. He held me trapped in his harsh bite as his free hand skimmed over my breasts, his palm teasing my peaked nipples.

I cried out as sensation assailed me, my entire body lighting up with awareness. He growled his approval against me, and the sound rumbled over my skin, making it pebble and dance.

He finally released me from his bite, running his hot tongue over the little indentations his teeth had left in my skin. I moaned and tipped my head farther to the side, offering him better access to my neck. He pressed feather-light kisses along my throat, up to my ear before nipping at my lobe. His hand left my hair to trail down my waist, over my hip, moving down between my legs. He suddenly slapped my exposed pussy.

I shrieked at the sting that bloomed on my flesh, and I tried to close my legs. He bit down on my neck again and kept me spread wide, his legs keeping mine splayed apart.

I writhed, my ass grinding against his thick erection. He spanked my pussy a second time, and I whimpered, accepting that I couldn't fight him.

His bite eased, and he resumed kissing my neck sweetly, even as his harsh hand smacked my tender labia. I groaned as dark pleasure settled over me, my thoughts floating away as I became lost to sensation. I was powerless to escape him, and bliss began to pulse through me as I slipped into submission.

“Are you still upset?” he murmured, his lips teasing the shell of my ear.

“What?” I struggled to gather my wits and focus on forming a coherent response. “No. I'm not upset. I'm...” I trailed off on a low moan when he traced around my clit in a little circular pattern.

“Horny?” he finished for me. “Does your wet little pussy want to be filled after being spanked?”

“Yes,” I begged on a ragged whisper. “Please.”

Suddenly, the world spun as his strong hands maneuvered my body. When everything settled into place, I found myself lying back on the mattress, staring up at him. The sight of him towering over me in his suit made lust pulse through my system. I remembered how alluring he'd been when he'd stood over me last night, wielding a crop.

He grinned down at me with savage pleasure. “I do like when you look at me like that, *sirenita*.” He reached for his

zipper and freed himself from his slacks. I licked my lips, and he growled in satisfaction. “Are you as hungry for my cock as you were last night?”

I nodded, my mouth watering for him.

“But what about your pussy?” he asked, his voice dropping deeper, rougher. “I could have fucked you last night. But you weren’t aware enough to know what you would be agreeing to. You weren’t capable of knowing what you were begging for.” He began to stroke his shaft. “*This* is what you’re begging for. I’m going to fuck you, Samantha.”

Some of my euphoria ebbed, trepidation burning into my bliss. My body might be aching for him, but I wasn’t ready for this.

Was I?

“You have to beg me,” he said, his black eyes boring into mine as he imposed his will. “Beg me to fuck you.”

“Andrés...”

Please teased at the tip of my tongue, but I swallowed it back. I didn’t want to lose my virginity like this: begging my captor to fuck me. It was twisted and wrong, and it felt like defeat. My arousal soured as I was reminded of the early days of my captivity, when he’d told me how he’d subjugate me.

“I can’t,” I said, my voice small. “I don’t want to. Not like this.”

He stared down at me, his jaw working. His dark eyes shuttered, and he abruptly tucked himself back into his slacks. I could still see his cock straining against the expensive material, but he turned sharply and started walking away from me.

“Wait,” I called out. “I didn’t mean...”

I wasn’t sure what to say. I hadn’t meant it when I said *no*?

That wasn’t right. I’d definitely meant to refuse.

What I hadn’t meant was to hurt him.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, my eyes burning.

My mind registered that it was fucked up that I was apologizing to my captor for preventing him from taking advantage of me. But that didn't make my sense of guilt abate.

He stopped in his tracks and stiffly turned back to me. For a moment, my heart leapt. I thought he was coming to kiss me, to hold me and tell me he'd never ask me to debase myself for him again.

Instead, he picked up my collar where it already lay on the mattress, chained to the bed and waiting for me. Without a word, he locked it around my neck.

He turned to leave, but I caught his wrist in the strongest grip I could manage.

"Wait," I asked again. "Don't leave like this. I didn't want to upset you. I just... I can't give you what you want."

He turned back to face me, his face carefully blank. "I won't force myself on you," he said, his voice rough.

"Thank you," I whispered. I pulled his hand toward me and pressed my lips against it, softly communicating everything I didn't know how to put into words. I wasn't sure how to express what I was feeling, but I knew I didn't want to hurt him.

He blew out a shuddering breath, and the tension melted from his powerful body. He leaned down and brushed a kiss across my lips, a silent apology.

"I'll see you tonight," he promised.

He pulled his wrist free from my grip and walked out of the bedroom, leaving my body and my heart aching for him.

CHAPTER 17

“A board game?” I asked, nonplussed. “You want to play a game that involves an actual board?”

Andrés’ dark brows rose as he set the chess pieces out between us, white for me, black for him. “Is there some other kind?”

“You’re kidding, right? How about *World of Warcraft*? You know, something with multi-layered storytelling, cool effects, and kick-ass heroes?” I gestured at the board. “Who’s the hero in this game? What’s the story? There isn’t one. It’s just us, staring at some funny pieces that don’t have any special abilities at all.”

“Chess is a battle of wits. It’s just you, against me. But you can be the hero in this scenario, if you want.” One corner of his lips tipped up in an indulgent smile.

I considered making a quip about him being the perfect real-life villain, but I held it back. Mostly because it hit too close to home, and I didn’t want to hurt him. He might be my captor, but I was coming to see him as more than that. Andrés wasn’t an evil man, even if he was holding me against my will. He put my needs first, in his own weird way. Even when he was obviously desperate to fuck me, he held back. After I’d refused to give him my virginity a few days ago, he hadn’t pressed me for it again. Instead, we split our time between reading comic books and playing kinky games.

Tonight, he had a much more vanilla, much more boring game in mind.

Chess. Ugh. So analog.

“You don’t have to look so disdainful,” he said, still smiling. “I’ll teach you how to play. If you really hate it after a few games, we can stop. I’ll warn you now, I will win. So don’t let that deter you from enjoying the game.”

“You’re a little cocky,” I remarked drily, reaching for my queen to examine the exquisitely-carved pieces. They were worn from age and use, but the quality of craftsmanship was still discernable.

“I’ve been playing for years, and it’s an impossibility for a new player to beat someone with my kind of experience.”

“Who says I don’t know how to play? They do have online chess, you know. I’ve dabbled. I know the rules, even if I do find it boring.”

He grinned. “Knowing the rules won’t prepare you for playing against me, but it will certainly make these first few games more interesting. How advanced are you? Who taught you how to play?”

“An online tutorial taught me how to play. I get the rules and know some trickier strategies. I pick things up quickly.”

He shook his head. “A tutorial isn’t going to prepare you for playing against me, but show me what you know, and we’ll go from there.”

I was starting to get irritated. Didn’t he value my intellect at all?

“Why bother playing chess with someone when you think they won’t be able to beat you?”

“Because I believe you will be able to challenge me, just not in the first few games. Or even the first dozen.”

I eyed him, considering. His response allayed my irritation. Just a little. I still wasn’t sure if I wanted to play a game that Andrés would certainly win. He already won all of our kinkier games.

Didn’t he?

If attaining multiple orgasms is me losing, I guess I don't mind.

I shook it off, focusing in on the current challenge.

“How long have you been playing?” He'd assessed my skill level. It was only fair that I do the same.

He picked up one of his knights, stroking the edges of the piece. It was a familiar touch, something he seemed to be doing without realizing. “This was my first chess set. I got it for my tenth birthday. That's when *Abuela* taught me how to play.”

“*Abuela?*”

The ghost of a smile flickered around his lips before giving way to something harder. “My grandmother.”

“Oh.” I could tell from his suddenly tense demeanor that she'd passed away. I hadn't meant to pry into painful topics.

He placed the knight back on the board, and his dark gaze focused on me again. “White goes first,” he prompted me.

“I know.” He'd given me the slight advantage, presumably because he thought he'd defeat me so easily.

Well, too bad for him, I'd picked up some pretty sweet strategies, even in my dabbling. I wasn't being overly-proud when I said I was a quick study. It was just the way my brain worked. A little bit of internet research had told me some of the strongest opening moves.

Since he'd made the mistake of letting me play white, I'd checkmate him in six moves.

I moved my pawn from E2 to E4.

Andrés studied the board, then made his countermove. It didn't affect my strategy at all.

Okay, maybe this was going to be fun, after all. He'd been so cocky with all that talk about how I didn't have a chance at beating him. I was really looking forward to seeing his crestfallen expression when I made him my bitch.

This felt almost as good as winning a battle in *World of Warcraft*. Maybe even better, because this was *Andrés* I was defeating, not some anonymous person online.

I took a minute to pretend to consider my next move, even though I was about to win. It would be even more satisfying to take him by surprise.

I moved slowly as I placed my bishop on C4, trying to make it look like I was hesitant about my choice.

Andrés' face remained impassive. He sat for a full two minutes of silence before making his next move.

Usually, I would have found such a long wait boring, but anticipation sizzled through me.

I didn't bother to hold back when I maneuvered my queen to attack his pawn. I clicked it down on the board decisively.

Andrés grinned, and my heart did a funny flip. That sharp, arrogant smile made something flutter low in my belly.

He knew.

"Scholar's Mate," he observed. "I'm impressed. You did study properly, *cosita*."

He moved his knight to F6, blocking me.

His black eyes glinted as he captured me in his steady stare. "Now, we can play."

"When did you realize my strategy?" I asked.

"I suspected on your first move. I knew by the second."

"But you didn't try to stop me."

"You were so cute, trying to fool me. I thought I'd let it play out for a few moves. You're not capable of lying to me, Samantha. You can't play dumb with me, either. I know you better than that."

I flushed with pleasure. Did Andrés really respect my intellect? He'd proven he cherished me in his own way, but I'd never thought he might care about my mind. So far, he'd seemed more interested in my body. Even though he'd

expressed that he wanted me to be happy, that wasn't the same as respecting me.

“Who do you play with?” I wondered who usually was capable of challenging him.

“Believe it or not, I do play online mostly. There's not anyone here I'm interested in playing against. It doesn't compare to sitting across from your opponent, though. Studying you is part of the game.”

“You play online? I thought you only got on your laptop to work. There's like, no technology in this penthouse. I never even see you with a phone.”

“I don't like to be easily reached once I come home. This is my space. And if you're worrying that I'm wasting my time playing chess while you're tied up, don't. I'd much rather play games with you. I really am taking care of my business in the evenings. This is the first time I've played a game in weeks.”

My mind chose to skip over the topic of his *business*. Instead, I focused in on the fact that he'd chosen to play chess with *me*. He could just tie me up and toy with me. He could fuck my mouth and take his pleasure from my body, even without taking my virginity.

But he was choosing to play chess with me instead. What had seemed ridiculous and boring at first now made my chest warm.

Andrés valued me as more than his plaything.

“Don't be too disappointed when I win this game,” he continued. “I really am impressed with your knowledge of chess. But I've known Scholar's Mate for years. Valentina beat me with it half a dozen times before I caught on.”

“Who's Valentina?” Something ugly stirred in my gut at the thought of him playing with another woman.

His face hardened again, the same way it had when he'd mentioned his grandmother. “My sister.”

I'd managed to pry into some secret pain again. “I'm sorry.” Guilt nipped at me, even though I wasn't sure exactly

what I was apologizing for. “You lost her?” I asked quietly.

“Yes,” he bit out. “I lost her.”

“How—”

“It’s your move,” he said tersely, a clear warning not to press him on this topic.

I nodded and moved a pawn, not really focusing on my choice. I was so caught up worrying over the fact that I’d upset him that he managed to beat me in five more moves.

He barely took the time to say “checkmate” before putting the board away.

“Can we play again?” I asked timidly.

He blinked and focused on me for the first time since I’d asked about Valentina’s fate. “You want to?”

“Yes. I’ll do better next time. I know I can beat you.”

A half-smile tilted his lips, and my heart squeezed. “Tomorrow,” he promised. “I have another game I want to play with my clever *gatita*.”

He hurt me that night. He made sure I enjoyed the experience, but he still left marks on my skin. My tears seemed to calm the dark mood that had settled over him.

I gave him my tears willingly, hoping that by shedding them for him, I could ease some of the pain that he kept locked inside.

CHAPTER 18

Andrés kept beating me at chess. But I persevered, if for no other reason than the fact that I liked watching his brow furrow in intense concentration when I actually managed to outmaneuver him. He was clearly a master strategist, which shouldn't have surprised me, given the way he'd handled me over the last few weeks. He seemed to anticipate my every move—in chess and in the kinkier games we played.

I should have been scared at how complacent I'd become, but I couldn't help finding moments of joy when we were together. I'd never shared this kind of intimacy with anyone, and it felt good to be so connected. It made me ache for more, and sometimes I almost broke down and begged him to fuck me.

I couldn't quite bring myself to do it. I didn't want to beg him for it. That reminded me of our first few days together, when he'd been demanding and scary. I enjoyed the fantasy of our relationship too much to face the reality that he was still demanding. And even if I no longer found him scary, he could definitely be intimidating. He touched me however he wanted, whenever he wanted. Just because I liked it didn't mean my consent was necessary.

Was it? He still hadn't taken me against my will. He held himself back, even though I could tell it caused him almost physical pain to deny himself what he wanted: me.

He wants me to beg, I often reminded myself. I won't beg.

I might beg him to touch me on a daily basis, but I wouldn't beg him to take my virginity. It was my last shred of dignity, of control over my own body and my own life. I couldn't surrender it. No matter how badly my body ached for him to fill me, to connect with him in the most intimate way possible.

After years of fear and isolation, his touch was like a drug. I doubted even Bliss would have been more effective at keeping me wet and needy for him as soon as he walked into the bedroom in the evening. He'd been right from the very beginning: he didn't need drugs to make me compliant.

At times, dark thoughts plagued me. Despite our chess games, it occurred to me that perhaps I was nothing more than his plaything, his pet. That made my chest ache, a sensation I didn't fully want to contemplate.

So I'd ignore it and concentrate on potential opportunities to escape. Even if that made the ache persist.

But it wasn't like he ever afforded me an opportunity to escape. He still kept me collared and chained to the bed in his absence, and I was completely reliant on him to see to all my needs. It should have made me resentful. I should have hated him.

But the way he held me so tenderly when he cared for me made me feel cherished. Even the pain he gave me was a form of caretaking; he brought me transcendent bliss with his deviant toys. I wasn't scared of the playroom anymore. I wasn't even scared of the flogger. He'd shown me how good it could feel when applied with my pleasure in mind rather than wielding it to punish.

When I did think about escape, it was to plan for the day when Andrés would give me access to a computer. The day he decided I was ready to work for his brother. It was the only opportunity I could see available to me.

And it was coming soon. Some of my days were hazy, but I thought my assessment of three weeks in captivity was about accurate. That was the deadline Cristian had given Andrés. I'd

been so well behaved, surely my captor would think I was ready to be trusted with access to the internet.

Then I could finally get away from him and make my way back to the Bureau. Back to my friends. Back to Dex.

I rubbed at the dull throb in the center of my chest and turned my attention back to my comic book.

I'd only been reading for a few minutes when the bedroom door banged open and Andrés stormed in. It was the middle of the afternoon. He shouldn't be back yet. And the fire in his eyes and furious twist of his scar mirrored his expression on the day he'd dragged me to the spanking bench and threatened to hurt me while he was angry.

I scooted back on the bed and held up my hands to stall him.

“Wait!” I gasped out. “Andrés, wait. Please.”

He stiffened and stopped in his tracks, only three steps away from grabbing me.

“You're upset,” I said quickly. “I don't like it when you're like this. You scare me. Please, don't... Don't hurt me.” My heart twisted as the words left my lips. He might give me pain sometimes, but never more than I could handle. He was always fully in control, carefully administering how much pain he was inflicting. But he wasn't in control right now. I hadn't begged him not to hurt me in... How long?

Long enough that I'd forgotten how terrifying he could be when he was in a truly black mood.

A low, feral sound rumbled from his chest, and his fists clenched at his sides.

“Please. Talk to me. Tell me what's wrong. What happened. Is it your brother? Did he—?”

“Of course it's my brother!” he shouted, and I cringed away as his rage slammed into me. He closed the distance between us and grabbed my upper arms, pulling my body up against his. I struggled, but he snarled down at me. “He wants

to see you. He expects you to be ready by now. But you're not. I've been too soft with you."

"You haven't," I insisted, desperate. "You don't have to hurt me."

"I don't want to hurt you," he bellowed. "He does. Why can't you understand that? I'm not the one who wants to break you. I want to save you. I want to protect you. I can't do that if you continue to defy me."

"I haven't defied you," I gasped out, my fear rising. "I've done everything you've asked."

"No," he railed, shaking me. "I've given you everything *you've* asked. I've tried to make you happy here with me. I've indulged you and played with you when I was supposed to be training you. And now he wants to see you, and you're not ready."

"I am," I squeaked out, needing him to believe he could trust me with a computer. Terror rode me hard, and in that moment, I wanted to escape him more desperately than I had since the day I'd first been captured.

"Don't lie to me, Samantha," he warned on a growl. "You think you can manipulate me with your pretty tears? You think I'll do anything you ask if you smile for me? I won't allow you to play games with me. I'm in control. You belong to *me*."

His eyes took on a feverish light as he spoke.

"You're not in control," I said, trying to blink back the tears that burned at the corners of my eyes. "You're scaring me. You're hurting me." His fingers were digging into my arms hard enough to bruise, but that ache was nothing compared to the horrible sinking sensation in my chest.

Fighting him would get me nowhere. He wasn't rational at the moment. He was in pain. I could see it in the wildness of his black eyes, the deep furrow of his twisted scar. With trembling fingers, I reached up and tentatively touched his cheek. He flinched away. I tried again, pressing my palm against his scar.

"Talk to me," I begged. "Tell me what happened."

“What happened is my brother takes everything from me,” he said on a harsh whisper. “*Abuela*, Valentina. Now he wants to take you.” He pulled me impossibly closer. “He can’t have you. You’re mine.”

“Yes,” I agreed, trying to soothe him. “I’m yours. I’m not going anywhere. You won’t let Cristian take me away. I... I trust you.” Despite his bruising grip on me, I knew the truth deep in my soul. Andrés would do anything to protect me from his sadistic brother.

I traced the line of his scar with my fingertips. I’d never touched it before. I’d never touched his face with tenderness. We came together in carnal need, but I never initiated intimate contact.

He shuddered, but he leaned into my hand. His hold on my arms eased, and he embraced me, cradling my body carefully against his.

“*Sirenita*,” he said, his voice strained. “*Lo siento*.” He turned his face into my palm, kissing my hand.

“What happened to them?” I asked softly. “The people your brother took from you. Your grandmother and sister.” I didn’t really want to hear the horror of it, but Andrés needed to purge some of the pain from his soul. It was eating at him, driving him to the edge of sanity. I’d known he’d lost them, but it wasn’t until just now that he’d revealed Cristian’s role in that loss.

He grimaced, but he kissed my palm again, and his arms didn’t tense around me with renewed aggression. He was so big, and I felt tiny in his embrace. But he held me carefully, as though I was something precious and fragile.

“Valentina...” His voice hitched on her name. “My sister. Half-sister. Cristian and I share the same father as Valentina. Our father kept her mother as his mistress after our mother passed away, but she died giving birth to Valentina. Father let Valentina’s grandmother live on our estate, so she could care for her. Valentina was my best friend. Her grandmother became *mí abuela*. I spent more time in their home than my own. Cristian was always jealous of our friendship, our little

family. As the oldest, father was harder on him. He had more responsibilities, a legacy resting on his shoulders.”

He paused, his eyes sliding out of focus as he fell into memory.

“Your father dealt in cocaine,” I prompted, knowing their family’s criminal history. “He wanted Cristian to take over the business?”

“Yes. But then father died when I was sixteen. Heart attack.”

“I’m sorry,” I said softly.

His jaw firmed. “He was not a nice man. But I had a home with *Abuela* and Valentina. Until Cristian took over father’s organization. He resented us, our family. Maybe if I hadn’t left him alone with father, things would have been different. But he always had a sadistic streak, even as a child. I wanted nothing to do with him. He scared me, so I stayed away.”

“What did he do?” I asked, softly prodding. This was the most personal information Andrés had ever shared with me, and I was beginning to understand his warped relationship with his brother. Andrés was bigger than Cristian. Scarier. Smarter. It didn’t make sense that he worked for him when he so obviously hated him. Unless the emotional scars went deeper than the ones carved into his flesh.

“He sold Valentina,” he whispered, his gaze dark with pain. “She was fourteen. He traded her for money, for bribes to secure his place as father’s successor. Well, he said it was for money. He did it to punish me. To punish both of us for our happy childhood. One that had been denied him.”

My stomach churned, and my heart ached for the innocent, teenage Andrés who’d lost his sister and best friend in such a horrible way.

“*Abuela* died nine months later,” he said bitterly. “Breast cancer. She didn’t even try to fight to survive it. Not after losing Valentina. She left me alone. With Cristian.”

I suddenly understood Andrés’ fierce desire to *keep* me. He didn’t want to lock me in a cage like an animal, to keep me

as a pet. He just wanted someone who was his, someone to care for and protect. Like he hadn't been able to protect his grandmother and sister.

Lauren had been right when she'd said Andrés needed me to be good for him. He needed my submission, my willing surrender to his control. He needed to see me restrained, because it reassured him that I couldn't leave him. He needed to see me cry, because he couldn't shed the tears himself. He wanted to care for me, but more than that, he craved my devotion in return.

Cupping his scarred cheek in my hand, I leaned up into him and lightly pressed my lips to his. For a moment, his mouth was tense beneath mine; a hard, anguished slash. Then he groaned, a long sound of pained release, and he opened for me. His fingers threaded in my hair, pulling me closer as his tongue swept into my mouth, devouring me like a starving man.

Hunger rose within me, more than physical need. I craved his closeness, skin-to-skin. He'd just dropped so many barriers between us, letting me see into his tormented soul. I wanted to offer him something in return, something I'd never offered to anyone.

But I didn't want to beg. I didn't want to prostrate myself before him and cheapen our connection to nothing more than his victory and my subjugation. I wanted *him*. All of him, good and bad, ugly and beautiful. And I'd give myself to him, willingly, eagerly.

My hands went to his shirt, tearing at the buttons in my haste to feel his hard chest, the thick ridges of the scars that were physical marks of his inner pain. I wanted to touch them, to explore every lash that had been inflicted on his soul and heal them.

He growled against my mouth, kissing me harder as he shrugged out of his shirt and helped me remove the rest of his clothes. When we were both naked, he gripped my waist and guided me down onto the bed, his weight settling over me. His

hard cock pressed against my inner thigh, straining toward my virgin channel.

“I want you, Andrés,” I gasped when he broke our kiss so we could both draw in much-needed air. “Don’t make me beg. I want to give this to you. I want to give myself to you.”

He pressed his forehead to mine, so we exchanged each ragged breath. “You don’t have to beg, *sirenita*. You just have to say *yes*. I need to know that you want me. Let me in.”

The tears that spilled from my eyes welled up from a place deep inside as emotion flooded free. “Yes,” I whispered. “Please, Andrés.”

I begged because I chose to. Because he didn’t demand my surrender. I gave it willingly.

“Samantha,” he groaned my name and lined up with my slick opening. I was wet and ready for him, my core throbbing with need. “Do you feel what you do to me? You are so perfect.”

His swollen cockhead pressed at my entrance, parting my pussy lips as he eased inside. I whimpered at the burning stretch of him pushing in, but he didn’t stop at the sound of my discomfort. He stroked my cheek with one hand and reached between us with the other, playing with my nipples, giving me the little bites of pain that always drove me wild. My whimper turned to a high whine, and my inner muscles relaxed as my arousal grew, easing his progress as he penetrated me slowly.

Once he was fully seated inside me, he paused. My core contracted, struggling between pushing him out and welcoming him in. His jaw was clenched, his scar drawn deep and fierce. But the sight didn’t scare me. I touched the mark again, tracing the furrow across his handsome face. He closed his eyes, a shiver running through his entire body as his cock jerked inside me.

He withdrew slowly, using aching care with my untried body. His cockhead dragged across my g-spot, and pleasure lit up my system, burning away the discomfort. My core heated and relaxed, opening for him. I wrapped my legs around his

hips and dug my heels into his sculpted ass, pulling him back inside me.

A rumbling shout left his lips at my bold movement, and he grasped my wrists, pinning them over my head with one hand while his other played with my breasts more harshly. He pinched and pulled at my nipples. Each little hit of pain went straight to my pussy, making it flutter around him.

He began to move, pumping his hips faster and harder as he clung to his control by a thread. I knew he was holding back so he wouldn't hurt me, but I didn't want that. I didn't care if it hurt. I welcomed the burn of his huge cock filling and stretching me. It made me hyperaware of our intense connection, bound together by pleasure and pain. This was how it was meant to be between us: our bond so tight that it was nearly too much to bear.

“More,” I begged, rocking my hips up to meet his thrusts. “Please, Andrés...”

My pleading triggered him. With a snarl, his control snapped, and he started fucking me in harsh, possessive strokes. His hand tightened around my wrists, and his weight pressed me deeper into the mattress, pinning me down so there was no escape from his onslaught.

I cried out, welcoming more. I didn't want to escape. I wanted to stay right here, in Andrés' brutal hold.

He hit my g-spot over and over again, making pleasure build deep inside. My entire body tensed, my toes curling and my legs shaking around him.

“Come for me, *sirenita*,” he ground out, the order barely intelligible.

My body conditioned to come on his command, I let go. My orgasm claimed me with shocking force, ripping through my system in a vicious rush of ecstasy. My scream mingled with his wild roar, and his scorching seed pumped into my pussy, branding me with heat.

He drove deep one last time, holding himself inside me as he emptied his cum into me. Primal chemicals mingled in my

body, easing my harsh rush of pleasure to something softer, cocooning me in tingly bliss.

Our shaking and spent bodies remained locked together as his lips crashed down on mine in a soul-searing kiss, marking me as his.

CHAPTER 19

Andrés was gone when I awoke the next morning. The warm glow that filled my chest dimmed as soon as I opened my eyes to find myself alone in his bed. My fingers searched the cool sheets, as though I could summon up his warmth somehow.

He'd held me all night after our mind-blowing first time together. He'd petted me and told me how beautiful and perfect I was. It had felt real. I'd felt... whole.

I didn't like waking up without him beside me. I needed his touch, needed to be cuddled close after the intensity of what had passed between us.

I sat up and crossed my arms over my chest to ward off the sudden chill that clung to my skin.

Something was different. When I moved, the familiar sound of metallic clanking didn't reach my ears. I lifted my fingers to my throat. The collar wasn't there. I wasn't chained to the bed.

Tears pooled in my eyes as an irrational sense of loss knifed through my chest.

Why hadn't he put it back on this morning? Didn't he want me to bear the mark of his ownership? The symbol of my devotion to him?

I took several deep breaths, telling myself that I was being unreasonable. My emotions were raw and exposed, and I didn't like not having Andrés' strong arms to cling to when I was feeling so vulnerable.

The bedroom door opened. My heart leapt, then sank to my stomach.

It was only Lauren, bringing my breakfast.

“Where’s Andrés?” I asked.

She shrugged. “Master Andrés doesn’t tell me about his business.”

Something ugly stirred in my gut when she called him *Master Andrés*. I’d never liked it, but this time it stung. I tried my best to ignore it and act rational.

“He instructed me to give you this.” She held out a large white pill and offered me a glass of water.

“What is it?”

“The morning after pill.”

A block of ice formed in my stomach. “Oh.” The sound left my chest along with all the air from my lungs, as though someone had punched me.

“He wants me to give you a birth control shot, too.” She gestured at the waiting syringe on the cart.

My fingers went numb, and the glass of water dropped from my hands, soaking the carpet.

Lauren was saying something in a harsh tone, but I couldn’t listen. I couldn’t focus on her. All I could do was feel the pain my heart ripping open. I gasped for breath, pressing a hand against my aching chest.

I had unprotected sex with my captor. I could have gotten pregnant. And I begged for it.

A maddened laugh bubbled from my throat. Of course I couldn’t have gotten pregnant. Andrés had made provisions to ensure his fucktoy didn’t inconvenience him with a pregnancy. He’d sent his mindless slave to give me the morning after pill and a birth control shot.

Stupid. So fucking stupid.

I'd Stockholm-Syndromed the shit out of myself. I'd been scared of him in the beginning of my captivity. How could I have forgotten that was exactly what I was: his captive?

He'd told me so many times that I was his fucktoy, his pet. But my brain had reasoned its way around that horrible reality and presented me with a pretty fantasy that he actually had secret feelings for me.

He'd never lied about the fact that he was a master manipulator. And I'd fallen for it. I'd let him shape me into his willing, eager plaything.

I had to get out, before I lost my mind completely.

My training kicked in, and Lauren wasn't at all prepared for the half-crazy FBI field agent who launched herself at her. I tackled her to the floor, pinning her on her front. I wrapped my arm around her throat and squeezed, putting pressure on her artery.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, tears almost blinding me as she went limp beneath me, slipping into unconsciousness. I released her immediately, not wanting to cause her any lasting damage. Lauren might be loyal to Andrés, but she was still a victim.

I pushed up off her still form and raced to Andrés' wardrobe. I slipped on one of his huge dress shirts, only taking the time to secure three buttons with shaking fingers, just enough to cover myself.

Lauren groaned, and I hurried back to her. I braced my arm around her waist and dragged her upright. She stumbled along beside me, somewhere partway to consciousness. I pulled her through the bedroom, into the sitting room, and straight to the elevator. I pressed her thumb against the call button.

The door slid open without a sound. No angry buzz. Nothing to alert anyone that I was escaping.

I shoved Lauren back into the sitting room and jammed the button for the door to close before she could come back to her senses. She was still blinking up at me from where she was sprawled on the floor when the silver doors slid closed. I

pressed the button for the ground floor, praying no one else had access to this elevator except for those Andrés trusted. I couldn't afford to be stopped on my way down.

Adrenaline coursed through my system, my body preparing for a fight. If I did meet anyone, I'd remember my training for once.

I have to get out. I have to.

The elevator glided all the way down to the ground floor without stopping. When the doors opened, I found myself at the end of a long corridor. I could see light at the end of it, streaming through a glass door.

I started moving before I fully thought it through, my feet racing toward freedom. If I could just get outside—

A hulking body blocked the light in front of me, blotting it out as he ran straight for me.

“Hey!” he shouted. “Stop right there.”

I didn't stop. I launched myself at the man, my fist connecting with his jaw. He reeled back, and I darted past him. His fingers tangled in my hair, and a defiant shriek left my lips as he dragged me back, away from the light. Using his leverage on my hair, he jerked me toward him so he could grab my upper arms. Before I could get my hands up, he slammed me back against the wall. My head cracked against it, pain lancing through my skull. The world flickered around me, and I lost control of my limbs.

“How did you get out?” he asked, his voice rough with anger. “I saw you running down here on the security feed. You whores are supposed to be locked up on the third floor.”

Blinking hard, I willed the world to stop spinning. As soon as his furious, red face came into focus, I slammed my forehead into his nose.

He dropped me with a curse, and I stumbled forward. My head ached, and my vision swam.

I struggled to right myself, to run. I made it two fumbling steps before his weight barreled into me, taking me down to

the hard marble floor.

“Bitch,” he snarled. “You almost broke my fucking nose. You’ll pay for that, dirty little whore.”

I felt something hard pressing against my ass where Andrés’ shirt had ridden up, leaving me exposed. I screamed and scrambled against the marble, my hands slipping uselessly against the smooth surface.

Dirty little whore.

Dirty little girl.

You want me to touch your secret place again, don’t you, dirty little girl?

Dirty. Wrong.

Pure, icy terror seized my lungs as I heard his zipper lowering, heard the dreaded sound of his fist pumping his shaft.

I didn’t want this. I didn’t. It was dirty and wrong. It felt good for a little while when he touched my secret place, but then it hurt.

I beat my fists against the marble as I thrashed and screamed. All my training left my head as my mind receded to a long-forgotten, long-buried place.

I don’t want this.

I don’t want this, Uncle Robert. Please...

I couldn’t breathe. I gasped for air, but nothing filled my lungs. He was on top of me, his breath hot on my neck as he pinned my tiny body down...

His weight was lifted off me, and a furious roar reverberated through my skull. I curled my knees up to my chest and hugged them tight, trying to protect myself in the only way I knew how. I heard a horrible, wet sound; a man screaming; bone crunching; silence.

“Samantha.” Red-painted hands reached for me, and I flinched away, curling more tightly into myself.

“*Cosita*, it’s okay. You’re safe now.”

“Andrés?” My voice was soft and strangely high, like a child. Past and present mingled, toxic fear clouding my brain. “I don’t want him to touch my... I don’t want this. I don’t... I don’t...” I started hyperventilating, my chest convulsing as hysteria overwhelmed me.

Strong arms closed around me, but they didn’t frighten me. They were warm, powerful enough to protect me.

I turned my face into his chest and sobbed, my fingers fisting in his shirt as I struggled to get closer. A soothing stream of Spanish rumbled over me. Even though I couldn’t understand the words, I focused on the lilting cadence, allowing it to fill my mind and blot out all the awful things.

But now that the memories had finally been unearthed, I couldn’t bury them again. They played out in my head in horrible, vivid detail. Every muffled cry, every shameful gasp. The wrenching pain between my legs as Uncle Robert violated my small body.

Big hands stroked my back, my hair, my cheeks. They were warm. Familiar. I leaned into them, seeking more heat. I was so cold, frigid down to my bones. My entire body shook, except for my fingers, which were fisted so tightly in his shirt that my knuckles were white.

I didn’t want to remember. I didn’t want...

“Where is your uncle now?” he asked in English. His soothing voice roughened, and his arms were tight around me.

“What?” I asked, struggling to move from memory to reality.

“You said...” He trailed off on a growl. “You mentioned *Uncle Robert*. Where can I find him?”

I shuddered at his name. “Why?”

“I’m going to kill him for you, Samantha,” he swore, his hand firming on my head where he’d been stroking my hair. I realized I wasn’t the only one shaking. Andrés’ strong body practically vibrated with barely-restrained violence.

“He’s dead,” I said hollowly, remembering the day I’d watched his casket being lowered into the ground. I’d been fifteen then, when his alcoholism had sent him to an early grave. Six years after my parents had left me alone with him so they could go on a week-long vacation. They hadn’t known about his drinking at the time. They hadn’t known about *him*. About what he wanted to do to me.

“I cried at his funeral,” I whispered, anguished. “I didn’t know why I was so upset. I fucking cried over him.”

“How old were you?” Andrés asked. “How old were you when he—?” His teeth snapped closed, as though he couldn’t let the words leave his tongue.

“Nine,” I said softly. “But I forgot. How could I forget?”

Everything made so much sense now: my nervous tics, why I was so uncomfortable around men. I’d always been awkward and shy, even as a child. Before. But I’d had friends at school. People I wanted to play with.

After, I stopped going to my classmates’ birthday parties. The idea of a slumber party, especially, gave me crippling anxiety. I didn’t want to leave my parents.

So I’d stayed at home. I’d found solace in my computer games. I hid behind a screen, isolated from everyone. No one could touch me.

Until Andrés. He hadn’t let me hide from him. He’d pushed past my barriers and demanded that I let him in. It might have been fucked up, but he’d been right: I never would have found intimacy with another man like what I shared with him. Not even Dex. My gentle giant of a friend might be a Dominant, but he was far too sweet to have given me what I truly needed.

I needed ruthlessness. I needed darkness. I needed Andrés.

“I’m sorry,” I choked out. “I’m sorry I tried to leave. I thought you didn’t care about me. I thought—”

“You thought I didn’t care?” he demanded, his muscles tensing and rippling around me. “Do you know what it did to me, seeing another man hurting you, touching you? Seeing

you broken and crying when you remembered what—?” He cut himself off again before he fully verbalized what Uncle Robert did to me.

His black eyes bored into me. They sparked with fury, but lines of anxiety tightened around them. “Did I hurt you?” he asked, his voice strangely thick. “Last night. Did I hurt you?”

He thought he’d hurt me during sex?

“No,” I reassured him, touching my fingertips to his cheek, tracing the line of his scar just as I’d done when he’d been buried deep inside me.

“Then why? Why would you leave me?”

Shame heated my cheeks at the hurt in his voice. “I woke up, and you were gone,” I said, my voice small. “I didn’t have my collar. Then Lauren brought me the pill and the shot, and I thought I must have imagined... I thought you didn’t care.”

His face shifted to a carefully blank mask, but something stirred in his dark eyes. “Do you want to get pregnant?”

“I... No. Not... Not right now.”

The thought of having a child with Andrés—of having a family again after losing my parents—made something tug in my chest.

He started petting me again. “That’s for the best,” he said, sounding as though he was talking to himself as much as to me. “You need to take the pill.”

“I... okay.” It was the rational thing to do.

But then why were my eyes stinging?

“You were upset because I was gone?” he asked, cuddling me close. “Then I’ll stay. Do you want your collar back on? I thought you resented it.”

“I, um, I got used to it. I like it,” I amended truthfully. “It makes me feel safe. Like you’re with me, even when you’re not here. But I’d rather not be chained to the bed,” I added. It would be nice to be able to take care of myself during the day, instead of relying on Lauren for everything. In a weird way,

part of me would miss it, knowing Andrés was thinking about me waiting in his bed. It seemed I'd developed a kink to match his.

He traced the line of my jaw, rubbed his thumb along my lower lip. "You can have your collar, but I'm not going anywhere. I left this morning to see my brother. I was convincing him to give me more time with you."

"Oh. Thank you." I'd thought he'd been playing me this whole time, but he'd been honest with me from the beginning. Yes, his kinky games were meant to train me in how to please him, but everything he did was ultimately meant to protect me. He wanted me to cooperate for his brother so Cristian wouldn't hurt me.

"I still don't want to work for him," I said quietly. "It goes against everything I believe in."

"I know. I've read enough about your superheroes to see that."

"Then what are we going to do?"

He sighed, his eyes clouding with anxiety. "I don't know yet. I'll figure something out."

"*We'll* figure something out," I told him. I was no longer willing to sit around and wait for rescue. Cristian was the one threatening me, not Andrés. He wasn't my captor, he was my protector.

He stared at me with something like awe, cupping my cheeks in his hands before pressing his lips to mine.

Despite the horrible memories that had just resurfaced, I didn't flinch away from his masculine touch. I leaned into him and parted my lips, offering myself to him. I wanted him to claim me. I wanted to be his.

CHAPTER 20

Andrés held the final bite of bacon to my lips, and I playfully nipped at his fingers as I took it. His lips curved up in a dotting smile. There was no sharp warning in his eyes, no rebuke. Just pleasure.

He'd held me all day after my ordeal and cuddled me close through two nightmares involving my uncle. It had been a difficult night, but he'd comforted me and kissed me back to sleep.

This morning, he was staying late again. I worried about our timeline with Cristian, but Andrés didn't seem to want to leave me.

That suited me just fine, because I didn't want him to leave, either. Until we figured out how to deal with Cristian, I didn't want him to face his cruel older brother.

"Yesterday, you said you wanted your collar," Andrés murmured, trailing his fingers along my bare neck. "Do you still want it?"

"Yes," I said immediately, leaning into his touch.

He beamed at me. "Then you'll have it."

He lifted me off his lap where we'd been cuddled on the bed and went to the chest of drawers. When he turned back to me, he held the thin strip of black leather in both hands, touching it with careful reverence.

"Kneel for me." It was an order, but there was a hint of trepidation in his tone that made it clear that I could refuse. He

wanted me to choose to obey. He wanted me to choose *him*.

I got up off the bed and sank to my knees before him, moving more gracefully than I ever would have imagined I was capable of. He'd never asked me to kneel for him before, but I knew how to present myself from what I'd seen online. I spread my thighs so my pussy was open to him, and I pulled my arms behind my back, placing my hands on the opposite elbows. The position made my back arch, offering my small breasts to him. Keeping my spine straight, I bowed my head and waited to feel the leather kiss my throat.

He was silent for a long moment. Then his fingers brushed over the top of my head, trailing down through my hair before exploring the line of my jaw. His forefinger curled beneath my chin, and he lifted my face so I looked up into his dark gaze. The light flashed against his eyes, making them shine brighter than I'd ever seen.

"You are so beautiful," he said hoarsely. "So perfect. *Mi sirenita.*"

I flushed with pleasure. "So are you."

I still saw his scars clearly, but they weren't repulsive. They were physical reminders of his vulnerability. They were slices in his armor, and he'd allowed me to open them up and look inside to the man underneath the monster.

He stared down at me in awe. "You're not scared of me? I don't frighten you?"

"No," I promised. "I'm not scared of you, Andrés."

His lips parted, as though he was about to speak. Then he closed them and swallowed hard. His eyes shone with a worshipful light as he brought the collar up to my throat and wrapped the leather around my neck.

I heaved out a sigh of relief at the familiar, reassuring feel of it encircling my throat, a physical reminder of our connection.

"Mine," he said, tracing the line of the collar.

"Yours," I replied with fervor.

He bent down and gripped my waist, lifting me up and guiding me back down onto the bed.

“Are you ready for me?” he asked, his voice strained with need.

He was asking my permission. He didn't want to push me after the dark memories that had risen up to torment me.

But those memories couldn't destroy my desire for Andrés. He'd taken me in his harsh hands and ripped down all my barriers, helping me conquer my fears, even when I didn't understand them.

“Always,” I promised, taking his hand and moving it between my legs so he could feel my desire for him. “I want you.”

He groaned and grasped my ankles, pulling my ass to the edge of the bed before resting my calves against his shoulders. Still standing while I lay on my back, he gripped my hips and entered me in one hard thrust.

I cried out as he stretched me, my lingering soreness from our first time making me hyperaware of his size.

He paused, his brow furrowing. His dark eyes studied me, tight with concern.

I placed my hands atop his, curling his fingers deeper into my hips. “Please, Andrés...”

A low sound of longing left his chest, and he withdrew from me before slowly pushing all the way back in. He claimed me in long, careful strokes, playing with my clit and lighting my body up with pleasure.

He fucked me until I saw stars, and we both came undone.

No. Deep in my soul, I knew that wasn't right. He didn't fuck me.

We made love.

Love.

I was still contemplating my feelings hours later, as Andrés and I lay tangled in the sheets. He'd dozed off for a while after we'd had sex, but I'd been wide awake, my brain buzzing.

I had feelings for him. On a rational level, I had to acknowledge that they'd been building within me for weeks.

But *love*?

It was insane. He was a dangerous drug lord. How could I share a life with a man like him?

I hadn't thought about a future with him before. I'd just been living day to day, vaguely planning my escape with waning enthusiasm.

I didn't see how I could be with him in any real way.

And that made my heart twist in my chest.

There was one obvious way out of this that I could see, but it put him at risk: I could pretend to work for Cristian, and I'd get a message back to my friends at the Bureau. They'd come in to rescue me, and they'd arrest Cristian for abducting me.

They'd also want to arrest Andrés.

I couldn't let that happen. I might be able to arrange immunity for him if he turned on his brother, but that wasn't a guarantee.

I could also try convincing Andrés to give me access to a phone, so I could call my friends. That way, I wouldn't have to face Cristian at all.

It still wouldn't guarantee his safety, though. I couldn't see how to get back to my life without betraying Andrés.

But the idea of going back to my life without him in it made my chest ache. I wasn't ready for my time with him to end, even if I didn't want to stay locked in this penthouse forever.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked, his fingertips brushing over the furrow in my brow.

I blinked and propped up from where I'd been resting against his chest.

“I thought you were asleep,” I said instead of answering.

“I was, but I could hear you thinking.” He gave me a languorous smile and stroked my hair back from my cheek. “You do have a very busy mind.”

“Let me guess. You’re going to help me make it go all quiet and blissful?” I was only half-teasing. That sounded kind of nice right now. It would free me from my inner turmoil.

“I can, if that’s what you need,” he said. “But I like your clever brain.”

“You do?” He’d never openly expressed admiration for my intellect before. After our games of chess, I’d come to suspect it, but he’d never said it outright. It made my heart do a funny flip. I’d worried so many times that he saw me as nothing more than a pet, but actually respected me as an intelligent woman.

“Of course,” he replied. “You challenge me. I find you fascinating. Did you not know?”

“I...” I swallowed down the lump in my throat. “No. I guess I didn’t know that. Not for sure.”

“I should tell you more often, then.”

He was being so sweet. I just wanted to melt into him, to feel his weight settle over me as he drove deep inside me, connecting us intimately.

His fingers curled beneath my chin, lifting my face so he could study my expression. “Did I make you sad?”

“No,” I said, my voice catching. “That... means a lot to me.”

“Then why are you crying?”

“Because I don’t want to leave,” I whispered. “I don’t want to leave you, but I should.”

His jaw firmed, his eyes flaring. “You’re still thinking about how to escape?”

“No,” I said quickly. “I mean, yes. I mean, I want to get out of working for Cristian. I don’t want to spend my days

locked in this penthouse, fearing the day your brother comes for me. And if you really value my mind like you say you do, you won't want that for me, either."

He scowled. "This is the safest place for you. You should fear Cristian. This is the only way I know how to protect you."

"This isn't the life I want," I said, desperate. "I can't stay trapped in a cage forever. I need to do something meaningful. I need to help people."

"You've been reading too many comic books. You can't be a superhero, Samantha. You're far too breakable, and I won't put you at risk."

"I can be a hero," I informed him, anger rising. "I used to do it every day, before you took me. I had a life. I had purpose."

He wrapped his arms around me and rolled, settling his heavy weight on me so I was pinned beneath him. "Your life is with me now," he said, his voice rough. "And my purpose is to protect you."

"You won't be able to keep me from Cristian forever," I tried to reason with him. "Let me call my friends at the Bureau. If you go into hiding before they come for Cristian, I can cover your tracks. They won't find you. You'll be safe."

"And what about you?" His black eyes burned into me. "Where will you be while I'm in hiding? Will you go back to your friends? To your Dex?"

"I... I don't know," I whispered, torn. I didn't want to go back to my life without Andrés.

"You're *mine*," he snarled. His cock was hard against me, pressing at the entrance to my sex. "And you're not going anywhere. Not back to your Dex. And not to my brother. You belong to me."

"I'm yours," I agreed. "But I can't—"

He crushed his lips to mine, silencing me on a warning growl. My body heated for him, and I softened under his onslaught. My pussy grew slick with arousal. As soon as I

moaned against his mouth, he thrust into me in one brutal, possessive stroke.

He fucked me hard, claiming me in deep, merciless thrusts. My body welcomed his ferocity. Because I didn't want him to let me go. I didn't want to return to my old life and have Andrés disappear forever.

I couldn't yet see a clear path to a future with him, but I knew I didn't want to lose him. I wrapped my legs around him and pulled him impossibly deeper, welcoming his harsh claim over me.

CHAPTER 21

Andrés woke me early the next morning with a soft kiss against my neck. I turned my head, offering him better access. He rumbled his approval, the sound humming against my sensitive skin as he nipped at me. I pressed my ass back against his erection in wanton invitation, my body awakening for him before my mind was fully aware.

“It’s time for your punishment,” he murmured against my neck.

“Punishment?” I asked sleepily, not at all alarmed by the threat. “Why?”

“You tried to escape,” he reminded me, but he sounded more aroused than upset. “That was very naughty, *gatita*. I’ve owed you a punishment for days.”

“Oh. Okay,” I agreed, knowing he needed this from me. After almost losing me, he needed to see me bound and begging for him. And I needed it, too. I felt guilty and foolish for thinking he didn’t care about me, especially after our last few days of intense intimacy. A little pain and his forgiveness would absolve me.

He kissed the tender spot he’d bitten. “Good girl.”

He gave me a few minutes for my morning routine, and I emerged from the bathroom with my teeth brushed and face freshly washed. He was waiting for me, his powerful body on full display where he stood at the threshold to the sitting room. He held out his hand, beckoning me toward him.

“Come.”

I crossed the bedroom and placed my hand in his, allowing him to lead me to the playroom. I knew pain was coming, but my body heated at the prospect. He'd conditioned me to enjoy a little pain. Or maybe I'd always been built this way. I'd gotten aroused when he'd spanked me the first time, on the day I woke up in his bed after my capture, scared and confused.

I wasn't scared anymore. Not of the pain, and not of Andrés.

I followed where he led, trusting him implicitly even as we entered the room that had once terrified me. We came to a stop at the far wall, where he kept a multitude of implements designed for my torment hanging in neat, orderly rows.

He selected a length of crimson rope, and I shivered in anticipation. I'd come to love rope: the slightly earthy smell of hemp, the rough fibers that stimulated my sensitive skin. I felt secure when he bound me so thoroughly. He often used leather cuffs to strap me down, but rope was more intimate, methodical. Almost artistic. I was his to mold and shape, to bend and stretch into whatever position he desired, making me into something beautiful to be admired.

I took a deep breath and released it on a long, shuddering sigh as he began to wind the rope around me, forming a familiar harness around my chest. He took extra time and care to create a pretty lattice pattern above my breasts, turning my body into his work of art.

When he was finished tightening the rope around my chest, he drew my arms behind my back, binding them together from shoulder to wrist, until my back arched and my breasts stood out proudly, my nipples peaked and throbbing for his attention.

He tied off his work and took another length of rope, feeding it through the large metal ring bolted into the thick wooden beam above my head. He then looped it through the bindings on my arms, pulling them up behind me so I was forced to bend at the waist. My breaths came faster, shallower

as carnal need began to take hold of all my senses. I spread my legs without him having to issue a command, wantonly offering my wet pussy to him.

Satisfied with my helpless state, he knotted the ropes in place and stepped back. He took a long minute to admire me, but he didn't touch me. I whined for his attention, but he returned to the wall to select the next item for my punishment.

He held up the shiny set of rubber-tipped nipple clamps so I could see them clearly. A chain dangled between them, decorated with little red gemstones. It was pretty and perverted and perfect. I wanted the pinch of the clamps, the pull of the swaying chain as he toyed with it. I wanted him to take full control of my body; my pain, my pleasure.

He came back to me and lightly cupped my breasts, his calloused fingertips barely skimming my flesh as his palms kissed my tight, aching nipples. I tried to lean into him, but the ropes kept me trapped. The sense of helplessness I had once feared now sent me soaring, granting me the sweetest release. I put myself fully in Andrés' domineering hands. I was his to play with, his to punish, his to cherish.

He began to roll my nipples between his fingers, preparing me for the harsher bite of the clamps. When I whimpered and wiggled, torn between wanting relief and craving more, he caught my tight peaks in the clamps. I cried out as he turned the screws on the sides, slowly increasing the pressure to ensure they'd stay firmly in place when he tugged on the chain that connected them. I hissed out a breath and struggled to adjust to the pinch.

As I settled into acceptance, euphoria flooded my mind. He flicked the gems that dangled from the chain, and it swayed beneath me, tormenting me sweetly. I moaned, and my eyes slid closed as my head dropped forward, my weight sagging into the ropes that held me so securely. They shifted around me, tightening and caressing, embracing me.

I felt his heat recede, but my eyes remained closed as I drew in short, panting breaths. As my chest rose and fell, the chain tugged at my nipples. Every little hit of pain sizzled

through me, sending scorching lines of pleasure straight to my clit. My inner thighs grew slick with my arousal, and my core contracted, eager for him to fill me.

I sighed in bliss when I felt the snap of the crop against my ass. He started slow, peppering my flesh with little sharp slaps, the smooth leather tongue leaving bright patches of heat everywhere it landed. My skin warmed and tingled. Little sparks danced over my flesh, crackling up my spine to flood my mind with bliss.

Suddenly, he cracked the crop hard against my upper thigh, a harsh, punitive stroke. I cried out at the rush of pain, but I didn't try to move away. I welcomed it, craving the absolution he offered.

"Never leave me again," he said, his voice rough with emotion.

Another blow cracked across my thigh, stinging and burning.

"You don't get to leave me. Never leave me." There was something desperate in his harsh tone, yearning mingling with command.

"I won't," I promised, tears of release spilling down my cheeks. "I won't leave you. I love you."

The blows stopped, and the crop clattered to the ground. Both of his big hands curled into my ass, spreading my cheeks wide.

"Say it again," he ground out.

"I love you." The soul-deep truth left me on a sob. "Please, Andrés."

He snarled and slammed into me, his cock thrusting deep into my wet channel. "Tell me," he demanded, driving into me with ruthless, branding strokes. "Tell me again. Don't stop."

"I love you!" I cried out as he thrust into me mercilessly. "I love you, I love you..." The words left me in a litany, over and over again as his cock dragged across my g-spot, driving me higher. He reached beneath me and pinched my clit.

“Andrés!” I screamed out his name as I shattered. His raw shout echoed around us, and his cum filled me, marking me as his. He kept pounding into me, riding out the last of our pleasure with brutal force. I welcomed his claim over me.

Finally, he stopped, completely spent. He withdrew from me and carefully removed the clamps from my nipples. I whimpered when blood rushed back to the abused buds, but he soothed the sting away with gentle fingers, morphing the pain into pleasure.

He cut me down, severing the ropes that bound me. He supported my limp body and eased us down to the cool tiled floor, holding me tight.

“Mine,” he murmured, tracing the contours of my body as though seeking to memorize every inch of me. “All mine.”

I kissed his neck, tasting my tears on his skin. The salt mingling with his unique flavor was intoxicating. Better than any drug. I licked at it, craving more. A low, rumbling sound left his chest, vibrating against me. The sensation rolled through my body, making its way to my core. Despite the rough way he’d fucked me, my pussy wept for him, wanting him again.

I shifted in his hold, straddling him. He stiffened for me, needing me as desperately as I needed him. I boldly lowered myself onto him and captured his lips, welcoming him to claim my mouth the way he’d claimed my pussy. I moved against him, slowly sliding up and down on his shaft. His hands captured my waist, guiding me to take him faster, deeper. We found our bliss together, our sweat-slicked bodies entwined as closely as possible.

I screamed out his name, my fingernails scoring his back. I gave him everything, but at the same time, I claimed him as well, marking him.

I loved Andrés, and he was all mine.

CHAPTER 22

Andrés left me with a promise to return in a few hours. He was going to see Cristian to convince him to give me more time. Despite my devotion to Andrés, I couldn't bring myself to help with his business. And he wouldn't ask me to. In the beginning, he'd been determined to make me cooperate in order to protect me, but we were past that now. He promised he wouldn't force me to do anything that went against who I was.

Because he cared. He cared about *me*, not some version of me that did exactly as he said. I wasn't his doll. I wasn't his pet. I wasn't his fucktoy.

He might not have told me he loved me, but I could feel it in the reverent way he held me, the way he called me *his*. I knew he'd lost the people he loved in the past. He wasn't ready to say the words aloud, because he was afraid he'd lose me, too. I was still targeted in Cristian's crosshairs, and I didn't expect Andrés to admit his feelings for me until I was safe. Until he was certain his sadistic brother wouldn't take me away like he'd taken Andrés' beloved sister and grandmother.

So for now, I was content with his branding kiss, with his harsh claiming of my body. His possessive touch communicated all the things he wasn't ready to say to me.

I still didn't understand how we could have a future together, but I resolved to come up with a solution. I needed to push aside my worry and focus on formulating my plan.

Not worrying was difficult when I knew Andrés was facing his brother right now, defying him in an effort to protect me. I didn't particularly enjoy feeling like a damsel locked in a tower for safekeeping while my dark knight fought my battles. But without a computer, I really wouldn't have been much help in a fight.

I resolved to ask Andrés about that when he returned. Now that there was trust between us, he might allow me access to his laptop. I could take down Cristian's organization piece by piece, destroying his financials and leaving him utterly ruined.

But it was Andrés' livelihood, too. And although I knew he didn't approve of the Bliss and human trafficking, that didn't mean his hands were clean. I'd become convinced that he had a good heart, but he'd never known anything but a life of violence and crime. Circumstance had twisted him into a cruel monster on the surface, but I'd seen the damaged man at his core, the boy who had lost everything. His scars ran deep, and although he wouldn't like to admit it, he feared his brother. He was as much a captive in his dark life as I was in this suite.

I just had to convince him that I could help set him free, if he'd let me. He might not be able to take on Cristian, but I could do it for both of us. A few clever keystrokes would bring his entire empire crashing down.

I was only idly turning the pages of my comic book out of habit as my mind was absorbed in plotting Cristian's downfall. I wasn't sure how long I'd been skimming through the story without reading when Lauren arrived with my lunch.

I sat up in bed, covering myself with the sheet. I still wasn't comfortable with anyone but Andrés seeing me naked, even though Lauren had seen everything already.

She didn't even look me in the eye today. I suspected her jealousy of my relationship with *Master* Andrés might be growing into resentment. Not to mention the fact that I'd recently attacked her.

Without a word, she handed me the morning after pill and a glass of orange juice. I'd taken the birth control shot a few

days ago, but it wasn't guaranteed to be effective immediately, and Andrés hadn't been using condoms with me. I didn't want him to, anyway, so I'd accept the slight nausea that came along with the pill. I really wasn't ready to get pregnant.

I drained the glass of juice and handed it back to Lauren. She finally looked me in the eye. Her lovely face was drawn with anguish.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

I blinked at her. "Why? Because of Andrés? I know you care about him. That's okay." I didn't begrudge the woman her admiration of my captor any longer. I understood everything she'd claimed about him. He *was* kind. He was a good man, deep in his soul.

"No," she said softly. "Master Andrés is going to be so angry with me."

"What are you talking about?" I asked, more sharply. Fear for Andrés flooded my chest, pressing against my heart.

"Cristian made me," she said, wringing her hands. "You have to come with me now."

I shook my head. It felt lighter than it should, but I couldn't focus on that. "I'm not going anywhere without Andrés."

"You will in a minute." Her eyes filled with tears. "He's going to hate me."

My body heated with anger. Or was it just hot? No. I was very aware of the cool air caressing my skin, making it pebble. I shivered, feeling as though Andrés was running his fingers down my spine. My core warmed and pulsed, need blossoming low in my belly.

"What did you do?" I asked, even as a pleasant, floaty sensation settled over me. It felt almost as good as being suspended in Andrés' ropes.

"Cristian made me put Bliss in your drink. He wants you to be with the other girls, since you won't work for him. You have to come with me."

“I don’t...” The refusal died on my tongue, and a soft moan left my chest as my clit began to pulse.

“I’ll try to keep the worst ones away from you,” Lauren sniffled. “Come on. We have to go.”

I got to my feet, shuddering as the sheet slid down my sensitized body. My rational mind receded as desire swelled. My feet followed where Lauren led, with no thought of resistance. There was no thought at all. Just need.

I needed to be touched, to be kissed, to be fucked.

I needed Andrés.

We arrived at the elevator, and the silver doors opened for Lauren. She took my hand, and I gasped as my fingers tingled with awareness. She started to cry as she pulled me into the elevator with her, but I didn’t understand why. How could she be sad when everything felt so *good*?

I was warm. So warm. I leaned back against the cold mirrored wall, and a whine eased up my throat. My eyes slid closed as my inner walls began to contract, aching for Andrés to fill me.

“Andrés,” I groaned his name.

“You’ll see him later,” Lauren promised, her voice hitching. “After.”

The elevator stopped, and the doors slid open. Lauren was still holding my hand, and she tugged me out into the long corridor. I followed without question, without concern. All I could focus on was the lust coursing through my system, the need building deep inside me.

She led me a few steps down the hall and stopped at a closed door. She retrieved a key from her dress pocket and turned the lock before ushering me inside. The door closed behind me with a sharp *click*, but I barely registered it.

The room was huge, yellow lights filling the decadent space. Everything was red velvet and gold gilding. It was warm, soft, sensual. Couches lined the walls, and a massive circular bed dominated the center of the room. People lounged

on the couches in varying states of undress. One particularly voluptuous woman was dancing to a heavy, hypnotic beat, her naked body undulating around a silver pole. A musky scent filled the space. It made my pussy clench and my blood race.

Several sets of eyes turned on me, male and female. I heard deep, masculine voices rumbling beneath the music, a harsh laugh punctuating the sensuous beat.

A man approached me slowly. I recognized him. It was the boy who'd come to clean Andrés' suite, the one who'd threatened me. His eyes flicked past me to focus on Lauren.

"What's she doing here?" he asked. "She's supposed to be upstairs. Do you know what Andrés will do to us if he finds her in here?"

"Cristian wants her down here," Lauren said, her voice still trembling with tears. "He said he'd deal with Master Andrés."

Something stirred at the edges of my mind.

Andrés. He was with Cristian. And he...

God, I needed him. My body was on fire, my pussy throbbing to the point of discomfort. I needed relief, release.

Not caring that I was naked in front of a room full of strangers, I closed my eyes and cupped my breasts, squeezing them to make the tingling in my nipples abate. My firm touch only made my desire grow, and my wet arousal slipped down my thighs.

"If you're sure..." I heard the boy's voice getting closer, but I didn't care about him.

I cared about getting back to Andrés, so he could help me ease this craving that was gnawing at my insides.

Long, masculine fingers closed around my wrists, directing my hands to my sides. Warm flesh touched mine, and I cried out at the shock of sensation as he caressed my breasts. My nipples were hard peaks against his soft palms.

Soft. Not calloused.

This was wrong. It felt wrong. But *so good...*

A loud *bang* sounded behind me, accompanied by the *snap* of splintering wood. My eyes flew open when the hands were jerked away from my breasts. Andrés' savage snarl filled my senses, and a pleasurable shudder ran through my body at the sight of his scarred face. It was twisted with maddened fury. He held the boy's face in both hands and twisted sharply. Bone cracked, and the boy's body fell to the floor, his neck at an odd angle.

Andrés positioned his body in front of mine, his fists curled tight at his sides.

"Who else touched her?" he roared. "Who?"

"N-no one." Lauren's voice was a high squeak. "I'm sorry, Master Andrés. I'm so sorry."

"Do not speak to me." He bit out each word. "You're lucky I don't snap your neck, too."

I heard her heave out a despairing sob, heard her soft footsteps whispering across the carpet as she fled.

"*Master Andrés,*" I said. "I don't like that she calls you *Master.*"

He turned to me, his black eyes burning with rage. Despite his fury, he handled me as though I were a fragile doll as he lifted me up in his strong arms and carried me out into the hallway. I moaned and rubbed my face against him, like the needy kitten he'd always claimed I was.

"You're not hers," I murmured, snuggling into his heat, loving the feel of his corded muscles rippling beneath me. "You're mine. My Master." I giggled. "Isn't that funny? I always wanted a Master. And you're mine."

The elevator took us up to his penthouse, and he carried me to the bed. He tried to set me down and pull away, but I locked my arms around his neck, keeping him close.

"Touch me, Master," I breathed. "Please. I need you."

My pussy ached, and my desire for him coated my thighs.

He grasped my arms and pried them away from him. His hands slid up to my wrists, and he pressed them into the

pillows above my head. I whimpered and arched my back, lust pulsing through me as he dominated my body.

“I can’t,” he rasped. His lips were twisted downward, pulling his scar to a deep slash. “I can’t be with you like this.”

Holding my wrists in place with one hand, he brushed my hair back from my face with the other. I hummed my pleasure and nuzzled into him.

“My Master,” I sighed. “Mine.”

“You don’t know what you’re saying,” he said tightly. “I’m sorry,” he continued, his voice breaking in a way I didn’t understand. “I’m so sorry. I wasn’t here. I didn’t know. When Cristian told me...” He gnashed his teeth. “I should have killed him. I should have fucking killed him.”

I wasn’t used to hearing Andrés curse in English.

“You’re upset,” I observed. “Don’t be upset. Make love to me, Master.”

“Don’t call me that,” he growled, his eyes tightening with anguish.

“But you are,” I said. “I love you, my Master. My Andrés.”

He cupped my cheek in his hand. “Please, don’t say that. Don’t.”

I wasn’t used to hearing him beg, either.

“Don’t be sad,” I said, dimly noting the wetness pooling at the corners of his black eyes.

He blinked hard, and some of the wetness fell to splash against my cheek.

“Make love to me,” I urged again, arching my back, lifting my tingling breasts in wanton invitation. My entire body was *alive*, my nerve endings crackling and popping. Heat was building inside me. I was going to burn up if he didn’t touch me where I craved it most. “I need you.”

He pressed a tender kiss against my forehead. “All right, *cosita*,” he murmured. “I’ll help you. I know you must be aching.”

“I am. My pussy hurts.”

“I’ll kiss it better,” he promised.

“Thank you,” I sighed in relief. He was going to touch me. He was going to kiss me. I lifted my face to his, but he turned away.

“Not your lips,” he said, still sounding oddly pained. “I can’t when you’re like this.”

“But you said you’d kiss me,” I whined. “You said— Oh!”

Ecstasy lashed through me when he lowered his mouth to my tight nipple, flicking the tip with his tongue before sucking the peak into his mouth. He didn’t use his teeth, and I was grateful. Just the heat of his mouth was intense enough to bring tears to my eyes.

“Please,” I begged, lifting my hips. I needed him to touch my pussy. It was starting to throb to the point of pain.

He shushed me gently, pressing his palm against my stomach to pin me down. He moved onto the bed with me, but his body didn’t settle atop mine. I wanted his comforting weight holding me down, but he positioned himself between my quivering thighs.

I watched in rapt fascination as he lowered his head to my pussy and touched my wet folds with his tongue. His hungry groan mingled with my harsh cry. He’d never kissed me there before. And it felt...

“So good,” I panted, my fingers spearing in his thick hair as I pulled him closer. “More.”

He traced the line of my opening, teasing the little patch of skin between my pussy and my asshole before licking all the way up to my pulsing clit. I thrashed as stars burst across my vision, bliss singing through my veins. He growled against me, and his hands locked around my thighs, forcing me wide open. His tongue circled my clit, applying firm, hot pressure. My inner walls contracted and clenched, yearning to be filled. He licked and sucked at my pussy lips, tormenting me with ruthless pleasure.

It wasn't enough. I needed him inside me, needed him to mark me with his cum.

Tears leaked from the corners of my eyes as pleasure turned to a deep, knifing pain between my legs. The building pressure had to release, or it would destroy me.

"Please," I choked on a sob. "I need you inside me. It hurts. Please, Master..."

He pressed one final kiss against my clit before his body covered mine. He freed his hard cock from his slacks and lined up with my soaked pussy.

His eyes searched mine, dark with hunger and yearning. "You shouldn't call me that," he ground out, hesitating at my opening. "You shouldn't."

I wrapped my legs around him and drew him into me. "My Master," I moaned in relief when he filled me to the hilt.

A deep, pained sound slipped between his clenched teeth. He braced his arms on either side of my head and started to move within me, thrusting hard and deep. His forehead dropped to rest on mine, and he stared down into my eyes, his face drawn tight in an expression I didn't understand.

"Forgive me," he whispered. "Forgive me, *sirenita*."

I didn't know what he was talking about, and I couldn't focus on his words. All I could think about was how good his big cock felt stretching my tight sheath, how perfectly we fit together. The ruthless pleasure that had been building inside me crested, and I shattered on a scream.

My fingers fisted in his hair again, and I pulled his face down to mine so I could revel in his exquisite taste while my orgasm rolled through me. I caught his rough shout on my tongue, felt more wetness on my cheeks as his hot cum lashed into me, soothing the need that had consumed me. I shuddered beneath him as bliss flooded my body, making me light and tingly. My numb fingers fell from his hair, finally releasing him as all my muscles turned to jelly.

I closed my eyes and slipped into velvety darkness, his softly-spoken words following me down into sleep: "Forgive

me.”

CHAPTER 23

I stirred, slowly coming back to awareness. My body felt strangely heavy, and I was sore between my legs. I opened my eyes to find the shades drawn, with only the soft glow of city lights peeking around the edges. Night had fallen, but I was just waking up. Everything started to come back to me in pieces: Lauren, dosing me with Bliss; the red and gold room; the boy touching me; and Andrés, coming to my rescue like some dark avenging angel.

I sat up, searching for him. He sat on the edge of the bed, watching me with bloodshot eyes. His posture was stiff, his face a blank mask. He was fully dressed in his sharp suit, but his hair was wet, as though he'd just taken a shower.

"Thank you," I murmured, reaching for him.

He shifted away, grimacing. "Don't thank me. I fucked you while you were high out of your mind. I violated you."

"No," I said fiercely, grabbing his hand before he could retreat farther. "I begged you to." Even though I hadn't been able to control myself while under the influence, I remembered everything clearly now. "I needed you to. I was hurting. You helped me."

He turned his face away from me, but he didn't pull his hand from my grip. "You shouldn't have called me Master," he said hollowly. "You shouldn't have done that. I couldn't—" He pressed his lips to a thin slash, holding in whatever he was going to say. "I'm not blaming you. You didn't know what you were saying. It's not your fault. None of this is your fault. You

didn't ask to be trapped with me. You didn't ask to be beaten and raped."

"You didn't rape me. Don't you dare call it that. Don't you dare." Angry tears made my vision swim, and I swiped them away from my cheeks. "You were helping me. I trusted you to help me. I love you, Andrés. And I meant what I said. You're my Master."

He rounded on me, his eyes blazing. "Don't call me that," he barked, his hand tightening around mine in a vise-like grip.

I moved toward him, scooting across the bed so I could get in his face. "You did nothing wrong," I said, imbuing the words with as much fervor as I possessed. "You saved me. You've been saving me this whole time. You've been protecting me from Cristian. He would have—"

"He would have what?" he shouted over me. "Ordered Lauren to slip you Bliss and whore you out? That's what he wanted, Samantha. He wanted you to scream in pleasure while they violated you. He wanted them to send you back to me, broken and used. He wanted to punish me for my failure. I should have killed him," he hissed, his gaze turning feverish. "But I didn't. I ran back to you as soon as he told me. He fucking laughed while I ran away from him."

"You got back to me in time." I cupped his face in my hands, trying to get him to focus on me. "You saved me. You protected me."

He grabbed my wrists, squeezing to the point of pain. But he didn't move my hands away from his face.

"I can't protect you," he rasped. "I'm a coward. You deserve better than me."

"I don't, and you're not," I asserted. "I want to be with you, Andrés. You're not a coward."

"I'm afraid of him," he admitted on a bitter whisper.

"I know," I said softly. "And I understand."

"You don't. My face..." He trailed off with a shudder and cut his eyes away.

I touched his scar, applying enough pressure to guide his face back to mine. “Tell me what he did to you.” It was a steady command. Andrés needed to purge this from his soul. It was the only way he’d be able to free himself from the power his brother held over him.

“It was three years ago,” he began, the words bleeding out of him. “Cristian made a deal with some Russians. He started dealing in Bliss. I’d never dared to challenge him, but I hated it. It was too far, too much. He was selling women, just like he sold my sister. So I decided to stage a coup and take over the organization myself. I’d always been the one to keep the business running. I could do it without him. My life would be better without him.”

He paused, his eyes sliding out of focus as he fell into memory.

“He found out,” I surmised, quietly urging him to continue.

His jaw tightened beneath my hands. “One of my men betrayed me. Cristian came for me before I made a move against him. He strung me up in front of all of our people—the ones he hadn’t killed for following me. He cut me. He made me scream. He humiliated me. Then he stitched me up himself to make sure the marks lasted.”

My stomach churned, nausea rising in my throat. “Andrés...” I said his name shakily, struggling to get my tears under control. I wanted to weep for him, but that wasn’t what he needed from me. He needed me to be strong. He needed me to show him that his scars only made him more beautiful in my eyes. They were marks of his defiance, of his goodness. He bore them because he’d tried to put a stop to his brother’s evil.

I leaned in and brushed my lips across the deep furrow in his cheek. “I love you,” I said with the weight of an oath. “We’re going to get away from your brother. Together.”

His brows drew together, his face twisting in lines of anguish. “I have something for you,” he said instead of responding to my fervent declaration. I didn’t like that he was

avoiding what I'd said, but he pulled me into his lap, cuddling me close.

I sighed and pressed my cheek into the crook of his neck, relief washing through me at the feel of his strong arms around me.

He shifted slightly, reaching for something on the cart beside the bed. Confusion threaded through me as he uncapped the syringe.

"Lauren already gave me the birth control shot," I told him.

One corded arm wrapped around me, pinning me against his hard body as he carefully slid the needle into my upper arm.

"It's not birth control. I should have sent you away hours ago, but I had to see your lovely eyes one last time."

"What are you...?" My tongue grew heavy in my mouth, and lethargy rolled over me as my eyes drooped closed.

"I can't protect you," he said, pressing a kiss against my motionless lips. "Goodbye, *sirenita*. *Te amo*."

I knew what it meant. *I love you*.

CHAPTER 24

I awoke to the sound of someone's fist pounding on wood. Forcing open my sandpaper eyelids, I struggled to assess my surroundings. In my gut, I knew something was wrong. The bed beneath me, the too-rough sheets that covered me, the slacks I wore.

Wrong.

I could still smell Andrés' unique, masculine scent. But that was because I was covered by one of his huge shirts.

The pounding increased in volume, escalating to banging. The sound reverberated in my skull, and I winced, my aching brain working overtime to process everything.

"Sam!" A familiar voice bellowed. I glanced toward the locked hotel room door that separated me from my friend.

"Dex?" I rasped, my throat too dry.

Wood splintered, and the door burst open. My best friend rushed toward me.

"No," I breathed.

Dex couldn't be here. That meant...

"No!" Anguish wrapped around my heart.

Andrés had sent me back to my friends, back to safety. And he'd left himself at his brother's mercy. Cristian would punish him for letting me go.

“It’s okay, Sam. It’s me.” Dex stopped a few feet away from me, keeping the same careful, respectful distance he always did.

“Are you hurt?” Jason asked. He stood even farther away, barely inside the broken doorway. Tension gripped his body, and his dark green eyes studied me intently. His lips twisted in disgust when his gaze fell on Andrés’ shirt covering me. It obviously belonged to a man; it nearly swallowed my much smaller frame. “Who did this to you?” he ground out, clearly putting two and two together. He saw my state of dress and assumed I’d been violated by my captors.

“Where is he?” I asked thickly, struggling to control my tongue. The drugs lingered in my system, sapping my strength and dulling my mind. All I knew was I had to get back to Andrés before Cristian hurt him.

“Who?” Dex asked, kneeling beside the bed so he could study my face. “Who were you with? We got an anonymous call saying you’d be here. Are you...” He eyed Andrés’ shirt, his pale blue gaze igniting with rage. His jaw clenched, and he took a deep breath. “Are you hurt?”

“I’m fine.” I slurred. “I have to go.”

“Go? Sam, you’ve been missing for almost a month. You’re not going anywhere.”

I tried to sit up, but the world wavered around me, and I dropped back onto the pillows.

“I have a bus on the way,” Jason said.

I didn’t want an ambulance. I didn’t want to go to the hospital. I wanted to get back to Andrés before something terrible happened to him.

But I couldn’t seem to move. I could barely think. I heard Dex talking, but I couldn’t quite focus on what he was saying. The room kept sliding into darkness. Every time the world disappeared, I tried to force my eyes back open.

I was fighting a losing battle. Everything dissolved around me, until all I had left was fear for Andrés.

When I finally came back to full awareness, I found myself in a hospital bed. Dex was standing at the threshold to the room, his massive body blocked by a short nurse who was clearly struggling to hold her ground.

I heard her murmur the words *rape kit* as she tried to shoo Dex away, and my stomach dropped.

I couldn't let them run a rape kit. I'd had sex with Andrés a few hours ago while under the influence of Bliss, and he'd come inside me. I doubted his DNA was on file anywhere, but I couldn't allow them to collect that kind of evidence against him.

"I want to talk to Dex," I said loudly, alerting them both to the fact that I was awake.

His blue eyes blazed when they focused on me, his tanned face oddly pale. He evidently hadn't liked the words *rape kit*, either. Although, he was disturbed for entirely different reasons. He thought I'd been used against my will, violated.

"I need to talk to you," I said, more softly. "Please."

My mind whirred to life. I had to figure out a way to save Andrés before Cristian realized I was missing. I'd start by questioning Dex. I needed to know what the FBI suspected about my abduction and what was being done to try to find the people who'd taken me.

The nurse finally stepped aside and allowed Dex to enter. He approached me carefully, moving slowly so he wouldn't spook me. He reached for me, almost touching my shoulder. Then his hand clenched to a fist, and he pulled away. He never had been willing to push past my barriers and touch me. We were buddies, and he respected my personal space issues.

Once, I'd longed for him to look at me with desire, with love. Now, he was watching me with concern.

And all I wanted was for him to get out of my way so I could get back to the man I loved before something terrible happened to him. I knew where Andrés' building was located. I'd spent enough time staring down at the cross streets below

his penthouse windows to know exactly how to find my way back to him.

Andrés obviously thought I'd accept the sanctuary offered by the Bureau. He thought he could send my friends to retrieve me, and I'd quietly go back to my life with the FBI, kept safe by my fellow agents.

He was wrong. I was going straight back to him.

Te amo.

He loved me. He loved me, so he'd let me go. He didn't believe he was strong enough to fight his brother.

But he hadn't counted on having me by his side. He'd only seen me in my weak attempts to fight as a field agent. He'd never seen me in hacker-geek-goddess mode. If I could get back to him, I could show him how easy it would be for the two of us to take Cristian down.

I just needed his laptop, and I'd be able to destroy Cristian financially, backing him into a corner before sending the full power of the FBI after him. I'd send all the incriminating evidence straight to Jason and Dex, and they'd handle the arrest.

Especially if they knew Cristian was the one responsible for my abduction.

"It was Cristian Moreno," I said quietly, looking straight into Dex's eyes. "He kidnapped me."

His jaw clenched. He knew about the Bliss and human trafficking. He'd seen me in Andrés' shirt, and he was clearly coming to some dark conclusions.

"Jason thought Division 9-C had you. We looked into Moreno, but there was no evidence. We didn't think you were on his radar. We were looking in the wrong place. Fuck, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Sam. Did he... Were you hurt?"

I cut my eyes away from his, even though I didn't feel any particular compulsion to do so. My nervous tic seemed to have been eradicated, but I didn't want him to see the truth in my eyes. I hadn't been hurt. Not really.

But it was to my advantage if Dex thought I had been. I needed him to think I was weak, shaken. Not fully mentally sharp and calculating the best way to get Andrés away from both his brother and the FBI.

“Where’s Jason?” I asked instead of answering him.

“He’s out looking for the people who did this to you. I’ll call him and tell him it was Moreno.”

“What about you?” I pressed quietly. “Will you go after Cristian?”

“No. I’m staying right here with you.”

Crap.

I needed him to leave. I had to get back to Andrés, especially while the FBI was distracted with tracking Cristian. I’d been running through all the potential ways to save Andrés, and one had become clear to me: I had to get him and his laptop from his penthouse and go into hiding.

I didn’t know how to get in touch with Andrés directly. I’d never seen him with a phone, and while I knew he must have one, I didn’t know how often he kept it on him. Certainly not when he was in his penthouse. That was a mostly technology-free zone, except for his laptop. Even if I was able to find his number somehow—and I’d need access to a computer for that—it would take too long to track down.

I wasn’t sure how long I’d been out of it, but Cristian could find out I was missing at any time and decide to hurt Andrés for letting me go.

So the time factor ruled out trying to communicate with Andrés remotely. That meant I’d need to go to him in person. Which was an impossibility as long as Dex was hovering over me. He’d follow me. Or worse, prevent me from leaving the hospital.

I couldn’t risk telling him about Andrés, because then the Bureau would know exactly where to find the man who’d been holding me captive. They wouldn’t treat him gently if they knew his role in my abduction, no matter what I said to defend him.

Once I got away from Dex and back to Andrés, we'd leave Chicago. I wasn't sure what kind of private transportation Andrés had at his disposal, but I was fairly certain he'd have something we could use to leave the city. A car would do. A jet would be awesome.

I'd never cared for his drug money, but in that moment, I hoped to hell Andrés had a private jet. If he didn't, I'd have to get us fake passports, and that would be a snag I wasn't quite ready to deal with. Maybe he'd have a connection somewhere that could help. What good was being in love with a master criminal if he didn't have some useful seedy connections?

Somehow, we'd get out of the country. I'd move all his money to an offshore account—at least, as much as we needed to survive. And then we'd ride off into the sunset together.

Now that I was faced with the prospect of being returned to my old life, I realized I didn't want it. I'd spent years hiding behind my computer. I was ready to live my life, and I wanted to share it with Andrés. I didn't care where we went, as long as we were together and he was safe from Cristian.

But I had to get past Dex first. My eyes searched the room. He'd left his keys and phone on the table in the corner, beside a chair where he must have been sitting while I slept.

I needed those keys.

Not the phone, because that could be tracked. I didn't know how to call Andrés, anyway. Access to the internet from the smart phone would have been nice, but I didn't have time to do any hacking, especially not from a phone. I could do much more significant damage to Cristian once I had access to the raw data on Andrés' laptop.

“Um, can you do something for me?” I asked, still not meeting Dex's eye. He wouldn't think anything of it; I rarely looked directly at him.

“Anything,” he said hoarsely.

“Can you get me some real clothes?” I wore a hospital gown, which wasn't ideal for escape.

“I got Chloe to bring you some,” he said, gesturing at a pile of neatly-folded clothes on the table beside my hospital bed.

“Oh. Thanks. Could you, um, get me something else?”

My mind raced, trying to think of some errand I could send him on to make him leave me alone for a few minutes.

“Coffee,” I said quickly. “I haven’t had coffee in weeks.”

It was true, but I hadn’t needed it, so I hadn’t really missed it. I’d slept so soundly with Andrés that I hadn’t required my usual two cups a day.

“I don’t want to leave you,” Dex said. “I can wait until another agent comes to relieve me, and then I’ll get you anything you want.”

“Please,” I begged, letting my real desperation shine in my eyes as I finally looked up at him. “I miss it. Coffee is normal. And I haven’t... I couldn’t...” I trailed off, letting Dex read whatever dark things he wanted into my unfinished sentences.

His jaw worked as he ground his teeth together, and he nodded tightly. “Okay, Sam. I’ll get you coffee.”

“Is there a Starbucks here? You know what I like. Quad venti iced Americano with two pumps of mocha syrup. Please,” I added again when he looked hesitant.

“That’s all the way downstairs,” he said gently. “It will take a few minutes. I don’t want to leave you here by yourself.”

“I’ll be fine,” I said, feigning a yawn. “I’m still so tired. I’ll nap while you’re gone.”

“Okay,” he said reluctantly. “There’s a CPD officer just outside the door. She’ll keep you safe while I’m gone. You don’t have anything to worry about.”

“Thank you,” I forced myself to say.

Shit. Now, I had to talk my way past a police officer, too.

I set about formulating another plan as I watched Dex leave my hospital room. A small pang speared my heart as he

walked away. This would be the last time I saw him. In person, anyway. I fully intended to keep in touch online, if he was willing.

As soon as the door closed behind Dex, I got out of bed and quickly pulled on the clothes Chloe had brought for me: a pair of yoga pants made for a woman with a much more toned butt than me, and a soft black t-shirt. It felt weird wearing clothes after spending so much time naked in Andrés' bed, but they were comfortable enough.

I picked up Dex's car keys and made my way to the door, opening it with purpose.

"Excuse me," the officer said as soon as I stepped into the hall. "Where are you going?"

"I need to find a nurse," I said. "My call button isn't working, and I need some painkillers."

The woman eyed me, assessing. "You don't look injured to me."

I dropped my eyes again to hide my lie, hoping it made me appear frail and damaged. "Um, you can't really see where I'm hurting."

"Oh. I'm... I'm sorry. I'll go find someone for you."

"Thank you," I murmured. I watched her walk down the hall through lowered lashes. As soon as she rounded a corner, I took off in the opposite direction. I wasn't familiar with the hospital's layout, but it wasn't difficult to find my way to the elevators and ride down to the parking garage. Once I was there, I hit the panic button on Dex's keys so I could locate his car.

I raced across the garage, sprinting toward the sound of shrill beeping. As soon as I got to his black sedan, I turned off the panic signal and got into the driver's seat. I was careful to leave the garage at a normal speed, even though I wanted to tear across town to get to Andrés. I couldn't get a cop tailing me for speeding right now.

I was only a few blocks away from the hospital when a phone started ringing in the glove compartment. Sighing, I

retrieved Dex's personal phone and noted his work phone number on the caller ID. I also noted that he had a spare SIG stashed in there.

Good. I could use a weapon, just in case.

"Don't be mad," I requested as I answered the call.

"Where are you?" he growled. "You took my keys. The officer said you were wearing Chloe's clothes. Do you know what I thought when I came back and you were gone? I thought he'd come back for you. I thought—"

"I'm fine," I promised, cutting off his tirade.

"Why?" he demanded. "Why would you leave? And where the hell are you going?"

"Back to him," I said truthfully. "I have to save him, Dex."

"You're going back to Moreno? Are you crazy?"

Dex probably thought I was unhinged, warped by my time in captivity.

I hadn't been warped, but I had been changed. Maybe I was a little darker than I had been, a little less pure. Maybe some of my light had spilled into Andrés, just as some of his darkness had seeped into me.

I had to get back to him, to grab him and his laptop and get the hell out of Chicago before Cristian realized I'd been freed. Once we were off the map, we could take Cristian down. I wasn't exactly sure where we'd go, but I'd make sure to set enough of Andrés' money aside in an offshore account to establish a safety net for the two of us. The rest could be donated to various charities, to start to set right some of the evil Cristian had brought into the world. Evil that Andrés had facilitated, even if he hadn't wanted to do it.

I'd help him atone.

I'd have some atoning of my own to do. After all, I was stealing Dex's car and going on the run with a notorious criminal.

I grinned to myself. Maybe I was a bit of an anti-hero.

Cool.

“Sam, come back to the hospital. Please.”

“I can’t. Sorry, Dex.”

“Do you know what it did to me when you went missing? I can’t lose you again. Come back to me.”

I didn’t like the anguish in his voice. I didn’t want to hurt my best friend. I owed him an explanation.

“I’m going back to Andrés,” I told Dex. “I love him.”

“Andrés Moreno? No, you don’t. You’re confused.”

“I’m not confused,” I said calmly. “Not anymore. I used to think I was in love with you. Did you know that?”

“What?” His breathless tone let me know he’d had no idea.

“It’s okay. I’m supposed to be with Andrés. Just like you’re supposed to be with Chloe. If she were in danger, you’d do anything to save her, wouldn’t you?”

“Of course, but—”

“That’s what I’m doing right now. I’m saving the man I love. I’ll send you all the dirt you’ll need to arrest Cristian in a few hours. Call Jason and tell him to start getting ready to move in on Cristian. I need you to find him fast, Dex. I’ll do what I can to drive him out into the open.”

“Don’t do this, Sam,” Dex pleaded. “Let me help you. I know I failed you, but let me help. I can’t make it right, but—”

“I made my own choices,” I said firmly. “And I’m making my own choices right now. You didn’t do anything wrong, Dex. I’m happier than I’ve ever been in my life. Well, I will be,” I amended.

I just had to go save my man.

“Don’t try to look for me,” I warned. “I’ll see you online, if you’re ever up for a game.”

“I’m going to find you, Sam,” he promised. “Whatever’s happened to you, I’m going to help you.”

“I don’t need your help. You need mine. I’m going to keep tracking Division 9-C for Jason. I’m going to make sure Natalie is safe for good. I’ll email him. But don’t bother trying to trace it, because you’ll just be wasting the tech analysts’ time. I mean, I know you’ll make them try, but don’t be too mean to them when they fail.”

I was in full-on hero mode, and it felt damn good. I was armed with a weapon and my wits, more powerful than I’d been in weeks. Possibly ever. Now, I just needed to get back to Andrés, log on to his laptop, and proceed to destroy his sadistic brother for good.

“Sam. Come back. Please.”

“I really do hope I’ll see you online,” I said, softening. “Don’t shut me out. You’re my best friend.”

“I’ll see you in person,” he said firmly.

“Webcams have been around for like, a quarter of a century, Dex. And I’m going to have a really great internet connection, so you’ll be able to see me crystal-clear. Tell Chloe she’d better take good care of you. I’ll be checking in.”

I ended the call and dumped the phone out the car window so Dex couldn’t use it to track me. I’d leave his car in the garage for Andrés’ building. By the time he traced it there on traffic cams, we’d be long gone.

It took me precisely twelve minutes to get to Andrés’ building. I relished knowing exactly how long it had taken me down to the minute. I really had missed everyday conveniences like digital clocks. Wherever Andrés and I ended up, we would have one in every room. I’d insist.

I diverted myself from my little fantasy of our home together and pulled into the garage. Well, I tried to pull in. The barrier didn’t open for me.

Fuck.

I put the car in park and hurried out of it, grabbing up Dex’s SIG on my way. I’d have to go in through the front. Which was a shitty non-plan, but I couldn’t linger here, either.

If someone noticed Dex's unauthorized sedan blocking the entrance to the garage, I'd be a sitting duck.

I needed to get up to the penthouse, get Andrés and his laptop, and get out.

Mustering up all the new-found confidence as I possessed, I strode through the glass front doors. The atrium was surprisingly bland, like any nondescript office building. But I supposed it wasn't in Andrés' best interests to be ostentatious about where he lived.

A man in a security uniform looked up from a row of computer screens as soon as I stepped through the door. He stood quickly, pushing out of his chair where he'd been lounging behind the front desk.

I pointed my weapon at him and shook my head before he could reach for his own gun.

"Don't even think about it," I warned. "I'm taking the elevator up to the penthouse. Do you have access?"

"No," he said quickly, shaking his head and holding his hands up high to prove he wasn't a threat.

"Okay, then. I'm going to the third floor. Is there another elevator?"

"Yeah. That way." He pointed toward a darkened corner, and I saw little glowing circles that indicated call buttons for a set of elevators.

"You're coming with me," I told him, gesturing for him to come out from behind the desk. "Keep your hands where I can see them."

He moved where I'd instructed, and I closed the distance between us to take his gun from its holster.

"Let's go." I ordered, and he began walking toward the elevators, his hands still held high.

I just needed to get to the third floor and find Lauren. She had access to the penthouse. Well, she did as of yesterday. I hoped Andrés hadn't had time to revoke her clearance.

I shook my mounting worry from my mind. If she couldn't take me upstairs, she'd know how to contact Andrés. I'd never seen him with a phone, but he must have one he used when he left his suite. I considered asking the guard if he was able to call Andrés, but I had to guarantee that he'd bring his laptop down with him. His most likely reaction to finding out I'd returned to his building would be to storm downstairs and try to make me leave. He'd be too enraged to think to bring his laptop, even if I asked.

No, I needed to personally get up there and get both my man and the computer. The guard and I were only three yards away from the elevators when something sharp pierced my lower back. Pain lanced through me as electricity jolted my system. I lost control of my limbs, and I dropped to the hard marble floor, my guns slipping from my hands as I went down.

Fuck!

I knew what a Taser felt like. I also knew I wouldn't be able to move for another minute or so.

The guard I'd taken as my hostage bent down and scooped up my weapons, training one on my heart.

"Wait," a new, unfamiliar voice said. "We need to call this in and see what the boss wants us to do with her."

A second man appeared over me, holding the Taser that had taken me down.

Yes, I wanted to say. Call Andrés.

The words were an unintelligible groan.

"Took you long enough to get here," the guard complained. "She could have fucking shot me."

"You're lucky I came back from my break early, then," the second man said coolly. "Cuff her," he advised.

The guard nodded and grabbed the handcuffs attached to his belt. He quickly secured my wrists at the small of my back while the second man pulled out his phone and placed a call. He spoke into the receiver in rapid-fire Spanish that I couldn't follow.

I'd been disarmed and restrained in a matter of seconds.

I really sucked at being a field agent. As soon as Andrés got me out of this mess, I promised myself I'd never fight crime in person again. I could work far more effectively from the comfort of my ergonomic chair behind my computer screen.

"Moreno wants to see her," the second man said, ending his call. "Get her downstairs."

Downstairs? Not up?

The two men gripped my upper arms and wrenched me to my feet. I couldn't support my own weight, so they started dragging me the short distance to the elevators. Once we were inside and the guard had pressed the button for the basement, I started to regain some control over my muscles.

I'd only just managed to get my legs to support me when the doors slid open, and my knees gave out.

Andrés wasn't waiting for me. Cristian was.

CHAPTER 25

“Samantha,” his accented voice caressed my name. “I thought you were gone.” His sharp smile flashed in the dim light of the spare bulb overhead. I recognized this as the same room where he’d brought me when he’d initially captured me. The day he’d given me to Andrés.

I didn’t respond. What was I going to say? The phantom chill of his knife on my skin made me tremble as fear pulsed inside me.

Andrés will come, I told myself. He’ll find me. He always did. He’d come charging in and kill everyone who threatened me.

Wouldn’t he?

Did that vicious protective streak extend to his brother? I wasn’t certain Andrés would be able to challenge him.

He will. For me, he will.

I hoped I wasn’t lying to myself. My own fear of Cristian was enough to blow all the wits right out of my mind. I couldn’t imagine the clawing, instinctive panic Andrés must lock inside every time he faced his brother.

The men holding me upright dragged me forward. I tried to dig in my heels, but my feet stumbled uselessly as they closed the distance between me and Cristian. His black eyes—so like Andrés’—studied my face, searching.

“You came back,” he said, his head canting to the side as his eyes narrowed at me. “Why? My men say you were armed.

Were you going to kill Andrés?”

“No!” The word popped out before I could hold it back.

“Then why return, when my brother set you free?”

“I...” I swallowed hard and braced myself for the lie, drawing on a defiant mask. “I came to kill *you*. I was trying to find you. I was going to deal with him after.” I couldn’t tell him about my feelings for Andrés. If I did, he might hurt him again.

Andrés had warned me about Cristian, even in our early days together. The sadistic bastard liked to force you to watch while he hurt the person you loved most. When Andrés had first told me about his brother’s sick proclivities, I’d feared for Dex’s safety. Now, I feared for Andrés. I had to make Cristian believe I saw Andrés as my cruel captor, and that I was coming for revenge on the Moreno brothers.

Cristian laughed, the sound rich with genuine delight. “You do want to kill him? He’ll be so devastated. He does tend to get a soft spot for his pets. You, especially. I thought he was actually going to try to attack me when I told him I’d ordered Lauren to dose you with Bliss. He didn’t like the idea of other men fucking you.”

I remained silent, willing my brain to start figuring a way out of this.

“How about we make a deal?” Cristian continued before I could gather my thoughts. “I can’t let you kill Andrés. He’s the only family I have left, and he’s very good at running my business. But I’ll let you cut him up a little. I was about to do the same, myself. He really shouldn’t have let you go back to the feds. That puts my entire organization at risk.”

My stomach turned. I couldn’t hurt Andrés. But if Cristian was offering to hand me a knife...

No. That would be suicidal. There were still two armed guards in the room with us. If I tried to stab their boss, they’d shoot me.

“Take off the cuffs,” he ordered his men, but he didn’t take his eyes off me. “I’m going to need to make this look right to

keep Andrés in line. I'm sure you understand.”

The handcuffs fell from my wrists, but I didn't have a chance to think about defending myself. Cristian's fist slammed into my jaw. Pain cracked through my skull, and I tasted blood in my mouth as my cheek cut against my teeth. The basement flickered out of existence.

When I started to come back around, I became aware of the familiar feel of leather cuffs around my wrists. My arms were being pulled above my head, and my weight started to fall on my wrists. I scrambled to get my feet under me, but the tension on my arms increased, forcing me up onto my toes.

I blinked hard, fear helping clear away the throbbing pain in my skull. It receded to a dull ache as adrenaline kicked in.

Cristian came into focus, his handsome face filling my vision. He touched his long fingers to my injured jaw, and I hissed as pain spiked.

“This will do,” he said, studying me as though I were an object instead of a person. Worse than that: a tool he was going to use to hurt Andrés. “I had this set up for my little brother,” he explained, gesturing at the restraints that stretched my body taut. “He screamed so much the last time I did this to him. I didn't think he'd ever want to repeat the experience, but then he let you go. Imagine how upset he'll be when he sees you here instead, after he tried to save you from me.” He grinned. “He'll be absolutely destroyed once you start to work on him. Don't worry. I'll let you down so you can get your revenge, once I have him where I want him. Then, the offer to work for me still stands.” He grabbed my jaw hard, making me cry out. “If you refuse, I'll find another use for you. Did you enjoy your time in my brothel?”

“I'll work for you,” I forced out, struggling to speak when pain lanced through my jaw. I'd say anything to buy some time.

I'll get us out of this, I promised myself. I will.

“Good.” He released my jaw, and I sagged forward, my weight falling onto my wrists before I caught myself on my

tiptoes. “My brother might be obsessed with you, but you’re too skinny to earn me much as a whore. No matter how pretty your skin is. I knew Andrés would enjoy marking it up.”

He reached around me, and his fingertips trailed over my bare thigh, tracing the line of one of the faint bruises Andrés’ crop had left when he was punishing me for trying to escape. I gasped and tried to move away from his hand, but there was nowhere for me to go. His touch on my exposed skin made me look down to assess my body. I’d been stripped again. But in this horrible place, it didn’t feel normal to be completely bare. Cold air teased across my skin, making me very aware of how vulnerable I was.

“*Mi hermanito* is on his way down,” he told me. “Should we put on a little show for him?”

He reached for his belt, where he kept the wicked hunting knife close to his side.

“Don’t,” I begged, remembering the grating agony of the blade scraping across my collarbone.

“I need to make a point,” he told me, waving off my plea as though it was nothing to be concerned about.

He stepped behind me and touched the knife to my throat, the cold steel barely kissing my skin. My breath stuttered. I knew how easily it could part my skin, carving me up the way he’d tortured Andrés.

The soft *thump* of the elevator arriving sounded just before the doors slid open. I had a moment to register Andrés’ face fixed in a carefully blank mask before his features twisted with rage.

“Samantha,” he snarled out my name and launched himself out of the elevator.

“Stay right there,” Cristian commanded.

The knife sliced a stinging line into my throat, and Andrés stopped in his tracks, his entire body vibrating with barely-suppressed violence.

“Be a good boy and have a seat, or I’ll cut her open right now. Do you want your pet returned to you scarred or dead?”

“Let her go,” Andrés ground out. “I know I’m the one you want to punish. Just let her go.”

“And send her back to the feds, like you did? I don’t think so. Samantha has agreed to work for me, once we’re finished here. Sit down, *hermanito*. Or I’ll slit her open and let you watch her pretty insides spill all over the floor.”

I gagged, my body’s nauseated reaction to the horrific mental image.

Andrés’ dark eyes were drawn tight with anguish, his scar twisting deep into his cheek. A growl slipped between his clenched teeth, but he began to move stiffly toward the spare metal chair that had been positioned a few feet in front of me. The two guards flanked him, pushing his shoulders down so he dropped onto the chair before securing his wrists behind him with a length of rope. Once his arms were bound, they trained their guns on the back of his skull.

“That’s better,” Cristian said with satisfaction.

The knife left my throat, and I heaved in a gasping breath.

“How should we punish my little brother for his transgressions?” he mused, as though he didn’t already have his twisted plan in place. He suddenly cupped my breast with his free hand, squeezing hard. I bit back a whimper, but my eyes began to burn. He tutted at me and twisted my nipple. I cried out at the bite of pain, and wetness slipped down my cheeks.

Andrés’ nostrils flared, his eyes blazing. He tried to push up onto his feet, but the guards held him down with a firm grip on his shoulders.

“He doesn’t like that,” Cristian observed. “I thought you enjoyed when she cried, Andrés. Or are you the only one who’s allowed to enjoy her tears?” He leaned around me, so his chest pressed against my back as he brought his face close to mine. His hot tongue touched my face, tasting my tears.

I shuddered and flinched away.

“I should fuck her raw while you watch,” he continued, his tone conversational.

“You said...” I gasped for breath, desperate to get away, to save Andrés before Cristian could use me to destroy him. “You said this was for show,” I managed on a ragged whisper. “You promised I could hurt him if I worked for you.”

I had to get down and get my hands on that knife. It no longer mattered to me if I got shot. It was the only opening I’d get, and I had to take the risk.

Cristian laughed, running his hand along the curve of my hip.

“She’s a vicious little thing,” he said. “No wonder you couldn’t manage to break her. Is that why you’re so obsessed with her? All of your other pets were very obedient by the time you handed them over to me.”

My gut churned at this horrible revelation. Andrés had trained other women before me. Of course he had. I’d always known, even if I didn’t want to dwell on it. Why else would he have kinky toys stashed all over his penthouse, with a built-in playroom?

But the knowledge that Cristian had taken them for himself once they were trained made nausea creep up my throat. No wonder Andrés had been so possessive of me from the very beginning. I remembered Cristian promising that he’d be allowed to keep me. I was the only woman his brother had ever allowed him to keep, and now, he was trying to take me away from Andrés, too.

I wouldn’t allow him to take anything else from Andrés. He’d taken his family, his innocence, his pride. He’d stripped him of everything and everyone he cared about, leaving him scarred and cold.

“Let me down,” I demanded with as much vindictive fervor as I could manage. I drew on my hatred of Cristian to channel righteous rage into my features. He had to believe I’d hurt Andrés for him. “Give me what I want, and I’ll give you what you want.”

“Savage,” Cristian remarked with approval. “Your little pet is going to cut you up for me,” he told Andrés. “You risked your life to set her free, and she came back here to kill you. But don’t worry. I won’t let her take things that far. You’ll survive this, and I’ll patch you up again after. I’ll always take care of my baby brother.”

Andrés had gone pale, and his body shook with something other than rage. He stared at me, his eyes wide with disbelief. Then his jaw firmed, and he nodded.

More tears flowed down my cheeks. I wasn’t sure if he thought he deserved for me to hurt him, or if he was trying to tell me it was okay to do what I had to in order to survive. Either way, his response was unacceptable. I wanted to scream at him that I loved him and I’d never hurt him.

But I had to get the knife first.

Cristian reached up and finally unbuckled the cuffs around my wrists. My body dropped, and I barely caught my hands on the concrete floor before my face smashed into it.

“Get up,” Cristian said coldly. “You have work to do.”

I pushed up onto my feet and turned to face him. He held out the knife, offering it to me hilt-first.

I drew a deep breath and then sprang into action. I grabbed the knife at the same time as I jammed my forefingers into his throat. He clutched at his neck, dropping to his knees. Gunshots rang out. Pain seared through my right hip, but adrenaline coursed through me, keeping my body going. I ducked behind Cristian for cover and pressed the knife to his carotid artery while my other hand fisted in his thick hair, yanking his head back to expose his throat.

I could have killed him in that moment. I would have killed him for everything he’d done to the man I loved, but the guards were still armed, and Andrés was still bound and at risk of being shot.

“Drop your weapons,” I ordered. “Do it, or I’ll kill your boss.”

The guards slowly lowered their guns to the ground, their eyes fixed on the knife I held to Cristian's throat. He was still making horrible choking sounds as he struggled to draw in air.

"Untie Andrés," I barked the command.

They hesitated, so I increased the pressure of the knife just enough to make a drop of blood bead on Cristian's skin.

They hastened to comply, sealing their fates.

As soon as Andrés was free, he attacked. He was breathtaking in fluid, violent motion. My dark avenging angel. I watched with detached interest as he snapped their necks. The world was going hazy, surreal, but I kept my hold on Cristian as he continued choking beneath the knife.

Andrés turned to me as the second guard's lifeless body hit the floor. He closed the distance between us and went down on one knee so he was eye level with me.

"Hand me the knife, *cosita*," he ordered, his voice oddly smooth and calm.

My fingers were going numb around the hilt, anyway, so he easily plucked it from my hand.

His gaze left me to focus on his brother. A vicious snarl twisted his scar deep into his perfect face, and he lashed out. Cristian screamed as the blade sliced through his cheek, deep enough that I caught a flash of teeth and bone. Andrés closed his eyes and took a deep breath, savoring the sound. Then his gaze found Cristian again, piercing him with a wickedly sharp black stare.

He drew the knife back and slammed it into the center of his brother's chest. He growled as he twisted the blade. Cristian's entire body shuddered, then sagged back against me where I was still crouched behind him.

His dead weight fell on me, and I couldn't seem to get my hands up to push him away. The room was growing darker, the spare lightbulb dimming.

Andrés heaved his brother's body off me, his expression twisted with some emotion I didn't understand.

“*Sirenita*,” he said, strained. “Stay with me.”

“I came back for you. I’ll never leave you,” I promised, my voice strangely faint. I tried to reach up to touch his face, but my arms wouldn’t work. “I love you.”

He scooped me up against his chest, and agony lanced through my hip. A strangled cry ripped its way up my throat as he rushed me to the elevator. As it slowly ascended, Andrés started murmuring to me in Spanish in the soothing way I loved so much. I sighed and pressed my face into his chest, the pain receding as I slipped into warm darkness.

CHAPTER 26

“Seriously, Dex, I’m fine,” I told him for the thousandth time. My webcam specs and internet connection were flash enough that I could see the little furrows in his brow where his face filled my laptop screen. “Are we going to play a game, or what?”

“Where are you?” he asked. “Come home. Please.”

I shook my head and lounged back against my headboard, glancing down to make sure Andrés’ shirt wasn’t gaping open. I didn’t want to accidentally flash my best friend. I’d only covered myself with the shirt so I could video chat with him. Otherwise, I wasn’t really allowed clothes these days.

I didn’t mind at all. I liked being naked here. It was warm and humid on our little private island, far too hot to bother with clothes.

“I *am* home,” I told him firmly. “Andrés and I are perfectly happy and settled here.”

He scowled. “You shouldn’t be with him. He’s a criminal.”

“Not anymore,” I told him, repeating something I’d said another thousand times. “I’m starting to regret telling you we’re together. I want to share things with you. I don’t want to lose you as a friend. But if you keep interrogating me every time we talk, I can’t keep doing this. You already know you won’t find me. I’ve made sure of that. If I worked so hard to cover my tracks, do you really think I’m just going to tell you if you pester me often enough?”

He blew out a long sigh. “No, I don’t expect you to tell me. Even though I wish you would. I worry about you.”

“Don’t,” I insisted. “I’ve never been happier. Really. Now, if we’re not going to play a game, fill me in on what’s going on. Did you get all the dirt I sent you on Cristian Moreno? I want to make sure all his people get rounded up and the people they’ve hurt are saved.” I thought about Lauren, my heart squeezing. Dex had told me they’d recovered her and the other girls from Andrés’ building weeks ago. I hoped she was okay and able to get the help she needed to heal.

“Yes,” Dex confirmed, his lips still thin with disapproval. “Although there seems to be a key player missing in everything you’ve sent us. You know, the man who was actually running the organization.”

I waved him off. “Andrés was acting under duress. He’s squeaky clean now. And he’ll never hurt anyone else.”

Well, he might still whip me occasionally, but that was just for fun. And Dex definitely didn’t need to know about it.

“Tell Jason I haven’t given up on helping him, either,” I shifted topics. “I’m still trying to track Division 9-C for him. We’ll find them and trace them back to whatever organization they represent.”

I was in full-on hero mode these days, kicking ass and taking names. From behind the safety of my screen, of course. I was working on ensuring all Cristian’s people were arrested, tracking Division 9-C for Jason, and—although I hadn’t told Andrés—looking for any whispers that Valentina was still alive. I didn’t want to open up old wounds, only to let him down if I found something horrible about his sister’s fate.

“I’ll tell Jason,” Dex promised. “But I wish you weren’t going all vigilante on me. I can’t keep you safe if I don’t know where you are.”

“That’s not your job,” I told him. “Andrés is here to protect me. Trust me, he’s way scarier than you. He’ll keep me safe.”

“Always,” he swore, his accented voice rumbling over me. Even after spending nearly every waking moment with him for

a month, I still got all shivery and blissed out in his presence. I didn't think that would ever fade.

He crossed our bedroom, closing the distance between us. He took a moment to glance at my screen, shooting a warning glare at Dex before he tangled his fingers in my hair and crushed his lips to mine. It was an obvious display of ownership. He still wasn't entirely happy that I'd maintained contact with Dex, even though I'd managed to convince him I only saw Dex as a friend.

He deepened the kiss, claiming my mouth in firm, dominant strokes of his tongue against mine. I moaned and brought my hands up to capture his face, pulling him closer.

Dex cleared his throat pointedly.

Refusing to break our kiss, Andrés reached out with his free hand and snapped the laptop closed. I giggled against him, giddy at his possessive instincts when it came to me. He loved me fiercely, to the point of obsession.

I was equally obsessed, so I didn't mind at all. I couldn't get enough of him, and I never would.

His hands fisted in the shirt that covered me, and the buttons popped free with a powerful jerk of his arms. He wore only a towel, his hair still wet from a shower. I tugged the soft fabric from his hips, revealing his hard desire for me.

His weight settled over me, pinning me down against the massive bed we shared. Andrés had spared no expense in selecting a home for us and furnishing it with all his favorite kinky gear. Other than three members of staff, we lived alone on our private little slice of paradise. No one was around to complain about my screams of tormented ecstasy that floated through the humid air.

I felt a little guilty at the extravagance, but after looking at Andrés' financials, I decided we could keep a small piece for ourselves to ensure our safety and comfort. No one would find us here. I'd donated the rest of the money from his drug empire to various charities, mostly organizations that supported women who'd suffered abuse. Andrés had

approved, wanting to do what he could to atone for Cristian's Bliss trafficking.

He was so good at his core, so kind and caring. He'd carry guilt for what he'd helped his brother do for the rest of his life, but I'd be here to help purge him of the dark moods that claimed him.

He wasn't in a particularly dark mood at the moment, just possessive. Hungry.

He kissed his way down my neck, between my breasts, pausing to press his lips against the raised pink scar on my hip where the bullet had ripped through me. He'd managed to get his private physician to arrive at his penthouse in time to stop me from bleeding out. One of my ovaries had been damaged, but the doctor said I'd still be able to have children. My birth control shot would be effective for another three months, but I didn't think Andrés was going to provide me with another one when it wore off.

I didn't want him to, anyway. I wanted a child with him. Our lives would be unconventional, but we'd be a family.

He finished lavishing attention on the mark I'd gotten when I'd saved us, my wet pussy distracting him. He gripped my thighs with harsh hands and pinned them down, spreading me wide for him. My eyes closed on a groan when he licked me, his clever tongue knowing just how to caress and play to drive me wild. My fingers speared into his hair, pulling him closer. He growled against me and nipped at my clit. I shrieked as my pleasure spiked in response.

"Please, Master," I panted, loving the feel of his title on my tongue. "Please fuck me."

As much as I reveled in his hot mouth on my pussy, it couldn't compare to the feel of him filling me, marking me.

He pressed one last kiss on my clit before pulling away. Shifting his grip from my thighs to my hips, he flipped me over onto my front.

A delighted laugh bubbled up my throat as giddiness soared through me. The strong, assured way he so easily

handled my body send bliss pulsing through my veins. When he was in control, I could let go and relax. I didn't have to worry about being a hero or think about the weight of everyone who was counting on me to save them. I could just be *me*. I could be vulnerable with him, because I knew in my heart I could trust him to take care of me. I hadn't withered in his captivity; I'd become stronger than ever. He'd torn me down to my basest self and built me back up again, making me whole for the first time in years.

He made me whole. And I'd made him whole, in return. He still bore the marks of his brother's torment, but they didn't go deeper than his skin anymore. He'd escaped. We'd both escaped. In so many ways, we'd freed each other.

"I need you," I moaned as he pulled me up onto my knees, positioning my pussy where he wanted it. "I need you inside me." I needed to feel him penetrating me deep, for him to complete me.

He entered me in one hard thrust, stretching me ruthlessly. "Mine," he snarled, driving into me in harsh, fast strokes. This wasn't slow seduction, but it was our own particularly dark brand of lovemaking. My pleasure crested as his cockhead dragged across my g-spot, delicious tension coiling low in my belly. His hand fisted in my hair at my nape, pulling my head back sharply so I was forced to arch into him. At the same time, he pinched my clit.

I screamed and shattered, my inner walls fluttering around him as he roared out his own release. His cum branded me with the heat I loved so much.

He held me in place as he emptied his seed deep inside me, keeping our bodies locked together as we both rode out the last of our ecstasy.

When he finally pulled out, he collapsed onto the bed and draped me over his chest so he could cuddle me and pet me. He needed to touch me as badly as I needed to be touched.

We lay there for several minutes, catching our breath while our fingers explored the lines of each other's bodies. After a while, I trailed my hand down his abs, making my way to his

cock. It jerked beneath my soft touch, his desire for me rising to meet my own craving for him.

He sat up, propping his back against the pillows as I straddled his hips and guided him inside me once again. He hissed out a long breath as I slowly lowered myself onto him.

“Te amo, mí sirenita,” he said on a rough whisper. *“Te amo.”*

“I love you, my Master. My Andrés.”

I leaned into him and captured his lips, claiming him as he'd claimed me. Andrés was mine, and I would never let him go.

* * *

She was brought into my home when we were teenagers, her virgin body sold to my father to pay a debt. She became the only light in my dark criminal underworld, and I couldn't help loving her.

[Read Stealing Beauty HERE>](#)

SEXIEST BILLIONAIRE

By
Sierra Cartwright

CHAPTER ONE

What in the actual fuck...?

Jaxon Mills froze. The woman who'd just pushed through the frosted-glass door that separated the reception area of the Quarter from the main dungeon resembled his biggest investor's only daughter.

He shook his head. It couldn't be her.

As far as he knew, Willow Henderson was tucked away at an expensive New York college earning a master's degree in social work. She sure as hell couldn't be standing in the middle of one of New Orleans's most exclusive BDSM clubs.

But holy hell, the resemblance between the two was startling, at least on the surface.

Both were tall and slender. Each time he'd seen her, Willow's hair had been in a messy bun. She dressed in soft, comfortable jeans, often with artistic rips in the fabric, and tank tops beneath long-sleeved men's shirts.

She was very different from the woman who paused to watch a submissive receiving a flogging on a nearby Saint Andrew's cross.

He lowered his sparkling water to the table as he swept his gaze over the look-alike. Her blonde hair was lit by fiery highlights and danced around her shoulders in feminine waves. She wore a black leather crop top with sexy cap sleeves that left her midriff bare. Her asymmetrical skirt was short enough to slam his imagination into dangerous territory. He pictured

himself lifting the hem as she grabbed her ankles and took a deep breath before he caressed her then used his bare hand to paint her buttocks a tantalizing shade of pink. It would be even better if she was panting and screaming his name.

The woman took a step forward, perhaps to get a better view of the scene. He glanced around to see if she was with anyone. Prospective members of the Quarter were required to attend with a sponsor on their first three visits. Since she appeared to be alone, it meant she'd been here a number of times.

When the flogging ended, she turned toward the bar area. Aviana, the club's owner and respected businesswoman, had been persuaded to add one about a year ago when it was pointed out that she could open at lunchtime for members who wished to have a discreet place for business meetings. Serving lunch had been another stroke of genius—and financial gain.

Since most clubs of this nature didn't serve alcohol, it had taken her some time to establish a policy. Members or guests who imbibed at all had their hand marked with an *X*, which forbade play for the rest of the evening. And she had a strict two-drink rule for everyone.

The bar area was glassed in, making it much quieter than the dungeon. Jax appreciated having the opportunity to relax with a sub after a scene, providing them both a gradual transition from intensity back to the real world. At times, he'd used the space to negotiate with a new sub. On a couple of occasions, he'd even stopped by to relax after an evening out.

Aviana had decorated with a Louisiana flair. A picture of a tiger representing LSU hung from the wall, alongside an autographed New Orleans Saints football jersey, and neon signs from the thriving local brewery.

Tonight, he'd chosen his table with care. He had an excellent view of Aviana's throne, a number of the Saint Andrew's crosses, along with a few of the spanking benches. And of course, *her*. Captivated, curious, he stretched out his legs and watched her approach.

When she entered, she paused to scan the long, polished bar and the people seated there. A couple was snuggled together with their foreheads touching. Two stools were occupied by Doms without subs.

Obviously having made a decision, she walked toward the back of the space so she could sit alone, at the end of the bar, with an empty, inviting chair next to her.

About three feet away from him, she saw him and jerked to a stop, eyes wide. For a moment, their gazes locked.

Fuck it to hell. Shock, hot and white, pulsed through him.

The sexy temptress—with the parted, enticing mouth—*was* his friend's daughter. Did Brian have any idea that his only child was more than a thousand miles from school and that she liked to get her ass spanked by men she might not know?

Willow blinked, severing their connection. Instead of saying anything, she squared her shoulders and continued past him.

Jesus. What the living hell was wrong with him? He was lusting after her.

Now that Jax knew who she was, he was torn between pretending he hadn't seen her and paddling her ass himself.

If he were smart, he'd pay his bill, collect his play bag from the coat check, then go home where he could masturbate to some fantasy woman and forget he'd ever seen Willow. But he wasn't sure he could walk away, despite the risks.

The Quarter had a strict code of conduct. Movie stars, musicians, politicians, and business tycoons needed a place free from scrutiny, which made privacy Aviana's main priority. Many people opted to use a scene name, and unless there was an agreement between all parties, no one could acknowledge they knew one another outside the club. No doubt that was one of Willow's reasons for joining.

At the very least, striding over to her and turning her over his knee would guarantee a suspension of membership privileges. There was a chance he'd be expelled. Since visiting

the club on his rare trips to Louisiana provided a much-needed break from the grind of running his digital-media conglomerate, Jax valued his membership. So for the moment, he waited and watched, bouncing his leg with customary impatience.

She wriggled onto a barstool, exaggerating her movements—he was sure—to capture attention.

Stefan, one of the Doms at the bar—a man who was devouring his trust fund, sleeping all day, partying all night, and discarding a relationship a week—glanced toward Willow.

Jax mentally repeated the club's rules.

Willow was at least twenty-one, capable of making her own decisions. She was also free to allow a Dom to tie her up, blindfold her, flog her.

What she did was none of his business.

Still watching her, Stefan grabbed a cane from the top of the bar and tapped it against his open palm, as if in deep thought. Then he slid off his chair.

Jax snapped his back teeth together. No one was touching Willow. No one but him.

Fuck the club rules.

* * * * *

Shit.

The bartender slid a napkin in front of Willow. She snatched it close and shredded the edges.

“What will it be?”

Hemlock. “Something virgin.” Like she wished she wasn't.

“Piña colada?”

“That sounds perfect.” She tried to smile, but her facial muscles seemed frozen. “Thanks.”

When she'd first started coming to the Quarter a little more than a year ago, she'd been wary, expecting to see someone who knew her father. The Quarter had a lot of members who

moved in his circles, but as the months passed, she relaxed. She was comfortable flying down from grad school during breaks, and she'd become adept at navigating the intricacies of getting her needs met in a place far from home. Attending a club in New York would be easier, but after the disaster with Lawrence, she was on a break from romantic relationships. Traveling to New Orleans helped make that easier.

She risked another glance at Jaxon Mills. He was staring at her. Of all people here, why, oh why did she have to come face-to-face with the cockiest damn billionaire on the planet?

Even though he was across the room, he unnerved her, and she tore the napkin in half.

Since the moment she saw the digital marketing entrepreneur, she'd disliked him. Four years ago, Willow and her father had been among a dozen or so people who crowded into Jax's office while he recorded a video. In her naivete, she'd thought he'd be dressed in a business suit. Instead, a black T-shirt swaddled him, tight enough to show off his honed abs. Confidence and energy ignited his dark-green eyes. He spoke with rapid-fire speed, sharing strategies about how to connect on social media and build an empire like his. His presentation had been passionate and engaging, but then he'd told viewers to stop whining if they weren't enjoying the success they wanted and ordered them to get off their fucking asses and make something happen.

Shock made her drop her purse. Once the camera stopped rolling, he stood, shook hands, and high-fived another successful Jaxon Media presentation. His staff offered accolades, and he drank them in as his due, everyone bowing before the king. Who the hell behaved like that?

From her mother, Willow had inherited a different worldview, where everyone was better off working together and being supportive. Motivation was crucial. She'd been taught to offer support or lend a helping hand. But beating people up? Everything in Willow despised his self-important approach.

After his crew filed out, her father introduced them, and she forced a polite nod. Jax turned his massive focus on her. He sought her hand, and when she reluctantly accepted, electricity arced through her. The physical awareness of his power had been unwelcome and left a memorable impression on her. He repeated her name, rolling it around on his tongue, seeming to taste the syllables. Willow had never forgotten the way the he'd seared her senses.

She had the exact same reaction when he'd looked at her a few seconds ago.

Even though her appearance was dramatically different, his pupils had dilated. He recognized her. Despite the Quarter's rules, the way he leaned forward told her he intended to do something about it.

Her pulse had skidded.

Not only was the arrogant bastard at her favorite club—he was a freaking Dom. As much as she wanted to pretend that didn't matter, her submissive instincts stirred. On an elemental level, she was compelled to respond to him. What would it be like to be claimed by a man with that level of confidence? And it wasn't false bravado. A million people a day, maybe more, hung on his words, even when they were harsh. If he was as competent with a paddle as he was with a microphone...

Willow shook away the inane fantasy.

Deciding to be brave, she straightened her back in time to see a man headed her direction. He tapped a cane against his calf as he walked, and his gaze was fixed on her. *Thank God.* She could forget about Jaxon Mills and get on with her night.

“Good evening.” The stranger extended his hand. “May I join you?”

“That would be—”

“No. You may not. The young lady is with me.”

The atmosphere snapped around her, and she turned her head. Not that she needed to. His voice was unmistakable, as was his threatening tone. *Jax.* Of course.

Scowling, the Dom pivoted to face the taller and much more muscled Jax. In the years since she'd seen him, he'd gotten leaner. He wore his trademark black T-shirt and black boots, but tonight he'd switched out jeans for tailored black trousers.

Apparently he was not friends with a razor, and his hair was longer than she remembered. Willow twisted her fingers together to fight off the ridiculous urge to run them through his thick locks, maybe muss them to make him seem less formidable.

"She appears to be alone," the Dom said.

"Ask her." Jax shrugged.

Willow exhaled. They were having a ridiculous territorial battle, as if she was some sort of prize.

The bartender placed her drink on the remnants of the napkin. "Everything okay?"

She nodded a silent lie. Nothing about Jax was okay.

"The club code word is *red*," he reminded her. "Use it and I'll send both of these men home." The bartender directed his gaze at the Dom then at Jax. "I'll be right here." He folded his arms and remained in place.

"What's it going to be?" Jax asked, voice easy, apparently confident of her response.

He loved being the center of attention. And in the end, he would win. All he had to do was call her dad. Then the wrath of hell would descend. Worse, if he told her mother, the gentle Andrea would collapse in a pile of disappointment. After all, Willow was their only child. For the first ten years of their marriage, Brian and Andrea had tried to have children. She'd spent agonizing years not conceiving, and when she finally did, she endured two miscarriages. To say they'd do anything to protect Willow from the world was an understatement. She sighed. With a smile so fake her teeth ached, she turned toward Stefan. "I'm with him."

"Good night, Stefan." Using his impressive frame, Jax nudged the other man aside to take possession of the seat next

to her.

“Sorry to have interrupted.” With a firm scowl in place, Stefan nodded.

“Give my regards to Leah.”

“Fuck you, Mills.”

It took several seconds for Stefan to walk off. Then the bartender gave her another pointed look. “I’m here until eleven if you need anything.”

“Thank you.” She appreciated knowing the club’s staff and monitors paid attention to every interaction, no matter how important the member.

He rapped a knuckle on the bar top before leaving to pour a beer requested by another customer.

All of a sudden, she was alone with Jax. “Who’s Leah?”

“His girlfriend.”

“Oh my God.” She pulled her straw from the piña colada and stabbed it back in. “I didn’t know. I hate cheaters.” After being the one duped, it was especially painful. She’d never be a participant in hurting another woman.

“I figured it might make a difference to you.”

It did. She supposed she should be grateful to Jax for saving her from making a mistake. “Is his girlfriend a submissive?”

Jax lifted a shoulder in a noncommittal shrug. He sat close enough that she inhaled his scent. Power spiced with arrogance. Jaxon Mills was a man who took what he wanted.

“Are you?” His approving gaze lingered on her.

“Am I...what?”

“Submissive?”

Even though she didn’t want to have a reaction other than disdain for him, her traitorous heart rapped out a dangerous sexual tattoo. “We’re not having this conversation.”

“No?”

“Look, Jax...” Desperate for a distraction, she took a big drink of the nonalcoholic piña colada. The freezing cold gave her an instant headache at the back of her skull. “You think you’re being a hero, but I don’t need someone to cockblock for me. Thanks.” If only he knew how ridiculous that idea was. For her BDSM had nothing to do with sex. She loved impact play. There was a lick of pain, followed by a rush of pleasure. Enough of it vanquished all other thoughts from her mind, sweeping away her worries and helping her lock away stress for days. Scening was better than a hot bath or a kick-ass cocktail. It was as meditative as it was restorative. And she wasn’t about to let Jax stand in her way. “Go find someone to play with, Jax.”

“I’m afraid I’m not going to be able to do that, princess.”

CHAPTER TWO

Damn him. His words, flat and emotionless, took her breath, even though she should have expected them. “Look...” Willow shoved away her drink. “There’s no reason for you to behave this way.”

“Which way?”

“As if...” *You own me.* He sat close to her. Too close for her comfort. A little more distance would make it easier for her to think. She desperately needed that, because right now, she wanted to be across his lap, pretending to be fighting to get away as he paddled her. And of course, he was so much bigger and stronger. She could struggle all she wanted, and he’d be able to subdue her.

Scandalized by her own thoughts, she inched back in her seat. Instantly she regretted it. The friction shot arousal through her.

“You’re the daughter of my biggest investor. A man who’s a trusted adviser. Someone I consider a friend.”

Pampered and protected. Unspoken, those words hung between them.

When she was at college in Houston, he’d assigned men to watch over her. He’d refused to use the term *bodyguards*, but that was exactly who they were. Once she’d realized he was having her followed, they’d had the biggest argument ever. Without telling her father, she’d applied for a scholarship to graduate school in New York and found a part-time job working in a crisis center so she didn’t have to touch her trust

fund. Even though her mother had cried for days, Willow had remained resolute. She loved her parents dearly, but she needed to escape Houston and find her own place in the world. “Club rules prevent you from telling him. Your membership could be revoked.”

“I respect confidentiality. I would never betray that.”

“Fabulous.” Willow waved a dismissive hand. “I’m here to have a nice evening, and that’s what I plan to do. Quite frankly, you’ve done your noble deed, and you can feel good about that.” She slid from the barstool. “I hope you enjoy your evening.” Another lie. “No. That’s not true. After the way you ruined my night, I hope yours sucks.”

“Wait.” Jax’s word was as forceful as any pair of handcuffs, and the command in it rooted her to the spot.

“Sit back down.” The words were lethal. More than ever, she understood how he enthralled audiences.

An internal battle waged in her—obedience to a Dominant who turned her on, and an instinctive urge to flee from an asshole who made her tremble.

“Please.”

Anything but an irresistible entreaty. Willow wrapped her arms around her midriff.

“I want to talk.”

“I have news for you, Mr. Bigshot Internet Star. Communication is a two-way street. I know thousands of people hang on your every word and worship your advice like gospel, but I’m not one of them.” She was already so far in that she decided to go for broke. “In fact, I find you and your approach offensive.”

“Do you?”

Damn his dark soul, he grinned.

Those might have been the wrong words. Rather than offended, he seemed challenged and invigorated.

“Please sit,” he repeated.

The bartender meandered closer, putting away wineglasses, then leaning back to adjust the gold garter he wore around his biceps.

“No more threats?”

“I never threatened you, Willow.”

God. The way he said her name—breaking it into two syllables and trailing off in a whisper of seduction that shot rockets through her. He wasn't just dominant. He was dangerous. “You'd have to promise to zip your mouth shut and listen to me too.” She marveled at her defiance of a man wielding so much power over her life.

“Agreed.” He extended his hand.

She stared at it. The one time they'd touched, she carried his psychic impression for days. This time, she was smarter. She ignored him and lifted herself back onto the stool.

He lifted one eyebrow in a mock salute.

Once she was as comfortable as she could be with him crowding her space, she reached for her drink.

He flicked a glance at her hand, looking for the *X*, she guessed.

“You came here to scene,” he said.

“Nothing gets by you, does it, Sherlock Holmes.”

He signaled for the bartender and ordered a club soda. “Look. Can we have a truce?”

Not with the way nerves zapped through her veins.

“You're a sub.”

It was a statement more than a question. She'd had these discussions with numerous men, and none of them had disturbed her as much as he did. “I'm more of a bottom.” She swirled her straw around the inside of her glass.

Surprising her, he waited for her to continue. Aware that her words might someday be used against her, she proceeded with care. “I'm into kink, but not on a full-time basis.”

She paused while the bartender delivered Jax's drink. Her body language must have changed since the man wasn't watching them as intently as he had before. After ensuring they didn't need anything else, he walked off.

Jax ignored his glass in favor of studying her. "Go on."

"I don't want to be in a submissive partnership, but I like..." How the hell was she supposed to admit this to one of her dad's friends? "I like going out, and I crave impact play." She took a drink that she didn't want while she finished her thought. "It sets me free."

"Impact by itself? Or sensation, such as clamps? Or a Wartenberg wheel?"

Willow shivered. Not because she was scared, but because the idea of the pinwheel of tiny metal spikes pricking into her skin intrigued her.

"Ice? Heat?"

With other tops, she'd negotiated implements, discussed her pain tolerance, agreed on safe words. No one else had asked about torturing her in other ways. "I don't know." She stared into her drink.

"Tell me what things you have explored."

"I've told you everything I'm going to." She brought her chin up. If she didn't shut up this moment, she might confess she was fantasizing about him rubbing a piece of ice over her clit. "Why are *you* here?"

"I have a couple of clubs that I enjoy. The Retreat in Houston. Another in Boston, but this is my favorite. I had a meeting...nearby."

Breath rushed from her lungs. His slight hesitation omitted a ton of information, specifics that her mind filled in. She glanced at his right hand. As she expected he wore a gold ring. Though he wasn't close enough to make out all the details, emeralds winked in the overhead light, and she knew those were meant to be the eyes of an owl. Her heart plummeted.

Like her father, Jax was a member of the Titans, one of the oldest secret societies in the United States. The organization had thousands of members, a who's-who list of people from all over the world. The annual dues were astronomical, and the wait list to join was years long. The Titans, officially known as the Zeta Society, owned an estate on the banks of the Mississippi River. As a child, she'd visited a couple of times with her mom and dad, but never during the yearly meeting as nonmembers were banned from attending.

The Zetas did a fair amount of charity work, and they'd saved a magnificent historical home from demolition. Still, she chafed at the extreme waste of money that could be funneled into better purposes.

“So, you know.” It wasn't a guess. It was a statement.

“Yes.”

“You sound disapproving.”

His membership explained a lot. How he'd gotten some big-name clients and achieved superstar success at such an early age. Titans helped other Titans.

Then she took a drink to escape the obvious. He would never have been admitted to the society without merit. Only descendants of founding members received a legacy admission. He'd earned a seat at the table. “I'm studying for my master's in social work, Jax.” She chose her words with care, as he did, avoiding the mention of the Zetas. “I'd like to see people allot their resources differently.”

“Ah.” He nodded. “There's only one way to do good in the world? Your way?”

She brought her chin up. “I don't berate people.”

“Is that how you see it? You don't think some people need a metaphoric kick in the pants?”

Willow gave him a great big, fake smile. “Present company included?”

He lifted his glass in a toast to her.

“And no. I think if people have a compelling reason, passion, they will move forward of their own volition.”

“Is that true?” His words held more interest than challenge, making her consider what she’d said. “Or are individuals different?” he persisted. “Do we each respond to different stimuli?”

Her breath caught as he looked at her barely covered body.

“Pain. Sensation. Pleasure. All of them tied together in an inextricable knot so that you don’t know where one ends and the other begins?”

They were no longer talking about social consciousness.

“Is it possible that you’re right, but that my way works also?”

To his credit, he didn’t flaunt the fact that people thought he held the holy grail to success. Because she cared about helping people through their struggles, she answered him thoughtfully. “I’m concerned with life balance more than you seem to be. You’re constantly talking about pushing, focusing on work to the exclusion of everything else. People need time to pause, to reflect. Think about positive things. Spend time with family and friends. Socialize. Connect. Laugh. Maybe ride a bike, but indulge in some fun. *That’s* what makes life worth living.”

“Maybe you should watch more and judge less.”

She blinked. She looked for the best in people and encouraged them to explore it. “That’s unkind.”

“Perhaps it’s true.”

Beneath his penetrating glare, she fidgeted.

“I presented a commencement address for a high school in a disadvantaged area last year. Look it up.”

She studied him through narrowed eyes, unwilling to acknowledge that maybe she didn’t know everything about him. On the other hand, the fact that he was still here rather than leaving her the hell alone to get her needs met was proof enough of his cocksure attitude.

“Do you play in the dungeon? Or do you prefer *Rue Sensuelle*?”

He'd switched subjects so fast that it took her a minute to catch up. “I'm sorry?”

“When you scene, where do you like to play?”

The Quarter had two floors, and the first was set up in an interesting horseshoe shape. The dungeon area was a square, and beyond that was another play area for people who preferred a little more solitude. On the far side lay *Rue Sensuelle*—or Kinky Avenue as most members called it. There were a number of different settings, separated by partitions. Each was furnished to appeal to a particular fetish. From what she'd heard, there was a schoolroom, a pair of stocks, and a Victorian chamber, complete with a brass bed. There was even supposed to be an examination table. The idea of being strapped to that terrified her.

He remained silent, waiting for her answer.

“I...” Why was this so difficult with him? Willow had negotiated with a dozen different Doms. She didn't have to answer. Yet she wanted to. “Typically in the main area. I like the Saint Andrew's cross or a spanking bench.”

“Which is your preference?”

“The Saint Andrew's cross. It's”—*emotionally safer*—“less personal, I suppose.”

“I'm guessing you like a flogging, then?”

“Actually...”

He leaned toward her, ensnaring her in his massive focus. For that moment, no one existed but her. And that gave her the courage she needed. “I haven't had a lot of bare-bottom spankings.” Her body temperature increased, and she knew scarlet had flooded her cheeks.

“You'd like one?”

“From you? No! I wasn't asking.”

He grinned, and his features transformed. For a moment, he looked less hostile, more human. Inviting and approachable. Feminine instinct whispered that she needed to be extra cautious. A charming Jaxon Mills might prove devastating.

“Over the knee? Or tied to a spanking bench?”

Either. Both. What the hell was wrong with her?

“When you make an arrangement with a Dom, what do you tell him?”

She crossed her legs and took the opportunity to tighten her pelvic muscles. Even though she didn't want to be, Willow was horny for this overbearing man.

“I'm waiting.”

“Of course, I let him know that my safe word is *red*, like the club's. And I use yellow for slow. And absolutely no physical penetration.”

“That includes no ass play?”

She shook her head so fast that her hair swung around her face. “Not ever.”

“Is your hypothetical Dom allowed to touch your clit?”

His question sucked the air from her lungs. Her father's *friend* was asking this? And worse, she was going to answer. “I've never said yes to that before.”

“But you'd be open to it?”

Am I? She glanced at his ridiculously big hand. His finger would be rough against her skin. She tried to speak, but no words emerged.

“Would he be allowed to wedge your panties between your legs and use the fabric to get you off?”

She grabbed her drink and gulped down enough that she coughed.

“I'll take that as a yes.” A wry laugh wrapped around his words.

Willow slammed her glass back onto the napkin much harder than she'd intended to.

“Do you like to orgasm during a scene? Or do you just like to get lost?”

“Lost,” she replied. “I don't think I'm able to.”

He leaned forward. “Can you clarify what you mean?”

What was it about him that invited her to reveal more than she wanted to? With other Doms, she'd drawn the line at penetration, and they'd agreed. No one had asked for more information. “Well, I mean... I never have. Orgasmed at a club.”

“Has anyone else used sensation play with you?”

Her nerves were shattered. Even though she didn't intend to, she plucked the straw from the glass just so she had something to toy with. “No.”

“Is it something you want to try?”

“Maybe. I mean, we're talking hypothetically, right? It would depend on a few things, such as whether the right Dom asked.” She was leading a dangerous dance. Flirting, considering. Despite the warnings bouncing around inside her head, she couldn't stop herself from wanting to make a mistake with him.

“What toys do you like?”

“Nothing too intense. Paddles are okay. Hairbrushes, wooden spoons.” With other Doms, they were inanimate objects, but when she spoke with him, she couldn't help but imagine him holding the implements. Round and round, she twisted the straw.

“A devil's tail?”

“I haven't tried one.”

“You might like it. A tiny bite, maybe a bit more. Can be used with extreme precision and in tight, even intimate places. The red lines it leaves behind are rather appealing.”

“But...”

“Tell me what you’re thinking.”

“I like the way those implements cover a wider area. There’s a”—she sought out a description that made sense, something that was complicated since she hadn’t thought it through herself—“I guess an *oomph* factor. The impact forces my body forward. It’s an instinctive reaction. And the way it hurts, and the marks...” Thinking about it left her needy. She had to scene tonight. Had to.

He nodded slowly, taking in her words. “Since you’ve mentioned the Saint Andrew’s cross, I’m also assuming you’re familiar with a flogger.”

“Yes. But heavier ones. The way the falls wrap around my sides...they cover so much area, you know. So many impact points, things happening all at the same time. It’s a lot to take in. Too much, even.”

“You like that.”

“Yeah.” She breathed out, wondering if he sensed her dreaminess.

“Anything else you want me to know?”

Dare she? “My favorite is a—”she cleared her throat—“an open hand.” His. Jaxon Mills was a commanding presence. At six-two, maybe six-three, he was taller than most men she knew. No doubt, he was capable of delivering what she wanted, maybe better than anyone else had. The question was, would he?

“So it’s the impact? Maybe the sound?”

She met his gaze. He understood her. “And the intimacy. There’s nothing between me and my Dom.”

“It’s your lucky night, Willow. I have a few paddles in my bag. And I’ve been told I have rather strong hands. And there’s nothing I’d like more than having you turned over my lap with your bottom bared.”

Jax plucked the straw from her nerveless fingers. The melty coconut liquid dribbled over the glossy bar surface as he

returned it to the glass. “Now it’s my turn to tell you what I look for when I top a woman.”

He had demands of his own? The realization shouldn’t surprise her. Of course there had to be a catch. “Such as?”

“I want her naked. No clothes between us.”

“Which means a private room.” On the first floor, certain protocols had to be followed. Patrons had to wear panties, no matter how skimpy. And women’s nipples had to be covered in some way. Many people chose electrical tape or a sheer bra, even pasties. But upstairs, a place she’d never visited, the only rule was the enforcement of a safe word. She’d heard stories of things that happened in those rooms, and she assumed most were tall tales.

Willow had never been naked with a man. That she hadn’t already stopped Jax stunned her. What kind of spell did he have over her?

Unaware of what he was doing to her insides, he continued. “My rules...I agree to give my sub what she wants and honor her limits and safe word. But within her parameters, I set the pace.” His tone, which had been even, roughened. He captured her chin. “The bottom is not in charge.”

Lust rocketed through her. She cleared her throat, trying to convince herself this was an ordinary negotiation with an ordinary man.

He released his hold on her. Until then, she hadn’t realized she’d stopped breathing.

Seizing any opportunity to dance away from the trouble—the inevitability—that she was steaming toward, she tried for a diversion. “I got distracted earlier. I asked why you visit clubs. I mean besides the obvious of telling people what to do.”

He gave a quick smile. Part of her enjoyed their verbal sparring.

“Like you, I find impact play rewarding. As you said, connection with others is important. Quality over quantity.” He kept her gaze ensnared. “Despite what you think you know, I believe focus is more important than actual hours worked. I

can accomplish more in five hours than other people can in ten.”

He wasn't bragging, and she knew it.

“I work out every morning. Sleep six to seven hours.” More quietly, sensually, so she had to strain to hear him, he added, “I like being in charge.”

“Why doesn't that surprise me?”

“Pleasing a woman is its own reward. So very satisfying.”

“And you get to do it without any commitments or the complications that come with a relationship.”

“You said that. I didn't.”

She narrowed her eyes. “You don't have a girlfriend or wife waiting for you at home?”

“No. In case I wasn't clear, I don't cheat.”

In fact, she wasn't sure she'd ever heard of him being in a relationship. The way he spoke to her calmed her. Slowly, the rest of her resistance dissipated.

“Let's be clear with each other, Willow. You want to indulge in some impact play and lose yourself. I'll do my damndest to please you. One more thing.” He paused for a moment. “If you want to get your needs met tonight, it will be with me and no other man. Am I clear?”

He captured her gaze. It would be smarter to go back to her hotel. Scening with a man as forceful as him would be madness. Already, he'd made an indelible claim on her, and she was far too smart to allow this to go any further.

Wasn't she?

CHAPTER THREE

In the course of his thirty-two years on the planet, Jax had taken a lot of risks...all of them calculated. He'd also made a handful of unfortunate dumbass decisions. But until now, not a damn one of them had been made by his dick.

He shouldn't be thinking about taking his friend's daughter upstairs to a private room, baring her ass, then spank it. Yet that was precisely what he was going to do.

Some fucking hero I am.

"What will it be, Willow?"

When she spoke, her words resonated with confidence, bringing him to his knees. "Yes. I want to play with you."

He eased off the barstool and offered his hand. This time, she took it. He leaned forward so that his mouth was near her ear before he said, "I'm giving you one last chance to run."

The desire in his eyes made her shiver. "Are you planning to hurt me?"

"Very much so. In the exact ways you want."

"Then why are you warning me away?" Breathlessness weaved through her words, curiosity and wariness mixing.

"For a million reasons. Especially because I respect your father."

She angled her chin and delivered a ferocious scowl. He schooled himself not to respond.

“You picked a fine time to discover some integrity, Jax.”

He imagined she hoped to offend him. “If I may continue...?” He didn’t wait for permission before going on, this time with steel in his words. “This *is* a matter of integrity. I don’t care whether you think I have any or not. Without Brian’s belief in me, Jaxon Media wouldn’t be where it is today. I owe him a debt. If we go forward, you’ll be mine.”

“I don’t belong to anyone.”

“That’s why I’m offering you the last chance to tell me to go to hell. If you don’t, you might regret it.”

“Your conscience is annoying, Jax.”

All his life, Jax had avoided entanglements. He’d seen what had happened to his dad, after his mother had given up, abandoning her kid and the man who’d knocked her up and refused to marry her. His father had drunk too much, struggled to keep a job after the coal mine closed up, brought home too damn many women, some who hadn’t known he had a kid. Jax learned use a can opener when he was four, the stove when he was five. At nine, a teacher had recommended him for a summer camp, the first really good thing that had happened to him. He’d gotten out of the hellhole of a trailer where he lived, and he’d been served both breakfast and lunch every day. Best of all, he’d learned how to record videos. He’d attended some acting sessions and received voice coaching. Once the little light on a camera started blinking, he turned into a different person—someone he wanted to be. He thrived on the attention his videos garnered. It became his obsession, the thing that helped him hang on.

He began teaching others what he knew, running their sites, earning money and hoarding it beneath his shabby mattress so his dad didn’t find it. Jax was fifteen when his father discovered the cash. He’d called his son vile names before beating the shit out of him.

With a black eye and broken ribs, Jax had grabbed his camera and the forty bucks that his old man had missed. The screen door had slammed behind him. Doubled over, his father

shouting curses from their rickety front porch, Jax limped away, and he hadn't ever looked back.

Every day, he got in front of his first love, his savior—the camera—and recorded something. It was as essential to him as breathing. Willow was right. A lot of his words were fucking harsh. Too bad. So was life. He had no time for coddling. Grinding was the only way to beat the odds stacked against success. It meant pushing all the time, and all the time, he reminded himself and his subscribers of that.

Through the years that he'd fought through poverty and hunger, he never lost sight of his goal. Security. For that reason, he'd avoided entanglements.

Until now, he'd never been tempted.

Until Willow.

“What's it to be?” he asked. If she agreed, he was stepping onto a forbidden path. And there'd be no turning back for either of them. “Frustration or satisfaction?”

“No matter what, I'm afraid I'm going to end up disliking you.”

No doubt. Right now, he had a lot of power. “It's a risk I'm prepared to take.”

For a long time, she studied him, contemplating.

“Are you at least a halfway decent Dom?”

“Am I as...?” His mouth twitched. “I've never had any complaints.”

“If you're going to ruin my life, you'd better make it worth my while.”

“Princess, you have my word that you won't go back to school unsatisfied.” He extended an inviting hand toward her.

With a sigh, she pressed her palm against his.

“So brave.” *So foolish.*

She slipped from the stool and very nearly into his arms.

Fuck if he didn't want her there.

Together, they walked back to the main reception area. Aviana wasn't near the podium, but Trinity was. He knew very little about the woman, and he suspected she liked it that way. Her hair was a sleek hot-pink bob that fell over her face, often shielding her completely. Her eyes were violet, a color that didn't exist in nature. And always, she wore a tight-fitting catsuit, either vinyl or PVC.

She greeted them with a smile. "Something I can help you with, sir?"

"We'd like a private room."

Trinity brushed back her hair and tucked it behind her ear. "You're consenting, ma'am?"

Had everyone heard about the minor altercation at the bar?

"Yes." Willow nodded. "Thank you for asking, Trinity."

Trinity grabbed a book from a shelf in the podium, then logged them in. "Room five."

"My lucky number."

"Please check back when you're done."

After a promise to do so, he led Willow toward the coat-check room to collect his toy bag.

While they waited, Willow turned toward him. "Five's your lucky number?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"I earned five bucks for first video I shot. Kid at school was skateboarding, he wanted to see himself."

"Hustling even back then."

"Five led to fifty. Then five hundred." And broken bones, but an unshakable determination.

The clerk returned with his bag. Jax gave a tip, then looked at Willow. "Ready?"

"Yes."

Her breathing had evened out, letting him know that she'd moved past her frustration—at least for the moment. He liked seeing this relaxed side of her.

They pushed through the frosted-glass door into the dungeon and were swallowed by the pulsing sounds and sights. “How often do you attend?”

“I’m not going to answer that.”

Which meant it was pretty damn often, something he intended to put an immediate stop to. He tightened his grip on his bag. Another valuable lesson. Never ask a question unless you wanted to hear the answer.

Near a Saint Andrew’s cross, her steps slowed, and she touched his forearm. “Can we watch for a moment?”

“Of course.” It was the first time she’d touched him without his prompting. At this point, he’d gift wrap the moon and offer it to her on a star.

A pretty submissive was secured with her back to the X-shaped frame. She was blindfolded, and dozens of clothespins pinched tiny pieces of skin. Her Dom was flicking them off one at a time with a crop, each stroke making her scream in agony.

Surprising him, Willow’s mouth was parted and her eyes were glazed. He had no doubt she would enjoy sensation play, even though she hadn’t indulged before.

When all of the clips had clattered to the concrete floor, Willow exhaled, and she dropped her hand. There was so much he wanted to introduce her to, so many places they could go together. “Are you ready to go on?”

They walked through the dungeon and pushed open the door leading to the U-shaped part of the Quarter and the stairs to the second floor. It was much quieter. Much more intimate.

When they were halfway up, they paused at the landing. From here it was possible to survey the entire club. The dungeon was a hive of activity, thumping in time to the music.

Two rooms were occupied in Kinky Avenue. In one, a sub wearing a thong and pasties was fastened into the stocks, and her gaze was fixed on the Dom in front of her as he sorted through his collection of canes.

“Perfect for voyeurs,” Jax said.

“Is that one of your kinks?”

“From time to time, yes. I enjoy participating, but I also admit I love watching a woman surrender. I get a kick from all of her reactions, joy, fear.” Willow’s head was tipped back. Her hazel eyes were wide, and her wariness had been replaced with interest, stroking his already massive ego. “I’m particularly looking forward to watching the striptease you’re going to perform for me.”

Color danced onto her face. For a woman who was bold enough to visit the Quarter and ask strange men to flog her, she had an air of innocence about her. He appreciated the fact that she had a no-penetration rule. It meant he didn’t have to look at every Dom with suspicion and find out whose ass he needed to kick. “Have you seen enough?”

She swallowed. “Yes. I’m ready.”

They continued up the stairs. Tore, Aviana’s most trusted dungeon monitor, stood at the entrance to the private rooms, arms folded across his massive chest. Like all other monitors at the club, his black vest was adorned with a gold fleur-de-lis.

“Monitors check on the scenes from time to time,” Tore informed them.

“Thank you.” Willow nodded.

After stroking his beard, he stepped aside.

Jax rested his fingertips against her back, on her exposed skin, right above the waistband of her skirt. She hissed in a breath. And like each time they touched, sexual force pulsed through him—something alive, something he wanted to mainline.

At the entrance to their room, she waited for him open the door before preceding him inside.

The walls were painted a neutral color, which left the spanking bench as the main focus. Pleasing him, she went to it and trailed her hand across the top.

After placing his bag on the side table that was made from surgical steel, Jax dragged a chair to the center of the room. “Talk to me, Willow, at any time. You won’t be gagged.” He paused. “*This time.*” As certain as the sun would rise, he would dominate this innocent again.

Her tiny gasp pleased him—fear wrapped in a gentle plea.

“Now for the show you’re going to put on for me. Please remove your shoes.” He sat and steeped his hands in front of him.

He expected some hesitation. To his delight, she showed none. She wanted this as much as he did.

With her gaze on him, watching his reactions, she lifted one foot and tugged off the black stiletto. She had exquisite balance, and she had taken his words about a striptease to heart. The shoe fell to the floor with a sensuous thud.

She repeated the process with the second shoe before scooping them up and tucking them beneath his chair.

He inhaled her fresh scent. It reminded him of spring. Rebirth and hope. Over the years of being surrounded by people as ambitious as he was, she provided a respite he hadn’t known he needed.

Willow returned to where she’d been standing and reached behind her to lower the zipper on her skirt. She let go of the leather all at once, sending it swishing past her hips.

She stood before him in a T-back thong, the barest scrap of lace covering her pussy.

Rather than revealing that bit of herself, she moved closer to him.

What in the fuck was she thinking?

She straddled his knees, not lowering herself, but leaning her upper body toward him. “You asked for a striptease, Sir.”

What in the fuck had *he* been thinking?

Willow skimmed her hands up her ribs to take hold of her crop top. As she pulled it up, she gyrated her body. His cock swelled, pushing hard against his zipper. When she'd said no penetration, he'd had no idea how difficult that might prove to be.

She dropped the garment on top of his head in a brash, sassy move he admired.

Jesus. She was sexy. Her breasts were plumper than he'd thought, and her dusky nipples were large, pink, and already erect.

"Damn it, Willow. You'd better tell me you've never done this before." He'd never experienced jealousy before. And now, with her, it had happened twice. It destroyed him, a hated, all-consuming emotion, blurring his vision.

As if she understood how much this mattered to him, she cradled his head. "You're the first."

"And the last." He dragged her against him, patience at an end. "Give me your breasts, princess."

"Yes." She lowered herself onto his lap, her heat against his crotch.

Obediently she cupped one of her breasts in her palms. Driving him wild, she rubbed a nipple on his face.

He laved the swollen nub with his tongue. Her answering moan drove him on. He sucked her flesh into his mouth, increasing the pressure until she clung to him. "Rub out an orgasm." He pinched her free nipple while he continued to torment the first. One of these days, he'd attach half a dozen clips to each of her breasts and take great pleasure in flicking them off.

An innocent seductress with no idea how powerful she was, she moved against him, moaning, then whimpering when he sucked harder.

When he sensed she was close, he switched to her other breast and squeezed the damp one hard between his thumb and

forefinger.

“Oh Jax...”

His cock surged in response to her plaintive sigh, giving her something even harder to grind against. Even through her thong and his slacks, he felt her heat. She was exquisite.

Her motions grew more frantic, and he responded, pinching and sucking harder.

Less than a minute later, she tipped her head back, hair falling in wild abandon as she screamed. He'd been with plenty of women before, but none as unselfconscious as her.

He eased off the pressure on her nipples by degrees so that the blood didn't return with a painful wave. There'd be plenty of time to torment her later.

She collapsed against him and dropped her head onto his shoulder. He held her, stroked her skin, and murmured, “You're perfect.” Jax always provided aftercare for women he scened with, but he'd never enjoyed it this much.

“That was...” When she finally roused, she flattened her palm on his chest and pushed herself back. She wore a self-satisfied smile. “You're...”

He filled in the silence. “An amazing Dom?”

“How does your head fit inside a room?”

He waited for her to speak again.

“You're pretty darn good.”

“That sounds tepid. I don't do tepid.” He circled her tiny wrist with his fingers and returned her grin. “Challenge accepted.”

“I was hoping you'd say that.”

“You're bewitching.” He dug his free hand into her hair to pull back her head so that she read the hungry intent in his eyes. Jax had never been hotter for a woman. “Time for your first spanking.”

“First?”

CHAPTER FOUR

A tremor rocked through Willow, feeding desire. Discovering impact play had liberated her in a way nothing else had. At school, at her parents' home, expectations were lovingly heaped on her. But once she entered a dungeon, she unleashed her inhibitions. She asked for what she wanted and savored each moment. She refused to allow Jax's threat to unburden his soul and admit he'd despoiled Brian Henderson's daughter to ruin her evening. Right now, she craved her temporary Dom's touch.

When he drove away Stefan, she'd been pissed. But her breasts ached in a way they never had before. Other Doms were competent and had given her what she asked for, yet Jax had taken the time to notice what she liked in someone else's scene. That he'd given her an orgasm before they'd really started made any future consequences worth it.

"We'll begin with my hand."

Her favorite. He had been paying attention.

"You're going to like it." Certainty made his voice rough. "Ask for it."

"Please, Jax." Since he still gripped her hair and her wrist, she recognized his strength. Terrifying. Delicious. "Spank me."

His eyes flared.

He released her suddenly. Within seconds, she was over his lap, breath whooshing from her lungs. *Yes*. She touched her

fingers to the smooth wood floor as anticipation unfurled. He stroked her thighs and buttocks in a warm-up that she'd be fine with skipping.

His first few smacks were gentle, and she shifted restlessly, rising onto her toes and all but pressing her buttocks into his hands.

He chuckled. "I told you I'm in charge."

The next smack blazed. She went rigid. It damn well hurt. And she exhaled in relief now that he'd established his dominance.

"My speed, princess."

"Yes, yes. Your speed, Jax."

Point made, he continued the spanking in a rhythmic, ritualistic way. He covered her skin with kisses of pain, rubbing some away while exploiting others.

Once her brain acknowledged he was trustworthy, she closed her eyes in surrender.

The spanking was the best of her life. He went on forever, holding her tight to keep her in position and making her cry out even as she sighed her satisfaction.

Her mind flew. Worries and stress floated away, as if wrapped in gossamer strands.

She wasn't even aware that he'd stopped until his voice penetrated her haze.

"Come back, Willow." He snapped his fingers near her ear, and she shook her head to clear the pink fuzz coating her brain.

After helping her to sit up, he cradled her against him. "You entered subspace?" he asked, tucking wild strands of hair behind her ear.

"I..." She tried to hold up her head but it lolled onto his shoulder. "Uhm." She giggled.

"Just from that?"

“It doesn’t happen all the time.” She drew in a lazy breath filled with his sexy scent. It might be reckless, but she didn’t want to ever move. “I like it when it does.”

“That can be dangerous with the wrong Dom. You could get seriously hurt, Willow. I won’t permit it.”

Her ass was sore, but in a wonderful way. Because of the way he’d warmed her up, she wouldn’t bruise, even though she wished he’d left marks she could admire for the next few days.

“Are you listening to me?” His tone was a whiplash, forcing her to look at him.

“What?”

With patience, he repeated himself. “Subspace can be dangerous if you’re with the wrong Dom.”

“But I’m with the right one.”

“Holy Christ.”

She smiled and relaxed against him, enjoying his struggle. It might not be nice of her, but she liked knowing she annoyed the sexy billionaire.

Within a few minutes, the objects in the room came into focus. She took a deep breath and sat up, instantly regretting the loss of his comfort and body heat. “That was nice.” She could have stayed snuggled against him forever.

“Is that all it was?”

“No! I mean that’s good, right?”

“Do you know your name?”

“What?” She frowned at him. “Of course.”

“Then you are correct. I haven’t done my job satisfactorily. Please go to the table and unpack my bag.”

Intrigued, she scampered off his lap to unzip his bag. She pulled out sanitizing wipes, a bottle of water, cuffs, clamps, and a gag that he’d said he wouldn’t use on her. Reaching deeper, she extracted a blindfold and the terrifying-looking

Wartenberg wheel. When she saw his paddles, she knew he was the Dom for her. One of them looked as if it was supposed to be used for ping-pong. Another was wooden with terrifying holes drilled in it. Unable to help herself, she stuck her fingers through a couple of the small round openings.

“I guessed you would like that one.”

“It looks evil.”

“Which is exactly why I assumed you’d be drawn to it.”

She continued on, laying out each item with precise spacing. By the time she was finished, she’d removed another paddle, along with a tawse, a small flogger, and a dragon’s tail.

“How brave are you?”

Willow’s glance went to the vicious paddle. She was desperate to play with all his toys. One night wouldn’t be enough. Her thoughts reeled when she realized that meant she wanted to see him again.

“Bring it to me.”

She picked it up by the handle and carried it in her upturned palms.

“Thank you.”

The note of approval in his voice as he accepted the offering heated her insides.

“Do you need me to tie you to the bench?”

“No. I give myself over to my Dom. It’s never been a struggle for me to remain in place. But if it’s something that turns you on, it’s not a limit for me.”

“Another time, perhaps.”

Her breath froze. His casual mention of a future meant his thoughts mirrored hers. She didn’t dare voice how much she hoped that came true.

“Please bend over the bench.”

Once she was in position, he asked, “Do I have your permission to touch you over your panties?”

“I thought you wanted me naked.”

“A change of heart.”

Frowning, she lifted her head to look back over her shoulder.

A small smile toyed with his lips. “Safer for both of us.”

The knowledge that he wanted her was an aphrodisiac.

“I’m asking for your consent.”

She’d been so consumed with thinking about him that she’d forgotten to answer. “Yes. You may touch my clit through my panties.”

Once again he warmed her up before picking up the paddle. Willow closed her eyes and exhaled, pushing away all stray thoughts so she could focus on the heady mix of pleasure and pain.

He worked his way up and down each thigh and covered each buttock with light taps, and even those were worse than most of the leather paddles she’d experienced. He started over, repeating his pattern but with a few random, unexpected strikes.

She was breathless when he grabbed her panties and yanked them higher, wedging them in her pussy. The sensation was sharp, in such a good way. She wanted to come already.

“You’re wet.”

There was no need to answer.

He rubbed her clit, and it couldn’t have seared more if he’d touched her bare skin.

She pushed back, silently begging for more. Instead of giving it to her, Jax moved his hand to the middle of her back. He kept a physical connection between them as he blazed her skin. The wood whistled through the air with each strike. Her whimpers turned to sobs from the force of the release he gave her.

When it was over, he helped her to stand. Her knees wobbled, and she grabbed his forearm for support. She caught

sight of them in the mirror. Her hair was a mess, her eyes were wide, and tears streaked her face. Her ass was red, and a few of the lines were deep enough to linger.

Then their gazes met. He looked at her with possession and hunger in his narrowed eyes. “No man but me will ever do this to you.”

“Jax,” she whispered, turning to him, only him. “I need you to make love to me.”

* * * * *

Aching to bury his cock deep inside her and drive away the hunger threatening to devour them both, Jax folded her into his arms and held her until she stopped shaking.

“Will you?”

He eased back to hold her head between his hands. “No. I can’t, Willow, as much as I want to.” Honor was the only thing that provided him with the strength to deny her.

He’d paddled her hard, and when he helped her up, the sight of the tear tracks staining her face told him she’d been lost in her pleasure. If he fucked her now, he’d be taking advantage of her vulnerable state. But if she asked again outside of the club? He would never be able to resist.

“You’re refusing me?” Her voice was soft with rejection.

“I’m trying to be a hero,” he countered.

“Don’t.”

“Fuck, princess. Have some mercy. I’d do damn near anything to please you. But I agreed to your rules.” He had to hold on to the fraying thread of resolve.

“I’ve changed my mind about penetration.”

“My beautiful Willow. You’re not in any condition to give consent right now.”

She sighed out her vexation. And his demanding cock was strangled in his slacks.

Jax held her for a long time, until her breathing returned to normal. Then he helped her to dress.

She grabbed hold of his forearm for support as she slipped into her shoes.

“Give me a minute to clean up the room.”

“Isn’t the sub supposed to do that?”

“Yeah. But princesses don’t.”

She gave him a half smile. Was it his imagination, or did the room get brighter? After wiping down the bench, he packed his bag before asking, “Where are you staying?”

“Nearby.” She adjusted her skirt. She was back in control and obviously stinging from his denial. “It’s close enough to walk. I’ll see myself back. Thank you for a nice evening.”

“Don’t you fucking dare.”

“Look—”

“You’re not dismissing me, Willow.” He was pissed. “I will see you safely back to your hotel.”

“You made it clear that we were done.” She pulled back her hair and twisted it into some kind of knot.

“Not even for a second. I was honoring your boundaries. And if you have an emotional crash, I’m going to be there. You’re not getting rid of me yet, so you might as well quit trying. Your call. You can walk out of here or I can toss you over my shoulder.”

She looked at him, studied his stance as if trying to determine how serious he was. Finally, she exhaled a slight huff. “You can secure a ride for me.”

“Do I look like I’m open to a compromise?” When she opened her mouth again, his temper unraveled. “Don’t make me gag you.”

“You—”

“Last chance. I’ll give you the world, but I won’t risk your safety. Deal with it.” He picked up his bag. Then, aware that

he might have overreacted because she mattered to him, and not just because she was his investor's kid, he added, "It's a ride." Deep inside, he knew it was so much more for her. Her freedom. Her perceived slight. "Is it worth the argument? Five minutes, Willow."

In the end, she relented with a tight nod.

On the main level, he claimed her lightweight jacket and helped her into it while Trinity called the valet to bring his car around.

Jax took Willow's elbow as they walked down the steep set of stairs leading to the street.

Outside in the warm spring evening, people were everywhere—on the sidewalks, leaning over balconies, weaving through stopped, honking cars on the street. Revelers, some draped in Mardi Gras beads, bustled by, sipping hurricanes.

He guided her toward their waiting car and helped her inside.

When he was in the driver's seat, he asked, "Are you at a hotel or private residence?"

"The Maison Sterling."

"Excellent choice." The boutique hotel known for its exquisite service and accommodations was owned by the Sterling family—fellow Titans.

As she'd said, the hotel was nearby, but with the parties and gridlock of cars, it might have been faster to walk. Still, they reached their destination sooner than he would have liked. He didn't want their evening to end with her feeling abandoned.

He found a rare parking spot on the street and pulled into it so they had a few more minutes together. "May I buy you a drink?"

"I have an early flight." She shot him a polite smile that was gobbled by the nighttime shadows. "Thanks for the offer. It's nice of you."

There was that infuriating word again, wielded like a weapon.

“I—”

“Come on, Willow!” He slammed his hand on the steering wheel. “As your Dom, as a man, it’s my responsibility to take care of you. If I had fucked you as hard as I wanted in that room, I’d be the asshole you think I am.”

She leaned back against the headrest.

“I’m trying to be a decent human being.”

With a small grin she turned to look at him. The car was intimate and quiet. “Is it as difficult as it sounds?”

“Keeping my hands off you? Yeah. I’ve got it for you. Bad.” He gave into the temptation that was Willow Henderson and leaned across the car to capture her chin. “May I kiss you?”

For a second, she said nothing.

“You’ve got your chance to reject me.” And maybe she should.

“Kiss me, Jax.”

He did. At first, he teased, waiting for her response. When she gave it, he slid his hand inside her jacket, then her crop top.

Some idiot kid knocked on the window and gave him a thumbs-up.

Jax shook his head. “I’m going to need more privacy to seduce you.”

“Is that what you’re doing?”

“If you’ll have me.”

There was silence. Loud and echoing.

Finally, her words the barest of whispers, she said, “I accept your invitation to join you for a drink.”

Pride and possession thrummed through him.

Within minutes, they were in the lobby, and the concierge directed them to an intimate bar. It had old-world elegance, with oversize leather chairs, small round tables, and silver dishes filled with premium nuts. In the center of the room, a musician played a piano, providing a soothing background.

Willow ordered a dry white wine, and he opted for a premium whiskey.

“So...” She regarded him over the rim of her glass. “About this seduction.”

“I don’t sleep around, and I don’t discard women. If we sleep together, there’s no going back.”

“You really are a knight in shining armor.”

“No. A kid with a hard background who tries to do the right thing.”

They spent an hour over their drinks. She told him about her studies and shared that she was considering career options for after graduation.

“You can come work for me. Maybe have a positive influence on the office. And me.”

She rolled her eyes as if that was impossible. “One could hope.”

He tossed out the idea as a way to keep her close—a natural transition—but the more he thought about it, the more sense it made. She saw the world differently than he did. He was smart enough to know that could be a valuable asset. Not many people had the courage to look him in the eye and call him out. “I offer fringe benefits. All the spankings you need.”

An interested gleam lightened her eyes, making them appear golden. He adored her many expressions and wanted to explore them all. “Ah, impact play is the key to your kingdom, isn’t it? You could come to me anytime and I’d kick anyone else out and lock the door. From time to time, I’d even get you off.”

Her breath caught. “That took me by surprise. I don’t usually orgasm during a scene.” She clapped a hand over her

mouth. “Wait! I shouldn’t have admitted that. Now you’ll be even more insufferable.”

“Surely that’s impossible.”

“You read my mind, Jax.”

They shared a grin. Solidarity. He’d take that as a win. “What is it specifically about impact play that satisfies you?”

After laughing, she answered his question sincerely. “I’ve always channeled my energy into something—ballet, cycling, yoga. But a group of us visited the Quarter a couple of years ago on one of their explore days. There were lots of workshops and discussions, and we had the opportunity to try things, in a very vanilla type of way—over our clothes, that sort of thing. I found peace I hadn’t known I was looking for.” She took the final sip from her glass. “A spanking refocuses me, chases away stress. I can study better. Sleep better. I don’t have to have it all the time. Sometimes just knowing it will happen helps.”

“And the men you play with?” His voice was far sharper than he’d intended.

“I’ve scened with the same top a couple of times. But mostly, I see who’s available.”

He didn’t like that risk.

“Thanks to Aviana, the Quarter is a safe place for me to visit.” She slid her empty glass onto the table. “I’m ready for bed.”

“Is that an invitation or a dismissal?”

“Despite what you might have believed, I was in total control of my thoughts back at the club when I asked you to make love to me.”

He signaled for the check and paid the bill.

They rode the elevator to the third floor. Then, when they were in the room, she hung out the DO NOT DISTURB sign.

This time, he closed the distance with deliberate intent. He loosened the belt of her coat and slid the garment from her

shoulders. Then he kissed her the way he wanted to, coaxing a response and then deepening his probing until her mouth was wide and she leaned into him.

When he ended the kiss, she was breathless, and his hunger for her demanded satiation.

In a few calculated moves, he had her out of her clothing and shoes. He toed off his boots and spent a few impatient seconds getting rid of his socks before she reached for his belt.

He allowed her to fumble with it long enough for her to sigh in frustration. "Allow me." He managed to get it apart while she unbuttoned his trousers and lowered his zipper.

"You don't wear underwear?" she asked as his trousers fell.

"Another of my many charms."

She struggled with his T-shirt, and his patience reached its end. Lovemaking would have to wait for later. This was about staking his claim.

He captured her under her ass and lifted her from the floor. Obediently she wrapped her legs around his waist, holding on as he carried her to the bed.

She let go and landed on the mattress with a squeal, still reaching for him. Helping her out, he tugged the shirt over his head and dropped it.

"Jax..."

He yanked off her thong and covered her hot pussy with his mouth. She arched, crying his name. He tongued her clit until her words ran together in nonsensical pleasure. "Come for me, princess."

"I want you." She grabbed his head.

He pressed on that tiny nub and placed his finger inside her, making sure she was wet.

"Please..."

He left her long enough to grab a condom from his wallet, and when he returned, he kissed her hard, loving the taste of

her on his tongue. She was the sexiest woman he'd ever known.

Willow spread her legs. His dick was already raging, and he didn't need a second invitation. He grabbed her hands and pinned her wrists over her head. "Look at me. I want to see what I do to you." He pressed his cockhead to her entrance.

Her eyes widened. "This is what I want."

Him as well. He stroked in, a little at a time, until he felt some resistance.

"I want you all the way inside me." She pulled free from his grip so she could wrap her arms around his neck. Then she lifted her hips.

He drove deep, then knew the truth. "Holy *fuck*."

"Jax, please."

He pushed up onto his hands to look into her eyes. "You're a *virgin*?"

"After the spanking, the orgasms...I wanted it to be you."

Emotions spiraled through him. Shock. Disbelief. And then...humility. She'd chosen him. No wonder his refusal had been such a rejection for her.

"Don't be mad."

"Mad is the last thing I am." He kissed her again with tenderness.

Now that he knew, now that she'd chosen him, he changed his pace, making love to her rather than fucking her. There'd be time for that later. He stroked in and out, reaching between them to toy with her clit. Then because he knew she liked sensation play, he pinched it, sending her over the edge with a scream.

After he'd satisfied her, he orgasmed.

For long moments, he remained propped up so he could study her, the wonder in her eyes, the satisfied smile on her kissable lips.

When his arms started to shake, he rolled to his side to gather her close, facing him. He stroked her hair, then her spine. Until her, he hadn't known this was missing in his life.

“That was—”

“If you say nice, I'll blister your ass.”

“It was...” She smiled lazily. “Everything I dreamed my first time would be.”

He sucked in a breath. In his entire life, Jax had never heard sweeter words, ones that meant more. They didn't feed his ego...they opened his heart. Willow had given him the greatest gift imaginable, and he vowed to cherish it. *Her*.

It would take a lifetime to get enough of this, of her. And a lifetime was the perfect solution to the problems he'd caused when he'd scened with her instead of taking her home from the club. Her being a virgin made the next decision as easy as it was inevitable. “We'll get married within a month.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Willow shoved him away and struggled out of the viselike strength of his arms. Frantic, she scooted away and sat up. She pulled her knees against her and wrapped her arms around them, as if it would afford some sort of protection against the formidable man in her bed. “You’ve lost your mind.”

He sat up as well, but fortunately allowed her to keep the distance between them. “It’s the perfect solution.”

“No. It’s not. No, no, no, no, no, no, *no*. And in case that’s not clear, no.” She wasn’t ready. Her entire future—away from Houston—pursuing her dreams was waiting. She couldn’t allow anyone to derail her. “I’m not marrying anyone. Especially you.”

His nostrils flared, and she trembled, knowing she’d well and truly pissed him off.

The world closed in on her. By going to bed with him, she’d been ensnared by the steel trap that was Jaxon Mills.

He reached for her wrist, and claustrophobia closed around her, triggering a need to run. She leaped from the bed so hard that her knees wobbled when she touched the floor.

“Damn it, Willow. Listen to me.” He raked a hand down his face, man and fury, naked, his cock hard, and all his muscles and sinews coiled tight, ready to spring.

“Stay where you are!” She raised a hand. “I mean it. I need some space.” Her heart thundered so loudly in her ears that it drowned out all other sounds. She hurried across the room to

snatch up the thick robe provided by the hotel. With shaking fingers, she knotted the belt.

She backed up against a wall. To his credit, he stayed where he was, even though his jaw was set in implacable lines and temper burned in his eyes. She shuddered.

“Please, come here so we can talk.” He’d dropped his tone, removing the threat and making the words an invitation.

“No.” Willow refused to be swayed by his skilled vocal inflections. “It’s time for you to leave.”

“I’m not sure I was clear,” he countered, words still measured, not betraying the emotion that was conveyed by the rapid tic in his temples. “We’re getting married, Willow. We’ll need to work out the details.”

Was he deaf? She glared at him as she shook her head. “This isn’t the eighteen hundreds, Jax.” Hysteria bubbled through her, making it impossible to breathe. “I’m a grown woman who makes her own decisions. You don’t have to protect my virtue.”

“Of course I do. I scened with you at the club, then took your virginity.”

“Stop it. Please. You didn’t take it. I gave it. There’s a huge difference.” Why had she slept with him? Any other man would have been happy to fuck her and leave her. “Again,” she forced out. “I make my own decisions.”

He shrugged. “I warned you before I took you to a private room.”

“I don’t want to get married.” Especially to an overbearing alpha male. No matter how sexy.

His fist was clenched, visible proof of the effort it took for him to stay where he was. “I’ve heard all about you. What about me?”

Him? She barely contained her shock. He was destroying her life and was concerned about himself? “This isn’t about you.”

“Yeah. It is. I won’t get over you, Willow.”

Knocked in the solar plexus, she gasped.

“Give me ten minutes,” he asked. “Then, if you want, I’ll leave without another word.”

Willow knew what was good for her. And that meant she shouldn’t be in the same room as him. He was far too tempting, and she responded to him on an elemental level—a survival of the species urge. Every part of her wanted him.

His admission that he wouldn’t get over her rooted her in place.

“I’m honored you chose me, Willow.”

“It was just sex.”

“One more crack like that, and I won’t be able to keep my hands off you. I’ll prove how damn wrong you are.”

She tried to take another step back, but she couldn’t. Instead, she put a hand on her heart, as if she could protect it.

“But you already know that, don’t you?” His words were a whisper, a challenge. He saw her lies and took a scalpel to them.

“Jax...”

“Fucking admit it, princess. You like my kisses, the way you got lost when we scened. And you were alive in a way you’ve never been when my cock was inside you.”

She forced herself to focus on his face and not his honed abs, the hand that had held her in place over his lap as he spanked her, his damnable cock. The problem with that was his lips. She wanted them on her. He might be irresistible, but that didn’t mean they should spend the rest of their lives together.

Marriage wasn’t in her immediate future. She needed to finish her last semester at school, then establish her career, maybe buy a condominium or a house. When—if—she accepted a proposal, it would be from a man she’d spent a lot of time with and knew well. They’d have similar interests and shared vision for the future. She was looking for a deep, abiding love, such as her parents had. Their years of infertility

and miscarriages hadn't driven them apart. Instead, the struggle had bound them more closely together. They supported each other through the tough times, and they celebrated each joy along the way. They'd dated for years before marrying. "All right," she conceded. "We have instant lust. Which you seem to equate with some sort of misplaced sense of obligation." If she'd had any idea he would stake a claim on some moral high ground, she would have locked her virginity up in a chastity belt.

"It's more than some fleeting attraction that's going to be satisfied by us going at it a couple of times. And there's no misplaced anything. Admit it."

Her legs lost strength, so she moved to an armchair to sit down.

"I'm a possibility thinker, Willow. And I see the start of something good here. We could make a good team. An excellent one, even. You have talents that Jaxon Media needs and that I value."

"You're not listening to me."

"I have eight minutes left."

It seemed to have escaped him that she actually hadn't agreed to his request. He was a relentless force of nature.

"This is opportunity for both of us."

"Is that what I am to you?" Her skin prickled. "*An opportunity?*"

"I meant no offense." He held up an apologetic hand. "With your degree in social work, you'll have a perspective of the world that I don't. You think money is being squandered or at the least could be put to better use. You would have my full support in your endeavors. Perhaps you could establish a foundation and you could be in charge of it, or at least the final decision maker. As you may have noticed, I have an already-established platform you can use."

At what cost? Putting up with him every day? Enduring his attitude?

“Every relationship starts somewhere. Couples build together based on a shared vision. We can grow together, fall in love, do good together. Build a brighter future. I’d like to support some sort of charity for kids, camps, that sort of thing. We can do it together.”

Damn him. Jaxon Mills, master persuader, had captured her interest.

“Tell me you’ll think about it.”

She didn’t want to. But she was already picturing herself happily giving away his fortune.

“You’re someone who will stand up to me, tell me when I’m wrong, help me be a better person.”

She let out a shaky breath. He was so very tempting.

“You need to get to know me. I get that. So tell me what you want in a husband?”

“I’m *not* looking for a husband,” she reminded him.

“Okay, we’ll do it your way. Hypothetically.”

She didn’t want to soften toward him, but he was wicked good at changing her mood. “Things in common.”

“We both like sex.”

A tingle shot up her spine at the way he narrowed his eyes. “Sex isn’t a good basis for a relationship.”

“Okay. Agreed. So tell me what is.”

Willow needed to stop this conversation before it went any further. “I know what you’re doing, Jax.”

“What’s that?”

“You’re hoping I’ll convince myself that marrying you is a good idea.”

“Caught me.” He grinned. “You are wise to my nefarious ways.”

Damn him for being irresistible.

“Indulge me. What else matters to you in a life mate?”

She might be wise to his nefarious ways, but she wasn't immune to them. "Common values."

"And we both agreed, no cheating."

"Is everything about sex with you?"

"At this moment. Where you're concerned, yes." His dick pointed straight up.

"That wasn't what I meant. I meant like family, children. How we spend our time." Once again on solid ground, she folded her arms. "The way we go through the world and inspire people...using a carrot and not a stick."

"I'm open to discussion," he conceded. "What other attributes in Mr. Hypothetical?"

This time, when he left the bed, she didn't stop him. He walked toward her, a step at a time.

"I want love, Jax."

"I'd say we've got potential." With extreme gentleness, he held her by the waist. "The idea of another man touching you enrages me. This isn't any fancy social-worker term, Willow. It's raw. It's real." He stroked her hipbones with his thumbs. "I want to take care of you. I'm exposing my heart to you, knowing I could get hurt as badly as you could."

"You've swept me up in some sort of storm."

"I'll keep you safe from them." He leaned toward her, his eyes vibrant, intent on her. She knew how he'd built his empire now. When he focused on something, he was relentless in its pursuit. Yet his words weren't grandiose—they were filled with sincerity.

Maybe he wasn't all bad. *Maybe.*

"I'd like to kiss you."

A sensation rocked her, that of standing on the edge of a cliff and wanting to jump. "If you do, it doesn't mean we have to get married."

"Of course not."

She looked at his face, trying to decipher his words. “I’m not sure I believe you.”

“Oh Willow. Do you ever give up?”

“Do you?” she countered.

“See there? And you thought we had nothing in common.” He smiled, draining away her tension. “Now, as for that kiss.”

“Yes.” She cradled his face and rose on her tiptoes to meet him.

Jax wrapped his arms around her and claimed her mouth with tenderness and a heartfelt promise.

Once he recognized her surrender, he deepened the kiss, his tongue plundering her, asking for more than he’d taken before.

Lost, she clung to him and gave him what he demanded.

He groaned from deep inside, and his cock pressed into her. Boldly, she reached between them to cup his balls, then stroke his shaft. Jax broke off the kiss and pulled back to grab her hand and force her to stop. “God, no, princess. I don’t have another condom in my wallet.”

“I could just do this.” She’d never jacked off a man before, but with the way his body went rigid, she guessed she was doing something he liked.

“No. I mean, yes. You’re amazing, but I want to be inside you.” He moved her hand away from his cock. “I need to make a trip to the gift shop. I promise you, we can make love all night. Or at least until I have to put you on a plane in the morning.”

Her earlier white lie chafed. Before she could admit the truth, he said, “Condoms. Now. You want to come downstairs with me?”

“I actually haven’t eaten. So yes.”

“I’ll take you somewhere. What would you like to go?”

“Downstairs. Every night at ten, they have a pizza party in the lobby.”

“Pizza?” Disdain dripped from the word, making her laugh.

“All kinds of different choices, and they have several different craft beers that they sample. It’s the main reason I stay here.”

“It’s New Orleans. Some of the best steak and seafood places in the country are within walking distance. There’s a place on Chartres Street that serves Cajun food. Their sampler plate is divine. Gumbo, étouffée, red beans and rice, and jambalaya. If you need bread, I know a place with a great shrimp po’boy.”

“You don’t have to eat pizza. Just don’t judge my choice.”

He sighed. “You win.”

“How sweet that sounds.”

He flicked a glance toward her discarded outfit. “Do you have other clothes?”

“Yes, Jax. I brought more than BDSM wear with me.”

“Good thing, or you wouldn’t be leaving this room.”

She sighed. Not as self-conscious as she thought she’d be, she dropped the robe, then walked to the dresser to pull out a bra and fresh panties before selecting a pair of jeans and a T-shirt with a motivational saying on it. *Positive vibes. Positive life.* Then she grabbed one of her dad’s old dress shirts. After slipping into it, she tied the tails into a knot at her waist. Finally, she added a pair of comfortable sandals. With her mussed hair and ruined makeup, she was no femme fatale.

Willow sank onto the edge of the mattress and watched Jax pull on his boots.

She’d lived with Lawrence for almost a month, and she’d been on guard the entire time, dressing in the closet, never emerging from the bathroom without something covering her. It wasn’t until now that she realized she’d never trusted him.

Which meant... She inhaled. Even if he annoyed the crap out of her, Jax was an honorable man.

He glanced up to catch her staring at him. “Everything okay?”

Except for the way she ached to touch him, run her fingers across his face, reveling in the friction of his scruff as he leaned toward her to claim a casual, quick kiss that she associated with couples who’d been in a long-term relationship. “Lost in thought.”

Still keeping an eye on her, he stood and buckled his belt. “Tell me they at least have a Margherita pizza.”

“I’ve never looked, but they have so many different options, it’s hard to imagine they wouldn’t have it.”

After ensuring they had a room key, they walked to the elevator.

It wasn’t until the doors slid open that she realized that he’d distracted her with a kiss earlier instead of agreeing that they didn’t have to get married.

Since there were other guests in the car, she wasn’t able to ask him about it.

When they reached the lobby, it was to find dozens of people milling around.

“Quite the spread,” he observed.

“Isn’t it the best?” There were two tables to choose from. The first had pizzas and garlic knots. The second had desserts, all made from the same delicious dough but crafted with the hotel’s special flair. There were cinnamon rolls, an apple pie, even melted chocolate stuffed between two crusts.

This party was definitely her style, even if it wasn’t his. With his abs and tight ass, he no doubt deprived himself of all happiness-giving carbs and exercised like a fiend. Not that she minded.

“Next dinner has to be at a proper restaurant.”

“But tonight?” She raised her eyebrows. “Tonight we enjoy a gastronomic feast!” She grabbed his hand and dragged him toward the first table where she shoved a plate and several

napkins into his hand before selecting two ridiculously large pieces for herself.

He looked around. “Do they have salad?”

“Oh my God. Seriously?” She rolled her eyes. “Stop. They have a veggie pizza over there. And I see the Margherita one as well.” She pointed to the far end of the table. “And there’s beer, of course.”

“Excuse me?”

“Hops. Barley. They grow from the ground, right? Hence, beer is salad.”

“Is my future going to be filled with this kind of logic?”

“Hopefully not. You could have a magnificent change of heart and forget you ever saw me.”

“Not a chance.”

She sighed. “Please, not another word.” She’d been right earlier when she said he never gave up. “You don’t get to ruin my pizza party.” Since there were others in line who wanted the food as much as she did, she walked away from the table. “Want a beer?”

He joined her at the bar where the server described the evening’s three options and ending with his suggestions. “The lager pairs nicely with the Margherita pizza, complementing the charred crust and sweetness of the sauce,” he said. “Perfect for you, sir.” He poured a small sample. “Ma’am, may I recommend the brown ale? It will help deliver a complex finish to your meal.” He poured a second taster.

“Who knew pizza and beer could be so complicated?” Jax asked.

In the end, he went with the lager, and she selected the brown ale. They found a couple of bistro chairs around a wrought-iron table and settled in.

She took the first savory bite and closed her eyes in pleasure. When she finally reached for a drink of her beer, he was staring at her.

“I could watch you eat all night long. You’re all smiles and sighs.”

“Pizza is my favorite. I buy one every Sunday and eat it for dinner every night of the week. So I never have to cook dinner.” Midway through the second piece, she gave up.

“That was quite impressive.”

Hating to admit defeat, she eyed it. “If pepperoni had been the only topping, I could have finished it.”

A server took their plates, and they carried the remainder of their drinks to a comfortable couch in a secluded corner. The lighting was soft, and the area was quiet.

She kicked off her sandals and curled up near him, holding her beer. “You mentioned a children’s charity, such as supporting a camp. A summer school type of thing? Or after school?”

“So you are intrigued?”

“Of course. I think having places for kids to go, something to do is essential. Even community centers—free ones—are wonderful. Anywhere with adult supervision. Interaction.”

“Not everyone is fortunate enough to have resources when they’re growing up.”

There was something different in his tone. An underlying pain she’d never suspected.

“You’ve never listened to my videos, have you?”

Pretending she’d been uncomfortable, she shifted her weight, tucking her legs the opposite direction.

“Otherwise you’d know my story. I left home at fifteen with cracked ribs and a black eye.”

Shock rendered her silent.

“My dad did it.”

“Your mom didn’t stop him?”

Jax’s words were emotionless, but his eyes were turbulent. “I tell my story often as inspiration, but I rarely talk about my

mom, so this part is personal and not to be shared.”

When she nodded, he went on. “She left when I was young.” He shrugged. “I’m not sure how old I was. The memories are fuzzy.” He took a long drink of his beer before sliding it onto a nearby table. “I don’t know her name. Only thing I ever heard my dad call her was bitch. Whore. And a couple more colorful descriptions.”

“Oh Jax. I had no idea.” His struggle made his success all the more remarkable.

“He always suspected I wasn’t his, but I suppose we’ll never know. She swore I was legitimate, but one night when he was drunk, he called me a bastard, and not in the asshole way.”

She waited for him to go on.

“A teacher took pity on me and nominated me for a scholarship to summer camp one year, and my dad let me go because they fed me breakfast and lunch and that was less money he had to shell out for my miserable existence. His words.”

Her hand shook.

“I learned about acting and creating video.”

“Your first five dollars.” She gave a half smile. “Five. Your lucky number.”

He took his wallet from his back pocket and pulled out the bill. It was worn with time and handling, and it looked different from the currency she’d recently seen in circulation.

“My dad found other money hidden in my room. That’s why he snapped. I made my own way. Stayed with friends, slept on couches. Somehow managed to get a GED even though I dropped out of school at sixteen.”

How could she not want to help him support other kids? He was dragging her into his web. She had to be careful not to capitulate entirely.

Her phone vibrated in her back pocket. “My mother, I’m sure.”

“Go ahead.” He took a drink of beer while he watched her.

She typed in a reply and a heart emoji before putting the phone upside down on the table. “She often sends news from home. It’s her way of checking on me.”

“Your parents care about you.”

“The spoiled, pampered child.” She sighed. “That’s what you think, right? What a lot of people believe.” And one of the reasons she’d refused to let her mom and dad pay for grad school.

“There’s a deeper side to you.”

“I’m the child they never thought they could have. I’m sure you don’t know that they tried to have a baby for a lot of years, and Mom suffered a number of miscarriages.”

“All their hopes and dreams are on your shoulders.”

“Sounds petty, compared to your background.”

“No need to compare. Family dynamics are often complicated, as you know.”

“They are. No matter how well-meaning. They are more than protective. Mom used to call my college to make sure I was okay. I can’t imagine what she would do if I didn’t come home for breaks.” She took another sip of the brew, this time for fortification. “If they find out that I’m here...”

“Not a matter of if.”

“You’re hell-bent on giving my mother a nervous breakdown?”

He grinned. “Not swayed. I think Andrea is made of sterner stuff.”

“Not when it comes to me.” Andrea had devoted the past twenty-two years to motherhood, and the bonds wouldn’t be broken lightly.

“Then she’ll be glad if you return to Houston.”

“Jaxon?”

A man strode toward them, hand extended. Jaxon stood to greet him. “Rykker.”

She watched the two, about the same height, shake hands. It was impossible to miss the display of strength and masculine prowess. Sometimes she wondered how far alpha males had progressed since the caveman days.

“Have you met Willow Henderson?”

Rykker turned toward her with a polite smile. “Brian and Andrea’s daughter?”

Her incognito trip was now well and truly ruined. Glowering at Jax, she stood, trying to stuff her feet back into her discarded sandals. “Nice to meet you.” The words were polite, nothing more.

She accepted his offered hand, and he was gentle with her.

“My fiancée,” Jax added.

Her smile froze.

“Congratulations.” Rykker smiled, and she extracted her hand. “When’s the big day?”

“Soon.”

She called on the etiquette classes her mother had forced her to attend in order not to choke Jax and step over his dead body.

“Willow,” he went on, either oblivious or not giving a damn, “Rykker King. He chairs the Zetas membership committee, and he has a hand in a number of our philanthropic ventures. Fair warning, Rykker, my future bride thinks we should be doing much more than we are.”

“Is that correct?” He met her gaze with interest, forcing her to maintain her society smile. “Feel free to reach out to me. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m meeting Judge Anderson for a drink.”

“Give Gideon my regards.”

“I will.” He gave her a slight bow. “Nice to meet you, Ms. Henderson.”

She remained where she was until he was out of earshot. “That was an underhanded move, Jax. And I don’t appreciate it.”

“Better he would think we’re having a tryst?”

She clenched her hands at her sides.

“I need to get you to bed. How early is your flight?”

Her thoughts screeched to a stop. “Uhm...”

He folded his arms and waited.

She flicked a frantic glance toward his right hand, remembering the way he’d scorched her buttocks.

“Willow?”

“It’s on Sunday.”

“You lied to me?” His voice dropped an octave and took her stomach with it.

“A little one. Tiny. Itty-bitty. You know, a polite one.”

“You may want to stop right there.”

“It was harmless. Something people say to avoid hurting feelings.”

“Lying to me is never harmless.”

She shuddered. “Neither is telling people we’re getting married.”

“We should go upstairs. And we’ll need condoms.”

Fortunately there were only a few choices, unlike the displays she’d seen at the local drugstore. She pretended to look at a magazine while he made his selection. *Extra—large of course.*

After paying, he slid the box into his front pocket before capturing her elbow and guiding her toward the valet stand. “I have a bag in my car. Can you have someone get it for me?” He slid a twenty-dollar bill onto the counter.

“Right away, sir.”

He gave the room number and information on his car. “Oh, and a bucket of ice.”

Heat rushed through her, as if the man knew what Jax intended.

With a wicked grin, he said, “Ready?”

During the ride up, she cast furtive glances his way, but he focused on the button for each floor as it lit up.

“It was before we had sex, you know. The fib, I mean. A polite way to end the evening.”

He didn’t respond.

“Uhm, how about if I promise never to do that again?”

“I’d appreciate that.” He looked at her. “I will never lie to you. The truth stings once, and it can be damn brutal. Lies sting with every memory. So I promise you, I will be honest with you. Even if you don’t like it.”

She nodded. “And in return, the nature of our relationship is private from the outside world.”

“I was protecting your reputation.”

Willow almost argued. Almost. But he was alpha enough, stubborn enough, to spend the rest of the night insisting there was a difference.

As soon they were in the room, he had her against the door. “I don’t want anyone looking at you.”

How much was about her reputation, and how much was about him staking a claim? His eyes were intent, and he placed a gentle kiss on her forehead. All of her concerns vanished.

He stroked the side of her breast, and desire slammed into her. “Yes,” she whispered.

Jax lifted her from the floor, and she wrapped her legs around his waist and grabbed hold of his shoulders.

His eyes were predatory.

“I’m not scared of you.” Because she knew he had her, she fed her fingers into his thick hair.

“You need to touch me more often.” He claimed her mouth, tasting of possession.

Willow dragged in the scent of him, that of sex and confidence. She ached for him.

Somehow, he managed to get her to the bed, but before he could unknot her shirttails, a loud knock on the door interrupted them. “Better now than later?” she asked.

“For damn sure.”

He tipped the bellman and wished the man a good night.

Once the PRIVACY PLEASE sign was hanging from the knob, Jax closed the door. He slid the ice bucket onto the nightstand, then placed the toy bag on top of her suitcase. “Since you’re here for another day, I’ve decided to extend my stay. We can explore the city, go back to Quarter if you wish. Get some decent food.” He pulled out the box of condoms, opened it, and dumped out the three packages. “Maybe I should have bought a second box.”

He tossed one of the condoms on the mattress. “This time, I want to undress you.” He pointed to a spot on the floor right in front of him. “Come here, Willow.”

CHAPTER SIX

Everything about Willow turned him on. He loosened the knot she'd tied in the shirttails and then pushed back the shirt from her shoulders. Then he had the chance to read her T-shirt. "Motivational phrases on your clothing?"

"Well, a couple are about mimosas and happy hour. I have one about pizza."

He grinned. Of course. "No offense. I like you better out of your clothes." He reached behind her to unfasten her bra. Her nipples were gloriously hard, and he couldn't resist the urge to caress her.

She hissed in a breath.

"Too much?"

"No. Not enough."

"You're mine, princess." He left her long enough to grab a piece of ice. "Your introduction to sensation play." He sucked the cube into his mouth to melt it a little. "Offer yourself to me."

After a slight hesitation, she cupped her breasts.

"Since all of this is an exploration, you can safe word or use *yellow*. We'll learn more about each other as we go forward."

She nodded.

He touched the frozen water to her right nipple, and she sucked in a little breath. The temperature was obviously a

shock, but the moment he moved on, she shimmied. “How was that?”

“I liked it.”

“Yeah. Me too.” He repeated his action on her left breast. Her flesh contracted, then swelled, begging for more. He could spend forever exploring her.

When she was covered in goose bumps, moaning and rocking toward him, he tossed the cube back into the bucket. “I’d say your first experience with temperature play is a win.”

“Yes.” She was clenching her buttocks, as if fighting arousal.

He appreciated the way she’d been willing to try the ice. Even more, he enjoyed her reaction. “I want you out of your pants.”

She kicked off her sandals while he unfastened the snap at her waistband and lowered the short zipper.

He dropped to his knees after he’d stripped off her jeans and lacy panties.

Then he selected another piece of ice. “Hands behind your back, princess. And if you lose balance, you can grab my shoulders, but you can’t attempt to push me away.”

Gaze riveted on his hand, she nodded and did as he said. He tongued her pussy, and she moaned in surrender. His caveman instinct flared, and he renewed his internal vow to have her down the aisle and his ring on her finger within the week.

She grabbed him for support. “Cold and heat... God. Yes. I can’t think.”

He tossed the remaining ice chip into the bucket. Her pussy was red, and he inhaled the intoxicating musk of her arousal.

He pushed to his feet and backed her onto the bed. He hurriedly dropped his clothes, not caring where they landed. “Condom.”

Willow searched around for it and finally offered it to him.

“You do it,” he instructed.

“I’ve never done it before.”

The first touch of her hand on his dick almost made him shoot off. “Stop. On second thought, that’s not a good idea.” His words were gruffer than he intended.

It took him much longer to get the damn thing on than it ever had before. Before sliding into her, he took a breath to put himself back in control.

With slow, gentle motions, he moved inside her.

“Jax, faster,” she urged. “That ice...your mouth.”

“I want to be sure your pussy isn’t too tender.”

“I’m fine,” she insisted, eyes flashing, digging her hands into his hair to pull him toward her.

Her urgency rocked him, and he wanted to give her more power. “Why don’t we try something different?”

“*Now?*”

“You’ll like it.” Since she was so much smaller and lighter, he was able to reverse their positions with minimal effort, and within seconds she was astride him.

“Really?”

“Yeah. This way you can set the pace.” He fisted his cock and held it while she lowered herself toward him.

“I feel awkward.”

“We’ll do it together.”

She winced slightly as his cock entered her.

“Damn it, Willow. You are sore.”

“I’m fine.” She rocked her hips. “Oh. It’s—”

“Watch your choice of words,” he teased.

“Awesome?”

“That will work.”

It took a few strokes for her to find a position and rhythm that she liked, and then she began to move faster. He curved his hands around her hips, helping her balance.

She closed her eyes and tipped her head. Her hair spilled around her shoulders in a magnificent riot of blonde and fire. He was captivated. “You’re exquisite.”

“So much deeper this way.”

“Yeah.”

She rode him, her breaths shortening the faster she moved. “Jax!”

“Come for me, princess.”

Her pussy tightened around him. He concentrated on her, watching her climax, and he ground his back teeth to stave off his own orgasm.

Finally, with a sexy whimper, she collapsed onto his chest. He wrapped his arms around her, cherishing her.

A minute or so later, she put her palms on his chest and lifted her head a little. “I had no idea.”

“It’ll get better, too.”

“I’m not sure how it could.”

He grinned and chose not to point out that she’d fed his ego.

“But, uhm, you didn’t, I mean...”

“Come? No. I can live without it.”

“No. Let’s... I mean...” A hint of scarlet stained her cheeks.

He’d never been more charmed. “Here.” Jax helped her off him before he started stroking his cock. She turned on her side to watch, and her scrutiny was so damn sexy. “Want to do it?” he asked. When she nodded, he removed his hand and allowed her to take over.

“This is nice, but I’d like you inside me.”

“Say no more.”

She wriggled onto her back, and he rolled on top of her. He slid a finger inside her pussy to arouse her again before easing in. His fierce virgin with the kind heart was his undoing.

Willow moved with him, unselfconscious of her sighs of pleasure. In a scene or in bed, she was freer than she was anywhere else. Her pussy clenched, and he wondered if she would come again.

He readjusted himself to press a finger against her clit and she jerked, crying out a climax. No doubt the ice had made her nerve endings more sensitive. Which was all the reason he needed to keep a supply close at hand.

Consumed with her, he gave in to his own orgasm. It rocketed through him, more powerful than the one before. The more they knew each other, the deeper their connection grew.

He traced her nose. "I meant it earlier. The gift of your virginity...the way you respond to me. I would never get over you."

For a few minutes, he held her before realizing a warm bath would probably do her a world of good.

It took some time to convince her it was okay for them to share the bathroom. Once she sank into the tub of steaming water and closed her eyes, she no longer seemed to care that he entered the shower.

"You were right," she said, watching him while he dried off. "I needed this."

She stayed in there long enough that she needed to top off the hot water. The mirror had steamed over before she reluctantly accepted his hand to help her out of the tub.

He dried her off, then took her to bed, naked.

"This feels naughty. And I might freeze."

"I'll keep you warm," he promised.

She rested her head on his biceps and he snuggled her close and drew up a sheet.

"I've never done this."

“Slept with a man? Slept in the nude?”

Willow was quiet for so long he wasn't sure she was going to answer. “You're the only man I've ever been naked with.” She took a breath. “I lived with a guy for a little while, but... Something wasn't right.”

He stiffened.

“Feminine intuition, I don't know. Friends set us up, and we got along well. At first, we went out as a group, and then we became exclusive. After about six months, he invited me to move in, and he said he was okay with not having sex. It wasn't that I had something against it. I just wanted to be sure. I saw a bunch of my friends fall in love, and it was sex that made things messy. Emotionally, I mean. I wasn't sure I wanted to get so tangled up that I couldn't get back out.”

Yet she'd slept with him.

“After a week or so, he made a move on me when he'd been drinking, and it pissed me off. Then little things started to add up. He would come home late, with vague excuses that he'd had to work late or had to stay for a meeting.”

“He was cheating.”

“Yeah. He was annoyed that I wouldn't put out.”

“He wasn't good enough for you.”

“That's one of the reasons I come to the Quarter, Jax.” She sat up to look at him. “I don't date. And I won't go to a club in New York, just in case someone I know is there. It's something I need.”

“I'll take you as often as you want.” No matter how earnest her pleas were, he wasn't going to relent. “Sex is complicated for me too.”

“Men don't have the same feelings about it that women do.”

“That's a broad stroke. And not true for me. Because I didn't know my mom, don't know whether I'm legitimate or the bastard my dad thinks I am, I controlled my impulses. I didn't want to hurt any kid of mine the way I'd been hurt.”

She steeped her hands in front of her face.

“I channeled all my energy and time into making something of myself and helping others along the way. Maybe you don’t like the way I do it, but I kick the asses of a million people a day, men and women who rely on me for their dose of inspiration. So, Willow, I mean it when I say sex is damn important to me. Which is why I cherish the fact you chose me. You were absolutely right to be wary. Sleeping with a man came with a whole lot of consequences for you.”

* * * * *

Willow’s favorite song blasted through the room, dragging her from her sleep. Who the hell was calling her so early? She glanced over at the phone’s screen. *Dad*. Of course. Who else would it be? Obviously after slipping from bed before dawn with a promise to return with breakfast and coffee, Jax had called her father.

She tossed a pillow on top of the device, trying to shut out its happy, annoying tune.

After three more rings, it fell silent, and she was on edge, waiting for it to ring out again. It would. No doubt.

Knowing she wouldn’t be able to go back to sleep, she propped pillows behind her and sat up. She’d been sucked into Jaxon’s vortex. She didn’t regret their scene or offering him her virginity. With him, she had completion that she’d never experienced before. On the other hand, no man had ever irritated her more. Why the hell did he have to be a self-proclaimed knight in shining armor?

The phone sang out again. She couldn’t dodge her parents all day. If she did, they’d probably get on a damn plane and show up at the hotel. Her voice tight with fake sincerity, she answered. “Morning, Dad.”

“Congratulations, Willow.”

She dragged the blanket around her bare breasts. How much did he know? Afraid to unintentionally reveal something, she kept her mouth shut.

“Jaxon asked for permission to marry you. Of course, your mother wishes she had more time to plan the wedding...”

What? Her father’s voice buzzed in her ears, but she couldn’t make out a single word.

“But she finds Jax’s suggestion agreeable.”

She shook her head. “Wait. Can you repeat that? What suggestion?”

Her dad sighed. “She’s agreeable to a private ceremony in the next month or so, but she wants you to have the full church wedding and big reception later. She thinks it will take at least a year to plan it.”

The vortex tightened around her.

“I’d put your mother on, but she’s busy talking to her friends and searching for venues. She’s thinking about the Sterling Downtown. Their rooftop atrium, perhaps? Jax mentioned you don’t have time to be involved in many of the decisions because of your studies.”

Good of him. She pulled the covers over her head. She’d been right when she said she was going to end up hating him.

“I’ll let you get back to your future husband.”

Arguing with her father would do no good. She had to deal with Jax straight-up.

By the time he returned, she was dressed in blue jeans and wearing a T-shirt with an inspirational saying. Despite the fact that she was pacing the confines of the room, she was in control, no longer the woman who’d done scandalous things with the billionaire.

“Morning.” He held a cardboard to-go tray containing two cups. “Room service will be up with breakfast in half an hour.”

She took a step toward him and pointed a finger at his chest. “My dad called.”

“Ah. I expected he would.” His lips twitched. “I’m crazy about you, princess.”

And...she was lost. His transformation from resolved to shocked to humored unraveled the knot in her stomach. She lowered her hand.

He held the tray between them, either as a peace offering or to ward her off, she wasn't sure which.

"I don't drink coffee."

"It's green tea."

"How did you...?"

"I remembered. That day you visited my office. You brought your own drink with you."

His voice wrapped around her in provocative tendrils. It was so much easier to keep emotional distance from him when she wasn't inhaling his scent. "Don't do nice things when I'm mad."

"Would it be so bad? Being my wife? Knowing I'll take care of you?"

"I don't need a man for that."

"Of course not. I'm not questioning your capability or resolve. You've argued with me more than any other person. All within the first eighteen hours that I spent alone with you."

Despite herself, she considered his question. Would it be so bad? Having her BDSM and sexual desires satisfied? She might not want to go to work for him, but she'd planned to return to Houston at some point. Having someone like her on his staff would be good for him. His message needed to be tempered, and she might be the only person on the planet who was willing to say that to his face.

She accepted the tea and took a long drink. "It's wonderful."

He took his cup and lifted it in a salute. "Here's to many more mornings like this."

"I haven't said yes," she warned. "I'm not dropping out of school or transferring."

"I'll relocate until you're finished."

“That’s not possible.” She blinked. “You can’t just move your office.” The logistics would be a nightmare.

“No one but you has the audacity to tell me what I can and can’t do. You’ll need to fly home to get the marriage license.”

“This is ludicrous.”

“Would a spanking help convince you?”

Damn him. It would. And he knew it.

Wordlessly, he took her cup from her and set it safely on the desk. “Do you have a hairbrush?”

Her blood turned sluggish as she began the ascent to the alternate reality where worries slipped away.

“Willow?”

She nodded. “It’s in the bathroom.”

“Fetch it.”

While she complied, she heard him slide the drapes closed. When she returned, he was standing near the foot of the bed with his arms folded. He was forceful and intimidating. Even though her pussy still throbbed from the way he’d fucked her so hard last night, she couldn’t wait to be dominated again.

“Remove all your clothes and then place your palms flat on the mattress.”

God, his voice. So uncompromising. Exactly what she wanted in the bedroom. Aware of his watchful gaze, she did as he instructed. This was different than last night. He hadn’t asked for a striptease, and there were no sexual underpinnings.

“I’ll always give you this.” It was as if he’d seen into her psyche.

Which made him perfect for her.

He caressed her skin, but he didn’t warm her up like he had last night. “I want you to feel it. And if you have a few marks to remember this, I’ll be happy.”

Willow nodded.

“Spread your legs. Your inner thighs and pussy are not safe from me.”

She shivered as she adjusted herself.

“Your safe word will always be respected. Use it at any time.”

The first crack of the hairbrush knocked her forward. Everything inside her settled. *Yes.* Unprompted, she added, “Thank you.”

He was methodical as he applied the implement to her skin. As promised, he covered her inner thighs, making her sway. Then he caught her pussy with his bare hand. Though he'd been gentle, she whimpered. The scorch of pain receded almost immediately, leaving her more turned on more than she could have imagined. “That was...” She couldn't complete the sentence.

Jax continued until her arms gave out and she collapsed on the mattress in a pile of sobs. He hadn't taken her to subspace, but he'd made her vibrantly alive.

Suddenly, he tossed the brush aside, then smoothed his palms over her heated flesh. She needed this. *Him.*

With tenderness, he helped her up and turned her to face him. She was still wobbly, so she reached for his shoulders for balance. “Will you make love to me?”

“Princess, I'd do anything for you. Anything.”

She tugged his shirt from his waistband, reveling in his honed, sexy abs.

With a ridiculous grin, he lifted his arms so she could finish undressing him. “Are you sure you're up for it?”

Even after her long soak last night, her pussy was sore from the immense size of his cock. But she didn't dare tell him that. Instead, she settled for, “I'll take another bath afterward.”

“You can't get enough of me, can you?”

“There should be a way for us to put your ego in a box or something.” She dropped his shirt.

Catching her off guard, he captured her wrists and linked them behind her.

His eyes were dark, beseeching. "I'm falling in love with you, Willow."

Her pulse surged.

"Tell me you'll marry me." The tremor of doubt in his voice was endearing. This really did matter to him. With his expression and tone, he revealed another part of himself, one vulnerable to being hurt. Her emotions softened.

Still, she hesitated, a little. "Maybe it wouldn't be so bad, like you said. But I need some time to get used to the idea."

"More than a month?"

This time, his persistence made her laugh. "Three."

"Done."

What? He'd agreed?

With a gleam in his eyes, he capitalized on her shock by kissing her soundly.

Within moments, she yielded to him and linked her arms around his neck. If he was willing to take a risk, she would, too.

"How would you like to celebrate?" he asked, eyes still as intense, but this time with sexual desire. He backed her up toward the bed. "I have a suggestion or two, if you're interested."

"Oh, Sir. Yes." This was a pretty good beginning to their happily ever after.

EPILOGUE

“You’re a beautiful bride.”

Jax’s intimate words, feathered against her ear, made Willow soar. “The gown is wonderful.”

“It is.” He pressed his palm on her bare back. “Your mom made an excellent choice.”

Her mother had visited a store known as one of the best in town. The owner, Randy, had spent hours with her, looking at dresses. They’d linked Willow in by video, but she’d been so overwhelmed and distracted with school that she hadn’t been able to decide. So they’d proceeded on their own. The gown flattered her figure and flared out at the bottom. She loved it.

“But it’s the woman who makes the dress,” Jax finished.

The evening couldn’t be more magical. She was in his arms on the dance floor of the rooftop atrium of downtown Houston’s Sterling Hotel. The area had been lit with twinkling lights, and a nearly full moon radiated in the sky above. A jazz quartet serenaded them. Despite the fifty or so people watching from the sidelines, Jax stared at her as if she were the center of the universe.

“How long do we have to stay?”

“The cocktail hour ends in about twenty minutes. Then we need to eat. We’ll be expected to have cake, and then my dad is planning a toast.”

“I know what I want to eat.”

Scandalized, she blushed. He was such a paradox. He was a brash personality on his show, yelling at people to stop with their excuses and get up an hour earlier. His knight-in-shining-armor side could be just as annoying.

After she agreed to marry him, he'd decided they would wait until after the wedding to have sex again. No matter what she'd tried, from vamp to vixen, to naughty schoolgirl, he'd refused to relent. She was ready to crawl out of her skin. Once she'd suggested they elope just so he'd take her to bed.

The dance ended, and a few other couples joined them for a more up-tempo tune.

Shortly after, she and Jax left the floor to mingle. Her father shook Jax's hand, then took her shoulders and met her eyes. "I hope he makes you happy. If he doesn't, I have a shotgun."

Her mother was all smiles as she kissed Willow's cheeks. "I can't wait for your big ceremony! This was so much fun that I'm thinking of becoming a wedding planner."

"You'd be perfect, Mrs. Henderson," Jax said. "I'll do a few promo spots for you and give you some social media pointers."

"No. No, no, no." Willow scowled at him. "I'll give you the pointers, Mom."

He shrugged.

"You have your hands full, my boy," Brian said.

"I consider myself lucky." He stroked the length of her spine as he spoke.

Rafe Sterling, owner of the hotel, exited the private elevator and walked over to join them. "I wanted to be among the first to offer my congratulations."

She'd known Rafe for several years, and stress lines were now grooved next to his eyes. Rumor had it that his father had abandoned his family and the business, leaving Rafe to sort out the mess.

“And I wanted to thank you for comping the Honeymoon Suite,” Jax replied. “That wasn’t necessary.”

“It’s my pleasure.”

“So when are you finally going to come on my show? I stayed at the Maison Sterling recently. Exceptional service,” Jax said. “My subscribers want to hear your philosophies on hospitality, what you do different, how you consistently win top marks in the industry. They want to hear from winners.”

For the remainder of the cocktail hour, they chatted with guests, including Rykker King, whom she’d met in New Orleans.

Later, during dinner, Jax leaned toward her. Against her ear, he said, “Dinner is taking too damn long.”

“It was your idea for us to be celibate until tonight.” She tried to hide her smile.

“I’m having a fantasy. About fucking you while you’re wearing the gown.”

Her new husband’s words made her blush. The realization that she was his forever made her shiver anew. Every time she looked at him, tingles jumped through her. She wondered if that sensation would ever go away.

“Just pull it up and take you from behind.”

She dropped her fork.

From the other side of the table, her mother cast her a concerned glance.

Jax chuckled. “Smile, princess.”

She gave her mother a reassuring nod.

Jax stayed by her side the entire evening, and after her father gave his toast, Jax stood.

“I hope it’s okay if I say something.”

The crowd laughed. No one expected that Jaxon Mills would have resisted the siren’s call of an open microphone.

He faced her, as did everyone else in the room.

“In a man’s life, if he’s lucky, he meets a woman who completes his heart.”

Her eyes filled with tears and her mother patted her arm.

“He finally understands why no other relationship worked out, because there’s only one person for him.”

Willow reached for her champagne and took a drink to swallow the lump in her throat, but it refused to budge.

When the room fell silent, he finished. “You’re my one, Willow. The more I know you, what a good person you are, the more I love you. You’ve made me the happiest man on the planet.”

With that, he tossed the mic onto the table.

To prevent tears from escaping, she pressed her hands to her face. With purpose in each step, he strode toward her.

In front of everyone gathered to celebrate their union, Jax tugged her to her feet. Then, making her gasp with shock, he swept her off the floor and into his arms.

“You’ll have to excuse us,” he said to the crowd. “I’m taking my wife upstairs.”

“Jax!” She kicked her legs helplessly. “You can’t do this.”

“Darling wife, I’ve waited long enough. If you want me to keep my hands off you until we’re alone, you might want to stay still.” His eyes were dark with promise.

She stopped squirming.

“Excellent choice.” He summoned the elevator. “I meant what I said back there, Willow. I love you.”

She exhaled. Part of her thought it was too soon. But the truth was, she felt it, too. And she knew that their commitment to each other would deepen their emotional connection. “I love you, too, Jax.”

His smile melted her heart.

“Let’s get our future started.”

“Yes, Sir.”

The guests cheered as Jax carried her into the waiting compartment and took her to their suite to claim her as his wife.

◇ ◇ ◇ ◇ ◇

I hope you loved Jax as much as I do. Be sure to find out what's happening with another Titan, Rafe Sterling, in the Billionaire's Matchmaker. Suddenly he's a man in need of a bride. And his solution to the problem shocks his gorgeous matchmaker!

VIENNA BETRAYAL

By
Lila Dubois

CHAPTER 1

She watched the quiet man from the shadows of her hooded, enveloping cloak.

She stood out from the crowd, as she intended, her body concealed while around her, flesh was on display. Some bodies were already pink or red as a result of sadistic, masochistic, and taboo recreation.

The quiet man hadn't partaken. She knew because she'd been watching him watch everyone else.

He was the reason she was here. The reason she was willing to play the submissive once more.

And now he was watching her. She'd known the exact moment his gaze landed on her. Felt it the way prey felt the presence of a predator staring at them from the shadows.

Hidden under the cloak, Magdalena Moreau's fingers curled into her palms when he rose from his seat. If she'd done this right he was going to approach her, ask her to submit to him for the night.

As much as she longed to make the first move, she couldn't. Not here. He had to come to her. It was the only way.

The quiet man started towards her.

Her fingers relaxed as satisfaction and relief, with a thin note of panic interwoven, slid through her.

He walked with purpose and confidence, not the lazy grace she'd expected from the quiet man.

Two meters away.

There's still time to run.

She wouldn't run. He was a piece in the game. A knight, she decided. The black knight. She needed to take the knight, even if it meant sacrificing a pawn.

One meter.

She had to play multiple roles in this particular game... including that of the pawn the black knight would take.

When he stopped, he was close enough that she could smell him—liquor, a smoky cologne, expensive linen, and below it all the warm smell of skin.

She didn't look down, but she didn't look up either. He was taller than her, so she was looking at his throat, the inverted triangle of flesh exposed by the undone top buttons of his dress shirt. The shirt was crisp white in contrast with the black bowtie draped around his neck. There were no creases in the bowtie—it hadn't been tied. No, he'd looped it around his neck and tucked it under the collar of his shirt to cultivate an end of the evening, relaxed look.

Time stretched, disproportionate to reality. She bit the tip of her tongue to keep herself quiet.

“May I?” His voice was low, but precise. It was the first time she'd heard him speak in person, and it fit with the moniker she'd picked for him—the quiet man.

“Please do.”

He cocked his head to the side in response to her reply. Surprise. He'd spoken German, and she'd replied in the same language, but despite her best efforts, her American accent was present no matter what language she spoke.

Rather than comment, he raised his hand. She caught her breath as he toyed with the cloak's hood, which hid her hair and cast her face in shadow. After a long moment, during which he seemed to be considering her, he pushed the hood back.

Magdalena—Alena—looked straight ahead, holding perfectly still as he examined her.

“No collar,” he murmured.

Succinct but blunt, while also making his intentions clear.

Relief mingled with new, but not unexpected, anxiety.
“No, Sir.”

The quiet man held out his hand.

Alena accepted the silent offer, his fingers warm as they closed around hers.

Then the quiet man led her through the crowd, past women and men bound to appliances and structures of wood and chain. He led her past a whipping post, the stocks. Past a woman on her knees, panting in pain as her Dom added another magnetic weight to the nipple clamps dangling from her breasts.

The quiet man led her out of the medieval-style dungeon that was, under normal circumstances, a hotel ballroom. The contrast between it and the elegant hallway was sharp, but easy to ignore as she focused on walking beside him, her thoughts on what was about to happen.

The room he brought her to was done in an odd mix of Japanese and Moroccan styles, the floor scattered with massive meters-square floor pillows and soft rugs. The furnishings were low chairs and tables with bowed legs, footstools, and banded trunks.

The theme of the event lacked focus, in Alena’s opinion—a medieval dungeon and a Moroccan lounge were hardly copacetic—but she wasn’t the hostess of this month’s Orchid Club gathering.

The quiet man dropped her hand, then gestured, inviting her, without words, to take a seat.

She hesitated for only a moment, quickly considering and dismissing various options, weighing and calculating what to do.

How she should present herself so that she was both enticingly submissive, but not forgettable?

Alena sat on a floor pillow, but rather than kneeling, she tucked her legs to one side. As she sank to the floor, her cloak—maroon velvet with black closures running from her neck to waist—spread out around her, falling open enough to reveal her legs.

His gaze fell to her limbs, and his attention traveled from ankle to knee up to her thigh, where the lacy band of the stocking gave way to pale skin.

“Your name?” This time he spoke English. He had an accent, a lovely almost lyrical one with just a hint of the hard Germanic syllables.

She’d studied up on the German spoken in Austria before coming to Vienna, and even had she not researched the quiet man, she would have heard the difference from a traditional German accent both in the way he spoke German and his accent when speaking English.

“Alena,” she replied. “Is my accent so obviously American?”

She’d been hoping to make him smile, but he only nodded.

She should have expected that from her quiet man.

“I’m Alexander.”

Alexander Wagner, age 45. Billionaire CEO and president of the powerful Wagner Company. A man who was private bordering on reclusive.

The Wagners were an old Austrian family, and had made their fortune in shipping, bringing things into central Europe along the Danube River that passed through Vienna. The company had survived through both world wars, and was now a global powerhouse.

Alexander had never been married, and when he did socialize, preferred blondes. His primary residence was here in Vienna, but he also had homes—estates more accurately—near Beleu Lake in Moldova, and in St. Moritz in the Swiss

Alps. In the few video interviews she'd found, he spoke concisely and slowly, his entire demeanor one of quiet reserve.

Watching those was when she'd first started to think of him as "the quiet man."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Alexander."

"You would like to play?"

The words seemed innocuous enough, but her whole body flushed with heat, then icy cold.

"Play" was a loaded word when it was spoken in this setting.

The Orchid Club was an innocent name for a debauched society of one-percenter BDSM aficionados. Every month the club moved to a new location. Members took turns hosting, and the host provided the facility and picked the theme, while Lillian, the club's manager, handled the details of the three-night event.

Alena had been a member for a little over three months. She'd attended her first gathering in Copenhagen two months ago, and again last month in Rio de Janeiro.

Alexander Wagner had been at both.

Copenhagen had been for observation. He'd disappeared into a private room with a tall blonde on the second night, and a different blonde on the third.

In Rio she'd tried, and failed, to attract his notice.

But here in Vienna she'd succeeded. Now all she had to do was follow through.

On the floor at his feet, following through seemed a lot more dangerous than it had when she'd drafted this plan, this series of moves in the game.

"Yes..." She shifted, the cloak sliding away from her skin, exposing her hip and the wide satin bow that served as the hip band.

All it would take was a single tug and she'd be exposed and vulnerable.

Alexander's eyes widened. A small reaction, but enough to tell her that he'd noticed the bow, and was calculating how easy it would be to undress her.

Not that she had much on under the cloak.

"...Sir," she finished.

His attention jumped from her hip to her face. The light in this room was low enough that she couldn't see the color of his eyes, but she knew they were a lovely hazel. Brown around the outside, and a clear leaf green at the iris.

She held his gaze for a moment, then very deliberately bowed her head.

Alexander stepped forward and she caught her breath. The toes of his shiny dress shoes were mere inches from her knees.

He stared down at her, and once more the silence stretched long and seemingly endless.

"When I return," he murmured, "you will remove the cloak, and we will begin negotiations."

Alexander turned and walked out of the room.

Alena exhaled, sagging for a moment. She'd been building to this point for months, each step she'd taken a carefully chosen strategy.

Alexander Wagner had been easy enough to research, but hard to get to. His position and wealth meant he was protected by layers of corporate structure and a personal security team that accompanied him whenever he was out in public.

She'd considered and rejected half a dozen strategies, and that was after months of trying to get what she needed via other avenues.

In the end, she kept coming back to Alexander Wagner, CEO of Wagner Global. If there'd been another way she would have taken it. But this—her kneeling, ready to submit, was the best play.

It hadn't taken her long to zero in on the one aberration from standard billionaire behavior in Alexander's life—

monthly trips to random cities all over the world. She'd assumed the purpose of the sojourns was to assess the possibility of expanding Wagner into those areas.

Curiosity, her greatest trait or worst failing depending on one's point of view, had taken hold, and she'd set about trying to discover exactly who he was meeting with.

What she'd found was that Alexander's visits sometimes took place when the people he'd been meeting with were out of the country. If the CEO of a leading goods manufacturer in a particular city or country wasn't in town the weekend Alexander was there, it seemed highly unlikely that he'd met with a vice president or other lower ranking official. Billionaire CEOs met with other billionaire CEOs.

The question became, what was he doing when he went away for a long weekend?

Curiosity firmly in control, Alena had explored myriad possibilities. It was the list of other wealthy people who were in the same cities on the same dates that proved to be the key that unlocked the puzzle.

Once she found it, the pattern was obvious—several dozen wealthy, influential people ended up in the same cities at the same times. Rarely all at once, but the names on the list she'd compiled all connected to one degree or the other. That might have been a symptom of their wealth, but often there was no discernible reason for them to be there. No sporting or political event, no recreational activity, such as skiing, that would explain why all these people were visiting a town in the Alps in January or February.

With several assumptions, bribes to hotel managers and town car services, and leaps in logic, she pieced together the existence of the Orchid Club.

A secret BDSM club for the uber wealthy.

The perfect way for her to get close to Alexander.

It had taken her a month to put together the Alena Moore identity and portfolio. Alena Moore wealth came from old

money—well, what Americans considered old money—as well as current business interests.

Alena Moore was a woman of similar status and background as the people on the list she'd made. It had been tricky, but not impossible to identify and organize an introduction to the Orchid Club. She'd had to delve into her own past and a friend of a friend of a friend had finally connected her to Lillian.

Alena had been offered membership just before the Copenhagen event.

When Alexander had walked in, Alena had hidden her triumphant smile behind a glass of champagne. The satisfaction of being right was a wonderfully familiar sensation. Alena lived for the buzz of dominoes falling exactly as placed, of puzzle pieces clicking together. It was what made her so good at her job.

Alena enjoyed the game, but she *loved* to win.

* * *

The sounds of muted footfalls brought her focus back to the moment.

Alena reached up and pulled some dark hair forward over one shoulder, fluffing it a little. Given his preference for blondes she'd considered dying it, but had decided there were simply some things she wouldn't do. Not many, but bleaching her hair was one of them.

Alexander paused in the doorway, momentarily silhouetted by the hallway light. A dark figure, menacingly enigmatic.

Then he took another step, into the atmospheric lighting of the lounge, and was just a man once more.

He was holding a small sheaf of papers. Probably her submissive paperwork, a checklist of what she liked and didn't like. Or more accurately, what she would and wouldn't allow him to do to her and with her. The ways in which she was willing to be used and abused. And pleased.

“Remove your cloak,” he said softly.

Alena unfastened the top clasp, watching him watch her.

Alexander took a seat on an ottoman, his elbows on his knees, papers dangling loosely from one hand.

She undid the last button, revealing the lace half-corset and black lace panties with ribbon ties.

“Lovely,” the quiet man said softly.

Alena smiled. “Thank you.”

Being submissive, in the sense of BDSM, was a role she’d once embraced, but one that no longer fit her. She might have given up submitting years ago, but she remembered how this particular game was played.

“Shall we begin?” He held up the papers.

Alena dipped her head in a nod, then looked up at him through her lashes. He was handsome, and when he’d taken her hand she’d felt a tingle of pleasure.

She might be here for a job, but with Alexander as the Dom, she had every intention of enjoying herself.

* * *

Alena, age thirty-one, was an experienced submissive with a preference for physical rather than psychological play, including bondage and impact, and a dislike for high protocol postures and rules.

That information was from her club paperwork.

Alena Moore, American philanthropist and businesswoman, wasn’t married and was the sole heir to a wealthy family in the American south. Last names were rarely used at the club, but a quick search of the Wall Street Journal on his phone for any mention of a woman with the first name of Alena had yielded results. The article had been a profile piece on her philanthropic endeavors, accompanied by a photo of a lovely woman wearing a navy suit, her dark hair in a bun.

It was, if not officially against the rules, rude of him to have gathered more information about her than what was present in her club paperwork.

Alexander didn't care about being rude. He cared about being in control.

The article, and the paperwork from Lillian, gave him a superficial biography. She was a wealthy, powerful woman, and like many, she sought release through BDSM.

He watched as she undid closures on the cloak. Words and still pictures couldn't convey how lovely she was. Couldn't express the sense of poise and almost amused confidence that radiated from her.

He'd been drawn to the mystery she presented. The woman in the red cloak.

According to Lillian, he was the first Dom to request Alena's paperwork since she joined several months earlier. He doubted that meant he was the first club member to have her as a scene partner. The other tops probably hadn't bothered with paperwork, relying on verbal discussions for negotiation.

Alexander preferred written communication whenever possible.

Alena pushed the cloak back and off. It pooled around her butt and legs.

She was a study of pale flesh and black lace. A soft-looking corset hugged her breasts and stopped at her natural waist, leaving a band of bare flesh across her lower torso. The panties were also black lace, except for the satin bows at each hip.

"No sex," he said, holding up her papers.

Her brows rose and he winced internally.

You are an idiot.

The internal voice was familiar, and sounded like his father.

"Not on the first date, suga'," she said with a smile and a wink.

Unexpectedly, he let out a soft laugh.

“If that’s a deal breaker...” She glanced at his face, her confident expression turning questioning.

“Of course not. BDSM doesn’t have to be sexual.” He set her papers aside. He didn’t need them. He’d glanced over her list twice on the walk back, and knew exactly what he wanted to do to, and with, her.

“I’m glad it’s not a dealbreaker,” she said, some of that confidence returning.

“Why?”

“Fishing for compliments, Alexander?”

“Master Alexander or Sir when we play.”

“Are we playing?” She cocked her head. “We haven’t negotiated.”

“Safeword?” he asked.

“Well then, I guess we are.” She took a breath, and her breasts strained the lacy cups of the corset. He could just barely see hints of the darker flesh of her areolae. “Sherman. My safeword is Sherman.”

“Sherman?” It sounded like a name.

“Sherman, as in ‘like Sherman through Georgia.’”

He grunted in acknowledgement though he’d never heard that phrase before. It must be an American idiom. Part of him wanted to ask her to explain, just to hear her talk.

But another part of him, a much stronger voice, wanted her on her knees, wanted to rip that lace from her body and play with her, use her, until she was sobbing in mingled pain and pleasure.

He needed his hands on her. He needed to start, and finish, these negotiations.

“No penetration—ass, vagina, or mouth—with my cock or bare hands.” He reiterated the limits she had spelled out in her paperwork. Penetration didn’t automatically fall under the “no sex” clause because depending on what was inserted, and how

the insertion was presented, it could be non-sexual, much as a doctor's visit wasn't sexual.

"That's correct, Sir." The way she smiled made it clear her use of "Sir" was deliberate.

"No neglect play or high protocol rules." He stood, needing to move.

"That's right, Sir." She turned her head to watch him as he circled her.

"Sexual contact and pleasure?" He knew the answer but wanted her to expand on the simple statements on the paperwork.

"I'd prefer to keep my panties on, but it's not a hard limit. BDSM play is sexual for me, *if* I'm with a partner I know and trust. First time out of the gate, I want to keep it platonic."

"What about sexual contact for punishment?"

"Are we talking about edging? From where I stand, well, sit, that's just rude to leave a lady wanting."

His lips twitched in a half-smile as he went on. "Light to medium impact play."

"Right again, Sir. You memorized my sub paperwork very quickly."

"Impact, bondage, and power exchange are all acceptable. Correct?"

"Yes."

"Why no heavy impact?"

"I find that heavy impact play takes me out of subspace, rather than putting me in it. It feels physically, and emotionally, like a beating."

"'Heavy' is not a precise term."

She licked her lips, which were a sweet berry color. "True, but if I can't trust my partner to know heavy impact play from light, then I shouldn't trust him with my body at all."

It made sense when she said it, but for her own sake Alexander thought she should have a more detailed list of implements as well as upper limit counts.

“Why no alone bondage or human furniture?” he asked as he took a step towards her.

“I have no desire to be tied up and left alone in a corner. These events only last three days; why waste them? And as a woman, I object, philosophically, to being treated as a doormat or side table. Society does that well enough, and this is an escape.”

“Some need it.” Her words made him feel slightly guilty for the times he’d rested a drink on the pert ass of a submissive.

She tipped her head, a smile playing about her lips. “You don’t talk much, do you?”

“No,” he agreed.

Her expression turned chagrined. “I’m sorry, that was terribly rude of me.”

He nodded to acknowledge her apology. If he’d had a list of hard limits, discussion of why he was so taciturn—and how he’d gotten that way—would have been at the top of the list.

“Shall we begin?” he asked.

“You don’t want to negotiate for your needs?” Alena countered. “You know what I want, Sir, but I don’t have your papers.” She gestured to the folded sheets he’d set aside. “How will I know what you like in your play partners?”

“I’ll tell you.” Alexander was behind her, and he leaned in, let his nose brush the strands of her dark hair. “Or I’ll punish you. Stand up.”

“You’ll punish me for breaking rules I don’t even know?” She rose to her feet, and he got his first good look at her ass, the lower curve of each cheek exposed by the cut of the lace panties.

“Yes.”

Her breath caught and then she swallowed—a small, involuntary expression of excitement or trepidation.

“That’s...” her voice trailed off.

“Unfair?” He stayed behind her, where she couldn’t see him. It was a deliberate power move, which just so happened to give him time to continue studying her backside. The wide black ribbon bows at her hips tempted him to rush, to get past the foreplay and start pinning that ass with a spanking.

But he wouldn’t.

He would savor her, and in doing so bring her to the outer edge of pain where it transitioned to pleasure. If she’d been willing to engage in more sexualized play he would have planned to do the inverse, pleasure her until pleasure became pain.

He headed for one of the trunks scattered around the room. The Doms had been invited to take what they needed from any trunks or chests, all of which had been stocked with things they might need, though almost every Dom also had their own kit of personal toys.

“...perfect,” she breathed.

He paused, surprise making his brows rise as he looked back at her.

Alena turned just her head, soft waves of dark hair framing her face “I’ve always liked a Dom who’s a little bit cruel.”

“You want a sadist?” She’d asked about his limits, and sadism was one of them. Not because he didn’t enjoy it.

Because he might enjoy it too much.

“No. I want a Dom who will make me feel things that a sane, repressed person would run screaming into the night to avoid.” One corner of her mouth curled in a half-smile.

Alexander couldn’t help but return her smile with one of his own. Of course she didn’t want a sadist top. Heavy impact play was one of her limits. He shoved aside the vague sense of disappointment.

He bent and fiddled with the trunk latches. It opened, and as he'd expected, it was full. Also as expected, most of the contents were for post-play as this was one of the aftercare lounges.

Robes, rolled blankets, lotion, aspirin, and bottles of water were all in there.

Not everything was solely for post-scene care. There was also lube, gloves, alcohol wipes, black silk ties, and two crops, one long, one short. He pulled out the short crop, a pair of gloves, and alcohol wipes.

He tore open an alcohol pad and wiped down the crop, stuffing the black plastic gloves into his pants pocket.

When he turned back to Alena she looked uncertain, and had her arms crossed over her stomach.

He raised the crop, swished it through the air. "The scene begins now."

Her eyes widened, and when he brought the tip whistling down to strike a nearby ottoman, she jumped.

Alexander raised a brow. "A crop is not by default heavy impact."

"It can leave a welt."

"A long crop, yes."

"I'm sure you could use all those muscles to make it hit hard." She gestured at his arm.

She liked his muscles? There was no way she could see them through his tailored shirt. False compliments to manipulate him into being gentle?

Plenty of women had complimented him in the past. As a matter of fact, people rarely did anything *but* compliment him, yet Alena's words made him feel good. Maybe because she'd sounded disgruntled, and that added authenticity to her statement.

Alexander stalked towards her, holding the crop slightly raised. Not a threat, but the hint of one.

She dropped her hands to her sides, changed her mind and folded her arms, then pressed her lips together as if firming her resolve, and dropped her hands once more.

Her uncertainty was delightful.

Alexander placed the tip of the crop under her chin, nudging her face up until their gazes met.

“Leave now,” he murmured.

“Why would I do that, Sir? I want to be here.”

“You’re ready to submit? To me?”

In response, Alena closed her eyes, her shoulders relaxing, her lovely face still tilted up. He wanted to taste her lips, but he couldn’t. No fluids exchange was her other rule, and a common enough one it hadn’t been worth mentioning.

No fluid exchange meant he couldn’t lick her pussy without a dental dam, or ask her to lick his bare cock.

And it meant he couldn’t kiss her.

Alexander leaned in, let his mouth hover over hers. He closed his eyes, imagined the kiss, and then pulled back. Now was not the time for tenderness, even if her rules had allowed it.

“Once you kneel, you’re mine for the night.” It was a final warning, but not enough. He should have explained to her that he could be sadistic. It was, perhaps, his true nature.

He should tell her exactly how deep into the darkness he could fall, how his refined exterior, crafted by his upbringing and position, were a veneer for a dangerous, feral creature inside.

But he’d never warned a submissive about it before. He didn’t know why he felt like he should with her.

“I’m not looking for an out, Sir.”

He hoped she could handle him, because though he hadn’t started the night with a feeling of disquiet, ever since he’d pushed back her hood, his sexual appetite had skewed towards the darkness.

“Kneel, Alena.”

She obeyed.

CHAPTER 2

Alena focused on her breathing as she knelt before him. Inhale for a four count, exhale for eight.

“Nervous?” Alexander asked softly as he circled her.

“If I said I wasn’t, I’d be lying.”

“No lies. Not in a scene.” As he looped around the front she couldn’t help but stare at the riding crop. It had been a long time since she’d been cropped.

“I agree, Sir. This is no place for lies, but I’m not exactly nervous. I’m...trepidatious.”

“Trepidation is appropriate, but not what you’ll be feeling soon.”

“Oh?”

Rather than reply, he made a noise halfway between a hum and a grunt. He’d stopped behind her, and Alena had to resist the urge to bunch her shoulders up around her ears as her hindbrain registered him as a threat.

She might know how to submit, but it had been years. Her instincts were sounding the alarm, insisting she shouldn’t be passively kneeling when a predator was so near. The fact that she found him attractive was inconsequential according to her intuition.

The tip of the crop brushed her hair, and she shivered.

“Cold?”

“No, Sir.”

The crop trailed down her back, moving from bare skin at her upper back, to lace, to bare skin and more lace. She held her breath as the crop danced over her ass. He hadn't been specific about how she should kneel, so she'd opted for the most comfortable position, which was kneeling and seated, her butt resting on her heels.

“You should be barefoot or in high heels.” The crop tapped against the bottom of her ballet flats.

“I can't wear heels due to an injury, Sir.”

Most clubs had guidelines that both protected participants and helped define and maintain the “otherness” of the club space. A common rule was that submissives either wore fuck-me heels or went barefoot.

“You need the shoes?”

“No, I can go barefoot.” The Orchid Club had far fewer rules than the small clubs she'd been to when first exploring the submissive aspect of her sexuality. Tonight, with no rule to force her into heels, she'd decided to wear flats rather than go barefoot. It was a small thing, a meager defiance.

And Alexander had homed in on it. Interesting.

“Then remove them. Now.”

Alena's breath caught at the darkness in his tone. It hadn't been there a moment ago.

Rising up on her knees, she reached back, pulling off first her right, and then left, shoe. She set them aside, where she could still see them, but out of his way.

When she started to sink back onto her heels, he stopped her by pressing the crop against her ass. “Stay up.”

“You'll begin with a cropping?” Her voice wavered a little, and she hadn't meant it to. She cleared her throat.

“And if I did?”

“That would...certainly be one way to start a scene. Sir.”

He circled around to face her. Dropping into a squat—the crop dangling loosely from one hand—he stared at her with a heavy gaze.

Alena took a few breaths, reminded herself that he knew her limits. Crops were designed for use on horses, a small movement of the handle able to create enough force that a horse would feel it. In that light, a crop was perhaps on par with a cane or single-tail whip, but the crop he held was short. Designed for BDSM play.

“You disapprove.”

“No, Sir.”

“Do not lie to me.”

“I’m not lying.”

He examined her, regard almost clinical as he took in her face before moving his gaze lower. A small smile quirked his lips and she realized that her nipples were hard inside the lace cups of the soft corset.

The crop came up and he rubbed the tip across her left nipple.

Alena jerked, and shock at the unexpected, intimate touch quickly morphed to tingling excitement.

“This is allowed by your limits,” Alexander said.

“You just surprised me, Sir.”

“You enjoyed it.”

It wasn’t a question, but it seemed like he wanted a response. “Yes, Sir.”

“Why?”

“I’m sorry, you want me to explain...why I found it pleasurable when you touched one of my erogenous zones?”

Another quirk of his lips. “No.” He reached out, hooked a finger in the lace between her breasts, and yanked the corset down.

Alena gasped and instinctively raised her hands to cover herself.

Alexander moved, faster than she would have guessed a man whose job was being rich and powerful would.

As her palms closed over her breasts he dropped to one knee, while simultaneously releasing the crop. He grabbed her wrists and yanked her hands away from her body, forcing her arms down.

Shock, and a little ripple of fear, raced through her. Biting the tip of her tongue helped stave off the instinct to fight him. She raised her eyes to his face, only to find him staring back at her with cold, implacable resolve.

They held one another's gaze for a long moment before he deliberately looked down at her chest.

Alena felt heat in her face as he stared at her bare, exposed breasts. Her arms tensed, and he tightened his hold fractionally.

"You will not hide or cover your nakedness."

"I'm sorry," she murmured. "You...you took me by surprise, Sir." This was harder than she'd thought it would be. Submission had never been part of her nature. She'd first turned to it at a time in her life when she'd craved rules, structure, and the safety those provided.

He released her wrists, but his hands hovered near hers, ready to grab her if she tried to cover herself.

Alena lowered her chin to signal her acceptance, her submission.

"You expected me to leave your breasts covered?"

"No, Sir. I just expected us to...talk more first."

"I prefer actions to words."

"But you asked me to explain why I reacted when you touched me."

"I want *you* to talk." He raised his hand and reached for her left breast. "I want you to tell me everything you're

thinking and feeling.”

He cupped her breast, her pale flesh shades lighter than his tanned hand. She sucked in air, then held her breath.

“No,” he murmured. “Breathe.”

She exhaled, but was unable to look away from the sight of her breast in his hand. His fingers warm and hard, her nipple tight in anticipation of his touch. A man she’d just met was fondling her, and she couldn’t, well, wouldn’t, stop him.

With her next exhale she released some of the tension coiled tight in her gut, the urge to fight or flee paling in comparison to the new feelings he evoked.

“Tell me,” he commanded.

“I feel... Excited, a little scared. I want to...to run away. To change my mind about all of this.” She closed her eyes, licked her lips. She was being far too honest.

And she was starting to feel submissive.

On one hand that was a relief, because it meant she wouldn’t haul off and punch Alexander as if he were some stranger groping her in a club.

But there was danger in this feeling, too.

She’d prepared for half a dozen different situations and scenarios. Walked into the club tonight determined to attract his attention. Ready and willing to play the part of a submissive and kneel before him.

But she hadn’t expected his touch to make her feel like this.

“If you want to run, run now.” He took his hand from her breast, giving her the out.

She should run. Find another way.

There was no other way.

And I want him to touch me again.

“If I stay?”

“Then you’re mine for the night.”

“And what will you do to me?” She raised her head, needing to see his face.

Alexander’s expression was stern, almost cold. “Many things.”

“That’s it? That’s all you going to say?”

He raised a brow. “Stay or go?”

“Stay.” She needed him.

“Good.” He placed his hand on the top of her head and pressed down, forcing her to bow her head.

Arousal slid through her veins, warming her skin and wiping away the lingering traces of fight or flight instinct.

Alexander rose and went back to circling her, the crop once more dangling casually from his hand. The silence stretched, and her breathing seemed loud in the quiet.

“Tell me what you’re thinking,” he commanded for the second time.

“I was just wondering, if I screamed, would anyone come?”

“Depends on the scream.”

“Am I going to scream?”

He stopped walking and she stared at the knees of his slacks.

She was painfully aware of her bare breasts, the way they rose and fell with each breath she took.

“Yes,” he said. “You’re going to scream.”

She had only a moment to register the snake-quick movement of the crop before the folded leather tip struck the outside edge of her left breast.

The snap of sound was quickly followed by a burst of heat wrapped around a small spark of pain.

She twisted to the side and gasped, shocked more by the fact that he’d done it than by the small bite of pain.

“Shoulders back.”

Alena flexed her fingers and licked her lower lip.

“Alena.” Her name was hard and short, a command, punctuated by the sound of the crop swishing through the air.

Still curled away from him, she winced and braced herself, but no strike fell.

After a noisy exhale, Alena finally faced forward.

The crop came up under her chin, lifting it until she was looking up at him.

Their gazes met, and she was struck by how virile her quiet man was.

Chemistry. It was just sexual chemistry...albeit potent sexual chemistry.

Staring up at him, for a moment she forgot why she was here. Her thoughts focused on what he'd do next, how he'd use her, command her.

Alexander stared down at her from beneath dark brows, his eyes the green of a cider bottle rimmed in gold.

“You're lovely,” he said quietly. “But better suited to someone softer.”

Alena blinked. “What?”

He lowered the crop and bent, bringing his face down to hers. She stared at him, heart pounding and mind whirling as she processed what he'd said.

His gaze moved over her feature by feature, and she could feel his breath as he exhaled. “Too bad,” he whispered. “But what I would do to you...” He ran a finger down her cheek, then stood.

“Thank you for the honor of your company,” he said formally.

And with that, Alexander Wagner turned and walked away.

* * *

He heard soft, rapid footfalls approaching from behind, and Alexander stepped to the side of the hall and paused. He wanted to give Alena space to pass him.

The long halls of the small, elegant hotel—which was closed due to remodeling on the lower floors and kitchen—were elegantly lit by evenly spaced antique sconces. The hotel was from one of Wien’s—Vienna’s—baroque periods, and the juxtaposition of detailed wallpapers, ornamental lighting, plush rugs, and carved molding contrasted peculiarly with the medieval-style dungeon set up in the ballroom and the various Moroccan lounges.

The changing rooms were at the far end of the hall. That was most likely where Alena was heading.

It was too bad they weren’t compatible. Something about her called to him. The devil on his shoulder—who was most decidedly a sadist—was screaming that he’d made a mistake, that he should go back and take her, claim her.

It was because of that very voice that he’d left. She hadn’t been able to accept even a small amount of physical pain. Her list had said no hard impact play. It should probably have said no impact play at all.

He wouldn’t subject her to a scene with him. Even at his most mild, his scenes involved the use of impact implements, and she made him feel anything but mild.

The footsteps were close, and he politely averted his gaze, pretending to study the elaborate vine pattern of the wallpaper.

“Alexander.”

He jerked in surprise. Alena whirled to a stop facing him, the cloak flaring dramatically before settling around her.

“Hello, Alexander.”

“Alena,” he replied slowly.

“Why did you leave?”

He raised a brow. She pressed her lips together, and he watched her throat work as she swallowed. But she didn’t drop her gaze.

Intriguing.

“We are not a good fit,” he said simply.

“Because I had a natural reaction to pain stimulus?” Both her brows rose.

He took a moment to compose himself, to form the complete sentence in his mind before speaking. “That was small, compared to what I typically do to my submissives.”

“I didn’t think that was too much pain. It wasn’t more than I could handle.”

“You flinched.”

“You hit me with a riding crop. Of course I flinched.”

Once more he formed the thought before speaking. “You don’t like intense sensations.”

“Oh, I very much like intense sensations. I just have normal reactions to them.”

She was arguing with him. No one argued with him, especially submissives.

He took a half step, moving into her personal space. “There are other Doms.”

“And other submissives. That’s where you’re going, isn’t it? To find someone who will lie to you and pretend they’re instantly in subspace so—”

“No, I will find a masochist—”

“—you don’t have to do any work.”

His train of thought short circuited, and he had to clamp his teeth together to keep himself quiet until he was able to say precisely, and only, what he wanted to. “Pardon me?”

“Oh, you heard me, Alexander.” She stressed his first name, as if highlighting that she hadn’t called him “Sir.” For the third time.

“Are you submissive?” he asked in irritation. How dare she challenge him. He’d been nothing but polite.

“Yes. Are you a Dom?”

“Watch your tongue.”

“Or what?”

“Do not challenge me.” He bit off the words.

“Because if I did, it would mean you’d have to work?” She made an exaggerated shocked expression. “How dare I not instantly fall at your feet in perfect submission? How dare I feel nervous kneeling half-naked in front of a stranger?” She threw one hand in the air, which caused her robe to part.

There was enough light for him to see into the shadows of her cloak. She’d pulled the corset back up over her breasts. The urge to shove the cloak off and yank the lace down to expose those lovely breasts once more was nearly overpowering.

“How dare I expect you to help me find my submission? How dare I enjoy the idea that you’d keep cropping me even if I flinched or cried? How dare I expect you to understand that I might need—”

Alexander grabbed her shoulders and pushed her back against the wall.

Alena gasped, her eyes widening for a moment, before her gaze drifted down his face, pausing on his lips before sliding down to his neck.

He should kiss her.

No, he should not kiss her. Her paperwork had specifically prohibited any exchange of fluids.

And kissing was for romance, for lovers.

Instead, he released her and braced his hands on the wall. Then lowered his face to hers, bringing his mouth within inches of her glossy lips.

“I am not a kind man,” he whispered.

“I’m not a nice woman.”

“I would hurt you.”

“Why?”

Her word puffed against his lips. He could smell her breath, a clean scent with an overlay of champagne.

“Because I need to.” It was a simple sentence that ran parallel to the truth, but his truth, the reasons he was the way he was, were not things he talked about. “Because you need me to.”

“And pleasure?” she asked.

“I might make the pain pleasure. If you earn it.” He pulled back, far enough that he could examine her expression.

She was breathing hard, but the cloak had fallen closed, hiding her breasts, so he didn't get a proper view.

Slowly, he reached for the fabric, giving her plenty of time to move out of the way.

She didn't.

Alexander grabbed one side, shoving it back behind her left shoulder. Half of her scantily clad body was now on display, and he liked the dichotomy of it, so didn't bother with the other half of the cloak.

He could feel her watching him, and when he glanced up she once more met his gaze.

“You enjoy being forced,” he said, “to accept punishment.”

“Yes, I do. Something about a man who will keep going, keep doing wicked things to me even if I'm crying and begging him not to... That turns me on.”

His cock twitched in response to her words.

She sighed, and if he hadn't been so close to her he would have missed her next words. “I want to be topped by the quiet man.”

“The quiet man?”

She looked startled, like she hadn't expected him to hear that, or maybe hadn't meant to say it. “I was watching you tonight,” she said slowly. “That's what I called you in my head.”

His lips twisted at the nickname as he reached for her breast. Cupping it in his palm, he massaged the firm flesh, then ran his thumb across her nipple, rubbing rough lace against soft skin. Her breathing deepened, but remained steady.

Alexander reached down into the corset, fingers sliding between lace and skin. Cupping her breast once more, he lifted it out of the corset. With his other hand he scrunched down the fabric before releasing her breast. Again there was dichotomy, one breast still in the corset, protected by material, and hidden from view. The other now exposed and lifted slightly by bunched fabric.

“I will be rough with you.” Using only his index finger he started to softly stroke the tip of her nipple. It was a feather-light touch to the very tip, but she arched up as if it were a far more forceful caress, even rising onto her toes at one point.

She was incredibly sensitive. That thought only made him want to top her more.

Her half-closed eyes opened. “You’re the Dom I need. I want.”

Being wanted was an aphrodisiac even in normal circumstance—though that was usually tempered by suspicion of ulterior motives in his case. Coming from her, here, the words made him hot.

She didn’t know who he was, how much money he had, and she wanted him. That was a first for him.

He’d also never had a submissive chase him down. Even ignoring traditional gender roles outside of BDSM, in the Orchid Club most of the dominant players were men, the submissives women.

It seemed backwards for her to do the chasing. Yet, instead of offended, he felt wanted.

Or maybe that was a justification he was using because he didn’t want to stop touching her.

Alexander bent, bringing his mouth to her nipple. He kissed it tenderly, reverently, with closed lips.

He heard her soft sigh of pleasure, sensed her body relax.

Alexander opened his mouth and licked, one long slow sweep of his tongue over her nipple. She moaned in pleasure, the sound loud in the quiet hall.

And then he bit her.

Alexander closed his teeth on the sensitive peak of her breast. She shrieked—in surprise, in pain—and her hands cupped his head, fingers winding through his hair.

Alexander lifted his head, biting down harder on her nipple as he did. Her breast rose, her tender nipple bearing the weight of her own flesh as it was trapped between his teeth.

Alena's hands fisted in his hair and she yanked, trying to pull him away.

Alexander grabbed Alena's wrists and slammed them against the wall beside her shoulders. The movement caused his head to shift, tugging and pulling on her nipple even more. She whimpered piteously.

"It hurts," she panted.

Alexander released her nipple, worried she might have forgotten that she did have power to stop him. Submissives didn't always have the presence of mind to use a safeword.

He had to be sure that she knew she was safe. Well, relatively safe.

Alena's eyes were closed, her fingers curled loosely towards her palms. She wasn't fighting his hold on her wrists.

Her breathing had slowed and her lips were parted, jaw and neck muscles soft. She seemed...relaxed. No, not quite that.

She seemed...quietly expectant.

There was no panic, no confusion. There was no sign of distress so great that it would cause her to forget her safeword.

She'd told him she liked to be pushed. To be forced to accept more.

“It hurts” hadn’t been a plea for him to stop.

Alexander felt a surge of need, the kind of arousal that drove people mad, that urged them to do insane things to slake their desire.

He dipped his head and opened his mouth. She whimpered, but arched her back, offering up her breast for more abuse. He rewarded her with a quick lick. This was not the place to use and abuse her the way he wanted.

Straightening once more, he released her wrists.

Alena didn’t drop her arms. She kept them up, making no move to shield herself or soothe her abused nipple. Her eyes were still closed, lips softly parted.

“Alena.”

“Yes, Sir?” She opened her eyes.

Alexander’s whole body flushed with heat, and his cock, which had been semi erect since he first got a glimpse at the woman hidden under the hood, hardened with alacrity.

The darkness inside him was awake and hungry for her. Demanding not just that he find a submissive, but that it be *this* submissive.

He’d walked away, and now it was clear that was a mistake. He’d thank her for coming after him once he was done making her scream in sweet agony.

He held out his hand, and she placed her fingers in his.

“You’re mine now.”

CHAPTER 3

Alena wondered if this was the point a normal person would have started panicking and freaking.

Alexander finished buckling the padded suspension cuff around her wrist, then picked up a twenty-centimeter length of chain with spring hooks on either end.

She held out her arms, offering her cuffed wrists to him. With calm efficiency he hooked the chain to the D rings.

“Do you have any shoulder, elbow, or wrist injuries?” he asked.

“No, Sir.”

Alexander nodded, then raised her linked hands above her head. Alena focused on her breathing as he hooked the short chain over a large hook dangling over her head.

When he stepped back, an intense feeling of vulnerability washed over her, as if she was standing naked in a room full of strangers.

The feeling of being exposed and helpless had nothing to do with what she was and wasn't wearing, and everything to do with the fact that she was now trapped in bondage.

Whatever the feeling, physically she still wore the lace corset-bra, stockings, and panties. Though her left breast was on display, and that nipple was hard, her areola rucked tight.

Alexander went to a small winch and turned the handle, taking up slack in the rope the hook was attached to.

A normal person probably would have freaked out long before this.

“Do you ever wonder what it would be like to be normal?” she asked.

He looked...befuddled by the question. It was a cute expression on him.

Cute wasn't a descriptor she would normally have associated with him, but in this case, it fit.

When he shook his head, she smiled. “No, I suppose neither of us, or anyone in this room, is normal.”

The event was in full swing, and nearly every play space in the dungeon was occupied. Most scenes had small audiences.

She'd tried gently suggesting that they find a private room, but Alexander had merely looked at her, raised one brow, and started weaving through the crowd.

He'd found them a spot at the back of the room where two A-frames supported a crossbar three meters off the ground. A freestanding suspension structure.

During his set up she'd tried several times to start a conversation, but he'd never replied verbally, instead nodding or shaking his head. He was back to being the quiet man, and it was as if the conversation in the hall hadn't happened.

He continued winching, raising her hands until they were stretched over her head, her upper arms tight against her ears. Alena rose onto her toes, which put some slack in the chain. After a moment of that she dropped back onto her heels.

“Not long,” he murmured as he secured the winch.

She tipped her head back so her own arms weren't muffling her hearing. If she hadn't been looking at him, reading his lips, she wouldn't have known he'd spoken.

Alexander crouched down and started sorting through his kit—a large leather case, similar to what she'd seen several other Doms carrying. The cuffs he'd put on her and the small chain linking them had both come out of the bag.

“I can’t decide if I’m terrified of, or fascinated by, your kit.”

Alexander snorted and swiveled on the balls of his feet, still crouching, to look at her.

He considered her for a moment, then said, “Fascinated.”

Progress! He was talking again.

“You’re not wrong,” she said mournfully.

“Of course I’m not.” The corners of his eyes crinkled as he smiled. “I’m the Dom.”

Alena laughed, genuinely amused.

Alexander rose, holding a short riding crop in one hand, a flogger in the other.

Alena’s laughter died. She tensed, taking an instinctive half-step back. The chain connecting her wrists clanked against the hook, and the sound, coupled with the uncomfortable pressure on her wrists and shoulder joints, was enough to short-circuit the panic.

She wasn’t some fainting virgin. She could handle, had in the past handled, impact play from both those implements. What she’d told him was true. She could handle pain, but that didn’t mean she found it pleasurable the way a pure masochist might have. For her it was the Dom’s choice to hurt her, to push her, that aroused.

“Two at once, Sir?” Her tone was softer than it had been, and not by design.

Alexander walked towards her, but it wasn’t just walking, it was the arrogant prowl of a Dom.

He raised the flogger and let the tips of the falls dance over her breast. Made either of suede, or perhaps deer hide, the flogger was soft against her skin.

One strand slid against the very tip of her exposed nipple, managing to touch her with such exquisite precision that she rose up onto her toes in reaction to the jolt of pleasure.

Alexander tucked the flogger and crop under his arm as he circled around behind her.

His fingers were warm on her back, which was chilled from exposure. That didn't stop her from shivering as he pushed her hair over her shoulder so he could see what he was doing.

He undid the uppermost closure of the corset bra. Alena's blood heated, her body warm with arousal.

Though he worked with brisk efficiency worthy of a healthcare worker, having him undress her felt intimate. It was intimate, and trying to pretend it wasn't was stupid.

BDSM wasn't always sexual, in fact most people played in ways that either weren't sexual, weren't about sex, or both. However, BDSM was always intimate.

In the next moment the bra fell away, leaving her breasts bare and vulnerable.

He tossed the undergarment aside where it landed atop her discarded shoes and cloak. She took careful breaths, counting to five as she inhaled in effort to keep herself both calm and focused.

Approaching him as a submissive had been a calculated risk. This moment, bare-breasted and in bondage, was the first time it felt like the risk outweighed the benefits.

He gathered her hair into a single tail at the back of her head. She felt him lean in. When his warm breath washed over the sensitive skin behind her ear, she shivered.

“I will not be gentle with you.”

He pushed her gathered hair forward over one shoulder, leaving her back bare and accessible.

The first strike hit her upper back, just right of center. She flinched, tiptoeing forward a few inches in an instinctive desire to get away from the source of the sensation. A moment later her brain registered what she'd felt. A thump. The flogger, not the crop.

She settled down on her heels, her arms stretched painfully up and back because she'd shifted forward. Quickly, she backed up, taking the pressure off her shoulders.

Thwack. Again the flogger struck her upper back. This time she didn't shift away. Instead she inched her feet apart, bracing herself.

"Very good," he murmured.

"Thank you, Sir."

Around them dozens of people engaged in various debauched and taboo pleasures.

There were more sexual activities on display than there had ever been at the munches she'd attended or clubs she'd visited. Then again, those had been populated by ordinary people, who, if not exactly normal, were far more likely to feel constrained.

Rules didn't apply to the uber wealthy.

A couple was scening several meters away, the submissive woman facedown over a sawhorse as her male Dom worked a series of anal plugs, in graduated sizes, into her ass.

The flogger fell again, snapping Alena back into the moment. Her back felt warm where he'd struck.

"You're good with a flogger, Sir."

"How would you know? I've only placed three strikes."

"Two sentences in a row?" She tried to look back at him, but with her arms pulled tight alongside her head she was only partially successful. "How unusual, Sir."

His lips quirked. "A brat? Unexpected."

In her peripheral vision she saw his arm rise, the tails of the flogger swaying gently.

Thwack. This time it struck her ass, the blow harder than those to her back. She felt it, a solid thump with a few outlying stings where individual strands had nipped her.

"Are you?" he asked.

“Am I what, Sir?”

“*Ein verzogener Fratz.*”

She spoke enough German to get by, but his Austrian accent threw her off for a moment.

“A...warped?...something.”

Another blow to her ass, and the heat that lingered there multiplied.

“You spoke German before.”

Thwack.

“Only a little, Sir.”

Thwack.

For several minutes he concentrated on flogging her ass. The buildup of heat was tipping towards the point of pain. Alena was breathing deep but steady, shifting her weight foot to foot.

And after the pain would come pleasure. *You'd get there faster if you gave up trying to build rapport with him and let yourself sink into the scene.*

The next two blows fell on the back of each thigh in turn. She wanted him to continue flogging her ass, to focus there until she couldn't think anymore. Until all she could do was submit.

He worked the flogger up and down the back of her legs with soft blows to each calf, heavy-handed ones on each thigh, and particularly ferocious, stinging ones on her sit spot. He carefully avoided the back of her knee, and didn't let the tails wrap around her limbs.

When he paused to run his hand over her ass, down one leg and then up the other, her breath caught. The touch of his hand was a far less acute sensation than the flogger, but it wasn't the physical impact she was reacting to, but the emotional one of having her Dom's hands on her.

“You are taking it well.” His voice was dark and low, a bit rough, as if he needed to clear his throat.

“Thank you, Sir.”

She waited for him to say more. He said nothing. Her quiet man.

Dammit.

“What was that you said before, Sir, in German?”

“A spoiled brat.” His fingers curled around the lace band at the top of her thigh and began to roll her stocking down. “But that is not the right term for you.”

“No. I’m not a brat. I don’t throw tantrums or break rules as a way to goad my partner and top from the bottom.” Her plan had been to remain detached enough to—if not top from the bottom—at least influence their scene to ensure they established rapport.

“What do you do?” he asked.

“I ask for what I want. For what I need.”

He finished with her right stocking and started on the left. “Unusual.”

“My thigh highs, or that I ask for what I need?”

He finished with the second stocking and she lifted her foot so he could remove it.

When he stayed silent, she rose on her toes and pirouetted in place so she could see him. He was crouched, elbows on his knees, looking up at her.

The reversal of position might have held connotations of a reversal of roles, but there was no doubt who the Dom was. Alexander looked at her with the predatory gaze of a hunting bird, and the calm arrogance of a billionaire.

“You ask for what you need?” He raised one brow.

“Is that so unusual?”

“Some people. Many people...” Alexander picked up the flogger and stood. “...don’t know what they want.”

Alena started to turn back around, but he stopped her by reaching out and cupping her breast. He slid his thumb across

her nipple, then palmed her breast, lifting it slightly.

With his other hand he raised the flogger, then smacked it down on the breast he held up.

Alena cried out, rising up on her toes as pain warmed her breast. One strand of the flogger had struck her nipple, and sensation zinged through her.

He bent bringing his face within inches of her abused breast. She couldn't stop herself from arching her back, thrusting her nipple towards his mouth in a silent plea.

“Dangerous,” he all but growled. “I might bite, not suck.”

“You already bit me.”

“And it hurt?”

“Yes.” She strained forward. “Bite me, please, Sir.”

“Pain is what you want?”

She needed to say “no.” She should temper the moment, try and keep this light so she didn't sink too deep into her own submission.

But he was touching her breast, her ass was smarting from the flogging, and her whole body felt warm and ripe, ready for him to use and abuse.

“I want it. I'm ready for it to hurt.” She licked her suddenly dry lips, and glanced at his face.

She met his gaze for just a moment, then submissively lowered her eyes. He rewarded her with a swipe of his thumb over her nipple.

He released the first breast only to cup the other. “What else do you want?”

Before she could speak, the flogger slapped down. With his hand under her tit, the flesh was forced to absorb the full impact of the strike.

She breathed through the sweet pain, nearly whimpering when he released her breast and stepped back.

With uneven breaths, she watched as his gaze roamed over her front, as if considering where to strike next.

He studied her the way a master sculptor examined a block of marble.

He raised his arm.

The flogger struck, in rapid succession, each thigh, then the upper outside edge of her thigh—her hip area, but not high enough to land on the part of the hip that was out of bounds thanks to the kidneys and other soft organs not protected by the ribcage. Back to thighs then breasts, hip area again, and breasts once more.

By the time he was done, Alena was gasping and no longer able to keep still. Between blows she would rise up on the balls of her feet, arch her back, twist side to side, or some combination of all three. She wasn't trying to get away. The opposite.

She needed more.

Her whole body was warm and throbbing. The moments of waiting between the strikes were torture.

“Tell me what you need,” he commanded.

“Again. Don't pause. Please, Sir. More.”

“More pain?”

“Yes,” she gasped. “If that's what you want.” She blinked to focus her eyes on his face.

He looked grim, his jaw muscles clenched. Anger? No. His brow wasn't furrowed, and his eyes were...hungry. Control. He was near the edge of his own control, clenching his teeth as he fought to hold himself in check.

She didn't want him reserved. She wanted him wild, and it had nothing to do with why she was here. It had stopped being about the job, about the next move in the game, when he flogged her breast.

Bringing a Dom to the edge of their control stoked her own perverse desires.

He started up again, this time adding in blows to the outsides of her thighs, and striking her breasts less frequently.

“Hurt me, please,” she begged during a pause. “Make me feel it. I don’t want to think for a little while.”

His expression shifted to surprise for just a moment. Then it closed down again even as her rational internal voice was screaming at her to back up a proverbial step.

At least she hadn’t said all of what she’d been thinking. *I don’t want to think about why I’m really here.*

He raised the flogger and started to flick it through the air, moving only his wrist. Soon he had a good rhythm, the flogger making an infinity pattern.

She watched in wonder and masochistic fascination as he turned to her, the rhythm of the flogger never altering.

Snap. He struck the top of her right breast with a down swing, then the underside of her left with the upswing. The strands of the flogger were moving fast. This wasn’t the thumping sensation of a moments ago.

She’d never been flogged like this, with quick fast blows. Instead of the warm thumps, the strikes were sharp, the sensation closer to the sting of a crop, but with a multilayered sound as each tail hit at a slightly different time.

And it hurt. Wonderfully. Terribly. She cried out, rounding her shoulders as her breasts started to burn with heat, the sting not having time to fade before he struck her again.

“Shoulders back,” he commanded.

“I...I...”

“Give me your breasts. They are mine to abuse tonight.”

His perverse command made her shiver in need. She needed this, deserved it. How had she forgotten how good it could be to submit?

Years ago she’d been so heavily into BDSM that she’d actually hosted a monthly munch—a BDSM meet and greet.

Then she'd grown restless and slowly drifted away from the community and the lifestyle, taking with her everything she'd learned about how complex a person's sexuality could be, and how universal the desire for connection was, even if that connection was found on opposite ends of a whip.

The flogger never stopped, and she lost track of time. The sound of each strike was like a metronome, relentless and mesmerizing. Her breasts ached. She felt swollen and tender, each blow a warm sting.

The pattern broke, the flogger not striking her left breast when it should have.

"We'll pause for a moment."

Alena forced her eyes open, blinking.

Alexander casually bounced the flogger against his leg, the only sign of impatience during the small intermission.

"Look at me," he commanded.

Their gazes collided, and for a moment Alena was sure he could see the truth. The truth of why she was here, what she wanted from him.

Anxiety flashed through her, cold and sobering.

Alexander simply nodded, then leaned in, examining her breasts. He used the butt of the crop handle to lift each breast in turn, examining the underside.

"Your skin marks beautifully. No bruises of course, but you will be pink for several hours."

"Thank you, Sir."

The words were automatic, almost habitual.

As if Alexander had pulled that buried submissive part of her forward in the space of an hour.

This was a terrible mistake. There was a piece in play she hadn't seen, and that piece, her long forgotten submissive needs, bolstered by the sexual chemistry between them, had knocked her back several moves.

This plan had seemed perfect, both because it was one of the only ways she could gain access to him, and because she was an experienced submissive. It was an approach no normal person would have dared, unless they were so ignorant of what BDSM was that they walked in blind and ignorant.

Alena's life had never been normal. At best it had been interesting, and at worst traumatic. She was who she was, and did what she did, because of it.

“We'll continue.”

The flogger swished through the air, finding the rhythm once more.

Instead of her breasts he focused on her thighs and hips.

Thwack. Right hip.

Thwack. Left thigh.

Thwack. Right hip.

Thwack. Left thigh.

The blows were stronger now than they had been on her breasts, but not as hard as what he'd used on her ass.

She'd been right.

He knew exactly how to use a flogger. He knew the implement, knew how to use it to cause completely different sensations, how to moderate his swings for different sensations and strengths of impact.

He was precise. Methodical.

The kind of man who wasn't easy to trick.

Alexander paused, stepping back, and she sagged for a moment, letting her head fall back and lifting each leg in turn, circling her ankle and feeling the heat in her thighs.

“Again.” The word was merciless. He was merciless.

She braced her feet, closed her eyes, and forced herself to breathe.

Thwack. Left hip.

Thwack. Right thigh.

Thwack. Left hip.

Thwack. Right thigh.

He'd reversed the pattern, which meant he was striking virgin skin.

"You're almost at your limit." It wasn't a question, it was a statement.

"No, Sir."

She didn't want her limit to be what stopped them. She wanted him to keep going, wanted to linger in this place of uncomfortable heat. It was like the first moments of getting into a too-hot spa after a day in the snow.

"No?"

Alena arched her back, thrusting her breasts towards him.

"Ask for what you want," he commanded. "Or was that a lie?"

Alena's head snapped up, and she met his gaze, a bit of ire adding bite to her words. "I'm sorry, I thought you'd be able to read my body language, but if you need every single thing explained..."

"Watch your tone."

"Or what?"

Alexander grinned. It was the first time she'd seen a full smile. My god, what a smile it was.

"Or I'll stop."

"Oh, that's... That's just mean."

"You said you'd ask for what you want." The smile melted away. "That was a lie?"

"No."

He scooped up the crop and snapped a quick blow to the inside of her upper arm, which was exposed and vulnerable with her arms bound overhead.

Alena yelped and danced in place.

“Mind your manners.” The grin was gone, his tone cool. But the way he looked at her was anything but cool. It also wasn’t the dispassionate, focused look she remembered Doms wearing during non-sexual impact play scenes.

Because this wasn’t non-sexual.

He wanted her.

She wanted him.

“Did you lie?” He started to walk around behind her. Like prey trying to keep a predator in sight, she turned to follow his progress.

Crack. Again the crop struck the soft, pale skin of her inner arm. Then his hand tangled in her hair, jerking her head back, her scalp prickling with pain.

“Did you lie when you said you’d ask for what you wanted?”

“No... Sir.” She stumbled a little over the second word. Not because she had trouble saying it.

Because right now he didn’t just feel like a Dom, or a casual impact play partner—which was what she’d expected before actually meeting him.

As he held her by the hair, her body forced into a slight backbend, her hands bound and raised, her whole body throbbing from his precise use of the flogger...

He felt like her master.

It felt like they had a connection that was more than just a common interest, more than sexual chemistry.

Master.

She’d almost called him “master.”

CHAPTER 4

“I don’t allow my submissives to lie to me.”

Alexander’s words were a cold slap, snapping her out of the ridiculous flight of submissive fancy.

I’ve made a terrible mistake.

That thought sobered her enough that she was able to jerk herself away from a precipice she could not afford to crest.

He didn’t allow submissives to lie to him. Well, he was about to, even if he didn’t know it.

She’d planned to offer him nothing but lies and playacting. But what she felt, how she responded to his domination was the truth. Hopefully that was enough veracity to hide both the lies she’d already told and the ones she would have to tell to get what she needed.

“I wanted you to touch my breasts, Sir. I wanted you to...” She shook her head, casting aside thoughts of both past and future. Now was all that mattered.

She closed her eyes, trying to put to words a feeling that was nearly impossible to explain. “I wanted it to either end or for you to start using that crop.”

“Impatient.”

“Yes, Sir, but it’s more than that—it’s...” She licked her lips, struggling slightly to swallow because her head was still back, his hand still gripped in her hair.

The tip of the crop rubbed her hip then slid up. When he teased her nipple, gently tapping it with the crop, Alena couldn't help but moan.

"I *can* read your body language," he whispered. "I know what it was you wanted. What you still want."

"Thank you, Sir."

He released her hair. "Your skin is sensitized and now that you've had a break, starting again would be painful."

He was ending the scene. Alena looked at the floor, past her flushed breasts and hard nipples. It was in part to stretch her neck, and in part to hide her disappointment.

The crop came up under her chin, forcing her face up.

He looked like some dark, avenging prince—his face stark and merciless. "Beg."

"Sir?"

"Beg me to keep whipping you."

"And if I don't?" she whispered.

He slapped her right nipple with the crop. Sharp, hot pain lanced through her. From her nipple right down to her sex, which throbbed in response.

"Thank you," she moaned.

"Turn around."

Slightly wobbly, she rose onto the balls of her feet and turned, presenting him with her backside.

The crop swished through the air, and she cried out in sweet pain as it lashed her ass. In a matter of moments, or was it minutes? She was shifting and wiggling, seeking an end to the constant throbbing interspersed by bursts of sweet pain. Her whole body was humming with need. The need for it all to stop, for her to catch her breath and calm down.

The need for him to do even more. Harder, longer, more sensitive skin.

"Please, please," she sobbed.

“What?” he demanded.

“More, Sir.”

The chemistry she'd been surprised by when he first touched her was nothing compared to the connection she now felt. She felt submissive, truly submissive, for the first time in years.

And it was that full submission that sparked a terrible desire. She wanted to beg him to hurt her until she was bruised and bleeding. Knowing, trusting, that he wouldn't go that far.

“Turn around, offer me your breasts again.”

Her tits ached, especially her right nipple, but she obeyed, presenting her breasts to be cropped.

Thwack, thwack.

A dry sob escaped her, and Alena was no longer thinking about this moment. Instead all the things she'd shoved down, all the things that secretly hurt her, surfaced.

Insults and abuses that she'd dismissed with a witty comment or comeback were now dragged up from the depths of her memory.

Only to burn to ash as they met the ferocious heat of Alexander's dominance.

He switched to the flogger, starting up the sideways figure-eight pattern once more.

When the first pass struck her breasts, Alena nearly screamed. She was so sensitive. She couldn't take it.

She could. For him, she could.

And at this point it wasn't the pain she feared, but the private, personal revelations.

She wore a mask, which wasn't remarkable. Everyone did. It just so happened that hers was a bit thicker, a bit more permanent, than what other people wore.

And Alexander was stripping all that away.

She still heard the flogger but no more blows fell. Chain clanked and her wrists lowered a few inches. Her overworked arm muscles sent up a protest, but that was minor pain in comparison to her aching breasts.

“Feet together. Now bend over.”

She was tired and aching, raw emotionally and physically.

And he was still going to use her. “Sir, I...”

“I’m not done using you. You will submit until I release you.”

When she’d first been exploring BDSM, and had stumbled while explaining exactly what turned her on, a Domme had given her the language she’d been missing to verbalize her desires.

Submission by force.

She wanted the Dom to force her to find and touch her own limits. When she pleaded prettily that she couldn’t take a bigger plug, she wanted the Dom to hold her down and work it into her ass anyway. It was the very opposite of the affirmative consent that every man or woman should have in real life, which made it taboo, and probably why she found it so arousing.

The flogger was finally silent, its soft, wicked tails still.

If she hadn’t been so emotionally wrung out, she would have told Alexander exactly how hot she found his words and actions. How a moment ago she’d been on the verge of breaking down and crying about things that she’d bottled up for years, and instead she was so turned on she could feel her heartbeat in her pussy.

Alexander’s hands helped her into position, firm and a bit impatient, but not rough when he grabbed her red, aching hips.

With his help, she assumed a somewhat awkward position. She was bent at the waist, not at ninety degrees, but closer to forty five. Her elbows were crooked, wrists behind and above her head.

She wasn't sure how long she could hold this. After only a minute she felt the strain in her shoulders and lower back.

His fingers, which now felt cool in comparison to her heated flesh, glided over her back, pausing occasionally, probably to inspect her for any bruising.

Then he slid his fingers under the back waistband of her panties, and tugged.

Alena sucked in air and froze.

Ignoring the bows on the sides, he pulled her panties down to the tops of her thighs, her bare ass exposed for the first time.

"I will not penetrate you," he said. "I'm only looking, and making you aware of my right to look."

Alexander palmed her butt cheeks, spreading them, holding them open just long enough to make a powerful statement.

He released her ass, and then shifted so when he ducked down she could see him. He tucked her hair behind her ear, and it was such an unexpected, tender gesture that she couldn't stop the gasp of surprise.

"These will hurt," he warned her softly. "But you will take them."

A fresh wave of arousal shot through her, even as she whispered, "Yes, Sir."

"I will not tell you how many. You must trust me."

"I do." It was utterly stupid. She had just met him, even if she felt like she knew him from the months of research and planning.

He was the one who shouldn't trust her.

But the knowledge she had about him belonged to Magdalena Moreau, not Alena the submissive.

Alexander swiped his thumb over her cheek, then stood, moving out of her line of sight.

A second later the flogger landed on the ground right under her head. His way of telling her he wouldn't be using the flogger.

Which meant the crop. A more precise, sharp pain on her ass that was already aching thanks to the very flogger she was staring at.

Did she trust him? Far more than she should. She had her safeword, but a safeword couldn't magically unlock cuffs and disintegrate chains.

Crack.

Alena screamed, rising up on her toes as sharp, pinching pain flared on her left ass cheek. She would have lost her balance and toppled over if Alexander hadn't grabbed her. He forced her back into position.

Once she had her balance, and against all reason and sanity, Alena bowed her back, canting her hips and ass towards him.

He rewarded her with a single soft caress on her right ass cheek.

Crack.

He struck the flesh he'd just caressed. This time she screamed, but didn't move.

Her back and arm muscles were tight and burning, nearly every inch of skin from knees to shoulders throbbing.

Crack, crack.

Two more, in quick succession. The sensation was huge and hot and she wasn't sure if it was pain or pleasure anymore, because when he struck her, her breasts bounced, pussy clenched, and even as she wanted to run from the pain she was already fighting the urge to demand more. To demand he be faster, not make her wait even one second to feel it again.

Hands slid under her torso, helping her to straighten.

Alena blinked, momentarily confused as she saw the people gathered around them. They'd attracted an audience.

Then Alexander's lips brushed her ear. "You're very beautiful. Well done."

Several moments later the cuffs were gone and her cloak was settled on her shoulders. Alena reached up to pull it closed, more out of fear of it sliding off than modesty, but Alexander caught her hand.

"No. Let them see."

Well-abused breasts and thighs on display, ass aching, Alena followed her Dom out of the dungeon.

* * *

When her ass made contact with the firm floor pillow, Alena moaned.

"Remove the cloak and roll onto your stomach."

The words were not exactly clinical, but they were far more dispassionate than his expression.

His face was stark, a muscle in his jaw flexing as his attention shifted from her face to her body.

He wanted her, and the struggle to master that arousal was playing out on his face.

She shrugged, the cloak falling away.

"On your stomach."

She paused, caught in a moment of indecision. The scene was over; this was aftercare, which meant the power exchange should start to shift back, to equalize. In practice, he was still giving orders, and her first instinct was to obey.

Time to take back some of her power.

"Alexander?"

A rather plaintive sounding question wasn't the strong statement she'd hoped for, but she'd used his name.

His gaze returned to her face, and his expression softened, became tender. He crouched and reached out to touch her, but paused, fingers only a centimeter from her cheek.

"May I?"

Alena nodded. His tenderness made her feel soft and vulnerable. When his fingers brushed her cheek she closed her eyes and leaned into his touch. It was, at least for her, a poignant moment completely at odds with the way her well-beaten ass and breasts throbbed.

This man was dangerous, and not for the reasons she'd thought coming into the job.

Alexander was dangerous because his perversions fit nicely with her own taboo desires, she was ferociously attracted to him, and above all he was a very good Dom.

She needed to get through aftercare, make sure that tomorrow night he'd partner with her again, then take a frigid shower and reassess.

Alexander pinched her chin with thumb and the side of his forefinger, bringing her back to the moment. She blinked her eyes open, focusing on his face.

She should lean in and kiss him.

She should *not* kiss him. That was a very bad idea.

She loved bad ideas.

“Lay back. Face up to start, if you prefer.”

She was glad he was no longer restricting himself to single syllable words. Ironically, now she was the one who felt mute.

Alena stretched out across three pillows, the cloak under her like a blanket. When she moved her legs, her attention shifted to her sex. She was so wet that her labia were sliding against one another.

Lace wouldn't show dampness the way satin or cotton did, meaning he didn't have to know exactly how wet he'd made her.

Alexander dropped onto one knee and leaned in, examining her breasts. He touched her with the tip of one finger, the bare minimum contact needed for him to shift the flesh and assess.

The tender moment had passed. This was clinical. He was inspecting her.

It was demeaning and crude to be treated like a horse who'd been ridden hard and was now being checked before being turned out for the night.

She should hate it. This sort of objectification wasn't something she enjoyed.

But her pussy was pulsing, the slight pressure from her panties against her labia a tantalizingly feather-light sensation. Enough to keep her painfully aware of her sex, but not enough to provide real stimulation.

Alena squeezed her knees together and nearly moaned.

Impact play scenes, rope bondage, even some role play, could all take place without sex or even nudity involved. In more private settings and munches, subs were often naked because it increased their feelings of vulnerability and heightened the power disparity, not as a prelude to sex.

She'd trained with a Dom who'd enjoyed topping her, used orgasms as a reward, but hadn't ever made any sexual advances.

Even in her first proper scene, when novelty and uncertainty had heightened every sensation, she hadn't felt this combination of soft submission and aching need.

What would it be like if they changed the rules? If she added penetration and sexual options to their play?

Her stomach twisted at the thought. If she fucked him as part of the job, what did that make her?

A whore, and not the fun kind.

Or...

She could mentally separate what was happening. Alena the submissive versus Magdalena who was working Alexander as part of a job.

If she did that, and had sex with this man, it wouldn't be about the job, it would be about them. Their chemistry. Natural

sexual chemistry, combined with the power exchange of BDSM.

She wanted to kneel at his feet. Wanted him to call her a good girl as he forced his cock into her mouth and fucked her face. Wanted him to make her helpless again, to wrap her up in chains and rope until every inch of her flesh was his by right of possession.

Alena's breath hitched as her imagination painted vivid pictures. He shifted his attention to her thighs and hips. When he leaned down, Alena held her breath, hoping he couldn't see how wet she was, couldn't smell her arousal.

"Sekunde," he murmured.

Watching him rise and walk away she realized how desperately she wanted to see him naked.

Her imagination began crafting a fantasy that began with him stripping off his clothes.

Alena licked her lips, which were dry thanks to her heavy breathing. Her naked Alexander fantasy gained traction and she imagined all the wonderful, wicked things he would do to her when they were both naked.

He'd force a plug into her ass. A big one. One that would make it impossible for her to ignore the invasive presence. A fat plug that would remind her each time she moved that she was a submissive. His submissive. That he was preparing her body so he could fuck her.

He'd clamp her nipples, then twist the clamps until she cried out. Then he'd soothe her with his mouth.

He'd use his tongue and teeth on every inch of her skin.

He'd bury his face between her thighs. Tongue-fuck her as he worked a dildo in her ass.

Alena's breathing hitched, her imagination adding fuel to the already dangerous bonfire of her arousal, but the fantasies just kept coming.

She wanted him to turn her over his knee and spank her with his hand.

She wanted him to gag her so she'd have no way to work her secret agenda.

Her runaway kinky thought-train derailed as reality stepped onto the tracks. She had a job to do, and lying here fantasizing wasn't going to help.

“Roll over.” Alexander had returned to her side, holding several things, the only one she could see clearly a bottle of lotion.

She rolled onto her belly, her nipples burning as she lay on them. Alexander briskly tugged her panties, forcing them into the crack of her ass. She smelled the spicy scent of the bruise balm commonly used by those who enjoyed impact play a moment before his hands began to stroke and knead it into her ass.

It hurt, her skin sore, the muscles of her ass aching. She hissed out a breath, feet rising off the floor as she bent her knees. He briskly grabbed her ankles and forced them down, continuing his ministrations with the other hand.

The pain from her ass muted her desire, though the absolute dominance with which he handled her didn't exactly help her come fully out of her submissive headspace. Still, this was the pain of a deep tissue massage, not the sexy pain of a flogging, and she grimaced into the cushion below her.

Alexander carefully untucked her panties, patting her ass fondly when he was done.

Alena took deep breaths, strangely relaxed now that it was done. She lay there for what felt like no more than a moment, but was probably several minutes.

“Alena, how do you feel?” The soft question came from close by, surprising her.

Raising her head, she propped herself up on her elbows, her belly still on the floor in a modified cobra pose.

Alexander was seated cross-legged with his back against the wall. He held a large water bottle in one hand, a folded towel in the other.

“I’m wonderful.” She tried to smile, the sort of knowing wink-and-a-nudge smile that would put them back on equal footing now that the scene was over.

“I asked you not to lie.”

Apparently she hadn’t been successful. “I didn’t lie in the scene,” she countered. “Outside of the scene you don’t have the right to ask me that. The world keeps turning because of all the little lies we tell.”

Her lies were rarely little. God knew this one wasn’t.

“I prefer the truth.” He paused, but after a long moment spoke again. “If anything is hurting in a way it shouldn’t, you will tell me.”

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re bossy?” Alena rose up onto her hands and knees, then froze, realizing that she really didn’t want to sit on her aching ass. Kneeling here with her tits hanging down also wasn’t a good option.

Alexander snorted in amusement, and then he smiled. Oh that smile was bad, bad news.

He picked up the towel and unfolded it with a snap. Rather than looped terrycloth, this massive bath sheet was a Turkish-style weave. He draped it across his lap and chest.

Alexander’s gold-green eyes were focused on her face, pointedly not looking at her naked body. There was something old-fashioned about it—chivalrous. He wouldn’t look at her nakedness now that the scene was over.

“Let me hold you.”

Alena’s heart lurched in her chest, and her head shot up. She stared at him, unable to think past the knot of feelings that seemed to have scrambled her brain.

“If you would prefer not?” One brow went up, but she thought there was a bit of uncertainty in his eyes.

“I’d like that.” It wasn’t a lie.

Tentatively, Alena crawled onto his lap, twisting so that she minimized her ass’s contact with his hard legs. Her

forehead fit perfectly against the side of his neck.

He wrapped the edges of the towel over her, enfolding her while his body heat warmed her side. She could feel his heartbeat in his neck where their skin touched. His heart was beating fast.

Because of her? Because he was holding her?

“I didn’t think you’d be a cuddler,” she murmured.

“Not always.”

“Uh oh, you’re reverting.”

“To?”

“The quiet man. You talked to me during the scene, why not now?”

He inhaled, his chest rising and lifting her with it, then blew out a long, slow breath. “You were quiet towards the end. I think that is not your natural state.”

Alena huffed out a laugh. “No, it’s not. I wonder which one is the real us? Us now, or us in the middle of a scene?”

She used the term “us” deliberately, a psychological trick that would cause him to think of them together.

And she hated herself for the manipulation, however small it might be.

Get over it, you fool.

“You need water.” Alexander cracked the cap of a water bottle and offered it. She thrust one arm out from under the covering and took it. The moment it touched her lips she realized she was parched, and downed half of the large bottle in a matter of minutes.

He accepted the half empty bottle, but instead of capping it, he tipped it, pouring a bit of water onto a washcloth she hadn’t noticed.

“Give me your hand.”

Alexander wrapped his fingers around hers and with the other hand brought the damp towel to her wrist, gently wiping

the flesh that had gotten sweaty from the cuffs.

Damn it, he was being so tender. Emotion tightened her throat as a slimy, sick feeling pooled in her stomach.

He carefully wiped the damp cloth over her palm and fingers, all the while cradling her elbow with his other hand.

The tender care made her throat tight with emotion. How could she manipulate him, lie to him, after he'd so tenderly cared for her?

He's just a good Dom. Good Doms perform aftercare. That's all this is.

Maybe when he wasn't touching her, she'd be able to believe those words. She'd have to, because one way or another she was going to get what she needed from him.

"It's been a long time since a scene, a partner, made me feel this good," she murmured, and this at least, was true.

"Good?" He laughed softly, and it made his chest rumble against her back.

"Perverse thing that I am, I do consider sitting here on your lap with my ass on fire 'good'."

"When was the last time?"

"Too long ago, apparently." Alena shifted, cuddling tighter against him. "But now...you woke the dragon."

"Pardon?"

She sat up, pressing both hands against his chest as she twisted, bringing them face to face, so close their noses almost touched. "You go a long time without something—good sex, good wine, good food. You get used to it. Then you have it again, and that need that had fallen asleep—the dragon—wakes up. That's when you realize you can't have just one nice meal, one excellent bottle of wine, one night..." Alena let the word trail off and looked away.

"One night that reminds you why you need this," he said softly. "And all it does is make you desperate for more."

“Yes, the dragon is insatiable.” She’d hoped he’d laugh, but he remained serious.

“Tomorrow is the last night.”

“Do we...I mean since we...” Alena didn’t have to feign nervousness. She gave Alexander a moment to save her from her own stammering, but he, predictably if disappointingly, was silent.

“Do you want to scene with me again tomorrow night?” Her question hung in the air, heavy and expectant.

Alexander’s lips quirked and he nodded.

“And I want to amend my list.”

He frowned. “You shouldn’t decide now.”

“I know what I want, Alexander.” She used his name deliberately, to remind both of them that the scene was over.

“You do. You chased me.” He sounded bemused.

“Next time, don’t run away.”

Alexander’s gaze moved over her face with a seriousness that was at odds with the playful note she was trying to strike.

“We should not plan for tomorrow. I have undue influence in this moment.”

“I asked you to scene, not the other way around.”

“You are naked in my lap.”

“I’m not naked. I’m wearing this fancy towel.”

He sighed, and his lips twisted as if he were struggling with something. “You plan to amend your list to include sexual elements?”

“Yes, because I’m pretty sure the first thing each of us is going to do when we get back to our hotel rooms is masturbate.”

“And after you pleasure yourself, you might feel differently.”

“Or I’ll fantasize about what you’ll do to me and masturbate more.” Under her hip, she felt his cock twitch.

“I should not.” Alexander was holding himself so stiff and still that his arm and shoulder muscles were straining the fabric of his shirt.

“How about this?” She stroked his shoulder and arm, feeling the muscles slowly soften, his body going limp. “Tomorrow night, if I feel the same way, I’ll wear gray.”

“Gray?”

“They say life isn’t black and white, but I think it’s people who aren’t black and white. I know I’m not always on the side of the angels.”

“You confuse me,” he said softly.

“Is that a bad thing?”

“It’s a...” His face relaxed into a grin. “It’s a gray thing.”

She had him now. “What about you?” she asked. “You might change your mind about having me as a partner. How will I know? Do you have a gray bowtie?”

His lips quirked for a moment. Then his expression became serious once more. “I won’t change my mind.” He pinched her chin, tipping her face up ever so slightly. “Tomorrow night, you’re mine.”

CHAPTER 5

He wore all gray—steel gray slacks, and a dove-gray shirt. “May I?”

“Oh, I’m hoping you will.” Alena smiled at Alexander as he took a seat on the barstool beside hers.

She’d known he’d wear gray. Well, she’d been relatively certain. Eighty percent at least.

But as he sat, the knot in her stomach eased.

There was only a scattering of people here this early. Lillian, the club’s administrator, was moving briskly around the ballroom/dungeon. Alena had spoken with Lillian when she arrived and changed her checklist restrictions. It was one of the reasons she was so early. In fact, she’d been the first attendee.

“What are you hoping I’ll do?” Alexander’s voice had deepened.

And just like that, Alena’s body started to heat and soften. In the cold light of day she’d wondered if the chemistry between them was real, or if last night had been a fluke.

Now she knew that what was between them was all too real.

“What do you want to do?” she countered.

His brow arched. “Is that *carte blanche*?”

“And if it was?” Alena leaned toward him, the draped bodice of her silver dress gaping to show the tops of her

breasts.

“I would call you a fool.” His tone was serious, killing the playful banter.

Alena sat back in surprise. Needing a minute, she reached for her half-full champagne flute, waiting on the tall cocktail table.

There were four of these cocktail tables, and a few long dinner tables set up to facilitate attendees enjoying a meal. Once the event was in full swing, the food buffet and tables would be removed, while the bar remained open.

At just after eight, it was headed towards dinner time for many Europeans, though her granny would never have served dinner so scandalously late.

Thoughts of Grammaw and home made her shoulders tight. She didn't know what her grandmother would have thought about who she'd become. She would have been... puzzled, Alena decided.

Puzzled but hopefully pleased because Alena had found her place in the world, a way to thrive, and that would have been the most important fact to the woman who raised her.

Alena turned to look at the bar, wanting a minute to school her features. Now that Alexander was here, she needed to bottle up and put aside the contradictory feelings she'd been fighting all day.

“I'll go.” Alexander stood, turning away from her.

Alena realized she'd been quiet long enough that he thought she'd taken umbrage at being called a fool. She lunged and grabbed the back of his pants.

Alexander made a noise that might have been called a “yelp” of surprise and looked over his shoulder at her.

“Are you going to make me chase you again?” she asked.

“I scared you.”

“You didn't.”

“Then you are a fool. Because you should be scared.”

Alena tugged on his pants. “What’s wrong, Alexander? Sit down and talk to me.”

He frowned, looking at her as if she were crazy. “You’re...”

“Amazing?” Alena released his pants and arched a brow. “I can’t wait to hear how this sentence is going to end. I assume you wouldn’t be so rude as to call me a fool for the third time.”

Alexander’s frown disappeared as he huffed out a laugh. “You’re surprising.”

“Surprising good, or surprising bad?” Alena asked with narrowed eyes. She wasn’t actually upset. Right now her predominant emotions were fading panic and relief that he hadn’t walked away.

Because you need him for the job. The inner voice was cold and sneering.

Because you want him to top you and fuck you. The second voice was warmer, the voice of her need, her inner submissive.

Alexander slid back onto the stool and swiveled to face her. He braced one foot on the rung of her stool, his thigh brushing hers. Alena grabbed her glass, but before she could take a sip, he plucked the flute from her hand.

“First you insult me, and now you take my drink?”

“I need to know your consent is uninfluenced.” He set her glass down on the table.

“I was sober as a judge when I talked to Lillian.”

“Sober as a judge...” He smiled a little as he tried out the colloquialism.

“Alexander, what’s wrong? We clearly want to play together tonight.” She gestured between his gray clothes and her own silver dress, which was actually bespoke sleepwear. If she slipped off the spaghetti straps, the whole thing would slither to the floor.

“You are so...”

“Outspoken?”

He shook his head. “Honest.”

Oh, that hurt to hear.

“I tell plenty of lies. We all do.”

“Not when you submit to me.” It was an order, and a warning.

“I won’t lie to you in a scene.” Carefully worded, that was a promise she could keep.

Before and after? Well, that was another kettle of fish. Now, and again after the scene, during the aftercare, was when she needed to work him, build a relationship that she could leverage to manipulate him.

She took a sip of her champagne, faux glaring at him to ensure he didn’t attempt to snatch her glass again.

Alexander held up a hand and one of the bartenders came out from behind the bar to take his order.

Once he was done, she tried again.

“Are you going to tell me what’s wrong?” The perverse part of it was that she really wanted to know, wanted to understand what was going on in his head. That had nothing to do with the job, and everything to do with their chemistry.

“I didn’t say anything was wrong.”

“Of course you didn’t say it.” Alena waved one hand in the air. “You don’t talk. But I can read your body language, just like you read mine last night.”

“You think you know me?” There was bite to his words, and a bit of bitterness.

“No, I don’t know you.” Lie. “But I know that the man who topped me last night wasn’t this angry, so something happened, and I want to know what.”

“And if I told you?”

“Then I would...do absolutely nothing but listen.”

He laughed, and finally the tension in his shoulders relaxed. A second later the bartender arrived with his drink, a glass of red, which he gently tapped to her flute.

They sipped in companionable silence, though it took a good measure of self-control to keep from leaning towards him like a moth to flame.

“I couldn’t stop thinking about you today.” Alexander’s low statement caught her by surprise.

Alena lowered her glass, which she’d had halfway to her mouth. “I’m not ashamed to admit that I spent most of my day alternately remembering and fantasizing.”

Alexander swiveled to face her, once again bracing a foot on the rung of her stool.

Alena turned too, the outside of her thigh pressed to the inside of his.

They regarded one another, two strangers with a night of shared intimacy to bind them, the specter of what they would share tonight looming over them.

“The more I thought about you, the...harder...my fantasies got.” Alexander took a sip of wine. “No, not harder...darker.” His gaze met hers. “More brutal.”

Alena shivered, then reached for her glass, trying to cover up how much his words affected her.

“Alena, you should not submit to me.”

“Will you ignore my limits? My safeword?”

“No. But you’ve already said you changed those limits. That’s dangerous.”

“I changed them to add in sexual contact. Clearly you and I are attracted to one another, which doesn’t always happen between play partners.”

“True.” He ran his hand through his hair, brow furrowed.

Alena slid off her stool, standing so her hip was in contact with his thigh, her pelvis almost touching his stool.

“Alexander, I’m not afraid of you.”

“You should be.”

“Then you should be afraid of me. too.”

He raised his other foot, bracing it so she was caged between his legs. “I should?”

“Yes.”

He had no idea how true that was. She reached up and pulled the silver clip from her hair, letting it spill over her shoulders. “After all, I’m the one who keeps hunting you down.”

“True.” His gaze roamed over her head and shoulders, lingering on her breasts for a moment.

“Today when I was touching myself, I was thinking about you.” Alena leaned in enough that her breasts brushed his chest and she was able to whisper in his ear. “Did you think about me while you stroked your cock?”

Alexander growled—an alarming, sexy sound—and grabbed her by the shoulders, forcing her back.

Had she gone too far? Her thoughts scrambled as she tried to figure out how to backtrack. She shouldn’t have been so aggressive. He liked submissive women, and while he’d seemed to respond well to her pursuing him last night, maybe —

Alexander hooked his fingers under the straps of her dress and yanked them off her shoulders.

Alena gasped, instinctively raising her hands to press the bodice to her chest, halting its descent.

“Drop your arms.” It wasn’t a request, but a command.

Again she shivered, even as she dropped her arms to her sides.

The satin slithered down her body, the friction hardening her nipples. As she stood trapped between his legs, naked except for a red-satin g-string, she had a sudden foreboding that what happened tonight would change her.

Alexander relaxed even more, as if the sight of her submissively naked calmed him.

“Your safeword.”

“Sherman.”

He looked around the dungeon, caught Lillian’s attention, and nodded to her. She inclined her head and hustled out.

“We’re playing now?” Alena asked softly.

“Not officially. Not until I have your list.”

“Then I’m going to keep talking to you. Keep asking you what’s wrong. Why you think I should be scared and run away.”

He stroked her stomach with the back of his fingers. “If you ran, I would chase you.” It sound like a threat.

“I chased you,” she reminded him.

“True. But if you ran from me, when I caught you I would punish you.”

The mention of punishment made her breath catch.

“You should be afraid, because every time I find myself distracted by thoughts of you, my plans become harsher.”

Alena felt a stirring of true fear, the words more impactful while she was mostly naked and trapped by his legs. He was larger than her, stronger than her. In a pure physical contest, she would lose.

“Scared?”

“Should I be?” she countered.

Alexander reached out and cupped her neck, running his thumb up and down her throat, from the notch where collarbones met sternum, to the underside of her jaw.

“If you knew the things I’d imagined, you would be.”

“Tell me what you imagined.”

His thumb shifted, pressing against the pulse point on the right side of her neck.

“If I do, you’ll run.”

“I won’t. And even if I did, you’d chase me.”

“Don’t run, then. Use your safeword. Walk away.”

“Who are you trying to scare, Alexander? Me? Or yourself?”

“Scare myself?”

“Do you scare yourself?”

He frowned, his thumb once more idly running up and down the front of her neck. “Perhaps I do. No man wants to admit they’re the beast rather than the knight.”

The mention of “knight” made her wince internally, since she’d dubbed him the black knight in the game she was currently playing.

She met men who reveled in being “the beast.” She’d suffered at their hands.

Alexander wasn’t like them. “You are most definitely a knight.”

“I’m not.”

“You are. Your armor is tarnished, and you might ignore the rules of courtly love...” Alena put her palms on his chest, the first time she’d dared to touch him like this, though she’d been snuggled against him last night in aftercare.

Alexander stared at her with an expression she couldn’t quite decipher. It was both remote and hopeful. As if he were simultaneously distancing himself from what she was saying, while also hanging on each word.

“And when you rescue the virgin princess...” Alena smiled “You drop her off at the nearest castle.”

Alexander’s expression relaxed into a grin. “I have no use for virgins.”

His hand slid from her neck, down her chest, palm rubbing over her right nipple. She arched into the touch, offering herself.

He palmed her breast, kneading her flesh. “And who are you in this story?” There was no hesitation in his touch.

“Maybe I’m the local bawdy tavern wench?”

“No. You are too elegant.”

“Maybe I’m—” She choked to a stop as he gently pinched her nipple, rolling it ever so slightly.

“Master Alexander.” Lillian placed a small sheaf of papers on the table beside their glasses.

“Thank you, Lillian.” Alexander turned to look at the other woman while continuing to roll and tug Alena’s nipple.

“Alena.” Lillian inclined her head Alena’s direction.

“Lill—” Alena broke off with a yelp as Alexander pinched hard and pulled.

Her nipple slipped from between the vise of his fingers and Alena’s yelp turned to a moan.

Alexander picked up her new papers and started to read. Alena’s fingers trembled as she reached for her champagne glass, finishing it off as he reviewed the updates she’d made.

“You’ve allowed penetration with both toys and my fingers, but no sex. With sex being defined as my cock penetrating either your ass or pussy.” Alexander set down the papers and looked at her.

“I thought about removing all the restrictions,” she said softly. “But I...”

I can't, because no matter how much I tell myself that our scening together, my submitting to you, is entirely separate from my using you for the job, even my powers of compartmentalization aren't that strong.

Fucking him would cross a line, even for her. But she wanted his hand on her, in her. Wanted him to fuck her with his fingers and a dildo, wanted him to plug her ass and put a gag in her mouth.

“Sex, at least by your current definition, does not include my cock in your mouth.”

She smiled. “No, it doesn’t.”

She expected him to grin, but he remained serious. “Last chance.”

Alena reached out to cup his face. She didn’t think about it, just did it. “I’m not running, Alexander. Whatever it is, I can handle it.”

His eyes widened, then closed. He turned his head into her, his breath hot against the inside of her wrist.

Alena’s heart clenched. What was she doing? She’d never given up on a job before. She’d lost a game or two in the past, but not because she forfeited.

“Alexander, I…”

One night with this man, a hint of vulnerability mixed with the aggressive dominance and a *souçon* of danger, shouldn’t be enough to make her abandon a plan months in the making.

But when he leaned into her touch, she knew she couldn’t go forward. Couldn’t lie to him, use him. She’d have to back out, to find another way.

She took a breath, feeling sick at what she was about to do. “Alexander, there’s—”

“That’s the third time you’ve used my name.” Alexander’s eyes opened, and there was nothing soft or vulnerable in his gaze. The predator was awake, looking out at her through Alexander’s green and gold eyes.

He grabbed her wrist, pulling her hand away from his face. “We’ll start with a punishment.”

“We haven’t started,” Alena stammered out, her planned confession short-circuited by the possibility of punishment.

“I said not until I got your papers.” Alexander’s face was a stern mask, but there was a hint of sadistic pleasure in the way the corners of his eyes crinkled. “When Lillian set them down, we began.”

“Well, that’s just not fair,” Alena murmured. “Semantics.”

“I warned you to run.” Alexander stood, not letting go of her wrist. “Now it’s too late.”

It’s not too late. You have your safeword, and you’re not going to have sex with him, at least not in the most heterosexual traditional sense. It’s not too late.

But when Alexander pulled her away from the table, her dress forgotten on the floor, Alena knew that wasn’t true.

It was too late.

But too late for what?

CHAPTER 6

Alexander guided her to a spot in the dungeon equidistant between a kneeler and a large, rustic platform with a tall post jutting up from the center.

Alena was breathing fast with apprehension, and her sex was wet with anticipation.

Alexander stopped and turned to her, ran the back of one finger from her bellybutton up between her breasts then higher, tracing her neck up to her chin and finally tipping her face up.

She stared into his eyes, waiting for his command, needing the scene to start so she could fall into that place of mental peace he'd brought her to last night.

Alexander smiled, and it was a wicked expression.

Alena's blood heated, her body relaxing, accepting. *Use me. Hurt me the way I need.*

Alexander dropped his hand, then turned and walked away.

"Oh, that's just mean," Alena called out.

Alexander looked at her over his shoulder, one brow raised. The look said "wait or else". Then he was gone, out the doors of the ballroom.

Leaving her naked except for some very tiny underwear, standing in the middle of a BDSM dungeon feeling a confusing mix of apprehension and arousal.

Trying to distract herself, Alena examined the various scene spaces. Though the dungeon theme was a bit on the nose, the equipment was high quality. The wood structures, from the St. Andrew's crosses to the sawhorse benches, angled kneelers, and bondage chairs, were made of solid planks of wood and padded with real leather. Everything smelled slightly of disinfectant, indicating that the staff had disinfected all equipment before the final night of the event began.

Alena ran her fingers along the angled top of the kneeler beside her. Her nipples tightened as she pictured herself there, knees on padded lower rungs, torso draped over the angled top, her ass upthrust and vulnerable.

Both the kneeler and platform and whipping post were good options for punishment.

Alena exhaled slowly, and inched away so she wouldn't be tempted to touch the kneeler again, turning her attention to the whipping post and platform. Several sets of circular metal tie-off rings were bolted to the wood at various heights. The platform base was made of heavy dark wood planks. It could easily serve as a town square whipping post or the mast of a pirate ship.

Did Alexander ever indulge in role-play? While he didn't seem like the type, he'd surprised her several times.

But looking at the platform raised a more mundane issue.

Tonight she'd gone barefoot, even though standing for her punishment last night meant she'd woken up with her knee aching and stiff. If Alexander wanted her standing for the whole night she might have to wear her insole-equipped flats.

She hadn't lied about an injury making heels for any length of time impossible, but hadn't mentioned that going barefoot was difficult. Admitting that might lead to questions she didn't want to answer. If she had to, she'd tell him she had a knee replacement, and neglect to include information on exactly how she'd been injured.

The horrible parts of her childhood weren't something she discussed.

Though if she did tell Alexander, she was somehow sure he'd understand. He'd be quiet but attentive and let her get it all out. Maybe he'd take her in his arms like he had last night. Wrap her up and hold her.

Lost in her thoughts, she didn't register the man's approach until he spoke.

“*Guten Abend gnädige Frau.*” The stranger extended his hand, offering her a fresh glass of champagne.

Alena jerked her attention into the present, and away from a ridiculous fantasy in which she spilled her deepest secrets to Alexander.

The stranger was a good looking man with dark blond hair and bright blue eyes. His coloring, plus a height that put him a full head taller than her, made it a good bet he was Scandinavian, and the slight accent when he spoke confirmed it.

One of the club wait staff—an Asian man with incredible upper body physique, shown off by his attire of only brown leather pants—stood off to the side, holding a tray with a tumbler of what looked like whiskey.

“Good evening,” she replied in German, but didn't take the proffered glass.

“American?” His lips curved up into a devastating smile.

“Yes,” she replied in English. “And my German is only passable at best.”

“As is mine.” He replied in English while turning to place the champagne back on the tray. That done, he offered her his hand, palm up, not side-on as if for a handshake.

She considered her options and grabbed his hand firmly. She turned what would have been a courtly bow and hand kiss into a business-like shake.

His grin widened. “I'm Rolf.”

“Alena.”

He released her hand a little more slowly than would have been acceptable if this were a business setting, and didn't seem irritated at having been thwarted.

She started to cross her arms, then stopped, not wanting to telegraph discomfort or embarrassment. She wasn't ashamed of her body, and enjoyed nude beaches whenever her travels took her to the Caribbean or Jamaica.

But being one naked woman amid of throng of nudists was very different than being ordered to wait naked in the middle of a ballroom. Especially when, this early in the night, most people had something on.

Why the hell was Alexander taking so long?

"It is unfortunate that we meet now, on the last night." Rolf's smile had just a hint of wickedness to it. That smile might have lulled her into thinking he was harmless, if not for the cunning she saw lurking in his sky-blue eyes.

"I agree, and am flattered, but I'm waiting for someone." She gestured to her own nearly naked body as if to point out that she wasn't wandering around in the nude of her own volition.

"I saw, but thought perhaps you two had parted ways." His gaze dipped briefly to her bare throat, and there was the hint of a question in his words.

She wasn't wearing a collar and was alone, so his inquiries were valid.

"I'm waiting for him to return." She smiled politely and wondered if Alexander had sent Rolf over as some sort of test. It didn't seem like something Alexander would do.

How would you know? You know his net worth, what kind of wine he likes, and which bank he prefers to use for hiding large chunks of his wealth from various governments. Last night proved that what you know about Alexander the CEO, doesn't mean you know Alexander the Dom.

"Ah, then there's still a chance for me," Rolf said. "Next month."

By the time next month's Orchid Club event took place, Alena Moore would have quietly relinquished her membership. The Moore name was one she used often, more of an alternate identity than a false one, but she would avoid it for a while, depending on how the rest of the job went.

And doing that meant she'd never see Alexander again.

Damn it, and damn him for walking away, giving her time to think.

"It would certainly be a privilege." Alena smiled and gave Rolf a little wink, though inside she was tying herself in knots.

She'd hoped to be done with this internal war. Hoped that once the scene started, there wouldn't be time or space for her to worry about anything except submitting to him.

Rolf plucked his beverage from the tray.

"Skoal," Rolf said, raising his glass.

Alena glanced at the champagne she'd refused. She wanted to take the glass and swallow those sweet bubbles.

No, what she wanted was a shot of something stronger, something that would give her a buzz, making it easier to ignore the things she didn't want to think about.

Rolf caught her looking and grabbed the glass, extending it to her once again.

She accepted the flute, murmuring "Skoal" and nodding to Rolf before taking a sip.

She only barely managed not to shotgun the two hundred dollar a glass beverage like a heathen.

To distract herself, she looked around again, searching for Alexander. How long had Alexander been gone? It felt like an hour. It had probably been no more than fifteen minutes, but going to get his kit—which was what she assumed he'd left for—wouldn't take more than ten minutes.

No sign of Alexander.

There were more people here now—the club had started to fill up. She glanced at Rolf, who was still standing near her,

though he wasn't being threatening. He seemed almost... protective?

Rolf's attention was on a set of two couples gathered around a cocktail table. He raised his glass and nodded to someone in the group of four. "Solomon."

A dark-haired man whose most noticeable feature was a scar on one cheek, raised his glass. The lovely woman at his side turned too, nodding at Rolf. She wore an intricate, inlaid metal collar.

The other couple also glanced over. The woman had Latin coloring and features, and wore a multi-strand collar, while the man at her side, who had equally dark hair and looked Middle Eastern, projected an easy air of command that indicated status and wealth.

They exchanged nods with Rolf, and Alena suddenly felt awkward and out of her depth.

Looking at the other women, both clearly submissives given their collars, made her feel less-than. Less worthy, less beautiful. They wore lingerie—a classic corset and bandage skirt for Solomon-with-a-scar's companion.

The body con little-black-dress the other woman wore was unremarkable at first glance. With the second look, the details were apparent—the dress was made entirely of leather and elastic straps carefully laid and woven together. Gold ring accents and matching leather cuffs completed the look. Alena would have bet money that dress was a Bordelle, which meant it had cost well over a thousand dollars.

Alena's discarded silver gown, which she'd tailored herself—"bespoke" a far more elegant while also technically accurate term than "homemade"—now seemed cheap.

Alena's stomach clenched. She hated feeling poor. Hated feeling like an imposter even more.

She was better than that. Had made herself better than that. If she wanted thousand-dollar lingerie she could purchase it. The only reason she'd opted to make her own was because she'd know there was a strong possibility that she would end

up losing it, and brand names and other information on clothing tags could be tracked.

“You are new to the club, I believe?” Rolf’s words knocked her out of the downward mental spiral. “Let me introduce you to a few people.” Rolf gestured with his glass.

“No.” Alexander’s voice was cool and clipped.

The fine hair on her arms and the back of her neck stood on end as his warm hand settled on the small of her back. All the feelings of not-belonging, of being unworthy, faded the minute he touched her.

Stupid, Magdalena. Very stupid.

Rolf’s attention shifted from her to Alexander and back. Alexander’s hand on her naked body grounded her in the moment, the past and future both muted. She could feel the tension between them and Alena indulged in a brief fantasy of them fighting over her.

It was just fantasy, of course. She wasn’t a prize to be won. But she also wouldn’t object to seeing the men stripped down, oiled up, and wrestling.

The fact that she hadn’t yet seen Alexander naked was clearly messing with her mind.

Alena shifted ever so slightly, just enough so that her arm and shoulder brushed against Alexander.

He’d been able to read her body language last night. Would he understand this message as well?

I choose you. I want you.

Her movements, small though they had been, broke the men’s stalemate. Rolf glanced at her and smiled. “A pleasure, Alena. Until next time.”

“No,” her quiet man said again.

“No?” Rolf asked.

“No.” Alexander plucked the glass from her hand and passed it to the server, who nodded and finally walked away.

Rolf murmured, “We will see.”

Alexander watched Rolf walk away, then to her surprise, Alexander exchanged nods with Solomon.

Alena spun to face Alexander, prepared to set him straight if he accused her of soliciting the other Dom’s attention.

But when she looked at him, Alena’s mind went blank and her libido started howling with approval.

Alexander hadn’t just gotten his kit. He’d changed clothes.

Now he wore Dom leathers. He’d gone from handsome corporate shark to dangerously sexy biker Dom.

The button down shirt had been replaced by a plain gray t-shirt that hugged his biceps, shoulders, and pectorals, showing off the muscles she’d felt, but not seen, last night.

As sexy as the shirt was, his leather pants were the real star of the outfit.

“Dom leathers.” Alena reached out, but paused. “May I, Sir?”

Alexander raised one eyebrow but nodded. Alena ran a single finger from the waistband down his muscled thigh. He fidgeted, crossing his arms, and she swore she could see his cock twitch under the lace-up fly.

When she reversed course, trailing her finger up his tense thigh, Alexander grabbed her wrist, lifting her hand away.

“It’s time for your punishment.”

Alena hid a smile. “Yes, Sir.”

CHAPTER 7

“Up,” Alexander tapped one finger on the spanking bench. “Get in position.”

Alena stepped in close, hesitating for just a moment. This piece of equipment was better than the post as far as limiting the strain to her leg.

But it meant that her ass was most definitely getting spanked again, and she was still a little sore.

The spanking bench was well made, with the touches and details only someone familiar with the lifestyle would have bothered with, such as the way the torso support was angled, raising the ass slightly higher than the head.

The padded rails for the knees were spaced nearly half a meter apart. This was irrefutably a piece that not only allowed a sub to be strapped down, ass raised and perfectly positioned for punishment, but also kept her legs spread, her pussy exposed and accessible.

If she hadn't amended her list, she doubted he'd have selected this particular piece, which gave him easy access to both sex and ass.

She couldn't turn back now, even though apprehension and anticipation were making her stomach knot.

Alena slowly exhaled, then grabbed onto the angled top and put her right shin and knee on one padded knee piece. Shifting her weight to the right, she lifted her left leg, settling that knee in place, her legs spread wide.

As she got into position, the g-string shifted, drawing tight between her cheeks, rubbing her asshole. Her pussy lips spread along with her knees, and she was fairly certain that once she lay forward she'd be putting on a very lewd display—her labia spread on either side of the thong.

She was trying to decide if she should quickly adjust the g-string, as Alexander stepped forward to adjust the height of the torso support so it hit her just below crotch level.

He stood, and without glancing at her, said, “Down.”

Alena stared at him. He had not just—

Alexander turned to her, eyes narrowed. His fingers slid gently into her hair. Alena opened her mouth to explain that she would not respond to one-word commands.

Before she could speak, his fingers curled into a hard fist. She hissed, eyes squeezed tight as her scalp tingled with pain.

“Alena, obey.”

The tone of command was undeniable, but it didn't change her mind.

She reached up and back, grabbing his hand, pressing it against her head so that she wouldn't rip her own hair out at the roots as she turned to glare at him. “I'm a submissive, not a dog.”

“As a submissive, I expect you to be obedient.”

“Obedient? That's a term you use for an animal.”

“English is not my first, or second, language. I am not using the colloquial meanings of words.”

He was right. She couldn't assume he would know that dogs went to obedience school, or that he'd purposefully used the same commands dog owners did as deliberate dehumanization. However, even if that hadn't been his intent, it had those connotations for her.

There were people who enjoyed the kink of being treated like animals. She wasn't one of them.

“Saying up, down, calling me obedient... you might not have meant it that way, but it made me feel like an animal.”

Alexander examined her face, then his grip on her hair loosened. “You object to one-word commands, and any hint of puppy play.”

Alena looked at him out of the corner of her eye. “Very much so.”

He released her hair but didn't step back. He was close enough that she could feel the smooth leather of his pants against the side of her calf.

“I prefer to be...succinct.”

“My quiet man.” Before she thought better of it, Alena reached out and laid her hand on his cheek.

Alexander pressed his hand over hers, his eyes sliding closed for a moment.

And once again her heart lurched at the vulnerability she sensed in him.

Alena's heart pounded in her chest, and her stomach fluttered, and once again the urge to pull back, to abandon the lies and manipulations pressed on her from within.

She couldn't go on pretending she could have her cake and eat it too. No matter what mental hurdles she jumped, or Gordian justifications she came up with, there was no way to separate their relationship as sub and Dom from their relationship as investigator and target.

“Alexander—”

His eyes opened, and once more there was something in them, a darkness so wild it was almost feral. Those eyes were completely at odds with the tender way he held her hand against his face.

The rapacious look in his eyes made her wonder if she should have let him walk away earlier. Wondered if his talk of the dark, hard things he wanted to do to her was more literal than figurative.

Unsure what to do—which was an unfamiliar and uncomfortable feeling—Alena lowered her hand from his cheek.

For a moment they were still, as if frozen in time.

Alexander's hand shot out, grabbing not her hair but the back of her neck.

She gasped as he applied pressure and forced her upper body down.

Her breasts hit the leather-covered torso support. A second later her nose touched, and she turned her head to the side, her cheek mashed against the leather as he kept applying pressure—not a dangerous amount, but enough to make her brutally aware of how easy it would be for him to truly harm her.

The thought made her tremble, and it wasn't all from fear.

“Sir...”

“Quiet.” He released her neck and grabbed a wrist.

Alexander forced her right arm down so it dangled, then guided her fingers to a handle jutting out from one of the legs. It was cool against her palm, and had molded finger grips, the whole thing reminding her of the stationary handles on leg machines at the gym.

With her hand in place, Alexander crouched. Cheek resting on the leather, her gaze was restricted, and she could only see the top of his bent head. But she could feel what he was doing.

Cool, smooth strapping—it felt like nylon tie-down straps—was looped around her wrist.

He raised his head and glanced at her, brow raised. “I told you to be quiet. One word. Do you want to object?”

“Not when you're looking at me like that.”

“Like what?” He finished with her right wrist, which was now securely bound. Her elbows were slightly bent, meaning no stress and strain on her shoulder like there had been last night.

She'd traded physical comfort for more dangerous bondage.

His choice to use strapping rather than cuffs or safety restraints meant there was no quick release.

No easy getaway.

"Like what, Alena?" he asked again.

"Like the wolf."

"The wolf?"

"The one who eats Little Red Riding Hood."

Alexander stood and circled around to her other side. She reached down, groping until she was able to find and grab the handle. A participant in her own captivity.

He crouched and started to bind her left wrist.

"Have you heard that fairytale?" she asked, aware that she was nervously filling the silence, when she should have been practicing deep breathing and relaxing pre-punishment.

Alexander snorted out a laugh. "*Meine liebe, die Brüder Grimm waren Deutsche.*"

"Right, of course. Wait, I thought you were Austrian?"

Alexander paused, and for a horrible moment she couldn't remember what he'd said when they first met. Had he mentioned being from Austria, or was that a piece of information she'd brought in with her?

"My family has roots all over this part of Europe." He finished binding her left wrist. "But that's not what I want to think about right now."

"What do you want to think about, Sir?"

He leaned in and nipped her shoulder, then ran his mouth along her side, over her ribs to her waist in a hot, open-mouthed kiss.

When he sank his teeth into her hip, Alena pressed her forehead against the leather and breathed through the sharp ache.

Straps across her calves and ankles bound her legs in place, and the final restraint went across her waist.

Alena could still move her head, though turning to look back at him made her neck and shoulder muscles pinch and protest. Rather than give herself a muscle cramp, she laid her cheek down and closed her eyes.

Warm, firm hands ran up the back of her parted thighs to her butt. He kneaded her ass, pulling the cheeks apart as he did.

Alena shivered and tried to arch her back, raise her ass to tempt him into using her there.

Her body barely moved. She was strapped down tight, truly helpless.

He released her butt, the warmth of his hands disappearing. She heard him step away but could tell from the sound of his footsteps he hadn't gone far.

“What were they?” she asked without opening her eyes. “The things you were thinking of doing to me. The things that were so...harsh...you thought you should walk away?”

“Open your eyes.”

Alena blinked, looking at him through a veil of her hair, which had fallen over her face. She had no way to brush it back, but she could still see enough to recognize the paddle in his hand.

Her whole body went cold. “That’s heavy impact.”

“It can be.”

“That’s not on my list.”

“We discussed this last night. Your distinction between heavy and light impact implements is imprecise.” Alexander reached out and brushed her hair off her face.

All that did was give her a clear view of what he was holding.

The paddle was long and rectangular. If they were in the US, she’d call it a fraternity paddle.

“I don’t have to justify my limits to you.” The floaty submissive feeling she’d just started to connect with was gone, replaced by sharp fear and panicky irritation. “And you do have to respect them.”

“I respect them.”

“Then put the paddle away.” Her words were authoritative and precise. Ridiculous given her current position.

“Are you afraid of the pain of heavy impact play?”

“Of course I’m afraid of pain. That’s normal. We talked about this last night.”

Why was he retreading ground they’d already covered?

Alexander stared down at her, dark and merciless.

Safeword. Safeword out of this. You’ve already taken this too far.

He stepped closer to the spanking bench, towards her upraised ass, and lifted the paddle.

Alena closed her eyes and braced herself.

Smooth cool wood slid across her ass and down the back of her thighs, then reversed course, coming back to her ass.

Alena exhaled noisily. “You asshole.”

“Watch your tongue.” The paddle rubbed in circles over her butt. “You’re a masochist, but not an extreme one. Is pain what helps you feel submissive?”

Lecturing and psychoanalysis were both fairly common Dom pastimes. She hadn’t figured her quiet man was the type to deliberately poke at her limits in order to see how she reacted.

Alena took a breath, considered giving a playful, glib response, but as quickly as she’d considered it, dismissed it.

“There’s a point midway up the pain spectrum where it no longer feels like pain is just a tool that my top is using,” she said quietly.

“You place restrictions in order to stop the pain from rising above that threshold you’ve identified.”

“Yes.” It hadn’t been a question, but she responded anyway. Her throat felt tight almost as if she were about to cry, which was ridiculous.

“What happens if you are pushed past that point?”

“It hurts too much.”

“Physically?”

“Please don’t keep asking me these questions.”

“I thought you enjoyed questions, talking.”

The paddle kept up its smooth circular caress. It had been nothing but gentle, yet she couldn’t relax. Any minute now he could raise that paddle and strike her with it. It would hurt. And the hurt would bring up shit she did not want to think about right now.

“It’s not just the pain you’re afraid of, is it?”

“Stop analyzing me.”

“I’m not.” He paused the paddle’s caress and she tensed. “I’m learning my sub’s limits.”

He laid the paddle down along her spine, then crouched by her head. “What are you protecting with the limit?” He brushed a few errant strands of hair back behind her ear. “What are you really afraid of?”

Alena closed her eyes and lifted her head just enough that she could press her cheek against his palm. Funny, how they both kept repeating that hand-on-cheek caress.

Her throat was now so tight with emotion that she couldn’t talk.

“Alena.”

She shook her head, not ready to speak just yet.

He reached out, running his hand along her side to her hip. He massaged her butt cheek in his big hand, and arousal bloomed inside her.

She shifted a little, trying to press her ass more firmly into his touch.

He patted her butt, the taps not quite hard enough to be a spanking. “What scares you, Alena?”

“My past.” She opened her eyes, her voice under her control, the tears that had almost spilled now safely tucked away.

“Your past?” Alexander’s brow beetled. “You were abused by a Dom who didn’t respect your limits?”

“No, the abuse wasn’t from a Dom.”

Around the dungeon, other scenes were starting up and the ambient noise level had risen in sync.

But an invisible bubble had formed around them, creating an intimate moment, almost like pillow talk. It was easy to imagine that instead of laying on a spanking bench, she was laying in bed beside him.

“Who hurt you?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“It does.”

“Heavy impact implements. Beatings. They bring up stuff for me. Stuff that makes it impossible for me to stay in the scene.”

He was silent for a moment, then said, very softly, “Did you make them pay, the people who hurt you?”

“Do I seem like the kind of person who would waste time on revenge?”

“Yes. And it would not be a waste.”

Alena opened her mouth, but didn’t know how to reply.

Because he was right. She’d gotten her revenge, and no one else had ever asked about it. People who knew details of her past asked if she’d gotten therapy, rather than revenge.

The face she presented to the world was audacious and sophisticated. A woman who could handle anything with a

wink and laugh.

But Alexander saw through that mask.

He understood her.

And she was going to betray him.

CHAPTER 8

Alexander stood and plucked the paddle off her back. She watched him tuck it back into his kit, which only confirmed that he'd pulled it specifically to test her reaction. Clever jerk.

He dug around for several moments, during which she formulated options for witty comments, and ignored the guilt that was sucking at her soul.

He turned around, holding a silver butt plug.

Convoluting feelings about what she'd have to do in the coming days, about the dishonesty and deception, disappeared along with half-formed witty comments.

A single, clear emotion took over. Desire. Wicked, wonderful arousal.

Alexander walked to her ass, one hand running over her cheeks in the same pattern he'd used to stroke her with the paddle.

“When was the last time you were used anally?”

“Four months ago.”

“A plug?”

“No. Sex. Before joining the Orchid Club, I hadn't had the opportunity to sub in some time.”

“Because of your charity work?”

Alena lifted her head and tried to look back at him. “How did you...”

“I looked you up last night, after I had your list and before I returned to the room.”

“I thought we weren’t supposed to do that. Club rules.”

His lips twitched in a smirk. “Rules are for other people.”

“To be fair, you should let me go. I’ll go get my phone, google you, and then we can start again. What’s your last name?”

“Wagner. And I’m not letting you go.” Alexander started to lube up the plug.

Alena lay her head down, unable to maintain the twist needed to see him. She rested her forehead and nose on the leather and, knowing he couldn’t see her face, grimaced.

Her Alena Moore identity was good enough to hold up to a mid-level search, so there was no danger that what he could find about her on his phone would give him reason to suspect she wasn’t who she said she was.

If she gave him any reason to suspect her, a reason to run a deep check...

If that happened, the game was over.

Alexander slid one finger under her thong and tugged it to the side. “Relax.” Her thoughts had caused her to tense, and it didn’t help that his voice was once more hard and commanding, the moment of levity having melted away.

Two fingers and the thumb of one hand spread her open, exposing her rear entrance. Cold lube drizzled along the crack of her ass.

Alena breathed slowly, turning her head so she didn’t hyperventilate. The tip of the plug brushed against her anus and she tensed, then deliberately relaxed.

“Good,” Alexander said softly.

The praise made her feel soft and warm.

The plug’s tip brushed her once again, then held, poised right on the center of her ring of muscle.

It had been a long time since she'd been plugged, but she remembered how it went. She expected him to remind her to relax, or tell her to push back against the plug as if she were trying to expel it, which counterintuitively made it easier for the plug to enter.

Alexander did neither. Without warning the tip of the plug breached her anus, forcing the muscles to open.

Alena hissed out a breath at the sudden pinching sensation and unconsciously shifted forward, away from the plug. Not that she could move much, bound as she was.

Alexander shifted with her, allowing her not even a few centimeters of escape.

The plug pressed harder against her, opening her by force.

Alena hissed at the sweet discomfort. The pain made her tense and clench, which in turn made the plug's insertion hurt more.

More pressure and she felt it sink in deeper, her body helpless to keep the slick invader out.

Alexander said nothing. He didn't warn her or order her to relax. Didn't praise or encourage. He forced the plug into her ass, penetrating her hard and deep.

By the time the widest part was finally inside, her abused asshole able to tighten around the narrow neck of the plug, Alena was panting.

She stared into middle distance through a curtain of hair that blew out with each panting.

Her gaze focused on him, tracking as Alexander went to his kit, took out a small towel, and carefully cleaned his hand.

His unhurried manner, plus the brutal way he'd plugged her, left her feeling vaguely irritated and...

Aroused.

He tossed the towel down and turned to her. This time he didn't crouch, but he did brush her hair away from her face.

"Did that hurt?"

“Yes,” she hissed.

He bent low, his hand sliding from her hair down her back in a gentle but distinctly possessive touch.

His lips brushed her ear. “Good.”

Alena jerked in surprise, twisting her neck to meet his gaze.

“I will not beat you, but I will hurt you.”

Her shiver was pure arousal.

Alexander straightened, and Alena missed the intimacy of him whispering cruel, forbidden things in her ear.

“Your punishment.” Even as he spoke the last syllable, his palm cracked down on her left butt cheek. It was a sharp blow, the kind she mentally referred to as “bouncy” because he didn’t hold his hand against her ass once contact was made, but instead let his hand bounce up away from her. Because of this, it was a stinging strike, the kind that made her jump in reaction even when she knew it was coming.

Alexander started on her left, raining short bouncing spanks over every inch of her ass cheek, from thigh up to the top of her butt.

Her skin quickly began to feel hot and tender, as if she had a sunburn. He switched sides, a momentary relief that proved short-lived as her right cheek began to throb and burn.

She thought he might stop then.

He didn’t.

Now the spanking began to alternate between cheeks, continuing until the surface burning sank in, becoming a warm, deep ache that pulsed in time with her heartbeat. When he spanked a particularly sensitive spot, she cried out and wiggled, her ass clenching around the neck of the plug.

She’d grown so used to the sound of his hand slapping her ass that when he stopped, she was shocked by the loss of the familiar sound as much as by the lack of sweet sting.

In the sudden silence her heavy breathing—punctuated by the occasional soft moan of pain—seemed loud.

Alexander toyed with the plug, wiggling it side to side, applying gentle pressure. As he worked it, the sensitive nerve endings there were stimulated, turning the residual ache from the very thorough spanking into an agreeable, if not fully pleasurable, sensation.

He patted her butt twice. Signaling the end of the spanking?

She should have known he wasn't done with her.

Instead he grabbed the base of the plug, pulling on it enough to force her anus to expand. Then he held it there, her muscle clenching in a vain effort to either expel or draw in the plug once more.

But Alexander didn't allow that. He maintained control, shifting with her, only relenting, pushing the plug deep into her once more, after her ass and thigh muscles started to tremble.

Alena waited for him to say something, but her quiet man was precisely that—quiet.

He did offer her some comfort, some praise, though not with words. Instead he massaged her thighs and calves—his spanking hand noticeably hotter than the other.

As he rubbed and kneaded her thighs, his fingers passed within inches of her pussy. Each time they were close she held her breath, hoping he'd touch her. Hoping he give her some relief from the throbbing need.

He never did.

The massage ended, and she was now frustrated and antsy, disappointment that he hadn't played with her pussy making her restless.

When Alexander positioned himself on her right, she looked back in time to see him raise his left hand. Their gazes met, held, as he brought his palm down on her ass.

Alena wailed even as she submissively dropped her forehead against the leather.

Toying with the plug and the massage had just been an intermission in the most intense spanking of her life.

After the first cry, she stayed silent while he rained down quick, stinging blows. She still twitched when a particularly effective spank landed, but with her ass already throbbing, the new stings were much quicker to morph into heat.

And that sweet burn of pain became pure pleasure.

A Dom had once asked her if she'd enjoyed a spanking. Enjoy wasn't the right word, because it wasn't about enjoyment. It was about control and need.

She needed this, and he needed to do it. A symbiotic relationship that looked unhealthy to those who didn't understand it.

Time passed differently for her now that she was enshrined in the warmth of his control. When Alexander finished the spanking, she almost objected, almost asked for more.

He didn't stop touching her, and that was enough to keep her calm and quiet. His warm palm rubbed over her ass, down her thighs, then back up, over the curve of her butt to her lower back.

"Well done," an unfamiliar voice said.

Alena opened her eyes enough to see that they'd attracted an audience.

"Her skin shows the spanking well," another voice added.

Alexander ignored the onlookers as he went back to his kit. Alena watched him through heavy lidded eyes. She was both exhausted and hyperaware. Her pussy, barely covered by the g-string, felt swollen and hot. She wanted, no, needed, someone, something, to stimulate her clit the way someone dying in the desert needed water.

Yet the spanking had been so masterfully good that if he ended the scene now she wouldn't object, because though she

was still aroused, his utter dominance had satisfied the taboo need to be mastered that was the root of her submission.

Alexander pulled something out of his kit, and this time she wasn't able to see what it was before he was back at her ass.

She whimpered, terrified that he'd grabbed a flogger or crop, that he wasn't done abusing her ass.

She whimpered again, because she wanted him to keep going, wanted him to push her, punish her.

But it wasn't her ass he touched. He pulled on the g-string once more, running his finger down the inside of the narrow band of fabric until the back of his finger brushed her pussy.

Alena's eyes popped open and she held her breath. He rubbed her slick folds, which were parted due to her widespread thighs. His knuckle grazed her clit and that one brief touch was enough to make her cry out.

Alena started to fight the bondage, desperate to press back against him, to take his finger inside her. She wanted to rub her cunt against the laces of his leathers until she came from the friction.

"Do not move." His command was hard and sharp. When she didn't immediately still, he grabbed the base of the plug and jerked it out.

Alena choked on air as the widest part of the plug was brutally extracted, forcing her muscles wide, causing a shockwave of pain tinged in pleasure to shoot through her.

Alena, shivering in reaction to the discomfort, lay still, obediently waiting.

Obediently. This time the word, thought only though not said, didn't upset her.

Alexander once more stroked her clit, while also sliding the plug in once more, far more gently than he'd removed it.

Alena fought to hold still, but couldn't restrain the sigh of pleasure.

Something cool and smooth pressed against her labia. Alexander slid it down until it settled into the V where her labia met, and what would have been the top of her pussy were she on her back. Whatever it was, it was small enough to nestle against the hood and root of her clit.

Alexander carefully released her thong, which snapped back into place, helping to hold the unknown object in place.

“Don’t move.” Alexander took a knee and started undoing the straps around her wrists. “If you lose it, I won’t replace it.”

“Yes, Sir.”

When both arms were free, and the waist strap removed, he stood back.

Alena watched hungrily as he undid the laces on his leathers, his intentions clear.

It was a test. She had to keep the ball—she was fairly sure the thing between her labia was round, and about the size of a large marble—in her pussy, while also sucking his cock.

Alexander finished undoing the laces, and spread the placket to the side. His cock sprang out, long and hard. The tip glistened, proof he was as aroused as she was.

He rolled on a clear condom, then walked toward her, cock bobbing.

She wished he’d taken off the pants, so she could see his bare legs, his ass. As it was, she couldn’t even see his balls, and it was clear that though he might now be exposed in some small way, it wasn’t a sign of vulnerability as it was when a submissive stripped.

“Up.” He paused, cleared his throat. “Up on your elbows.”

The fact that he’d changed the command, that he’d both listened and actually heard her at the start of the scene, made her feel soft warm things that had no place in this lurid moment.

Alena carefully shifted her arms, elevating her shoulders and bracing her elbows on the leather. The ball in her pussy shifted, and she held her breath. Mercifully, it stayed in place.

Alexander's hand slid into her hair. Alena licked her lips, and when he pulled her head to his cock, she licked the tip, tasting the condom rather than his skin.

She lapped at the head and sides of his cock, since the condom wasn't lubricated. He held still for several minutes until, with a grunt, Alexander tightened his hold on her hair and pressed his cock against her lips.

She opened her mouth and leaned to the side, wanting to make it easier for him to fuck her face. Alexander slid his cock past her teeth; the head hit the roof of her mouth, but he didn't stop. She adjusted her position, and he slid in deeper, until his cock hit the back of her throat, triggering a gag.

He didn't let her go when she gagged. He held her head firmly but not cruelly, forcing her to work past the reflex.

Finally he withdrew. She sucked in air, licked her lips, and then opened her mouth, waiting for him to slide his cock in once more.

Alexander made a sound that was somewhere between a moan and a grunt. She looked up, and saw that his face was set in stark lines, his cheeks flushed. He was closer to the edge of his own limit than she'd thought, and the fact that she could do this to him was a pleasure in and of itself.

He didn't thrust into her waiting mouth, and instead took something from the small pocket of his t-shirt. It was a black rectangle the size of a business card, but several centimeters thick.

Alexander grinned down at her and pressed it.

The ball resting against her clit started to vibrate.

Alena sucked in air and held perfectly still as spikes of pleasure shot from her clit to every nerve ending in her body.

She looked up, panting, and Alexander said, "Orgasm if you can."

If? She could already feel her abdominal muscles tightening.

Alexander took a fresh hold of her hair and angled her face towards his cock. As he pressed the head into her mouth he said, “I’m turning it off when I come.”

Alena’s eyes widened as she realized the predicament, far more complex than just keeping the ball from dropping.

She had to pleasure him, keep the vibrator in place, and come before he did.

That meant it was in her best interests to give a bad blowjob, therefore prolonging her time with the vibrator. Not only was the idea of purposefully displeasing him abhorrent in her current deeply submissive state, she was sure if she did do something to prevent his orgasm, such as “accidentally” using teeth, she would no doubt earn another punishment.

Alexander thrust in, his cock filling her mouth, his hands cupping her head.

“You would run if you knew what I wanted to do to you,” he growled.

His cock hit the back of her throat, and this time she swallowed around the head. He groaned in response, which emboldened her to do it again.

“I would take you, keep you,” he panted. His words were rushed, spoken in lust and with none of the precision of his normal speaking patterns. “Naked, always ready to be used. Fucked. By me. By me, and by others. Anyone I wanted, they’d fuck you while I watched.”

He quiet man was no longer quiet.

The ball hummed against her clit, her ass clenched around the plug, and if she hadn’t had his cock in her mouth to focus on, she would have closed her eyes, gone limp, and let the orgasm take her.

“And if you displeased me I’d lock— I’d lock you in a cage. Put weights... I’d put weights on your nipples. Clit.”

It was now a race to see which would make her come first, the vibe or his words.

“I’d make you wear a collar. I’d solder it closed, so you could never take it off. While I worked, you’d sit on my desk, ass plugged, and I’d play with you, never letting you come.”

The vibe buzzed against her clit, his cock hit the back of her throat, while her imagination painted a lurid picture of sitting naked on his desk, clamps on her nipples, his fingers casually toying with her pussy while he worked.

The pieces came together, the stimulation both physical and mental.

Every muscle in her body drew tight and the orgasm rolled through her. Toes curled, ass clenching hard around the plug, the vibe relentless and precise.

Frantic with pleasure, she grabbed his cock with one hand, holding him still, but with the tip of his dick at the back of her throat. She swallowed hard, throat muscles tightening around the sensitive head as she did.

Alexander muttered guttural words she didn’t understand in German, and she felt his cock twitch as he released.

The vibrator, still buzzing, shocked her overstimulated body into a second blistering orgasm.

Alexander withdrew from her mouth, and the instant he was clear, Alena clenched her teeth and rode this second wave of now sharp-edged pleasure until she collapsed, her tensed muscles relaxing, her upper body once more flat against the bench, arms dangling.

The vibe didn’t stop—that lying bastard—and she whimpered, the stimulation too acute to be pleasure anymore. Her ass clenched rhythmically around the plug, an ever-present reminder that he had power over her.

Alexander’s hand stroked her hair back from her face, then he rubbed his thumb across her lips. Alena obediently opened her mouth.

He touched her bottom lip, then stepped back. A moment later his fingers were at her pussy. She cried out softly when he pressed the vibe harder against the root and hood of her clit.

The buzzing stopped, and then he removed the vibe. A moment later the straps around her legs were released. She was free of the bondage, but didn't move.

She could pretend it was due to exhaustion, and that wouldn't be a lie.

But the truth was that she remained still because he hadn't given her permission to move. In this moment she felt submissive in a way she never had before. A relaxed, exhausted peace akin to the endorphin high she'd gotten from running a marathon. She wasn't inexperienced in BDSM, but she realized now her past experiences weren't in the same league as what she'd just endured.

Alexander brought out something in her she hadn't realized needed to be free.

Why him? Why here?

Was it the environment of the Orchid Club that elevated the play, the clandestine nature and sense of abandon?

No. That didn't feel right. She knew it wouldn't have been this good, this intense if it were anyone but Alexander topping her.

That brought her back to why him. Maybe it was their chemistry, maybe it was because she was a more complex person now than she had been when she first explored the lifestyle.

Alexander kneaded her thighs in his big hands before helping her maneuver her legs off the supports. Then he grabbed her shoulders, easing her up so she was standing. When she wobbled, legs stiff, he pulled her against his chest. He smelled good. The t-shirt was soft under her cheek, his leathers smooth and warm against her legs.

"Come with me," he said simply.

Ass still plugged, naked except for the g-string, which was soaked, Alena walked with Alexander out of the dungeon.

And with each step they took, her dread grew.

CHAPTER 9

“Face down over my lap.”

Alena looked down at Alexander, who was sitting on a day-bed style couch. The large cushion—which was large enough it might have been a twin bed mattress—was covered in red satin, with half a dozen large pillows of the same fabric serving as the back.

Alexander patted his lap, and Alena barely repressed a whimper. The walk from the dungeon to this aftercare room—which was smaller than the room they’d used last night, with only the couch Alexander was sitting on, plus one other—had been long enough that she’d started to come down from the emotional and physical high.

And with each step the noxious feeling of dismay and self-directed disgust surged.

That emotional anguish was echoed in her ass, throbbing now that she didn’t have the tension of arousal, or pleasure of orgasm, to offset the pain.

As sexy as it was to be ordered over his lap in the traditional taboo spanking position, Alena wasn’t sure she could take any more pain to that already abused part of her anatomy.

When she hesitated, Alexander tugged on her arm, pulling her towards him. Her shins and knees touched his legs, and when he reached up and gently stroked one nipple, she shivered.

“Trust me.” He patted his lap.

As much as she didn't want her abused ass spanked again, worrying about another spanking made it much easier for her to ignore her feelings of dread.

Trust him? She did. He shouldn't trust her; he just didn't know it yet.

Wary, but needing to obey, if only to stave off dealing with what she was feeling for a few more minutes, Alena gingerly knelt on the couch, then lowered herself to lie across his thighs. She folded her arms under her head, focused on her breathing. She tried to count each inhale and exhale but little aftershocks of pleasure and pain broke her concentration.

His palm rubbed her ass cheeks. “Your ass is pink, red in some places. I'll treat the skin so there shouldn't be any marks by tomorrow night.”

She wished he hadn't said “tomorrow”. Wished he hadn't brought up, even obliquely, the future.

“I want the marks.” She twisted to look back at him. “I want to still have them when...”

His gaze met hers, and the dark predatory gleam was gone from his eyes. “When what?”

Twice tonight he'd been vulnerable, tender, and both times she'd nearly abandoned her plan and told him who she was.

No, she wouldn't actually have told him who she was. She wasn't suicidal. She would have said something to push him away, save him...from her.

He was relaxed, his expression soft and almost sleepy.

This was it, the moment when she either stuck to her guns, or abandoned months' worth of work because he'd dominated her, pleased her, and hurt her, better than anyone ever had before.

Put like that, what she needed to do was obvious. If only she could ignore the slimy feelings sliding around in her gut—guilt and dread an unpleasant combination making her feel vaguely ill.

Oddly those emotions were followed by irritation.

Irritation with herself for being so dramatic.

Irritation with him for eliciting a true, deep level of submission she hadn't known she was capable of and certainly hadn't anticipated.

Irritation with him for unknowingly making her feel guilty when she normally wouldn't have.

Life had taught her that right and wrong were flimsy ideas sheltered people thought were solid and fixed. White and black.

She didn't believe in the simplistic dichotomy of black versus white. She saw the shades of gray, but wasn't quite so melancholy or dramatic as to claim she lived in shadows.

If anything, her life was the golden hour, that precious time just before sunset when the light was soft red and gold and there were no shadows, only a feeling of gilded stillness, impish and fleeting.

You don't have to feel guilty. You're not going to hurt him, just use him for information. He's a billionaire—everyone around him is using him for something, and vice-versa.

And you didn't manipulate him during the scenes, just before and after. What happened in the scene was pure, unrelated to what you're about to do.

It was a paper thin distinction, but she clung to it.

He'd asked "when what?"

And it was time for her to answer.

Alena took a deep breath, reminded herself how much she'd put into getting here, and did what she needed to do.

"When I have to spend tomorrow night alone. I wish we had one more night together."

His lips parted as he sighed. She wanted to kiss him.

Alexander ran one hand from the top of her ass along her spine and into her hair. She tensed, but he didn't grab. Instead

he cupped the back of her head and gently pushed her down until her cheek rested on her forearms once more.

He began kneading her ass and thighs—he was working the muscles to make sure they didn't cramp, but like a deep tissue massage, it hurt.

She yelped and twitched when he hit a particularly sore spot. And each time he did, her ass clenched around the plug.

And her pussy throbbed in response to his caring cruelty.

After many long minutes he finished. Gathering her hair in a tail, he tugged gently. "Up on your elbows."

Last time she'd done this, it had been so he could slide his cock into her mouth. This time once she'd raised her chest and shoulders, his hand moved from her hair to her dangling breasts, and he plucked her nipples.

"I had planned to play with your breasts." Alexander punctuated the statement with a little flick of her nipple.

Alena's pussy throbbed as he rolled her right nipple then tugged twice before releasing it to play with her other breast.

"You want to know what other dark things I imagined?" His voice had deepened, and she was no longer sure this was aftercare.

Was it another intermission?

"Are you trying to scare me off?" she asked.

"No. Not anymore. You like it when I tell you... When I describe what I'd do to you."

And her butt cheeks throbbed and her ass clenched around the plug, still deep inside her, an ever present reminder of her submission.

He grabbed her ass and squeezed. She yelped.

"Did that hurt?" he asked quietly.

"Yes, Sir."

"Good."

He pinched her ass, eliciting another cry. She was mentally preparing herself for the scene to start up again when he grabbed the base of the plug and wiggled it side to side. Alena shivered and raised her hips.

“Stay. I mean stay still.” She heard the correction, and her heart clenched.

Alexander worked the plug with small tugs, then started to pull harder, forcing her body to open around the wide section.

Used and stretched as she was, it didn't hurt, but it was uncomfortable. And it was also arousing. Her pussy throbbed with desire even as she whimpered.

“Shhh, relax now.” He gently tugged her nipples, as if rewarding her for holding still as he withdrew the plug.

She whimpered when it slid all the way out, the whimper becoming a moan as he pressed it in again, starting up a rhythm. The thrusts were gentle, her well worked and lubed ass opening easily as the plug pressed in only to be withdrawn again.

“I'd planned to fuck your ass too. Dildos. I'd use dildos, in graduated sizes. Force your ass to open.” He wiggled the plug. “Would you like that?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“I told you I wanted to do dark things to you.”

He'd gone quiet when they first got to this room, but now he was speaking more, as he had during the climax of the scene, and with the same more casual cadences that he normally used.

It was puzzling, because the contrast was so stark. She wanted to ask him about it, to find out why he'd first claimed to prefer being “succinct” only to become a masterful dirty talker.

She wanted answers, but those weren't the answers she was here to get.

He withdrew the plug. Her body pulsed as her ass clenched fully closed for the first time in over an hour.

Alexander slid his arm under her shoulders and help her to ease off his lap and onto the couch beside him. She hissed when her weight pressed down on her abused ass.

Alexander stood. “Lay on your back, knees bent, legs spread so I can attend to you.”

The words were formal, and she felt a pang of regret that the dirty-talking, sometimes didn’t use complete sentences Alexander was retreating back into his taciturn shell.

He took the plug to the small in-room bathroom—easily distinguished by the familiar stick people plaque on the door.

Alena started to lay back so she could spread her knees as he’d ordered, but stopped.

This was supposed to be aftercare. He shouldn’t be giving orders, he should be helping her transition away from a submissive headspace.

It didn’t feel like last night’s aftercare. Playing with her nipples, fucking her ass with the plug rather than just removing it, had blurred the line.

He’d proven last night that he was both capable of, and good at, aftercare, so this deviation wasn’t the result of ignorance.

There was one, very obvious, explanation. Alexander was as affected by their scene, was as reluctant to end this, as she was.

Good, that will make this easier.

She shook her head to get rid of that nasty thought. Rather than lay back and lewdly spread her legs, Alena grabbed one of the large pillows and propped it up against the wrought iron “arm” of the daybed couch.

She stretched out on her side, arm on the pillow, head propped in her hand. Her other arm lay resting on her hip, and the urge to slide her hand down into her panties, to stroke herself to orgasm, was squeezing her.

Alena lifted her chin, kept her hand on her thigh, and waited.

A moment later Alexander emerged. The plug was nowhere in sight, but he held a stack of linen and a small bowl.

He stopped when he saw her, his gaze wandering from her toes up to her face.

“That wasn’t how I told you to wait.”

“I’ll move... I’ll *obey*, if we’re still scening. But if this is aftercare...” She arched an eyebrow.

Alexander’s lips compressed into a line. Then his shoulders sagged. Alena pulled her knees up to make room for him as he sat. She rolled onto her back, her shoulders and head propped up by the pillow so she could see him.

“It’s aftercare. My apologies.” He gingerly set the bowl of water down and dipped a washcloth into it.

As he wrung out the excess water, Alena stretched out one leg, sliding her foot across his thigh.

“I wasn’t complaining. Just clarifying.” She pointed her toes, rubbing them across the laces of his leathers. “I think neither of us is fully satisfied yet.”

This time when she arched her brow, she smiled.

Alexander grasped her ankle, lifting her foot away from his crotch. He bent his head and for a minute she thought he’d kiss her foot, and some long-buried saccharine part of her was giddy, citing that one ridiculously romantic scene in *The Scarlet Pimpernel*.

Alexander glanced at her, the corner of his mouth kicked up in a sexy little smirk, and then he yanked on her leg.

Alena yelped as she slid across the slick fabric, coming to rest with her butt nestled up against the side of his thigh, her knees bent.

Alexander laughed, and for a moment he seemed young and carefree. A man unmarked by life’s stresses and strain, wearing a simple gray t-shirt while he teased a girl.

Alena wiggled her ankle out of his grasp, then hooked her leg around his neck. His laughter died as his gaze turned hot.

His attention drifted from her face to breasts, then to the apex of her thighs. He turned his head, breath fanning her leg as his hand skimmed down her thigh towards her pussy. Alena let her other leg fall open, her body splayed for him, every worry and dark emotion that had plagued her since he'd taken her off the spanking bench forgotten.

His fingers stopped a millimeter away from her soaked panties.

“You’re right,” he murmured against her skin. “This is aftercare. I shouldn’t play with you.”

“Oh, that’s just mean.”

“You enjoy mean.”

“I do.” Alena tightened her leg, forcing his head down. “Clearly neither of us is totally, fully satisfied. Why don’t we scene again tonight, while we still can?”

Alexander closed his eyes and turned his face into her leg. His teeth grazed her skin, causing goosebumps.

“We can’t. *I* can’t.”

“Why?” Alena rubbed her hand up and down his forearm, which was in easy reach since he’d planted his hand on the couch beside her waist.

“I’d want more. I told you that— I told you that I’d... The things I would do to you...they’re dark things.”

His quiet, halting words, laced with conviction, gave her pause. She hadn’t been scared when they talked before the scene. During the scene, even as he hurt her, even when he’d described doing things that were far beyond her personal limits, she hadn’t been scared. She’d been sure they were just dirty talk, not real possibilities, and as aroused as she’d been they’d sounded sexy and amazing.

She hadn’t been scared before.

But now she was.

Alena unhooked her leg from around his neck and scooted away.

He cleared his throat and looked at the far wall while she repositioned herself, once more reclined on the pillow, keeping her weight off her ass.

He seemed so far away, so sad. She stretched out one leg, resting her calf across his thighs.

“Alexander, this is a safe place to think about those things. Sharing a sub, BDSM in an office setting... they are hardly taboo fantasies in a place like this.” She gestured around them, smiling softly, while inside she wondered if he really would put a permanent collar around a woman’s neck, force her to service and fuck his friends and acquaintances.

No. Surely not.

That flash of fear had been a result of dealing with too many different feelings and juggling too many opposing needs.

“I know I haven’t been a member long, but I bet at some point the Orchid Club had an auction.” Her teasing tone hid the undercurrent of unease. “Slave auction is one of my favorite fantasies.”

“I am a cruel man.”

Alena’s heart clenched at the self-loathing she heard in his words.

“Alexander, sugar, there’s nothing wrong with you.” She was aware her accent had thickened, dropping the “r” and turning “sugar” into “suga”. “Or if there’s something wrong with you, then the same thing is wrong with me, with all of us.”

“You’re lovely and...and radiant.” He exhaled heavily. “A Dom should tend to the needs of a submissive. I should want to take care of you... not— And I do. Want to take care of you. Now, in aftercare.” He turned his head away from her, lips pressed together as if he were trying to stop himself from saying more.

Alena swung her legs to the floor and stood.

He closed his eyes, as if he didn't want to watch her walk away.

Alena straddled his legs, knees beside his hips, her still-aching ass perched on his leather-clad knees.

Alexander's head whipped around and his brows were halfway up his forehead in surprise that she was sitting on his lap.

Smiling at the shock on his face, Alena cupped his cheeks. "Seems like you might need some aftercare. A scene should make you feel good."

And just as he had before, he leaned his cheek into her hand. They stayed that way for several moments, and Alena let the silence wrap around them. She wouldn't rush him.

"You're the type of sub I should never partner with." His words were soft and grim, but during the extended quiet his expression had relaxed.

"And what type of sub am I?" She rubbed his temples then ran her fingers back through his hair.

"The captured queen."

Alena blinked in surprise. "Come again?"

"You're...regal. Know your worth. Even if a Dom puts you on your knees and makes you lick his boots, you wouldn't be humbled."

"I don't lick boots."

"No monarch would." His hands cupped her hips, and the first hint of a smile tightened the skin at the corners of his eyes.

Alena swayed forward, her breasts nearly brushing his face.

"Even when I had you strapped down...helpless..."

His breathing turned heavy as he spoke, his voice deepening, and Alena had to bite back a moan of desire.

“...there was a part of you I couldn’t touch. A sense that even as I used you, you were in control.”

“Now hold on just a minute. I didn’t top from the bottom.”

“No,” he agreed. “But you possess a sense of...reserve. A core of power that will never submit.”

You think I’m reserved, but really I’m lying to you.

Planning to betray you.

Alena rubbed his cheekbone with her thumb. “And that makes you...?”

“It makes me want to do terrible things to you.” He whispered the confession, then rested his forehead against her breastbone.

Alena stroked his hair. “I meant, does that make you the king, or maybe the knight sworn to protect the queen?”

The black knight was in play, sliding across the board, unaware of the hand that guided it.

“I think maybe you haven’t made peace with your Dominant needs.”

His only reply was to wrap his arms around her waist. Though his head rested between her naked breasts, there was nothing sexual about how he held her.

Alena made soothing noises and stroked his head and shoulders.

They stayed that way for a long time, Alexander’s breath fanning her belly, her fingers rhythmically raking through his hair then sliding along swells of his shoulders and down the flat plane of his back.

They couldn’t stay this way forever, and no matter how much she might want to, it was impractical to change her plan. Alena took a deep breath and closed her eyes; when she exhaled she’d firmed her resolve.

“Alexander, why don’t we go change, then maybe we could have a drink, do some aftercare that way.”

He lifted his head. Once more he looked younger than she knew he was. "I'd like that."

Alena slid off his lap. He stood and picked up one of the large, soft bath sheets, wrapping it around her shoulders.

He escorted her to the submissives' changing room, his hands on the small of her back.

Alena opened the door, then looked back at him, smiling saucily. "See you soon?"

Alexander's defeated, vulnerable aspect had shifted to the confident, slightly aloof manner she associated with her quiet man.

Rather than reply in words, he bowed slightly, looking up at her from behind the lock of dark hair that had fallen forward over his forehead.

Alena slid into the changing room and closed the door, her smile gone, replaced with grim resolve. She went to her locker, pulling out the outfit she'd chosen specifically for this moment.

It was time for her to use Alexander Wagner, and if her heart hurt at the idea, well...that was something she'd just have to live with.

CHAPTER 10

Alexander waited for her just outside the subs' dressing room. He'd changed from his leathers and t-shirt into his gray slacks and button up shirt. Before changing, he'd detoured into the main dungeon to get his kit and her discarded dress.

The dress was tucked into a pocket in his kit. He had no intention of giving it back—instead he'd wrap it around his cock and use it to jerk off while remembering their time together.

And when he was done, he'd think about how it had felt to hold her, to rest his head against her while she'd petted him.

The door opened, and Alexander straightened.

Alena stepped out, and for the first time he saw her in street clothes.

She wore slim black slacks that stopped at the ankle. Her shoes were black flats with a red toe, while her blouse was a creamy white with long sleeves and a tie at the neck.

His fingers curled into his palms and he repressed the urge to reach out and tug on the dangling tails, undoing the bow and opening her shirt to expose her lovely neck.

“Alexander.” She smiled regally, a large Birkin bag hooked in the crook of her elbow.

“Alena. May I?” He gestured to her bag.

“I've got the bag, but I'll take your arm.” Alexander cocked his arm, and she slid her left hand around his right

elbow.

They walked down the hall and paused at the door to the dungeon. She'd suggested they get a drink, which meant going into the ballroom, as that was where the bar for this event was.

They both hesitated, and Alena glanced at him, brows raised, lips twisted in distaste.

He didn't want to go back in there either.

"It's nearly five a.m. Perhaps we should have breakfast instead." The words were out before he could think about them. It wasn't exactly forbidden for members to socialize outside of the club, but it was discouraged.

Alena smiled, clearly relieved. "Breakfast is perfect. I forgot you're a local, well, at least you're from this country. Do you know the city well enough to choose a place? I can do a quick search if not."

"I know the city. I live in Wien."

"Where's that?"

"My apologies. Wien is Vienna. It's the German name."

Alena clicked her tongue. "Of course, I knew that. I'll admit my brain is tired after everything you put me through."

She narrowed her eyes in mock anger, and Alexander laughed.

Had he ever laughed with a sub before? No, usually they were either blissed out or semi-horrified once the arousal wore off.

Together they walked to the elevator, passing a few couples and triads still in their club attire headed for aftercare rooms.

Alexander pushed the button for the elevator, then turned to look at Alena. "Are you staying in this hotel?" The hotel was technically closed, which was why they were able to use it, but the host had made rooms available to members.

"I was. I had my bags picked up last night before coming up to the club. I'm headed to Iceland this morning for

business, and didn't want to have to worry about my suitcase.”

“You're flying to Iceland today?”

“My flight is at ten.” She checked her slim watch. “Given that it's now just after five a.m., I have plenty of time for breakfast. And at least two cups of strong tea.”

The elevator doors opened and they stepped in. Alexander set his kit down and tugged his phone out of his pocket, looking for the article he'd seen.

“Are any restaurants going to be open this early?” Alena mused.

He tapped the screen, opening the article. “I don't think you're going to Iceland today.”

“Sugar, I know I said I wanted another night, and if I didn't have to go I'd be—”

“One of their volcanos is spewing ash,” he interrupted. Later he'd think about what she'd been saying and parse out what it made him feel. “Flights are grounded.” Alexander turned the phone screen so she could see it.

Alena took his phone, quickly scanning the article. “No flights in or out. Well damn.” She passed back the phone and started to reach into her bag when the doors opened.

Alexander cupped her elbow, guiding her out. Most of the lobby was draped in plastic that sealed off the areas being remodeled. Tall, slim windows above the main doors allowed in light. Alena paused in a streak of pale pearly white luminescence that painted silver highlights on her cheekbones and hair. Dawn was approaching, and quickly.

She dug her phone out of her purse and checked it, making a frustrated noise. “My flight was most definitely canceled. My assistant, who I hope is now asleep, poor thing, canceled my meeting, but didn't make me another reservation.” Alena tapped her nail on the phone screen. “I don't like to make unnecessary trips, or waste trips.” Alena was speaking fast, her fingers sliding over her phone screen. “Just paying for carbon offset won't do as much good as not flying when I don't need to.”

“You are an environmentalist?” Alexander asked. His company moved goods by plane, train, and cargo ship, all of which produced pollutants.

“No, just want to make sure the earth survives.” Alena sighed. “Anyway, apparently I don’t have a flight to catch. Would you be so kind as to recommend a hotel?”

“You’re planning to stay in Vienna?”

“I’m already in Europe, so hopefully I can bring forward some meetings I have scheduled in France for next month, and avoid flying to Europe again.”

“The planet thanks you,” Alexander said while internally wincing.

She tucked her phone into her bag. “My clever plan to have my luggage held at the airport doesn’t seem so clever now. Once I check in somewhere, hopefully I can get a messenger service to deliver my bags.”

She looked up at the windows above the door. The roof of the building across the street was visible, and a little patch of pale gray-blue sky.

“I’m glad we’d already made plans for breakfast, otherwise I’d be standing here lost.” Alena’s wry smile and the way her eyes sparkled made him want to kiss her.

He looked at her lips, and remembered how pretty they’d looked wrapped around his dick.

“I doubt you’d be lost,” he said.

“At five a.m. with nowhere to go, and no plans? That seems like lost to me.”

“The captured queen is never lost, only waylaid.”

Her eyes widened.

Damn it, remembering her sucking his dick had made him speak out of turn. He shouldn’t have mentioned, even obliquely, her submission.

“Maybe you’d care to escort me to the hotel you’re planning to recommend?” Her gaze darted to his bag. “You

have your kit with you...”

Alexander nearly choked on his surprise.

Alena’s cheeks heated and she looked away. “I’m so sorry. I forgot that club members aren’t supposed to do things like that.” She adjusted the bag on her arm, then reached for her phone once more. “I’ll find a hotel and—

“We didn’t get our third night,” he said softly. He probably should have taken longer than a few seconds to think about what he was doing.

Alena turned slowly, one brow arched. “Oh?”

“You said you wanted another night.”

“I did. I do. You’re not offended I suggested it.” She gestured to his kit once more.

He shook his head. “No. I would never have proposed it, as we’re too close to the last scene.”

“You’re worried if you suggested it, I’d only agree because I was still feeling submissive?”

“Worry? No. You are perfectly composed. But it wouldn’t be proper.”

“Your faith in me is complimentary, but I assure you I love to make bad decisions.”

That startled a laugh out of him. “I do know a place that will serve us breakfast. Where you can have your bags delivered. But—” He stopped to clear his throat. “But it is not a hotel.”

This is a bad idea. You’re going to scare her.

Alena’s mouth rounded in an “O” and he wanted to lean in and bite her bottom lip.

“You’re talking about your house.”

“I am.”

“Is that allowed?”

Alexander shrugged.

“Right, I forgot you said rules are for other people.”

“If you don’t feel comfortable, which is of course understandable—”

He spoke at the same time she did, saying “That would be lovely but I don’t want to impose.”

They stared at one another.

Her lips twitched. “I must admit I find the idea of a third night with you slightly appealing.”

“You are the one who first suggested it,” he said dryly, while enjoying the way her eyes sparkled as she teased him.

“As long as you promise there will be a chaperone, and that my bedroom door will have a lock...”

Alexander couldn’t remember the last time he’d enjoyed a conversation so much. Still, he had to make sure he wasn’t manipulating her. “I don’t want you to feel obligated.”

“I don’t. I trust you, Alexander.”

“You shouldn’t.”

“And maybe you shouldn’t trust me.” She winked.

Alexander took out his phone and called his driver, speaking to him quickly in German. He hung up and looked at her. “If you’d feel safer taking your own vehicle, I can give you the address.”

Alena slid her arm around his. “Alexander Wagner, correct? With a W? I’ll send myself an email saying that if I disappear, you’re the primary suspect.”

“I’m not entirely sure you’re joking.”

“Oh, I am. I’m going to email my assistant and say that if I disappear she should send the police after Vienna resident Alexander Wagner.” She grinned.

“Is that a yes or no to wanting your own car?”

“I want to ride with you.” She looked at him through her lashes. “I plan to make you feel very guilty as I wince while sitting on my abused ass.”

“Guilty, or aroused?”

“Will the fact that it hurts to sit, and that the hurt makes me remember what it felt like to have you spanking me, arouse you?”

His slacks wouldn't hide a hard-on the way his leathers did. “Keep teasing me, and I will feel far less guilty than I should.”

Arm in arm they walked to the front doors. A club staff member waited silently, and when a black car pulled up out front, he unlocked the doors to let them out.

Alexander opened the rear car door for Alena, chuckling softly at her exaggerated wince when she sat.

He slid in on the other side, greeted his driver, and then turned to her.

Alena was no longer smiling, but frowning while looking down at her hands, curled loosely in her lap.

She'd changed her mind. He leaned away from her, giving her space. “I'll drop you off at a hotel, and wait to make sure you get a room.”

“No, it's not that, but... I need sleep, and some time to work. I hate to make demands when you're already going out of your way to help me.”

He relaxed. “It is not an imposition.”

The frown melted to a smile and she reached up and touched his cheek. “Have I mentioned how much I like it when you talk? Not that I don't like it when you're all forbidding and silent.” She twisted her features into a ferocious frown.

“I do not look like that.”

“Of course you don't.” She patted his cheek again, but then her hands dropped, her expression turning grave. “What worries me is... Am I going to your house as a guest, or as a sub?”

Ah, he understood her concern. “As a guest, of course. I will give you privacy for as long as you need.” He touched her chin so she looked at him. “This evening doesn’t have to be a scene if you’d prefer—”

“Tonight I’d most definitely prefer to be—” She leaned in, whispering against his cheek. “—naked, on my knees, begging you to touch me.”

Alexander’s cock hardened in his pants.

Alena’s lips brushed his cheek as she pulled back, a knowing smile curving her lips. “But until then, I’m just a waylaid traveler, accepting your kind hospitality.”

“After dinner,” he all but growled. Damn it, he sounded like a fucking animal.

Fitting, when the things he wanted to do to her were savage. He’d tried to warn her away both nights, and she’d been the one to make sure he didn’t walk away.

Every time he was with a sub, he worried he’d lose control of himself, give in and take it too far. Alena had tempted him far more than any woman in recent memory, but he’d maintained control.

“After dinner?” She arched a brow

“After dinner, you’re mine.”

Alena leaned back, apparently relaxed. “I do love having something to look forward to.”

Alexander spent the rest of the ride imagining all the things he wanted to do to her. Some of them were dark, cruel things he would never actually do. The things he’d threatened her with at the apex of their most recent scene.

If the woman beside him knew every lurid detail of his fantasies, she’d jump out of the moving car.

Or maybe she’d face him, regally demand he abide by her limits, then drop to her knees.

By the time they pulled up outside his home, his fantasies had mellowed and become plans.

He'd taken her mouth last night, but this evening, if she begged just right, he was going to fuck her sweet pussy.

* * *

Alexander waited by the stairs. The guest chamber Alena was using was halfway down the hall on the fourth floor of his home in Josefstadt. The property, which took up half a city block and was five stories high, with a Mansard-style roof, white stone walls, and evenly spaced windows, had been in his family for generations. In the past, when business was bad, sections had been split off and turned into apartments or offices. At one point no Wagner had lived here, the whole thing rented out to various businesses.

Alexander's father had waited out the last tenants, then renovated the building, turning it back into a fifteen-bedroom mansion, an almost obscene luxury to have so much real estate used as a private residence in Vienna's eighth district.

The ground floor was leased retail space, a concession to the district director who'd personally asked Alexander's father to allow businesses to operate there, especially given the building's location across the street from Hamerlingpark.

A satellite Wagner Global office suite on the first floor had a large, stately conference room which he used whenever he had to meet with the board. Meeting in his home both emphasized his status and meant everyone was comfortable enough to have a drink or two. Alcohol made board members far more insouciant.

Besides the meeting room, the business suite had several private offices, including his home office, paper file storage, and even a small server farm, the off-site backup for the company's information network.

One of his two assistants worked exclusively out of the office here, coordinating with the other assistant who was based at Wagner Global headquarters, located only a few minutes away in District One.

The remainder of the first floor was also dedicated to offices, but not for employees of Wagner Global. The half-

dozen offices on the opposite side of an impressive landing were for the people who managed the Wagner family affairs. Alexander's house manager, valet, chef, and the curator who supervised and maintained the Wagner's art collection, all had offices. There was also a set of offices RTW Security used when needed. The Wagner Global board of directors insisted he have personal security with him for some travel, and in those instances the offices served as a home base for the personal, event, or physical security teams Zakaria Schroeder sent over. RTW's CEO would have preferred that Alexander allow a full security office, with variable speed guard rounds, ingress and egress checkpoints, as well as the most advanced—invasive—security system possible. Alexander valued his privacy too much to allow that.

The second and third floors had beautiful drawing rooms, parlors, libraries, and even a small ballroom. There were also bedroom suites on those floors, ornate rooms filled with antiques, most often used by visiting dignitaries or business people who needed to be impressed, flattered, or both.

The fourth floor had been stripped of any of its original architectural details when it was rented to a garment company and used as a factory. Given that there was no remnant of the original architectural details, this floor had been renovated into seven bedroom suites, a dining room, and a commercial kitchen capable of preparing food for several hundred if he hosted a party.

Tonight they wouldn't be eating in the fourth floor dining room—though that's where they'd had breakfast this morning, a quiet affair punctuated by yawns as they began to feel the effects of a night without sleep.

The door down the hall opened, and Alena stepped out.

Alexander straightened, awed anew by not just how lovely she was, but her innate magnetism.

She wore black. A simple black dress that might have been unremarkable if it was on anyone but her. Her hair was loose around her shoulders in soft, dark waves, though it was pulled back on one side in a style reminiscent of old Hollywood.

A blood-red pashmina was hooked over her arms, and matched the red heels she wore.

She glanced at him, and her lips curled up. Her smile was full of secrets, but warm rather than cutting and cold.

He wanted to strip the dress off of her, bare every inch of her flesh so he could torment her, tease her. He wanted to bring her to her knees, even as he wanted to kneel before her.

The captured queen.

She exuded august confidence as she walked down the hall, each footstep making her hips sway.

The queen. She wasn't captured.

Not yet.

“Alexander.”

“Alena.” He held out his arm. “Will you join me?”

“Of course.”

When he turned her towards the stairs instead of leading her to the dining room, she glanced at him in surprise.

“Skipping dinner, and going right for dessert?”

“No. But I wanted us to dine in private.”

Together they mounted the steps, Alena walking rather gingerly.

“You mentioned that you prefer not to wear high heels.” Alexander said when they paused on the landing.

“Sugar, I know you aren't suggesting I would wear flats with this dress.”

“But if the shoes hurt you...”

“Beauty is pain.”

Alexander chuckled, as much at her exaggerated tone as the words themselves.

When they reached the top of the stairs, he keyed in a code on the discreetly hidden panel, then opened one side of the grand double doors that protected his home.

He gestured for her to proceed him, watching her butt, which was nicely cupped by the fabric, but not so tight as to be lewd or cheap.

“Oh,” Alena said in surprise. “This is your home.”

“The whole building is my home.” He stepped in and closed the door.

“You might own the whole building, but I got a tour of the first, second, and third floors after I woke up from my mid-day nap, and the rest of the building is a showplace. A museum. This, this is *you*.”

She gestured around the open plan central living area.

“You’re correct.”

Alena reached out and stroked his cheek. “Back to being my quiet man?”

He shrugged, slightly uncomfortable, even as he was secretly pleased she’d referred to this space as being “him”.

The fifth floor was his private space. No one except his valet and the cleaning staff, under the watchful eye of the house manager came up here. He had his own kitchen and oftentimes cooked for himself, which never failed to make his mother sneer.

The interior designer had taken his sparse directions and somehow created a space that felt right.

The open floor plan had kitchen, dining room, living space, lounge, and library all occupying the same large rectangular space. A dozen evenly spaced windows looked out over the trees and greenery of the park, and had been treated to prevent anyone from being able to see in, even if he had on all the lights, and reinforced with pressure sensors and bulletproof coating at the insistence of his security team.

Alena walked slowly around the room, which was done in shades of blue and green with pale silvery gray accents.

The floor was blue-veined gray marble, the modern but very comfortable couch a deep gray-blue with gray and green accent pillows. Alexander usually tossed them into a chair to

get them out of the way, only for the maids to return them to their rightful places on the couch.

The colors reminded him of his family's residence near Beleu Lake in Moldova, where the landscape was dozens of shades of green from the grass to the leaves of the trees, and the sky above and lake itself added cerulean and azure to the palette.

Alena abruptly stopped and looked back at him. "I'm so sorry. I didn't ask if I could explore. May I?"

He gestured for her to go ahead, then went to the kitchen and opened the oven to check on the plates he'd put in there—on instructions from his chef—to keep warm.

He cooked for himself, the important part of that statement being *for himself*. His chef had prepared the meal they were about to eat.

When he turned around, Alena had slipped out of her shoes, leaving them by the door. Something about her wandering around his home barefoot made him want to scoop her up and kiss her. Not a pre-fucking kiss, but a kiss just to tell her, without words, how he felt.

She trailed her fingers over the backs of chairs, then drifted to the library area, where two reading chairs waited, surrounded by beautifully crafted bookshelves. Alexander walked over to join her, ducking his head to look at the cover of the book she'd plucked from the shelves and was currently reading.

It was a noir mystery book, written in English.

"Hardly worthy of this," he said softly, gesturing to the shelves.

"There's nothing wrong with reading for pleasure." She closed the book and slid it back into its spot on the shelf. "You have a fancy library with books I doubt anyone ever reads downstairs. Why not focus on pleasure here?"

She leaned back, resting her shoulders against a shelf. Alexander braced his hands on either side of her, as he had that first night in the hallway.

“You are the pleasure I want tonight.”

“Are you planning to have your way with me before doing me the courtesy of feeding me dinner?” She pressed her hand over her heart in mock offense, her accent slow and thick.

Alexander grinned, feeling lighter than he had since breakfast. Since the last time he’d seen her.

“I will feed you, before I have my way with you.”

“Or maybe I’ll have my way with you.” She cocked her head to the side and frowned. “That’s what we agreed on right? You topped me last night, so tonight I get to be the Domme, and you’re the sub.”

Alexander froze.

Alena held the puzzled expression another few heartbeats then broke into a grin. “I wish I’d had a camera to capture that expression.”

“I was not amused.” He’d damn near had a heart attack.

“I was.” Alena ducked under his arm and padded across to the kitchen area in her bare feet. Her shawl slipped from her arms, landing on the floor.

When he’d called her the captured queen, she’d asked who that made him.

And now he couldn’t get the image of himself kneeling at the foot of her throne, his armor dented and dusty from battle, out of his head.

Alexander scooped up her pashmina, tossing it on the couch as he followed her to the kitchen.

Despite his brief protests, she helped him with dinner, popping the bread into the still warm oven as he added the finishing touches to the plates, opening and decanting the red wine, which he probably should have done before he went downstairs.

Ten minutes later they sat at one end of his heavy wood dining table enjoying seabass with *Spargel*. There was even some Schnitzel, which wasn’t an item Chef normally prepared

from the list of acceptable foods a nutritionist had drafted. Schnitzel breaded and fried, unhealthy and delicious. His housekeeper must have told Chef his guest was an American.

Dessert was another traditional Viennese dish, *Kaiserschmarrn*, and discussions of food and wine dominated their conversation.

Alena ate sparingly, and drank only half a glass of red with dinner. When he opened a bottle of chilled sparkling wine for after dinner drinks, she gladly accepted.

He'd have to remember she wasn't a red wine drinker for next time.

What next time?

"I managed to arrange a meeting," Alena said after several sips. "I'm headed to Madrid tomorrow."

Alexander stiffened. "What time?" He cleared his throat, realized that sounded accusatory. "My driver can take you to the airport."

"Nine."

She'd need to be there at six, and it was already just after 20:30. "If you would prefer to go back downstairs and sleep..."

Alena set down her glass and rose. She stood next to his chair, waiting.

Alexander scooted out from the table and she sat on his lap, winding one arm around his shoulders. "I want to have my third night with you. But I may not have time to say goodbye in the morning. I'd like to get at least four hours of sleep, and I suspect to do that I'm going to need to sleep up until the last possible moment." She leaned in, lips hovering near his cheek. "Are you going to keep me awake all night...Sir?"

Alexander ran his hand up her back, found the small tab of the zipper and pulled it down.

"I intend to do far more than merely keep you awake."

Alexander lifted her off his lap. As she stood, the dress slithered down, catching briefly on her hips. He solved that with a simple tug. She wore a black strapless bra and solid black panties. Simple, everyday lingerie, but on her it was just as alluring as any fet wear could be.

Right now, here in his home, he found her irresistible. He wanted her with a passion so strong and deep that “want” hovered on the edge of “need”.

“Strip,” he commanded. “Then kneel.”

CHAPTER 11

Alena reached back and unhooked her bra. Taking off a strapless bra was always a good feeling, but even more so when removing it meant she was one step closer to having his hands on her.

As she held the bra out, then dramatically let it fall to the floor, she also let go of the real reason she was here. She boxed up the part of her mind that was furiously working and reworking her plans.

Right now she was Alena the submissive.

His submissive. What was about to happen with him had nothing to do with what was on the first floor of this building.

Alexander sat back in his chair, one elbow on the table. A king at ease in his castle?

Funny, but that metaphor didn't seem as fitting as calling him a knight.

"I've been thinking about what you said last night." Alena hooked her fingers under the waist of her panties.

Alexander raised a brow.

"The captured queen." She slid her underwear down to her knees, then let it fall to the floor. "Is that how you see all subs?"

"No."

Alena stepped out of her panties, then dropped to her knees. The marble was cold and hard.

“Are you going to make me beg you for every word?” She reached up and removed the comb that held back one side of her hair, setting it on top of her discarded bra.

“No.” He smirked down at her.

Alena inched closer to him, until she could fold her arms on his knees and prop her chin on her wrist. “What are the other types of subs?”

Alexander slid his hand into her hair, tugging until she scrambled to her feet, her hands braced on his thighs, their faces close enough together that she could smell the rich scent of red wine when he exhaled.

“The brat.”

Alexander forced her to turn towards the table. They’d shoved their plates away, and that meant there was plenty of space for him to bend her over the table, her bare breasts pressed against the wood.

“Hands behind,” he murmured, tapping the small of her back.

Alena managed it, though it was awkward and difficult to do while facedown on the table. Alexander helped her, his touch slow and deliberate.

“Lace your fingers together.”

Alena shivered, and it had nothing to do with being naked. Her butt was sore from two back-to-back nights of impact play and here she was, in the perfect position for more spanking.

When his hand grazed her bare ass cheek, she yelped in alarm.

“Sore?” he asked.

“Yes. I’m not sure...” She sighed. “I was going to say I’m not sure I’m up for impact play tonight, but I trust you.”

“You shouldn’t.”

Alena twisted awkwardly to look back at him, her fingers curled around one another to make sure her hands didn’t separate and slip off her back.

“That’s not something you should say to me right now,” she half warned.

“Face down.” Alexander grabbed her shoulder and forced her torso down onto the table.

His hand slid over her ass again, then he added a quick, hard swat. It hurt enough to tense her muscles. She squeezed her eyes closed.

Another spank, then another.

At the fourth one, she broke. She shoved off the table, her shoulder knocking into Alexander’s chest.

She whirled away from him, backing up several steps. Her breathing was labored, fueled by newborn panic.

“Alena.” The word cracked like a whip and she winced, taking another step back. Her dress was on the floor by his feet, as was her underwear.

“Alena?” His voice softened, her name now a question.

“You said I shouldn’t trust you.”

“Yes.”

“Do you see how I might find that alarming when I’m alone in your home with you?”

Alexander frowned. “You’re...scared?”

The panic folded in on itself, making way to exasperation. “Yes, Alexander. I find it alarming when you say I can’t trust you when, unlike at the club, there would be no one here to help me if you...” She swallowed heavily. “If you really hurt me.” Her fingers twisted together nervously. “It didn’t help that I told you I’m sore and you still started to spank me.”

He crossed his arms. “You’re a lazy sub, then.”

“Excuse me?” Alena’s fear disappeared in an instant, replaced by outrage. She mirrored his posture, arms folded under her bare breasts.

“You’re submissive because you’re lazy. You want the Dom to do all the work, make all the decisions, while still

controlling what happens.”

“I am not a ‘lazy sub.’” Alena narrowed her eyes at him. “You can be infuriating. First you walked away because I have an entirely normal reaction to you smacking me with a weapon —”

“A crop is a weapon now?”

“And now you’re calling me lazy because, once again, I am having an objectively justifiable reaction to both pain—that spanking *hurt*—and your implied threat.”

“I know the spanking hurt. You have to trust me.”

“Lord, preserve me...” Alena pantomimed strangling him, then took a deep breath. “You literally just said I shouldn’t trust you. That’s the implied threat I was talking about. But now I should trust you?”

“I...” Alexander unfolded his arms, shoulders sagging. “There’s a reason I prefer silence.”

“Which is it? Can I trust you? Or should I walk away?”

“Both.” Alexander ran a hand through his hair, then scrubbed his palm across his face.

She waited for him to say something, but after a painfully long minute he walked to the kitchen and braced his hands on the countertop, his head hanging low.

Alena’s heart clenched. She couldn’t hold on to her outrage. She walked over, silent on her bare feet. He tensed when she slid her arms around his waist from behind, but relaxed when she lay her cheek on his back.

She’d never forgotten something a fellow sub, one who was married to her Dom, had said back when she’d been new to the lifestyle.

They need us to be soft because they’re hard. Everything the world has done to them...all the scars, they put up walls and only our softness, the trust we give them can let them know it’s okay to come out of that prison.

Alena had thought the other sub was full of shit at the time. She hadn't been able to hear the truth of those words, because she had her own scars, her own walls.

Now she was older and wiser. She knew her mental health was far from perfect, and her moral compass no longer functioning, but she had coping mechanisms. She'd found a way to live with her scars, put windows in her walls.

She didn't think Alexander could say the same.

Alena closed her eyes and hugged him tighter. He was at war...with himself. He needed her, if only for this one brief moment.

Alena lifted her cheek and kissed his back. She wished he'd undressed so she could press her lips against bare flesh.

She hadn't yet seen him naked. It was one of the things she was hoping would change tonight.

But before they could do anything, she had to help him find his way out of the prison within his mind.

"When I pull away, what do you feel?" she asked softly.

The silence was long, but less painful than before because now she had her arms around him.

"I feel like a monster," he finally said.

"You're not a monster."

"Deep down, I am." Alexander straightened, then turned within the circle of her arms. "That's why you shouldn't trust me."

"Because your monster might emerge?" Alena wiggled her eyebrows and pressed her pelvis against his, hoping humor would work.

Alexander snorted out a laugh, and his furrowed brow smoothed out.

Success!

She waited, giving him time to answer her question, but he didn't say anything.

“Hey, sugar, talk to me. Please.”

“I started classifying subs, as a way to make sure I never partnered with someone who would tempt the darkest parts of me.”

“And subs like me bring out the dark?”

“Yes.”

“You were going to tell me what your other classifications were.”

“I was...” He slid his arms around her in a mirroring of how she was holding him. “A brat is looking for an excuse to be spanked so they can cry. They are looking for an outlet for their emotions.”

Alexander was staring into middle distance. Alena rested her head on his shoulder and listened both to his words and the faint *thump thump* of his heart.

“A lazy sub is focused more on kink and sexual pleasure than being a sub. They want to be strapped down and played with until they come. The more toys, the better.”

Alena held him and listened, glad he was talking again.

“Then there’s the abuse-fantasy subs. They want to be abused, but safely. They like humiliation, being used as an object.”

Alena was glad he couldn’t see her face when he said “humiliation.”

“Then there’s the CEO sub. She’s tired of being in charge. Tired of making decisions.”

“Why aren’t I a CEO sub?” Alena asked, adding a little outrage to her tone.

Alexander turned his head, bringing his lips within millimeters of her forehead. She wanted him to kiss her.

“Because you don’t need to be helpless. Powerless.” He frowned. “I’m not sure I’m explaining it correctly. These classifications are probably overly simplistic. I’ve never told anyone else about them.”

Alena rubbed the line between his eyebrows. He jerked, looking down at her as her hand shifted to cup his cheek.

“If I used my safeword, would you respect it?” she asked softly.

“Yes.”

“And if you gag me, will you give me a physical safeword sign?”

“Of course.”

“Then I trust you.” Alena grabbed his hips, then slowly slid down the front of his body until she was once more on her knees.

“I trust you, Sir.”

* * *

He bound her wrists using simple metal handcuffs, then forced her hands behind her head, locking the chain between the handcuffs to a D-ring on the back of the collar.

She knelt in the center of a large bed in what she assumed was a guest room, given the Spartan, almost hotel-like feel. If he had a playroom, he apparently wasn't going to use it. Given his status, and how many people probably came in and out of his home on a daily basis, it was very possible that he banked his urges and desires, letting them burn hot and bright once a month within the safety of the Orchid Club events.

He set his kit on the bench at the foot of the bed and opened it, glancing inside, then looking at her, as if considering where he would use her first.

She held back a whimper at the thought of a spanking. Their conversation had veered in an unexpected direction, and she hadn't gotten around to telling him that she was so sore, so tender that if he spanked her, she might have to safeword out of the scene.

He smiled faintly, slender gold chains spilling from between his fingers.

“On the floor,” he commanded softly.

Moving was awkward, her sense of balance thrown off thanks to the position of her arms, but she knee-walked to the edge of the bed and then stepped off. The floor of the guest room was wood, which was easier on her knees than the stone.

She knelt with her knees spread, elbows wide, her body soft and vulnerable.

“Open your mouth.”

Tentatively she obeyed. Alexander held up a gold tweezer clamp, a chain dangling from the back end.

“Stick out your tongue.”

Alena glanced up sharply.

Alexander looked down at her with a remote expression. A merciless expression. “Tongue,” he ordered.

Alena stuck out her tongue, and whimpered when he placed the clamp on it, tightening it by adjusting the slide that banded the clamp.

“Safeword.”

“hermun,” she mumbled.

“Good. Now stand.”

He didn't help her to her feet, seeming to enjoy her coltish awkwardness. Every time she moved, the chain swung side to side, occasionally slapping against her breasts.

Once she was up, he spread out the rest of his selection on the bed. Five additional tweezer clamps and various lengths of gold jewelry chain with spring clasps on both ends.

He put tweezer clamps on her nipples, tight enough to make her squirm, but placed back from the tip which made the ache bearable—and also meant she could keep them on for an extended period.

He added a chain to the nipple clamps, then connected it to the chain hanging from her tongue.

When he took a knee and told her to spread her legs, Alena whimpered in both fear and anticipation. She craved pain, a

sense of helplessness. He gave her both when he applied clamps to each pussy lip, adding chains that wrapped around her thighs, both ends clipped to the clamp. When she spread her legs, her labia spread too, the clamps tugging on her sensitive pussy.

He laid her back on the bed, her elbows pointed at the ceiling, the chains from the nipple and tongue clamps draped over her sternum and breasts.

He buckled leather straps around her legs, just below each knee, then attached a small spreader bar between them. He paused at her right knee, and she held her breath, wondering if he'd ask about the scar.

He hadn't, and she'd been glad. She didn't want to tell him another lie, even if it was a lie she told all the time. Knee replacement due to a skiing accident was unfortunate, but not horrifying the way the truth was.

She thought the spreader bar was the last piece of this particular bondage, and wondered what he was planning to do to her now that he'd hobbled both arms and legs, and clamped her nipples, tongue, and sex.

She was wrong to assume he was done.

Apparently she still had too much freedom of movement.

Alexander grabbed the spreader bar and used it to force her knees up towards her shoulder.

He took a narrow leather strap and looped it around the spreader bar, then fed the other end through the ring on the front of her collar. He buckled the strap, preventing her from straightening her legs.

She was folded in half yet spread wide, every part of her body that a Dom could want to abuse easily accessible—her breasts, sex, and ass all exposed and vulnerable.

Alena whimpered, swallowing the spit that had gathered in her mouth thanks to the clamp.

Alexander braced one hand on the bed beside her ribs, leaning over so she could see his face. "You're helpless," he

murmured.

This time her whimper wasn't one of pain, but of desire. Being so lewdly spread could have been embarrassing, but it also provided a sense of helplessness that was an aphrodisiac. No matter what she did, she couldn't get away.

He was going to use and play with her, hurt her and pleasure her.

Alena opened her eyes, wishing she could talk, could tell him all the things she was feeling.

Alexander slid his thumb into her partially open mouth. With the clamp preventing her teeth from closing, she had no way to stop him.

His thumb explored the inside of her cheek, her teeth. Then he rubbed his wet finger over her clamped nipples.

Wet made her nipples cold, and that only added to the sweet aching pain from the clamps.

Alexander disappeared for a moment, but when he came back, he was holding a square footstool. He set it down at the side of the bed, then grabbed her hips, pulling her ass to the very edge of the bed.

Once he sat, he would have an up-close view and uninhibited access to her pussy and ass.

Before he took a seat, Alexander held up something for her to see. It looked like a plain black pen.

She shifted her attention to him and raised a brow.

"The tip," was all he said.

There was a lewd joke she could have made had she been able to talk. Since that wasn't an option, she looked at the pen more carefully. The tip was solid black, and seemed to be made of molded plastic, with no hint of a hole for ink to come through.

It was a stylus pen. What was he...

This time when she looked at him, it was with wide eyes, and she started to shake her head, or at least as much as she

was able to.

Alexander grinned and sat on the stool. Cool air washed over her inner labia and clit—he was blowing on her pussy. Then his fingers spread her open even more, so her clit was totally vulnerable and exposed.

Then he ran the stylus over her clit. It felt sharp, and she screamed, both in protest and in reaction to the nerve-jangling sensation.

It wasn't really sharp. She knew that, intellectually.

Again the tip of the stylus ran over her clit, along the edge of the hood. Her thigh muscles trembled in reaction.

The feeling was so acute and novel that she couldn't tell if she loved or hated it. This was wicked torment of her most intimate flesh. Pleasure that veered toward pain. Pain that was almost pleasure.

He flicked the tip of her clit with his thumb, then starting drawing a spiral on her clit with the stylus. As the spiral circled around her clit, her legs began shaking, and her stomach clenched. Her hairline was damp with sweat, her nipples and tongue ached, and...

And she hoped this moment went on forever.

* * *

“Keep your knees spread.”

“Leave my poor clit alone,” Alena panted.

“No. I'll play with you as long as I want. In any way I want.”

His hand slid between her thighs, his chest brushing her back. When his fingers dipped into her pussy, finding the pool of wetness, he swirled it up and around her clit, which was hypersensitive after the torment of the stylus.

Or maybe it was hypersensitive because in the hours they'd been playing he had yet to let her come. The devious bastard always pulled back, stopped touching her, just before the orgasm would have claimed her.

After tormenting her pussy with the stylus, he'd worked her ass with anal beads, pairing that with a gentle hand spanking of her pussy.

Then the bastard had yanked the clamps off and made her suck his cock while her nipples and labia throbbed, her sore tongue working the underside of his cock.

And now she was on her knees on the bed, black leather cuffs on each wrist and ankle, with short chains connecting right wrist to right ankle, and the same for her left limbs. Simple bondage that nonetheless prevented her from getting off her knees. He'd joined her on the bed, his chest to her back, his hand between her legs and she'd hoped he was almost done tormenting her.

That hope had proven vain.

His finger swirled around her clit, and then he was gone. Fabric rustled and she turned her head, listening.

"Are you getting naked, Sir?"

"Yes."

"Can I please take the blindfold off?"

The blindfold had been the last piece he'd added to this bondage arrangement.

"No."

"Please, Sir. I want to see you naked."

"And I want to keep you blindfolded." The bed dipped behind her, and then his hands were on her arms, holding her still. "Helpless."

He leaned in and she sucked in air when she felt the tip of his cock nudge her lower back. His chest brushed her shoulders and he was most definitely naked.

She leaned back, wiggling her hips so the tip of his cock rubbed across the top of her ass.

"No," he commanded.

"Damn it."

“Frustrated?”

“Who me? Not at all.”

“No lying.” He smack her pussy once. “Don’t make me punish you.”

“Sorry, Sir.”

“You don’t sound sorry. You sound frustrated.”

“I am frustrated.”

“I want to hear you beg.” He grabbed her breasts, pulling her back against his chest, his cock pressed between their bodies.

She would do anything, say anything, to have that cock inside her.

“I need to come,” she moaned. “I need to come with your cock in me, your hands on me. I need a release from all this before I go insane.”

His lips feathered along the side of her neck, and then he bit her shoulder. “Only pleasure, no more pain?” His words were muffled against her skin.

“More. More of anything, everything. Please, Sir.”

He released her, and when he moved away, her back felt cold after the heat of his body. “Sir? I’m sorry. What—”

“Don’t be sorry.” He removed the blindfold.

She blinked rapidly, her eyes taking a second to focus. And when she did focus, when she saw where he was, she had to suppress a yelp of delight.

Alexander was stretched out on his back in the middle of the bed, gloriously naked. His erect cock was sheathed in a pale condom.

“You may ride my cock. If you do a good job, I’ll play with your clit until you come.”

Alena lifted her arms—well tried to. The cuffs prevented her from raising her hands above her waist. She jiggled, making the chains clank.

He grinned. “No, your majesty, the cuffs stay on.” He raised his arms and folded them, putting his palms under his head.

“Yes, Sir.” The words were polite, even if her tone wasn’t.

Alena awkwardly shuffled towards him on her knees. Without her hands to brace herself, throwing one leg over his hips was going to be a trick. Her first attempt nearly ended with her knee crushing his balls, so Alexander grabbed her leg and helped her get in position, so she was seated astride his thighs.

Alena looked down at where his cock was nestled against her lower abdomen.

His smile had given way to an intense expression, and when she rose up and inched forward, centering her pussy over his cock, his jaw clenched.

Alena moaned as the fat head of his cock bumped her clit. She tilted her hips and his cock slid along the valley of her pussy, until it rested at the entrance to her vagina.

She stayed still, savoring the moment, watching his neck muscles which, like his jaw, were tight with tension.

If she hadn’t been so desperately aroused, so helplessly in need of his cock inside her, she would have tormented him, trying to pay back even a small fraction of what he’d made her feel.

But she couldn’t wait.

Alena sank down onto his cock. They groaned in unison. She felt each inch of him enter her, his cock filling her. She wiggled when he was fully seated, her pelvis grinding against his.

“I should have put a plug in your ass,” Alexander said softly.

“It’s better this way. I’m not distracted from the feeling of your cock in me, Sir.”

Alena rose up on her knees until the tip was the only part of him still inside her. She adjusted the angle of her hips and

sank down. This time his cock hit her g-spot and Alena moaned low and long as a small wave of pleasure washed through her.

“Naughty, your majesty.” His words held a warning.

She smiled down at him. “Whatever do you mean?”

“I didn’t give you permission to use my cock to make yourself come. Focus on pleasing me.”

Alena rose up, slid down, rose up again. “I read an article once, written by a man, that female penetration orgasms were a myth.”

“Hearing you talk about other men makes me want to paddle your ass.”

Alena found her rhythm, rising up then sinking down in a motion that wasn’t perfectly straight up and down, but more of a circle. Her thigh muscles started to tremble, and she worried she wouldn’t be able to keep this up.

When Alexander splayed his fingers on her lower belly, his thumb wiggling between the lips of her sex and dancing over her clit, Alena knew she needed to make him come, fast, because she wasn’t going to be able to hold back her own orgasm with his finger on her swollen, wet clit.

Abandoning the slow rise and fall, she sank all the way down and then started to rock forward and back, his cock sliding in and out only a few inches as she shifted forward and back.

His thumb was relentless on her clit, moving in soft, rhythmic circles.

Her belly muscles were tight, her breathing fast. The ache from her abused nipples added to the pleasure, as did the sight of him gloriously naked under her. She wanted to run her hands over his impressive pecs, to taste his flat nipples, and test the muscles of his arms with her teeth.

The orgasm swelled, sudden and inescapable. Alena arched her back, fingers wrapped around the chains binding

ankle to wrist as a wave of pleasure crested and broke, pleasure flooding through her, powerful and elemental.

Alexander grabbed her hips, guiding her movements on his cock, which only prolonged her orgasm as he fucked into her pulsing body.

Then he groaned, head pressing back into the pillow, jaw clenched and fingers digging into her hips.

When the last wave of pleasure subsided, Alena collapsed forward on his chest.

They stayed like that, both panting, his cock buried inside her until it softened enough to slide out.

Alena fought back tears. Her time being his submissive was over. And now she had a job to do. When she started to sit up, Alexander wrapped his arms around her and kissed the top of her head.

She let the tears fall, and hoped he wouldn't notice a little bit of extra moisture on his already sweat-slicked chest.

CHAPTER 12

“Alexander? I’m sorry, but...”

He knew what she needed, and knew it was past time for him to let her go.

He kissed the top of her head one more time, then slid her off his chest and onto the bed beside him. He quickly released each cuff, and watched as she rolled her wrists. He checked her ankles, making sure she didn’t have any marks other than some pinkness due to the skin being warmer than the rest of her naked flesh.

Alena sat up, legs curled to one side. It reminded him of the way she’d looked that first night, sitting on the floor with the red cloak hiding all but her legs. Now there was nothing to hide her. She was completely, gloriously naked.

“You need to get some sleep?” Alexander said softly.

“If it was a longer flight, or a night flight...” She sighed and shook her head.

“You’re welcome to sleep here.” He tapped the bed.

“Is this your room?”

“No, a guest room.”

“Oh. I...I think I’ll stay in the room downstairs. My suitcase is there.”

She didn’t look at him. Was she insulted he’d offered her his guest room instead of offering to share his bed? Alexander hadn’t shared his bed with a woman since he’d taken over as

CEO. He didn't let people get that close, and with a house so large it could serve as a boutique hotel, it was easy to have women spend the night without involving the intimacy of sleeping together.

But if that's what she wanted, if that was what would make her stay...

Alena slid off the bed, and padded naked towards the door. She paused, glancing over her shoulder at him.

Alexander could take a hint. He jumped out of bed and followed her, pausing to quickly dispose of the condom and pull his pants back on. By the time he made it to the main room, she had her panties back on and was fastening her bra. He watched her struggle for a moment then brushed her fingers away, hooking the last closure for her.

She picked up her dress and shimmied into it. He watched her ass as she wiggled. Once the dress was on, he grabbed the zipper, sliding it up.

Dressed but barefoot, she turned to look at him.

There were suddenly a million things he wanted to say, starting with "don't leave yet" and finishing with the cliched but true "you make me feel something I've never felt before."

She touched his cheek. "My quiet man."

He leaned his face into her hand. Doing it felt so right, as if he were slipping into something he'd done a thousand times before, but he'd never felt the urge to lean into a woman's hand.

Only Alena's.

"Alexander." The hand on his cheek slid down to his chest. She patted him, and he knew she was about to pull away.

"Alena, wait."

She glanced up, brows raised in question.

"There's one thing we haven't done."

She smiled. "I've wanted to do it all night."

“I’m sorry I waited.”

She rose up on her toes, he bent his head, and their lips brushed together. They paused, feeling and tasting one another’s breath.

Then his needs—to taste her, claim her, possess her, and punish her—surged up inside him.

Alexander cupped the back of her head. His tongue swiped over her lips, then inside her mouth when she yielded. She sucked his tongue, which made his cock twitch in his pants. Three nights wasn’t enough. He needed more.

That thought was both alarming and invigorating. A wholly unfamiliar desire to simply be near her, to sit beside her on the couch with a glass of wine, to take her out to dinner just to watch her enjoy herself, was hammering at him.

Alena broke the kiss, gently pushing him away with the hand still on his chest. They looked at one another. Her face was pinched with regret. He hoped it was regret that she was leaving, and not that she regretted the kiss.

He wanted to say so damned many things. He wanted to invite her to dinner, to offer her a place in his bed, or to go down and sleep beside her so that when she got up to leave for the airport he’d be right there, able to steal one last kiss.

He had too many things he wanted to say, but he knew better than to speak when there was this much going on inside his head.

After a long moment, Alena stepped back. “I’ll call a car service, I don’t want to make your driver get up early.”

He formed the complete sentences in his mind before speaking. “I don’t need his services tomorrow. He can sleep when he gets back.” He hated that they were talking about such mundane things.

“Oh, that’s good.” Alena ran her palms up and down her upper arms. “Where should I meet him?”

“Wait for him on the first floor.”

“Thank you.” Alena walked to the door, pausing to put her shoes on.

Alexander snapped himself out of the indecision paralysis that gripped him as he tried to figure out what, if anything, he should say. Could say, without sounding like a moron.

In the end he said nothing. He opened the door, Alena murmured something polite and appropriate. At the top of the stairs she glanced back at him once, smiling tentatively.

He could feel the words crowding in his brain, knew that he wouldn't make any sense if he tried to speak.

The moment passed and she turned away, starting down the steps to the fourth floor.

Alexander waited until she was out of sight to close and lean against the door.

“Dummkopf. Alex, du bist sehr dumm.”

He turned, then walked over to the couch. Her red pashmina lay on the couch where he'd tossed it. As they were saying goodbye he'd waited for her to ask about it, hoped she wouldn't.

He picked it up and held it to his face. It smelled of her.

Tossing the pashmina around his neck, he wandered towards his bedroom.

Why did he feel like this? It wasn't like he'd never see her again. There was another Orchid Club event next month.

Damn it, he didn't want to wait a month. He should have said something. Should have...

He hung her pashmina in the closet. He'd have to tell his valet—who selected, purchased, and laundered his clothes—not to touch the vibrant scarf, or find somewhere else to keep it.

Alexander turned on the shower and stepped in, hoping hot water would wash away this odd feeling of loss.

He braced his hands on the wall, let the water sluice over his back, and finally admitted that he might have fallen in love

with Alena Moore.

* * *

Alena took everything that had just happened, put it in a little emotion-proof box at the back of her brain, and got to work.

As she'd expected for someone of Alexander's status, he had servants who had taken care of her things the way a five-star hotel would. Her suitcase had been opened, clothes hung up, and the various bags and totes set out on top of the vanity.

The lovely room felt formal and a bit stiff, with high quality furnishings in muted colors, the only personality coming from the Arabesque wallpaper.

Alena unzipped her dress, and reached into the closet, trading evening wear for black leggings and a long-sleeved tunic style t-shirt with pockets, also in black. The outfit screamed "athleisure" and could be passed off as her sleepwear, if needed.

She buckled on her passport belt, with passport and credit card, both of which had her real name on them, safely inside.

She'd done the hard part—she was here, and that had been the biggest challenge of this whole job. The security at Wagner Global's headquarters was too good. The next best option had been to get into this building, but security during parties and events hosted here was tight, and she needed some private time in order to get what she needed.

She'd considered trying to get a job as a member of the household staff, but everyone who was hired to work here, or even brought in for a day to assess a piece of art or provide some other service was heavily vetted.

The only one who could walk somebody inside, no questions asked, was Alexander himself.

After aggressively brushing her hair to get rid of any loose strands, she piled it up in a messy, casual-looking but secure bun, which would hopefully keep her all black outfit firmly in the "comfortable lounge clothes/sleepwear" category. A braid and beanie to make sure she didn't leave behind even a single

hair would have been better, but those would tip her whole look into the “cat burglar” category.

Next she opened one of her toiletry bags and took out several tampons. She pressed on the end of the stick and instead of an oblong of cotton, a small black device, about the size of a thumb drive, popped out.

Slowly she freed her tools from their various camouflages. Most important was her robotic laparoscope, which she assembled after disentangling pieces from inside a curling iron and several other tampons. The button camera was, of course, inside her travel sewing kit. White fingerprint powder had replaced the baby powder in the travel-sized bottle. The data cable was packed in with her laptop, and really didn't need anything to disguise it. The item she'd worried about the most was still there. A small drill dressed up like a hair dryer.

Finally she reached for a large makeup palette which was slightly deeper than a standard palette, but not so thick as to be suspicious. The weight of it, however...

She opened the palette, which looked normal, with twenty pans of color in a nice assortment of shimmer and matte.

Alena wiggled her nails into a seam on each side, and popped off the interior top. The eyeshadow pans were decoys, only as deep as a credit card, leaving just enough hidden interior space for the most important piece of equipment.

Carefully, she pulled out the state-of-the-art hardware protocol analyzer. The heavy black rectangle was the thickness of a new notepad, but powerful enough for what she needed.

Sliding all the bits and pieces into her pockets, and tucking the HPA between the passport belt and her skin, Alena checked her watch.

Originally, she'd just been hoping to manipulate him into inviting her to spend the night at his house, which was not as outrageous as it sounded. He often hosted individuals of sufficient wealth and power who didn't want to stay in a hotel, and executives from various Warner Global partner companies.

There had never been a flight to Iceland. She'd picked that as a destination while in the sub dressing room, after a quick scan of the news. There was always somewhere in the world that was canceling flights for one reason or another. All she had to do was find out what location was suffering today, then act shocked when she found out that her plans would have to be canceled.

The fact that he'd been the one to tell her about the volcano had been a wonderful stroke of luck.

Thinking about Alexander made her heart hurt, so she double-checked her emotional compartmentalization and opened the door of her room.

She'd spent a lot of time and nearly eighty thousand dollars in bribes to get current security plans for Wagner Global. That was how she'd known that hitting the headquarters would never work.

And if her expensive information was to be believed, in this building, security came second to Alexander's and his guests' privacy.

According to the plans, there were only a handful of cameras and motion detectors, all of which were centered around the doors and windows.

The trick was getting inside, but once someone was in, there was almost no security.

Still her information might have been wrong, and she held her breath as she started down the stairs. She paused on the third floor, again on the landing halfway to the second floor. Nothing happened.

Had there been motion detectors, she was fairly certain she could have talked her way out of the situation—hence the careful clothing and hairstyle choice.

She sat on the steps at the bottom of the second floor for five minutes, restlessly playing with the cord of her "blowdryer."

She even had a stupid story prepared about why she was carrying a blowdryer.

Satisfied that she hadn't tripped any security measures, Alena rose and rolled her shoulders.

The building might not have had interior cameras and sensors, but that didn't mean she was home free.

The next hurdle? Every door in this place had its own unique passcode lock.

The people who worked here were given the codes to let them into the building, and then into their floor and into their office. Only the house manager and, of course, Alexander himself, had the master override code that would open any door.

She didn't need a master code; she just needed to get into one room, a room she'd seen, briefly, earlier in the day on her tour.

She didn't *need* the master code, but she was fairly certain that was what the house manager had been using at each room they visited.

Standing, she grabbed the baby powder bottle from her pocket and walked over to the side table beside the second floor parlor door. A vase of fresh flowers hid the otherwise unsightly keypad that unlocked this particular door.

When Daniela had given her a tour, opening the rooms one by one, Alena had watched out of the corner of her eye. The tour had included the first floor offices used by the handful of full time staff needed to maintain and manage Alexander's affairs. Curator Absolon Blanchar hadn't been in his office, but she'd had a chance to meet several of the cleaning staff, who were updating the care and maintenance logs for the expensive antique pieces of furniture they'd dusted, waxed and polished today. If Daniela thought Alena's interest in the household staff was odd, she was far too proper to show it.

Alena unscrewed the top of the baby powder bottle, dipped a travel size blush brush into it, then carefully dusted the keypad.

The powder clung to the oil left by Daniela's fingers. Five numbers. One, two, three, five, and zero.

Knowing nothing but the numbers in a code was only useful if someone had unlimited attempts to key in every possible combination of numbers, as well as nothing better to do, because that would take forever.

That was why she'd tried to memorize the way the house manager's hand had moved each time she entered the code.

After seeing her repeat the process of unlocking a door several dozen times, Alena was certain the code was six digits long and started at the bottom of the keypad.

She looked at the fingerprint powder. A six digit code, and five numbers. *Shit*. One of the numbers repeated.

This part of the plan was always the most unsure. Despite what the movies depicted, the number was rarely ever something personal. It was a random number, occasionally with a pattern for ease of remembering. She had a custom-built app that would spit out the most likely passcode for a given set of numbers, which it did by analyzing millions of currently active passwords.

It was a gamble, and one she'd hoped not to have to take. And now it looked like even her long-shot option was too long of a shot. The app might give her a right answer if she could give it the correct six numbers. With the added complication of one of those numbers appearing twice, and less time than she'd hoped, that option was out.

She had a Universal Software Radio Peripheral unit upstairs, disguised as a portable personal humidifier. The USRP unit used radio signals to disable alarm systems. She could try that, but it wasn't a precision tool and she risked tripping a backup system.

Based on her intel there *wasn't* a backup system, but since that would be the height of stupidity, she was pretty sure there was a backup, and her sources just hadn't been able to find out anything about it.

The better option was to break in the old fashioned way, by outsmarting the physical lock. It might have been controlled by the electronic keypad, but there was a physical mechanism

that kept the door closed. She had some magnets, metal plates, and a slim jim all tucked away inside innocuous items from her luggage.

Alena looked at the pad again as she turned to leave, some instinct telling her not to give up.

How many times could the wrong code be entered before the alarm went off? People were fallible, so it was extremely rare that a system wouldn't tolerate a few failed code entries.

Even if she could enter the wrong code ten, twenty, or one hundred times, it was still extremely unlikely that she'd get it by plugging in random numbers.

Six digits in the master code. A master code that only a few people, including Alexander knew.

Alexander.

She swallowed hard. All the manipulation and lies to get to this point, it had better be worth it. Alexander was both tender and harsh, precise and emotionally complex.

Precise. He was precise, and logical.

0, 1, 2, 3, 5, 10...no that was one digit too many.

Some long-buried knowledge from high school math was jumping up and down, trying to get her to pay attention.

Did the numbers double? One doubled was 2, but two doubled wasn't three...but that idea worked for five and ten.

Not double, but add. Add the previous two numbers together.

And start at the bottom of the keypad, with 0.

Alena smiled slowly as the buried memory came into focus. Math rarely had projects, and she'd loved projects, that enjoyment a precursor to what she currently did.

The one project she did remember from math was plotting out a spiraled seashell, using the Fibonacci sequence.

A mathematical sequence in which each number was the sum of the two preceding numbers, starting with zero.

She slid on a glove and reached for the keypad.

0, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5

The light blinked once, then turned green.

Hot damn, that worked.

Grinning, Alena carefully brushed the fingerprint dust off the number pad, then put the flowers back in position.

A minute later, she gingerly opened the parlor door and slid inside.

Now, so close to her goal and high on the fact that she'd figured out the code without having to use any of her nifty toys, her heart was racing, her whole body humming with adrenaline.

She resisted the urge to whistle the theme song to various heist movies. After all, she was a professional.

Looking around at all the beautiful art, she took a moment to mourn the fact that she wasn't here for a painting or sculpture.

In the far corner of the room, Alena knelt, then popped the barrel off of the blowdryer.

Using only the light spilling in through the windows, she chose a section of floor that had clearly been repaired. She objected, morally, to ruining some long ago artisan's handiwork by drilling through hundred-year-old hand-laid parquet.

Alena set the drill bit on a seam of two rectangles of wood, and started to drill. The tool had been specially built to be quiet, but it wasn't completely silent. If anyone was up and walking by the door, they'd hear.

If she was caught right now she was probably screwed, so she held her breath until the drill finally broke through the floor, and the ceiling of the room below.

Working quickly now, relying in part on muscle memory, she added the button camera to the end of the robotic laparoscopic arm, and slid it through the seven-millimeter

hole. The feed from the camera appeared on her phone screen, which she propped up against the wall, looking at it, rather than her hands.

The temperature controlled server farm was illuminated by the lights on the racks of servers, red and blue pinpoints like a thousand regimented colored stars in the vast inky darkness of space. She worked the control and slowly rotated the head of the laparoscope, the camera feed shifting little by little.

The back of her neck was sweaty and it felt like ten minutes had passed before she located the cluster servers.

Luckily they weren't far from where she'd made the hole in the ceiling.

When she withdrew the laparoscope to thread the fire-wire cable into the room below, a tiny stream of cool air caressed her face.

She remembered Alexander's hand on her cheek and her stomach rolled.

She plugged the other end of the cable into the hardware protocol analyzer, with more force than was necessary.

Dangerously impatient, she slid the laparoscope back into the hole. It barely fit, thanks to the thickness of the cable sharing the space.

Watching the camera feed, she used the robotic clamp to grab the end of the dangling cable.

It took her several tries to get the plug of the cable lined up with a free port, but once she had it, she pressed the small button that controlled the robotic section of the laparoscope. The tip of the scope jerked forward, providing enough force to plug the fire wire cable into the stack.

Alena sagged in relief, hating the feeling of cold sweat on her back.

Aware that time was not on her side, Alena turned to the HPA.

It wasn't a consumer device, so it didn't have helpful things like a display to tell her it was working. The black hat

who'd built it for her had grudgingly added a small light that would blink if the unit was picking up data packets.

The light was solid red.

Sweet suffering Jesus, why wasn't this damned thing—

The light started to blink.

Alena nearly whooped with joy, but managed to restrain herself.

Taking a small satellite uplink transmitter from her pocket—it had been in the first tampon—she plugged it into a port on the opposite side of the HPA.

As data flowed through the cable into the HPA, it was then transmitted via satellite signal to her computer, which would in turn back up the data to an external hard drive, and encrypted cloud storage.

Gathering up everything she didn't need, she left the HPA on the floor, its light merrily blinking, the laparoscope embedded in the floor, and headed for her room.

She would have preferred to stay with the device, but with her timetable thrown off, she needed to make sure to rehide her tools in her luggage. She wouldn't have time to do it all later.

She started up the steps, moving quickly and quietly.

She didn't see the shadowy figure standing at the far end of the hall when she opened the door to her room and slipped inside.

CHAPTER 13

He couldn't sleep.

He wanted Alena again, and not just for sex. He wanted to hear her call him "sugar" while she teased him. Wanted to ask her about the scar he'd noticed on her knee, if that was why she didn't wear high heels.

She was right here, just one floor below him, and yet he was tossing and turning in bed, pining for her as if she were on the other side of the world.

Disgusted with himself, Alexander got out of bed and padded into the bathroom. Thinking about Alena, even if it wasn't thinking of her as a submissive, had his cock half erect and tenting the front of his boxers.

Alexander splashed cold water on his face and the back of his neck.

He stared at himself in the mirror. She'd left an hour ago, and if he hadn't fallen asleep by now he wasn't going to.

Before he thought of all the reasons not to do this, he went to the closet and grabbed her pashmina.

He couldn't let her leave without it. She might need it. He should return it to her.

He grimaced. Returning a scarf was no reason to wake someone up in the middle of the night. An utterly stupid excuse to go down there and wake her up.

Still holding the scarf, he got back in bed and spent the next hour willing himself to sleep.

It didn't work.

He hated this feeling that he'd lost her, that she was now somehow beyond his reach. First of all she was only one flight of stairs away. Second, if he wanted to see her without manufacturing some stupid excuse, he could set an alarm and be there to see her off.

You're never going to see her again.

Alexander pressed her pashmina over his face, half hoping he'd suffocate, putting himself out of his emotional back-and-forth misery.

He would see her in a month. He'd been in romantic relationships in which he saw the woman less frequently than once every four weeks.

A month. He'd wait a month and then they'd be able to scene together.

Unless she got another partner.

Alexander sat up.

He was a fucking idiot.

This was why he couldn't sleep—they hadn't said anything about scening together at the next club event. Was that why she'd turned to look at him?

He needed control, and yet he'd been so lost in the tangle of his own emotions he hadn't stepped in to take control of this very simple thing. It was so blindingly simple that he couldn't believe it had taken him this long to figure out why he couldn't shut his brain off.

He'd been distracted by trying to convince himself he hadn't fallen in love with her.

Jumping out of bed, and no longer caring that it was closer to dawn than midnight, he pulled on some gray joggers and, carrying her pashmina, jogged down the stairs. Determination brought him all the way to her door, but then he hesitated.

She'd said she needed some sleep since she'd be getting on a plane in a few hours, for a flight that wouldn't be long enough to let her sleep. It was rude of him to wake her up just because he wouldn't be able to get a good night's sleep until he knew, without a doubt, that she'd be subbing to him at the next event.

Secondly, what if she said no? Or worse, what if she said yes, but only because she wanted to avoid turning him down in person.

He paced down to the far end of the hall, disgusted with his indecision.

He should just stay away from her. Earlier, when he'd told her she shouldn't trust him, he'd scared her enough that she'd started to run.

Why was it that every time they were together, the night started off with one of them trying to walk away? Surely that had to be a bad sign.

Alexander propped his shoulder against the wall and stared at the door to her room, imagining what she looked like when she slept. Imagined waking her up by sliding his hands and mouth over her skin.

Imagined forcing her to straddle a wooden horse, her hands tied overhead, feet barely touching the ground. She'd stand on her toes as long as she could, but her calf muscles would fatigue and she'd be forced to put her whole bodyweight on her pussy, her labia splayed open by the narrow top of the punishment horse.

Alexander's hand curled into a fist. Damn it. Those kinds of thoughts were exactly why he'd been the one to try walking away the first and second nights.

Alena wasn't the kind of sub that would meekly accept the torture, using it to sink into some calm mental headspace he'd never fully understood, but greatly respected.

She would fight it, challenge him even as she suffered, and that would only make him want to see how far he could push her. To see what it would take to break her, to strip away her

regal core, the reserve that made her the type of sub he really shouldn't ever play with.

Divest her of everything that prevented the power exchange from tipping all the way to his side.

That thought was abhorrent. She'd said he wasn't a monster, but deep down he was cruel and grotesque.

He'd mail her the damned scarf, and maybe by next month he'd have better control of some of his more sadistic fantasies.

The sound of footsteps made him look up. They were quick, purposeful steps and Alexander tensed. The end of the hall where he stood was dark, so if he held still, the person coming up the stairs probably wouldn't see him.

It was probably one of his staff who'd stayed late working, or come in early for some odd reason. Most likely it was his chef, who came in early some days to start making bread.

Alena, dressed in black, her hair in a messy bun, cleared the last step and raced for her room. She was carrying a...hair dryer?

He rubbed his eyes. Was he seeing things?

The sound of her door closing was quiet, but very real. He hadn't imagined it.

What was she doing up, and wandering around with a hair dryer? Did she sleepwalk?

If she was sleepwalking, should he wake her up? He frowned, trying to remember if he'd read somewhere that you shouldn't wake up someone who was sleepwalking.

Before he could decide, Alena's door opened again. She walked out, sans hair dryer.

Alexander pushed away from the wall and followed.

* * *

Alena slid into the parlor, and pulled the door closed behind her. She hustled across the room.

The light on the HPA was solid red.

Alena unplugged the firewire cable from the HPA, tucking the end under her leg as she knelt on the floor. Grabbing the laparoscope, she pulled her phone from her pocket and propped it up so she'd be able to see the camera feed one last time.

She could have unplugged the wire on her end and let it drop through the hole and hope there was no scheduled maintenance on the server farm in the next several days.

If she did that, the cord would eventually be discovered, and then, if they hired a good enough white hat to assess their IDS—which she'd blown by, thanks to pre-programed coding in the HPA—they'd figure out someone had accessed their data.

New, more secure protocols would be put in place, and if what she was looking for wasn't in the current data, the evidence she'd left behind and their reaction to it would all but guarantee there would be no way to repeat tonight's activities.

Coming back would mean spending another night with Alexander.

Alena wasn't paying enough attention, lost in thoughts of the man sleeping somewhere above her head. She pulled the trigger to retract the clamp, but neglected to make sure the clamp had a good grip on the wire.

The laparoscope retracted, sans wire.

"Damn it," she hissed.

* * *

Alexander stood, frozen, in the entrance to the second floor gallery parlor.

He watched as Alena manipulated a long stick-like thing which seemed to be stuck into the floor.

Not into, *through*, straight through the floor to...

That area of the parlor was situated was right above the server farm on the floor below. Those servers contained complete copies of all his Wagner Global data, from customer information to the proprietary tracking system they used.

He was so stupid that even when he'd seen her open the parlor door—which should have been locked—he'd assumed someone had forgotten to close the door. Assumed she was still sleepwalking.

Even when he'd tried the door she'd closed behind her, found it locked, and had to enter his master code to open it, he'd still been stupidly hoping this wasn't really happening.

Willful stupidity, because he'd fallen in love with her.

He watched her, shock freezing him in place, as if he'd turned to ice.

She was a spy—maybe on behalf of the US government. Was she really American, or was that another lie?

That she was some American 007 was possible, though it was far more likely that this was corporate espionage.

One of his competitors had hired her to steal his secrets.

Not a spy, a thief.

Did that make it better or worse? A spy could at least claim patriotic duty.

A thief then. And apparently a very good one. She'd manipulated him, had sex with him, and given him no reason to doubt or question her identity.

She'd been at the Orchid Club for him. But he'd been the one to approach her. It had been his idea to invite her into his home.

For one moment hope rose, and he was sure he was wrong.

There were none so blind as those who would not see.

Icy shock melted under the heat of a new emotion—rage. Pure, blinding rage.

Alexander stalked into the room, his anger burning a hole in his broken heart.

* * *

She was so focused on trying to get the pincher to grab hold of the cable that she didn't notice the sound of the door

open.

But there was no way to miss the sound of rapid, heavy footsteps.

Alena released the laparoscope, and swiveled around, still on her knees.

Alexander.

Alexander was stalking towards her, his face twisted by anger.

Adrenaline flooded her system, even as her heart cried out in desolation.

It wasn't until that moment that she admitted to herself that she'd hoped to see him again, to submit for him again. With the data she now had there would probably be no reason for her to contact him again, but the possibilities—either that she'd need to find her way back into his home, or that she could keep being Alena Moore long enough to see him at next month's event—were what had kept her from mourning the fact that she had to leave him today.

As he closed in, her emotional anguish was quickly shoved aside in favor of panic.

Alena grabbed the HPA and jumped to her feet.

“Alexander—”

This isn't what it looks like? It was.

I can explain? She couldn't.

Alena stood her ground, waited until he was only a meter away then darted to her left.

She raced past him. Alexander was quicker than she expected. His hand caught the fabric of her shirt, but didn't get a good enough hold.

She zig-zagged between the pedestals of art, her thoughts racing. With her passport and a credit card safe in the pack strapped around her waist she could run and just keep running.

If she fled into the night, she'd be abandoning things—tools, her Alena Moore identification—that she would rather hold onto.

But nothing was worth the risk of going back upstairs.

Alena made it out of the parlor, and was halfway to the stairs leading down. Two flights and a door. It no longer mattered if she triggered alarms. She'd disappear into the park across the street, and hopefully be several blocks away before the authorities could get there.

Her panicked breathing was too loud, and it covered the sound of Alexander's rapid, heavy footfalls.

He caught her on the landing between the second and first floors. She'd slowed down to make the turn, and that's when he grabbed her.

Alexander's hand closed around her upper arm, his fingers digging into the muscles. Her forward momentum was arrested by his hold, and all that kinetic energy transferred to her shoulder joint. A white-hot stab of pain lanced through her, but she gritted her teeth, forced herself to ignore it.

She had a split second to try to decide what to do. To decide if there was any hope of her getting out of this.

Alena tossed the HPA down the steps. It cracked and clattered as it broke into pieces.

Then she was slammed back against the wall so hard her head bounced. Alexander loomed over her, his hands squeezing her upper arms so tight, her fingertips started to go numb.

He'd done this to her once before, but this time she doubted it would end in the same way.

She looked up, into Alexander's eyes, and she saw the hurt, the betrayal...and a frightening, seething anger.

“Alexander, I'm so sorry, it's—”

He grabbed her by the throat, squeezing tight enough that she couldn't speak. She could breathe, but barely. Alena

grabbed his wrist, trying, ineffectually, to loosen his grip on her throat.

She fought him, raking her nails over the back of his hand, tried to knee him in the balls.

He ignored her nails, and pressed his hips to hers, trapping her legs.

Fear, icy and hot at the same time, washed through her.

Alexander was physically stronger than her, and if he lost control of his anger, he had the kind of resources that would make it easy for him to dispose of her body.

It was just a game. That's how she approached all her jobs. This was a particularly complex, difficult game—her favorite kind.

But in games, no one got hurt.

And she'd hurt him.

Alexander was supposed to be the black knight, a piece she could manipulate across the board in order to win.

But Alexander wasn't a game piece. He was a dangerous opponent. She'd let her feelings, her desire to submit to him, cloud her judgement.

Her red pashmina was draped around his neck like a scarf.

The devil was always in the details.

If she hadn't been so heartbroken at leaving him, she would have remembered the scarf. If she'd remembered the scarf, he wouldn't have had a reason to seek her out in the middle of the night.

Alexander squeezed her neck tighter, briefly cutting off her breath. She tugged helplessly at his hand. His enraged gaze bore into her as she gasped for air, prying desperately at his fingers.

He released some of the pressure, but didn't let go. The betrayal she saw in his eyes made her sick. She closed her eyes, tears sliding down her cheeks in pain and relief as she sucked in air.

Finally, Alexander spoke, his tone ice cold and cruel.
“Who are you?”

* * *

The story continues in *Vienna Bargain*.

DUBIOUS

By

by Charmaine Pauls

CHAPTER ONE

Valentina

I never take the yellow glow of a light bulb or the blue staccato flicker of the television screen for granted. Looking for signs of life is an ingrained habit for people like me, people who live in fear. Already from the corner, I strain my neck to look at our floor. Then I stop dead. The rectangle of our window stares down at me. Black. Dark.

Oh, my God.

Charlie!

My palms turn clammy. I wipe them on my tunic and sprint up the remaining stairs to the second floor, almost tripping on the last step. A jerk on the handle confirms the door is locked. Thank God. Someone didn't break in, attack Charlie, and leave him for dead. I drop my keys twice before I fit them in the lock. From inside, Puff starts barking.

The damn lock mechanism resists. One of these days, the flimsy nickel is going to break off in the door. I force until the key turns. In my rush to get inside, I stumble over Puff who runs out to greet me. He scurries away with a yelp and his tail between his legs.

The darkness is menacing. Flicking on the lights doesn't expel the emptiness or the sick feeling pushing up in my throat. A hollowness settles in my chest as I take in the bowl of half eaten Rice Krispies and the glass of milk on the table.

“Charlie!”

Even if I know what I'll find, I run to the bathroom.

No one.

“Dammit.”

Leaning on the wall, I cover my eyes and allow myself one second to gather strength. Something wet and warm touches my calf. Puff stares at me with his hopeful, sad eyes, his tail wagging in blissful ignorance.

“It’s all right, baby.” I pet his wiry hair, needing the reassurance of his warm little body more than he needs my caress.

Lightning rips through the sky, the sound lashing out a beat later. I close the curtains. Puff hates thunderstorms. After feeding him, I lock up and knock next door, but, like ours, Jerry’s flat is dark.

Damn him. Jerry promised me.

It’s a wild guess, but I’m betting on Napoli’s being Jerry’s favorite hangout. It’s the only place he ever goes.

The rickety framework clangs under my trainers as I charge down the two flights of stairs. It’s after eight. Having a car thief as a neighbor keeps me protected to an extent, but only from criminals lower in the hierarchy than Jerry. There are the drug dealers, mafia, and gangs to be reckoned with. I remain alert as I go, checking the abandoned houses, parked cars, and alleys. Staying under the streetlights, at least the ones not broken, I walk like my mom taught me—like I’m not a victim.

The brewing storm dissolves, taking with it the rain that would’ve washed away the neighborhood’s stench and soot. It’s summer, but the smoke from the cooking fires gives the

Johannesburg air a thick, wintry smell as I cross from Berea into Hillbrow. Most buildings in Hillbrow no longer have electricity. When crime took over, people who could afford municipal services moved to the suburbs, turning the city center into a ghost town. Shortly after, the homeless and others with more sinister goals invaded the deserted skyscrapers. The door and windowless buildings look like

skulls with empty sockets and gaping mouths. Doors have long since been used for firewood. What is left is the carcass of a city. The vultures have picked the meat off the bones, and now there are only the scavengers who prey on each other, and if I'm lucky tonight, not on me.

The walk to Napoli's takes almost forty-five minutes. I'm scared, and my legs ache from standing in the veterinary clinic all day, but worry over my brother outweighs fear and exhaustion. By the time I get to the club, I'm close to collapsing. It's not the first time Charlie has disappeared. From experience, I know the police won't help. They have their hands full with murder cases and so many missing persons they don't have enough space on milk cartons to post everyone. Anyway, most of them are corrupt. I'll more likely get gang-raped by officials in a police cell than get assistance. I have to find my brother myself.

A group of teenagers in dirty vests sniffing glue at the corner shout insults.

The tallest climbs to his feet, his skin shiny with perspiration and the whites of his eyes like saucers. "Yo, white bitch. What ya doin' on my block?"

"Hey!" A meaty bouncer in a T-shirt with a Napoli's logo shuts them up with a look.

The bouncer doesn't stop me when I push through the entrance, but I feel his eyes burn at the back of my head as I walk down the black-painted corridor into the brightly lit interior. A song from a local rave-rock band blares from oversized speakers. The walls are covered in street art, the day-glo colors popping off the bricks under the fluorescent lights. The club smells of poppers and disco machine smoke. There's every kind of generalization inside, from the darksuited Portuguese to the gold-chained Nigerians. Half-naked women do the rounds, most of them looking spaced out.

Please let them be here.

I run my gaze over the bar and the roulette tables at the back. On the left, raucous cheering is directed at the flat screen where a horse race is taking place. The spectators go quiet

when they notice me. One of the men touches his buckle and widens his stance. A sign says the money lending office is upstairs. There's a queue outside the door. That's where gamblers and people who can't make the rent or pay off the mafia sign away their lives, pledging interest of up to a hundred and fifty percent on loans that will literally cost them an arm and a leg.

The men playing darts turn their heads as I pass. Shit. I'm getting increasingly anxious. As panic is about to seize me, I spot Jerry's orange afro in a circle of heads at one of the card tables. Charlie sits in the chair next to him. Almost crying with relief, I push people with plastic beer cups in their hands out of the way to reach my brother. Charlie's curls fall over his forehead, and his eyes are scrunched up in concentration. He's wearing a Spiderman T-shirt and his flannel pajama bottoms. The attire makes him look vulnerable despite his age and bulky frame. Anyone can see he doesn't belong here. How dare the sick son of a bitch who runs this cesspool allow my brother inside?

"How could you?" I say in Jerry's ear.

He jumps and gives me a startled look. "What are you doing here?" Charlie is studying the cards in his hand. He hasn't noticed me, yet.

I press a hand to my forehead and count to five. "You said you'd watch him for me."

"I *am* watching him."

"He's not supposed to be here."

"He's a grown man."

"My brother is not accountable for his actions, and you know it."

Charlie looks up. "Va-Val! I'm wi-winning."

For now, my focus remains on Jerry. Alcohol and gambling are not his only addictions.

"What did you give him?"

“Relax.” He gives me an exasperated shrug. “Orange juice, that’s all.”

“Come, Charlie.”

I take my brother’s arm, but the croupier snatches my wrist.

“He’s not going anywhere until his debt is paid.”

My mouth drops open. How could Jerry let this happen? He knows I barely make ends meet. I jerk my arm from the dealer’s grip. “How much?”

“Four hundred.”

“Four hundred rand!” That’s almost half of my weekly wage.

“Four hundred *thousand*.”

The strength leaves my legs. Letting go of Charlie, I brace myself with my palms on the tabletop. We may as well carve dead on our foreheads.

“It’s impossible.” I can’t process that amount. “In one night?”

The croupier regards me strangely. “Charlie’s a regular. He’s been running a tab, and his time’s up.”

“Jerry?” I look at him for an explanation, a solution, to tell me it’s a joke, anything, but he gnaws on his bottom lip and looks away.

I slam down a fist, rattling the plastic chips. “Look at me!”

The table goes quiet, but not because of my outburst. The men’s heads are turned toward the landing on the upper floor. When I follow their gazes, I can’t miss the man who stands under the light, his hands gripping the rail. He wears a dark suit, like the Portuguese, but he’s anything but a generalization. He’s nothing short of a monster.

His body is muscular. Too big. There’s not enough space in the room for him. He drowns everything in power and dominance. He’s not young, but he isn’t old, either. Rather than defining his age, his years give him the distinguished

edge of men with experience. Thick, black hair falls messily over his forehead, the wisps brushing his ears. His features are rogue, wild, and uncompromising. The lines running from his nose to his mouth are deeply etched. They're the kind of lines men with hard, rough lives wear. A ghastly network of scars runs from his left eyebrow to his cheek. Under the disfigured patchwork, his complexion is tanned. The ruggedness of his skin gives the impression of being marred by bullets. A short-trimmed beard and moustache cover some of his imperfections, but the damage is too vast to hide. It's a face you don't want to see in the dark and definitely not in your dreams. It's a face that stares straight at me.

Heat of the scary kind crawls over my skin. When I look into his eyes, it's as if a bucket of ice is emptied down my shirt. An unwelcome shiver contracts my skin, and my fear turns from hot to cold. His irises are blue like the far-off glaziers I've only seen in pictures. Everything about him seems foreign. Out of place. Dangerous. He's the kind of bad that's even out of Napoli's league.

"Fucken fuck," Jerry mumbles when he finds his voice. "Gabriel Louw."

I've lived here long enough to recognize the name. His family runs Napoli's. If Hillbrow is the crime capital, Gabriel Louw is the king of the money lords. They call him The Breaker. He's a loan shark, and I've heard stories about him that make my blood freeze with their brutality.

The best time to run is when your opponent is distracted. If we have any chance of getting out of here alive, it's now, while Gabriel holds the attention of the room with unyielding demand. Taking Charlie against his will won't work. He weighs twice as much as me, and when he gets obstinate, he's an unmovable, dead weight.

"Let's get an ice cream," I whisper in his ear, "but you have to come quietly."

Charlie knows about being quiet. We practice it enough times when we hide from the mafia, pretending we're not home.

Charlie gets up like I silently prayed he would and allows me to lead him to the door. I pinch my eyes shut and wait for someone to shout, grab us, shoot, or all three, but when I glance back Gabriel lifts a palm, and the bouncer steps aside for us to exit.

Outside, I suck in a breath of polluted air. Clutching my brother's arm, I walk him back to our side of the tracks, which isn't much better, but it's all we have. He talks, and I let his voice soothe me, trying not to think. When we're home, I'll go over what happened. For now, I'm too preoccupied with lurking dangers.

At Three Sisters, I buy Charlie a cone with vanilla ice cream dunked in caramel, his favorite. It's not until we round the corner of our building that trouble strikes again. Tiny leans in the entrance, smoking a joint. When he sees us, he straightens, takes a last drag, and flicks the butt into the gutter.

"Well, well." He wipes his hands over his dreadlocks and saunters over. "Hello, sunshine.

Tiny was looking for you." There's an edge to his voice. "Where were you?" "Ice crea-cream," Charlie says.

"Is that so?" Tiny stops short of me. He's not Nigerian or Zimbabwean like most of the people on our block, but Zambian. His skinny frame towers over me, his black skin lost in the darkness of the night, except for the whites of his eyes and teeth. "You've got money to spoil your ol' brother here, but not for Tiny's tax?"

He calls himself the Tax Collector. He's not the landlord, but he gathers 'tax' on the rent from everyone who lives in our building. He's a mini-mafia within a bigger mafia, but dealing with him means I don't have to deal with the bigger mafia, and he's the lessor of two evils.

Putting his nose in my hair, he sniffs. "You smell like smoke. Club smoke. Who were you with?"

Tiny pretends he owns me. Mostly, he pretends I like him. In reality, he's a coward, but he still has the power to hurt me. I know this from a split lip and blue eye.

“You’re dating now?”

“It’s none of your business.” Charlie’s key is not on the cord around his neck. I’ll have to ask Jerry about it later. I fish my key from my bag and hand it to Charlie. “Go up and lock the door.”

Charlie takes the key, but doesn’t move.

“Go on,” I urge. “I’ll be right up.”

“O–okay.” Charlie takes two steps and stops.

I give him an encouraging smile. “Quickly. I don’t want you to catch a cold.”

Tiny grabs hold of my hair. I close my eyes. *Please, Charlie. Obey.* I don’t want him to see this. When I lift my lashes, my brother is climbing the stairs on the side of the building.

“Got the money?” Tiny pulls on my ponytail.

The bond on our flat is fully paid. My parents paid cash for the property years ago before anyone could predict how crime and dilapidation would render their investment worthless.

“We don’t pay rent,” I bit out. This means nothing to Tiny, but I have to try. God knows why, but I try every time.

“You still owe.” He grins, flashing a row of straight teeth. “Tiny can’t let you stay without paying tax. What example will that be for the others? Give it up, Valentina.”

I freeze. “Don’t you dare say my name.”

He scoffs. “That’s right, because you’re my bitch.” He yanks on my hair. “Ain’t it so, *bitch?*”

“Go to hell.”

“Now, now. That’s no way to speak to Tiny.” He clicks his tongue. “Who’s gonna protect you if Tiny ain’t around?” He tilts his head. “Won’t ask you again. Where’s Tiny’s money?”

I swallow. “I’ll have it by the end of the month.”

“You know the rules. The fifteenth is payday.”

“Please, Tiny.” Tears burn at the back of my eyes. A cold weight presses on my heart.

In the middle of the dirty road, he pushes me down to my knees in the gravel, the stones digging into my skin. His eyes take on a feverish light as he unties the string of his sweatpants and lets them fall to his ankles.

“If you bite again, you’ll walk away with more than a shiner. This time, I’ll break your arm.”

Taking the root of his dick in one hand, he grips my hair in the other and guides my mouth to his cock. Disgust wells in my throat.

He pushes against my lips. “Suck me, white bitch.”

I don’t do anything of the kind. I tune out of the moment and become an empty shell. It’s a routine he knows well. He lets go of his penis to catch my jaw, squeezing painfully on the joints until my mouth opens of its own accord. Then he simply uses me, pumping and shoving until I gag. Tears roll over my cheeks. The saltiness slips into my mouth, mixing with the taste of sweat and filth. Mercifully, like always, Tiny comes fast. Not even a minute later, he ejaculates with a grunt and shoots his load into my mouth. When he pulls out, panting like a pig, I turn my head to the side and spit.

He chuckles. “One of these days, you’re gonna swallow.”

I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand. “When you’re pretty and your parents are rich.”

“Come on, baby.” He pulls me up by the arm, his dick hanging limp between us. “Give Tiny a kiss. Let Tiny taste himself on that useless mouth of yours, because you sure as fuck don’t know how to suck cock.”

“Let go.” I jerk free and snatch my bag up from where it has fallen on the ground.

His laugh follows me down the road as I run to our flat, hating myself as much as I hate him.

Jerry leans on our door as I come up the stairs. He looks away, avoiding my eyes. He must’ve left Napoli’s shortly after

us. That means he slipped past me in the street while Tiny got off in my mouth.

“You’re a scumbag.” I try to push him aside, but he doesn’t budge.

“Val...”

“Did you get a kick out of watching?”

He shoves his hands into his pockets. “I’m sorry.”

“For being a peeping Tom or dragging Charlie to Napoli’s?”

“I couldn’t resist the temptation. A Napoli’s VIP pass doesn’t happen every day.”

“Four hundred thousand rand, Jerry.”

“We’ll sort it. Don’t sweat.”

“Right.” The only way to *sort it* is to disappear, and we have nowhere to go. “How long has this been going on?”

He scratches his head and has the decency to look guilty. “A few months.”

“You dragged Charlie out there at night, without my permission?”

“Come on, Val.” Jerry braces his shoulder on the door. “I said I’m sorry.”

I knock for Charlie to open. I’m physically and mentally too exhausted to fight now.

“Whatever.”

I cook and clean for Jerry to keep an eye on Charlie while I work, and although Jerry is a thief, he’s not physically mean, at least not to Charlie.

After a while, when Charlie doesn’t open, Jerry takes Charlie’s key from his pocket and hands it to me. Puff barks as I unlock the door. He waits with a wagging tail.

“Good night, Jerry.”

“Can I come in?”

“It’s late. I need to study.” I use the excuse even if I know there’s no way I’ll focus on a textbook tonight, but it’s the quickest way to get rid of Jerry. Otherwise, he’ll stay until four in the morning.

“Oh, come on. Just an hour.”

I close and lock the door on his plea, waiting until his shoes shuffle down the landing. I brush my teeth three times before I fix Charlie scrambled eggs and toast for dinner, put him to bed, and settle down on the sleeper couch with Puff.

Sleep doesn’t come. I think of Charlie and the handsome fifteen year-old boy he’d been. He was one of those all-rounders who was good at sports and first in his class. He was my big brother. My hero. Two years younger than Charlie, I was in primary school when he went to high school. He fetched me when the bell went at the end of the day, carried my schoolbag, took my hand, and walked me to ballet practice. We didn’t tell my parents he made a deal with Miss Paula to work in her garden so I could carry on dancing. If they knew, my father would’ve demanded he worked for money to buy *necessities*, those necessities being booze and cigarettes. Charlie helped me fit the ballet shoes Miss Paula lent me and waited the hour the dance practice lasted before walking me home to fix me a sandwich. He could’ve hung out with his friends, but he didn’t. He took care of me.

If the accident hadn’t happened, if I didn’t want a stupid piece of chocolate cake that night, Charlie would’ve been Charles. My brother would’ve grown into the man he was born to be.

Like every night, I weep into my pillow, shedding bitter tears that won’t help one damn bit.

Brain damage is irreparable.

* * *

Puff cries at the door, letting me know he needs to go. The sun is up, but it’s barely five. I wait downstairs on the cracked concrete while he does his business against a dead tree and throw a stick for him to fetch a couple of times. Beside himself

with joy, he trips over his paws to lay the broken branch at my feet. Puff is always a happy dog. One morning, yelping coming from a garden trashcan alerted me. I pulled out a starved, dirty, flea-ridden puppy. To this day, Puff is scared of trashcans.

He's not done playing, but I have to call Kris and tell her I won't make it to work today. I hate leaving her in the lurch, but I've got to figure out what to do. Four hundred thousand rand isn't going away. Maybe I can explain about Charlie's condition at Napoli's. Maybe if Jerry backs me up, we stand a chance. Napoli's is part of the big fish. They make mince of petty criminals like Jerry, but he's a regular, no less with a VIP pass. They feed on addicts like him.

They need his business.

Back inside, Charlie is up. He offers me a smile that breaks my heart, because it's a smile that hasn't grown beyond fifteen years. Ruffling his hair, I turn to the kitchenette so he won't see the tears in my eyes. I call Kris, but her phone goes straight onto voicemail. Perhaps she's in the shower. I leave a quick message, telling her I won't be in and that I'll call back later to explain.

“Are you not going to wo–work?”

“Not today.” I open the cupboards and scan the contents. There isn't much. Charlie eats like a horse.

“What's for brea–breakfast?”

I can't tell him how sorry I am. We can't have mature discussions about guilt and penance.

“How about cookies?” The simple treats that make him happy are all I can offer.

“Cho–chocolate?”

There are flour, powdered milk, one egg, and cocoa. I can concoct something. If I could, I'd give him the world.

I heat the two-plate, portable oven, and let him mix the dough. While the cookies bake, I shower and dress before sending Charlie to do his morning grooming. At the same time

the timer on my phone pings for the oven, there's a text message from Jerry.

Run.

A tremor rattles my bones. I shiver, even if it's hot inside from the oven. Hurrying to the window, I peer through. A black Mercedes is parked across the road. A woman sits in the front, but with the glare of the sun on the window I can't make out anything other than her black hair. A man in a suit gets out from the driver seat and another from the back. He holds the door. A third man folds his large frame double to exit, adjusting the sleeves of his jacket as he looks up and down the street before turning his head in the direction of our window.

Gabriel Louw.

My breath catches. I jump back before he sees me. Charlie comes out of the bathroom and starts making his bed like I taught him.

“The coo—cookies.”

They're burning. I switch off the oven and use a dishcloth to dump the baking tray on a cork plate, trying not to panic.

There's no backdoor or window. The only way out is through the front. We're trapped. I lean on the wall, shaking and feeling sick.

Please, don't let him kill us. Scrap that. Rather let him kill us than torture us.

Everyone from Aucklandpark to Bez Valley knows what The Breaker does to debtors who don't pay. He has a reputation built on a trail of broken bodies and burnt houses. Puff, always sensing anxiety, licks my ankles.

Footsteps fall on the landing. It's too late. Fighting instinct flares in me. My need to protect my brother takes over.

I grab Charlie's hand. “Listen to me.” My voice is urgent, but calm. “Can you be brave?”

“Bra—brave.”

Puff barks once.

The knock on the door startles me, even if I expected it. I can't move. I should've taken Charlie and run last night. No, they would've found us. Then it would've been worse. You can't outrun The Breaker.

Another knock falls, harder this time. The sound is hollow on the false wood.

“Stand up straight.” Don't show your fear, I want to say, but Charlie won't understand.

No third knock comes.

The door breaks inward, pressed wood splintering with a dry, brittle sound. Three men file through the frame to make my worst nightmare come true. They're carrying guns. Dark complexions, Portuguese, except for the one in the middle. He's South African. He moves with a limp, his right leg stiff. Gabriel is even uglier up close. In the daylight, the blue of his eyes look frozen. They hold the warmth of an iceberg as his gaze does a merry-go-round of the room, gauging the situation to the minutest details with a single glance.

He knows we're unprotected. He knows we're frightened, and he likes it. He feeds off it. His chest swells, stretching the jacket over his broad shoulders. He taps the gun against his thigh while his free hand closes and opens around empty air.

Tap, tap. Tap, tap.

Those hands. My God, they're enormous. The skin is dark and rough with strong veins and a light coat of black hair. Those are hands not afraid of getting dirty. They're hands that can wrap around a neck and crush a windpipe with a squeeze.

I swallow and lift my gaze to his face. He's no longer taking stock of the room. He's assessing me. His eyes run over my body as if he's looking for sins in my soul. It feels as if he cuts me open and lets my secrets pour out. He makes me feel exposed. Vulnerable. His presence is so intense, we're communicating with the energy alone that vibrates around us. His stare reaches deep inside of me and filters through my private thoughts to see the truth, that his cruel self-assurance stirs both hate and awe. It's the awe he takes, as if it's his right

to explore my intimate feelings, but he does so probingly, tenderly almost, executing the invasive act with respect.

Then he loses interest. As soon as he's sucked me dry, I cease to exist. I'm the carpet he wipes his feet on. His expression turns bored as he fixes his attention on Charlie.

Taking back some power, I say, "What do you want?"

His lips twitch. He knows I'm bluffing. "You know why I'm here."

His voice is deep. The rasp of that dark tone resonates with authority and something more disturbing—sensuality. He speaks evenly, articulating every word. Somehow, the musical quality and controlled volume of his voice make the statement sound ten times more threatening than if he'd shouted it. Under different circumstances I would've been enchanted by the rich timbre. All I feel now is fear, and it's reflected on Charlie's face. I hate that I can't take it away for him.

"I'll only ask you once," Gabriel says, "and I want a simply yes or no answer." *Tap, tap.*

Tap, tap. "Do you have my money?"

Spatters of words dribble from Charlie's lips. "I—I do—don't li—like them. Not ni—nice me—men."

The man on the left, the one with the lime green eyes, lifts his gun and aims at Charlie's feet. It happens too fast. Before I can charge, his finger tightens on the trigger. The silencer dampens the shot. I wait for the damage, blood to color the white of Charlie's tennis shoe, but instead there's a wail, and Puff falls over.

Oh, no. Please. No. Dear God. No, no, no.

It has to be a horror movie, but the hole between Puff's eyes is very real. So is the blood running onto the linoleum. The lifeless body on the floor unfurls a rage in me. He was only a defenseless animal. The unfairness, the cruelty, and my own helplessness are fuel on my shocked senses.

In a fit of blind fury, I storm the man with the gun. "You sorry excuse of a man!"

He ducks, easily grabbing both my wrists in one hand. When he aims the gun at my head,

Gabriel says, his beautiful voice vibrating like a tight-pulled guitar string, “Let her go.”

The man obliges, giving me a shove that makes me stumble. The minute I’m free, I go for Gabriel, punching my fists in his stomach and on his chest. The more he stands there and takes my hammering, my assault having no effect on him, the closer I come to tears.

Gabriel lets me carry on, to make a fool of myself, no doubt, but I can’t help it. I go on until my energy is spent, and I have to stop in painful defeat. Going down on my knees, I feel Puff’s tiny chest. His heartbeat is gone. I want to hug him to my body, but Charlie is huddled in the corner, ripping at his hair.

Ignoring the men, I straighten and cup Charlie’s hands, pulling them away from his head.

“Remember what I said about being brave?”

“Bra–brave.”

So much hatred for Gabriel and his cronies fills me that my heart is as black as a burnt-out volcano. There’s no space for anything good in there. I know I shouldn’t give in to the darkness of the sensations coursing through my soul, but it’s as if the blackness is an ink stain that bleeds over the edges of a page. I embrace the anger. If I don’t, fear will consume me.

Gabriel gives me a strangely compassionate look. “You owe me an answer.”

“Look around you.” I motion at our flat. “Does it look like we can afford that kind of money? You’re a twisted man for giving a mentally disabled person a loan.”

His eyes narrow and crinkle in the corners. “You have no idea how twisted I’m willing to get.” Gabriel grasps Charlie by the collar of his T-shirt, dragging him closer. “For the record, if you didn’t want your brother to make debt, you should’ve declared him incompetent and revoked his financial signing power.”

“Leave him alone!”

I grab Gabriel’s arm and hang on it with my full weight, but it makes no difference. I’m dangling on him like a piece of washing on a line. He swats me away, sending me flying to the ground, and presses the barrel of his pistol against my brother’s soft temple where a vein pulses with an innocent life not yet lived.

“Va–Val!”

He cocks the safety. “Yes or no?”

“Yes!” Using the wall at my back for support, I scramble to my feet. “I’ll pay it.”

Charlie cries softly. Gabriel looks at me as if he notices nothing else. His eyes pin me to the spot. Under his gaze, I’m a frog splayed and nailed to a board, and he holds the scalpel in his hand.

He doesn’t lower the gun. “Do you know how much?”
“Yes.” My voice doesn’t waver.

“Say it.”

“Four hundred thousand.”

“Where’s the money?”

The ghost of a smile is back on his face. Behind the scarred mask is a man who knows how to hurt people to get what he wants, but for now he’s entertained. The bastard finds the situation amusing.

“I’ll pay it off.”

He tilts his head. “You’ll pay it off.” He makes it sound as if I’m mad.

“With interest.”

“Miss Haynes, I assume.” Despite his declared assumption, he says it like it’s a fact.

Everything about him shouts confidence and arrogance.
“Tell me your name.”

“You know my name.” Men like him know the names of all the family members before they move in for the kill.

“I want to hear you say it.”

I wet my dry lips. “Valentina.”

He seems to digest the sound like a person would taste wine on his tongue. “How much do you earn, Valentina?”

I refuse to cower. “Sixty thousand.”

He lowers the gun. It’s a game to him now. “Per month?”

“Per year.”

He laughs softly. “What do you do?”

“I’m an assistant.” I don’t offer more. It’s enough that he already knows my name.

He regards me with his arms hanging loosely at his sides. “Nine years.”

It sounds ridiculous, but the quick calculation I do in my head assures me it’s not. That’s almost five thousand per month, including thirty percent interest on the lump sum. I can’t call him unfair. Loan sharks in this neighborhood ask anything between fifty to a hundred and fifty percent interest.

“Nine years if you pay it back with the lowest of interests,” he continues, confirming my calculation.

Of course, I’m not planning on staying a vet assistant forever. It’s only until I qualify as a vet in four more years. By then, I’ll be earning more. “I’ll pay it off faster when I get a better job.”

He closes the two steps between us with an uneven gait. He’s standing so near I can smell the detergent of his shirt and the faint, spicy fragrance of his skin.

“You misunderstood my offer.” His eyes drill into mine. “You’ll work for *me* for nine years.”

My breath catches. “For you?” He just looks at me.

“Doing what?” I ask on a whisper.

The intensity in those iced, blue depths sharpens. “Any duty I see fit. Think carefully,

Valentina. If you accept, it’ll be a live-in position.”

I know what *any duty* implies. He’s no different than Tiny. Loathing fills me.

Gabriel regards me as if he’s making a bet with himself. “Either I shoot your brother and you walk away, or he’s free, and you work off his debt.”

“Give me whatever contract I need to sign, and I’ll find my own way to pay you.”

He chuckles. “It’s my terms or none.”

What choice do I have? My knees feel shaky, but it’s hardly the time to be weak.

“I’ll do it.” As I say the words, a ball of ice sinks to my stomach.

For a moment, he looks surprised, but then his expression becomes closed-off. “You have five minutes to pack.”

“I have a condition.”

The amusement is back on his face. He taps the gun on his thigh and waits.

“I want my brother’s safety guaranteed.” If I’m not around, Charlie will need protection. I don’t want a repeat of what got us into this mess.

“Fair enough. He’ll have my protection.”

“I need to call someone to fetch him. He can’t stay alone.”

He takes his phone from his pocket, punches in a code, and pushes it into my hand. “You’ll use mine until we’ve ensured yours isn’t compromised.”

Turning my back on them, I type my only friend’s number. While I’m dialing Kris, the man with the dark eyes searches my purse that hangs over a chair in the kitchen. I watch the men from the corner of my eye, my hand shaking as I wait for Kris to take the call.

“It’s Valentina,” I say when she answers.

Dogs bark in the background. “I didn’t recognize this number. Do you have a new phone?”

I saw you called earlier, but I haven’t listened to your message yet.”

“Kris, listen to me. I need you to fetch Charlie. Can he stay with you for a while?”

“What happened?”

“Charlie made debt at Napoli’s. I’m with the creditor.”

“What?” she shrieks. “You’re with a loan shark? Where?”

“My place. Things have changed. I’m going to work off Charlie’s debt, but he can’t stay alone.” My cheeks grow hot as I add, “It’s a live-in position.”

“What about your job here?”

“I’m sorry. I know how much you need me.”

It’s always hectic at the clinic, and I feel bad for what I have to do. Kris is one of the best vets I know. She gave me a job when nobody else would, and I hate turning my back on her.

Gabriel checks his watch. “You have three minutes.”

“I have to go. Will you call me when you’ve got Charlie?”

“I’m on my way.”

“Thank you, Kris.” I glance at Puff’s body, forcing down my tears. “You’ll have to—”

Gabriel takes the phone from my hand. “Hello, Kris.” He keeps his piercing gaze trained on me. “The door to Valentina’s flat is broken, but don’t worry. I’ll have it replaced.” He cuts the call. “Two minutes. I suppose you’ll pack light.”

Stress drives me as I shove the few outfits and toiletries I own in our only travel bag. What will become of Charlie? For now, he’s alive. I’m alive. That’s what I need to focus on.

Gabriel's cronies help themselves to the cookies cooling on the table. Gabriel says nothing.

Only his disturbing stare follows me as I move through the room.

I've barely zipped up my bag before he says, "Let's go."

Adrenalin from the shock makes me strong, strong enough to walk to my brother with confident steps and take his tear-streaked face in my hands.

I go on tiptoes and kiss his forehead. "Remember what I said about being brave. You can do it." I want to say I'll call him, but I don't want to lie. "Wait for Kris. She'll be here soon."

Gabriel takes my bag and steers me to the door, stopping in the frame to say to the man who shot Puff, "Stay with her brother until the woman arrives and bury the dog. Have the door fixed before you go."

The man nods. He's shorter than Gabriel, but not less muscled.

I look over my shoulder and take in everything I can—Charlie's haphazard hair, his soft hazel eyes, and the washed-out Spiderman T-shirt—because I don't know if I'll ever see him again.

CHAPTER TWO

Gabriel

The petite brunette stiffens when I take her elbow to steer her down the stairs. Her face is ghastly white, and her whole body trembles, but she walks with a straight back. I have dragged men three times her size kicking and screaming to a tamer fate than the one awaiting her. She has guts, but I already knew that from last night.

On the pavement, I take her hand to help her down the curb. Her delicate frame grows even more rigid, but she doesn't resist. Magda turns her head to the car window when we approach. She startles at the sight of the woman I have in the iron grip of my fingers, and then her expression turns stoic. My mother isn't happy. This isn't what she ordered. Tough luck. It's not going to happen the way she wants today, but I've got some explaining to do.

Magda gets out, her eyes shredding me to pieces.

"Put her in the back," I say to Quincy, handing Valentina over like a parcel.

Magda waits until Quincy shuts the door and walks to where we're out of earshot. "She was supposed to be dead."

"I made a deal."

"What deal?"

"Nine years for Charlie's debt."

She blinks. "You're *taking* her?"

I cross my arms. “Yes.”

“You want to fuck her.”

I don’t deny it. There’s no point.

“It’s not that simple, Gabriel.”

I saw her. I wanted her. I took her. Yeah, it’s that simple.

“That wasn’t the plan,” Magda insists.

“The plan changed.”

She throws her hands up in the air and starts pacing the sidewalk. “The price was death.”

“Charlie has brain damage.” That’s a tougher price than death. To me, at least. “We shouldn’t have granted him a loan.”

“Well, we did. Retard or not, showing mercy is showing our enemies we’re getting soft.” “Nine years are not exactly mercy.” Not with what I’m planning for Valentina.

“She has to die.”

“I never go back on my word. People in our business trust us because I keep my word.

Rhett and Quincy heard me make the deal.”

The charcoal lines around her eyes wrinkle. “What did you promise?”

“A live-in arrangement.”

“Arrangement?”

“I said she could work back the debt.”

Underneath Magda’s controlled exterior she’s simmering. A vein pops out on her temple. “Fine. You want to play doll? Have your fun, but we’re setting her up to fail. When she does, she’s dead and so is her brother.”

A sharp pain jolts into my damaged hip. I make a conscious effort to relax my body, muscle by muscle.

“Come on.” Magda is already on her way back to the car. “I’ll figure it out on the way home.”

For the first time, I regret never giving a fuck about professional relationship building. I don't care what people think or about anyone but my daughter, but Magda has always cast the net out wide, catching everyone she can put in her pocket. Her network and influence stretch much further than mine. She carries all the authority in this organization. Sometimes, I have the ugly suspicion the business is the only reason she married my father, so she could take it over.

She makes a hell of a tougher loan shark than he ever did, and he was a scary bastard.

I get into the back with Valentina while Magda sits up front with Quincy.

“Drive,” she tells my bodyguard.

Quincy and Magda are quiet, I guess because of the girl. An intense awareness of the woman next to me and my power over her spreads through my body, making me hard.

Fuck me. I own her.

She's mine.

The thought gives me a head rush. She's so small she looks like the doll Magda accused me of wanting to play with. Upright, Valentina barely reaches my chest. Her bones are fragile enough to crush under the lightest pressure. If I hug her too tight, her ribs may crack. I can wrap one hand around her slender neck. How hard I choose to close my fingers will be the discerning factor between life and death. Yet, she attacked me when Rhett shot her dog. She gave *me* an order when she told me to let Charlie Haynes go. She's strong and loyal.

I'm both fascinated and jealous of her love for her brother. No one has ever fought for me like that, and I doubt anyone ever will. Throwing *any duty I see fit* into the package was a test. I wanted to see how far she was willing to go for Charlie, not that her decision would've changed anything. I took ownership of her the minute I laid eyes on her. Last night, I already knew I was going to take her. Regardless.

When the club manager at Napoli's called to let me know my mother's target was in, the said target being Charlie, my

plan was to go in, take Charlie out, and then his sister, who would've been home alone. Making examples of people who don't pay is standard procedure. Some people don't fear for themselves, but they always fear for their families. By Magda's design, Valentina would've been the sacrifice to serve as a reminder to our debtors as long as they owe, their families aren't safe.

Then I stepped out of the office, and there she was, all tits, ass, and legs. No woman, except for the prostitutes, goes into Napoli's willingly. A nerve pinches between my shoulder blades when I think of what could've happened to her had I not been there. She's either extremely naïve or stupidly brave. After this morning, I suspect the latter.

Come to think of it, I don't get how she survived here this long. According to Jerry, she's been residing in Berea for six years. The shithole she lived in is in drug valley. It's a surprise the drug and sex lords haven't kidnapped and sold her or a street gang hasn't raped and killed her yet. There are infinitely dark things that can happen to an unprotected, beautiful girl in this neighborhood.

I watch her from the corner of my eye. In the twenty minutes we've been driving, she hasn't said a word. Her brown hair is long and wavy, curling down her shoulders. A clean smell clings to her, like fragrance shampoo or body lotion. I like it. Complex perfumes give me a headache. In the white shorts and yellow tank top, her toned legs and rounded breasts are exposed to me. So is the vein that pulses under the golden skin of her neck. Her fear excites me.

Her courage intrigues me. Long, dark lashes shutter the expression in her brown eyes from me. She's pretending to look through the window, but I know she's aware of me, and the gun resting in my lap.

The weapon is cool in my hand. I'm long since past the stage where my palms get sweaty before a job. I don't mind the killing. I live in a violent city. Only the toughest survive, and I'm a survivor. I won't hesitate to pull the trigger if anyone threatens or harms my family. Lay a finger on my property, and I'll break it off. I was the kind of kid who took

pleasure in breaking other boys' toys. I still break. Mostly bones, these days. When it comes to hearts, I only break what's already broken. That way, I don't have to take responsibility for anyone's feelings. Now I've taken responsibility for a person on a whole different level. At least there's no risk of breaking Valentina's heart. She already hates me, and with what I'm planning for her body, she'll only hate me more, but she'll need me with equal intensity. Of that, I'll make sure.

Her gaze widens fractionally as we pull up to our property. It's a double-story mansion on big grounds surrounded by a six-foot wall fitted with electrified barbed wire and twenty-four-hour armed guards. In this city, only people with money are safe. She keeps her face perfectly blank as we clear the gates. The original Frank Emley design dates from the early 1900s and combines various styles with a strong Victorian influence, iron work, stone walls, and art nouveau stained glass windows. It's smack-bam in the heart of Parktown, in the middle of the homes of the bankers, diamond dealers, politicians, and everyone else who can be bought.

Quincy parks and opens the door for Magda first, then for me. While I'm stretching my stiff leg, he lets Valentina out and hovers with her purse and travel bag in front of the fountain.

"I'll take that." I grab her possessions and grip her arm to lead her up the porch steps. My fingers overlap the small diameter of her upper arm. This is the point where I expect her to kick in her heels and scream, but she remains eerily calm.

Magda overtakes us on the stairs. "One wrong move, one wrong word to anyone, and

Charlie is dead. Get that?"

Valentina tilts her head away from my mother, a tremor running through her body.

Marie, our faithful old cook, opens the door. Her face freezes when her eyes land on the young woman.

"Prepare the maid's room," Magda says. "I'll brief you later." She enters ahead of us.

“Gabriel, bring the girl to my study.”

Before I can argue, Magda is gone. Marie’s gaze remains fixed on the woman at my side.

May as well get the introduction over with.

“This is Valentina,” I say. “She’s property.”

Marie nods as if I bring *property* home every day, but she understands. She’s been around the block. She scurries away without offering me my usual drink.

I steer Valentina to my mother’s study and close the door. Whatever Magda is cooking up, I already don’t like it. The sight of my mother’s personal bodyguard, Scott, standing behind her chair with a pistol clutched in his hand makes me rest my hand on my own weapon tucked into my waistband. The threat is clear. Defy Magda and Valentina will end up like her dog—with a bullet between her soft, mud-brown eyes.

Magda addresses my tiny charge. “I understand you’ll be *working* for us.” She points at the chair facing her desk. “Sit.”

I let Valentina go. She obeys, balancing on the edge of the seat. Mirroring Scott’s stance, I remain standing, just in case.

“What are your skills?” Magda asks.

Valentina’s lashes flutter as she lifts her eyes to me. They’re big for her small face and hauntingly sad, but proud, also.

“Answer when you’re being spoken to,” Magda says in the headmistress voice she reserved for chastising me as a kid.

“I’m an assistant.”

Magda’s mouth pulls down. “That’s it?”

“I also cook and clean for my neighbor.”

Magda taps her fingernails on the desktop. After some time, she says, “You’ll work for us as a maid and whatever else Gabriel expects from you.” My mother gives me an acidic look, as if the sight of me gives her indigestion. “You’ll work Monday to Friday until dinner’s been served and the kitchen is clean. On Saturday, you’re off from five in the afternoon.

You're expected back by eight on Monday morning. If we have events at home, we expect you to work, regardless of afterhours."

The maid idea pisses me off, but the leisure time unleashes a rage in me, not that I have any ground to stand on. It's Magda's business and her debt to collect. I'm only the dealmaker. My new toy better not try to escape. I bet that's what Magda is bargaining on. It'll give her the reason she wants to eliminate Valentina and terminate my *idiotic* deal, as she put it.

"You'll keep the house tidy," Magda continues, "and with tidy I mean spotless. Everything on the inside of the building is your responsibility, except for the cooking. Marie takes care of that. If I need you to cook, I'll tell you. If you poison any one of us, you and your brother will die slow and painful deaths. Understand?"

Her throat moves as she swallows. "Yes."

"Yes, Mrs. Louw or ma'am."

Those dark eyes flash with defiance, but she averts them quickly. "Yes, ma'am."

"If you fail in any of your tasks, the deal's off, and you're dead." A sardonic light sparks in Magda's eyes. "Work well for..." She looks at me and waits.

"Nine years," I fill in.

"Work well for nine years," Magda continues, "and Charlie's debt will be paid off. We won't pay you a salary. The money we would've given you will go toward the settlement of your debt. I don't allow servants to eat from our table, but you may use the kitchen facilities to prepare your meals. Since you won't earn cash, my son will pay you an allowance for food and personal commodities. Any questions?"

"Is there a routine I need to follow? What do I do, exactly?"

Magda gets to her feet. "You'll figure it out. You start immediately."

Valentina follows Magda's lead, getting up from her chair with consternation on her face.

Before she goes, there's one thing she needs to understand. I grab her face in one hand, digging my fingers into her cheeks. "Run from me and you'll wish I shot you today."

Her body is close to mine, and I can smell her scent. I fill the olfactory gap I couldn't place in the car. Raspberry. She looks like a dove with her wings tied, but she doesn't falter under my stare.

"Are we clear?" I ask softly. I never raise my voice. I don't have to.

"Yes."

"Good." I let her go.

Her hand goes to her jaw, touching the imprint of my fingers.

"Marie will show you to your room," Magda says. "You'll find her in the kitchen."

I hand Valentina her travel bag, but hold onto the purse and remain standing since I haven't been dismissed.

The minute Valentina is gone, I say, "She doesn't know the way."

Magda goes to the wet bar and pours a tot of Vodka, which she dilutes with orange juice.

"Letting her find her own way is her first test."

"Meaning?"

"The hidden cameras will record any traitorous acts she may conceive in her simpleton mind, and you'll use it to your advantage to break her." Magda takes a sip of her drink and walks back to her desk to pick up the internal phone that connects to the kitchen.

Marie answers on the first ring with a professional, "Mrs. Louw?" that comes over the speaker.

“Order maid uniforms for Valentina and linen for her room.”

“Any preference, ma’am?”

“Black.”

“The uniform or the linen?”

“The uniform. Make the linen...” she thinks for all of one second, giving me an over-easy smile, “...white.” She hangs up and continues, “Black and white. Has a nice ring to it, doesn’t it?”

It’ll remind her of what she became—our servant and your plaything.”

“She won’t run,” I say, a challenge in my voice. I just found Valentina. I’m not about to kill her on Sunday.

Magda smirks, swirling her glass. “That’s not why I gave her Sundays off.”

“Why did you?”

“To give her the illusion of freedom. Of fairness. For now, I’ll let her believe she has a chance. People without hope can’t be broken.” My mother lifts the glass to her lips. “You see?”

I’m giving us both what we want. You get to break her, and I get to kill her.”

Hatred laces Magda’s words. The fact that I want this woman enough to defy my mother elicits Magda’s scorn. I have no doubt she’ll make Valentina pay for causing me to stray from the not so straight and narrow path cut out for me.

At my silence, Magda says, “You understand we can’t let her meet her end of the bargain?”

That’ll be weak.”

“I promised her nine years.”

“I have no intention of letting her live that long.” Her smile grows until it invades all of her face. “She’s bound to screw up sooner than later.”

A sudden insight startles me. Magda is happy with the turn of events. She wants Valentina to suffer, and she's relying on my natural disposition to make it happen.

* * *

Valentina

My throat aches from pent-up tears as I leave Mrs. Louw's study. If I had any hope that Gabriel's mother would have compassion and help me, it's been eradicated in that room. She's worse than her son, her blackness far colder.

I'm sick to my stomach with worry over Charlie. I need to call Kris and check that he's all right, but Gabriel gave me my clothes and held onto my purse with my phone. I can't allow myself to think about this morning or Puff. Not yet. For now, I need to be strong.

With the imminent danger of death over, reality crashes down on me. Despair seeps into my pores. The calculation is harrowing. I'll be thirty-two before I walk free. *If* I ever walk free.

There's no doubt in my mind Gabriel will kill me without blinking an eye. I know men like him. My father was one. The servant role isn't only to pay off a debt. It's a means of degrading me. I have no issue pulling the hair from Gabriel's shower or scrubbing his toilet. What's killing me is sleeping under his roof and eating food he pays for. I'm forced to allow my enemy to take care of me. It feels personal and wrong. The last thing I want from Gabriel is any kind of care. I'll talk to Kris and negotiate to work Sundays. That way I'll still be able to pay for my studies. No matter what, I'm not giving it up. It's my only hope, our ticket out of Berea. I'll just have to put my plans on the backburner for nine years.

After getting lost in corridors and too many rooms with sofas and chairs—How many lounges can one family need?—I finally locate the kitchen at the far east end of the mansion. The size of the house overwhelms me. It's going to be a hell of a job to keep the place spotless.

Marie waits for me in a sterile looking kitchen, a hostile expression on her face. “I better show you around.”

Wordlessly, I fall in behind her. We go through the ground level with its reading, sitting, television, entertainment, and dining rooms, and up a flight of stairs. The bedrooms and bathrooms on the first level are luxurious and comfortable. As we move along, my heart sinks lower and lower. It’s too much.

“Who’s currently cleaning the house?”

Marie looks at me as if I asked her for a gold coin. “A cleaning service. I presume since you’re here, they’ll be fired.”

Poor people. They’re going to lose a big contract, but at least they’re free.

At a wooden door with an intricate carving, she stops. “This is his bedroom. Next door is

Miss Carly’s. Mr. Louw’s mother is at the opposite end.”

She knocks on Miss Carly’s door and opens it without waiting for a reply.

A girl of about sixteen lies on her stomach on the bed. The room is one of the prettiest I’ve seen. It’s decorated in blue with whitewashed furniture.

“Carly,” Marie says, “this is Valentina. She’s the new live-in.”

Carly lifts her head to look me up and down before burying her face in her iPad again.

“His daughter,” Marie says, closing the door. She lowers her voice. “She sometimes lives with her mom, but she’s mostly here.”

So, Gabriel and Carly’s mom are separated or divorced.

We explore the house until we end up back in the kitchen. Only the kitchen is surgical white. It’s not a room the inhabitants of the house *live* in. There’s no breakfast nook, books, or flowers, not a trace of warmth. It’s a functional room equipped for the staff. This is where Marie pauses the longest

to show me the adjoining scullery where they keep the household appliances and a fridge for the staff.

“You can keep your food here,” Marie says. “The one in the pantry is only for the family.”

Cleaning products are neatly stacked on the shelves on the wall. Everything is tidy and in its place. At least there are a state-of-the-art vacuum cleaner and washing machine to work with.

“Do you know how to operate these?” Marie points at the washing machine and tumble dryer.

I nod, even if I don't. I washed our clothes in the bathtub, but how difficult can it be to figure out a washing machine?

“The washing has to be sun-dried,” Marie explains, “unless it rains. Mrs. Louw doesn't believe in wasting electricity.”

From the scullery, a door leads to the maid quarters. This is where I'll be sleeping for the next nine years. I put my head around the frame. The room is small, the double bed taking up most of the space, but the cream-colored carpet is clean, and the mattress looks new. The paint is white, and there are no foul smells or damp to darken the walls. A connecting door gives access to a small bathtub with a shower nozzle fitted inside, a basin, and toilet. It's much better than what I'm used to. There are no linen or towels, and I didn't bring any, but I don't ask.

“Well,” Marie dusts her hands, “I'll let you get on with it. Your uniforms will arrive later.

For now, you'll have to work like this.” She gives my legs a disapproving look.

“Can I have my phone?”

“You'll have to ask Mr. Louw about that.”

The minute she's gone, I use the bathroom to splash water on my face. The enormity of the situation pushes down on my chest. I can't breathe. Needing air, I open the window, letting the breeze on my wet cheeks cool me. From here, I have a

view over an enclosed courtyard. There's a circular clothesline in the center and a wheelbarrow pushed up against the wall. Through the open door giving access to the backyard, the blue water of a pool is visible.

Since I don't know how to go about my new job with the massive size of the house, I decide to dive into the deep end and swim. It's an approach that always works for me. For the next few hours, I work out a plan of action as I go, starting with laundry and dusting, then vacuuming and finally washing the floors and windows. My mind is filled with Charlie and Puff, and even if I can't fight my tears, I can hide them while I bend my head over the mop. As I

mourn for Puff, I let my hate for Gabriel and the guy who shot him ripen. The only ray of hope in this nightmare is that today is Wednesday. On Sunday, I'll see Charlie.

* * *

In the late afternoon, Gabriel summons me to the reading room. Stepping inside, I'm taken aback by the presence of an elderly man dressed in a Mandela style shirt and chinos.

Gabriel turns to me. "This is Dr. Samuel Engelbrecht. He's going to take a blood sample and examine you."

I look between the men. "What for?"

Gabriel ignores my question. "Are you on birth control?"

The wind is knocked out of me by the implication of the question, even if I expected it as an inevitable part of the deal I'd made. If the doctor recognizes the shock on my face, he doesn't acknowledge it.

"No," I force through dry lips.

The doctor offers me an impersonal smile. "Take off your clothes and lie down on the couch, my dear."

I can't move. I'm stuck to the carpet.

"How long do you need?" Gabriel asks.

"Twenty minutes."

"I'll be back for her."

On his way to the door, he stops in front of me. “If he hurts you, I’ll kill him.”

Dr. Engelbrecht chuckles over his open doctor’s case. “It’s not nice to make jokes like that.”

“It’s no joke.”

Gabriel says it with a smile, but his words send a shiver down my spine. He walks from the room, shutting me inside with the doctor.

“Come now,” the doctor says, “I don’t have all day.”

It’s embarrassing to undress in front of a stranger who knows my employer is going to fuck me. My whole body blushes as I kick off my trainers, push down my shorts, and peel off my top.

He must see many patients at home, because he’s well prepared. A disposable sheet is already spread out on the couch. I keep my eyes fixed on the ceiling as I lay down, trying to go someplace dark in my head.

He fits on a pair of surgical gloves. “Bend your knees.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Don’t worry, my dear, it’s just a pap smear. You’re supposed to do it every year. First time?”

I nod. It’s not like I have money for doctors’ visits.

He chats through the examination to put me at ease, but I’m tense, and when he takes the sample it hurts. He lets me get dressed before he takes my blood. He’s just about done when Gabriel steps back into the room.

He walks to the couch where I’m sitting with my arm on the armrest while my blood runs into a vial. “How did it go?”

It’s the doctor who answers. “Very well. I’ll have the results tomorrow.”

I guess Gabriel wants to be sure I’m clean. Can’t blame him, seeing where I come from.

“Depending on the hormone level results,” Dr. Engelbrecht continues, “I’ll drop off an oral contraceptive.” He removes the needle and gives me a cotton swab to press on the wound. After packing the samples in his bag, he removes the gloves, shakes Gabriel’s hand, and takes his leave.

I stare at Gabriel when we’re alone, heat burning under the neckline of my top. “You could’ve warned me.”

“It would’ve stressed you unnecessarily.”

“I’ll be the judge of that,” I say, jumping to my feet. “I may be working for you, but it’s still my body.”

“No, beautiful.” He gives me a calculated look. “I beg to differ.”

I don’t have a reply. All I can do is rush past him, escaping the unsettling situation, and for now he lets me.

* * *

The hard physical labor is an outlet for my anger, frustration, and even a bit of my fear. As I don’t run into anyone while I’m cleaning, a false sense of calmness settles over me, but I start to stress again when I realize I can only manage the ground level in whatever time of the day is left. At least the house is immaculate. I can start with the first floor tomorrow. I won’t manage unless I work on a rotation basis, deep cleaning some rooms only every second or third day.

I don’t stop for lunch, and I never had breakfast. By the time I walk into the kitchen at sunset, I’m famished, sweaty, and tired, but everything downstairs is sparkling clean. Marie is stirring a pot on the stove. The delicious fragrance of tomato and beef stew fills my nostrils. My treacherous stomach gives a growl. My body doesn’t understand pride or honor. It’s ruled by the simple survival needs of hunger and thirst. Taking a glass from the cupboard, I fill it under the tap and drink deeply.

Marie wipes her hands on her apron. “I kept you a sandwich.” She motions at a plate under a fly net on the counter with a white envelope next to it. “Mr. Louw left your food allowance. He said you won’t leave the property before

Saturday, but if you write down what you need, I'll order it for you. We have a delivery service that comes every day." Of course they do.

Glancing at the wall clock, the housekeeper continues, "I'm off. The dinner is ready. Mrs. Louw is going out, tonight. Set the table for Mr. Louw and Miss Carly in the informal dining room. Make sure the kitchen is clean and the table set for breakfast before you go to bed. Mr. Louw usually sees to his own breakfast as he eats before I get on duty. I'll be in at eight."

A soft meow sounds from the door. I look down into a pair of yellow eyes flecked with green. A gray cat, his tail and paws tipped with white, runs inside and rubs against my leg.

I bend down to pet him. "Hello, you. What's your name?" "That's Oscar," Marie replies.

From her tone, I gather she doesn't care much for him.

"He's Mr. Louw's late grandmother's cat."

Pleased with the attention, the tabby flops onto his side. He stretches when I scratch his chin.

"Nothing but a nuisance," Marie says with a click of her tongue.

This makes me like her even less. I don't trust people who don't like animals. "He seems quiet enough."

She snorts. "Pisses everywhere. You'll see how much you like him when you have to clean

it."

"Has he been neutered?" I lift a back leg for a better look. Yep.

A puff of air escapes her lips. "Like I'd know." Marie takes her jacket and purse from a hook behind the door. "See you tomorrow at eight." She shuts the backdoor behind her with a firm click.

Curious, I tear open the envelope with my name on it and peer inside. I'm surprised to pull out eleven five hundred rand

bills, five hundred more than my monthly wage. It's a lot more generous than I expected. I contemplate refusing the money on the principle, but I don't have a choice. Without an income, I can't take care of Charlie and pay for my studies. Or eat. Feeling my hunger with full-blown force, I refill my glass with water.

At the sound of the running tap, Oscar twitches his ears.

“Are you thirsty? Where's your bowl?”

When I move toward the door, he jumps to his feet and scoots past me to the scullery. There, next to the dishwasher, are two porcelain bowls, one filled with water and the other with kibbles. It doesn't take me long to locate the bag of pet food under the sink. It's a cheap brand, one with more fiber than nutritional value. Typically, it's manufactured to fill, but not to nourish. I top off the food, rinse the water bowl before refilling it with fresh water, and make myself at home on the floor next to Oscar where I feed him pieces of the ham and cheese I dig out of the sandwich. Not the healthiest meal for him, either, but at least it's tastier than the cardboard they're feeding him. The food makes Oscar my new best friend. As I set the table and bring the laundry in from outside, he stays by my side, stealing hopeful glances at me that I can only reward with caresses, at least until I have my own groceries.

It's late, but I'm worried I won't have time to catch up with all the outstanding work tomorrow, so I fold the clothes I can and put the shirts and dresses for ironing aside. As I wait for the iron to heat up in the scullery, I hear sounds in the kitchen. Immediately, my stomach tightens. How, I don't know, but I know it's *him*. It's as if the air thickens, making it difficult to breathe. I pinch my eyes shut and hold my breath, hoping he'll leave, but the iron hisses and spits, giving away my hiding place.

At the sound, Gabriel sticks his head around the corner. His eyes fix on me, and then on Oscar by my feet. It's difficult to read him. He's looking at me like he's appraising me or trying to find fault. I hate that he makes me fear. I hate even more that he makes me curious. I try not to stare, but the scars on his face have a magnetic pull on my gaze. What kind of

weapon creates such scars? What kind of man survives it? I can't look away from the challenge in his stare.

Finally, the harsh lines of his mouth soften a fraction. "You better serve dinner while it's warm." Abruptly, he turns and leaves.

I let go of the breath I was holding, my chest deflating as his presence fades and the air decompresses again.

Carly sits at the table opposite her father, a smart phone in her hand, when I enter with a tray loaded with dishes. She doesn't look up from texting as I place everything in the center of the table. In contrast, Gabriel's eyes follow me around the room. I become intensely aware of my clothes and the state of my body. My skin is shiny with perspiration. I need a shower. To add to my discomfort, he inhales audibly as I sweep past him.

When the tray is offloaded, he nods at me. "Serve us, then leave."

I lift the lid on the bowl of rice and carry it to Carly. "Rice, miss?" I try to hide my discomfort as I'm forced to grovel and bow to my brother's enemy.

No reply. Her head remains bent over her phone, causing her wheat-colored hair to fall in a veil around her face. I hover until the slam of Gabriel's palm on the table make both Carly and I jump. The cutlery and glasses clatter from the force.

"Put away your phone, Carly. If I see it at the dinner table again, I'll confiscate it."

She glares at him with a cool, blue gaze. "Then I'll have dinner at Mom's."

A muscle twitches under one eye before he narrows both. "You're welcome to, but since *I* pay your allowance, your phone stays here."

She throws the phone down on the table, the mobile hitting the wood with a thud. "Fine."

"Valentina asked you a question."

She looks at me as if I'm the reason for their argument. "What?" "Rice, miss?" I repeat, keeping my face void of emotion.

"For God's sake." She sighs with an exaggerated eye roll. "Call me Carly. I hate to be called miss."

"Rice, Carly?" I say flatly.

She steals a glance at her father and mumbles, "What the hell ever."

Gabriel's knuckles turn white around the stem of his glass. I can't get out of there fast enough. The atmosphere is so thick with tension I want to choke. I return to my ironing and listen, but there's nothing but the clanging of their cutlery and the clinking of their glasses as the meal progresses in silence.

By the time they're done, so am I. All the shirts are folded to perfection, a hated curse pressed into every, neat line. The dining room is empty when I clear the table. Loud music comes from upstairs. I don't want to contemplate the difficulties of Gabriel's relationship with his daughter. I don't care.

When I get to my room, there are towels and a heap of linen on the bed, together with my purse. In the cupboard, I find three black maid's dresses in my size. There's no key in the lock and no chair or other piece of furniture I can push against the door, not that it will do me any good. I made a deal with a monster, and the only way to survive is to honor it.

The first thing I do, is extract my phone and call Kris.

She answers immediately. "Tell me you're all right."

"I'm fine."

"Where are you?"

"At Gabriel Louw's house."

"Did he...?"

A flush works its way up my neck. He will, but I can't tell Kris. She's got enough on her plate. "No. How's Charlie?"

“He was upset when I fetched him, but he’s calm, now. He’s watching television.”

“Thank you, Kris.” I blink away the moisture in my eyes. “I didn’t know who else to call.”

“You did the right thing to call me. I was worried sick about you.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I tried your phone several times. Why didn’t you answer?”

“I was working.”

“Doing what?”

I clear my throat. “Maid.”

“Maid or whore?”

“Kris, please.”

“Val, you’re worth more than that.”

“I’m doing what I have to.” A sudden wave of tiredness washes over me. “Can you please keep Charlie until the weekend? It’s a lot to ask, but I’ve got no other options. I’ll come visit on

Saturday, and we can talk.”

“Okay.” She gives a relieved laugh. “I thought you’re a prisoner or something.”

“Can I say hello to Charlie?”

“Of course. Hold on.”

She calls my brother’s name. A second later his sweet voice comes onto the line.

“Va–Val?”

“Hey, how are you doing?”

“Bu–burgers.”

“Kris made burgers?”

“Ye–yeah.”

“You’re going to stay with Kris for a while. I have a new job, and it requires that I stay in.”

“Wi–will you vi–visit?”

“Every week.”

“Whe–when?”

“Saturday.”

“Sa–Saturday.”

“Don’t worry about a thing. I’m going to take care of you.”

“Ta–take care.”

“I’ll see you on Saturday, okay?”

“Sa–Saturday.”

“I love you, and remember to be brave.”

“Lo–love you, to–too.”

I hang up and stare at the phone for several seconds, battling to process how quickly our lives have changed. It’s no use crying over things I can’t change. I’ve gotten through bad situations before. I can get through this.

Exhausted, I make the bed and have a quick shower. I try not to think about the fact that it’s *his* water or that I have to sleep in a bed that belongs to him, between his sheets, under his roof. Too weary to dry my hair, I pull on my nightgown and get into bed. My thoughts dwell on Charlie and Puff as my head hits the pillow. I want to say a prayer for them, but I’m so tired I fall asleep halfway into it, only to be jerked awake to a familiar and threatening presence in the room.

CHAPTER THREE

Gabriel

My new toy wakes with a soundless gasp. Purposefully, I let her fall asleep first.

Disorientated, her defenses will be down. It makes it easier to see the truth. For the moment, the only truth is the fear in her eyes.

It's not so easy to see the truth in myself, because I don't know what I feel, except for the physical. Her intoxicating smell dominated my dining room and hardened my cock. I don't know what it is about her that brings out my lust. I only know I want her like I've never wanted a woman.

Straightening from the doorframe, I prowl to the edge of the bed. She watches me with her big, murky eyes, her chest rising and falling to the rhythm of my steps. Gripping the sheet, I pull it down slowly. She clings to the fabric, but after a second she lets go, surrendering to the inevitable.

It's the chase. That's what I want to tell myself. It's not that I need to lie to myself. It's just hard to find the truth in the fucked-up slush I call my heart. Maybe I simply want the things I glimpsed in her, the bravery and the love that made her strong enough to take this— what's happening right now— and nine more years of it for the sake of her brother.

My mind tends to be overactive. It rarely shuts down, not even in sleep, but all of my logical thoughts still as I stare down at her body. She's laid out stiff and straight on the white sheet, her hair fanning over the pillow. I reach for the button of

my collar. As it pops through the buttonhole, she gulps. Her fingers dig into the sheet. If her body tenses any more, she's going to snap like a twig.

I'm many things, including a killer. I know I'm a scary son of a bitch. I own mirrors, and I'm not afraid to look in them. I see what she sees in her eyes. They're wide and moist in the light that falls from the scullery. The room isn't cold, but she shivers in her nightgown. Inexplicably, this touches me. The women I usually fuck don't shiver. To soften it for her, I turn the scarred side of my face away when I switch on the light of her room.

With the sheet discarded at her feet, I take the hem of her nightgown and move it up over her body, exposing her thighs, cotton panties, and her full breasts that, like her eyes, are too big for her body. She's perfect. Her calves are toned and her ankles tapered. I can see her pubic bone beneath the humble fabric of her underwear, and even the sight of the simple cotton hardens my cock. Careful to temper my lust down a notch, I take my time to study the swell of her stomach and the way her breasts slightly flattens to the sides. Her nipples are a dark pink, exactly like I prefer. For the moment, those peaks aren't contracted, but I know how to remedy that, despite her fear. I've had enough partners to accurately read a woman's body and give her what she needs.

To ease the tightness in my chest, I undo two more buttons, letting the cool air wash down my torso. When I climb onto the foot of the bed, the first sound leaves Valentina's lips. It's something between a sob and a gasp. I much rather prefer a moan. I fold my hands around her narrow feet. She jerks as if I shocked her with a stun gun. Slowly, I run my hands up her legs, over her hips, and up her ribs. Goosebumps break out over her skin. Careful not to touch any erogenous zones, I reverse the path, keeping the touch light. My cock twitches in the constraints of my pants, pushing painfully against my zipper, but this isn't about me. It's about setting her at ease and bringing her pleasure. After a long time of stroking her like this, she's still incontinent, but her muscles are less tense. With each caress, I move closer and closer to her breasts, until my fingertips skim inches away from her nipples. Even as they

finally contract for me with the tips turning into little pebbles, she fights it, pursing her lips almost as hard as she's squeezing her knees together. She's holding back, watching my every action, trying to contemplate my next move instead of giving over to the feeling.

“Close your eyes, Valentina.”

“Are you going to rape me?”

I chuckle. “No.”

“Then what are you doing?”

“Getting to know your body.”

“You're not going to fuck me?”

“Eventually, yes. When you beg me.”

Her eyes glisten like cold tiger eye gemstones. “That will never happen.”

“You talk too much. Close your eyes and shut your mouth, or I'll be forced to blindfold and gag you.”

My words have the desired effect. She seals her lips and pinches her eyes shut. I retrace my movements, starting a slow rub from her feet to the underside of her arms. After a few minutes of stroking her like this, a flush spreads over her skin, marring her neck and the upper curve of her breasts. The erogenous zones of her body will be filling with blood, making her breasts heavy and her sex swollen, preparing her for penetration. This is the cue I've been waiting for. Drawing circles around her hardening breasts, I close the spiraling trace of my fingers until I'm outlying her areolas. I watch her nipples tighten more, extending into kissable pinnacles I ache to feel on my tongue. Ignoring the hunger that makes my balls draw tight, I roll her nipples between my thumbs and forefingers and am rewarded with a gasp that sounds very different now. There's a crescendo of pleasure and an undertone of shame. The mixture is an intoxicating sound, one I take perverse pleasure in. I want to own her feelings, her whimpers, her pleasure, and her breaths. Like a signal, her hips lift. I know what her body is asking for, and I know she'll fight it.

I need total surrender.

Letting go of her pretty tits, I wrap one hand around her neck, applying gentle pressure. The touch is both dominating and protective, and the way she reacts to it will tell me everything I need to know about how to make her happy in bed. To my surprise, her head lifts slightly, pressing her neck harder into my palm. Valentina is a natural submissive. My favorite kind of conquest.

Keeping my hand in place, I reward her with a kiss on each nipple. Her lips part on a soundless moan, and her eyes fly open. She blinks at me in surprise. She either expected me to bite her, or she's battling to process the sensation. Holding her gaze, I flick my tongue over her right breast, sucking the delicious nipple deep into my mouth. Her back arches off the bed, and a soft cry falls from her lips. At the sound of it, she goes completely still. Instead of fighting her arousal, she lies back like a corpse, her eyes fixed somewhere on the ceiling. Her muscles unclench, going slack under my hands. This won't do. I won't let her hide from me in her mind.

“Look at me.”

The command is at direct odds with my earlier one, but I'm learning to read and understand her reactions. Of course, she ignores me, wandering around in the void she has created in her head.

“If you don't look at me right now, we're going to start over. This time, we'll practice in front of the mirror.”

Slowly, she turns her gaze back in my direction until she's watching me from under her lashes.

“Good girl. Keep on watching me and tell me what you feel. If you stop talking, we start from scratch.”

“What?”

She furrows her eyebrows, but I don't give her time for another question. I resume the task of licking her nipple like it's my favorite candy. When a suppressed moan slips from her lips, I lift my head to give her a hard look.

“Valentina, I won't tell you again. How does it feel?”

She licks her lips, watching me as I lave her breast with my tongue.

“It feels ... hot.” She flushes bright red. “Wet. I mean...”

“Good?”

She bites her bottom lip.

“Carry on.” I move to her other breast.

“Uh... Soft. Ah! Hard.”

She cries out as I nip her with my teeth. “Tell me.”

“Sore. No. Different. I don’t know!”

I suck her relentlessly, plumping up her breast in my fist and pinching the hard tip with my lips. “Be clearer.”

“Good! Ah, God. It hurts...good.”

She pants and squirms. It’s good to have her in the moment with me. I need her to feel, because I get off on her pleasure. I kiss her breasts and fondle her nipples until she’s close to hyperventilating, throwing incoherent words and phrases at me. “I’m going to make you come,” I say, “and you can’t stop it.” She tenses again, her face a mask of agonized pleasure.

“Say it,” I urge, pinching her nipple hard.

She yelps. “Can’t...stop it.”

“That’s it.” I suck on her nipple. “Let it go.”

She wiggles. “I—I can’t.”

“I won’t stop, Valentina. We’ll go all night if we have to, but you’re going to give it to me.”

She grips my shoulders, her nails digging into my skin, and gives a frustrated sob. “I don’t understand what you want from me.”

“Just lie back and I’ll show you.”

Her grip on me tightens, and her neck strains up, fear dampening the arousal in her eyes.

“My cock will stay in my pants. Lie back.”

Slowly, the muscles in her neck relax as she lays her head back on the pillow. Once more, her body goes soft beneath me, but this time she's present. There's no more holding back. Her legs go slack, her thighs parting an inch. The slow, raspy lick of my tongue over her nipple is another reward, strengthening her good behavior. When she lifts her shoulders off the mattress, I almost lose control. I suck her nipple to the back of my mouth, eating her breast like a piece of cake, and she throws the reward right back at me by pushing deeper, forcing me to take more and giving me what I've been waiting for. The sweetest whimpers fall on my ears.

So damn hot. My fingers tighten involuntarily around her neck, applying more pressure, showing us both who she belongs to. There's no intent to harm, and her subconscious mind knows this. I lave her other breast with the wet strokes of my tongue, giving the plump curve the same meticulous attention as its twin until she squirms in my hold. Loosening my grip on her neck, I let my palm slide down her throat, between her breasts, and over her stomach. Her skin is slick from my kisses, and the wet trail makes her tummy quiver. Keeping my hand on her stomach, I kiss a path to her pubic bone, nuzzling her skin with my nose. The smell of her desire drives me crazy. She's wet, and the possessive side of me revels in the knowledge that I'm the cause. I'm the master of her desire. I brought her this far. I'll take her over the edge.

She seems barely coherent as I hook my fingers in the elastic of her underwear and pull it over her hips and down her legs. I free her ankles and discard the piece of clothing on the floor. She's turned on enough to take it a level rougher. I push her legs wide open, giving all of my senses access to her deepest core.

It's no secret that I love fucking. This is the part of women I love with reverence. I love their delicate folds, their taste, their smell, and the sounds they make when I invade their bodies. Valentina's cunt is beautiful. Her pussy lips are pink and plump, glistening with arousal. Her clit peeks from between her swollen labia like a pearl. The pucker of her asshole is a rosebud, and the tightness tells me no man has claimed her there. I don't mind her dark, silky pubic hair, but it

has to go. I want to see her bare skin when I part her with my cock. I want to see her peachy lips stretch as wide as they can go when I take her deep, but thinking ahead only fucks with my head and torments my aching dick. I close my eyes and focus on her taste, instead. My tongue sweeps over her slit to the tip of her clit. She jerks violently, a sweet cry bouncing off the walls. Her hands dig into my shoulders, shoving and pulling simultaneously. She stopped talking. The only sounds coming from her lips are the moans I was chasing after.

“Just feel,” I whisper over her skin. “You have no control, no choice.”

She relaxes and opens wider, giving me better access. I spear my tongue into her pussy, and groan as her thighs hug my face in a soft vice. Her honey coats my tongue, the taste a powerful aphrodisiac. I could stay with my head buried between her legs forever, but even my patience, the resolve and control I’m so proud of, has limits. I eat her like a starving man, my teeth grazing and nibbling while my lips pinch and suck. Her nails dig into my skin and her heels kick into the mattress. When I lift my eyes, I’m shocked to see she’s staring at me, her brown pools drowsed in desire. Soft, feminine pants and moans lash at me as I suck her harder, feeding my addiction for this, for everything she’s giving me.

A little surprised cry fills the air, and her hips lock. I know what this means. I push down with my palm on her stomach to measure her body’s reaction, but it’s not necessary. I know exactly at which point she comes. She utters a high note and contracts around my tongue with a tangy explosion of moisture. I want to use her orgasm to drench my cock, to make it slick so I can sink it deep into her body, as deep as she can take me, but for now I only kiss and lick her clit, prolonging the shockwaves and reveling in her release. Despite my earlier resolution, I’m more than ready to fuck her, but something is holding me back. For some reason, I feel like it’s her first time coming. A hot wave of satisfaction and immense anticipation washes over me as I consider the impossible.

Valentina is a virgin.

And it fucking crushes me.

I can't break something that is whole *and* pure.

* * *

Valentina

I'm inexperienced, not stupid. I know I had an orgasm, but it was my first and I'm devastatingly sad. Ashamed. I gave in to the man who was going to kill my brother, but those hands on my body... I expected force and roughness. Instead, he gave me gentle. It confused the hell out of me. The way his fingers explored my skin soothed me, and when I gave up on my fear, he set me on fire. He knew exactly what to do. There's no doubt he's a skilled and intuitive lover. He touched me like no man ever has, in a way that made my skin come alive. He twisted and primed my body, playing it like an instrument until it gave him the tune he wanted. I thought he was going to rape me. In a way, he did. In a way, this is worse. He raped my senses, took my defenses, and left me vulnerable, but not yet cold. His arms fold around me, pulling my naked back to his clothed chest. Hot, unwanted tears drip on the pillow.

I gave in.

I lost.

My body betrayed me.

Big, hard hands, hands that tortured my nipples into aching points of need, brush over my hip. One arm curls under me, strong fingers locking on my breast, while the other strokes my thigh gently as I battle to get my sobbing under control.

"Shh," he whispers against my ear. Repeating the same mantra from earlier, he gives me absolution. "You didn't have a choice."

There are many things I can take, but not his gentleness. I need to hate him. Prying his fingers open, I roll to the edge of the bed and jump to my feet.

"Get away from me." I jerk my nightgown down my body.

His eyes harden, but he doesn't reach for me. With his dark expression on top of the scars, he looks scarier than any man

I've seen.

Lifting up on one elbow, he says, "You should've told me it was your first time."

Why can't I feel indifferent? Indifference won't hurt or cut so deep. The ache and betrayal won't let me go. Using that pain, I mold it into a shield of hatred.

Loathing infuses my tone. "What difference would it have made?"

There's a warning in his voice. "Valentina, I took nothing you didn't promise to give."

"Exactly," I snap. "I promised to give, not to take."

His lips lift in one corner, giving him the same amused expression from this morning when he threatened Charlie's life. "Give and take, now that's a debatable subject. The way I look at it, this was all give on your part. I did all the taking."

I'm fuming. I expected him to use me, but to do it like Tiny. Instead, he somehow managed to make me a partner in whatever he executed.

"Are you angry that I made you come or that you enjoyed it?" he asks, hitting the hammer on the nail.

Shivering with fury, mostly at myself, I wrap my arms around my body. "Is there something else you want? Any other *service* you require?"

He smirks. "All in good time." A wince replaces his cocky smile as he gets to his feet. "I'll have my breakfast at five. Grapefruit, orange juice, coffee, and omelette with chili. Make sure it's ready."

Adjusting his pants over a hard-on impossible to miss, he limps from the room. I wait a good five minutes after the clack of his heels on the kitchen tiles has disappeared before I shut the door, leaning against it with wobbly legs. My shoulders shake with more unwelcome sobs, but I can't stop them. It takes me a few minutes to find my control. I want to have another shower to wash away the remnants of Gabriel's touch, but a glimpse at my phone tells me it's past midnight. I have to

wake in four hours, so I slip into bed and give myself over to the escape of a shallow and fitful sleep.

* * *

It's torture when my alarm goes off at four. Oscar is stretched out on the foot of the bed, purring like an engine. He must've jumped through the window during the night. I can only spare him a quick cuddle, or I'll be late. I put last night out of my mind, making a conscious decision to not dwell on the shameful memory. Torturing myself with the details won't change anything.

I'll only make it harder on myself.

After a shower, I dress in the morbid, black dress and tie my hair into a ponytail. Knowing I'll be on my feet all day, I slip on my trainers. Half an hour later, I'm in the kitchen, chopping chili for Gabriel's omelette while the coffee percolates. Cooking comes easy for me. I've fed Charlie and myself since I was fourteen. I miss my brother so much. We've never been apart. It feels as if my anchor has been dislodged, and I'm floating aimlessly in a dark and treacherous sea.

My back is turned to the door, but I know the minute Gabriel walks into the kitchen. I first feel and then smell him. Heat creeps up my spine, making me break out in a cold sweat. The air becomes thick like smoke hard to breathe. My body registers his scent from where I've categorized it in my brain, connecting the dots to the sensual experience from last night, an experience I'd rather forget, but I can't help the powerful association. The clean, spicy fragrance of his skin triggers an unwanted reaction in my belly, contracting my womb with a fluttering echo of my first orgasm. My cheeks flame at the thought. I hope he'll think it's from the hot stove plate.

“Good morning, Valentina.”

That voice again. Now that I'm less frightened, it leaves a complex mixture of sensory impressions on me—dark, smooth, bittersweet, and deep. Like burnt sugar. I glance over

my shoulder. He's dressed in a dark suit with a white shirt and red tie. His hair is damp and his beard trimmed.

I fold his omelette, doing my best not to let my nerves show. "Good morning."

He comes to stand next to me, so close that our hips almost touch, and reaches for two mugs in the cupboard above. As he pours the coffee with a steady hand, mine holding the spatula starts shaking.

"Sleep well?" He pushes one of the mugs toward me, angling the scarred side of his face away.

Of course not. "Yes, thank you."

"Have you eaten?"

"Later."

"We can share the omelette."

"I can't eat this early."

I'd rather die of hunger than share his omelette. It's an illogical thought, since he gives me the allowance that pays for my food, but I have to hold on to whatever pride I can salvage.

"The doctor emailed your blood test results. You're clean."

Our eyes lock when I involuntarily jerk my head in his direction. We both know what this means. As soon as the birth control takes, he'll fuck me. Unless he uses a condom to do it sooner. Before he can say anything else, I serve his omelette on the plate I heated in the warmer drawer and carry it to the dining room. Then I disappear to start my duties for the day, trying not to think about what he said in the kitchen or that I'd become a maid with benefits. A whore.

* * *

I quickly get a handle on the house routine. Carly gets up at six and leaves the house at seven without breakfast. Marie comes in at eight, places the grocery orders for the day, and starts preparing lunch. I give her my habitual shopping list. My staple diet consists of instant noodles and apples. Apples are cheap, filling, and nutritious. The noodles give me a boost

of energy when my blood sugar levels drop too low. I need the bulk of the money I save for Charlie and my studies.

As I make the bed in Gabriel's room, I try not to gawk at his private space, but my curiosity outweighs my manners. Like him, the room is overly masculine. Heavy, silver-gray curtains drape the windows, and his furniture is bulky, modern, and square. The bed is bigger and longer than a king size. The monogrammed initials on the sheets indicate they're custom made. The fabric is soft between my fingers. A glance at the label tells me it's a high-thread Egyptian cotton. There are many black and white photos of landscapes and buildings on the wall.

The pictures are of foreign places and cities, maybe places he's visited.

A walk-in closet connects his bedroom to his private bathroom. The closet is bigger than my room with suits organized by color and shelves for shoes and ties. Gabriel is painstakingly neat. There are no dirty clothes or towels on the floor. Whatever toiletries he uses are stored in the cupboards. Nothing stands on the shelves, not even a toothbrush. His bathroom tiles are black and white with a gray border running above the twin basins. The taps and fittings are brass, and it's a bitch to polish them to a shine. I scrub until my nails are chipped, but that's the easy part. The not-so-easy part is trying not to feel the shame of my reaction to him as, even in his physical absence, his lingering presence taunts and torments me, forcing me to remember.

Oscar follows me around, keeping me company. By the time the morning deliveries arrive, I'm shaky with hunger. After wolfing down a bowl of noodles and an apple for breakfast, I feel better. Walking into my room for a quick bathroom break, my gaze falls on a box on the edge of the basin. I pick it up to read the label. Birth control pills. My face is ablaze with heat, even as my stomach turns to ice. I've never used birth control. Never needed it. With a shaky hand, I take out the leaflet and read the instructions. It feels like I'm crossing the last line by accepting the pills, but falling pregnant will be a disaster, and as crazy as it sounds to

appreciate any gesture from my captor, I'm thankful to Gabriel for his consideration in this regard.

* * *

I'm hanging out the laundry when a whistle catches my attention. The driver from yesterday enters through the courtyard door.

"Morning." He offers me an uncertain smile, eyeing my uniform. "How are you?"

I don't know what to make of his greeting, so I simply say, "Fine, thank you."

"I'm Quincy."

I tug a stray strand of hair behind my ear. "Hi."

When I resume hanging the washing, he cuts the small talk. "I came to warn you not to come outside before clearing it with the guard house."

"The guard house?"

"We live in a staff house at the back of the estate. There's a phone in the kitchen. If you dial the button marked guard house, one of us will pick up."

"Oh."

"Next time, if the door is open," he motions at the garden access, "call before you come outside."

"Why?"

"Gabriel keeps a guard dog. He patrols the garden, and we've had an accident before."

"Okay."

"Well then, have a nice day." He must realize what a stupid thing that is to say, because his cheekbones turn a shade darker. "See you later." With an awkward salute, he hurries away.

Picking up the empty basket, I notice Marie in front of the kitchen window, watching me.

* * *

Sometime during the day, Gabriel and Magda must've left, because they're gone when Carly comes home at five. Judging by her casual clothes and the late hour of her return, she attends a private school. Public schools require uniforms and are out before lunchtime. Marie has already left when Carly finds me ironing in the scullery.

"Valentina, right?" She leans on the wall and bites into a peach.

"That's right."

"My dad didn't say he was hiring a maid." She regards me from under her lashes. "Can you bake?"

"Yes."

"Will you bake me a cake for dessert? Marie made flan. I hate flan."

I crane my neck to check the time on the wall clock in the kitchen. I need to finish earlier tonight so I can do my homework, but I can fit something in if it's not too complicated.

"What do you like?"

She swings the fruit by the stalk. "Anything with coconut."

I know a simple recipe for honey and coconut cake that doesn't take long. The ingredients are common enough. The chances are good I'll find everything I need in the pantry. I switch off the iron. "All right."

When the base cake comes out of the oven, I pour the melted butter, honey, and shredded coconut over the top, and caramelize it to a crispy brown under the grill. Carly leans on the kitchen counter as I remove the cake, her blonde hair hanging in a braid down her back. She's a stunning girl. She doesn't take after her father. Her mom must be gorgeous.

Carly sniffs appreciatively. "That smells good. I'll have a slice now."

She's not a child, but I say what I'd say to Charlie. "You'll spoil your appetite for dinner."

“Come on, Valentina.” She pouts. “My mom never lets me have sweets. It’s bad for my figure.” She motions at her body on which there isn’t an ounce of fat. “Daddy will be home any minute now, and I don’t want him to know I’m snacking before meals. I’ll never hear the end of it.”

“You’re a big girl.” I push the cake toward her. “Don’t say it’s my fault if you’re not hungry for proper food later.”

“Oh,” she winks, “I won’t.” She cuts a generous slice and bites into the warm cake, humming her approval. “Oh, my God, this is so good.”

“I’m glad you like it.” I return to my work, happy that I pleased her. Instinct tells me getting on with Carly won’t be smooth sailing.

Twenty minutes later, I’m folding the last of the ironed shirts when Gabriel’s thunderous voice bursts through the house.

“Valentina!”

Oscar scoots off the top of the tumble dryer where he’s been sleeping and escapes to my room. I jump, burning my arm on the still-hot iron. A second later, Gabriel storms into the kitchen, almost knocking me off my feet as I exit through the scullery door.

He grabs my arm, his fingers digging into my flesh. His face is pale, making the red scars stand out more. “There’s a first aid kit in the pantry. Top shelf on the left. Get it and bring it to the television room.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Valentina

I jump to execute the command, running through every lounge on the ground floor with a big screen in it until I find Gabriel on his knees in front of the couch in what must be the television room. Carly is lying on the couch, panting through an open mouth. Her skin is blotchy and puffy, and the glands in her neck are swollen. The sight shocks me to a standstill, but Gabriel's calm, strong voice commands me.

“Give me the epinephrine auto-injector. It's a yellow and white box.” He loosens his tie and pushes a cushion under Carly's head.

I find the box and hand it to him with shaky fingers. Contrary to my trembling hands, his are steady as he opens the box and retrieves the injector. He removes the gray cap and pushes the red tip against Carly's thigh, then counts out loud to ten. When he's done, he checks that the needle has extended and caps it with the protective cover. I'm a vet student, not a doctor, but I know what epinephrine is for, and I know a severe allergic reaction when I see one.

There's underlying panic in Gabriel's steady voice. “The ambulance is on its way, honey.” “Allergy?” I force from a tight throat.

The only answer I get is his cold, frightening glare. I want to ask what she's allergic to, but the ringtone of a phone cuts me short. A mobile vibrates on the coffee table. Gabriel holds

out his palm in silent instruction, his eyes back on his daughter.

When I place the phone in his hand, he glances at the screen, and answers in a flat tone. “The ambulance is on its way.” His expression turns hard as he listens to a reply. “Yes, I take full responsibility if anything happens to her, and no, now’s not the time to threaten me with sole custody. Come over if you want to see for yourself how she is or wait for us at the hospital, but stop calling every two minutes. It’s not going to change a damn thing.” He cuts the call and dumps the phone on the couch.

Before I can get my bearings, the doorbell rings. I run to get it, but the door opens to reveal one of the men from yesterday, the one who shot Puff. He leads two paramedics pushing a stretcher inside. A private ambulance is parked in the circular driveway.

“Where?” one of the men asks tersely.

“Follow me.”

I lead them to the television room. The medics go inside and shut the door on me. Puff’s killer gives me a hard look before he exits the house. While I’m pacing the corridor, a modelpretty woman rounds the corner and stalks my way. Her blonde hair is twisted into a French roll. A white two-piece suit clings to her body, defining her curves. There’s a striking resemblance between her and Carly.

“Where are they?” she asks with regal calmness.

I indicate the door. “Through here.”

She opens and slams the door, causing it to shake in the frame. Through the door, I hear the heated tones of an argument, but I can’t make out the words. Carly’s mom must live close by to be able to get here so fast.

Not sure if I should wait or leave, I decide to stick around in case they need me. Why didn’t Carly call for me? Maybe she did, and I didn’t hear. It can’t be the cake. Carly would’ve told me if she’s allergic to eggs or honey. It can be a bee sting. The sliding doors to the pool deck are open.

Seconds later, the paramedics exit, pushing Carly on the stretcher. Gabriel and the blonde woman walk next to the stretcher, Gabriel's face tense.

At the front door, the paramedics stop.

"Only one of you can accompany us in the ambulance," the older man says.

"You go." Gabriel drags a hand through his hair. "I'll meet you at the hospital."

When Gabriel's guard helps the men to lift the stretcher down the stairs, the woman I presume to be Carly's mom turns to Gabriel. "I expect you to deal with this." "I will," he says tightly.

She looks down her nose at me before clacking a path down the stairs to the waiting ambulance. At the bottom, she throws her keys to Puff's killer. "Rhett, bring my car to the hospital."

Rhett glances at Gabriel, who gives a small nod. Carly's mom gets into the back of the ambulance, and the door is pulled closed from the inside. As the vehicle pulls off with blaring sirens, Rhett gets into a Mercedes sports model and follows.

We are alone in the entrance now, Gabriel and I, and fury replaces the coldness in his eyes.

"You have a lot to explain."

Panic speeds up my breathing. "What?"

"The cake."

To say I'm shivering in my shoes is an understatement. "Oh, no, Gabriel." This can't be happening. "I'm so sorry."

His eyes drill into mine. "Why did you do it?"

"I just wanted to make something nice for dessert."

"*Nice* could've gotten her killed. Or did you know all along? How did you find out?"

“I swear I didn’t know. I still don’t know! Was it the honey? The eggs?”

“Carly is allergic to coconut.”

“What?” My mind is reeling. “She specifically asked for it.”

He looks at me with an expression that stops my heart before sending it into overdrive, the beat pounding in my ears.

“If you’re lying, you’ll pay dearly.” He grabs my arm with such a strong grip it hurts to the bone. “You don’t want to know what I do with people who threaten my family, let alone try to kill them.” He shakes me hard. “Next time, stick to what’s expected of you and leave the menu planning to Marie.” He shoves me away and takes his phone from his pocket.

I’m hugging myself while he barks out a command into the phone.

There’s a dark threat in his words. “Stay with Valentina until I return.” After putting away his phone, he hisses, “Be very glad she’s not dead and be even gladder Magda is at a dinner party tonight.”

A guard comes jogging up the path, an automatic rifle in his hands.

When he reaches the porch, Gabriel says, “Don’t let her out, and if Magda returns, don’t let her near Valentina.”

The guard nods, taking up a position by the door.

I try to calm my breathing as I meet Gabriel’s livid stare. He has all the reason in the world to be angry, and the fact that he doesn’t hit me makes me fear him more. It means he has control, and men with control are the most dangerous.

“Go inside.” The words sound like an ice lake cracking. “Don’t even think about running.”

The windows and doors are protected with an alarm.”

I bite my cheek to still my chattering teeth and do as I’ve been told. I’m scarcely inside when I hear the tires of a car

shooting up gravel. Through the lounge window, I see a Jaguar convertible clear the gates.

I'm shaking all over when I get to my room. Oscar is my consolation, offering me affection as I sink down on the bed and sit in the dark until my breathing is more normal. As the minutes roll into hours, I try to calm my mind by studying, but I can't concentrate on what I read. One hour becomes two, then three, four, and five. I don't have the courage to shower or change. All I can do is wait for Gabriel and Carly's return. Not able to stand the tension any longer, I take up a post in front of the window in the dining room that overlooks the street-side of the property.

It's almost eleven before the headlights of a car illuminates the gates. It can be Magda, returning from her dinner party. Relief washes over me when the Jaguar pulls up to the door. A haggard-looking Gabriel gets out and limps around the car to help Carly from the passenger side.

With his arm around her shoulders, he leads her up the steps. I rush to meet them in the entrance. "Carly! Are you all right?" "She will be," Gabriel says, moving past me.

"I kept the dinner warm."

"I'm not hungry," Carly says.

"You need your strength, honey. Bring it up to Carly's room."

He doesn't spare me a glance as they make their way upstairs. I prepare a tray and knock on Carly's door before I enter.

Gabriel sits in a chair next to the bed, Carly's hand clasped in his. He turns his scars away from me. "Leave it on the table. We'll serve ourselves."

I obey and escape to the false safety of my room. I'm petrified Gabriel won't believe me, but even more terrified that my mistake will cost Charlie's life. 'One wrong move,' Magda said. I don't get why Carly would do something like this.

For another hour, nothing happens. Eventually, my tiredness wins over my anxiety. I have a quick shower and get

into bed.

* * *

Gabriel

In the solitude of my study, I sit down at my desk to contemplate my options. It's a difficult decision. I watched a playback of the security feed from the cameras in the kitchen. Carly's voice was clear when she asked for a cake with coconut. Valentina told the truth. With a sigh I feel all the way to my bones, I pour a shot of whisky and down it in one go.

I don't understand my daughter. I failed her. There's a gorge so wide between us I'm afraid

I'll never bridge it. When the crack started, I can't say. Was it during Carly's toddler years, when

I was always absent from home, the family business taking up my days and nights? Is it because Sylvia and I couldn't make things work? If I can pinpoint when it started, maybe I'll find the reason. Carly and I both know there's a problem. We don't acknowledge it, because it's easier to skip the drama. If I believed Carly has a better relationship with her mother, I'd encourage her to stay with Sylvia, but she's old enough to choose, and the fact that she lives here tells me enough.

Despite being scum, I try to be fair. It's the only shred of humanity that stands between the man and the monster, but in my business, fair only applies to family. Putting any staff member above family, right or wrong, won't be tolerated. Such an act could get said staff member killed. Innocent or not, actions have consequences, and Valentina can't escape taking responsibility for hers. Sylvia expects me to inflict suitable retribution. She's not going to forget or let it go. If I don't do it before Magda comes home, Valentina will die for what happened tonight. I don't feel like punishing Valentina for something Carly should pay for, but I don't have a choice.

I refill my glass and shoot back another shot before I pick up my phone and dial Rhett.

"Come to my study," I say when he answers.

The fact that something ignites in me, making me hard, when I think about what I'm about to do is proof of how far gone I am. It could be that the alcohol is fuel on my rusty inhibitions.

Maybe it's heredity, and it's in my genes. I'm not a made monster. I was born one.

The door opens, and Rhett enters. "You called for me, boss?"

"Take Valentina to the gym."

The twitch that wrings his lips into a smile makes me want to break his nose. I add it to the mistake he made of shooting the dog. Deep down, I know it's not Rhett's fault. He never expected me to let the Haynes' live. He did what he believed was right, but he caused Valentina suffering, and he'll have to pay. Lucky for him, he leaves without question. I could do with another drink, but I won't risk it. I have to be sober. I'll need utter control.

The house is dark and quiet as I make my way downstairs to the basement. It's a windowless room where my guards and I work out, but it also serves as interrogation room when the need arises. For this reason, it's soundproof. Carly can never know what happens in the depths of the house when she's fast asleep upstairs.

CHAPTER FIVE

Gabriel

I flick on the lights and walk around the room, trying to still the upsurge of regret that's not powerful enough to wash out my excitement. The exercise mat absorbs my steps, not giving sound to the unequal harshness of my soles.

Regret makes me weak. Excitement makes me cruel. Anger makes me dangerous. I assess my state carefully. Anger is not part of my repertoire tonight. That's a good thing, or I wouldn't be able to do this. It would be much too hazardous.

Rhett enters the room with Valentina, his hand folded around her upper arm. She's wearing her nightgown, which exposes her toned legs. Rhett's fingers leave white indents on her skin. It shakes up all kinds of sentiments in me, but they're like shredded pieces of paper. I can't make sense of anything, except that I want to chop off his hand and poke out his eyes.

With a flick of my head, I direct him to the back wall. He knows what to do. Her eyes hold mine as he drags her past. The quiet kind of anger I often recognize in myself makes the brown of her irises sizzle with sparks. Within seconds, Valentina is strung up by her arms on a rope knotted to her tied wrists, facing the wall.

"Go," I say to Rhett.

He gives me a questioning look. The surprise and disappointment on his face threaten to unleash my rage. I've never dismissed him when punishment or interrogations are executed, but this isn't a goddamn show for his entertainment.

Rhett knows me well enough to read the signs. With a last, confused glance in Valentina's direction, he walks from the room, shutting the door behind him.

When there are just the two of us, I breathe easier. The violence dissipates. It becomes something different, something that turns my already erect cock into a raging hard steel rod. I adjust the rope, stretching it gently through the eye in the ceiling until she's barely touching the mat with her toes, and secure the cord to the hook on the wall. I don't want her to struggle or move. It's safer this way.

She peeks at me from over her shoulder, her eyes big and her cheeks pale. "What are you doing?"

It's not an easy question. There are many layers to it. I unbutton first one, then the other shirt cuff, rolling the sleeves back as I contemplate the answer. I don't lie if I can prevent it. I decide to give her the simple truth.

"Punishment, Valentina." I let her name roll over my tongue, loving the sound of it. Such a pretty name. *Valens*. Strong. It suits her.

She twists in her constraints. "I didn't do it on purpose."

I reach up from behind, grabbing her arms to still her. "I know."

She stops struggling, and her body freezes. "Then why are you doing it?"

I sweep her silky hair over her shoulder and brush my lips down the curve of her neck.

"Because I get off on this." Another layer of truth.

A sob tears from her throat. "Please."

My cock twitches. There's begging in that word, but also acceptance. She knows there's no turning back. Even if there weren't Sylvia's expectations or my mother's threat, I can't stop myself. Not anymore.

I kiss the shell of her ear.

"Gabriel..."

She should call me sir or Mr. Louw, but the sound of my name on her lips is a treat I'm not going to deny myself. Already battling to carry her weight, she tips back. I catch her around her waist. My hands dip under the hem of her nightgown, gliding up her soft thighs. Hooking my thumbs into the elastic of her underwear, I pull it down over her hips and calves, leaving it around her ankles.

She shivers under my palms, but wisely doesn't speak. There's nothing she can say to stop this. When I step away, her body sways backward. Like a ballerina, she dances on her toes to regain her balance. A cry leaves her lips when I grip the collar of the nightgown and rip it down the middle. The fabric hangs loosely down her body, giving me a glimpse of her smooth back and the curve of her ass, but I'm greedy. To save time, I use one of the combat knives from the weapon counter, cutting open the arms to free her from the constraining clothing.

I step back to admire the view. Fucking hell. Restrained, with only her panties around her ankles, she's an erotic image that will haunt my dreams. Her frame is a flowing portrait of Slines, from the slender curve of her neck to the sides of her plump breasts and the narrow diameter of her waist to the swell of her hips and the rise of her firm ass. My eyes follow the trail of her legs from her quivering thighs to the dip of her knees and from the gentle expand of her calves to where they taper to her delicate ankles. My fingers ache to bury themselves in the cheeks of her buttocks and in the warm, wet depth of her cunt. I expel those thoughts almost violently, knowing I can't enter her there. For now, I'm content to have her naked and bound, and if I'm honest, I'll admit this isn't about retribution or proving to my mother I'm not weak.

This isn't even about saving Valentina's life. This is all for me.

I cup her breasts from behind and search the soft sweetness of her skin, dragging my lips down the elegant curve of her neck. "If I don't do this, Magda will kill you." She turns her head to the side, away from my caress and voice.

So be it. She won't defy me much longer. I can never have my fill of looking at her like this, but her arms can only hold her weight so much longer before I risk tearing them from their sockets. I shake my fingers to loosen them and breathe in and out a couple of times to find my control. It'll be easy to go over the edge with her. Too easy. There's something about her that shatters every ounce of willpower I possess, a new experience I'm not sure I like.

I loosen my buckle and pull the belt from the loops of my waistband. Only then does she look at me again. Finally, she understands my intention. Her eyes grow large, and her lips part.

"Eyes in front." I don't mind seeing her tears or hate, but I don't want her to see the lust in mine, the darkness that makes me the monster.

Stepping so close I can smell the raspberry fragrance of her skin, I smooth my hand over her ass. When she clenches her muscles, my cock pushes painfully against my zipper. I knead her ass cheeks, playing with the firm softness of her flesh. Parting them, I can glimpse the pretty pucker of her ass. I draw a finger down her crack, teasing the dark entrance before running the tip down to test her pussy. She's dry. Good. I love the challenge.

I take a step away, widen my feet and find my stance. Drawing my arm back, I practice careful control with my strength, letting the leather collide with her ass hard enough to sting, but not forceful enough to bruise.

Whack.

The red line that welts over her golden skin makes my cock twitch. A drop of pre-cum heats the tip of my shaft.

Whack.

She cries out softly and jerks in her restraints. She's holding back.

Whack.

"Let me hear you, Valentina."

Fire simmers with tears in her brown eyes as she glances back at me. “Fuck you.”

“Very well.”

The next lash falls over her thighs, just under the curve of her ass. She squirms and whimpers, grinding her teeth so hard I can hear it. The next smack is gentler, aimed higher to heat her pussy.

Her cry comes involuntarily. She tenses up as the sound escapes. I let the lashes go higher, leaving a crisscross pattern over her back and shoulders. Allowing the tip of the leather to fold around the sides of her breasts, I keep well away from her nipples. My lashes are not hard enough to draw blood or break skin, but before long she’s grappling for air, moving as far away as the position allows, which isn’t much. I let the belt curl around her waist, letting her feel the bite on her stomach, and move back down to her ass and thighs.

I give her a break to catch her breath, using the time to free her underwear, spread her legs, and tie each ankle to a cuff on a chain extending from the wall. She can move her legs forward or backward, but she can’t close them.

I walk around to face her. Grabbing her jaw, I kiss her hard. She’s crying into my mouth, her lips defenseless as I sweep my tongue over hers, devouring her like a starving man. Forcing myself to pull away, I steal a last, chaste kiss before taking my place behind her again.

“Ready?”

I test my strength by swinging the leather under the curve of her ass. When her golden skin is left unmarred, I twist the belt one more time around my hand, leaving a shorter bit at the end, and let a succession of soft but fast swats rain between her legs, aiming the leather to heat both her labia and clit. She fights it at first, flinging her head back, and pushing her breasts forward. “Let me hear you.”

I don’t stop until she finally breaks for me with a scream. The breath she’s been holding escapes, allowing her shoulders

to rise and fall with violent sobs. At her surrender, I cast the belt aside and grab her to my body.

I want her. I want her so fucking bad I can't think. For all of my intentions to be gentle, I can't help the rough way my fingers feel between her legs. A groan is trapped in my chest when I find her wet. I need to be inside her. Now.

My hands shake as I undo my pants and let them fall to my ankles to free my cock. My shaft aches with need, the root pulsing as I grab it in my fist and guide it to Valentina's wet pussy. Bending my knees, I spear through her thighs and drag the head of my cock through her folds. I shiver in anticipation as her moisture slickens me, and the heat emanating from her core invites me deeper. Driven by primal hunger, I place the sensitive head against her opening. My only instinct is to impale her, to take her as deep as I can, but it's her frightened whimper that pulls me back from my dark lust.

Barely holding onto reason, I coat my dick in more of her arousal before slipping free from between her legs. I'm too far gone to back off completely, and as much for my sanity as her chastity, I carefully open her ass cheeks, and wedge my slick cock between them.

"Please," she begs, arching her back away from me.

My voice is guttural. I don't recognize the sound. "Relax. I won't fuck you."

She stills at that, but only until I start gliding up and down, folding her ass cheeks around my cock with my palms. I have to push her body against the wall in front for leverage. When I move faster, she starts squirming in all earnest, twisting to the left and right.

"Keep still," I hiss, "or I'll accidentally penetrate your asshole."

Again, she goes slack, allowing me to find my release by grinding my cock up and down the crack of her welted ass. I find her breasts and hold her to me as I come, shooting my seed up her spine, the hotness of my release dripping down between our bodies. When there's nothing left to give, I let go,

stumbling back a step to look at her. She's marked with the imprint of my belt, and my sperm running between her ass cheeks over her pussy and down her thighs. Intense satisfaction surges inside of me, overriding even the physical high of ejaculating on her skin. It's the most beautiful thing I've seen, and that fucking scares me.

Coming to my senses, I pull up my pants and unlock the cuffs around her ankles. I loosen the rope from the hook on the wall, releasing her arms. Valentina falls backward, but before she hits the floor, I catch her around the waist and use the same knife I used to cut off her clothes to cut through the rope around her wrists. She's crying and shaking, her body limp in my arms. I use her nightgown to wipe her back and between her legs, getting rid of most of the semen, and then I pick her up in my arms and carry her to her room.

Placing her inside the bath, I run a cool shower and sponge her down. She doesn't object to anything. Her pretty eyes are closed, but tears are leaking from under her long lashes, and I have to look away. I find them way too appealing. She's like a ragdoll in my arms when I towel her dry, taking care not to press on the marks of my belt. They'll be gone in a day, but she'll hate me much longer. No marks will be left on her body, but not everyone carries their scars on the outside.

I put her to bed on her stomach, naked, and don't pull the sheet over her. She'll want nothing to touch her skin for a while. Going down on my knees between her legs, I make her come with my mouth until she begs me to stop. Through her begging, I wring one more orgasm from her before I'm satisfied. Then I get onto the bed next to her and pull her onto my chest so that she's stretched out on top of me. I kiss her head and stroke her hair, holding her until her breathing takes on the even rhythm of sleep.

It's after midnight. Magda will be home any minute. Valentina doesn't wake up when I ease out from under her. Looking down at her slender back marred with red welts, I'm filled with the devastating affirmation that I can't play with a perfect, new toy without breaking it.

* * *

I wait in my study for Magda to return. I prefer to relay tonight's events to her myself, before she hears the news from Sylvia or Carly. I can still taste Valentina on my lips. Her arousal is a powerful aphrodisiac that twists my balls into rock hard knots and feeds my lust. There's peace in knowing I own her pleasure and discord in not being able to take her. Until she's no longer a virgin, I can't bury my cock in her soft body, and I want nothing more than to train her to come with my dick until she gets wet from the mere sight of me. It takes everything I have not to go back to her room and fuck her raw. I drag my tongue over my bottom lip. Savoring Valentina's womanly scent one last time, I pour a drink and down the liquor, drowning the perfume of her skin in alcohol.

Magda is pissed as hell when I give her a brief summary of how the night turned out. It's when I assure her Valentina's been punished, and she watches the video feed of Carly asking for a coconut cake that she calms.

"You have work with Carly," she says. "That girl has issues." "I know." I rub my eyes.

"Do something about it, before it becomes a disaster we can't fix." She walks from my study without saying goodnight.

I touch the photo of Carly on my desk, having plenty of questions and no answers.

* * *

Valentina

It feels like Gabriel took something from me. I knew he was dangerous, but I had no idea how dark he is. What Tiny did to me was almost more bearable, because it never turned me on. What Gabriel did to me last night made me wet, and that makes me sick. I, of all people, should be disgusted by the violence. It wasn't the lashes on my back. It was the intense rhythm of the leather between my legs. I both resented and appreciated that he took care of me—both emotionally and sexually—afterward. It was something I needed desperately, and I hate myself for it.

Wanting to hear a kind, safe voice, I call Kris before she's due at the practice, and speak to

Charlie, who sounds as happy as only Charlie can be. It soothes me enough to get me through my Friday morning chores. My body is sensitive from Gabriel's lashing, and each brush of the rough linen of my dress is abrasive on my skin. Carly is at home today, skipping school to recover, and I do my best not to run into her. I only clean her room when she's outside by the pool.

Marie avoids my eyes. If she knows about last night, she doesn't say so. She comes looking for me in the entrance where I'm mopping and fixes her gaze on a spot behind me. "Mr.

Louw says the towels in the gym needs washing." "Okay." I mop past her feet.

"You must take clean ones. Now."

She leaves stiffly, hiding her discomfort behind her brusque manner.

I fetch a clean pile of towels from the linen closet and make my way down the hallway. As I descend the stairs to the gym, my stomach clenches, and my throat closes up. Forcing my feet to move forward, I stop abruptly when the door opens, and Rhett exits, blood all over his naked chest. He's pressing his palm to his nose, his head turned up, and almost bumps into me before I have time to jump out of the way. The reason for the blood seems to be a broken nose. The bridge is swollen and the cartilage askew. His right eye sports a shiner, and the skin on his cheekbone is split. When he notices me, he glares and pushes past, making for the stairs. I'm still staring after him when Gabriel walks through the door dressed only in sweatpants and clutching the ends of a towel draped around his neck. His face and chest glistens with perspiration.

My face flushes at the memory of last night, and my mouth goes dry. Where I come from, I've seen a lot of gangsters who pump iron in the gym all day, but no one as hard or perfectly cut as Gabriel. His upper arms are the size of my waist. Deep lines define his pecs and abs. A trail of dark hair starts beneath

his navel and disappears under the pants, the V of his hips cutting sharply down to his groin. It's not the beauty of his body that renders me speechless, but the power of it. Even with his disability, he stuffed Rhett up badly, and Rhett is a hulk. As he advances, I stand there like an idiot with the towels in my arms, not having words.

A smile flirts with his lips. "Training," he says with a shrug, grabbing one of the clean towels off the pile to wipe his face. He gives me his intense stare, searching my face. "How are you?"

"Fine."

"Good." Dumping the towel in the basket by the door, he limps away.

It's the first time I see him in anything but a dress shirt and suit pants. The broadness of his shoulders and the tightness of his ass don't surprise me as much as the way the sight of him, half naked, makes my womb flutter. I can't feel desire for a man who tortured me. It will make me as twisted as him. It will drag me down to a place I won't be able to come back from.

Angry at my unwelcome reaction, I enter the gym and pack the clean towels on the shelf before picking the dirty ones off the floor. I take my time to do what I haven't done last night—take stock of the room. There's a section with free weights in the corner and a small bathroom off to one side. Judging by the metal rings bolted to the ceiling and the hooks fitted on the walls, this is where Gabriel tortures his enemies. A chill fills my veins, and I'm not able to look any longer.

I rush back upstairs, banishing my memories of last night to the depths of the gym. In the lounge, I run into Carly.

She props a hand on her hip. "Hey, Valentina."

I can't ignore her without being rude. "How are you feeling?"

She cocks a shoulder. "I'll be fine."

"Why did you do it?"

“To get you fired.”

I don't know if she knows what her dad does for a living, but if she doesn't, it's not my place to disillusion her. I can't tell her I'm here against my will, especially not after Magda's threat to kill Charlie and me for one wrong word. All I can ask is, “Why?”

“I saw the way my father looked at you at dinner.”

“What way?”

“A way he never looked at my mom. It's the money, isn't it?” She gives me a wry smile.

“It's always the money. Well, plenty of others before you tried, and it always ends the same way. He won't marry you, and you won't get a cent, so save us all the trouble and pack your bags now.”

“Yes, it's the money, but not how you think. I can't give up this job, even if I want to.”

“You don't belong here. I want you gone.”

“So badly that you'll endanger your life?” I ask with a note of anger.

“Oh, come on. Why are you so upset? It didn't work, did it? You're still here.”

“I have every reason to be upset. What you did was foolish and irresponsible.”

“What's your problem? You're acting like you're the one who almost died.”

“My problem is that if you *had* died, I would've carried your death on my conscience for the rest of my life. Have you considered that?”

“Who do you think you are to speak to me like this?”

“Is it the attention? Is that the only way you can get your parents to show you they care?”

She draws back her arm and lashes out. Her palm connects with my cheek, leaving a burning sting. “You know nothing

about me.”

In that moment, her guard is down, and a vulnerable part peeks out from under her bitchy veneer.

I cup my cheek, pressing a cool palm on my heated skin. The fight goes out of me as I only feel pity for the poor, rich girl who, underneath it all, is just a girl.

I sigh. “Listen to me, Carly. You’re young, beautiful, privileged, and healthy. You have your whole future ahead of you. You can have anything you want. It’s more than most people get. Don’t waste it. Even if you don’t see it now, your parents would’ve been devastated if anything happened to you, and I would never have forgiven myself.”

“Yeah?” Tears glisten in her eyes. “Like you know me or my family. Don’t you dare preach to me. Maybe you would’ve liked to be a psychologist, but you’re not. You’re a *maid*, so stick to your trade.” Her eyes turn hard. “I’ll be outside. Bring me a turkey sandwich and lemonade. Plenty of ice. When you’re done, you can clean my bathroom again. You missed a spot. Then you can iron my new blue dress. I want to wear it to school tomorrow.”

I want to say I don’t answer to her, but that’s not true. By the rules of our kind, I’m lower on the hierarchy than the cat.

* * *

That afternoon, Carly doesn’t touch her lunch. It’s a delicious looking lasagna, but she’s not to be persuaded to take a bite. Magda and Gabriel treat her with kid gloves. Gabriel goes out of his way to drag a conversation out of her but gives up after a while.

After clearing the table, I salvage the portion from Carly’s plate and set it aside to eat later. The rest I scrape into a plastic container I store in the staff fridge for the street dogs. I hate wasting, and I’m famished, hungry for something other than apples and noodles. I’m sure no one will mind if I eat a leftover portion destined for the trashcan.

During my lunch break, I put a cushion from a patio chair on the deck steps and make myself as comfortable as I can on

my bruised butt. Then I dig in. The lasagna is rich with white sauce and cheese, the meat dripping with fresh tomato and oregano. I close my eyes as I chew, savoring every bite. Marie knows how to cook.

I'm almost finished when barking draws my attention. Quincy stands at the edge of the pool with a vicious looking Boerboel. The beast is straining on the leash, baring his teeth.

Quincy jerks on the chain. "Quiet!"

The barking stops, but the dog still growls at me, his lips pulled back over his teeth.

"What the hell are you doing outside? I told you to call. You shouldn't be in the garden when the dog is out." Quincy takes a few steps toward me, but stops a safe distance away. "I told

Marie I was taking him for a walk."

"I guess she forgot to tell me."

"I'll have a word with her." With a tight nod, he continues on his way, the dog hopping along on three legs.

"What's wrong with his paw?" I call after them.

He pauses. "Don't know. I'm taking him to the vet tomorrow."

It looks painful. I leave the plate on the step and get to my feet.

Quincy looks mildly surprised when I approach, but when I'm almost within reach of the leash, he holds up a palm. "Don't come closer."

The dog goes ballistic, barking and straining toward me.

"Down, boy," I say in a stern voice.

The dog reacts immediately. He stops barking and sits down.

"That's better."

As I reach for the dog, Quincy looks like he's going to have a heart attack. "Valentina!"

Stay—”

His words are cut short when the beast flops down on his side and turns on his back, all four legs in the air.

I go down on my haunches to stroke his belly. “That’s a good boy. It’s not polite to make so much noise for nothing.”

Quincy stares at me, his mouth agape. “How did you do that? No one is able to touch him but me, and I’ve trained with him for a year.”

“I have a thing with animals.”

“You don’t say.”

Smiling at the surprise in his tone, I look up at him. “What’s his name?”

“Bruno.”

“Of course it is. Can I have a look at his paw?”

He squints at me. “If he’ll let you.”

Taking the injured paw in my hand, I study the pad. A broken thorn is lodged in the flesh.

The poor baby must be suffering.

“It’s a thorn.” I point it out to Quincy. “Do you have a pair of tweezers?”

“No.” He thinks for a bit. “Wait. Maybe this’ll do.” He pulls a Swiss Army knife from his pocket and unfolds a small pair of tweezers.

“Perfect.” Taking the knife, I scratch Bruno’s ear. “I’m going to make it better.”

It takes a second to extract the thorn. The area around the wound is inflamed. Handing the knife back to Quincy, I ask, “How long has he been like this?”

“He’s been limping all week. I couldn’t get an appointment at the vet sooner.”

“You’ll still have to take him.” I straighten. “He needs an anti-bacterial and antiinflammatory cream.”

He tilts his head. “How come you know all this stuff?”

“An interest.”

Bruno rolls back onto his paws and licks my toes.

“No shit.” Quincy shoots me a smile. “Thanks for your help. He wouldn’t let me touch that paw.”

“Don’t mention it.”

“I’m not sure Gabriel is going to be happy when he learns you turned his guard dog into a drooling puppy.”

“It’ll be our secret. As far as the rest of the world is concerned, Bruno is a vicious guardian.”

He whistles through his teeth. “Come on, Bruno. Time to finish your walk.” He salutes, and walks off with Bruno in the direction of the orchard.

* * *

My homework is falling behind. I have an essay to finish before Friday next week, but I’m too exhausted to read further than one page. With what happened last night, I didn’t get much sleep. I *have* to meet my study deadlines. I won’t give up. I can’t. It’s not only my dream that keeps me motivated, it’s knowing that I’ll have something to fall back onto when I’m free. Charlie and I will need an income. We’re not going back to Berea. I have to build a better future for us, and Gabriel Louw isn’t taking that away.

I take a cool shower, still feeling the sting of the water on my back and butt. Since the only nightgown I owned is destroyed, I pull on a T-shirt and a pair of panties before slipping into bed.

Like the first night, Gabriel comes to me when I’m sleeping. I’m not sure if it’s the way he softly cups my breasts or the sound of my moan that wakes me, but I’m too tired to fight it. I simply let him hear what his touch does to me. I’m rewarded with a kiss on the mouth, startling me to a fully awake state. It’s nothing more than a brush of his lips over mine, but the intensity burns like a fire, and I find it...

pleasurable. His mouth is cool and dry, and his breath smells of mint and alcohol, like whiskey.

Warm air blows over my ear as his lips graze the shell. “Turn over for me, Valentina.”

He lifts the sheet for me to make it easier, but my feet get tangled in the duvet at the foot. Carefully, he frees each foot, stopping to caress the bridge before planting a kiss on the sole. The tender act confuses me. I expected him to hurt me like last night, not to trail his hands gently up my body and twist my hair into a ponytail before arranging it on the pillow next to me. Maybe he will. My body tenses. Gabriel is anything but predictable. He lifts my arms and, bending them by the elbows, puts my hands above my head. A tap on my inner thigh makes me lift my head to look at him, but he cups my neck and, with the slightest pressure, pushes my face back into the pillow. He taps on my thigh again. Understanding the cue, I open my legs. The mattress dips as he gets onto the bed behind me. He doesn't undress me, but pushes the T-shirt up to my shoulders and pulls the panties down to the under-curve of my butt.

Heat drenches my skin as he stretches out on top of me without touching our bodies together. Keeping his weight on his arms, he flicks his tongue over a welt on my shoulder, making my nerve endings pop with electricity. Goose bumps break out on my skin when he blows air over the wet trail of his tongue. He continues down my body, treating each lash with the same care, until he reaches the dimples of my ass. As he licks and blows over my ass cheeks, moisture gathers between my legs. This goes on for a long time, until my clit is swollen and pulsing in need.

The first time he lays his hands on me after kissing my bruises is to remove my underwear. Gripping my hips, he lifts my ass. He takes his time to position me like he wants, kneeling with my legs spread and my forehead resting on the pillow. With my ass and sex exposed to him, he sits back and watches. I can't see, but I feel his eyes on my body, burning on my naked parts. His palms glide over my buttocks before he takes a cheek in each hand, parting me like fruit while running

his nose from my coccyx to my opening. A shiver runs through my organs. My depraved body knows what's coming and wants it. His tongue flattens on my clit, warm and wet. I cry out as the raspy, hot surface draws over my slit, all the way to my asshole. Somewhere in the back of my mind there's a cry of embarrassment, but it's no use giving rein to the sentiment. Gabriel will do what he wants.

He continues to lap me like this until I'm desperate to come. Unable to stand the slow torture any longer, I moan loudly into the pillow. He hums his approval and finally gives me what I want. Catching my clit gently between his teeth, he flicks his tongue over the nub—fast, but too light.

My hands fist into the sheets. "Ah, God. Please."

"Please what?"

"Please make me come."

As soon as I verbally express my need, he opens me wider with his hands and nips at my folds, alternating the gentle bites with sucking on my clit. It takes me seconds to come with a violent spasm of my womb. Pins and needles prick my genitals. My toes curl. I can't take more.

"Stop. Please."

Begging doesn't help. He milks me dry until I'm a quivering mess, and only then does he push on my back to lower my pelvis to the bed. I'm shaking and boneless. I never thought it could be like this. He lowers over me, at last pressing our bodies together, until my trembling stops. With a kiss on my neck, he lifts from the bed. I turn on my side to look at him, some part of me needing to see his expression, but he turns his face away. He taps his fingers on my lower back. "Go back to sleep." Then he's gone.

For a long time, I lie in the dark, trying to understand Gabriel. I don't get it. What is he doing to me?

* * *

Gabriel

It doesn't help that Valentina is around every hour of every day. I'm a walking hard-on, suffering from constant blue balls. No amount of wanking is enough to relieve my ache. I want inside her. Deep. Deep enough to hurt. The only niggle is her virginity. It's a barrier to me, literally and psychologically. I don't want to be the one to break her that way. Her first time needs to be special, not monstrous. Even I am not that cruel. She deserves a pretty face and gentle kisses, not a scarface who loves to fuck rough.

In this lies the problem. I can't take her virginity, and I can't stomach the thought of someone else taking it, either. I won't last much longer without relief. I consider calling Helga, but when I think of another woman, I can't get it up. The image of Valentina's strung-up body with her underwear around her ankles haunts my nights. I wish I'd taken a photo so I'd have something concrete to jackoff to.

The emergency with Carly is further fuel on my nerves. I'm not sure if I should punish her or call in professional help. I'm not a great moral example. I have no ground to judge or discipline her. If there's one thing I'm sure of, it's that Carly won't live the life I lead. My mother never gave me the choice. She put a gun in my hand when I was twelve and told me to pull the trigger. When I couldn't, she shot me in the foot.

There's no point in talking to Sylvia. Sylvia is way too much like Magda. God knows why I ever thought we had a chance. I loved her. I truly did. I believed she'd learn to love me with time, but the only thing that became clear with time was her ambition. What she wanted was my money and protection, not my love. She married me on her father's orders and got out as fast as she could, as soon as she produced the heir expected of her. Her sacrifice got her what she wanted. As the mother of my child, she'll always have my money and protection. After Carly, she insisted on a hysterectomy, ensuring she wouldn't bear me any more children. Sylvia hated every minute of being pregnant. She was devastated when the doctor confirmed the results of the pregnancy test. Carly stretched and scarred her body. Sylvia never forgave me for that. The minute Carly was born, Sylvia went on a diet and a binge of plastic surgery, letting the nanny take care of our

child. Maybe Carly subconsciously felt the rejection. She was a colicky baby. She's never been an easy child, but she's my daughter, and the only human being I love in this world. I wish I knew how to fix this.

Magda's high-pitched voice and fast-slapping heels on the marble floor in the foyer pulls me from my troubles. An itch works its way down my shoulder blades.

"That's it! I've had it."

I pull the door open to see Magda charge down the hallway with Oscar. She's got him by the skin of his neck.

"What's going on?" I barely hide the irritation in my voice.

She doesn't stop in her stride, but calls over her shoulder, "He peed on my Louis Vuitton sofa. Quincy! Get your ass over here."

Quincy rounds the corner, a question on his face.

"Here." Magda pushes the clawing cat into his arms. "Take him to the vet and have him euthanized."

I'm about to tell my mother she's overreacting when Valentina flies from the lounge, a cloth and spray bottle in her hands.

"Oh, no, please, Mrs. Louw, you don't have to do that. It's not his fault. It may be a urinary infection. I'm sure antibiotics will fix the problem in no time."

Magda turns on Valentina. "What makes you the goddamn expert?"

"She's got a point," Quincy says.

The fact that he puts himself between Valentina and my mother isn't lost on me. I don't like it. Not one fucking bit.

"I'm heading out to the vet with Bruno, anyway," Quincy continues. "I can take Oscar."

"I'm not spending another cent on this fur pollution. He's just signed his death warrant."

That figures. My mother never harbored any love for my late grandmother's overweight cat. If it was up to her, she would've abandoned him at my grandmother's house after the funeral, but Carly insisted we bring him here.

"I'll take him," Valentina says quickly. "I mean to the vet. You don't have to pay anything,

I promise."

I lean in the doorframe, enjoying Magda's irritation. "It was Grandma's cat, after all," I drawl.

My mother shoots me a dirty look. "Fine," she says to Valentina. "If you've got money to waste, do as you please, but if he pees in the house one more time, he's dead."

"I can take him on Sunday when it's my day off."

"Today or never," Magda says, marching to her study and slamming the door.

Valentina looks at me. There's a plea on her face. I haven't missed how Oscar follows her around or that he sleeps in her bed. She's fond of the shedding fluff ball.

"You can take an hour this afternoon," I say.

Her face lights up, and a smile transforms her features into something angelic, something too good for me. I take it anyway, enjoying the knowledge that I put that expression on her face, giving her something more than physical pleasure.

"I'll drive you," Quincy says.

Immediately, my good mood evaporates. Dark, suffocating jealousy smothers my reason. My bodyguard may mean the gesture in the most platonic way possible, but I want to break every single one of his ribs. The only thing that prevents me from kicking the life out of him is that Valentina doesn't see the way his eyes soften as he drags them over her, because she's looking at me. She's looking at me for permission. The submissive act somewhat calms me. I don't manage more than a nod.

"Thank you," she says, her gaze wary, as if she's reading the change in my temper.

I'll be watching Quincy from now on.

* * *

Valentina

The vet bill eats a hole into my allowance, money I was going to use for my studies, but the tests are done, and Oscar has medicine. It's a urinary infection as I thought. The vet assures me he'll be back to normal in a couple of days. It was my plan to take him to Kris on the weekend. She would've treated him for free, but I couldn't risk his life, and I don't doubt for a second Magda would've had him put down. To play it safe, I lock him in my room with his litter tray and food, waiting for the frequent urination to stop.

When I get to my room that night, there's a bundle of colorful silk tied with a ribbon on my bed, and a note tucked underneath. Curious, I pick up the piece of paper. The handwriting is neat and square.

Shave your pussy.

Gabriel is the most warped man I know. Flinging the note aside, I pull the ribbon off to reveal seven nightgowns in red, navy, white, pink, baby blue, black, and cherry plum, all with lace and ribbon trimmings. Did he get me new nightgowns because he destroyed mine, or are the sinfully sexy sleepwear something that turns him on?

I should be studying, but I can't stop thinking about the note. There will be repercussions if I disobey. In the shower, I trim and shave my pubic hair. It's a surprisingly lengthy task. After moisturizing my body, I pull on the navy nightgown, which is the least revealing, and sit down on the bed to wait.

It doesn't take long before I hear footsteps in the kitchen. Oscar, who sleeps on my bed, twitches his ears, but he doesn't move. Gabriel's tall frame appears in the doorway. With the backlight from the scullery, his face is in the dark. I can't make out his expression. He flicks on the light and enters the room with slow but purposeful steps. He's a man who always knows what he's doing and who always has a reason for his actions. His gaze slides over me from top to bottom, but there's

nothing of Tiny's lustful need for a quick fix in his eyes. They're filled with questions as he runs his fingertips down my arm from my shoulder to my hand. There's a crazy moment when I almost trust him with my body, that I almost surrender my mind. It's like being in a car with a good driver, knowing you'll end up safely at your destination. I must be going nuts. It's the endorphins my body releases when he touches me. Purely hormonal. Biological.

Gabriel is a sadist, and he made me a whore. I can never trust him.

He slides a finger under the strap of the nightgown. "It looks good on you."

"Thank you," I say awkwardly. "You didn't have to."

"Yes, I did." He lifts Oscar from the covers and puts him in his cat bed in the corner. "He doesn't need to see this."

I'm not sure if he's joking or serious, but the insinuation behind his words makes my underwear damp. I don't want this reaction, but I'm helpless to stop my body from wanting what he gives.

He drums his fingers on my wrist. Whatever is going through his mind, he's giving it deep thought. Finally, he breaks the silence with a single command.

"Undress."

I can fight and argue, cry and plead, but it won't make a difference. It never does to men like him. Sitting up, I take the hem of the nightgown and pull it over my head. My underwear follows next. I don't want to drag it out. The quicker we get this over with, the quicker I can go back to pretending I don't want him to touch me like this.

Gabriel doesn't hide his arousal from me. He's comfortable with it, like he is with his body and clothes. His erection strains under the fabric of his pants, but he doesn't touch it or go for his zipper. He tucks my hair over my shoulders with a gentle brush and continues with his orders.

"On your knees and open your legs."

Heat creeps up my neck as I take the posture that opens me up for his gaze, but I lift my chin and face him squarely. I won't surrender to my shame, not with him in the room. For a long moment, his eyes fix between my thighs, seemingly pleased that I obeyed his order to shave.

He tests the weight of my breasts, sending an uncontrollable shiver over my skin. I can't prevent my nipples from hardening.

“Shoulders back, tits forward.”

I give him what he wants and wait.

A rare smile tugs at his lips. “You're so brave, Valentina.” Without warning, his hand slips between my legs. He cups a broad palm over my sex. “I love your cunt bare. Do you know what

I want to do to you?”

He doesn't wait for my answer, but flicks the forefinger of his free hand left and right over the tip of my breast. The movement is firm and fast, and it makes my already heavy breast turn even more swollen. While he's toying with my nipple, he pushes his middle finger against the opening of my vagina. He doesn't penetrate me, but runs the tip of his finger up and down my slit. The rasp of the rough skin of his pad feels more intense on my shaved skin. Strangely, his touch on my breast echoes in my clit. The nub between my folds swells and throbs with aching need. Wetness coats his finger. I can feel the moisture as he slickens the outer walls of my opening with my arousal. Determined not to give him a sound, I gasp nevertheless when he grips my nipple between his thumb and forefinger with a pinch.

Satisfaction bleeds into his expression. For some reason, he's happy with my reaction.

He's happy that he has this effect on me. Another cry leaves my lips as he rolls my nipple.

“Valentina,” he says with a moan, “you're everything I want.”

Alternating between pinching and rolling my nipple, he works my body into a state of desperate need. The bite of pain followed by the softer caress is too much to bear. No man has ever touched me like this. There's so much wetness, his hand is covered. It takes everything I have not to grind into his palm. I don't have to. He presses the pad of his thumb down on my clit, massaging in circular movements. His deft fingers abandon my tormented breast to start working on the other one. When he gives the curve a soft smack on the side, making it bounce, a gush of liquid heat spills from my body and coats his fingers.

His eyes widen, and his pupils dilate. "You like that."

My lips part, and sounds I don't want to make tumble from my mouth. Nerve endings in my lower body spark with electricity, and an invisible band of fire draws tight around my womb. It implodes, drawing all my feminine parts tight in my core before it snaps and explodes from my clit outward. All the while, I watch his face. I hold his eyes as much as he holds mine. For the briefest of moments, he's exposed, and I understand why he's enjoying this. My pleasure gives him power.

With a hand on my back, he presses my upper body to his chest while he holds my sex in hand, applying gentle but unyielding pressure to my clit while aftershocks from my orgasm wrack my body. I shake in his hold, my energy spent, and my pleasure his. Only when my body turns quiet does he stop his assault on my clit. He keeps his hand between my legs still while he brushes a broad palm over my hair and down my back. His lips are warm and dry as he plants kisses from the arch of my neck down to my shoulder. His breath is a mist of heat on my skin. His erection is a steel rod that presses against my stomach from the difference in height with him standing and me on my knees, but he doesn't pay it any attention. Slowly, he pushes me back on the mattress and straightens my legs. Kneeling on the floor between my legs, he kisses first my clit and then my folds, running his tongue over the wetness and lapping it up until I'm only wet from his tongue, but no longer slick.

When he finally gets back on his feet, he wipes his mouth on the back of his hand. A flush burns on my cheeks.

He smirks and bends over me to plant a firm kiss on the corner of my mouth. My scent is musky on him. He continues to plant kisses down my body, turning rougher. I'm still soaring from my orgasm when he starts nipping my nipples and pinching my clit. It takes him a long time to bring my body to a quick, but intense, second orgasm. His roughness, in contrast to the first orgasm, feels like punishment, but I can't think of a single reason why. His house is spotless, and I stay away from the kitchen. By the time he's done with me, he's panting as hard as I am. He doesn't angle his face away from me like I'm used to, but pulls me into a sitting position on the edge of the bed while his hands go for his pants.

The air squeezes out of my lungs.

He's going to fuck my mouth.

CHAPTER SIX

Valentina

Visions of me on my knees in the middle of the road for anyone to see make my throat tight. I close my eyes, trying to visualize a black hole in space, anything so I can escape into a dark corner of my mind.

“Open your eyes,” Gabriel commands.

I obey. I don't have a choice.

“Unzip me.”

He has undone the button of his pants. A trail of hair peaks out from under the open flaps. My hands shake as I pull down the zipper. I'm on eye level with his crotch, and he's towering over me. The difference in strength between us chokes me. He can easily make me swallow him, and there will be nothing I can do.

“Take me out.” His voice is quiet and calm. There's nothing threatening about it.

Slowly, I push the elastic of his briefs down his hips to free his erection. He's impossibly big. Free from its constraints, his cock twitches and hardens more. The crest is broad and smooth. Manly veins run over the thick shaft to where the root is cushioned by heavy balls.

He doesn't grab my hair and force himself into my mouth, but simply stands there, watching me as I study his cock. I've never seen one from close-up. I've had Tiny's down my throat,

but I deliberately never looked at it. Gabriel's is beautiful, a work of art.

He doesn't object when I slide a finger over his length from the bottom to the top, so I carry on with my exploration, caressing the velvety head. I'm rewarded with a drop of moisture that spills from the slit. In response, liquid heat gathers between my legs, even if I've just had two orgasms. When I wrap my fingers around him, he groans. Loudly. He's not afraid to let me see the power I have. The deep lines that cut from his hips to his groin fascinate me. I abandon his cock to trace them with my fingers, surprised at how hard the muscle is underneath. A white scar runs across his hip, covering bone and flesh. He grits his teeth when I trace it, but doesn't say anything. His cock jerks when I run my hands down to his inner thighs and cup his balls.

They're soft and heavy, contracting in my palm.

"Valentina," he moans, "suck me already or zip me up."

He's giving me a choice? Emotion clogs up my chest. I swallow and look up to catch his expression. He's looking down at me with something like hope and acceptance. He'll take whatever I'm prepared to give.

He strokes my hair, his big hand cupping the back of my head. "Take only what you want."

At the verbal confirmation, my fear vanishes. He'll let me stop. He won't hold it against me. I lick my lips to moisten them, uncertain how to proceed. I've never done this without force.

"However you want," he whispers. "There's no right or wrong way."

I inch to the edge of the bed, taking his cock in both hands. Holding him close to my mouth, I flick out my tongue to taste him. A strangled grunt escapes when I lick over the crest. He tastes of earth and sea, a mixture of fertile soil and salty air, and I love it. I lick down to the base to see if it's the same, and when I suck a testicle into my mouth the heady taste intensifies.

“Fuck. Goddammit.”

He threads his fingers through my hair, but he doesn't pull. He's holding onto me for support as I take his control. The knowledge gives me more power, and it makes me brave. I slicken the whole shaft with my tongue, using my saliva as a lubricant for my hands. I grip his girth firmly, one hand above the other, and move my fists down while pushing my lips over him.

“Ah, fuck.” Air wheezes through his teeth. “Yes.”

I suck him into my mouth, hollowing my cheeks, and running my tongue over the head.

He buries his fingers deeper in my hair. “Yes, beautiful, just like that.”

When I glide my hands up and down his length where my mouth doesn't reach, he grows even thicker in my mouth. His hold on my hair tightens, and his ass clenches. “Pull out if you don't want to swallow.”

I don't want to give my power away, yet. He's letting me do what I want with him, and his cock is jerking in my mouth. He's close. I want to take him all the way. There's agony in his eyes. I recognize the look, know the depth of that kind of pleasure. I felt it at his hands, lips, tongue, and teeth. I open my throat and take him deep, breathing through my nose.

His jaw clenches as he grunts out his pleasure while warm jets coat my tongue. He holds my head in the gentle vice of his palms as he empties himself. Keeping his hips still, he lets me suck him dry rather than moving between my lips. I take every drop like I earned it, drinking down the dizzying cocktail of male ecstasy and feminine power.

Looking spent, he bends over and leans our foreheads together while he catches his breath. I'm still floating on a cloud of warm satisfaction knowing I pleased a man like him, when he tilts my head and crushes our lips together. He kisses me fiercely, tangling our tongues, and sucking my bottom lip into his mouth. When he finally lets go, I'm breathless.

His eyes crinkle in the corners. “You taste good with my cum on your tongue.” A wave of heat creeps up my neck and spreads to my cheeks.

He chuckles and kisses my forehead. “Zip me up.”

I bend to pull up his underpants and pants. There are more scars on his leg, but I don't linger there. For now, I'm concentrating on adjusting the clothes over his cock. He's still semihard. The velvet feel of his warm skin is pleasantly erotic. He catches my hand and moves it away, finishing the task of zipping his pants up himself. He plants a warm, wet kiss on my mouth and pushes me down to the mattress with a hand wrapped around my neck. For a second he stays like that, watching me, and then he lets go.

“Not yet,” he says, as if to himself. “Good night, Valentina.” Then, like last night, he's gone.

* * *

It's ten when I go up to Gabriel's room to make his bed. By now, he'd have finished his morning workout and shower. He'd be working in his study. As I'm pulling the sheets over the mattress, the bathroom door opens, and he steps out with a towel tied around his waist, his hair wet and droplets running down his chest.

I gulp and almost choke on my saliva. Heat gathers in my underwear as my imagination completes the picture hidden under the towel. A slow smile spreads over his face. He twists his head, hiding the scars from me, and walks to the dressing room.

“Shall I make the bed?” I ask in a small voice.

He turns to watch me, letting his eyes slide over my dress, making me feel naked. “Unless you have other ideas?”

His smile broadens as a flush heats my cheeks.

I clear my throat. “I meant I could come back later.”

He drops the towel, flashing me with a full frontal of his glorious, naked body.

“There’s nothing you haven’t seen,” he says, “so don’t let me keep you from your work.”

He’s wrong. The white, embossed line running diagonally across his knee is new to me. So is the circular mark surrounded by finer lines, like a spider’s web, on his foot. He looks like a perfect Frankenstein specimen, angrily stitched together and magnificently hard. There’s not an inch of him that’s not one hundred percent man, in every right and every wrong way possible.

For an utterly embarrassing moment, I’m frozen to the spot, staring at him like an idiot. It’s Gabriel who breaks the spell by walking to a rack of shirts. His ass looks like it’s chiseled from marble.

My breath flutters as I force my eyes away and continue the task of making his bed. All the while, I’m aware of him. He pulls on a white shirt and buttons it up. Next follow briefs, black slacks, and silver tie. He sits down on a stool to pull on socks and expensive looking shoes. He opens a drawer and selects a pair of cufflinks, which he fits without difficulty.

I’ve never watched a man’s grooming. There’s something intimate about it. It’s like a privilege he’s given me, allowing me to watch. All dressed up, he leaves the room, trailing his palm over my backside on his way out. The caress is so light, maybe I imagined it. Alone, with no one to see, I fluff out his pillow and push my face into it. I inhale his scent, remembering the taste of him in my mouth. What is it like to be a woman from his world, treasured and respected, and not a maid or sex toy? We’re worlds apart, and our worlds don’t mix.

* * *

For the remainder of the day, I keep a watchful eye on Oscar. His frequent urination stops in the late afternoon. It’s safe to let him out of my room. Besides, he can’t stay here all weekend when I leave.

Gabriel is out when my weekly shift comes to an end. I’m nervous to leave the grounds even if Magda was clear on the rules, but I’m also anxious to see Charlie and Kris. I shove a

change of clothes and the container of food remains into a grocery bag and check that Oscar has enough food before I go. Outside, I find Rhett on the porch.

“Hi.” I clutch the bag in my hands. “I’m off until Monday.”

“I know.”

“I’ll need the new key to my flat.”

“You’re going back there?”

“I need to tie up loose ends.”

“Wait here.” He disappears inside and exits a short while later with a set of keys he places in my hand. “The big one’s for the main lock, and the two small ones for the top and bottom deadlocks.”

“Thank you.”

“Are you going there now?”

“Probably tomorrow. I’m first going to see my brother.” I also want to visit Puff’s grave.

“Where did you bury Puff?”

“You don’t want to know.”

“I want to put flowers on his grave.”

“You don’t want to put shit out there. In fact, I’m not sure you should go anywhere near that neighborhood.”

From the look he gives me, I’m scared he’s going to prevent me from leaving, so I say quickly, “See you Monday.”

He doesn’t reply, but doesn’t stop me either. When he presses a code on his phone that opens the gate, I rush through with relief. There are no public busses in this area, but if I walk far enough, I’ll eventually hit the off-ramp to the highway where I can catch a minivan taxi. I flag one down after a fifty-minute walk. I’m the only white girl in the van and receive nasty remarks about the color of my skin from the other passengers, but the driver is kind and lets me sit up front until he drops me off in Orange Grove.

A Jewish community mostly populates the area because of the synagogue. In Rocky Street, I pause to feed the food remains to the street dogs before hurrying the last two blocks to Kris' house. I enter through the adjoining clinic. A few clients are waiting in the reception area. Kris runs an honest to God good practice for the love of it. She charges way less than what she should, and I know she treats a lot of animals for free when the clients can't afford the medicine or consultations. She barely makes ends meet, and I feel bad for saddling her with my problems, but I have no one else.

There's no assistant. She hasn't replaced me yet. I knock on the consultation room door and push it open.

Kris lifts her gaze from a Yorkshire Terrier and shoots me a smile. "Get me a vaccine shot while you're here, will you?"

I scrub my hands in the basin and enter the small backroom where she keeps the vaccines.

She's in over her head, so I stick around and help out where I can.

After seven, she pats my shoulder and jerks her head toward the door. "Go on. Charlie's in the house. I know you're anxious to see him."

"Thank you." I offer her a grateful smile and hurry through the back to the house.

Charlie sits in front of the television in the lounge, wearing a Superman T-shirt and shorts, his fringe falling into his eyes.

When he sees me, his eyes light up. "Va-Val!"

He jumps up and grabs me into a hug, almost crushing my ribs. Sometimes, he forgets his strength.

"Hey." I brush the hair from his face. "How are you? Is Kris taking good care of you?"

"Loo-look." He points at a stack of comic books on the coffee table. "Kri-Kris gave me money to ex-exchange th-them."

"That's great," I say, even if I worry. The comic store is across the road. Charlie has to cross a very busy street to get

there. “Have you eaten?”

“Kris is a good coo-cook. She’s making ma-macaroni and chee-cheese to-tonight.”

“Sounds good.” I tie an apron around my waist, and set to work cooking dinner and cleaning the kitchen. Dirty dishes are stacked on every surface. The trashcan needs a good scrub and the floors a wash. Kris has never been tidy, but she spends every free second in the practice. An hour later, the kitchen is spotless, and the lounge and bedrooms vacuumed. I’m busy putting clean linen on the beds when Kris enters, looking shattered.

“Dinner’s ready.” I pull out a chair by the small table in the kitchen where Charlie is already seated.

She looks around and shakes her head. “You didn’t have to.”

“Are you kidding? After what you’re doing for Charlie?”

“Yeah.” Her eyes are probing. “We need to talk about that.”

I glance at my brother and give her a pointed stare. “After dinner.”

“Okay.”

Later, when I’ve tucked Charlie into bed, I take the clean laundry from the dryer and start folding it. Kris takes two beers from the fridge, cracks the cans, and hands me one.

She leans on the counter and props a foot on the cupboard door. “So, care to tell me about this new job of yours?”

I take a long swig from the beer before I face her. “There’s nothing more to tell.”

Her eyes narrow on me. “How long?”

“Nine.”

“Nine months?”

“Years,” I say from behind the beer can.

She sprays the swallow of beer she's just taken over the clean floor. "Jesus, Val." She shoves a hand into the pocket of her jeans and stares at me with an open mouth.

"I know. It's not like I have a choice." I don't go into the gritty details. "Hold on. Are you telling me you're his live-in maid for the next nine years?" "Yes." I dab up the spilled beer with a paper towel.

She starts pacing the floor. "What about your studies?"

"I'll still carry on."

She stops. "Will you manage?"

"I'll have to."

"It's a lot of studying. A fucking lot of studying."

"I know."

"Did you sign a contract?"

"I don't need a contract. Paper is worthless to men like him. His word is enough."

"How does this agreement work?"

"The salary he would've paid me goes to settling the debt."

"How could he approve a loan for Charlie? I mean, Charlie. Of all people. There must be a law that prevents institutions from granting loans to disabled people."

"I never declared Charlie incompetent. A big oversight on my part. In any event, fighting him with the legal system won't work. You know every judge in this country is corrupt. The man with the most money always wins."

"Fuck, Val, there must be something we can do."

"Look, I can't change it. I have to make the best of it."

"If you're working for him for nothing, how will you afford your studies?"

"He's giving me an allowance. It'll be enough to pay the portion the bursary doesn't cover, and I was kind of hoping you'll keep me on for Sundays."

“You’re going to burn yourself out.”

“That’s rich coming from you, Miss Workaholic.”

She smiles. “You know I’ll do whatever to help.”

“I’ll pay for Charlie’s food and expenses. I don’t expect you to put him up for nothing.” “Forget about it.”

“It’s not up for negotiation.” I hesitate. “Nine years is a long time.”

“Don’t worry about Charlie. He’s welcome here for however long it takes.”

“Thank you, Kris.” A heavy weight lifts off my shoulders. “I don’t know what I would’ve done without you.”

“What about your flat?”

“I’m selling it. There’s no point in keeping it if it’s going to stand empty.”

“Good luck. You’ll battle to give it away for free.”

I sigh. “I know. Listen, about Charlie.” I twist the tip of my trainer on the floor. “He told me about the comic store. It’s a busy road, Kris.”

“I taught him to wait for the green light. We did a few practice rounds together. You’ve got to let go a little, give him some freedom. I know you feel protective, and it’s understandable, but you have to push him to be as autonomous as possible.”

“I just...” I swallow. “I just don’t know. I feel responsible.”

She leaves her beer on the table and takes my shoulders. “It’s not your fault. It was an accident. You have to let it go.”

I wipe at the unwelcome tears in my eyes and look away. “I know.”

“Hey.” She wipes my face with her palms. “Everything’s going to be all right. It’ll work out. You’ll see.”

“Sure.” I only say it to placate Kris, because once she’s on a roll, she won’t stop until she believes she has me convinced.

Kris is the queen of positive thinking, and for that I'm as grateful as I am for her giving me a job and taking Charlie in.

"Come on." She hooks her arm around mine and drags me to the lounge. "Let's watch a stupid sitcom and laugh ourselves silly."

"I don't know." I pull back. "I have to get to the flat."

"What, *now*?" She points at the window. "It's pitch black dark outside. How will you get there? I'm not letting you out of this house tonight. You can bum on the couch. By the way, I cleaned up your place and emptied out the fridge."

Tears of gratitude stream over my face. I really need to put a cork in it, but it's as if the dam wall has broken.

"Now, now." She hugs me tightly. "Tomorrow is another day."

* * *

I work all Sunday in the practice, and after buying a few groceries to stock up Kris' cupboards, I head out to Berea in a minivan taxi before it gets dark. The agent I called that morning is waiting for me in front of the building when I arrive. I wonder about Jerry, but I already see from the street his windows are dark. When we exit the stairs on my floor, my heart lurches. The door stands ajar.

"Wait," the elderly gentleman says, pushing me aside.

He takes a pistol from the waistband of his pants and nudges the door open with his shoe.

Chaos greets us. Every single cupboard is open. Broken crockery is scattered over the floor. The mattress is shredded, foam peeling from cuts in the fabric. The cushions have been destroyed, too.

He lowers the gun. "Is anything valuable gone?"

I shake my head. There was nothing, except for our kitchen utensils. "Why would anyone do this?"

"Destruction. They don't need any other reason." We study the door together. It's not broken.

“The bastards picked the locks,” he says, confirming my deduction.

As I start sweeping up broken glass and porcelain, the agent inspects the ruined space. He ums and ahs, testing the taps and the button to flush the toilet.

“Everything looks clean,” he finally says, “but it’s tough selling in Berea these days.”

My heart sinks, even if I know no one in their right mind will buy a place in the heart of drug valley, and those who’ll risk it here don’t pay rent. They simply take or vandalize.

“Can you try? I really need the money.”

“Don’t we all? What about the furniture?”

“I’m having it picked up by a pawn shop.” Kris gave me the contact. They offered me a few bucks for our belongings.

“I’ll keep in touch.”

After he’s gone, I ensure the fridge is empty and have a shower before I switch off the geyser. Tomorrow, I’ll have the electricity and water cut. It’s additional bills I don’t have to worry about. The money will go to Kris to help pay for Charlie’s part of the living expenses. Tonight is the last night I plan on spending here. I never want to come back. When I’m done paying Charlie’s debt, I’ll join Kris in her practice and get Charlie and me a place of our own.

Kris promised me a full partnership when I graduate from vet school.

It takes a good couple of hours to clean up the flat, after which my grumbling tummy reminds me I haven’t eaten since lunch. I drink a glass of water, but the hunger pains won’t go away. There’s nothing in the cupboards. The thieves took all the tinned and dry food that was left. There’s ten bucks in my bag from the allowance Gabriel paid me, but I’ll need it for taxi fare. I turn the broken side of the mattress onto the bedframe and make the bed, trying not to think about food. I double-check that the door is locked. The new door is sturdy and comes with a deadbolt on the inside, which I slide into place. It gives me a small amount of added security.

Sometime during the night, there's a thunderstorm. I lie awake, watching the lightning run across the sky and listening to the drops falling on the roof. I long for Charlie and Puff. A selfish part of me wishes they were here so I could hold them in my arms, while the logical part of me is happy that they're free from this hell. It's a miracle that I'm here, unbound, that despite my debt, I have a measure of freedom. It gives me hope. Maybe Magda has some fairness inside of her. My thoughts drift to Gabriel as I fall asleep, and my dreams are filled with disturbingly erotic images of his scarred body.

* * *

When the alarm on my phone goes off at five, I haven't slept much, but I can't risk being late for work. The gangs and criminals are mostly active at night. At this time, most of them will be passed out from alcohol or drug abuse. There's little chance I'll run into any unfavorable elements on the street. After brushing my teeth and washing my face, I pull on my clean dress. I lock the door, drag the trash bags with our broken crockery downstairs, and hit the streets.

My trainers fall quietly on the pavement as I dodge the potholes filled with water. The air is fresh after the rain with steam coming off the tar. There's a quiet after the storm, leaving me peaceful and calm, but my tranquility doesn't last long.

A little way down the street, a tall, slender figure emerges from between two buildings.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Valentina

My heart lurches in my chest. Maybe he hasn't seen me. I clutch the bag to my body, searching for a side road to slip into, but it's too late. The man heads straight for me. I know that step. There's a slight bend to his knees, and his arms are spread wide. My breathing quickens, and my body breaks out in a sweat, but I lift my chin and give him a defiant stare when he stops in front of me.

"Well, now," Tiny says, "if it ain't Little Red Riding Hood."

"I don't have time for your games."

I try to move past him, but he grabs my arm.

"No time for Tiny? My, my, are you an uppity-ass, now?"

"Unlike you, I work. Let me go or I'll be late."

"High and mighty, huh? Tiny heard you left. Tiny was watching your flat, waiting for you."

His words shake me. I didn't run into him by chance. He *waited* for me.

"Tiny..." I want it to sound like a warning, but there's a wheeze in my voice.

"You still owe Tiny. You'll always owe Tiny. Tiny has waited long enough."

He starts dragging me by my arm toward an alley. I kick in my heels and try to pry his fingers open, but his grip is like steel. Panic gets the better of me. This time is different. If he was going to fuck my mouth he would've done it in the street, as always.

“Tiny, no!”

“You can scream all you like. Nobody gives a fuck.”

He shoves me down the foul-smelling alley all the way to the end where the exit is blocked by overflowing trashcans and rips the plastic bag from my hands. Peering inside, he takes out my purse, drops it on the ground by his feet, and throws the rest onto the heap of garbage.

“Come here, white bitch.” He takes a wide stance and feels his way up under my dress, dragging his sweaty palms over my hip and stomach.

Oh, God, I'm going to be sick. “Don't.”

“Or what?”

My defenselessness infuriates me. The anger boils over. I pull back and punch him on the jaw as hard as I can. For all of one second he's off balance, but before I'm one step away, he grabs my arm and throws me against the wall. My back hits the bricks with a thud. He slaps me so hard my ears ring.

“Fucking bitch.”

I scream and scratch, my fingers going for his eyes while my knee aims for his crotch, but he catches my wrists above my head and presses my body to the wall with his weight.

“Wanna fight?” he hisses, the repugnant air from his mouth fanning my face.

“Let me go!”

He laughs and shifts, holding me secure with one hand to stick the other down the front of my panties. “What have you been doing with this cunt, huh?” His fingers drag over my clit, parting my folds.

I press my knees together, but it's no use. He wiggles his fist until it's lodged between my legs, forcing my thighs open.

He licks my neck, inviting a shiver of repulse.

"Tiny's gonna fuck you so hard, you're gonna forget your name."

His upper body crushes me. I almost sigh in relief when he pulls his hand from my underwear, only to cry out in despair when he shoves his pants down over his hips.

Please, no. Not this.

He knocks my knuckles into the wall, but I hardly feel the pain. I need to fight. I struggle like mad person, which only makes him laugh. By the time he has his dick out of his underwear and my dress hitched up to my waist, I'm already panting from the exertion of fighting him while he hasn't even broken into a sweat.

"Tiny." The plea falls from my lips while tears stream down my cheeks.

"Yeah, say my name, bitch."

When he rubs up against me, I bite my lip so hard I taste blood. The fear I've fought against my whole life finally gets to me, making my throat constrict and my heart pump with furious beats. It's difficult to breathe. It happens all over again, the man who raped me. I fight the images that play over in my mind, but I'm back in the bar where the men dragged me, on my back on the pool table while the one with the deep voice unzips his fly, and the rest watch. I'm in a zone where I don't want to be, but I can't come back. Tiny's hand is around his flaccid cock, pumping it to life, but I already feel the tear in my body and the dribble of blood running down my legs.

"Get your hands off her."

The voice that spoke isn't part of the memory. The men cheered him on. They didn't tell him to remove his hands. They were filming it, laughing as I cried.

"Now."

The deadly calm in the baritone voice is dangerous. It's like this morning's quiet before the storm. Tiny freezes, bringing my attention back to him, to the present. He drops his penis and lifts his hands, glancing over his shoulder as he takes a step back.

"Easy, man," he says in a thin voice. "You're interrupting our fun."

"Fun?" The tall, broad figure in the dark steps forward, a gun aimed at Tiny.

His face is in the shadows, but I know it's him. I know his voice, his shape, his smell, his very presence.

"Doesn't look like she's having fun," Gabriel says.

"Whoa." Tiny laughs nervously. "You've got it all wrong, here. Tiny ain't doing nothing wrong. She's Tiny's bitch. Ain't you, honey? Come on, love." He jerks his head in Gabriel's direction. "Tell the man."

Gabriel moves so fast, I don't see it coming. The one minute he's standing at the entrance of the alley and the next he's in front of Tiny, hitting him in the stomach with a punch that sends him flying through the air and falling in the gutter water. Gabriel steps over him, pointing the gun at his head.

"Oh, fuck." Tiny lifts his hands. "I'm sorry, bro. I didn't recognize you."

Gabriel cocks his neck, cracking a bone. "Apologize."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Louw, really I am."

"To her, not to me, you prick."

Tiny licks his lips and glances at me briefly before returning his gaze to the gun. "Sorry."

Tiny didn't know you and Mr. Louw are friends."

"Friends?" Gabriel utters a cold laugh that vanishes as quickly as it started. "She's property."

Tiny gulps and starts crying. "Fuck, man."

I'm shivering in my dress, feeling like I'm stuck in a very bad dream.

"Valentina." The firm way in which Gabriel says my name commands my attention. "Walk to the street and wait on the corner."

"No," Tiny says, shaking his dreadlocks, snot running from his nose. "Please, fuck. No." Gabriel is going to shoot him.

"Gabriel, please..." I take a step toward him. I need to find a connection with him, to reason with him. "Please, look at me."

He doesn't look away from Tiny. "I won't tell you again. Leave the alley and wait at the corner."

I start crying myself, touching Gabriel's arm. "He's not worth it. Don't."

I can't live with myself knowing I'm the reason for another man's death. My father is enough.

Gabriel cups my nape, and drags me closer, pressing me hard against his body without moving his aim from Tiny. He kisses my temple with his gaze fixed on the man on the ground and speaks softly against my ear.

"Go. Now."

In Gabriel's world, there's vengeance and violence. Violence can be dissuaded, but never vengeance. I know how it works. If he doesn't shoot Tiny, Tiny will have to kill him or look over his shoulder forever. I don't want this for Gabriel. I don't want him to carry another life on his conscience, especially not because of me.

"Gabriel—"

Quincy comes running down the alley. He brakes in his tracks when he takes in the scene.

Roughly, Gabriel shoves me toward Quincy. "Take her to the car."

Quincy doesn't hesitate. He drags me kicking and screaming down the alley, all the way to the car where Rhett waits. He bundles me into the back and wipes a hand over his face. Rhett gives me a grim look in the rearview mirror. I huddle in the corner, unable to control my shaking. I wait for a shot to go off, but hear nothing. Gabriel would use a silencer. A few seconds later, he exits the alley, adjusting his cuffs and walking with brisk strides to the car, my purse in his hands.

Once he's in, Rhett pulls off. No one says a word on the way home. Gabriel puts his arm around me, holding me tight, and I close my eyes and cry quietly for the terrible act he committed for me.

* * *

Gabriel

At that hour, everyone at home is asleep. We park at the back so I can carry Valentina to her room without having to traverse the whole house. She objects when I lift her into my arms, but I don't heed her. Rhett and Quincy will go back to deal with the body. They know the drill. Since that scumbag fucker son of a bitch Tiny wasn't connected to any gang, there are no logistics or payoff to iron out. My priority is Valentina.

Oscar jumps from the tumble drier and runs ahead of me into Valentina's room to keep guard in the windowsill. I lay her down on the bed and remove her trainers before stripping the dress. It's going to the trashcan. I don't want anything that filthy Zambian touched on her skin. Anyway, the dress is threadbare.

Going through the shelves of her closet, I find one T-shirt, a tank top, a pair of jeans that has seen better days, and a pair of shorts. These are all the clothes she owns? I make a mental note to go through her belongings later and grab the T-shirt.

Helping her to sit up, I dress her. After what happened, I don't want her to feel vulnerable, and nakedness will do that.

"What time is it?" she asks.

"Almost six."

"I need to get ready for work."

She tries to get up, but I push her down.

“Stay.”

“I’m fine.” She looks up at me through her wet lashes, her lips quivering.

Yeah. She looks anything but fine, but she’s obstinate and worried that she’ll fail in her job and therefore get shot.

“Don’t move,” I say with enough authority to make her obey as I leave the room.

In the kitchen, I pour a stiff shot of whiskey and take a mild sedative from the medicine kit. The remedy is natural and won’t have adverse effects with the alcohol.

Sitting down on the edge of Valentina’s bed, I lift her head, slip the pill into her mouth, and hold the glass to her lips. “Drink up.”

She doesn’t argue. Her blind obedience heats my insides. It’s a huge step, and I don’t think she realizes how much trust she’s showing me.

Depositing the empty glass on the floor, I take her hand in mine. Her bones are delicate and thin in my palm—breakable. There are scratches on her knuckles, but they’re not deep. We can worry about that later. The sight of those marks unleashes the monster in me, though, and it takes some effort to calm myself enough to ask, “Do you want to talk about it?” I do, but I’m not going to push. Not now, at least.

She puts a hand on her forehead. “I—I don’t feel so good.”

My body tenses, every muscle going taught. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know. I just feel weird.”

“Tell me what you feel.”

“Dizzy. The world is turning.”

The effect of the alcohol is kicking in, but instead of relaxing her, it’s making her drunk.

“When was the last time you ate?” I ask with caution.

She lifts her eyes to the ceiling while she thinks. “Lunch.”

I try to keep my voice normal. “Yesterday?”

She clutches my hand like a riptide is about to pull us apart. “Gabriel?”

“It’s just the whiskey I gave you to relax. You need food. I’ll get you something to eat.” “You don’t have to. I can.” There’s a slight thickness to her speech.

“I know you can, beautiful.”

I pry her fingers open gently and go back to the kitchen to rummage through the fridge.

Going for as much carbs, fat, and protein as I can find, I pile a plate high with leftover Bacon Carbonara and add lots of cheese. While the food is heating in the microwave, I grab a fork and paper napkin. Back in her room, I prop her back up against the pillows and twist the pasta around the fork. When I bring it to her mouth, she utters a weak protest.

“Open,” I say.

Again, she obeys.

I feed her until the plate is empty before I pull her into my lap. “You should sleep now.”

She shakes her head, brushing her cheek over my chest. “Can’t. Have work to do.”

“It’s an order, not a request.”

Her eyelids are already heavy. “Thank you for saving me.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Why were you there?”

I run my gaze over her face, drinking in her pretty features as the truth registers in her expression.

“You followed me?” she asks with disbelief, a tinge of hurt thrown into the mix.

“Your phone,” I replied flatly. “I planted a tracker in it before I gave it back to you.”

“Why? Don’t you trust me? Do you think I’ll run?”

If she knows the intensity of my obsession, it’ll expose the one weakness I can’t afford. I’ll lose my power over her, and that’s not something I’m willing to let go, ever, so I give her a warped version.

“You’re worth a lot of money to me, Valentina. I’m protecting my interests.”

Hurt shimmers in her eyes and creeps into the tremulous smile she gives me. “Of course.

How could I forget? Four hundred thousand rand.”

I let a note of warning infuse my tone. “You chose. I never forced you.”

“You’re right.” A single tear slips free and runs over her cheek. “I’m sorry.”

Her apology catches me off-guard. “About what?”

“That this morning happened.”

I catch the drop on my thumb and stick it in my mouth, tasting her sorrow. “It wasn’t your fault.” I hesitate, choosing my words carefully. I don’t want to contradict what I just said by making her feel responsible for what happened. “What were you doing back at your flat?”

“Trying to sell it.”

There can only be one reason she would risk it out there to make a sale. The state of her almost bare closet gives me a hint. “You need the money that bad?”

She looks away. “It doesn’t make sense hanging onto the place if neither me nor Charlie is going to live there.”

That’s not the point. The point is that no one is going to buy a bachelor flat in Berea.

Homeless people and thugs may move in, but they’re not going to pay a cent. I get it, though.

She’s proud. She doesn’t want to tell me why she wants the measly money that shithole is worth. I give her more than

enough money to feed and clothe her, with plenty left to take care of her brother. It's not that she owes anyone. I checked with the money lords. There's something else.

"How much are you hoping to get?" I ask.

"Ten, twenty thousand, maybe?"

If this is part of a scheme to pay me back quicker, I'll play along for now. In time, she'll understand I'm not letting her go. Anyway, she won't get a lousy buck for the place. If she wants twenty grand, I'll give it to her.

"I'll handle the sale for you." She doesn't have to know I'll be the one to buy it. "You're never going back to that area. Do you understand?"

"Oh, no." Her eyes grow large. "I'm not making my problem yours. I can do it."

"I know you can do it, but I said I'll deal with the agent. End of discussion. There are too many others like Tiny out there."

She goes quiet at the mention of the fucker's name. *Way to go, Louw. Why don't you rub her face in it?*

"You shot him, didn't you?" she asks in a small voice.

I hug her tighter. "He'll never bother you again." I'm afraid to ask, but I need to know if I should call out a doctor. "Did he hurt you?"

"Some."

I go cold, the fury from earlier reviving in my veins. "How?"

"When he slapped me. My hands."

That explains the bruises on her knuckles. "Anything else?"

"Not like *that*."

Relief has me close my eyes briefly. "It wasn't the first time he bothered you." I of all people know when a man is proprietorial, and Tiny acted like she was territory.

“He collected levies for our building. It doesn’t matter now.”

It does. I can only imagine how he made her pay. The thought has a nerve twitch in the back of my eye, making my eyeball jump in the socket.

“What did he do to you?”

“Nothing.”

“It didn’t look like nothing.”

“It wasn’t always like this. Today was different.”

The light bulb goes on in my head. “He made you give him head,” I state matter-of-factly, keeping the agonizing rage from my voice, because I need to know.

“I gave nothing,” she bits out. “He used my mouth, but I didn’t give him a single damn thing.”

That lowlife fucking son of a bitch. I wish I had more control back in that alley, enough to hold back from shooting him straight away. I should’ve tortured him to death, starting by cutting off his dick. The irony of the situation isn’t lost on me. I’m condemning an already dead man to a slow, painful death for something I’m guilty of myself. I took her and decided to keep her. I eat her pussy every night and get off on her climaxes. I stuck my dick in her mouth and shot my load down her throat. Yes, I’m no goddamn better than the man I killed for her today, but she’s *mine*. Tiny had no right to lay his hands on her.

Turning my scars toward the shadows, I bring my head down and brush our lips together. I want to wipe the imprint of every other man’s dick on her lips away. I press my lips on the mouth that cocksucker Tiny abused God knows how many times.

“There.” Despite my dark mood, I try to keep things light. “All kissed better.”

A smile curves her lips. She looks so damn innocent looking at me like this. After what happened to her, the enormity of the oral sex weighs heavy on my shoulders. She’s

mine like no other person has been, not even my ex-wife. When I took possession of her body, I also committed myself to take care of her feelings. I'm training her body to want me, because God knows I'm too ugly to inspire spontaneous desire in a woman, let alone love, but she needs to understand sucking my cock isn't mandatory.

I smooth my hand over her hair. "You never have to do that again. Not for anyone. Not even me."

She lifts her head to look at me, her brown eyes soft and wide. "It wasn't the same. With you, I wanted to."

The alcohol loosens her tongue, but it also makes her speak the truth. A foreign feeling crushes my chest. Gratitude. It's the first time in my life I feel gratitude toward anyone.

Not knowing what to do with the emotion, I rock her in my arms until she drifts off. For a long time I hold her, until Marie is about to arrive. Easing her limp body down on the mattress, I cover her with the duvet and put Oscar on the bed to keep her company. I go straight to my study to call my PI. I prefer to conduct sensitive calls in a room swept for bugs every day.

Anton answers on the first ring. "Gabriel," he says jovially, "what can I do for you?"

"I need a detailed report on the financial activity of Valentina Haynes and anything you can get on her history."

"Marvin Haynes' daughter?"

"The one and only."

"I'm on it. By when do you need it?"

"Yesterday."

"I don't know why I still ask."

I'm about to head for a shower when Rhett returns.

"The flat was broken into," he says. "I spoke to the agent Valentina met there. Apparently, the place was turned upside down."

Why the fuck would someone burglar her place when it's under our protection? It's a stupid act only an idiot on a

suicide mission would risk.

“Any leads?” I ask tightly.

“No. Must be a random break-in, maybe a thief who’s new to the neighborhood and doesn’t know shit about the hierarchy.”

True. There are thousands of murderers and thieves out there. Not everyone is familiar with the families or how we operate. Still, I smell a rat, and I don’t like it.

I give him a pat on the shoulder. “Get some rest.”

He’s been up with me all night. If the business meeting on Saturday hadn’t run overtime, I would’ve been home before Valentina left for the weekend. I was irritated for not being able to see her before she was off for two nights and a day. I tracked her via her phone to Orange Grove, and when she went back to Berea, we spent the night outside her flat, parked in a nearby street. I was lucky I checked the tracker when I did, or I wouldn’t have noticed she was on the move, being attacked in a dirty alley by that filthy Zambian. I didn’t expect her to leave that early. My bodyguards must think I’m crazy, but they’re wiser than to comment. I could’ve broken down her new door again and dragged her home to safety, but I want Valentina to have an illusion of freedom. Magda wants her to have hope, but I want her to be happy. Suddenly and inexplicably, it’s important to me.

* * *

Valentina

It’s after noon when I wake with a start. Ice fills my veins when the memory of this morning floods my mind. Gabriel shot a man because of me. I know it’s not the first man he’s killed, and it won’t be the last, but I didn’t want to be responsible. If I’m to function today, I can’t think about it. Pushing the dark memory from my mind, I pull on a uniform and braid my hair.

Marie looks up when I enter the kitchen, her face pulled into a scowl. “Mr. Louw said you’re sick. Apparently, so is

Carly. Must be a bug going through the house. I made the beds, but you better see to the laundry.”

I grab the washing basket and brush past her to fetch the dirty clothes from the bedrooms.

Before I reach Carly’s room, heated voices coming through the open door stop me in my tracks.

“Dad, come on, I’m old enough to go on a date.”

“Not with a boy I don’t know from Adam.”

“You want to *know* every boy who asks me out on a date? Jesus, Dad, they’re too scared of you to come to our house. I may as well become a nun now and get it over with.”

“Watch your tongue, young lady.”

“All the girls in my class are going with dates. It’s only a movie.”

“I said no.”

“I’ll look like an idiot if I go alone. Everyone will think I couldn’t get a date.”

“If that’s your only motivation for wanting to go with him, you’re not doing it for the right reason.”

“Dad!”

“If it’s really such a big deal, I’ll get the Hills’ boy to go with you.”

“You’re mean and cruel! I don’t like Anthony Hill. I like Sebastian.”

“I don’t give a damn. I don’t trust a man I don’t know, and I don’t know Sebastian.”

“You’re ruining my life!” Carly storms from the room, her eyes brimming with tears. “I hate you!”

She runs down the stairs, her sobs audible until the front door slams behind her. When I look around the door, Gabriel stands in the middle of the room, his eyes closed and his head turned up to the ceiling.

“What are you doing?” Magda says behind me, making me jump. “Eavesdropping?” “Laundry.” I lift the basket.

“Get on with it then.”

I get out of her way and load the washing machine, but I can't stop thinking about Carly. In some regards she's a brat, but I feel for her. I remember what it was like when my father told me who I'd marry and that I'd never be allowed to go out with other boys. At the time, it felt like my world had come to an end.

Later, when I wash the windows, I see Carly sitting outside by the pool, her cheeks streaked with tears. I pour a glass of lemonade and carry it outside.

Leaving it on the table next to her, I say, “I'm sorry you're upset.”

She crosses her arms. “I'm sure you are.”

“He's just being protective.”

“He's a pain in the ass.”

My mom always paved the way for me with my dad. “Why don't you ask your mom to speak to him?”

She snorts. “Like *that* will help. She's ten times worse.”

“When is this big night?”

“Friday.”

“Maybe he'll come around.”

“If that's what you think, you don't know my father.”

I stare down into her unhappy face, seeing myself at a younger age when I already knew I'd never have love, not the kind people marry for, anyway. Maybe it's the futility of my life, of my own unhappy existence that makes me blurt out, “Do you want me to speak to him?”

She jerks her head up, her lips parted. “Will you?”

“I can't guarantee he'll listen, but I can try.”

She turns her face toward the pool, staring at the blue water with empty eyes. “I guess you're my only shot. No one

else will try.”

“All right. Now cheer up. Sulking gives you wrinkles.” A smile almost curves her lips.

* * *

Gabriel

I’m poring over the information Anton sent about Valentina—the general stuff that’s easy to come by—when the object of my research walks into my study.

“Excuse me, do you have a minute?”

Lowering the report, I scrutinize her. She looks pale. “Feeling better?”

“Yes.” She fixes her gaze on the carpet and shuffles her feet. “Thank you.”

She’s nervous. “What is it, Valentina?”

“Earlier on, back there,” she throws a thumb in a general direction, “I couldn’t help but overhear the argument.”

I lean back in my chair and narrow my gaze. “With Carly?”

“It’s none of my business, but—”

“Damn right, it’s not.” Carly is *my* daughter, and whatever issues I have as a father are private.

At my tone, her eyes grow large. I can practically see the fear bleeding into them. Making a conscious effort to soften my tone, I say, “Whatever you want to say, I’m sure you mean well, but your opinion is unwanted.” I turn my face to the computer screen, not dismissing her, but showing her she no longer has my undivided attention.

For a moment, she says nothing. I believe she’s going to bolt, but then she lifts her chin and looks down at me from her meager height.

“Gabriel.”

All I want is to throw her over the desk and fuck her, but in this, I have to show her her place.

“It’s sir when I’m not going down on you.”

Her cheeks turn pink, but she stands her ground, her gorgeous courage making me hot around my collar and hard in my pants.

“*Sir*, I promised Carly I’d speak to you. You can do to me whatever you want, listen or not listen, but I won’t break my promise.”

The chair scrapes over the floor as I push it back and get to my feet. “I won’t tell you again, keep your nose out of my business.”

The hem of her dress trembles—her knees must be shaking—but she doesn’t back down.

“You’re making a mistake.”

I round the desk and stop in front of her. “Am I, now?”

“You should let Carly decide who she wants to go out with.”

“You would know.”

“Yes.”

“You’re not a parent. Until you are, keep your opinion to yourself.”

She cranes her neck to look me in the eyes. “No, I’m not a parent, but I’ve been there. I know what it feels like.”

The angry part of me stills as I picture her as a young woman asking her father’s permission to go out on a date. From the report I just read, I know she was only thirteen when he died, way too young to date, but I’m curious.

“My father already decided who I was going to marry when I turned ten. It didn’t matter what I wanted or how I felt. My mother was already gathering a trousseau for the day I’d turn eighteen. My father passed away early, saving me from that fate, but if he’d still been alive, I would’ve been far, far away from here.”

There’s nowhere far enough she could’ve run. Marvin would’ve found her. He was a small fish in a big pond, but he

was part of the mob. Every single man in the business would've been looking for her. My curiosity piqued further, I ask, "Who were you supposed to marry?"

"Lambert Roos."

It makes sense. It would've strengthened Marvin's connections, but hearing her say it doesn't sit right with me. Lambert is an old fart. I feel like killing him now just because he once upon a time considered marrying her. Which raises the questions I've been mulling over for the last hour. Why didn't anyone in the family take the Haynes orphans in? Now I want to know, why didn't the Roos family take Valentina and Charles when their mother died? Lambert's family should've claimed them and raised Valentina until she turned a marriageable age. Too many things about Valentina don't add up.

She watches me with her big eyes. "Don't push her away. Give her reason to confide in you, not to do things behind your back. Carly is her own person. She deserves to make her own choices, even if they're mistakes."

Everything she says is true, but the protective side of me is too fierce.

"It's just a date," she continues. "You can't lock her in a glass cage forever. She has to find her way in life."

"I'm not sure I can."

"Of course you can. At least meet the kid before you cast judgment. Invite him over. That way you can decide if she's safe with him."

I consider her words. I'm not the world's greatest father, but I want what's best for Carly.

"You can always kill him if he misbehaves," she says with a hint of a smile.

It's her way of telling me she accepted what happened this morning, not that I need her acceptance. I'm not worried about her ratting on me, either, because I know how desperately she wants to keep her brother alive. Anyway, it won't do her any good. Magda practically owns the police force.

I sigh and wipe a hand over my face. “I have to discuss it with her mother.”

Hope lights up the somber depths of her eyes. “Can I tell her you’ll think about it?”

“Fine.” I shove my hands into my pockets. “I’ll think about it, and I’ll tell her myself.”

“Thank you,” she says, as if I just granted *her* freedom to date, which brings another nagging issue to my mind—Valentina’s virginity.

I won’t be able to hold off much longer. At some point, my control is going to snap. It tears me apart to even think about it, but soon I’ll have to face the decision I’ve been putting off for far too long.

* * *

When Valentina is cleaning upstairs, I send Marie out on a shopping errand with Quincy, and go through Valentina’s room. Except for a few pieces of clothing, a pair of flip-flops, and a change of plain, white underwear, there are raspberry-scented shampoo, body lotion, deodorant, and tampons in her closet. There are no cosmetics, jewelry, or shoes, not even a hairclip.

On the bottom shelf, I find a stack of text and notebooks. From the titles, I deduce they’re on veterinary science. Could it be that Valentina is a university student? It should’ve occurred to me earlier. She’s clever, driven, and ambitious. It makes sense that she’d want to further her education. As I’m staring at her neat handwriting, I’m struck by another foreign emotion.

Pride.

The pride I feel for Carly is her birthright, but this is different. This pride is *earned*. A piece of the ever-present coldness in me makes way for a pleasant rush of heat. Valentina wants to be a vet. She’ll make a brilliant, gorgeous animal doctor. This is why she needs the money. I finished an MBA after high school, and I know how much hard work it is. She won’t keep up this job and her studies. Not for long. The

part of me that wants her to be happy wants her to have this, but I'll have to find a way around Magda.

I'm enjoying the sensation of warmth in my chest too much to let it go, but when my gaze sweeps over her belongings, a new feeling dampens my pride. It takes me a while to place it.

Fuck me. I feel compassion. Big, empathic compassion. I always knew Valentina was going to play havoc with my body, but what the hell is she doing to my heart?

* * *

Valentina

"Which one?" Carly holds up a pink strapless dress and a blue one with a tight-fitting bodice.

I stop ironing to consider the options. "The pink one." Gabriel will definitely object if she shows off too much of her figure.

She puts the pink one on the ironing pile and lifts her hair on top of her head. "Up or down?"

"You have a pretty neck. I'd say up."

She all but skips from the scullery, leaving me with a smile. I'm glad Gabriel finally agreed to let her go out after meeting Sebastian and his parents. It didn't take a brain surgeon to see Carly was smitten with the boy. He has all the qualities to make a schoolgirl's knees weak, including playing for the school rugby team.

I finish pressing the tablecloth, hiding a yawn behind my hand. I'm exhausted. It's a battle to keep my eyes open past eleven. Every night, Gabriel comes to me. My body has learned not only to respond to him, but also to need the pleasure he gives me like I need food and water. When my body hits the mattress, it starts craving him. I'm wet and aching before he even walks through my door. By the time he fondles and kisses me, I'm begging for release. Sometimes, he lets me return the favor. It's always the same routine. When it's me making him come, he leaves everything up to me. I find comfort and power in this, and I also find I need more.

I'm ashamed to admit I want more from Gabriel than oral sex. I'm fantasizing about having him inside my body, feeling him rock a rhythm into me with his cock. I shouldn't want this, not from him of all people. I crave what he does to my body, but I hate him for having this effect on me. I never wanted a man before or had erotic dreams, but now I wake up soaked and needy every morning, my senses super aware of him as he moves around the house. Last night, I was on the verge of asking him to fuck me, but my pride won't let me. Maybe controlling me with powerful orgasms is enough for him, but it's not enough for me. Not only did he make me a whore, he made me a greedy one.

"Meeting in the kitchen," Marie says, breaking my train of thought.

I let my hair fall around my face to hide my flustered cheeks. "Coming."

Magda is waiting for us with a clipboard in her hand. As usual, she jumps straight into business. "It's my son's birthday in four months, and we're hosting a party at the house. I'm hiring caterers and servers, but everyone's help is needed. Make sure you're available on Saturday and Sunday the tenth and eleventh of March. It'll finish late, so, Marie, you'll have to sleep over. You can share Valentina's room. Any questions?" Both Marie and I shake our heads.

"Good. I'll give you more details closer to the time."

When she's gone, trying to sound casual, I ask, "How old is he?"

"Thirty-six."

"He had Carly young."

"He married Mrs. Louw when they were both only nineteen. They had Carly the following year."

"Was it an arranged marriage?"

Marie pulls her back straight. "You shouldn't ask questions about affairs that don't concern you."

She's right, but I have an insatiable curiosity about my keeper. I'm devastated to admit I want to know everything there is to know about him.

"The table needs to be cleared," she says harshly.

I tidy the dining room and smuggle the untouched food to my room. On my break, I carry the Shepard's Pie outside and make myself comfortable on the low wall separating the garden from the pool.

* * *

Gabriel

Before Valentina's arrival, I never spent time in the kitchen. I never had reason to. Now, I gravitate to that part of the house with increasing frequency. An urge to see Valentina drives me there, but she's nowhere to be seen. Marie can't hide her shock at my presence, more so when I switch on the kettle and take a mug from the cupboard.

"Anything I can do, Mr. Louw?"

"I've got this."

She eyes me warily as I drop a teabag into the mug.

"I can prepare you a tray," she says, "or get Valentina to bring it to your study."

"Where *is* Valentina?"

"Lunch break." The way she wrinkles her nose tells me our maid isn't one of her favorites. Any resentment she has should be directed at me. The little maid came voluntarily, but only because I made sure there was no other choice.

"Shall I call her?" Marie asks, watching me with hawk eyes.

"No." Valentina needs her rest. Her back is breaking under the burdens Magda piles on her.

"As you wish." Her dismay is laughable. If she weren't a loyal employee, I would've kicked her ass out on the spot.

As if sensing my discord, she moves away quickly, busying herself with chopping vegetables. I don't really want the damn tea, but if I abandon the task, Marie will know my ulterior motive for gatecrashing in the kitchen.

I walk to the window while I wait for the water the boil and jolt to a standstill. Valentina sits on the wall with a plate in her hands.

I go colder than the morgue.

Bruno is out. Quincy told me ten minutes earlier he's letting him run free for exercise.

"Valentina!" My voice carries through the window, because she lifts her head with a frown.

Jumping to action, I sprint as fast as my limp allows to the backdoor, my body in fight mode. I clear the house in record speed, but my voice didn't only attract Valentina's attention. The Boerboel rounds the corner, his ears drawn back in alert. My heart stops. My lungs collapse, making it impossible to draw in a breath.

"Quincy!" Where the fuck is he? "Valentina!"

I don't have time to elaborate on my warning. The dog spots her and charges.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Gabriel

The chances are in Bruno's favor of making it to Valentina before I do, and I don't have my gun on me. I throw my weight behind my effort, but my disability makes me too slow.

One more second and Bruno is next to the wall. Horrible visions play off in my mind. I reach for Valentina with an outstretched arm, trying to throw myself between her and the dog, but Bruno is at her feet, his enormous jaw going straight for her delicate ankle. I'm about to tackle and strangle the animal when the fact that he's licking her leg instead of tearing her apart registers in my frantic mind. I barely stop myself from crashing head-on into both of them. My hands are shaking, and my skin is clammy. The powerful rush of adrenalin drops as quickly as it has flared, making me feel physically ill. I swallow several times to suppress the urge to puke. While I'm battling to settle my guts, Bruno slobbers all over her.

Valentina gives me a confused look, uncertainty creeping into her eyes. She puts a plate with a half-eaten serving of Shepard's Pie on the wall and pushes it away from her, as if the food is the cause of my reaction. Bruno puts his forepaws on the wall and stretches. When she scratches behind his ear, he closes his eyes, and tilts his head to her touch.

"Is everything all right?" she asks in a small voice.

I must look like I feel—a fucking madman.

Quincy comes running from the back, jogging up when he spots me. He stops with his hands on his hips, looking between Valentina and me. “What’s going on?”

I can’t look at him right now. The chances are too big that I’ll rip his head from his body.

Instead, I lock gazes with Valentina.

“What the fuck are you doing outside when the dog is loose?”

She stops petting Bruno and drops her hand. “He doesn’t mind me.”

“He’s a guard dog, not a lapdog.”

The vixen dares to challenge me. “He seems friendly enough to me.”

“She’s right,” Quincy adds quickly. “Bruno likes her. He won’t attack.”

“You,” I turn to him with ice in my tone, “are supposed to check that nobody is out before you let him loose.”

“It’s not Quincy’s fault,” she says. “I didn’t tell him I was coming outside.”

She’s covering for Quincy? With the aftermath of the adrenalin still burning in my veins and my leg aching like a bitch from the overexertion, this is as much as I can take.

I grab her arm and pull her from the wall, catching her around the waist before she falls.

“Inside.”

Her face pales at my tone, even if the command was no louder than a whisper.

Quincy lifts his palms. “Gabriel, take it easy.”

“Are you giving me an order?”

He backs down. “Of course not.”

“Next time, follow instructions,” I snarl.

I don't care that Marie stops to look at us as I drag Valentina behind me through the kitchen. I don't stop until I get to the gym. Shoving her inside, I lock the door and turn to face her. She wraps her arms around herself, regarding me calmly, but there's wariness in her eyes.

For a moment, I just look at her. The thought of anything happening to her leaves an acidic, bitter, fucking horrible taste in my mouth. The intensity of the notion shocks me to my core. I hate her for it. I hate her for the crippling anguish I suffered on her behalf. It's a goddamn sick feeling, and it makes me fucking weak. I like my sex wild, and I love a woman's tears, which is why I sleep with women who crave my money enough to take what comes with having sex with me. But Valentina? I never wanted to hurt her up to this moment. When I belted her, it was to prevent Magda from killing her. Yes, it turned me on, but I regretted it. Now, I want to paddle her ass until she screams. I want to punish her for what I feel.

I undo the buttons of my shirt cuffs and fold them back twice. Her eyes follow the movement, but she says nothing. It's only when I walk to the weight bench and sit down that she finds her voice.

"Gabriel, please."

"Come here."

She doesn't move.

"If I have to come get you, you're going to suffer double as much as what I've got planned for you."

Slowly, she moves to me, her eyes flittering between my face and lap.

I point at my knees. "Bend over."

"Gabriel..." Her lip starts to tremble.

"You endangered your life, and your life is mine, which means you put my property at risk."

"Nothing happened."

"Don't make me tell you again."

She shuffles closer until her knees brush my thighs.

“Bend over my lap and press your palms and feet flat on the floor. Keep your legs spread.”

She lowers herself across my lap so that her head hangs down one side of my thighs and her legs down the other. The bench is low enough for her hands and feet to touch the ground.

I pull her dress up to her waist and move her panties down to her thighs. “If you move, your punishment will be tripled.”

Her smooth, golden ass and plump, pink pussy are exposed to me. I take my time to admire her perfect body, her unmarred beauty and unsoiled innocence. My cock stirs and grows impossibly hard. I lift my hand and take aim.

Smack.

My palm lands on the tight curve of her left ass cheek. She jerks in my lap, driving her belly into my hard cock.

Smack.

The second marks her other cheek. She sucks in a breath, but she doesn't give in to me. Her silence is her defiance. Not giving her time to draw another breath, I land a succession of firm blows over her ass until I find my rhythm. I keep it light enough not to bruise, but hard enough to turn her skin pink. She squirms and whimpers, but she doesn't break her stance. Her ass clenches with each slap. I keep going until not a patch of her skin is left unmarked. When I start to repeat the pattern on her inflamed skin, she finally breaks. A loud cry escapes her throat.

I keep at it mercilessly, not giving her reprieve until her body goes slack.

As she relaxes under my touch, her cries become different. The whimpers turn to moans. She mumbles my name and grinds her body down on my cock. I reward her by stopping the blows and reaching between her legs to cup her sex. She's soaked. My cock rises against the constraint of my zipper in satisfaction. I didn't plan on taking it here, but I can't help myself. The fight has gone completely out of me. All that's left

is the gnawing lust. I pet her folds for a while, reveling in how they swell to my touch, before I rub my middle finger in circular movements over her clit. I like the vantage point I have on the view. When I bend my head, her pussy is so close I can smell her arousal. It drives me insane. Her beautiful female parts clench, and her lower body shakes. Her thighs and arms quiver as she screams out her orgasm. I let her have it and more. I carry on rubbing and pinching her clit until she begs me to stop, but I don't let up until I'm certain she can't take any more. Only then do I adjust her clothes, help her up, and pull her into my arms with her head cradled against my chest. While she's sobbing it out, I caress her cheek, wiping the tears away as they fall. Every molecule in my body is aware of her. I'm intoxicated with the woman I hold in my arms, the woman I'll eventually have to kill. It's then that I acknowledge the truth. I'm not going to kill her. I was never going to. She's meant to be mine.

When she stops crying, I dry her tears with my palms. "Don't ever do that to me again."

She blinks. She's confused. Hell, so am I. Spanking her makes me hot. Holding her makes me forget why I spanked her in the first place. With her arms wrapped around my neck and her ass cushioning my dick, I can't think straight. All I know, is that I can't lose her. "From now on, I want Quincy to train you with Bruno." She lifts her head to look at me.

"You're not allowed outside if he's loose, unless you give me a demonstration that proves you can handle him."

"He won't attack me."

"He's bitten a trespasser before. Fuck, Valentina." I drag a hand through my hair. "Not even Magda risks it out unless he's closed in the back."

"Why do you keep a dog if he's so dangerous, even to your own family?"

"Protection. People who want to break in badly enough will eventually find a way."

"Bad people will also poison a dog."

“He’s trained not to take food from anyone but Quincy.” I study her tear-streaked eyes.

“What did you do to him? How did you get him to heel?”

“I removed a thorn from his paw.”

“That’s it?”

“It’s not hard at all. You just have to show him who has the authority. You can’t be frightened. Animals sense fear.”

It sounds a lot like me. No surprises there. I’m an animal, at best. I brush my lips over her hair, inhaling her sweet, raspberry scent. “Was my lesson clear enough for you, or will you need a repeat?”

“No,” she says quickly. “I get it.”

“Do you fear *me*?”

“Why? Do you sense it?”

“Yes,” I say gravely. I do, and I’ll encourage it, even if it’s only to use her fear like a leash, holding her close to me.

I lift her to her feet. “I’ll tell Quincy to set aside some time later today.” She brushes her hair behind her ear.

“Do you need a moment?”

She gives a grateful nod. “Please.”

I give her the privacy she needs to gather herself. After arranging for dog training with

Quincy, I distract myself by catching up on business, and then I access the financial records Anton emailed me. Valentina earned a salary from Rocky Street Veterinary Clinic. When she said she was an assistant, I assumed it was the secretarial type. That explains the white tunic the first night in Napoli’s. Debit orders went off from her account for water and electricity, which she stopped yesterday. Her credit card statements show the usual expenses for food and essentials. Other than that, Valentina isn’t a spender. Not that she had the means. There are no luxuries, nothing of the things women like, not even a tube of lipstick. Every month, she withdraws a

substantial amount of cash, and it's always the same amount, to the last cent.

I call my private banker and arrange for twenty grand to be transferred to her account. Next, I get the agent on the line and offer him a five grand commission to transfer the Berea property to my name. He's happy to oblige. Firstly, he knows who I am. Secondly, he knows he'll otherwise not get a cent for the flat. I arrange for the necessary transfer of ownership documents to be delivered. For Valentina's sake, the sale must look authentic.

With the finances in place, I call the club manager at Napoli's. I'd like to have a word with Valentina's ex-neighbor about the burglary, and Jerry hasn't been home since we took her and her brother. The manager assures me Jerry hasn't been back, so I put word out that I'm looking for him. Whoever wrecked Valentina's flat will pay. I leave the most unpleasant task for last, dialing Lambert Roos. The phone rings for a long time without going onto voicemail. Looks like I'll have to pay Lambert a visit.

It's only when I grow more settled again and reflect on this afternoon's episode that I recall the lunch Valentina never finished. On strict order from Magda, Marie won't serve the food she prepares to the staff. Is Valentina eating our leftovers? Goddamn. An uncomfortable emotion lances into my heart. The pinch in my chest won't let up. I pull our grocery order records. Valentina is living on Granny Smith apples and cheap Chinese noodles. I feel too many things to distinguish one from the other. There are pity, concern, and anger at myself for not discovering the truth earlier. She's starving right under my nose.

This won't do. I need her healthy. I adjust the order and send Marie a note. From now on, Valentina will eat what *I* decide.

* * *

Valentina

There's a box with my name on it in the kitchen when I come in from washing the patio.

“That’s for you,” Marie says, drying her hands on a dishcloth.

“For me?” I lift the flaps to peer inside.

There are meat, cheese, eggs, veggies, fruit, bottled water, and juice. In a smaller box, I find a variety of delicatessens, including olives, nuts, cold pressed cooking oil, and dark chocolate. There must be a mistake.

“I didn’t order these.”

“It’s from Mr. Louw.” She scrutinizes me. “Whatever you did, it made him very happy.”

I shouldn’t feel guilty, but a flush warms my cheeks. I’m ashamed of my poverty. Always have been. Gabriel’s gesture only reminds me of the gap between us. The kindness makes me irrationally sad and inexplicably angry. I’m nobody’s charity case. I’ll return everything, but for now I unpack it in the fridge to prevent the expensive food from spoiling.

When Gabriel comes to my room, I fight the orgasm he forces on me, doing everything in my power not to come, but it’s a losing battle. Eventually, the pleasure takes over. My body gives in and delivers what he wants. His power over the physical part of me is complete. He stripped me of my defenses. I can’t allow him to strip me of my pride.

Afterward, he pulls me into his arms. His voice is gentle, but stern. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“The harder you fight me, the harder I’ll push.”

I lower my eyes. “The food... I don’t appreciate the gesture.”

“Ah.” He says it as if he suddenly understands everything that’s going on in my head.

“Look at me.”

I oblige. Grudgingly.

“What are you to me, Valentina?” “An investment,” I bit out.

“What do I do with my investments?”

“Take care of them.”

He brushes a thumb over my cheek. “I *like* to take care of you. Is that so bad?”

Yes, dammit. I want to be more than someone’s investment. “You can’t force food on me.”

“Yes, I can. You can eat what I tell you or be force-fed. It’s your choice, but it’ll please me if you accept it without arguing.”

It shocks me how badly I want to please him. What the hell is wrong with me?

“Whatever you need,” he continues, “I want you to tell me.”

I can only stare at him, not sure what is changing between us, but the balance is shifting.

He runs a forefinger over my lips. “Is there anything you’d like to tell me now?” The air of anticipation that hangs around him makes him seem vulnerable, as if he has more to lose than me in this strange game playing off between us.

“No,” I croak, not sure what he wants from me.

As I expected, my answer disappoints him, but he doesn’t pursue the matter. He simply kisses me until my desire spikes again before he gets to his feet and unbuckles his belt.

* * *

Gabriel

What did I expect from Valentina? To open up to me? Why is it important to me that she tells me about her studies out of her own, free will? I don’t have an answer. I only know I want to hear it from her. Until she admits it, I won’t tell her I discovered the truth.

Besides keeping an eye on Valentina’s eating habits, worry about Carly’s date dominates the rest of my week. On Friday night, I have men placed around the movie theatre. Discreetly, of course. Still, I don’t relax until my daughter is home safe

and sound, bubblier than ever. If Sebastian put as much as a finger on her, my men would've acted, and I'm glad it didn't come to that. Carly comes to my study to say goodnight. She surprises me with an uncharacteristic kiss on my cheek and a hug.

When the house is quiet, I make my way to Valentina's room. It's a routine I look forward to, a fix to which I'm already addicted. My steps fall unevenly on the kitchen floor. My limp is heavier, tonight. There's rain in the air. The humidity makes my joints ache.

My breath catches when I open her door. She's spread out on the bed, naked. Her golden skin is flawless, except for the tiny beauty spot under her left breast. The small mark of imperfection only adds to her allure. In her sleep, she looks more vulnerable and innocent than when she watches me with her big, frightened eyes. Her folds already glisten with the arousal I conditioned her to have. Walking to the bed, I stare down at her. Usually, my presence is enough to wake her, but she's been tired, lately. Too tired. It doesn't help that I steal an hour of her sleep time, but I have very little control where Valentina is concerned. I take another moment to study her body. I like looking at her when she's sleeping. The voyeuristic act is invasive, but it turns me on and feeds a dark part of me.

After a few seconds, she starts to stir. Her eyelids flutter, and her lashes lift. I read her expression as she rises from her sleep. First, there's recognition and then desire. There's no more fear or resistance. She's ready for the next step.

Keeping my clothes on, I stretch out next to her on the bed, lifting myself up on my elbow. Immediately, she spreads her legs. The submissive act makes me dizzy with desire. If I'd remained standing, she would've sat up on her knees for me, legs wide, just like I taught her. I reward her with a soft kiss, my tongue spearing through her lips and stroking hers while I'm playing with her breasts. I can get drunk on her moans. I want to drown in her arousal, but I have other plans for her pussy tonight.

I run my hand down her stomach to her sex. I stroke the pad of my middle finger up and down her slit, working moisture to her clit. When she's drenched in her own wetness, I clamp my mouth over hers and drive the first digit of my finger into her soaked channel. She's soft like velvet and so fucking wet. So hot. Her eyes fly open, and she gasps into my mouth. I eat the sound like an addict, greedily swallowing the whimpers that follow when I twist my finger a few times. When Engelbrecht examined her he told me there's no membrane—not an uncommon occurrence with virgins—so there shouldn't be any bleeding, but goddammit she's tight. Sucking her lips into my mouth, I drive home, burying my finger all the way inside, and then hold still while I stretch her. This time, she moans loudly into my mouth. I don't mind if she screams. Her room is too far for anyone in the house to hear, but I want to eat her sounds of pleasure like I eat her orgasms. I want to swallow her essence in every sensory way possible to carry it inside of me. I want her to be a part of me in the most literal sense.

She's panting in my mouth, sucking the oxygen from my lungs, and fueling me with rapid breaths of ecstasy. I take as much as I give, drinking her air like a vampire. It becomes a battle of breaths, a sucking and exhaling, a give and take. Putting my free hand on her forehead, I smooth back her hair in a soothing caress, preparing her for what's to come. As she starts breathing more easily from my mouth, accepting only the air I choose to give her, I pull out my finger and push back in. Her internal walls quiver around me. I drive in and out, finding a rhythm that matches the rise and fall of her chest. My thumb finds her clit, pressing down while I curl the finger inside to caress the soft spot under her pubic bone. Her hips lift toward me, chasing my touch, so I give her more, a bit harder, a bit faster.

Her lower body trembles. I want to make her fly so fucking high. The thought has my balls climb up into my body. When the first flutter of a spasm strokes my finger, I glide my palm from her forehead over her eyes to pinch her nose shut with my thumb and forefinger. Before she has time to register my intention, I start fucking her with my finger in all earnest,

slapping her pussy hard enough with the heel of my palm to turn her clit pink.

I suck the life from her body with my mouth while I give back with my hand. Her legs scissor. Her ass lifts off the bed, and her toes curl inward. Then she begins to fight. She tries to twist her head in my hold while shoving at my shoulders. Realizing she's no match for my strength, she scratches. My skin burns deliciously hot where her nails leave long gashes in my neck. She bites my tongue. The metallic taste of blood coats my lips and drives me wild. One more second and her body jerks as if she's taken a thousand volts. I can own her life for several more seconds before she'll pass out, but I don't want it to go that far. I only want her to have the pleasure. Two more seconds and she falls limp, taking the relentless fucking of my finger in and on her pussy without fighting it any longer. She does nothing but ride the pleasure I force out of her, allowing me to control her breathing.

Total surrender.

I ease my hold on her nose and mouth, keeping our lips a hairbreadth apart. She sucks in the cool night air with a hoarse gasp, her neck arching from the intensity of the action.

Shockwaves ripple through her abdomen, dissipating in her pussy. I keep her pussy in the vice of my middle finger, which is still inside her, and my thumb, which is pressing on her clit, until the tremors pass. Her vagina feels plump and ripe from my workout. I kiss her lips one last time, tracing my tongue over a spot where she bit herself during the struggling, and move down her body until my tongue finds her folds.

She shivers when I push inside to taste her climax. It's uniquely Valentina. She tastes raw and well loved, and I have a shocking desire to taste her with my cum in her body. I'm beyond myself with need. She protests with a meek whimper when I shove her thighs wide and push my hands under her ass, digging my fingers into the fleshy globes to pull her open. I stare at her cunt. She's more than a treat. She's the food I need to survive. I bury my head between her legs and devour her flesh. I eat her like I need her, with no excuses and no mercy.

“Gabriel, no more. Please.”

I ignore her begging. The business about finding her a man, a pretty man, to take her virginity has me on edge. I'll give her a handsome man only this once, even if it feels like carving my heart out with a blunt knife, but fuck it, I own her. I need to show us both after all that will happen, she'll still be mine. Her pleasure is mine. Getting her off is my addiction.

I make her come once more with my mouth and twice with my hand. When I'm done, she's boneless. I'm not even sure she's conscious. I settle down beside her and drag her against my body. Folding my arms around her, I hold her until I drift into a haunted sleep.

* * *

Valentina

I wake up with a weight on my stomach and chest. Gabriel is draped around me, fully dressed, except for his shoes. It's the first time he stayed after making me come. A full-body flush heats my skin when I remember what he did last night. My breasts grow heavy, and my clit starts to throb. It was carnal. Deadly. Somewhere between the last orgasm and Gabriel petting me, I passed out, too tired to lift an eye. Careful not to move, I revel in the comfort of being in his warm arms. The sun is barely up, tainting the curtains with a golden glow. I don't have to face the reality yet, that he's the man who holds the power over my life. Charlie's life. I bite my lip as I acknowledged the painful truth. I liked what he did. Very much. Once I got over my initial panic, I gave over to him, trusting him to keep me safe, and he did.

Gabriel moves, his hold on me tightening. His breathing doesn't change, but he drags his chin over my jaw and kisses my ear. His beard grates my skin, making me aware of his masculinity in a rough, pleasant way.

“Morning, beautiful.” He nibbles on my earlobe and sweeps his palm over the goose bumps that break out on my skin. “Coffee?”

Gabriel is offering me coffee? I turn to face him, trying to read his expression, but his face is blank.

Without waiting for a reply, he swings his legs off the bed and gets to his feet. I don't miss the flinch he tries to hide as he puts his weight on his damaged leg. His white shirt is crumpled, and his black hair sleep-messy. He looks gorgeous. I want to tell him how grateful I am that he didn't leave me last night, how much I needed his arms around me after the intense way he treated my body, but he limps to the door and disappears before I can formulate the words.

I have another ten minutes before my alarm goes. Cuddling under the covers, I feel replete and strangely happy. A short while later, Gabriel returns with a cup of steaming coffee, the welcome aroma filling my room.

I prop myself up on the pillows to take it from him. "Thank you." I'm not sure what else to say. It's such an unexpected act.

"Milk, two sugars," he says.

He knows how I drink my coffee? I blink at him, not sure if I should ask, but he doesn't give me a chance. He wipes a thumb over my bottom lip, over the mark where I bit myself, and drags his heated eyes up to mine. From the way his cock hardens, he's thinking about last night.

He checks his watch and angles his head away from me. "I'll be out tonight. Don't leave tomorrow without saying goodbye."

The minute he walks out of my room, the air changes. A cold emptiness expands in my chest. Needing some warmth, I cradle the cup between my hands. I allow his act of kindness to warm my heart and fill my empty spaces. He's a contradiction of sensations, a very bad kind of good.

* * *

Gabriel

When I walk into my study after lunch, Helga sits in my chair. How the hell did she get past security?

I click the door shut. “How did you get in?”

“Hi to you, too.” She leans back in my chair and crosses her ankles on my desk. Her dress rides up to her thighs, exposing black garter stockings. “Chill. Your mother let me in.”

I’ll have to have a word with Magda. For Carly’s sake, I don’t invite my bed partners home. Seeing her reminds me that I haven’t fucked a woman in a very long time, not since I took Valentina.

“Why did you come?” I approach the desk, irritated with her presence. “You know the rules.”

She pouts. “I miss you.”

“Carly’s home, for fuck’s sake.”

“You haven’t called. It’s not like you.”

I cross my arms and stare at her. I don’t owe her explanations. We fuck when we’re both in the mood, and that’s that.

“I need you, lover boy.”

“I’ve told you before, don’t call me that.”

She uncrosses her legs and plants a heel on each side of my desk. No panties. Her fanny is bare, shaved like I prefer. The wide posture gives me a prime view of the goods on offer.

“Tell me what to call you, ugly boy.”

Normally, Helga would have my balls in a knot with the act. By now, I would’ve had her bent over my desk. I would’ve spanked her pink before fucking her smart mouth, but not today.

My cock doesn’t stir. Not even a twitch.

“I’m busy.”

“It’ll only take five minutes.”

I smirk. “You know me better than that.”

“Okay,” she gives me a sly grin, “thirty if you make it a quickie.”

“You have to leave.”

“Throwing me out?”

“Don’t make me. It won’t be pleasant for either of us.”

She narrows her eyes. “Who are you fucking?”

“No one.”

“Come on. I know you. You can’t go a day without sex, let alone weeks.”

I don’t have time for this shit. I round the desk and stop next to the chair, intimidating her with my size and height. “I’ll ask you nicely one last time.”

She grabs my tie and pulls me down to her level. “You don’t scare me. Whatever you want to give, I can take it.”

A knock on the door interrupts us, but she doesn’t let go or break the stare. I’m going to be a first-class jerk. I give her a calculated smile.

“You won’t.”

“Watch me,” I whisper.

“It can be your daughter.”

Carly never knocks. It’s probably Quincy or Rhett. “Come in,” I call in a loud voice.

Helga’s eyes grow large. By now, she should know I never bluff. She brings her knees together and pulls down her dress, but not before the visitor who opens the door gets a full glimpse of her pussy.

Triumphantly, I turn my head to see who the lucky spectator is and freeze. Valentina stands in the doorway, a stack of white envelopes in her hand and shock in her eyes.

CHAPTER NINE

Gabriel

“I’m sorry,” Valentina says. “I didn’t know you were busy.”

I free my tie from Helga’s grip and straighten, not missing Helga’s curious expression. I have to be careful. Helga is perceptive. Raising a brow at Valentina, I encourage her to continue.

She swallows and holds up the envelopes. “Your mother sent me to bring you these.”

“Leave it on my desk.”

She approaches with averted eyes and puts the stack on the corner. With a small nod, she hurries out of the room.

“New staff?” Helga asks. “You never told me you have a maid. I thought you used a cleaning service.”

I grip her arm and drag her to her feet.

“What are you doing?”

“Tell me why you’re really here.”

She licks her lips. The facade finally drops. “I need money.”

I always leave money after fucking Helga, and she’d feel two weeks without a bonus. Letting go of her arm, I take out my wallet and press a couple of thousand in her hand. She bats

her eyelashes when I take her wrist and pull her around the desk.

“Does this mean we’re fucking?”

“It means I’m walking you out.” I all but drag her to the front door where Rhett stands guard. “See to it that she leaves the grounds.”

“Gabriel!”

The last thing I see before shutting the door in her face is her disgruntled expression. It’s over. I never want to see her again.

* * *

Valentina

Gabriel Louw has a reputation. He’s dangerous, and the women who have first-hand experience say he fucks like a horse. Why seeing it with my own eyes hurt so much I can’t fathom. It’s not like I found out today. What did I expect? Exclusivity? Last night was sweet. The dull ache between my legs reminds me of how Gabriel fucked me with his finger. It’s the kind of hurt that feels good, until a few moments ago, before I walked in on a pretty blonde with her naked parts splayed on his desk. It’s a game to him. I’m his toy. When he tires of me, he’ll cast me aside. The only thing he values is the debt I owe. When I walk free, I don’t want to leave a piece of my heart here. That will be too ironic. It’s a good thing I walked in on them. No, it’s a good thing he *allowed* me to walk in on them. I guess he wanted me to see that, to remind me I’m not special. I’m one of many, and for the moment, I’m convenient.

I get through the day by working myself to a standstill. Even my brain is too tired to think. That night, for the first time, he doesn’t come to me. I’m a heap of shivering and aching need when morning comes, cursing him and my body. Visions of him in the blonde woman’s bed drive me to maddened tears. He’s ruined me for other men. He’s ruined me for even myself.

I'm busy with the vacuuming the following morning when he stumbles through the door, Rhett and Quincy in tow. His hair is disheveled, and there's blood on his shirt. His knuckles are bleeding. My heart squeezes, and my pulse quickens. He glances at me, but limps down the hallway without a greeting. I contemplate the reason for his state the whole day, refusing to acknowledge the worry that gnaws on my gut. Worrying means caring, and I don't care.

At five, I have a shower and change into my shorts and T-shirt. I throw my tank top into my bag together with the food for the homeless dogs. I'm not in the mood to face Gabriel, but I'm not so stupid as to ignore his order to say goodbye before I leave.

Like yesterday, he calls me in when I knock on his study door. I don't enter, but only pop my head around the frame.

"Have a good weekend. I'm off." I retract my head, hoping to get away with a quick greeting, but I'm not that lucky.

"Valentina."

I close my eyes and take a deep breath before facing him again.

He gets up from behind his desk. He's wearing a blue shirt with navy pants and a striped tie, looking as hot as ever. "I'll take you."

All I can do is stare at him in confusion. "What?"

"I'll drop you off."

Gabriel is offering me a lift? I'm not sure how I feel about that. I don't want him to be kind to me. "That's not necessary. I can find my own way."

"Like you did last week?"

"Um, yes."

"In a minivan?"

"Yes."

He crosses the floor with menacing steps. "If you ever get into a minivan again, I'll tan your ass so hard, you won't sit

for a week.” I blink up at him.

“Do you have *any* idea how dangerous that is?” he asks.

For a white girl, he means. Other people have cars. Nobody dares walking in the street alone. The chances are too good of getting raped, tortured, and murdered. Life carries no value in this city, but in my world, if you don’t have a choice, you just have to take your chances.

“You’re worth a lot to me, Valentina. I own you, and I protect what’s mine.”

He returns to the chair and lifts his jacket off the back. Picking up his keys from the desk, he takes my hand and leads me to the garage.

I feel small next to him in the luxurious interior of his car. He says nothing as he steers the sleek Jaguar down the driveway and into the traffic. Instead of heading east, he goes north. He doesn’t ask where I’m going, so I keep my mouth shut until he pulls up in front of an exclusive store in Sandton. I get out when he comes around to open the door for me, clutching my bag to my chest as he guides me inside the luxurious shop. It’s not like any department store I know. There are no items on display. There’s only a leather sofa and a glass desk stacked with clothes, purses, and shoes. A pretty, young lady greets us by the door and waves an arm to the desk.

“Everything’s ready for you, Mr. Louw.”

He acknowledges her with a curt nod and ushers me forward. “Go ahead. Choose whatever you like.”

Dumbfounded, I gape at him.

“What’s your color, darling?” the woman asks. “Red will look good with your complexion. White, too. Silver for the evening.” She starts pulling dresses from the heap and drapes them over the sofa.

“Um, excuse me.” I clear my throat. “May I please have a moment with...” What do I call him in front of her? “...Mr. Louw.” “Gabriel,” he corrects.

The woman looks from me to Gabriel. There's judgment in her eyes, even if she tries to hide it. "I'll fetch refreshments. Take your time."

When she disappears into a backroom, I turn to Gabriel. "What are you doing?" "I'm getting you clothes."

"Why?"

"I threw your blue dress in the trash." "I don't expect you to replace it."

"I told you I like to take care of you."

Wringing my hands together, I close the distance between us. "I can't take your money."

His eyes darken, the chipped blue turning stormy. "It's legal money."

"It's not that. It just doesn't feel right."

"Feels pretty damn good to me. Are you saying making me feel good isn't right?"

"Don't twist my words."

He grabs me to him so suddenly my breath catches. Holding me around the waist with one arm, he cups my breast and gives my nipple a soft pinch. "Don't test my patience."

Immediately, heat floods my body. It bubbles in my veins and sends blood to my clit. My nipples are as hard as pebbles. I want to hate the feelings coursing through me, but I can't. As my body puts my arousal on display, the same heat I feel reflects in his eyes.

The shopkeeper returns with a pitcher of ice tea and glasses, but Gabriel doesn't let go of me.

She measures our stance. Depositing the tray on the table, she says in a professional tone,

"Have you chosen anything yet?"

An hour later, I walk out with a new dress, designer jeans, two T-shirts, a casual trench coat, a pair of ballerina flats, five sets of pretty underwear, and a cute off-shoulder sweater.

Gabriel pushed me to take more, but this is already more than I need.

He loads my parcels in the back of his car, and when we're seated, he turns to me. "Where to, beautiful?"

I'm sure he already knows, but I give him Kris' address. On the way there, I try to figure out what just happened. By the time we pull up in front of the practice, I'm still nowhere near understanding Gabriel.

He switches off the engine. "Your flat has been sold."

"Wow, that quickly?"

"I arranged for the money to be paid into your bank account. I hope that's in order."

"Gabriel..." I'm at a loss for words. "Thank you." The words don't express my gratitude, but they're all I can muster.

"No need to thank me. I said I'd handle it."

He reaches over me and opens my door, his arm brushing against my breasts. Before I can object, he gets my parcels and carries them to Kris' house. Charlie meets us by the door, taking me into a bear hug.

"Va-Val!"

"Hey, big brother."

Gabriel holds out his hand for Charlie to shake. "Hi, remember me?"

"You're the ba-bad ma-man."

Gabriel chuckles. "I guess you can say that, but I prefer Gabriel." Charlie takes a step back and looks at me with big eyes.

"It's okay, Charlie. Gabriel isn't going to hurt us. I work for him, remember?"

After contemplating my response, Charlie's good manners finally win. "Want a jui-juice?" "Sure." Gabriel flashes me a smile and makes himself right at home in Kris' kitchen.

I'm wary of having him around my brother. I watch him like a hawk while he makes small talk with Charlie, but Charlie quickly warms up to Gabriel. When he leaves an hour later, you'd swear they're best buddies. What game is Gabriel playing? He can toy with me if that's the price I have to pay for Charlie's freedom, but I won't let him disrupt my brother's life.

* * *

Gabriel

Since Carly is at her mother's this weekend, I have the evening and tomorrow to myself. Magda is out with friends. I ensured that no business meetings were scheduled and gave Rhet and Quincy the weekend off. I pour a whiskey and settle into an armchair in the reading room with Valentina's file in my lap. There's not much in her history I don't already know. Her father, Marvin, was involved in a car cloning syndicate. Her mother, Julietta, was a housewife. Valentina grew up in Rosettenville, in the south. When she was thirteen, their Chevrolet went off a bridge. Marvin was killed on impact. Valentina survived, and Charlie incurred serious injuries resulting in brain damage. One year later, her mother was killed during an armed bank robbery. An aunt took care of Valentina and Charles, moving into the flat her parents owned in Berea when their house was auctioned to cover the outstanding accounts and funeral costs. The aunt died after Valentina's nineteenth birthday, leaving her to take care of Charlie alone.

My earlier question remains. Why did no one take care of Julietta and her kids? In our business, family is everything. We take care of our own. Marvin wasn't at the top of the hierarchy, but he wasn't a petty thief, either. He had enough influence and support to guarantee his widow and children protection, a roof over their heads, and food. Instead, they lived from hand to mouth after his death.

I put the file aside and wipe a hand over my face. The second folder contains Valentina's bank activity of the day. Half of the money I paid her for her flat was transferred to Kris' account. The other half, she paid into an account

registered to UNISA. Following up the lead on the University of South Africa, I confirm my assumption. Valentina is enrolled in a correspondence degree in veterinary science. Using my contacts, I have a number for Valentina's mentor at the university within minutes. Even if it's late, I dial the number. It doesn't take me long to convince Mrs. Cavendish to have breakfast with me tomorrow.

* * *

I sit at a table tucked away in a private corner on the Rosebank Hotel rooftop when Aletta Cavendish arrives. She's not the old prude her voice made me imagine. The only reason I know it's her is because she walks onto the rooftop at the exact time we agreed. The tall platinum blonde is in her late thirties. Wedding ring. Big diamond. The husband must have a cozy job, because university professors don't earn that much. Her hair is loose around her shoulders, and there's not a trace of makeup on her face. Even without the help of cosmetics, she's attractive. She wears a white T-shirt and flowing, Indian-print skirt with leather sandals. There must be twenty bangles on her arm. The flower-child type. From her straight back and square shoulders, I gather she has confidence. Her walk is easy and light. Clearly the type who sleeps well at night.

She gives her name to the waiter, and when he motions in my direction, she meets my eyes with a level and friendly stare. For a moment, there's shock on her face when she takes in my features, but her smile doesn't unravel. Her earrings dangle as she approaches my corner. I'm on my feet before she reaches the table.

She greets me with a firm handshake. "Mr. Louw."

"Gabriel, please." I pull out her chair and seat her. "Thank you for meeting me."

Dropping an oversized bag next to her chair, she gives me a scrutinizing look. "I have to admit, if the student concerned wasn't Valentina, I wouldn't be here."

"I appreciate your time." I nod at the waiter. "Shall we order?"

As she studies the menu, I observe her. Aletta is intelligent and doesn't beat around the bush. I like her. She's passionate and dedicated. Must make a good teacher.

We both order coffee and eggs benedict. When the waiter's gone, she says, "You said on the phone you're Valentina's new employer. I didn't know she'd changed jobs."

"It's very recent."

"What does she do for you, exactly?"

"House management."

She tilts her head. "Like a maid?"

I smile, keeping my expression even.

"I'm surprised," Aletta continues. "She loved the job at the vet practice, and it was good experience."

"I made her an offer she couldn't refuse." No lies there.

The waiter returns to serve our coffee. Aletta stirs in one sugar and milk. "In that case, it must be for better money. God knows, she can do with every extra cent."

"I'm concerned about her financial welfare, which is why I wanted to meet. Valentina doesn't know about it, of course. She's proud. I'd appreciate it if we can keep this discussion between us."

She blows on the coffee, watching me from over the rim. "What are you asking me?"

"How much does she owe?"

"Isn't that a question you should ask her?"

"All right. I'll rephrase that. How much does a veterinary degree cost these days?"

"You're looking at roughly fifty thousand a year, excluding books and material."

"I know how much she earned before she started working for me. How did she manage?"

"She has a partial bursary, but it's not enough to cover everything."

“Is she a good student?”

“Honestly? She’s hands-down the best I’ve ever had. Her grades are top, but that girl has a natural vet in her. I’ve never seen animals react to anyone like they behave toward her.”

You bet. “Then how come she secured only a partial bursary?”

“With the financial collapse and political unrest there’s very little left in the university coffers. There are no full-time bursaries for vet students. I’m donating her books, but as you said, she’s proud. Luckily, Valentina is also strong. Becoming a vet is her dream. She’ll find a way.”

The food arrives. The waiter arranges the salt and juice, shifting it around several times before he can fit the plates.

I’ve never had to worry about money. If I want something, I go out and buy it. I can’t imagine what it’s like to work your fingers to the bone and worry about covering your bills, which is ironic coming from a man who makes money from other people’s financial troubles.

I lean back in my chair. “If I’m to create a bursary, can I choose to who it’ll go?”

The knife stills in her hand. “Yes.” She looks at me with mild surprise. “You can name the beneficiary.”

“The beneficiary doesn’t need to know who the sponsor is?”

A smile warms her eyes. “You can call the bursary whatever you want. It doesn’t have to carry your name, and it can certainly be anonymous.”

I lean my elbows on the table and tip my fingers together. “In that case, I’d like to offer a full bursary, all expenses paid.”

Her smile turns ten degrees warmer. “I’ll put you in touch with the right person in finance.”

“Monday.” I want to pave this road for Valentina as soon as possible.

“Gotcha.” She takes a bite, chews slowly, and swallows.
“You know, I had my doubts about you.”

“Yes?”

“I thought you were going to tell me Valentina’s studies are interfering with her job.”

“Oh, no. Nothing like that.”

“I’m glad I was wrong.”

She has no idea.

* * *

After breakfast, I text my private banker and give instruction for the bursary to be set up. Then I head to Rosettenville. I drive past the address in my file, the house in which Valentina grew up. It’s a humble miner’s house, the cheap, cookie-cutter type the gold mines constructed for their workers and later sold to private owners. In this street, everything looks the same. It’s hard to imagine someone like Valentina walking the streets of this average and dull neighborhood. She belongs someplace exotic, someplace beautiful. The main street that houses most of the commercial businesses is quiet. The shops are closed on the weekend. At the mechanic workshop, I park my car and tuck the gun into the back of my waistband. Lambert Roos lives in a house adjoining the workshop. The simple dwelling has a low wall in front, an easy target for thieves. With the fall of Hillbrow and downtown, Rosettenville became a dangerous neighborhood. The fact that he hasn’t raised the wall and fitted it with electrified barbwire tells me one of two things. Either he’s too poor or he’s powerful enough for criminals not to fuck with him. Judging from the peeled paint on the walls and the missing roof tiles, I’m putting my money on the first option.

I jump over the wall and bang on the door. Footsteps shuffle inside.

“Who is it?” a male voice calls.

“Gabriel Louw.”

There's a moment's hesitation before the door swings open on a crack. A short, bald man dressed in a vest and a pair of boxer shorts regards me with skepticism. He shoots a look over my shoulder, his gaze traveling up and down the street.

"I'm alone," I say with a cold smile.

"Well, well, if it ain't Owen's ugly duckling. Howzit?"

I should kill him for that remark, but I need information. Shoving past him, I make my way into his house. The place smells like old socks and stale cabbage. The carpets are worn, and the furniture has seen better days. Business must be slow. Or maybe not. On the table, there are several bags filled with white powder. Coke or maybe cat.

His eyes follow mine. A thin layer of perspiration shines on his forehead. "What can I do you for?" he asks with humorless slang. "Want a beer?" He shifts his weight.

He's hospitable enough, but he wants me gone.

"Remember Marvin Haynes?"

Cocking his neck, he blinks twice. "Yeah. Who doesn't?"

"You must've known him well, seeing that you were supposed to marry his daughter."

His puffy eyes narrow, and he utters a forced chuckle. "He lived down the road, but we weren't thick with each other. Saw his missus from time to time in the pharmacy. Why do you ask?"

"If Valentina Haynes was promised to you, why didn't your family take her and her brother in after her mother died?"

He scratches the back of his neck. "With her daddy gone, the deal was off."

"You didn't want to honor the agreement?"

"She's not my type."

Bull fucking shit. "She's a very pretty woman, isn't she?"

"Yeah."

"You don't like pretty? Or you don't like women?"

“Look, she didn’t do it for me.”

“You backed out because she didn’t do it for you?”

“Yeah.”

He’s lying through his crooked, yellow teeth.

“Why do you want know?” he asks, trying to look nonchalant, but his voice breaks on the last word.

I shrug. “Curiosity.”

With a nod, I go back to my car. Before I’m inside, the idiot has his cellphone in his hand, looking at me through the tattered lace curtains as he makes a call. I should’ve tapped his phone before my visit. It doesn’t matter. I’ll find out. I text Anton with Lambert’s name and address, as well as the date and time, instructing him to get a recording of the conversation and send it as an encrypted message to my private email account.

* * *

Valentina

When I step outside Kris’ house on late Sunday afternoon, Rhett is waiting across the road next to the Mercedes. He opens the backdoor in silent instruction for me to get in. Not a word passes between us during the drive to Parktown. My heart is sad to leave Charlie. I feel guilty for not being able to take care of him, but more than that, I miss his presence. His joy is innocent and genuine. He’s the only piece of uncomplicated truthfulness in the twisted emotions of my life.

Despite my sadness, my body starts humming when we get nearer to the house. Like a conditioned animal, my body becomes aroused at the knowledge that it will soon be with my captor, while my brain condemns the reaction. I hate this division between my thoughts and physical reactions. I’m at constant war with myself.

Gabriel himself waits on the porch. My heart gives an unwelcome lurch at the sight of his muscular shape. He gets the door and my parcels, the new clothes still unpacked and

the price tags intact. Rhett disappears to wherever. The minute he's gone, Gabriel brushes his lips over the shell of my ear.

“Welcome home.”

The words grate on me. This isn't my home. My home is with Charlie. What Gabriel is doing to us as a family is wrong. I hurry inside and make my way to my room. A minute later, Gabriel steps inside, standing like a menacing, dark energy at the foot of the bed.

“What's wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“Aren't you happy you got to spend time with your brother?”

I give him a hard look. “Of course I am.”

I start unpacking the clothes, taking my time to fold each item meticulously.

He lets me carry on like this for a while before taking the pile from my hands and leaving it on the bed. “Let's go for a swim.”

My jaw drops. He's inviting a house servant for a dip in his pool?

“What do you say, Valentina?”

“I don't have a bathing suit.”

“You don't need one.”

Without waiting for a response, he takes my wrist, pulls me through the kitchen and out the backdoor. On the deck, he starts stripping his clothes.

I glance around to make sure we're alone. “What are you doing?”

“Swimming naked with you.”

“Are you crazy?”

“We're alone. Magda's out, and Carly won't be back before tomorrow.”

Gabriel stands stark naked and hard in front of me. His scarred body is terrifying in its brutal beauty. The marks on his foot and knee don't diminish his physical perfection. To me, they add to his appeal, making him breathtakingly perfect in a broken kind of way. Is it the warped attractiveness of imperfection, or is a part of me is just attracted to everything that's dark and destructive?

Flashing me his rock-hard ass, he walks to the deep end and dives. Water splashes onto the side, the sound reminding me of holidays and stress-free times long gone.

"Come on," he calls. "The water's good."

It's tempting. It's been a hot as hell day, and my body feels sticky. I can't remember the last time I swam.

My gaze travels in the direction of the staff quarters. "Rhett—"

"Rhett won't come near the house unless I give him an order. Now I'm giving you one.

Get in."

"All right."

Pulling off my trainers and clothes, I walk to the edge of the pool. The minute our gazes lock, there's a shift in his. The ice in his eyes makes way for a molten look of heat.

Unashamedly, he ogles my breasts and lower. His cock grows enormous under the water. I wish I wasn't tingling between my legs or that my nipples hadn't hardened, but I'm as helpless to my reaction as I am to his wordless command when he curls a finger at me. Stepping into the cool water at the shallow end, I leave my guilt and judgment behind. No matter how hard I protest, Gabriel will do whatever he wants. The crazy, unequal power play gives me a measure of absolution.

When I'm up to my waist in the water, he swims to me and grabs a fistful of hair. Pulling my head back to arch my upper body, he latches onto a nipple, and sucks my breast deep into his mouth. I cry out as pain assaults the sensitive tip. Immediately, he pulls back to look at me.

“You usually like that.”

I cup the sore curve. “It’s almost that time of the month. They get overly sensitive.”

He studies my breasts with new interest, taking both into his hands. “They’re bigger.” He jiggles them, making me groan with the discomfort. “And heavier.” His hands move down my sides to my hips, and over my swollen stomach. “When’s your period due?”

“Tomorrow.” I shake a little when I say it. After that, the birth control will be effective, and nothing will prevent him from taking the final step.

He eases up then, setting my body free. “Maybe the water will do you good.”

It does. We swim a few laps and just drift around without talking. By the time we get out, my skin is wrinkled. Gabriel fetches towels from the pool house and covers me with one on a deckchair. For a few blissful moments, I forget my circumstances and simply enjoy the rays of the setting sun on my face. I’ve never been alone with him in the house. There’s less tension when no one else is around.

When it starts to get cool, he carries me inside and lies me down on my bed. Like every night he came to my room, he makes me come. He’s gentle, avoiding my sore breasts and swollen abdomen. Afterward, he lets me take him in my mouth and stays with me for another hour.

Does he hold other women like this? Does he go out to fuck someone after he’s been with me? I’ve never seen another female in the house except for the woman in his study, but that doesn’t mean he’s celibate. Maybe he entertains his women elsewhere to protect Carly. For all I know, he has a girlfriend. Maybe it’s the woman I saw. Maybe he’s fucking her brains out every night after he leaves my room. Our silence is no longer amiable.

I can’t help myself from asking, “Are you sleeping with someone?”

His chest vibrates against my back with a chuckle. “Does it matter?”

If the ache in my ribs is anything to go by, yes, it does, but I’d die before admitting it. “Just wondering.” Hell, I don’t even sound convincing to myself.

“Her name is Helga.”

Humph. It’s like he punches the wind out of me with a fist in the stomach. I wanted to know, and now I regret asking. I especially don’t want to know her name. Pain lances at me from all directions, rendering me vulnerable. Jealousy mounts in my chest.

“She’s the woman you saw in my study. That’s what you’re really asking, isn’t it?”

Now that it’s out, I may as well go the full nine yards and let myself hurt thoroughly.

Maybe the ache will dampen my need for Gabriel. “Did you sleep with her?”

“Yes.” After a moment, he continues, “But I haven’t fucked her since you arrived.”

Something gives in my torso, like an elastic band that snaps. Stupidly, I feel like crying.

Correction, I feel like bawling. Damn PMS. “It doesn’t matter.”

His laugh is knowing. “Of course not.”

“Why haven’t you slept with her?” I hold my breath for something I can’t name.

“I don’t want to.”

But he may. Gabriel is the kind of man who takes what he wants, not by force, but by making your own body betray you, by stealing your will and breaking every one of your good intentions, leaving you with a hole only he can fill. Where I’m aching now, only his cock can fill the empty feeling. It’s twisted. He made me want him—need him—like I need water, while he can walk away on a whim, whenever he doesn’t want

me. There'll come a day I'll be the next Helga, a day he won't come to my room to make me come, just because he doesn't *want to* any longer. He's an asshole, and I hate myself for being affected.

"You're quiet," he muses. "If you're tired, I'll let you sleep."

Longing for solitude so I can curl into a ball, I let the lie spill from my lips. "That'll be kind."

My heart drops when his weight lifts from the mattress. With a chaste kiss on my forehead, he walks from my room. Finally, I have the solitude I demanded, but I'm utterly and miserably lonely.

* * *

On Monday morning, Magda awaits me in the kitchen with shocking news. Marie had a stroke.

"You'll take over the menu planning," she says, "and the cooking. Run it past me to approve." She points at the computer in the corner. "You'll find the budget and supermarkets that deliver on the system."

"Will she be all right?"

"I don't know. Her daughter will let me know. It's mighty inconvenient, though, seeing we have a formal business dinner at the house on Friday. Oh, you'll have to see to the catering and serving. I'll email the menu to the kitchen computer. I'm only expecting two or three guests."

She writes a code on the message pad. "Here's the password."

She's halfway to the door before I find the courage to speak. "I'm not sure I can manage."

She twirls around to narrow her eyes at me. "Do you have a problem?"

"The cleaning and cooking...it's a lot for one person. It's not that I'm not willing, but it's a big house. I don't want to neglect one or the other."

“Then make sure you don’t.” Her lips thin into a smile. “Your life depends on it.”

I stare at her back as she leaves the kitchen. I hate the haughty clack of her heels as much as I detest the traffic cone color of her lipstick. She may look down on me because I’m poor and treat me like a slave because she owns nine years of my life, but when those nine years are over, I’ll never take an order from her again. I’ll take Charlie and move to another town, a city where the Louws don’t rule. Allowing the intention to strengthen my resolve, I switch on the computer and wait for it to boot up so I can place the grocery order for the day.

* * *

Monday and Tuesday pass in a blur. I wangle some sort of schedule, vacuuming only every second day and ironing later at night. By Tuesday evening, we get an update from Marie’s daughter, stating that she won’t be back at work for at least six months. Since I don’t know Marie’s recipes, I don’t have a choice but to change the menu. What I know is more my late mother’s Mediterranean style. I find a small, local producer of fresh produce, which turns out not only to be organic, but also cheaper. The fruit and vegetables aren’t pretty, but they’re tasty. I also order less cleaning products. I can wash a floor just as well with a bit of vinegar in water than with an expensive product that smells like a summer orchard, but has been tested on animals. The result is a thirty-percent saving on the weekly grocery bill.

The new work pace is strenuous. On top of that, my period arrived right on time. I’ve always suffered from a heavy flow that leaves me feeling weak. I order an iron supplement with my personal deliveries to boost me for the big night on Friday. The last thing I want is to fail my first dinner party test when my life depends on it.

Despite my period, Gabriel still comes to me at night, but instead of bringing me to the earthshattering climaxes I got used to, he fondles my body with backrubs and massages. It’s strange and out of character for him, not that he’s predictable. The more Magda pushes me, the kinder Gabriel acts toward

me, which infuriates Magda. It's a vicious circle between the two of them, and I'm caught in the middle.

Carly is cool but not completely unfriendly since she got to go out on her date. Sebastian is allowed to visit her at home with her grandmother or father's supervision, but as Gabriel is always out during the day, it's mostly Magda who keeps an eye on the lovebirds.

On Wednesday, Carly is alone by the pool. When I pick up her towel to put it in the wash, I notice she left her iPad outside again, something she does often. I take it with the intention to put it away in the house, but as I reach the sliding doors, Quincy's voice stops me.

"Hey, Val. Look, Bruno's all better."

Bruno runs on a leash with Quincy, the limp gone. The dog barks and wags his tail furiously when I approach. Leaving the iPad on the wall, I go down on my haunches and get a sloppy dog kiss.

I laugh, wiping my face with the back of my hand. "Glad to see you're back in shape, boy."

"Thanks, again."

"I'm glad I could help." I straighten and glance over my shoulder at the house. "I better get back. Lots to do."

"Yeah." He looks uncomfortable. "Are you coping?"

"Sure."

"Valentina," Magda says from the door, her condescending stare resting on Quincy and me as if she caught us making out or something, "if you've finished socializing, we need to talk about Friday's menu."

"Bye, Bruno." I stroke his back and smile at Quincy in greeting.

His eyes are hard as he directs them to the door where Magda waits with her hands on her hips, but I don't give it further thought as I hurry inside.

* * *

It's not until the following morning when Carly makes a ruckus at breakfast about her missing iPad that I remember leaving it outside.

Magda summons me to the dining room. At first, I'm in the dark when Carly points a finger at me and exclaims, "She took it. It was there last night, and now it's gone."

"Did you take Carly's iPad?" Magda asks. "Don't bother lying, because I'll be going through your room myself."

My insides freeze, remembering where I left it. They go even colder when I look at Gabriel. He's regarding me with a frown. He believes I stole it? Hurt lances into my heart. Why does it matter what he thinks?

"Well?" Magda asks with a flick of her penciled eyebrow.

"I meant to bring it in last night, but I got distracted and forgot it on the wall." "Distracted with Quincy," Magda says snidely.

A thunderous expression darkens Gabriel's face. Of the three people in the room, right now, I'm most scared of him.

"I'll go get it," I offer quickly, but Carly's already on her feet, heading for the door.

Magda folds her hands on the table and gives me a single instruction. "Stay."

I stand quietly in the uncomfortable silence until Carly's screaming filters through the backdoor. Everything inside of me tightens further.

"It's ruined!" Carly shouts, running into the room with the iPad. It's dripping with water.

Gabriel's tone is flat. "On which wall did you leave it, Valentina?" "The one by the pool!" Carly shoots daggers at me with her eyes.

"The sprinklers reach there at night," Gabriel says almost distantly.

"This is your fault," Carly continues in hysterics. "Do you realize how many photos I had on here? Not to mention my

homework!”

“Carly.” Gabriel’s quiet but hard voice instantly shuts her up. “Let that be a lesson well learned for leaving your iPad outside. It’s not the first time. It was bound to happen.”

“Dad!”

He holds up a hand, giving her a dark look. “Let me finish. You can recover your homework and photos from iCloud.”

“I didn’t activate it!”

Gabriel’s tone is uncompromising. Not a flicker of sympathy warms his eyes. “Lesson number two, well learned. From now on, you’ll make a backup like I told you.” He turns to me, suddenly looking tired. “I’ll deal with you after breakfast.”

“You’ll replace Carly’s iPad,” Magda says. “It’ll teach you to be less forgetful in future.”

She shakes her napkin out on her lap. “Now, I want to eat in peace. Quiet all of you.” Carly flops down in her seat, her face red.

I’m shaky as I return to the kitchen, cursing myself for my negligence. I can’t afford to replace the iPad, not without making more debt.

It doesn’t take long for Gabriel to come find me. The words I dreaded most leave his lips.

“Go to the gym after you’ve cleared the table.”

Going down to the basement is like a walk to the gallows. He’s already waiting inside, his tie removed and his shirtsleeves rolled back.

“Close the door,” he says quietly.

I push until I hear the click, but I don’t have the courage to turn and face him. “Come here.”

I bite my nail as I gather enough strength to obey, one step at a time.

When I stop in front of him, he pulls my hand from my mouth. “Undress.”

My eyes lift to his. I don’t mean to beg, but it slips out anyway. “Please.”

He doesn’t bat an eye. There’s no compassion, no mercy. “Undress.”

As I pull off my shoes, dress, and underwear, he watches me like a hawk. By now, I’m used to his scrutinizing stare, and it’s less embarrassing than during those first few times, but not less frightening. Once I’m naked, he taps a finger on his lips, studying my face. Finally, he drops his arm, as if he’s made his decision, and points at the floor. “On your back.”

I swallow as I lie down on my back, watching him fetch a bar with a set of handcuffs secured on each end.

“What are you doing?” I ask as he locks my wrists on either end.

He gathers my panties and bundles them into my mouth. “Sorry, beautiful, but I’m not in the mood for dialogue right now.”

I mumble a protest when he locks my ankles to my wrists, spreading me open on the bar. He pushes the bar back until it touches the mat, raising my arms above my head and my legs with them. Flat on my back, my ass and pussy are exposed in the most vulnerable way. My hamstrings are on fire. I shift in an effort to relieve the uncomfortable stretch when he fetches an object from the torture shelf.

He returns with a wooden paddle. I shake my head, pleading with my eyes, but he grips the bar and lifts a few times, giving me brief reprieve from the position before he pushes down flat and starts paddling my ass. The first whack on my ass cheek comes as a shock. I scream behind the bundle of fabric in my mouth, even if the sting heats my skin without hurting. The second lash makes me jerk, but when I realize he’s caressing my skin rather than inflicting pain, I almost relax. He works his way from left to right on the fleshy part of my ass until my nerve endings are on fire and my clit is a

pulsing nub of ache. My vagina feels swollen. The need for release is severe. When I'm no longer begging with my eyes for him to stop, I'm begging him to let me feel the paddle where I crave it most. Only after every inch of my skin is humming with electric sparks does he finally bring the paddle down right in the middle of my pussy, covering my opening and clit. With the tampon inside me, it feels full. And good. I grind up, desperate for more, but he changes to a slower and gentler rhythm, teasing me mercilessly with a few too-soft taps on my swollen parts.

Just when I think I can't take more, he pulls the underwear from my mouth and says,

“Beg.”

I don't hesitate. “Please, Gabriel.”

“Please what?”

“Please, please fuck me.”

He goes still. There's a mixture of shock and disbelief on his face, which is slowly replaced with satisfaction. Heat darkens his eyes. His jaw tightens as he looks down at my sex.

“Please.”

His chest is rising and falling rapidly, his breathing as harsh as mine. There's only the sound of our pants in the room. Then he exhales with a long, shaky breath. He pushes the paddle down on my clit and starts massaging with circular movements. Everything clenches as I come violent with a spasm that shatters my respiration. I'm out of air by the time he frees the constraints and drags me to my knees. In his haste to undo his pants, his fingers fumble with the button. I grab the waistband and pull it down his hips to help, not bothering with the zip. His cock juts at me, the tip close to my lips. I devour him like a crazy, starving woman, sucking and licking until he grabs my hair for leverage. He clenches his ass with a primal roar and a curse as he empties himself in my mouth. I swallow as best as I can, trying to breathe through my nose. I don't want him to pull out. I want him in me forever.

After a moment, he grips my face in the vice of his giant hands and eases out of my mouth. He uses my hair to wipe himself clean, an act I find strangely and savagely satisfying. Pulling me to my feet, he shoves his tongue between my lips, tasting himself on my mouth. He nips and sucks, bites and laves. I'm aware of nothing but the heated skin of my ass and the wetness of his mouth as he steals my reason. His taste is addictive. I don't know for how long he kisses me before he pushes me away with a gentle shove.

"Get dressed," he says in a hoarse voice. "And leave."

Confused by the change in his behavior, I obey wordlessly, empty and dissatisfied despite the orgasm I just had. At the door, his words make me pause.

He grits out every syllable like he has to push it from his throat. "Put on a pretty dress, tonight. You're going on a date."

* * *

Gabriel

When I asked her to beg, I expected her to beg for release. Instead, she begged me to fuck her.

She's ready.

I both rejoice and shiver in dread, because the first time won't be with me. No matter how much I want to take her virginity, I made a promise to myself, and I never break my promises.

This time I may be pushed to my limits to keep this promise, but I already have a plan.

Magda waits in my study when I get back from the gym. I grit my teeth as I stroll past her.

"Did you do it?"

I know what she means, but I ask anyway, "Do what?"

"Punish her."

"Yes." I sit down and open my laptop.

"How?"

“Appropriately.”

Carly learned a valuable lesson. There was nothing to punish Valentina for. I’m a sick bastard for using the situation to feed my own lust.

Magda doesn’t budge. “How?”

I shoot her an incredulous look. “You want the juicy details?”

“What is it about her that’s got you thinking with your dick instead of your head?”

“Don’t insult me, and your reference to my dick is highly inappropriate.”

Her eyes, the same watery blue as mine, turn dark with anger. She slaps her palms on my desk, bringing us at eye level. “You’re just like your goddamn father.”

Keeping my voice calm and my gaze indifferent, I say, “If you can’t speak without repeating yourself, and you have nothing new to say, please get out of my office so I can focus on the business of running your business.”

Her nostrils flare. The thick layer of foundation around her nose cracks with thin lines. The pores are big with white hairs standing erect in each follicle. Every minute detail of her age catches my attention.

“You won’t live forever, Magda.”

She straightens and adjusts her jacket. “Neither will you.” A superior smile curves her lips. “Who knows? You may die before me.” She turns, making it clear she’s leaving my office on *her* terms.

There’s no love lost between my mother and I, and no amount of introspection to figure out where it went wrong will change that. We are who we are.

I pick up the phone and set out to do what I’ve been meaning to when I walked through the door.

Quincy answers with a bright, “Yes, boss?”

“Come to my study.”

I take a deep breath, and steel myself. A short while later, he enters. I want to break his face, but it's not his fault he's fallen for Valentina. As little as it's hers. She's a gorgeous woman with a courageous heart and a soft spot for animals. How could he not be under her spell?

"Sit." I point at the chair facing my desk.

He takes the seat, his posture at ease.

"I have a mission for you tonight."

He waits quietly for me to continue.

"You're going to fuck Valentina."

CHAPTER TEN

Gabriel

I may as well have drenched Quincy with a bucket of ice water.

He coughs. “Excuse me?”

“Take her out on a date. Someplace nice. Romantic. Dinner by candlelight, that kind of thing.” I flip my credit card at him. “All expenses paid. Take two guards to make sure you’re safe.”

His eyes grow larger by the second.

The next part is hard for me to get out. I swallow the bitter taste in my mouth. “Then get a room at the Westcliff Hotel and fuck her.”

His skin is as pale as the whites of his eyes. “I don’t understand.”

“There’s nothing to understand. Wear a condom and be gentle. It’s her first time. Oh, and she’s having her period. That kind of thing doesn’t put you off, does it?”

“Of course not, but—”

Not able to stomach the conversation any longer, I say gruffly, “You’re dismissed.” He jumps to his feet, obviously eager to escape my presence.

“One more thing,” I say as he gets to the door, “I don’t want to see you until tomorrow morning. Make sure you stay

the hell away from me until sunrise, and then I expect a full report.”

He all but jumps through the door, leaving me alone with a kind of agony no human being can understand.

* * *

In the afternoon, a visit from Sylvia puts me further on edge. I meet her in my study. It keeps things professional. She declines my offer for a drink and sits down on the corner of my desk, the slit of her skirt riding up her thigh. At some point in time, I would've kneeled at her feet and kissed my way down that leg, all the way to her toes. Now, there's no desire for the woman who married me in a pretty white dress with a fake smile on her face.

“What's with Carly's new diet?” she asks. “We already discussed this. You're not supposed to change her meal plan without consulting me.”

I fight to control my irritability. “I'm not aware of any diet.”

“She's wheat intolerant, for God's sake. She's not supposed to eat pasta. What's wrong with Marie? Is she going senile?”

“Marie had a stroke. Valentina's taking care of the cooking.” “The maid who tried to kill our daughter?” she shrieks.

“She didn't do it on purpose. It was another one of Carly's attention-seeking, selfdestructive actions.”

“Don't you dare take that maid's side over our daughter's.”

I sigh deeply. “Relax. Valentina has been punished. It won't happen again.”

“I won't relax where Carly is concerned. She has a modeling audition in a month. She can't afford to pick up weight with carbs and creamy pasta sauces.”

“She's *not* doing a modeling audition.”

“It's not up for discussion.”

“Have you called the therapist?”

She stiffens. “Carly doesn’t need a therapist. It’s hormones. Normal teenager issues.”

“Sylvia.” I say her name warningly. “Carly never got over our divorce. It’s time to face the fact that she may have issues we’re not equipped to deal with.”

She snickers. “That’s rich coming from *The Breaker*.”

“Keep the business out of this.”

“How can I? It’s all that matters in your life.”

“Yet, that’s why you married me. Security and money, don’t you remember?”

“Don’t be so dramatic. Why do you always have to bring up the same old accusations? It’s boring.” She gets to her feet. “Shall I speak to your maid?”

“You lost the right to address my staff when you walked out.”

She rolls her shoulders. “Dear God, Gabriel, get over me and move on.”

“I am, Sylvia. You have no idea.”

“Good. It’ll make you easier to get on with.” She walks to the door with a straight back.

“Tell Carly I dropped in.”

“Why don’t you call her tonight and tell her yourself?”

She narrows her eyes. “Fuck you, Gabriel. I love my daughter, and she knows it.”

“Does she?”

She yanks the door open and slams it hard enough to shake the frame. Dragging a hand over my face, I take a moment to calm myself before I go out for the business of the day that requires the end of another scumbag’s life.

* * *

When I get home, I shower and spend time with Carly, helping her with her math homework. I don't go down for dinner. I can't bear to look at Valentina. I'm too terrified I'll change my mind. After a whiskey too many, I call Rhett and tell him to meet me in the gym. He enters cautiously, probably thinking of the last time we wrestled because he shot Valentina's dog.

Dragging a bench from the free weights section to the metal chains attached to the wall, I sit down. "Cuff me."

It takes him a moment to find his voice. "What?"

"You heard me."

Not stupid enough to defy me, he approaches slowly. I hold out my wrists. He secures first the one, then the other in the metal cuffs.

"Take the key with you," I say, "and don't give it to anyone, no matter what."

"The key for the cuffs or for the door?"

"Both."

His head bobs up and down, like a toy dog on a car dashboard. "When must I come back?"

"At six tomorrow morning and not a second before. Got that?"

He gulps. "Yes."

"Go."

His eyes say I've finally lost it, but he doesn't argue. The key scrapes in the lock after he has closed the door, making me a prisoner of free will.

* * *

Valentina

Wearing the new dress Gabriel bought, I bite my nails while I wait in the kitchen. I've never been on a date. I should be studying, but I'm curious about what Gabriel has planned.

The door opens just after eight, but it's not Gabriel who steps inside. It's Quincy.

"Hi," I say with an easy smile, half-relieved and half-stressed, because now I'll have to go through the waiting anxiety again.

There's a flush on his cheeks as he takes in the red dress. "You look nice."

This is so uncomfortable. "Thanks."

"Ready?"

I blink. Maybe he's driving me somewhere to meet Gabriel. "Um, yes."

"Let's go." He looks me over. "Take a jacket. It'll get fresh later."

I grab my black trench coat and follow Quincy to the car. He drives. Another car follows at a distance. I peer at the headlights in the side mirror.

"Are they going to follow us all night?"

"Protection," he mumbles, his forehead pleated in a frown.

"Where are we going?"

"I was thinking the Thai Hut. It's got five-star reviews for its curry dishes, and it's fancy without being uptight. What do you think?"

I have no idea where or what the Thai Hut is, but my brain is stuck on something else.

"Wait, you mean you and I decide? Gabriel's not coming?"

He shoots me a quick look. "Ah, fuck. He didn't tell you."

"Tell me what?"

He clenches the wheel and faces straight ahead. "This is— How do I put it? He set us up on a date."

"Me and *you*?"

"Hey." He utters a wry chuckle. "I know I'm not the world's greatest hunk, but there's no need to say it like you

won't go out with me if I'm the last man on earth, which you probably wouldn't, even if it was true."

I'm so gob smacked I have to remind myself to shut my mouth. "I don't understand."

"Neither do I." He shifts in his seat. "Look, I'll be honest with you. All I know is Gabriel ordered me to show you a good time tonight."

"He *ordered* you?" Who the hell orders anyone to go on a date? What am I? A piece of meat up for auction? I narrow my eyes. "What else?"

He steals another glance at me. "What do you mean what else?"

"A good time and what else?"

He wipes a hand over his face. "Dinner, candles, and..."

"And what?"

"He wants me to sleep with you."

"Stop the car."

"Valentina—"

"Now!" I'm already jerking on the door handle.

He brings the car to a screeching halt on the side of the road and grabs my arm. "Please, calm down. We've got his guards watching us."

I still at his words. I can't believe Gabriel set me up with Quincy. For sex. I cover my face with my hands. "I'm so embarrassed."

He pulls my hands away. "It's not your fault. You have nothing to be ashamed of. I don't know what Gabriel's idea with the whole thing is, but we may as well go out and have a good time since he's paying." He adds quickly, "I'm not saying you have to sleep with me. We'll just say it didn't work out that way. I know you don't feel for me like that, and I'm not in the habit of forcing women."

“Thanks.” I drag in a shaky breath. “I guess you’re right. We’ll just go on our makebelieve date and order the most expensive dishes on the menu.”

“Good.” He pats my hand. “Now I can relax. Man, this was eating me. You have no idea.”

I can’t help but laugh. “Sorry. I didn’t want you to stress over sex with me. Must be a terrifying thought.”

He gives me another wry smile. “Don’t put words in my mouth, now.”

The tightness in my chest vanishes a bit, but not the hurt that Gabriel would rather send me off to be serviced like a cow or horse than deal with me himself. I need to change the uncomfortable subject.

“How come you got to train with Bruno?” I ask.

“I was the only one more or less not scared of him.”

“You should treat him better. I saw what you’re feeding him. May as well give him sawdust.”

He chortles. “Yeah? What do you recommend?”

“I’ll give you the name of a good brand, but you’ll have to order it from the vet.” “Is this an order or a request?” he asks mockingly.

“It’s not like Gabriel can’t afford the best.”

“You’re right.” His smile is bright. “We’ll give it a try.”

The Thai Hut is a small wooden house on stilts with colorful fairy lights draped over the porch. The interior smells of curry, and the ambience is warm. Despite myself, I relax with Quincy’s easy banter. We polish off a bottle of wine, and by the time we ask for the bill, there are no other diners left. Since Quincy is over the limit, one of the guards drives us back. At home, he kisses me on the cheek and saunters off to the staff quarters.

The night guard lets me in. After a second’s hesitation, I take the stairs to Gabriel’s room. I want some answers, and I want them now. I push the door open, anger making me brave,

but the room is dark and empty. Maybe he's out himself, doing what he wanted me to do with Quincy. Banishing the thought from my mind, I go to my room and try not to think about him as I fall asleep.

* * *

Gabriel

The overhead tungsten bulbs buzz with a constant noise. Their blue-white light washes out the shadows with an overly bright intensity. It's been an hour since Rhett left me in the gym. I'm going through the week's business in my mind, trying to focus on planning and figures, but my thoughts keep on drifting to Valentina and Quincy. Where are they? What are they doing? What is she wearing? Is her hair hanging loose down her back, or did she take it up in the messy bun she does on a Sunday? Maybe it's tied in the ponytail she wears for work, and my guard is pulling the elastic from the silky strands right now, letting it spill over her full breasts. Is he pressing his lips against the soft, plump curve of her mouth? Is his hand between her legs?

I jerk on the cuffs, rattling the chains like a beast in a cage. A cry of outrage fills the space. It takes me several long breaths to find some resemblance of calm, forcing my brain to function rationally. I made a promise. This is for Valentina. It shreds my heart to bleeding pieces, but I've seen the way they look at each other. Quincy is smitten with my woman, and she likes him more than she'll ever admit. Daily, I'm forced to witness the way her eyes light up when they run into each other in the garden. His gentleness toward her is shoved down my throat. It's a reminder that I'll never have her like another man can have her, a man with a handsome face and an easy smile. A man without darkness and a need to hurt and own her. She'll never be mine like that—freely—but it doesn't matter. I'll never let her go. In exchange for forever, I'm giving her this one night. She deserves it pretty with a gentle man on top, offering her a handsome face to stare up at and an unbroken body to hold onto.

Does he find her wet?

“No!”

I strain against the chains. My roar sounds animalistic, even to my own ears. I can't do it. I can't stand it. Fuck my promise.

“Rhett!” My voice carries through the room, lifting the roof. “Let me the fuck out! Open the door!”

I shout profanities and utter threats even Magda will be ashamed of, jerking on the cuffs until my skin is chaffed raw and I'm running the risk of pulling my arms out of their sockets. I scream until my voice is hoarse, but the sounds are trapped in the room designed for exactly that purpose.

“Valentina!”

I struggle in a rage so dark that reason flees my mind. I grapple with thoughts that slice my heart open and blind me in the red fury of my possessive jealousy. I wrestle with nothing but the air, as if I can strangle those images torturing my mind and lay them to rest. Clawing and kicking, I twist my body until the bench falls from under me. I kick at the wood with my boots, the splintering crunch as it breaks a satisfying sound that feeds my need for violence. Pain shoots up my injured leg, a sharp stab lancing in my knee. I fight until every part of me is hurting as much as my heart, until I have no more energy left.

Sweat-drenched and battered, I sag in my chains, hanging by the threads of sanity. The irony of where I find myself isn't lost on me. I'm chained in my own torture chamber, suffering a self-inflicted torture far worse than anything I've done to any enemy who's ever had the displeasure of crossing this doorstep.

“Valentina.”

Her name is a croak. My throat burns. I can no longer scream. I can only sob and give in to the cruelty of my imagination as it leads me on a graphic tour of Valentina's first time.

* * *

Sometime during the early hours, I wake. I found a position on my knees, my arms pulled up and my head hanging between my shoulders. I must've passed out from physical exhaustion.

My throat and eyes are dehydrated. Scratchy. Everything inside of me is raw. I did her a favor, but the selfish part of me is too great, the possessive part of me too complete to accept it gracefully. I glance at the wall clock. It's done.

Too late.

The key turns in the lock, and the door opens. Rhett pauses when he takes in the scene. "Come get me," I grate out.

He hesitates, but finally approaches with quick steps. As he unlocks me, he avoids my eyes. The minute I'm free he retreats to the far end of the room.

"Leave," I growl, frightened that I'll take it out on him.

He doesn't let me tell him twice. Like an arrow from a bow, he shoots through the door, his steps falling in a fast jog down the hallway.

I wipe a hand over my face, the stubble where there's no beard a reminder that I need a shower and a shave. Every ounce of my body is pulled tight. More than anything, I want to hunt Quincy down and kill him. In less than an hour, I'll face him and listen to his account. I want every fucking detail so I can pretend I've been there, part of it all. I'm too damn jealous to even spare myself the pain.

Walking to the wet bar that's always stocked with bottled water and drinks—torturing people is thirsty work—I pour a whiskey and shoot it back neat. Then another. And another. I need the alcohol if I'm not to crush Quincy's windpipe and rip off his dick. For good measure, I have a fourth. The alcohol burns my stomach and relieves the worst of the rawness in my throat from the vile curses I uttered all night. My skin heats, and my brain blurs enough to dull my emotions, enough to get through the hour that awaits without committing a murder in my own house.

* * *

Valentina

At five, I'm up as usual, but Gabriel doesn't come to the kitchen for his coffee. I leave his breakfast on the hot tray and shrug inwardly. If he had a rough night, I hope he wakes up with a hell of a hangover. It will serve him right for the stunt he tried to pull on me. Still seething with annoyance, I take the washing basket and set out to collect the dirty laundry. In the hallway, my step slows as none other than Gabriel turns the corner, heading my way.

He looks like shit. His hair is disheveled, standing in every direction, and stubble blurs the neatly shaved line of his beard. His eyes are bloodshot and his clothes—the same clothes from last night—are creased. Wherever he's been, it looks like he slithered out of some woman's bed a second ago.

His eyes fix on me with the kind of intensity that isolates us in this moment. Everything else fades away as he nails me with his glacier stare, making me shiver inside. He holds me locked in invisible constraints until he's almost on top of me. Even if I want to, I can't move. I'm frozen to the spot.

He leans an arm above his head on the wall and crosses one ankle over the other, his stance both relaxed and intimidating as he stares down at me.

“So,” his eyes run over me from top to bottom, “how was last night?”

There's a bite in his words that's contradictory to the flash of hurt in his eyes. The whiskey that laces his breath drifts to me on the air. He's been out drinking?

I want to tell him he's an asshole, but his masculinity folds around me like a cloak, the power he has over me both frightening and exciting.

“Did he kiss you?” he asks on a drawl, cool amusement masking something else I can't place.

“On a first date?” I say sarcastically. “Some men are gentlemen, you know.”

First, he looks surprised, then relieved, and then angry. “Are you telling me nothing happened?”

“Like I said, Quincy is a gentleman.”

Predator intent fills his eyes. He moves so close to me, I can see his pupils dilate. “Then it seems it’s not a gentleman you need.”

I pull myself to my full height, my breasts brushing over his chest in the process, but I don’t care. “Why, Gabriel, you look disappointed.” I bat my eyelashes in mock innocence.

“What were you hoping for?”

He reaches out so fast I jump in fright and drop the basket when he grabs my wrist.

“I offered you a chance to have it pretty.” His lips thin. “I offered you beautiful. You blew that chance, and now you’re left with hard and ugly.” He squeezes to the point of pain. “You’re left with *me*.”

There’s so much meaning in those words, I can’t stop the shiver that crawls up my spine.

He releases me with a soft shove and says in a quiet, threatening voice, “Remember, you begged for it.”

Picking up the basket, he pushes it into my arms and walks around me like I’m nothing but an irritating obstacle in his way. If I was infuriated last night, I’m ten times more so now.

“You can’t pass me around like a toy for your men,” I say to his back, “and you can’t decide who I sleep with.”

He stops and takes two steps back to me. His smile is cold and cruel. “That’s where you’re wrong. You’re *property*, Valentina. You agreed to *any duty* I see fit. I can share you however I want, but you don’t have to worry about being a toy for my men. I don’t like to share my toys. Last night was a big fucking gift. Not for Quincy. For *you*.” Heat and possessive intent darken his eyes, making him look more dangerous than ever. “And it’ll never happen again.”

He stalks away with a heavy limp, leaving me trembling with something other than anger. Understanding blooms in me. Gabriel wanted my first experience to be with someone normal. He wanted me to have a taste of how sweet it can be

before he submits me to the dark lust I sense in him. I brace my back against the wall and take a few deep breaths. I'm not sure what's worse, that I find his intention sweet or that I crave the darkness he's withholding from me.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Valentina

That afternoon, Gabriel goes out on a job and doesn't return for dinner. I'm already in bed when I hear his uneven gait in the kitchen. Rummaging sounds come from the pantry. If he's hungry, I left his food in the oven. I'm not ready to face him, but I can't put it off indefinitely. Rather now, than later.

Entering the scullery, I forget my apprehension. Gabriel is removing a bloody shirt over the basin, the medicine kit balanced on the edge.

"Gabriel!"

I run to him, my eyes doing a quick evaluation of his state. There's a cut in his shoulder through which blood is oozing and several scrapes on his stomach and ribs.

He presses the shirt to the wound and opens the tap. "Shh. Where's Carly?"

"She went to bed after dinner. What happened?" I take the shirt from him and dump it in the trashcan. It's torn and stained beyond saving.

"Business."

He flinches when I touch the wound to assess how deep the cut is.

"This needs stitches. Where are Rhett and Quincy?"

"I sent them to bed. It's not that serious." He flashes me an amused smile. "But your concern is flattering."

“This is no time for jokes.” Taking disinfectant and sterile gauzes from the medicine kit, I start cleaning the wound.

“Good thing blood doesn’t make you queasy.”

I don’t return his smile. I don’t even want to think what sinister activity earned him these injuries.

“Give me a needle and thread,” he orders.

Only Gabriel will keep sterile needles and surgical thread in his medicine kit. I locate the items and hold them out to him. He takes a vanity mirror from the shelf and balances it on the counter. I watch as he pulls the thread through the eye of the needle, but when he angles himself toward the mirror and pushes the needle through the skin at the top of the cut, I take over. He lets me, studying me as I work to sew him back together. I’m no nurse. I’m not even a vet, but I’ve watched Kris stitch up cuts plenty of times. He winces, but he doesn’t say a word until the cut is closed and dressed.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

I dispose of the used materials and scrub the basin and my hands with disinfectant. When I’m done, I give him a painkiller and anti-inflammatory with a glass of water. He drinks the pills without protest. Fine lines of fatigue mark his eyes and the corners of his mouth. His permanent frown lines run deeper than usual. Taking his hand, I lead him to my bathroom.

“What are you doing?” he asks.

“Getting the blood off you. You should be worried about catching AIDS.”

He grins. “Next time, I’ll wear surgical gloves.”

I snort. He lets me undress him while the water runs warm. I have to undress as well so my clothes don’t get wet, but the shower in my bath is too small for both of us to stand comfortably. When I’m with him in the shower, he has to drape me over his body or hold me in his arms. I angle the water away from his wound, and wash the rest of his body,

trying to be gentle on his abdomen where he's bruised. When he's clean, I wrap a towel around his waist and take another to pat him dry. I have to stand on the toilet to reach his hair. Judging by the teeth he flashes me, he finds my care amusing, but he doesn't interfere or take over. I dry his back, chest, and arms, and then I go down on my knees to rub the towel up his legs. There are so many muscles on these legs. They knit together in rigid lines, defining the man's hard exterior with an accurate mirror image of what lies inside his soul.

As I'm pushing to my feet, he prevents me with his hands on my shoulders. I look up. He's devouring me with his eyes, his cock tenting the towel at my eye level.

"Valentina."

There's a plea in the way he says my name. I can't help but want to please him. My reply to his unspoken question is to tug on the towel and let it fall to the floor. I take him in my mouth, and like always, he lets me do whatever I want. I suck him as deep as I can take, eating him hungrily. He groans and dips his knees, giving himself over to me. I take his pleasure like I own it, like it's his duty to give it up to me. He's breathing hard when I'm done, but so am I. He hooks his hands under my arms to help me to my feet, pressing our lips together, and dipping his tongue into my mouth like he always does when I've swallowed his seed. He growls deep from his chest as he sucks on my tongue. The primal sound makes liquid heat gather between my thighs. I'm impossibly slick, my body preparing itself for his invasion, an invasion that's yet to come.

After drying the water that splashed on me while I washed Gabriel, I take him to my bed, and make him lie down on his back to avoid putting pressure on his shoulder. I curl up against his side with my head on the uninjured side of his chest.

"Why did you do it?" he asks.

"Do what?"

"Take care of me."

“I don’t know.” Deep inside, I wanted to. It frightened me to see him hurt.

“It doesn’t matter.” He cups my sex, stroking a thumb over my clit. “It was sweet.”

He delves a finger into my wetness, teasing and torturing me until he drags a long and slowly detonating orgasm from my body.

Later, as he holds me in his arms, I say, “Gabriel?”

“Mm?”

“Are you ever afraid of dying?”

He answers without hesitation. “Every day.”

The big, strong man next to me suddenly seems too vulnerable for my liking. “The scars, are they from fights like today?”

He gives a low chuckle. “You didn’t think I was born *all* ugly, did you?”

I cup his cheek. “That’s not what I said. I just tend to think of you as indestructible.

Untouchable.”

He places his hand over mine and rubs his cheek against my palm. “I’m not untouchable,

Valentina. I’m far from it.” He moves my hand to his chest. “I do have a heart.”

I kiss the flat disk of his nipple and put my ear on his chest, just for good measure. The beat is strong and rhythmic. It sounds sure and secure. I have to believe nothing will happen to him. If he’s gone, our nine-year deal is off, and I’m dead. Magda won’t honor the agreement. Of that, I’m certain.

I push up on one elbow to trace the embossed lines on his face. “Tell me how it happened.”

He catches my hand. “Not tonight.”

“Nothing?” I ask with a tinge of disappointment. I want to know his history. I want to understand the man inside the

sadist.

“All you need to know is that I regret them.” He moves my palm to the bandage strip covering the cut on his shoulder. “For this scar, on the other hand, I’m eternally grateful. I hope it never fades.”

“Why?”

“Now it’s a reminder of you.” He kisses my temple. “Go to sleep. It’s late.”

The balance that started shifting between us from the day he bought me food tips to the one side of the scale, the side where affection surpasses the physical. There’s no denying it, any longer. I’m starting to care for my jailer. Maybe I’m suffering from Stockholm syndrome. Not that it matters how or why it happened. Whatever sparked my feelings, they’re real.

When I wake up sometime in the middle of the night, he’s gone. I don’t even have a scar to run my finger over, no raised tissue on the surface of my skin that can make me feel closer to him. All I have are the marks he’s leaving on my heart.

My period is over. My breasts and womb are no longer sensitive, but my body is primed with a powerful arousal that won’t grant me relief. The orgasms Gabriel gives me are no longer enough. He made me like this, a pathetic addict who needs, craves, and aches, and still he denies me the remedy, even when I beg. I lie in the dark for a long time, trying to make myself come. It’s not my fingers, my touch, I need. It’s not even Gabriel’s touch. I want him *inside* me. I don’t care that he’s ruined me or that he still holds my life in his hands. He’s conditioned me, and I’m at the end of how far I can go. I’m at the edge of a dark abyss, and even if I fear the plunge, I can’t turn back. Getting out of bed, I pad barefoot through the dark house.

He won.

Again.

* * *

Gabriel

Leaving Valentina in her bed is becoming harder. I want her next to me all night. It's an impractical and dangerous notion. If Carly sees us or Magda suspects I'm taking it further than the game I claim, I stand losing both my daughter and the woman who dominates every minute of my waking hours and even my dreams. The alarm beeps, pulling me from my thoughts.

The red dot on the bedside monitor warns me of movement in the house. Our security is top-notch, but even the best systems are breached. I check the doors and windows on the monitor. No entrances have been compromised. It can be Carly or Magda. Still, I'm not taking any chances. Whoever is moving through my house is at my door. The creak of a floorboard confirms the information on the screen.

I reach for the gun on the nightstand. When the door opens with a soundless swing, I take aim. My finger freezes on the trigger. It's Valentina's slender form that fills the doorway. A bolt of shock runs through me for how easily I could've shot her. I lower the weapon. The fight leaves my body, but my muscles don't relax. They're tense with a different kind of anticipation. Her white negligee glows pearly in the moonlight. She's staring at me, biting her lip. Putting the pistol back on the nightstand, I flick on the lamp for a better view.

I know what she wants. We both know why she's here.

I told myself I couldn't do it, and yet, I've never wanted anything more. I've belted and spanked her without breaking a molecule on her skin, but if I take her tonight, I won't only break her virgin body, but also my promise. Call me a weak man, but I already lost the battle the night

Rhett locked me in the gym. It was only a matter of time. Tonight is a night for broken promises.

I hold out my hand. "Come here."

She walks to the bed and crawls over me. Every inch of my skin catches fire. By the time her pussy is resting on my crotch, I'm a live wire, ready to explode, but I hold back, giving her control, because she came to me and it's the sweetest moment of my entire fucked up life.

I'm not a man to make small talk or beat around the bush. Especially not when something as serious as this is about to happen. When she doesn't move for several beats, seeming uncertain of where to go from here, I roll us over, pinning her underneath me.

"Get rid of the clothes." I give her just enough space to pull the negligee over her head.

Impatient, I pull the panties down for her, and she kicks them free. She wiggles my pajama bottoms over my hips to my knees. I have to lift first one and then the other leg to get rid of them. Stretched out on top of her, naked, static sparks detonate in every cell of my body. My cock is heavy and painfully hard, cushioned between her soft thighs. My balls ache from too many weeks of celibacy and not enough hand and blowjobs. The need to drive into her is so fierce that I have to grit my teeth.

I slip my hand down our bodies and dip my fingers between her legs. She doesn't need foreplay. She's dripping wet. For *me*. The nights of training her body to want and need me are like one long endless stretch of foreplay, and finally, it's about to explode. I've sucked and tweaked her tits, eaten her pussy, and played with her clit for weeks. What's left is to give her every inch of my cock. Once I'm inside her, there's no turning back. Her body belongs to me, but when I'm done fucking her, her soul will be mine. Once my seed spills in her womb, no other man will touch her again. Not tomorrow. Not when her nine years are up. Never.

Spreading her pussy lips with my fingers, I push the head of my cock against her entrance. My head spins as if I'm on a high. I keep my eyes open. I want to see her face the moment I sink into her. I want to remember her expression. I want to know what she looks like when she comes on my dick, and what she feels when I mark her inside with my cum.

She meets my stare head-on, as bravely as I thought she would, and takes my face between her hands.

"Gabriel..." She inhales deeply.

There's hesitation in her voice. I'm ready. So is she, or she wouldn't be here. The only thing preventing me from tearing into her is the air trapped in her lungs along with her unspoken words.

"Say it," I grit out, my need painful.

Placating my libido, I grind down on her pubic bone. The tip of my shaft edges forward, dipping into the slick heat that waits. Almost violently, I jerk back before I lose all reason and fuck her before she's spoken.

"I know you think I'm a virgin," she says softly, "but I'm not."

For a moment, I'm shocked to a pause. How could I have been so wrong? My judgment concerning a woman's body is always on the mark. All this time, I punished myself, withholding from her, making promises I couldn't keep. To think I almost let Quincy have her. I shake the thought. It's not where I want to take my mind, right now. Whoever her lover was, the asshole didn't know how to get her off. In that regard, I'm definitely her first. Anyway, I don't care who her first was. It doesn't matter, because I'll be her last. It makes no difference to me if she's a holy virgin or a whore.

"I don't care," I say gruffly, grabbing my shaft and directing it to the place that will give me access to her soul. It's when you take a woman, when you make her fall apart in your arms, that you see the nakedness of her heart, and all the truths she hides from the world.

"It doesn't matter to you?" she asks with a tinge of disbelief.

"Of course not." I nip at her ear. "Why would it? I'm no virgin, either."

"I just don't want you to be disappointed."

Disappointed? Is she crazy? "Believe me, nothing about this," I rub my dick over her slick folds, "can be disappointing."

A sob tears from her throat. It catches me so off-guard I almost miss the flash of terror that sparks in her eyes.

“Valentina.” I pull back an inch. “If you’re not ready, you have to tell me now.” I used seduction as my weapon to lure her into my bed with good reason. There’s no pleasure in it for me if it’s by force.

“Is that why you waited? You thought I’m not ready?”

“You know why I waited. What are you really asking?”

“Do you...?” She bites her lip. “Do you want me? I mean, do you want me like *this*?”

“Goddamn, Valentina. This isn’t an act of kindness or a favor. The reason you’re here is because I wanted you from the moment I first saw you, and a second from now I’m going to fuck you like I’ve been wanting to for a very long time, so you better tell me if you’re having second thoughts.”

“It’s not that.” She sounds ashamed. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Wait...” If she’s not a virgin, but she doesn’t know what to do? A cold feeling of rage unfurls in my gut. Bitterness fills my mouth. The truth lodges like a stake in my heart. “You were raped.”

“Yes,” she whispers, “but it was a long time ago.”

The pace of my breathing quickens, changing direction. I go from turned on to raving mad. Fucking furious. I’ll kill the son of a bitch with my bare hands, peel his skin from his body, and cut his muscles from his bones. Forcing back my emotions, I let go of my cock, easing up to cup her cheek.

Calmly, so as not to frighten her with the force of my anger, I ask, “Only once?” while holding my breath for the answer.

“Only once.”

“When?”

She turns her head to the side.

I won’t let it go. I need to know. “Look at me.”

She obeys, her eyes begging me not to push, but the more she holds back, the more uneasy I get.

I brush my thumb over her cheek. “When?”

She purses her lips and stares at me with big eyes, as if I’m going to judge her. “I was thirteen.”

When I lay my hands on that motherfucker he’s going to suffer. There’s only one question left to ask. “Who?”

“I don’t know.”

She’s not lying. She doesn’t blink or look away, and her pupils don’t dilate. She was a random victim. I’ll find and kill him for her. If she wants to, I’ll give her the gun and let her shoot him herself. If it’s the last thing I do, I’ll make the bastard pay.

I kiss her lips. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“I know.”

I’m glad she told me. This will require a different skill and attitude. Technically, she may not be a virgin, but physically, emotionally, and mentally she’s the virgin I took her for.

Easing over her body, I cup her jaw and hold her in place for my kiss, bruising our lips together. She gasps into my mouth, but lets me take control. As she can’t move her jaw, I’m the one nipping, sucking, and molding my lips around hers, taking and giving and making the moment mine. After a while, she starts fighting me, wrapping her arms around my neck and pulling me down for a deeper kiss, her tongue tangling with mine in an urgency that sets me ablaze. I shift my palm from her jaw to her neck, squeezing with dominant control. She embraces the touch, arching up into my hand. I pin her to the mattress with that commanding hold while I shift to her nipples, starting a slow seduction of tongue and teeth on every erogenous zone of her body. I nip the insides of her elbows and bite into the flesh where her pussy meets her thigh. I drag my tongue over the insides of her legs and dig my fingers into her ass, pulling the curvy flesh apart so I can lick down her crack to her pussy. By the time I’ve kissed my way from her feet to her mound, her legs are wrapped around me, and she’s sliding her wet sex over my cock, seeking the friction that will bring her release.

“I want you,” she whispers, breathing beauty into my room. “I want you, Gabriel. Please.”

A low groan vibrates in my chest. She’s begging *me*. She wants me like no other woman has wanted me before—not for my money or protection, but to ease the need I so carefully planted and nurtured inside of her. Her pleasure is mine, and I’m keeping it forever.

“Oh, God, please.” She digs her nails into my back. “Fuck me, already.”

We’re both out of control. I need to be lucid, or I risk hurting her, but she has me by the balls—literally—dragging her sharp nails from my sac up my ass and sending me way beyond sanity.

I grip my shaft and squeeze the root hard, praying the bite of pain will keep me within reason. Pushing up on one arm, I pull myself from the vice of her thighs and part her legs with my knee. When she’s wide and open, I take only a second to enjoy the sight before I lodge the head of my cock in her pussy. Her lips spread wide around my girth, stretching to accommodate all of me. I have precious little control left.

“Look at me,” I demand.

She opens her eyes. They’re hazy with desire and smoky with need, but they’re focused on me. I rest my elbows on the mattress so I can cup her face between my hands, needing to catch her expressions like a prayer between my palms. The movement shoves me another inch into her. She gasps, and her eyes widen. She’s tight and hot, her unused channel already pushing to expel the foreign object lodged in her entrance. I push deeper, feeling her like a velvet fist around me. I’m big, and she’s fragile, small. Her slickness helps, but it’s like pushing into a narrow chamber of hot, melting lava. The deeper I go, the more she squirms. I see it all in her face—the shock, pain, trust, and all-consuming need.

Sweat beads on my brow and torso. My skin is on fire. Her breaths explode from her chest.

“Gabriel...”

It's a plea for mercy. It's moving too slow. I can drag out the discomfort or make it hurt hard and quick before fucking it all better. Pulling back until only the head of my cock is held in place by the stretching muscle in her opening, I hold on to her face tightly and drive home.

Tearing through feminine tissue, I bury myself inside her body as far as I can go. It's the moment I've been dreaming of, of hearing her sounds, seeing her surrender, inhaling the scent of our sex, and feeling her body stretch for my cock. She's shaking, her fingers digging into my hips.

"It's almost over, beautiful. It won't hurt for long." I kiss her jaw and move, taking her with long, careful strokes until her body surrenders just like her mind, her tight channel embracing my dick rather than pushing it out.

Her moans turn to panting. It's music to my ears. When she throws her head back, I let go of her face, holding only her eyes. I play with her body, petting her breasts and clit as I stroke deeper and faster, taking everything she can give, everything that makes Valentina a woman. I knead and massage until she's soft and pliant in my arms. She molds like wet, earthy clay under my touch, until her hips start moving to the rhythm of my fingers on her clit.

And then it's over.

She breaks.

Her body sucks me deeper, catching my cock in a trap of painful ecstasy. Her pupils dilate like shooting stars, and her gaze flies away from me like a comet as she comes and leaves a burning trail in my soul. In this moment, she can ask me anything, and I will bust my balls to give it. I'll fetch her the moon and the stars, if that's what she wants, but she only says, "Hold me," and I give her what she desires.

* * *

Valentina

Gabriel's arms are safe around me. He's given me uncountable orgasms, but this one was different. This one was deeper and more intense, stirring the buried emotions I haven't

had the courage to look at for so long. After my assault, I shied away from men. The event prevented me from exploring my sexuality. I was afraid to go down that road in the fear of uprooting everything I experienced that awful night, but what I shared with Gabriel was nothing like that. It was a carnal, guilt-free, and necessary need. He took my freedom and made my body a slave to his, but right now, there's nowhere else I'd rather be. This is where I belong. This is where *he* belongs. As much as he took me, I took a part of him, too. I took something of him for myself, and I'll always keep it in my heart. I feel connected to him as I lie in his embrace, enjoying the afterglow of my orgasm. Now that I've had him inside me, I'm hungrier than ever for more. I'm starving for information that goes beyond the sex we share. I want to know why his beautiful physique is broken. I want to know everything about him.

I slide my hand down his body to trace the scar on his knee. Maybe he'll tell me tonight.

"How did this happen?"

"Got my kneecap shot away by one of our rivals," he says matter-of-factly.

"And this?" I stroke his hip.

"Baseball bat."

"And this?" As I'm about to cup his cheek, he catches my hand.

"Shrapnel. Explosion. A debtor tried to blow us up with the building where he was laundering the money he stole from us."

"Did he survive?"

He gives me a forced smile. "What do you think?"

"Have you ever considered having it fixed?" I ask as gently as I can.

He replies in a cold voice. "This *is* fixed."

Horror, not because of the ugliness, but because of the sadness, invades me. How did he look before, if this is *after*?

He utters a small sigh. “My bones were crushed. Underneath the skin, there’s mostly metal. The risk of the muscles collapsing with more plastic surgery is too high.”

I wrap my arms around his waist, holding him tight to me. Saying his mask of pain doesn’t bother me will only sound frivolous, even if it’s true.

I rest my cheek on his chest. “Your foot?”

All of his muscles go tense. It takes him several seconds before he relaxes under me again.

Just when I thought he wasn’t going to tell me, he says, “My mother shot me.”

I barely manage to swallow my gasp. “Why?”

His tone is flat. “When I turned twelve, she gave me a gun and told me to shoot a man. I couldn’t.”

A lump in my throat restricts my speaking. I can’t imagine the kind of childhood he had. A part of me relates to that and understands. There’s quiet accord between us as we hold and comfort each other, two damaged people with different scars.

* * *

It’s still dark when Gabriel wakes me with a kiss on the mouth. I stretch, feeling the roughness of his loving in the tenderness between my legs, even if he’s been as gentle as I guess he can be.

“Good morning.” He nips my bottom lip.

His cock is hard against my hip, a reminder of last night and of what I can have again.

“Gabriel.” My voice is breathy.

He chuckles. “If I weren’t so concerned about not letting you sleep enough, I would’ve been buried between your thighs an hour ago.”

I shiver at the thought, desire making me wet.

A shadow creeps into his eyes. “You have to go. Carly will be up soon.”

It's a logical comment, but it hurts, and that's a surprise. Maybe it's because creeping down the dark hallway like I have something to hide, like what I did with Gabriel belongs to the shadows, kills the emotional upsurge of last night.

"You're right." I sit up, clutching the sheet to my breasts.

Groping around under the sheets, I find my nightgown and underwear and pull them on. As I swing my feet off the bed, he grabs my arm. I pause, but I don't look back at him. I'm scared he'll see what I feel in my eyes. That I care.

He kisses my shoulder and brushes his lips up the curve of my neck to my ear. When he releases me, I take it as my cue to leave. I close his bedroom door quietly behind me and glance down the hallway to make sure it's clear before I sneak back to my room. The room looks empty and cold. Out of nowhere, I have an attack of inexplicable loneliness, followed by a bout of guilt because Oscar is sleeping alone on my pillow.

I pick him up and hug him to my chest. "Poor baby. I'm sorry I left you all alone last night."

He purrs and rubs his face against my jaw, not halfway as unsettled as I am.

* * *

Gabriel

There's not much information in the country Anton can't lay his hands on, so when he tells me Lambert Roos' phone records have been wiped, I know the rat I smelled is real. I order Anton to dig into Lambert's history, present and past, and to flag anything suspicious that comes up, especially pertaining to the Haynes family. Lambert did business with Marvin. I want to know why he stopped brokering the car cloning business after Marvin's accident. I also want to know who Valentina's rapist is, but I'll have to get more information from her, a delicate situation I don't look forward to. I already checked the police records. The family didn't report her rape.

My own research produced nothing helpful.

The remainder of my time is dedicated to preparing for tonight's dinner meeting. Despite her protests, I ship Carly off

to Sylvia for the weekend. I don't want her around for the dinner party, not with the guests Magda invited. We'll be catering for the Ferreira drug cartel men, Jeremy, the owner, and his son and future heir, Diogo. It's tough enough stomaching the political pawns Magda likes to entertain. I don't like hosting drug thugs in our home, but Magda is wheeling a deal to open a new financing franchise in Westdene, the heart of Jeremy's territory.

From the minute they walk through the door, I dislike them. Jeremy has the close-set eyes of a crocodile who acts asleep to snatch his non-suspecting prey. He grabs my hand in a jovial shake, treating me like his long-lost son, while Diogo, a smooth, handsome man in his late twenties, gives me a measuring look that tells me he finds me too short, not in the literal sense, of course. He may be ten years younger than me and blessed with a whole body, but I have years of experience over him and a darkness he can't begin to understand.

They kiss Magda's hand and accept the cocktails and hors d'oeuvres she offers in the lounge. Their chitchat and pretense at civility irritate me. If it was up to me, I would've cut through the bullshit and gotten to the point. We want exclusivity in their area. They want our money. Simple. We pay a kickback, and no other loan sharks get in. A deal also guarantees that we don't fuck with them, and they don't kill our men.

Magda navigates through a whole family tree of questions about their wives, kids, grandmothers, and whatnot before she finally announces dinner is served. The tux I'm wearing for the occasion, these affairs being sordidly formal, is too hot. I hook a finger between my neck and the collar of my evening shirt and tug. The bowtie gives marginally, but I only breathe easier when Valentina walks into the room in her somber black dress and hair pulled back in a neat bun in the nape of her neck.

I watch her unabashedly as she serves our starters. The curve of her neck is long and elegant. Her fingers are slender, but they serve with efficient and sure movements, not spilling a drop of the gazpacho soup. A smell of raspberry fills my

nostrils as she brushes past me, the fabric of her dress touching my chair. She's present in all of my senses, even in my thoughts with a memory of how her body surrendered to mine last night. My cock hardens. It's a good thing we're seated.

It's hard to tear my attention away from her, but I need to concentrate on the negotiation and the subtle nuances of the conversation. I'm good at reading body language. I may not say much, but if our partners try to fuck us over, I'm always the first to get the hunch. With difficulty, I return my attention to the people seated at the opposite side of the table, but as I lift my eyes, I notice the way Diogo stares at Valentina. Anger explodes in my body and courses through my veins. The only thing that prevents me from reaching over the table and drowning him in his bowl of soup is that Valentina leaves the room, cutting his ogling short. I can't wait for this night to be over.

Halfway through the main meal, we come to an agreement. The minute we shake hands on the deal, Magda's tenseness evaporates. She becomes the engaging hostess she's known for, drawing Jeremy into a friendly argument about the opposing rugby teams they support. Diogo asks for directions to the bathroom and excuses himself.

The skin between my shoulder blades pinches. I push back my chair. "Excuse me. I'm going to check on dessert."

Magda shoots me a look, but I'm blind to the annoyance in her eyes. My soles are quiet in the carpeted hallway. In the entrance to the kitchen, I come to an abrupt halt. Valentina has her back pushed against the wall and a kitchen knife aimed at Diogo.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Gabriel

The knife in Valentina's hand makes me see images that will haunt me forever. A million scenarios pop into my head. The thought of Valentina hurt or Diogo's hands on her, pulls me from reason into a state of madness. In a flash, I pounce on Diogo, throwing him on the floor. I slam his face into the tiles and pin him down with my knees, my fists pounding into his ribs. The sounds of his strangled grunts and bone cracking aren't enough. I want him to cough up blood until his lungs drown in it.

"Gabriel!"

Valentina's voice pierces the ugly bubble of my rage. The piece of shit under me is struggling for his life. Slowly, I return to the distant part of humanity inside me, the little that's left in my soul. Magda and Jeremy come running into the room, probably alarmed by Valentina's scream.

"What in God's name?" Magda grabs my arm and tries to pull me off the man sprawled out on the floor.

I shake her off, but it's Valentina's round, fearful eyes that beckon me to let the scumbag go.

Getting to my feet, I adjust my jacket. "Get up, you son of a bitch."

"What the hell's going on?" Jeremy takes Diogo by his shoulders to help him to his feet.

Pulling him up is a struggle. It looks like he has trouble breathing. I must've knocked the wind out of him and broken a few ribs. His nose is bleeding from the blow on the tiles.

Magda flutters around him like a hen. "Gabriel! Are you out of your mind?"

I jab a finger at Diogo. "If you put a finger on her, asshole, you're dead."

Magda and Jeremy turn their heads toward Valentina. She's still standing with her back against the wall, her body trembling and her eyes fixed on Diogo.

I take the knife from her hand and leave it on the counter. Lowering my head, I put us on eye level. "Look at me." Once I have her undivided attention, I ask, "Did he touch you?" "No," she whispers.

Magda starts speaking, but I cut her short. "What did he do?"

"He wanted to—to..."

She doesn't have to say it. I know men like Diogo. I know the things they want to do. I turn to Diogo with cold calculation. "If I didn't walk in here, what were you going to do?"

He spits blood from a split lip on the floor. "Have myself some fun. She's only a maid, for

Christ's sake."

My voice is soft, but my anger carries in my tone. "That gives you the right to assault the people living under my roof, the people I protect?"

"Hold on, son." Jeremy steps between us, his palms raised. "You're not going to risk our newly forged relationship over a maid, are you?"

I turn my vengeance on the old man. "She's not just a maid. She's property."

Jeremy knows what that means. In his and my world, property is more untouchable than a man's wife. You may fuck

someone else's wife and pray you don't get caught, but you don't lay a finger on another man's property without accepting that you're going to get your hand chopped off.

"Whoa." He utters a nervous laugh. "Honest mistake. Diogo didn't know. We're used to helping ourselves, if you know what I mean."

"Are you insulting me by insinuating my house is a brothel?"

"Jeremy," Magda takes his arm, "your son needs medical attention. I'll cover all the costs, of course. I do apologize for this unfortunate misunderstanding."

It's a subtle way of telling him to leave. Magda knows me too well. I'm a lunatic, and right now, I'm about as stable as an active volcano.

Jeremy frees his arm. "Let's go, Diogo."

Diogo sneers at me as he passes, clutching his side. He should've just carried on walking, but the mistake he makes is to turn back in the doorway.

"You know what your problem is, honey?" he says to Valentina. "You're too damn pretty. It's a shame you're also a prude. I think you would've enjoyed it if I'd jumped you against the wall."

Just like that, my frayed control unravels. Magda grabs for the hem of my jacket as I lurch forward and catch the cocksucker around the neck. Jeremy is cussing and trying to pull my arms away from his son, but not a hundred horses are enough to tear me away. I drag him by his scrawny neck to Valentina and force him down on his knees at her feet. I grab a fistful of his perfectly styled hair and jerk his head back. Reaching for the same knife Valentina used to defend herself, I push the tip against his lilywhite, pretty-boy neck.

"Apologize."

"Diogo," Jeremy says from behind me, a tremor in his voice, "do as he says."

“Gabriel.” There’s consternation in Magda’s tone, but she doesn’t touch me. The situation is too volatile. I’m too unpredictable. A flick of my wrist and Diogo’s life will bleed out at Valentina’s feet. Only, I don’t want another man’s blood on her conscience. She already feels responsible for Tiny’s death. Diogo doesn’t deserve the guilt she’ll suffer over him.

“I’m sorry,” Diogo grits out.

I jerk harder on his hair, making him cry out in pain. “Say it like you mean it.”

“I’m really fucking sorry.”

I lodge the tip of the knife under his skin. “Beg.” A thin trickle of blood runs down his neck under his collar.

“Forgive me,” he says. “I beg you.”

I look at Valentina. “Do you forgive him?”

She looks at me with owl eyes. “Yes.”

“You’re more compassionate than me.” I yank him up by his hair until he finds his feet. “Get the fuck out of my house. The deal’s off, and you better pray I don’t run into you on the street. You better stay very far away from me.”

When I let go, Diogo stumbles to his father. Magda is paler than the white tiles on the floor, quiet for once. Jeremy gives me a narrowed glare, but he takes Diogo’s arm and escorts him from the room. You don’t insult a man in his own house. Jeremy knows this. He knows I can cut Diogo’s throat for that, and none of his business associates will retaliate.

Magda rubs the back of her neck. “I’ll see you out.” She turns to Valentina. “You better go to your room and not come out until morning. If I see your face before, I may not be able to suppress the urge to kill you.”

When it’s just the two of us in the kitchen, I take her in my arms and give her a hug. “You okay?”

She nods. “I didn’t want to cause trouble.”

“You did the right thing.” I kiss her nose. “I’m proud of you.”

“You put your life at risk. They’re going to kill you.”

“They’ll try, but so is every other criminal and cop in the country. You’re mine, Valentina, and nobody touches you.”

The clicking of Magda’s heels down the hallway makes me go rigid. “Go to bed.”

“The kitchen—”

“Can wait for tomorrow. Go.”

She obeys wordlessly. By the time Magda reenters the room, Valentina is out of sight.

“In my study.” Magda stalks from the room, not waiting to see if I’m following.

She holds the door for me and slams it when I step over the threshold.

“Are you out of your goddamn mind?”

“You know I am, Magda.”

“Do you have any idea how hard I worked to secure that deal?” She pushes her finger in my face. “What gave you the right to blow it away? Over a fucking maid!”

I grab her finger and move it away with force. The act catches her off-guard. She stumbles a step back and gapes at me with a mixture of disbelief and fear.

“If you ever push your finger in my face again, I’ll break it.”

“Gabriel,” she exclaims on a gasp, “I’m your mother.”

“You’ve never been a mother to me. Don’t claim the designation now.”

“What’s gotten into you? You blew a multi-million-rand deal, for God’s sake!” She straightens her back, her fear suddenly gone. “Don’t think you’re above my punishment because you’re my son. You’re taking this game you’re playing with the girl too far. You’ve had your fun. Let her slip up and kill her so we can all go back to our lives.”

“I’ll decide when the fun’s up.”

“Is part of the fun buying her fancy clothes? Playing with a doll isn’t enough for you? You have to dress her, too?”

“Are you checking my bank statements?”

“I know the owner of the boutique where you took your slave on a shopping spree.”

“That’s none of your business.”

“You’re fucked in the head, you know that? Just like your father.”

“How can I forget when you’re doing such a great job of reminding me?”

She wipes a hand over her face. “I need a drink.” Propping her hands on her hips, she regards me from under her lashes. “Get her out of your system, Gabriel. Do whatever it takes.

Eventually, you’re going to have to kill her.”

“Good night, *Mother*.”

I leave her alone in her study, going to my own for a stiff drink and to mull over the evening. I should’ve broken Diogo’s nose the minute he stepped over my doorstep. That way, I would’ve saved myself a whole evening of his unpleasant presence. My thoughts don’t dwell on the cocksucker for long. As always, my attention is reserved for Valentina. I’m not sure in what emotional state she’ll be when I go to her room, but I’ll be there for her, regardless. She should feel safe under my roof, knowing I won’t let anyone harm her. The kind of hurt I want to give her, that’s something entirely different. The kind of pain I like to inflict is as much for her pleasure as mine.

When I walk through her door, I don’t find her curled up in bed or huddled in a corner. She’s spread out on the bed, naked, waiting for me. My balls draw tight. My cock swells.

I can’t look away from her fingers where they rest between her legs. “You played with yourself?”

“Yes.”

“Did you come?”

“No, I was saving that for you.”

“Good, because otherwise I would’ve had to punish you. I own your orgasms. Say it.”

“You own me, Gabriel. All of my orgasms.”

I swallow away the hoarseness in my throat. “Show me. Play with yourself.”

“Later.” She wiggles her hips. “I want *you* inside me.”

Holy fuck. What she does to me. I strip my clothes and climb between her legs. Even if she’s offering herself, I want to hunt her. I want to catch her in the wild, wild, darkest woods of our desires and conquer her body. I want to tame her soul. I’ve got her, but I’m terrified I’ll lose her. I need to pin her down and constrain her, keep her in the cage of lust I so carefully constructed to trap her.

I flatten my palm on her pelvis, keeping her lower body in place as I push two fingers inside her pussy. She’s wet. The suction of her inner muscles welcomes me. I can’t wait. I grip the root of my shaft and place it at her entrance, but she shakes her head. It takes every ounce of willpower I possess not to give in to the urge to tie her up and make her have it my way. It takes strength to lift my hand from her abdomen and allow her to escape, but she doesn’t run away from the monster in her bed. She embraces the need that’s chasing us both by turning over on her hands and knees. She looks back at me from over her shoulder, putting her beautiful cunt on display.

“Take me like this,” she whispers.

The animal in me rises to the occasion. I open her pussy with my thumbs, align my cock with her slick folds, and drive home. Her back arches from the fast and hard intrusion, but she slams back, meeting my force with an urgency of her own. I’m giving her my all, thrusting our groins together with enough force to bruise her skin.

“More,” she pants. “You’re holding back.”

I’m fucking the air from her lungs, and she’s begging for more.

“Harder, Gabriel. Please. Please, God. Let it go. Make me forget. Make me forget what happened tonight.”

I do. The walls of my constraint break, crumbling around her, and I take her like I’ve never taken a woman before.

* * *

Valentina

Gabriel is pounding into me, hurting me inside, but I need more. With him, I’ll always need more. He steals my breath, takes my pleasure, and owns my desires. I am so filled with him, I can’t take more, and, yet I want him in every crevice and corner of my body.

Reaching between my legs, I caress his testicles, feeling their charged sway as he slams his groin against my ass.

“More,” I moan. “Please.”

“If I fuck you harder, I’ll break you.”

I want him to bleed into my cells until we are inseparable, until our DNA is entangled and my life is grafted with his. Together, we’re invincible. As long as he’s with me, no one else can touch me. Like this, there’s no ugly. No Diogo. No men like Tiny. Only Gabriel who makes me forget everything, even that he owns me.

“Fill me, Gabriel. Fill me more.”

“Goddammit, Valentina. You kill me.”

I look back at him from over my shoulder. His face is scrunched up with pent-up desire, his cool eyes dark with lust, and his jaw tense with control. Without breaking his pace, he lets go of my hip to stick his forefinger in his mouth. He opens my ass with his free hand and sticks his wet finger into my dark entrance. I fall forward and catch my weight on my arms. With the intrusion in my ass, the pressure in my pussy increases two-fold.

“Yes,” I whimper. “Like that.”

I brace myself for the impact. His hands being otherwise occupied, he can no longer support my hips. The force is too

much. My body is helpless under his brutal hammering. Every thrust shifts me higher up the mattress. He follows me, pulling out and pushing back in, his cock and finger working in synchrony. One hand moves around to the front of my body, finding my clit. A few fast strokes and I come, yelling his name. I expect him to come with me, but he doesn't. While I'm riding the incredible wave of my release, he stretches me by adding a second finger to the first in my backside. I'm overfull, but I don't care. I'm contracting and sizzling, my body a canvas of receptors for pleasure. I'm floating in a space of euphoric bliss. I don't care what he does with my body.

After a while, he pulls his cock free. Only his fingers are punishing my ass. This, too, stops. His touch disappears.

“Don't move.”

Exhausted, I melt into the sheets. I'm not going anywhere. The bed dips, and then he's gone. Cupboards open and close in the kitchen. What is he doing? I have my answer when he returns with a bottle of cooking oil. He places it on the floor and continues right where he left off, working two fingers into my ass. The sensation is wrong and thrilling. A forbidden kind of pleasure runs up my spine. After a moment, he withdraws his fingers and opens my crack. Cold liquid squirts into my ass. After the heat, the cold comes as a shock. I squirm to escape the onslaught, but he grabs me between the legs and holds me still while more of that slippery liquid fills me up. The oil. It feels like when he comes inside of me, only colder. He smears the substance around the tight ring of muscle, and when he pushes his finger back, it slips right in. I arch my back in response, needing more of the friction. The second finger joins the first, and soon a third finger stretches me. It doesn't hurt, but it's too full. I'm about to say so when his hand disappears and a hot, smooth surface pushes against my dark entrance. I look over my shoulder to see him positioning his cock where his fingers have been.

I try to lift my upper body, but he pushes me down with a hand on my lower back, working himself into me an inch. It burns like hell. I moan and squirm and try to push him out, but the harder I clench my backside, the harder he pushes.

“Relax,” he says in a tight voice. “I’ll take your ass regardless.”

I know he will, and I want him to. I take a deep breath and try to let the tension go, but when he moves deeper, I cry out and bite into the pillow to muffle the sound.

“Almost there,” he says, rubbing his palms over my ass cheeks.

God, it hurts. I’m not sure I can take it. “Gabriel.”

“Hush, beautiful.” He bends down and kisses my spine. “Take a deep breath.”

He talks me through it, making me breathe in and out until he has buried all of him inside me. The last inch is the worst. I gasp and swallow air. When he moves, I scream, grinding my pelvis to the mattress to escape the touch, but he chases after me, fucking me deeper. With every thrust he pounds the breath out of me until my voice is raw, and then he stills, keeping his cock in my body. I’m barely aware of anything but the invasive hardness. Carefully, he slips two fingers into my pussy. The pad of his thumb rests on my clit, stimulating my need. As my desire starts climbing again and my muscles contract around him, he moves again. He takes me to a place I didn’t know existed, where pleasure and pain are one, and the effect of having both sensations simultaneously on my body makes it impossible to discern where the one starts and the other stops. He’s kindling the biggest need in me yet. I’m full and fulfilled. I’m aching, but he’s soothing me. I’m hovering on the edge. If I tumble over, I may not stop falling, but I’m powerless to prevent it.

My body tightens. As the wave starts rolling, he drags his wet fingers from my pussy. His hands fold around my neck, squeezing just enough to cut my airflow. I need to fight, but I’m too weak. I don’t have enough energy left. I can only lie there with electric shivers running through my clit, and Gabriel’s cock ramming into my ass while white spots start to dance in my vision, and my pulse hammers in my ears. The minute he gives me back the gift of oxygen, of life, I come with a force that shatters my body and mind. Thousands of

volts of pleasure course through me, pulling every muscle, finger, and toe so tight my body is one, great spasm. I must've fallen over that edge, because I'm drifting like a feather, and everything around me turns into a comfortable darkness where the brutal pleasure mercifully stops.

* * *

Gabriel

Fuck. Shit. It's the first time I fucked a woman unconscious. I turn Valentina's limp body on her back and slap her cheeks.

"Wake up, baby."

She doesn't move. Not even her eyelashes flutter. The euphoria of my climax evaporates. Fuck, fuck, fuck. I pick her up in my arms and carry her to the shower. I can barely squeeze inside with her draped over me. I adjust the water to a lukewarm setting and, tipping her head back, let it run over her face and hair.

She frowns and stirs.

"That's my girl. Come on, Valentina."

She gasps and coughs. Her eyelids lift to reveal tiger-eye gemstones staring at me.

"Gabriel."

Relief washes over me, and the tightness in my chest expands marginally. "I'm here, beautiful."

I hold her to me, letting her find her feet without releasing my grip on her waist. Allowing her to pass out wasn't part of my plan. I'm furious with myself. She deserves better than a sadist who pushes her to the limits of pleasure, all the way into fucking fainting. The only way I know to make it right is to give her comfort. Like she took care of me the night I was stabbed, I take care of her, washing her hair and her body from the top of her head to the tip of her toes as best as I can in the confined space. I'm careful with the tender part between her legs and especially her ass. After drying and dressing her, I put her to bed. It tears me up, but I have to go to my own. I'm too

exhausted to risk staying with her. If I fall asleep, I may not wake up before Carly.

I don't want to leave her like this, but I must. For how much longer can I keep up the pretense?

* * *

After my morning workout with Quincy and Rhett, I meet Sonny and Lance, two of my franchise owners, about a dispute over territory. Lance has been casting his nets in Sonny's reservoir, and as much as I hate playing ombudsman, I prefer to step in before we have a war on our hands. It's a glorious day, and we're having our discussion by the pool. My leg has been bothering me more than usual after last night's sexual marathon, and the exercise in the water does me good. I swim a few laps before stretching out on a deckchair in the sun, listening to the squabble between the grown men. When it gets close to one o'clock, I interrupt their bickering.

"No eyes on the housekeeper."

Sonny and Lance exchange a glance, but comprehension dawns on their faces when Valentina exits from the kitchen, a tray loaded with food in her hands, and walks our way. Sonny looks up at the sky while Lance fixes his gaze on his toes.

Her figure is slender in the dark dress. With tendrils that escaped her ponytail, she looks feminine and vulnerable. I want her next to me, in my arms, not at a distance acceptable for a servant, not with a barrier between us that lets me enjoy the sunshine while she's standing there in her black garb, sweating in the sun.

There's not a stitch of resentment in the brilliant smile she gives me. "Can I get you anything to drink?"

"Lemonade." I turn to Sonny and Lance, who are looking anywhere but at Valentina.

"Beer?"

"Please," they say in unison.

"Anything else?"

I'm suddenly bothered that she has to serve men not worthy of kissing her feet. "No."

Her smile is genuine and pure, a ray of beautiful that doesn't fit in the filth of my world.

"Just shout if you need me."

As she walks back to the kitchen, I can't help but stare after the frail set of her narrow shoulders with an emotion that, this time, isn't foreign to me.

Longing.

I'm consumed by longing.

* * *

Valentina

Nothing is worse than the helplessness I felt at the hands of men who bullied and assaulted me. Tiny lifted the tightly sealed lid on those emotions. What Diogo tried to do made me relive those feelings. Those forbidden sentiments, the ones I banished to the depths of my mind, make me shaky with shame and anger. I hate not being able to defend myself. Then there's Gabriel.

The things I feel when I'm with him are too complicated to examine, and I'm too scared of what I'll find. What I need is not to analyze what's happening between me and my keeper—I can't change it, anyway—but to learn to protect myself from people stronger than me. Maybe I could get a weapon and learn how to use it.

I'm sweeping up the leaves on the pavement, fantasizing about my options, when Magda walks up.

"I want all the leather sofas treated with beeswax and polished to a shine today. Carly is complaining her cupboards are full of dust. Unpack everything and wipe down the shelves. Her closet can do with a good reorganization."

"Yes, ma'am."

"I want dinner to be served an hour earlier, tonight. I have an appointment after."

“I’ll make sure it’s ready.”

“Tomorrow you need to start taking down the curtains and wash them. Start with the bedrooms. You can do one room every day.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She checks her watch. “Don’t wait for the afternoon to sweep the pavement. It has to be done every morning at eight. The neighbors must think we’re pigs living in a pigsty.”

“I’ll do it at eight.”

“Are you any good with a sewing machine?”

“I’ve never used one.”

“Better learn. You can adjust the hems of the new curtains I bought for the lounge.”

The delivery van pulls up, thankfully saving me from more tasks she can think up, as I have to check and sign for the produce.

For the rest of the day, I race through my chores, skipping lunch and teatime. It’s hard not to stress over screwing up a task or failing to execute it when your life’s in the balance. I haven’t slept enough in weeks, and I haven’t studied in days. I missed deadlines for two assignments and only got extensions because of my good grades, but no matter how fast I work, there’s always more work and too little time. My mentor warned me if I miss another deadline, I’d get a zero for the assignment. She can’t keep on making exceptions for me.

* * *

During the next two weeks, Gabriel is hardly home. When he comes to me at night, there are lines of strain on his face. I don’t ask about his business, but from the way he takes me, hard and relentless, I know in his own way, he’s as stressed as I am, so I don’t complain. When I’m at Kris’ house, I cook, clean, help in the clinic, and spend as much time with Charlie as I can. At night, I try to catch up with my outstanding projects, but I’m several weeks behind. I sleep between four and five hours per night, returning to my studies when Gabriel

leaves me to go back to his own room. I don't dare confess to him in the fear that he'll take it away from me, and I can't lose my dream. Despite the explosive sex, I'm still property. Nothing but an amusing toy.

Gabriel takes care of me like one would maintain an expensive car or look after a cute pet. Copious amounts of coffee keep me awake and jittery during the day. It's only by sheer willpower that I finish the tasks Magda doles out. The harder she pushes me, the harder I try. The more she demands, the more I deliver.

It's a bright December morning when half a kudu carcass is dropped off in the kitchen.

"A gift from business colleagues who went hunting," she says, regarding the piece of meat with her hands on her hips.

It's not hunting season. "Where does it come from?"

"A friend did some culling on a game farm up north."

"What shall I do with it, ma'am?"

"Marie used to process the meat. The leg is good for biltong. You can use the offcuts for sausage."

I've never chopped up half an antelope, but I'm not going to admit it. When she's gone, I do an internet search and come up with page that gives detailed illustrations on how to process a carcass. It's too heavy for me to handle alone, so when Quincy walks past the kitchen with Bruno, I ask him to help. Together, we use the meat axe to chop the meat into smaller, more manageable pieces. He helps me to set up the electric meat saw and grinder on the island counter. While he's cleaning the blades for me, I order the intestines for the sausage from a local butcher.

"All ready," he says. "Need some help with the grinding?" "I'm good, thank you." I'm proud that I figured it out.

"Just shout." With a wave, he's off.

For the next hour, I cut the bigger pieces into smaller parts, keeping the strips for the biltong aside, while soaking the offcuts in a solution of vinegar and salt for the sausage. It's a

long and time-consuming process. I'm stressed about preparing dinner, but I can't cook in the dirty kitchen. I'll have to disinfect the countertops, first.

My phone beeps while I'm pushing the meat through the blades to make sirloin steaks. Normally, I won't interrupt my work to check my messages, but the beep tone tells me it's from my mentor, Aletta. I flick the switch on the saw and gingerly fish the phone from my apron pocket between my thumb and forefinger. The message hits me like a hammer between the eyes. *Come see me. You failed your cell biology test.*

My hand trembles as I leave the phone on the counter, reading the text over and over. The repercussions are enormous. The test scores are taken into consideration at the end of the year. If I fail one subject, my partial bursary will be revoked. I'd have to drop out. Devastation crashes over me. I want to remain positive, but the realistic side of me brings my mind to a standstill to evaluate the facts and face the truth.

I'm not going to make it.

There's a terrible finality in the notion. It's as if an anchor has been cut from my life, and now that I'm no longer grounded to a dream, I'm floating meaninglessly in a life which only purpose is to keep Charlie alive. Swatting at the moisture building in my eyes, I try to let my pride keep me strong. I won't cry over this, but my heart is not on par with my mind. Fresh tears blur my vision as I switch the saw back on and start feeding the meat through the blades. I work on autopilot, letting the rhythm of my hands and the noise of the machine dull me to a state of unfeeling, automated movements. It liberates my mind to think. Not making my dream come true will hurt my heart, but failing my brother will destroy me, so I make peace with giving up the dream.

The very moment I make the decision, a hot sensation explodes in my right hand and travels up my arm. I look at the slicer and the meat I clutch in my hands, but I don't make immediate sense of the scene. My brain registers the blood squirting from my thumb long before it does the pain.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Valentina

The first digit of my thumb is gone. I cut it just above the metacarpal bone. My mind switches down, and my body goes into automatic functioning mode. I open the cold-water tap and hold my hand under the stream. Water-diluted blood swirls down the drain. The first thing in reach is a clean drying cloth. I turn off the tap and wrap the cloth tightly around my hand to stop the bleeding. I switch off the slicer by the wall and, careful of the blades, go through the reservoir until I find my severed thumb. I feel sick and dizzy, like I'm about to vomit and pass out, but adrenalin keeps me going. After putting the top of my thumb in the mini icebox, I retrieve an icepack from the freezer for my right hand. I grab my purse with my identity card and walk through the house, looking for someone, but only Carly is in her room.

"My dad's out," she says without looking up from her book.

I can't afford an ambulance, and I don't have medical insurance. Private insurance costs a fortune in this country. I'll take my chances with the public hospital, but I need a ride.

I go out the front and find Rhett by the door. "I need a lift to the hospital. Can you please drive me?"

He takes one look at the bloodstained cloth around my hand, and takes the car keys from his pocket. He opens the door for me and helps me into the Mercedes.

"Joburg Gen is the nearest," I say.

He nods and steers the car down the road with a speed that will most likely get us killed before we arrive at the hospital. On the way, he dials Gabriel on voice commands via the handsfree kit and is directed to his voicemail.

“It’s Rhett. I’m driving Valentina to the Joburg Gen. She...” He looks at me.

“Cut my finger,” I fill in for him.

“I’ll keep you posted.” He disconnects and dials another number to instruct a guard to take up his post by the Louw residence front door.

When he hangs up, he shoots me a sidelong glance. “You okay?”

“Yes.” As if on cue, the pain intensifies. I lean back and purse my lips. My hand is throbbing like a giant heart.

The emergency entrance drive is blocked with vehicles, so we go to the underground parking. The state of the place comes as a shock. Garbage litters the surface up to my ankles. We take the lift to the emergency floor, and when we exit, I’m halted by the rows of people sitting on the floor in the hallway, all looking ten times worse than me. Some of them have gaping wounds, and others have invisible ailments that seem no less fatal judging by the lifeless shine of their eyes. The corridor stinks of vomit and urine. I haven’t seen the inside of a hospital since the age of ten when I fell and needed stitches on my head. This makes me never want to come back. We walk past a man with a fracture, the bone sticking through his skin. Another one has a gush in his arm so deep, I can see the tendons. The woman next to him has a broken beer bottle still lodged in her cheek. Violence screams at us as far as we go.

I feel for Rhett’s hand with my good one, clutching his fingers as we make our way through misery and despair to a front desk where a bored-looking nurse looks up.

“What’s your problem, love?”

When I sway, Rhett catches me. “I cut my finger.”

She pushes a clipboard with a form across the counter. “Fill that out.” She scratches her head with a pencil and points

at an area at the far back. “Waiting area’s over there.”

We pass an examination room. A naked man lies on a bare mattress. He’s handcuffed to the iron bedpost. A nurse is washing blood from his legs. The floors are dirty, and the walls are stained. There are no pillows, sheets, or dividers. Our eyes connect. I avert mine quickly, but feel his follow me until we’re out of sight.

All the seats are taken, but I don’t want to risk sitting on the germ-infected floor. Rhett takes the pencil from me and calls out the questions while I tell him what to write.

From the way the cloth is soaking up the blood, the bleeding hasn’t stopped. I’m starting to feel the effect of the blood loss, or maybe it’s delayed shock that’s making me feel like fainting.

“Come on,” Rhett says gently, taking my arm to lead me back to the reception desk when the questionnaire is completed.

The nurse takes the form, but is in conversation with a colleague and doesn’t look up to acknowledge us.

“How long does she have to wait?” Rhett asks tightly.

“What’s that, love?”

He jerks his head toward the long line of people. “How long?”

She chuckles. “See that man over there?” She points at the one with the gash in his arm.

“He’s been waiting for twelve hours.”

He opens his mouth to argue, but there’s no point. These people are in as much need, if not more, than me.

I touch his arm and say softly, “I think we should do it at home.” I won’t be able to hold the severed piece in place and stitch. “Can you help me?”

The nurse’s attention is already on her colleague again. They’re laughing together, sharing a joke.

He nods at my hand. “Show me.”

I unwrap the cloth slowly to reveal my thumb. Blood pumps from the digit as if bubbling from an underground fountain.

Rhett blanches. “Jesus Christ.” He sweeps me up in his arms and starts walking with long strides back in the direction from where we came.

“Rhett! What are you doing?”

“There’s a private clinic in Brixton. It’s only seven kilometers from here.”

“I don’t have medical aid. I can’t afford a private clinic.”

“I’ll pay.” He shifts my weight in his arms. “Don’t worry about the money, okay? I’m not leaving you in this dump for one second longer.” “We can do it at home,” I insist.

He doesn’t say anything, but the hard set of his jaw tells me he disagrees.

Twenty minutes later, we’re going through the same procedure at the Garden Clinic, but the change is remarkable. The building is clean and sterile. A nurse takes charge of me the minute we enter, and no less than ten minutes after Rhett put down the cash for my treatment—which was required upfront—I’m wearing a hospital robe, lying on a gurney outside the operating room. Rhett is pacing the hallway, his figure passing from left to right and back in front of the door window, his phone stuck to his ear. The doctor who introduces himself as the surgeon tells me the good news is that he can try to save my thumb, thanks to my foresight to recover and bring the missing piece. As they start pushing me toward the operating room, the door slams into the wall, and Gabriel rushes into the corridor, his limp heavy and his short hair messy.

“Excuse me,” the doctor exclaims. “You can’t barge in here.”

He doesn’t look at the doctor. He finds my eyes and holds them. “She’s with me.”

“I don’t care if she’s with the queen of England.”

Gabriel's blue eyes grow hard. His face sets into a frightening mask, and when he turns it on the doctor he says in a cold voice, "I'm staying with her."

Gabriel reaches for my uninjured hand, but the doctor cuts him short.

"Get out or I'll have you removed."

His gaze fixes on my covered wound, and like Rhet, he pales.

"Good thing you're not squeamish, huh?" I smile at him, feeling a little high from whatever they injected me with to kill the pain.

"Call security," the doctor tells the nurse.

Gabriel lifts his palms. "Calm the fuck down. I'm leaving."

"I guess no one is eating meat tonight." The thought sends a sudden rush of hysteria through me. "Oh, my God, Gabriel. The dinner." I trip over my own words, trying to get them out. "It was a stupid accident. I didn't pay attention. I'm so sorry. Please don't let Magda kill me."

"Forget about the goddamn dinner," he says harshly. When the doctor shoots him a warning look, he continues in a softer tone, "I'm taking care of everything."

He holds my gaze as the medical staff rush me toward the swinging doors. As I look back at him, standing there by himself, I have this weird notion that he's alone in the world. Suddenly, I long for him, inexplicably and completely. In this scary moment, it's him I want by my side. I reach for him, recognizing the helpless expression on his face, and then the doors shut out his image. Coldness washes over my body and invades my soul as the doctor pushes a mask on my face and tells me to count to ten. I get to three before the memory of Gabriel's face fades.

* * *

The doctor keeps me overnight and discharges me the following day at noon. He tells me the operation went well,

and that he gave me a tetanus shot. A tense and tired-looking Gabriel enters my room with a huge bunch of white lilies when the doctor leaves after examining me.

“Hey, beautiful.” He kisses my lips. “How do you feel?”

“I’m fine, thanks.”

“Come on.” He helps me to get dressed, and even if I protest when a nurse pushes a wheelchair into the room, he lowers me into the chair. “It’s the chair or my arms.” He gives me a smile, but it’s weak. The expression in his eyes is shuttered, making it hard for me to read him.

“I have your prescription from the doctor,” he says. “We’ll stop at the pharmacy before we go.”

We leave armed with antibiotics and painkillers from the hospital pharmacy. On the way home, Gabriel clutches my fingers, and when he shifts gears, he places my bandaged hand on his thigh.

It’s only when we take the off-ramp to Parktown that he speaks. “Don’t ever do that to me again.”

His anger sparks annoyance in me. It’s with difficulty that I keep my temper in check. “It was an accident.”

“You have no idea what you put me through.”

“I can guess. You were worried about your investment.”

He swerves and brings the car to such a quick stop on the shoulder of the road that my body is thrown forward, and the seatbelt cuts into my chest. I utter a shocked cry, but it’s lost in his mouth when he grabs my shoulders and presses our lips together. His kiss is frantic and brutal. His teeth cut my tongue, and the force of his caress bruises my lips. My jaw aches when he finally lets me go. We’re both breathing hard, our chests rising and falling rapidly. I can only stare at him, both turned on and frightened.

“Valentina...” A flash of something tightens his eyes and makes his nostrils flare. “You have no idea...” He drags a hand through his hair, messing it up more.

I swallow away the constriction in my throat that makes it hard to speak. “I said I was sorry.”

He cups my cheek and brushes a thumb under my eye. “Not as sorry as I am.”

In that moment, he lets me see his anguish. I remember what he said about having a heart the night I asked him about his scars. Compassion replaces my irritation.

I place my hand over his. “It’s going to be all right.”

A flicker of a smile plucks at his lips. “I’m supposed to say that, dammit.”

“Then say it.” I dare him with my eyes, urging him to let go of whatever darkness took hold of him.

“It’s going to be fine, Valentina.”

“That’s better.” I bring his palm to my mouth and plant a kiss on it.

“I’m supposed to do that, too,” he says with a hint of sadness.

I wordlessly offer him my palm, but he doesn’t kiss the inside. He draws my hand to his lips and sucks my forefinger into the warm depth of his mouth, biting down gently on the tip. Heat floods my underwear as he swirls his tongue around the digit. Then he pulls my wet finger from his mouth and dries it on his shirt. The kiss he leaves on the top of my hand is the opposite of what he did to my mouth. It’s sweet, tender, and careful. After holding my eyes for another second, he puts my hand in the same position as earlier on his thigh and steers the car back into the traffic. When he’s not shifting gears, he plays with my fingers, rubbing his thumb over my knuckles.

At home, Rhett opens the door and helps me from the car. “If you need help with anything, you only have to say.”

“Thanks for driving me, yesterday.”

Gabriel’s dark expression stills Rhett. I’m not sure what Gabriel’s problem with Rhett is, but the guard immediately excuses himself and leaves.

Inside, Quincy and Carly rush to greet us.

“Show me your hand,” Carly exclaims. “You could’ve told me.”

I hold up my bandaged thumb. “It’s not so bad.”

“Lunch is in the oven,” Quincy says. “We had to improvise, but it’s edible.” He turns to me, looking guilty. “I shouldn’t have left, yesterday. I should’ve stayed and helped.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“Come on, Dad,” Carly hooks her arm around Gabriel’s. “I’m starving.”

He hesitates for a second before he follows her to the dining room, his eyes finding mine over his shoulder.

To be honest, I’m happy for the time alone. I haven’t dealt with the shock, yet, and I want solitude to process what happened. Oscar greets me by the entrance to the kitchen, rubbing his soft body against my legs.

“Hey, baby.” I take a moment to pet him and check that he has food.

There’s no place to put the enormous bouquet of flowers in my room, so I borrow a vase from the crystal cupboard and leave them on the counter in the kitchen. Thankfully, Quincy left the kitchen tidy. I’m prohibited from using my hand or working for a week, but I won’t allow that to give Magda a reason to kill me. Or Charlie. She’s only biding her time, waiting for the right excuse. Packing the dishwasher and doing a few minor chores, I find that I cope well enough with one hand, but Magda grudgingly tells me to take the rest of the day off. I use that time to rest, catching up on sleep.

Much later, Gabriel comes to my room. He covers every inch of my skin in kisses and makes love to me gently. When he holds me afterward, I allow the warmth of his arms to soothe me. Uninvited tears flow over my cheeks. The grief of giving up my studies and the shock of the accident come tumbling down on me, pushing me under a wave of sorrow that makes it hard to breathe. Sobs wrack my shoulders as I cling to him, holding onto the man who took my freedom. In

what feels like my darkest hour, he's all I have. It's so damn screwed up. How much more can I handle before Gabriel completely destroys me?

He pulls me into his lap and kisses the top of my head. "Hush, beautiful."

"Gabriel." I bury my face in his neck, inhaling the spicy fragrance of his skin. "Set me free, I beg you."

He rests his chin on my head and inhales slowly. "You may as well ask me to cut off my arm."

When I fall asleep a long time later, I dream that I'm standing on one end of a hospital corridor and Gabriel on the other. Between us, there are rows of people with horrendous injuries, the number of patients too big to count. I'm pushing my way through the bodies, trying to reach him, but when I get to the other side, he's gone. I wake up in a fit of pain, sweating, and alone in my bed. I take a painkiller and count a hundred sheep ten times before I drift off again.

* * *

Gabriel

The first thing I do the following morning, is have the meat saw driven to the dump. The second is to take out medical insurance for Valentina. As long as I'm alive, I'll cover her bills, but I may not live as long as I'd like, especially not with my kind of business. I almost fired Rhett for his stupidity of taking her to the goddamn Joburg Gen. The only thing that saved his skin is that I couldn't punish him for my negligence. I should've thought about Valentina's health the minute she crossed my doorstep. I should've informed my staff in the case of an emergency, she's to be treated like any member of the family. All sorts of bad things could've happened. She could've bled to death. She could've caught an infection. With all the filth and blood around the Joburg Gen, she could've contracted AIDS. To think she considered sewing back her own thumb. That she didn't panic gives me a new level of respect for her. It's one thing to stitch me back together, but quite another to pick your thumb off the floor and not raise the roof in hysterics.

She's managing with one hand, like she always does, but this isn't what I want for her. She's been in my house for less than a quarter of a year, and my perfect doll is already broken. I threatened her with the whip if she doesn't rest. Magda isn't happy with the turn of events, but she only raises the issue when we're alone in the car on our way to one of the loan offices.

"Why did you do it?"

I glance at her from over the rim of my sunglasses. "Do what?"

"Pay Valentina's hospital bill."

"Jesus, Magda, did you expect me to sit back and let her lose her thumb? Anyway, Rhett paid for it. I only reimbursed him."

"You're investing in dead meat."

"We've been through this enough times already."

"When are you going to let go?"

"When I'm ready."

"When will that be?"

I gave her a hard look. "When I'm damn well ready and not a second before."

"I've been lenient with you, but my patience is wearing thin. Don't make me choose a date."

"I'll choose a date," I say evasively, placating her for now. Maneuvering the car down the steep hill into Braamfontein, I ask the question that, for the last few weeks, has been foremost on my mind. "Why do you want her dead?"

She blinks and looks away. "I told you, to make an example out of her."

"Why her?" "Why not?"

"If it's just about the money, I'll settle her debt."

She turns in her seat. "You're willing to buy that little slut?"

Anger spurts into my veins, setting my heart off at a dangerous beat. “She’s anything but a slut.”

She gives a cynical snort. “Maybe you prefer a different term, but she’s your fuck toy, and in my opinion that makes her a slut.”

“Easy, Magda,” I say evenly. “You’re pushing me too far.”

“Gabriel,” her voice takes on a softer tone, “you can never trust her. If you lower your guard, she’ll stab a knife in your back or steal you blind.”

I can’t say for sure about the knife in my back. I’m sure Valentina has wished me dead plenty of times. What I do know is that she’s not a thief.

“She’s been managing the food budget since Marie’s stroke, and she’s saving us a lot of money.”

“That doesn’t say anything.”

“It says she’s trustworthy where money’s concerned. Don’t think I’m unaware of the money Marie pocketed for herself with the kickback she got from the suppliers.”

“It’s small money.”

“Doesn’t change the principle. Stealing is stealing, which makes Marie a thief. Yet, you never lashed out at her.”

“That’s different. Marie is practically part of the family. Her mother worked for my mother. Your fuck doll is neither family nor loyal. I don’t care how much money she’s saving us, her time’s running out.” “*Let it go.*”

At the cold deliberation in my tone, she turns her head to look through the window.

“Anyway, I’m not interested in selling her. You won’t settle her debt.”

I let it slide, making an effort to calm myself. “I called our old cleaning service company.

They’ll stand in until next week.”

My mother scoots up straighter. “You did what?”

“Valentina is booked off. You know that.”

“This is the perfect opportunity to let her fail.”

I clench my jaw. “Don’t make me repeat myself.”

“Fine.” She waves a hand in the air. “Treat her like a princess and wrap her in cotton wool.

It’ll make her fall so much harder.”

My fingers tighten on the wheel. I feel like leaning over my mother, opening her door, and shoving her out of my car and my life. We keep on clashing heads over this, and if she can’t accept that Valentina is a part of our lives for good, it’s going to get ugly.

* * *

The week drags on with Valentina being withdrawn and quiet, keeping to her room. At least she has time to rest and maybe study. She still hasn’t told me about her studies. I’m not sure if she’s hiding something else from me, or if it’s the after-effect of the anesthesia that’s giving her the blues, but she’s not herself. I suppose it’s normal, given what she’s been through. All I can do is give her my support and care until she’s back in the kitchen in her black dress. I’m not happy about it, but I haven’t found a solution to the dilemma, yet, and Magda won’t budge.

On top of my worry about Valentina, I need to raise a difficult issue with Carly. Carly doesn’t normally eat in the morning, but since Magda isn’t present today, I ask my daughter to have breakfast with me so we can speak in private.

I wait until Valentina has left us after serving bran muffins before I say, “I know you love your mother and our divorce was tough on you. We didn’t discuss it much when the breakup happened. I think it’s important that you have someone neutral to talk to.”

She stares at me with wide eyes. “It’s a bit late for that.”

“It’s never too late.”

“It won’t help.” She hides her face behind her hair.

“You can’t say unless you’ve tried.”

She pushes the fruit around on her plate.

“Stop hiding behind your hair and look at me.”

She lifts her head, her eyes throwing daggers at me. “There’s only one thing that’ll help, and that’s if you and mom get back together.”

I sigh deeply. “It’s not going to happen. You have to accept it.”

She bangs her fork down on her plate. “Why not? Why can’t you live together like a normal couple?”

“Your mother and I, we don’t love each other any more. That doesn’t mean we don’t love you.”

“Bullshit.” She pushes her chair back and jumps to her feet. “You don’t know the meaning of the word.”

Grabbing her bag, she sprints for the door.

“Carly!”

I want to order her to come back and finish her breakfast, but my common sense tells me to give her space until she has cooled down. Dwelling on my parental problems, I finish my breakfast alone, even if I no longer have an appetite.

Valentina’s voice pulls me to the present. “Can I clear the plates?”

The new melancholy that has invaded her makes her big, sad eyes more haunting than ever. I gather my plate and glass to carry it to the kitchen, and return with the tray while Valentina takes the rest. Knowing how proud she is, I try to make things easier for her without making it obvious. While I’m loading my plate in the dishwasher, I notice that she scoops Carly’s untouched muffin from the plate, carefully wrapping it in a paper napkin. The rest of my half-eaten muffin she packs into an ice cream container half-full with bones, bits of meat, and cooked vegetables, which she keeps in the staff fridge. I’ve never seen her clear the table before, but it’s obvious she’s in the habit of collecting the left overs. What does she do with the food that’s meant for the compost bin?

My morning conference call is due, so I don't give it further thought, but leave the kitchen with a feeling I can't place. It's as if my time with both Carly and Valentina is running out. I don't like it. The last time I felt like this was right before I tripped a wire and was left for dead with half of my face blown to pieces.

* * *

I time my meetings so that I'm free during Valentina's lunch breaks to check on her. Before going outside, I spend a few undisturbed minutes observing her through the kitchen window. I love looking at her like this, when her guard is down. The perverseness in me likes to invade her privacy, stealing a part of her I'll otherwise never have. I came to accept that Valentina will never be one hundred percent open with me. Our forced relationship isn't the kind that nurtures an unconditional sharing of the soul.

As always, she's sitting on the low wall by the pool. Bruno is lying next to her on the grass, his head on his paws, staring up at her with dotting eyes. Her hands are cupped around an object, like the petals that protect the stigma of a flower. She opens them to reveal something round and white. What is she holding? It looks like a paper napkin. Folding the napkin open carefully, she breaks the muffin that's inside in two, and feeds one half to Bruno while she eats the other. The dog gobbles it up in one gulp, and wags his tail optimistically, watching to see if more is coming. She eats slowly, like a person who tastes every bite.

Everything inside of me slams to a standstill. What I'm witnessing is an ordinary scene of a woman nourishing her body, but it shatters me. I've seen many atrocious deeds and tortures that will make most grown men crumble, but *this*—Valentina eating our leftover food—this does something to me not even a killing does. I'll double her allowance and buy her more food. I'll put her brother in a fancy institute. I'll do anything it takes for her to never have to eat the crumbs from someone else's table again. That bursary better come through soon. I go back to my study and call my CFO, who ensures me

it's a matter of days now. Some red tape at the university is slowing down the process.

When I go to her that night, I decide to broach the subject. I strip her naked and drive my cock into her, keeping us both on a precipice of pleasure. I drag it out until neither of us can tolerate it any longer.

Her nails dig into my shoulders. "Gabriel, please." She rocks her hips against mine, trying to create more friction.

I pull out almost completely and still my movements. "Who do you belong to?"

She shivers when I press my thumb on her clit. "You."

"Who takes care of you?"

"You."

"How do I take care of you?"

"However you like."

"Damn right. How the hell ever I like." Her back arches when I pinch her nipple. "Who makes you come?" I shove back into her.

"You," she cries on a gasp.

"Who dresses you?"

"You."

I move again in all earnest. "Who feeds you?" "Ah, God, Gabriel! You."

"That's right, beautiful." I kiss her lips. "Me."

I slam our bodies together so hard I have to cup her head to prevent it from hitting the wall.

She cries my name as she comes with a violent spasm, her pussy sucking me deeper and milking me dry. There's nothing more satisfying than coming inside her. I empty my body in hers, making her take every drop, but I don't pull out. Her cheeks are flushed, and her hair sticks to her damp forehead.

I frame her face between my hands. "Anything you need, you've got it. You only have to say the word. Understand?"

She closes her eyes.

“Look at me, Valentina.”

When she opens them again, they’re moist with tears. “Why are you doing this? It’s not part of our deal.”

I kiss each eyelid and then her nose. “Because I’m everything you need.”

The sadness in her gaze intensifies, fueling my fear, which in terms spurs my anger. “Say it.”

She licks her lips, but doesn’t reply.

I wrap my fingers around her neck and squeeze. “Say it, damn you.”

Her body tenses, but she doesn’t fight my hold. Instead, her shoulders sag as she slowly lets out a breath. “Yes, Gabriel. You are my everything.”

Heated satisfaction warms my balls, spreading all the way up my spine. My cock grows hard inside her again. I have her in every way I want, but I still need her in so many ways. Rising on my knees, I hook her legs over my shoulders and use my cum to lubricate her ass. She screams when I enter her there, but with my fingers in her pussy and on her clit, she quickly gives me the moans of ecstasy I’m after. Long after she had her second orgasm, I’m still punishing myself with new pleasure. It takes a long time before my second release. With her, I can go all night, but she needs her rest, so I gather her body against mine and hold her until she falls asleep.

* * *

Valentina

My mother used to say if something bad happens, celebrate something positive. That way, you’ll never become depressed. Maybe that’s how she survived when my dad died and we lost everything. She never left the house without red Estee Lauder lipstick.

“If you’re sad, Valentina,” she used to say, “put on your red lipstick.”

I fish the tube I ordered with my supplies from my bag and apply the lipstick in the mirror. The red stands out on my tanned skin. I scrunch my curls around my face, letting their natural glossiness stand out. I’m wearing the pink T-shirt, jeans, and flats from the Sandton boutique. On the outside, I look pretty. No one will know how broken I am on the inside. Maybe, one day, I’ll be able to just look at the pretty and forget that I’ve been a whore to the most dangerous killer in the city.

When I say goodbye to Gabriel for the weekend, he looks at me like he may object to me leaving the house with the makeup on my face, but I’m not his daughter, and this is *my* time.

He swallows as he studies me, jiggling the keys in his pocket. “I’ll drive you.”

I don’t argue anymore. It’s pointless. On the way, I ask him to stop at the corner bakery to pick up a Black Forest Cake. I could’ve baked it for half the price, but that’s not the point. I’ve never purchased a cake in my life. I hold the fancy shop cake in its plastic container on my lap, the black cherries shiny with sugary syrup on top of the whipped cream.

Gabriel glances at the cake and then at me. “Whose birthday is it? I know it’s not yours.” “No one.” I look from the window at the passing cars.

“What’s the occasion?”

“Nothing.”

He purses his lips, but doesn’t continue the interrogation. Near Rocky Street, I ask him to stop again so I can feed the hungry dogs. The minute they see me, they come running. Gabriel leans against the car with his ankles crossed, watching me as I distribute the food between them. I wipe the plastic container out with a paper towel, and wrap it in a plastic bag to wash later. A shadow of a smile plays on his lips as I get back to the car.

“What?”

He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. “You’re every kind of good.”

“No, I’m not.”

“To me, you are.”

He doesn’t give me a chance to reply. He opens the door and helps me inside.

When he drops me off across the road from Kris’ place, I wait until his car turns the corner before I head over to the house. Charlie nearly knocks me off my feet as I enter through the kitchen door.

“Hey.” I laugh and deposit the cake on the counter. “How are you?” I take him into a big hug. There’s more meat on his bones and a tube around his middle.

“Ca–cake!”

“It’s for after dinner.” I squeeze his shoulders and sit down next to him on the couch, switching off the television.

We play Chinese Checkers until Kris locks up the practice. As habitual, I cook, and she gets to take a much-needed break after she spends the first ten minutes freaking out about my thumb. When Charlie is seated with a big slice of cake in front of his favorite cartoon, she takes the chair opposite me at the kitchen table.

“What’s with the cake?” she asks through the motion of chewing.

“We’re celebrating.”

“We are?”

“Yep.” I lick the chocolate filling off my spoon.

“Can you be a little less secretive?”

I shrug. “We’re celebrating that I have more free time and money. I can now pay you proper board for Charlie.”

She makes big eyes at me. “Did he give you a pay rise? More off-time?” I take a big bite. My mouth is too full to

answer.

“Well?”

I wipe the cream from the corner of my mouth with my good thumb and lick it clean. “Not exactly.”

“Val.” Kris pushes her plate away and folds her arms on the table. “What’s going on?”

“I dropped out of uni.”

I’m saying it like I just told her it’s hot today, hoping she’ll let it go, but I already know better.

“Like in, quit your studies?” she exclaims.

Charlie looks up from the television.

“Shh.” I give her my best angry frown. “You’ll make him think something’s wrong.”

“Something *is* wrong.”

“Kris.”

“Why?”

“Look at it this way, I don’t have the burden of paying a huge school bill any longer, or worries about exams, and spending late nights studying anatomy.”

She dips her head, searching for my eyes. “Why?”

I sigh. “The cook had a stroke. I took over her duties.”

“They’re going to hire another cook, right? You can’t give up. Val, you’ve completed more than half of the course!”

“I can’t keep up the job and the studies. It’s too much.”

Her lips thin. “You’re letting them win.”

“I don’t have a choice,” I say through gritted teeth. “I work until dinner is served and the kitchen is clean, which means I’m lucky if I get off at ten. God, I’m lucky if I go to bed by midnight, and I’m up at four every morning.” I don’t say that Gabriel occupies another hour or more of my day, fucking me senseless and giving me orgasms until I pass out.

Emotions play on her face. Thank God she doesn't say something meaningless like she's sorry.

"It's for Charlie." I lower my voice. "Nothing will matter anyway if he's dead. He's all

I've got."

She covers my hand with hers. It is a big, strong hand with cat scratches and dog bite marks, and a calloused skin that tells its own story. "You've got me, babes."

Warmth spreads through my chest, making tears build at the back of my eyes. "Thank you."

"You can still work here. I mean, after..."

"I know." After nine years, I'm not sure I'll still have the stomach for this city. "Eat your cake. I paid a lot of money for it."

"You better hide the rest or Charlie will devour it in the night."

Worry nags at me. "He's picking up weight."

"Sorry. I'm not here much, I'm afraid, or I would've taken him out for exercise."

"I have an idea."

"Uh-uh. When you get that light bulb moment look, I get worried."

I prop my foot on the seat of my chair, hugging my knee. "He can walk the dogs." "You mean *them*?" She throws her thumb at the door adjoining to the clinic.

"Yes! He crosses the road by himself, right? We can try with one dog first and see how it goes. I can go with him tomorrow."

"I suppose it can't do harm."

"It'll be good for him to get out more, breathe in some fresh air."

She snorts. "What fresh air? In case you haven't noticed, this is Joburg."

I'm not having my spirits dampened, not tonight. "Charlie and I'll do the first doggie walk together."

"You're a good sister, Val. Charlie's lucky to have you."

"No, I'm lucky to have him."

I'm still raw about my studies, but there's a reason I'm doing this. The reason is a beautiful, innocent boy trapped in the body of a man who sits on Kris' couch with a huge smile on his face. All it takes to make Charlie happy is a piece of cake. I should learn from him.

* * *

Gabriel

The therapist knocks on my door at ten sharp, as agreed. Dorothy Botha is a short, attractive woman in her late forties. She's wearing tight jeans and a stretch shirt, not the attire I imagined for a psychiatrist. At the rate I'm paying for the house call, I expected her to show up in Dior or Gucci.

She shakes my hand, and offers a smile. "Mr. Louw."

"Call me Gabriel. Thank you for meeting Carly at home. It's more comfortable for her in her own environment." And there's less chance for one of our enemies to discover my daughter has instability issues. They'll use anything they can against me.

I show her to the reading room where Carly sits on the couch, her legs pulled up under her. My daughter gives me a cutting look when we enter and doesn't offer Dorothy a greeting. Every part of her body languages says she's not happy about spending her Sunday morning with a shrink.

"Carly, this is Mrs. Botha. Say hi." "Say hi," Carly parrots.

I'm about to lose my cool and give her a lecture about proper manners, but Dorothy lays her hand on my arm.

"You can call me Dorothy." She takes the chair opposite Carly and looks up at me expectantly.

I get it. She wants me to leave. "Coffee, tea?" "No, thank you." She's pleasant, but firm.

“All right, then.” I close the door, hoping to God Dorothy will accomplish what neither me nor Sylvia is able to do—get Carly to open up.

While the women are talking, or *hopefully* talking, I clear the table from our late breakfast, and feed Oscar. He’s got a new brand of food, the same as Bruno. With the price on the tag, they must put gold flakes in the kibbles. The brand’s worth its weight in gold, though, because Bruno’s allergies have disappeared, and Oscar’s coat is thick and glossy. Bruno’s food is delivered to our door from our local vet. I pay the bill. No cat food is included. The specialty food isn’t available at supermarkets. If Valentina doesn’t order it with our daily groceries, where does it come from?

Magda walks into the kitchen, dressed up in her black and white Chanel suit. “Where’s

Carly? I want to invite her for lunch.”

I cross my arms, and lean on the counter. “Where?”

“The McKenzies.”

My back immediately turns rigid. “Not interested.”

“Come on, Gabriel.” She props her clutch bag on her hip. “Carly’s never going to take your place. She hasn’t got it in her. Our only chance is finding her the right husband.”

“I said no.”

She advances two steps, stopping short of me. “Do you have a cleverer idea? What if something happens to you? Or me? Who’s going to take over our business? Not that golddigging, ex-wife of yours. Word’s going around she’s got her sights set on Francois. If she marries him and we can’t provide a successor, that slimy rat will take over as Carly’s stepdad. Is that what you want?”

Acid burns my mouth. Francois is a pretty boy five years Sylvia’s junior, but that’s not what’s bothering me. It’s the idea of him playing stepdad to Carly that I can’t digest.

“Answer me. Is that what you want?”

“Is that all you care about, finding a successor for the business? What about Carly’s happiness?”

“Happiness?” She laughs. “Carly is my granddaughter, but by God, she’s a spoiled child. You got her used to this.” She waves her arms around the room. “You give her everything her heart desires. You think she’s going to ever settle for less? I don’t think so.”

“Don’t project your sentiments on Carly.”

“Oh, money is as important to her as it is to me. Let’s face it, even if she’s not a leader, she’s a Louw. She’ll do her duty for our name.”

“Don’t you dare treat her like a pawn in your business. Carly’s not going to lead the life I live.”

“The life *you* live? You want to live the life of one of our debtors? Want to see what it’s like on the poor side of the fence? Do you know what happens to you and your daughter at night when you don’t have enough money for an alarm system that criminals can’t break through?”

“I know what happens. I’ve seen it.”

“You haven’t *felt* it. Believe me, you don’t want to live any other life than this life.” She scrutinizes me. “You’re getting soft, Gabriel. It’s that girl, isn’t it?”

My hackles rise. “She’s got nothing to do with this. Valentina or no Valentina, I’ll never marry Carly off to Benjamin McKenzie.”

“I hope for your sake you’re growing tired of fucking your toy.”

Every muscle in my body tenses. My injured leg protests against the strain. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“A cat only plays with a mouse for so long before he goes for the kill. Why isn’t she dead, yet?”

My heart drops like an ax splitting wood. “I’m not ready.”

“I’ve been patient with you. I gave you the toy you so badly wanted. We made a deal. Now

I'm giving you a direct order. Kill her, or I'll do it for you."

I almost jump on her. I'm a hairbreadth away from her face before I stop myself. "You'll do nothing for me, do you hear me?"

"You have one last chance. Make it sooner than later." She smiles sweetly. "You're not twelve any more. Don't make me shoot you in the foot."

My vision goes blurry. I'm about to strangle my own mother in our kitchen. The only thing that stops me from reaching for her scrawny, white, wrinkled neck, is Carly's figure that appears in the doorframe.

There's a chill in her voice. "We're done."

"I'm going out for lunch, Carly dear. Why don't you join me?"

"Magda is having lunch at the McKenzies," I say, knowing how much Carly hates Benjamin.

"No thanks, Gran. I've got homework." She trots down the hallway, pretending I don't exist.

When Carly is out of earshot, I narrow my eyes. "Let me handle my own affairs and leave Carly out of the business." Giving my mother my back, I walk from the room, feeling the tension in my leg.

"Softness will get you killed, Gabriel," she calls after me.

Dorothy waits in the reading room.

I close the door and take a seat. "How did it go?"

She wipes her fingers over her brow. "She's tough to talk to. Of course, I need to win her trust first." She looks at me from under her lashes. "I pick up a need for approval and acceptance.

Are you spending enough time with her?"

"Not as much as I'd like."

"Busy job?"

“It’s not that. Carly would rather spend time with her friends than her father.”

“It’s normal. Try to strengthen her self-esteem by complimenting her for homework well done or good deeds, anything positive, but be authentic. Make sure she knows you’re noticing her and taking an interest in her life.”

“I assure you, I am.”

“I don’t doubt that, or I wouldn’t be here. Just make sure you show her as well as tell her. It will help, of course, if I can have a joint session with you and your ex-wife to agree on a consistent strategy that will reinforce your daughter’s self-image.”

“I’m afraid you won’t find much cooperation from my ex-wife.”

“Ah, well.” She wipes her hands on her thighs and straightens. “Let’s see how it goes after a couple of sessions. Try to maintain the status quo at home. Don’t introduce any new or stressful situations if you can avoid it, at least not for a while.”

“Such as?”

“A stepmom.”

“Carly’s worried about that?”

“She mentioned it. I know this is a personal question, but are you seeing anyone, maybe a lady friend your daughter doesn’t get on with?” “No.” Not that Carly knows of, at least.

“Then Carly’s fear is unfounded. It’s not uncommon for children to feel lost after a divorce. Carly’s frightened of losing you or her mother to someone else. Reassure her of your affection whenever you can.”

“Of course.”

“I’ll see you next week, same time.”

“I’ll walk you to the door.”

Even as I speak, my mind is drifting to a reoccurring thought. How will Carly react if she ever finds out about

Valentina?

* * *

Valentina

Regret is not a conducive sentiment. Still, I can't help from feeling it when I read the letter addressed to me that Gabriel brings to the kitchen on Monday morning. Reading it with my back to him, I curl my fingers in a fist until my nails cut into my skin. I want to cry, but he's hovering at the coffee machine.

"Good news?"

I glance at him from over my shoulder. He's dressed in a dark suit with a blue shirt and yellow tie. He makes the ensemble look perfect. The tailored pants stretch over his narrow hips, which emphasizes the broadness of his chest. His unique fragrance beckons me, but I need to be alone to deal with the news.

I shrug.

"All right." He says it like a threat, making me understand he'll let me get away with my disobedience of not giving him a reply for now, but maybe not later.

I hold my breath until he has left the room. Only when I'm alone do I allow the emotions to explode inside of me. I grab the edges of the counter so hard my arms shake from the strain. The letter crumples in my fist. I scrunch it up until it's a tiny ball. Of all the sick jokes in the world, this one must have the best timing. I bang my fists on the counter, setting the bowls and knives and spoons clanging. For all of three seconds, I allow myself every single destructive emotion that lances into my heart, and then I lift the lid of the trashcan and dump the letter informing me of my all-inclusive scholarship inside. When the lid falls back with a clang, something inside of me ceases to exist. What's left is the hollow echo of a dream and nothing more than the will to survive.

* * *

Gabriel

The letter that arrived from the university this morning should've made Valentina ecstatic. There's a change in her I don't understand. After doing my morning rounds at our franchises in town, I head to her friend's place where Charlie lives. The woman waiting in reception with a Miniature Doberman shrinks back when she looks up at my face. Walking past her with practiced ignorance, I venture to the food section and lift my sunglasses to read the labels. I pull a bag of the urinary diet brand Valentina bought for Oscar from the shelf and carry it to the till. A few minutes pass before a peroxide blonde in a white overcoat exits. Hard lines mar her weathered face, and her fingernails are broken. Her eyes give away nothing as she assesses me.

They flitter from me to the bag of food standing on the counter.

"Can I help you?"

"Is this the best brand you've got?"

"By far."

I lean an elbow on the counter and check out the board with the rates for neutering and vaccinations. "My housekeeper buys it for my cat. I don't know the brand, but I thought I'd get the same."

Her eyes flare for the briefest of seconds before she narrows them. "Your housekeeper is a clever girl."

"She sure is, but she should've told me she's paying for the food out of her own pocket."

"Maybe she couldn't, because she knows you don't care much for your cat."

The lady with the Doberman is watching us, her head bobbing between the vet and me.

"It's true. I don't care for the hair that he sheds in my house or the fact that he tears my curtains to pieces, but my housekeeper seems to like him, so here's the deal. I'll open an account and send a driver once a month to collect the food." I point at the large breed dog food of the same brand. "You can throw in a couple of bags of that, as well."

It almost looks as if she's going to refuse me, but the state of her waiting room tells me she needs the business. After a moment of measuring me, she says, "I'll take down your details."

She writes my address and phone number down in a book. In this day and age, nobody uses a book, not even my most unsophisticated loan sharks. She has a patient waiting, and me taking a chunk of her consultation time. What she needs is a computer and an assistant. No wonder she's operating in a run-down building, charging fees lower than the going rate.

I tap my fingers on the countertop as she scribbles down my order. "You should go electronic."

She lifts her head to give me a cutting look. "I'll upgrade when I can afford it."

I don't blame her for hating me. What makes her different than the rest of the world? In any event, I'm not out to win anyone's love. I can forget about getting information on Valentina's emotional state of late from this woman. She won't give me a glass of water if I'm dying.

She slams the book closed. "Are we done?"

I let the sunglasses fall back over my eyes. "For now."

Saluting her, I take the food and walk to the door. The Doberman whines as I pass her owner who leans as far away from me as she can without falling out of her chair.

* * *

Valentina

This lasagna can't flop. I'm so engrossed in letting the white sauce thicken without forming lumps that I don't notice Rhett until he's right next to me. Startled, I drop the whisk. It bounces on the stovetop, rolls off the edge, and hits the ground. It's the first time he's set foot in the kitchen since I arrived. He bends down to retrieve the whisk and rinses it under the tap before handing it back to me.

"Thank you." I use my left hand to stir the sauce.

He motions at the bandage on my thumb. “How’s the hand?”

“Good, thank you.”

He gives a wry smile. “I didn’t get a chance to apologize for driving you to the Joburg

Gen. If I had any idea the place was that bad, I would’ve gone directly to the clinic.”

“You did what I asked.”

“I wasn’t thinking straight. I saw the blood and kind of blanked out.”

I can’t help but smile. “You? Seriously?”

He lifts his palms in a gesture of surrender. “It wasn’t the blood as much as it was *you*. I thought Gabriel was going to kill me.”

“For what?”

“It happened on my shift.”

“It wasn’t your fault.”

“Wouldn’t have mattered. I was the messenger.”

I stop stirring to look at him. “I’m sorry if I got you into trouble.”

He grins. “Not as much trouble as you got yourself into. No more kitchen accidents, okay?”

“I’ll do my best.” I return my attention to the sauce.

He leans on the counter and crosses his ankles. “I was thinking of getting you a puppy.”

“A puppy?”

“I already cleared it with Gabriel.” He shifts his weight around. “I can get you one of those fluffy dogs women like. A Maltese Poodle or something.”

“I don’t want a dog.”

He looks disappointed. “Why not?”

“I’ve lost enough. I don’t want to care about another dog.”

He uncrosses his ankles and crosses his arms, not meeting my eyes.

When he doesn’t speak, but doesn’t leave either, I remove the sauce from the heat, and turn to face him squarely. “Why did you shoot Puff, Rhett?”

His chest expands, as if he’s taking a breath, and when he lifts his gaze again, he regards me with a level stare. “I didn’t want to leave the dog to fend for himself on the streets.” “What?”

“I’ve seen enough of dogs to know that mongrel wasn’t going to make it on his own.

Leaving him would’ve meant a drawn-out, cruel death of starvation.”

“Leaving him?”

His voice takes on a quiet tone. “When we broke into your flat that morning, it was with explicit orders.”

The blood drains from my head, leaving me with a fuzzy feeling. Rhett was certain we weren’t going to get out alive, neither Charlie nor me. Oh, my God. Gabriel wasn’t there just for Charlie. He was going to kill us both. I put the information away in the back of my mind to deal with later. Alone.

“I don’t know why Gabriel changed his mind, but I can assure you, it’s never happened before.”

My laugh is forced. “My mother used to say I have a guardian angel. Maybe she was right.”

“If it’ll make you feel better, Gabriel fucked me up good for killing your dog.”

“That day you came out of the gym with a broken nose.”

“Yep. Look, I’ll sleep a whole lot better if you’ll let me get you that dog.”

The look he gives me is so remorseful that my compassion wins over my vengeance over Puff. Logically, I understand why he did it. It doesn’t make it right or better, but I’m not in a

position to deny anyone redemption. I'm still chasing after absolution for what happened to Charlie. Wiping my hands on my apron, I consider his proposal. Another living being will only make me more vulnerable than what I already am, because that's what caring for someone or something does.

"I don't want a dog. I want you to train me."

He looks at me like I lost my mind. "What?"

"Teach me self-defense. We can practice in the gym."

"Gabriel will kill me."

"Not if he doesn't know. We can do it when he's out."

"It's a crazy idea, Valentina."

"Is it? Have you ever stood helpless while men took the money you busted your ass for?"

Have you ever been held down and violated, unable to do a goddamn thing about it?" He averts his eyes, unable to hold mine.

"Please, Rhett. I'm not going to use it against anyone in this house. I'm not stupid. I just don't want to feel helpless any longer."

He swallows. "Ask me anything else. If Gabriel finds out—"

"He won't, not unless you tell him."

He looks at me again, a war waging in his eyes. Finally, it's his guilt that wins out. "Fine, but not a word to anyone, not even Quincy."

"All right."

He straightens from the counter, but his shoulders sag. "I'll let you know when the coast is clear."

"Thank you."

"Consider us even." There's a hint of apprehension and even fear in his expression as he walks from the room.

* * *

Gabriel

The report from Anton only confirms what I already know. No one knows anything about Valentina's rape. I drop the pen on my desk and rub my tired eyes. I'm not surprised Marvin didn't go to the police. His family was shamed. The way he would've dealt with the crime was to avenge his daughter's stolen innocence by killing the man responsible. Since he died in the same year she was assaulted, I'm not sure he got around to it. Is that why Lambert abandoned his promised fiancée? Because she was spoiled goods? Find the bastard who raped her I will, but for now I have a bigger priority—Magda's threat.

Never underestimate Magda. I know what she's capable of better than anyone. If I don't kill Valentina, she *will* do it, and as punishment for my disobedience she'll do it in a way that will hurt me. I'm not shy about my habits. My mother knows I fuck like some people take up a hobby. She knows I'm territorial and the most possessive bastard on the face of the earth. She knows me well enough to understand that the thought of another man's hands on Valentina will drive me to my knees, especially after what I did to Diogo. Valentina's death is a place I can't even go. If Magda has to finish the job for me, Valentina will most likely suffer gang rape followed by a horrendous and slow death of torture. I have to find a way to keep her, but there's nowhere I can hide her where Magda's network of business associates won't find her. And then there's Charlie. What do I do with him? Where do I keep him safe? I made a deal with Valentina and, knowing how much Charlie means to her, this is one I intend to honor. Every problem has a solution. I just have to look hard enough.

Seeing that I have precious little time, I should be searching for a way to keep my beautiful toy, not slamming my study door, and stalking the hallway like a crazed man, my steps taking me where they always do, Valentina's room. It's late. Magda and Carly have long since gone to bed, but I still keep a watchful eye.

Just a few minutes. I need a break to clear my mind. Chasing improbable solutions to escape Magda's promise has

sent me in circles like a dog chasing his own tail. I need to hold her, see her, taste her, breathe her, to calm the clawing fear of losing her.

When I walk into her bedroom, she steps from the bathroom, her hair wet and her body damp. She stops in the doorway. The bandage is dry. Good. The last thing I want is more worry. I need her too much.

For a few seconds, we have a stare-down, each one of us waiting for the other to make a move. There are a million things I can do with her. I should punish her for this morning's obstinance when she gave me the cold shoulder, but I won't touch her like that when she's injured. I haven't yet made up my mind when she closes the distance between us, placing her delicate body in front of mine like a vulnerable white pawn in the path of the black stallion's hooves. The position is a physical reminder of the difference in power between us. I can throw her on the bed and eat her pussy from the inside out, I can fuck every hole in her body, or kiss her until she can't breathe. She's mine to do with as I please. I overcompensated for my looks by becoming a master of physical pleasure. I can't give her a pretty face, but I can make her scream with orgasms until there's not a breath of air left in her lungs.

Her hands reach for my shirt. I'm curious. Is she going to undress me? She grips the edges of the fabric above the first button and yanks them apart. Fuck dammit. There's a tearing sound and buttons flying everywhere. She goes up on her toes to push the shirt over my shoulders, but the sleeves get stuck on my upper arms. Abandoning her efforts with the shirt, she focuses on my belt instead, her fingers fumbling with the buckle.

My heart is beating like the hooves of that dark horse she unleashed, and I'm frightened that the beast will crush her when he lets his passion rein free, but I'm too weak to stop her. Finally managing to pull the leather from the loops of my waistband, she folds it double and pushes it into my hand. It's there in her eyes, what she wants me to do. The brown of her irises is mud-stained and murky, like a dam after a landslide.

Under normal circumstances, I'd tie her up and give her what she wants, spank her while I fuck her, but it hasn't been a normal week. When I don't move, she cups my balls and squeezes them through my pants. Her tongue is hot and wet on my stomach, licking a line of molten lava up my chest. Her small teeth latch onto my nipple. I jerk when she bites. Bloody hell. She lets go to bite into the muscle of my pec, then pulls back to study the marks she left on my skin. Her hands snake around my neck, pulling me down to her lips. The nip she gives my bottom lip draws blood. Her nails dig into my scalp. She kisses me like a mad woman, moaning and rubbing her body against mine.

As suddenly as she grabbed me, she lets go, falling back onto the bed with open thighs.

Her pussy is ripe for me, wet and swollen. I follow as if she's got me on a tight leash, but before I can straddle her she rolls over and gets up on her knees, offering her ass and pussy. It is a sight so alluring I almost lose my reason. I don't move my eyes from the clean-shaved triangle between her legs as I kick off my shoes and almost tear the zipper to get out of my pants. I take no more than a second to pull off my socks. Gripping her hips hard, I drag her to the edge of the bed, placing her where I need her.

"Take me, Gabriel. Take me hard." I'm about to do exactly that when she says, "Make it hurt. Make it hurt really bad."

My lust jerks to a halt. I get off on hurting her, but her pain ultimately brings us both pleasure. I'm using pain to train to her body to need me, but I won't allow her to use physical pain to escape her feelings. That's reserved for monsters like me, and I have no intention of turning her into a monster. I need her sweet and innocent. I need her for who she is.

She looks at me from over her shoulder. "Gabriel."

Her cry is a plea while her eyes are filled with fear—fear that I won't oblige. There aren't many things I'll deny her, but this I won't give.

"Gabriel!"

Her tiny hand folds around my shaft. I'm so hard I scarcely feel the pressure of her fingers as she guides me to her asshole. I know how an ass fuck without proper preparation feels for a woman. I made my lovers describe every sensation to me in detail. The fact that she wants this shows me how badly she's hurting inside.

"Fuck me already if you're a man."

I know what she's trying to do. "Provocation isn't going to work with me, beautiful."

Grabbing her around the waist with one arm, I shift her up the mattress. When I go down on my side, I bring her body with me, pressing her back to my chest.

"Fuck you, Gabriel!"

She struggles in all earnest, trying to break free, but I trap her in the constraint of my arms.

"Let me go!"

I hold her in place and plant the gentlest of kisses in her neck.

"No! Don't you dare."

I kiss her ear, her hair, and her temple with a soft brush of my lips. "You're so beautiful,

Valentina. Have I ever told you that?"

Her voice breaks. "Please, don't."

I throw my leg over hers, confining her kicking legs while I push her upper body into the mattress to kiss her spine. Sobs shake her body, but I kiss every vertebra, working my way to the curve of her ass and back up.

"Not like this," she cries. "Not gently. Not like you care."

I give her all the tenderness I'm capable of, stroking my fingers over her firm ass and between her legs, testing her folds. She's wet. Always ready for me, just like I trained her. When I direct my cock to her entrance, she starts fighting me again, wiggling her upper body, and kicking with her legs. All I can do is hold her shoulders down with my arms and keep

her legs trapped between mine while I enter her slick body, inch by slow inch until she's taken all of me. She's so hot and tight she makes me dizzy. With her thighs pressed together the friction is too much. With every stroke, I risk coming like an inexperienced adolescent.

"I hate you." Her words are muffled by the pillow, but her body is already rocking with mine. "Why can't you do it? Why don't you hurt me?"

I won't cut her air, I won't bury my cock in her ass, and I won't take my belt to her. It's my business to understand her needs, and what she needs right now is to be loved.

"Why didn't you kill me, Gabriel?"

I still. "What are you talking about?"

She turns her face to the side. "Rhett told me." That fucker.

"That's why he shot my dog," she whispers. "We weren't supposed to make it out alive." I start moving again, trying to still her with our pleasure, but she won't let it go.

There are tears in her voice. "Why Gabriel? Tell me, damn you." "Because I wanted you," I grit out.

She pushes her ass up against my groin. "Is it this? You needed a fuck?"

I thrust deeper, making her moan. "You know why."

"You spared my life to make me your whore."

"Not my whore." I kiss the soft, golden skin of her shoulder. "My property." "What's the difference?" she asks bitterly.

The difference is that property belongs. I find her lips, kissing her like she's mine, trying to show her that however much I trained her to need me, I need her in equal quantity. This time, she doesn't resist the gentleness of my touch. She kisses me back, our rhythm slow and revering. I glide my body over hers, the slickness of my sweat-damp skin making the friction smooth. The movement drives my shaft deeper. I feel her on every inch of me. A deep groan tears from my chest.

Goddammit, this is heaven. My balls pull up into my groin, and sharp needles pierce into the base of my spine. Fuck, not yet. I want to last. I still for a moment to bite back the pleasure. I drag my hands over her hair and down her shoulders, over the soft curves where her breasts are pressed flat against the mattress. She's soft and resilient and so much woman. I revel in invading her body, making her secrets and feelings mine. I push as deep as I can go, until my cock hits a barrier. A small gasp escapes her lips. I must be pushing against her cervix. Carefully, I ease back and push again. She throws her head back and whimpers, her moans changing from cries of defiance to need. Just a bit deeper and I'd touch the place in her body where miracles happen, where a child can grow from a seed in her womb. The only thing more beautiful than a woman is a pregnant woman. When your seed takes root in her womb and her breasts grow plump with the wonder of new life as her belly expands with your child, you want to love her and fuck her with your child growing between you. Valentina will scare me with the rawness of her beauty as motherhood changes her.

My body tenses with a building ejaculation so powerful it hurts. As my release explodes an idea erupts in my mind. While I empty myself in her body, I find the answer I've been looking for. I know how to irrevocably save her.

It's depraved and immoral.

It's dubious.

It's perfect.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Gabriel

It takes a day for my doctor to deliver the placebo birth control pills. While he's there, I make use of the opportunity to explain to him what I need for next week's house call.

From next month, Valentina won't be protected. I'm an asshole, but falling pregnant is her only hope. The one line Magda will never cross is killing the mother of her grandchild. I'm not naïve enough to believe Valentina will ever want a baby with me. She can never know I took the choice from her hands. It'll be easier to accept if she thinks it was an accident.

Being pregnant will be tough on her. I have no illusions about the psyches of 'women in waiting'. Sylvia detested every minute of being pregnant. She hated what the pregnancy did to her body. My mother never lets an opportunity go by to remind me how she suffered to give birth to me. According to Magda, the pain of bringing me into this world was worse than torture. She resented not being as agile or mobile as normal. She got varicose veins and backaches that drove her nuts. The only time that Magda sympathized with Sylvia was when she was pregnant with Carly. Yeah, it won't be an easy road, especially not for a young woman who hasn't completed her studies. I don't even want to think about our age difference. I'm heading down a hell of a bumpy road, dragging a young woman along against her knowledge and will. You don't get more depraved than that.

After my morning gym workout, I have a shower, and close myself in my study to go over the financial reports. I'm not ten minutes into my work when my phone rings. My CFO's name pops up on the screen.

"Harry, what can I do for you?"

"I just had a call from UNISA. Miss Haynes dropped out."

"What?" I heard him loud and clear, but it makes no sense. "I'm not sure I understand."

"Would you like to withdraw the scholarship, or are you willing to consider another student?"

"I'll get back to you." I end the call and get Aletta Cavendish on the line. "I just found out

Valentina quit her studies."

"Oh, dear. I thought she told you."

Of course she hasn't. She doesn't know I know about her studies. "Did she say why?"

"Only that her priorities have changed."

"Is it too late to have her cancellation reversed?"

"I can hold onto it for a while, but not long. Her assignments are overdue, and the exams are coming up in less than two weeks. It doesn't help that she already failed a test." "I know how badly she wants this degree. Give me a chance to speak to her."

"I hope you can sway her."

"I will."

"I'll be waiting for your call then."

I hang up and lean back in my chair. So, this is what's been eating Valentina. Rhett told me she even refused the puppy he offered. If she can hang in there for a few weeks longer, everything will change.

* * *

For the rest of the day, I chase leads to Valentina's rape, but doors close in my face as far as I go. It's a futile effort that

leaves me agitated and exhausted. By the time I get home in the late afternoon, I'm worked up into a state that leaves Quincy with a bleeding lip after our wrestling exercise in the gym. A thunderstorm is brewing on the horizon when I have my shower, casting the sky in an ominous, purple light with a touch of gold where the sun penetrates the dark masses. Coming downstairs for dinner, Magda announces we have a surprise guest. Sylvia is seated next to Carly, her blonde hair braided in a French plait and a virginal white dress clinging to her body like a glove. She lost weight.

"Gabriel." She acknowledges me with a tight nod and a cold smile.

I kiss my ex-wife's cheek. "You look beautiful, as always."

She touches her diamond necklace, a gift from me for our first wedding anniversary.

"Thank you."

I take my seat and start pouring the wine. I'm going to need a few glasses. "To what do we owe the visit?"

"Nothing. I don't need a reason to visit my daughter, do I?"

Across the table our gazes lock in a non-verbal battle. Mine is torn away from hers when Valentina enters with the starters. My maid's demeanor is one of professionalism as she serves us, but I don't miss the way Sylvia glares at her.

"I'm going over to Sebastian after dinner," Carly says, bringing my attention back to her.

I nod as Valentina hovers beside me with the asparagus. "I don't remember you asking." "I already said yes." Sylvia drapes the napkin over her lap, challenging me to defy her.

The reason for Sylvia's visit suddenly becomes clear.

"I still don't like that boy." Magda gives Carly a hard look. "He's not our type."

"Grandma," Carly groans. "It's none of your business."

I'm too tired to deal with this tonight. "Mind your tongue, young lady. You won't speak to your grandmother like that."

"She started." Carly pouts and crosses her arms.

Magda snorts. "What can you gain from a relationship with him? Who are his parents? Nogood average workers with a business in textiles."

"She's not asking to marry him," Sylvia says. "Anyway, she's my daughter. You don't have a say."

"Our daughter," I remind her.

Magda picks up her fork. "We're not going to fight over this at the dinner table."

"We're not," Sylvia says sweetly. "The decision is already made."

"It's not about the boy," I say. "It's about going behind my back without asking."

"As I said," Sylvia adds with force, "she asked me."

For once, I agree with Magda. This is not a fight that needs to play out here. I'll have a word with Sylvia after dinner about her conniving ways with Carly.

"Well," Sylvia's shoulders set in a straight line, "that's handled then." She pats Carly's hand with more affection I've ever seen her deal our daughter.

Something is up with Sylvia. She hates poverty as much as Magda, which puts Sebastian under her radar line of suitable boyfriend material.

The rest of the meal is tense. I'm relieved when the ordeal is over. Sebastian's mom comes over with her son to fetch Carly and politely declines our offer for a drink. From the porch, I watch Sylvia say goodbye to Carly.

"Be back by eleven," I call, giving Sebastian a look that tells him not to fuck with me.

When the car pulls off, Sylvia comes back up the steps and hands me her jacket to drape over her shoulders. "Good evening, Gab. I'll let you get back to fucking your maid."

I grab her wrist. “It’s the last time you’ll call me that, and the last time you’ll make a snide comment about my maid.”

Jerking her arm from my grip, she hisses, “We’ll see how well your future works out for you,” and then she strides to her sports car with a stiff back. She waves through the window before pulling off with screeching tires.

There was a time she called me Gab. It was a time I trusted her and believed she cared.

She’s a damned good actress.

“That’s what you get for marrying that whore,” Magda says behind me.

I look over my shoulder to see her watching from the doorstep. “You’ll be wise to keep quiet now.”

She only chuckles as she turns on her heel and disappears into the house.

In the lounge, I pour a stiff drink and wait an hour. There’s no way I can go to bed before Carly is home. I dial the kitchen.

Valentina’s voice comes over the intercom. “Yes?”

“Come to the lounge.”

She steps into the room five minutes later, regarding me with mistrust where I sit in the armchair.

“Come sit with me.” I hold my hand out to her.

Instead of climbing onto my lap as I would’ve liked, she stops at the edge of my seat, and drapes herself on the carpet by my feet. I push her head down on my thigh, stroking her silky hair. Like she accepted my pain, she’s learning to accept my tenderness. I’m enjoying our tranquil moment, but there are two issues of importance I have to bring up. I don’t have the luxury of waiting for her to confide in me, any longer. I’ve given up on hoping for her trust.

“Why did you drop out of school?”

Her body goes rigid. It takes her a moment to answer. “How did you find out?”

“Does it matter?”

“You’re right,” she whispers. “I don’t want to know.”

“You’re going back.”

She jerks her head up to look at me. “Don’t. I’ve dealt with it. I don’t want to go down that road again.”

I fist my hand in her hair. “You’ll go back.”

“Gabriel.” Her eyes fill with tears. “Please.”

“Marie will come back. Things will go back to normal.” It’s a lie, but I can’t tell her how I’m planning on changing her circumstances.

“Things will never be normal for me.”

That’s true, but she better accept it. She’ll take whatever I choose to give her. My hand tightens in her hair. “You’ll call tomorrow and withdraw your cancellation.” “Why?” she whispers.

Because despite everything, I still want her to be happy. “You’ll obey me, like you promised.”

Hurt flickers in her eyes. “Are you threatening me?”

“I’m the biggest damn threat of your life.”

Her bottom lip starts to tremble. “Of course. How could I forget?”

My hand is aching to tan her ass. If it weren’t for her injury, she’d be draped over my lap right now, her panties around her ankles.

“Don’t push me, Valentina. You’ll do as I say without question, because I know what you need, and it’s my job to give it to you.”

That same acceptance with which she submitted to my lashings and fucking filters into her expression. It’s not so much a choice as an understanding that there’s no choice.

“Good girl.”

I bend down to kiss her, tasting the sweetness of her submission as her lips quiver under mine. If I don’t pull away,

I'll take her right here in the lounge, and I still have plenty to say.

“There’s something else you’re going to do for me.” I watch her face carefully as I choose my next words. “You’re going to tell me about the man who raped you.”

Panic flares in her eyes. Her cheeks pale, and her lips part. For a moment, she only stares at me. From her reaction, it’s clear she’s never spoken to anyone about it, not in the healing sense, at least.

“Who have you told?”

She swallows. “It was a long time—”

I pull gently on her hair. “That’s not what I asked. Who did you tell?”

“My—my...no one.”

“Let me rephrase that for you. Who knows or knew?”

“My family.”

“Who in your family?”

“My mom, dad, and my brother.”

“No one else?”

She shakes her head.

“They didn’t make you go to a doctor, the police, a therapist?”

“My mom got me the morning-after pill.”

I already know why. Her family would’ve tried to bury the shame. What I need are details so I can track the fucker down.

“Start by telling me where you were when it happened.”

A sob escapes her throat. “I don’t want to go back there.”

I loosen my fingers in her hair and drag them down the long strands. “I’m here for you, baby. You’re not going through this alone.”

“I can’t do it.”

She tries to get up, but I push her down. If I could find out the truth without putting her through this, I would, but I'm at a dead end.

"You don't have to go into the details. Think of it as a movie. Look in from the outside. Go back to the scenes and tell me where you were."

"Gabriel, no." She gets onto her knees and clutches my thighs. "Please, I beg you."

I almost falter. Valentina on her knees in front of me, begging, is more than what I can handle, but she needs to heal, or she'll never be free. The man who stole her virginity will always own a piece of her as long as she keeps it bottled inside, and the fucker doesn't deserve her peace of mind or pain. I press her face down in my lap, running my fingers through her hair.

Steeling myself, I say in a stern voice, "Start at the beginning."

She rubs her cheek on my thigh. A big tear rolls from under her long lashes, the wetness penetrating the fabric of my pants. She licks her lips and opens and closes them twice before she gets a word out.

"Mom sent me to take Dad's dinner. He was working late."

"Where?"

"At the workshop."

"Was it dark?"

She thinks for a while. "It was still light. I think it was before six, because it was right after the afternoon sitcom."

"Good. Carry on."

She swallows again. "A car pulled up."

"What kind of car?"

Her whole body goes rigid. "I don't remember."

"Don't feel, baby. Just tell me who drove the car."

"I-I don't know. I only know they were old."

They? She said only one man raped her. “How many?”

“Five. Six. I think six. I was scared. I didn’t want to look at them. I kept my eyes on the ground.”

“Don’t feel.” I brush my thumb over the tears that spill down her cheek. “What did they say?”

“I can’t remember. I don’t think they said much. One grabbed my arm. Daddy’s lunchbox fell on the ground. His sandwiches dropped out. I remember thinking how angry he was going to be if there was sand on them.”

“Go on,” I say when she falls quiet, rubbing my hand up and down her back.

“They laughed. They laughed a lot.”

Anger boils up in me. I feel like breaking something.

“They took me.”

“Where?”

She blinks. “I don’t know.”

“Did they take you by car? Did they make you get inside?”

“No. They dragged me into the building. A bar.”

“Can you remember the name?”

“I didn’t see.”

If she walked, it was not far from where she lived. “Maybe you saw when you went past there later.”

“I never walked that road again.”

“What did the inside look like?”

“It was dark. Smoke. It smelled of cigarette smoke. There was a counter and bar stools, and a neon sign above the mirror, I think. There was a room at the back with a pool table.”

“Were there other people inside?”

“A man behind the bar. I remember him because I screamed for help, but he turned away.”

“What did he look like?”

“Fat. Bald. That—that’s all I remember.”

“You’re doing well, sweetheart. Where did they take you?”

She starts shaking, her frail body trembling between my knees. “The back.”

“It’s a movie. It’s not happening to you. Can you see it?”

“They ripped off my clothes and held me down.”

Enough. I can’t stand it, but I can’t let it go, either. “What did he look like?”

“I kept my eyes closed. I couldn’t look.”

“Only the one?”

“Yes,” she says meekly.

I bite back my fury. “What happened after?”

“They left me.”

“How did you get home?”

“I woke up in an alley. It was dark.”

“You woke up?”

“They beat me. I must’ve passed out.”

God help me, I will tear their limbs from their bodies and make them swallow their dicks before I skin them alive.

“I tried to walk, but I was hurting and bleeding. I didn’t get far. That’s where my brother found me. When I didn’t get home, my mom got worried. She called my father. They started looking.”

“He took you home?”

She nods, exhaling a shaky breath. “Mom treated my wounds. I stayed home until the bruises were gone. My father said he’d find the men responsible.”

“Did he?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t want to remember. I didn’t want to ask.”

“Can you remember the date, Valentina?”

“Thirteenth of February.”

Two months later, her father died in the car crash, and her brother suffered brain damage. The mafia who was supposed to be their family rejected them, and here she is, on her knees in front of me. I hook my hands under her arms and lift her onto my lap, cradling her head against my chest.

“They’re going to pay.”

The tenseness eases somewhat from her small frame as she sits in my arms, allowing me to soothe her and keep her safe.

I kiss the top of her head. “I won’t let anyone ever hurt you, again.”

For the first time in my life, I have no desire to take cuddling further than holding a woman in my arms. There’s satisfaction greater than the high I get from sex in providing her with strength and protection. Even better is that she allows me take care of her, to be the man for her I couldn’t yet be for any woman.

We sit together like this for a long time. My only desire is to carry her upstairs and lay her down on my bed, to hold her until the day breaks, but it’s close to eleven, and Carly will be home soon.

My thought is scarcely cold when the front door bursts open, and Carly flies through it, sobs and tears following in her wake as she runs through the entrance and up the stairs. Valentina jerks in my arms. She scurries off my lap as fast as I’m trying to get to my feet with my useless leg. She looks at me with wide eyes, concern etched on her face.

“She hasn’t seen us,” I say.

I have to leave Valentina to go after my daughter. If that dickhead of a pretty college boy touched her, he’ll get what he deserves. On the landing, I hear her door slam. My hip aches as I rush to her bedroom.

“Carly?” I call, knocking on the door.

“Go away.”

I try the knob. It's locked. Her sobs reach me through the wood.

"Open the door, Carly."

"I said go away!"

"If you don't open this door right now I'm going to break it down."

"I don't care. I don't give a damn."

"Carly!" I'm more worried than angry, but it's the anger that sounds in my voice. "You have three seconds."

"Go to hell."

That's it. I take a few steps back and get ready to charge. I'm about to throw my weight against the door when Valentina comes running up the stairs.

"Gabriel!" She grabs my arm. "What are you doing?"

"Stay out of this."

"You'll scare her."

It's the plea in her eyes that makes me pause. I don't want to frighten Carly, but my fatherly instincts are in overdrive.

I drag my hands through my hair. "Something's wrong."

My concern is mirrored on Valentina's face. Maybe it's the subject we discussed just before Carly's turbulent entry, but we're thinking the same thing.

Valentina walks to the door and taps gently on it. "Carly? Are you all right? Your dad's really worried about you. Please come out and talk to him before he does something stupid." A hiccup and a snort-laugh comes from inside.

Laughing is good. Whatever happened can't be that bad.

"I don't feel like cleaning up the mess he's about to make," Valentina continues, "not to mention facing your grandmother when he wakes her up with the noise."

The mention of Magda does it. Footsteps approach the door. The key turns. The door opens on a crack, and Carly's tear-streaked face appears around the frame, black mascara

smear under her eyes and her hair a mess. I have to clench teeth, hands, and muscles not to shove the door open, and march into her room.

Carly sniffs and looks between Valentina and me. “I don’t want to talk about it, Dad. Go to bed.”

“Not until you tell me what’s wrong.”

“Nothing.”

I motion at her face. “This doesn’t look like nothing.”

“You won’t understand!”

It’s times like these that I hate Sylvia with an unfair fierceness for walking out on us. “I’ll try my best.”

“No, thanks.” She adds sarcastically, “Can I go to sleep, now?”

“Fine. I’ll have to drive over to Sebastian’s.” “Dad!” Fresh tears build in her eyes.

I can’t stand to see her tears. Moving forward, I hold my arms open for a hug, but she takes a step back into the room and starts closing the door. Only when I stop in my tracks does she let go of the door.

“Can I speak to you, Valentina?”

Valentina shoots me a look. I motion for her to go ahead. I’m desperate. I’ll use any measures to get Carly to open up.

“Sure.” Valentina clears her throat. “Do you want to talk in your room?”

Carly takes her by the arm and drags her inside, the door shutting behind them.

Why am I surrounded by females who are set on making my life difficult? I go to my study and activate the security system. For my family’s safety, every room in the house is equipped with hidden microphones. You never know. It’s less than honorable to eavesdrop on my daughter’s conversation with Valentina, but only a father will understand how I feel. I pour a whiskey and take a seat behind my desk.

Carly's voice comes over the speaker. "We had a fight."

"Oh, Carly. I'm sorry, honey. Fights happen, you know."

"Not these kinds of fights."

"Was he mean to you?"

"Not exactly. Actually, he was quite polite. I just don't understand. I don't get guys."

"What did he do to upset you?"

"He broke up with me."

"Oh. I didn't know you were going steady."

"He asked me on our first date."

"Then he breaks up a few weeks later?"

"He met someone else. He cheated on me. He lied to me."

"That must hurt an awful lot."

"He says I'm too girlie for him. I'm so humiliated. I hate him."

"You shouldn't look at it like that. Someone not liking you for who you are is nothing to be humiliated about."

"He's a first-class jerk. He's dating Tammy Marais."

"I don't know Tammy, but I know you're beautiful and clever. You're also still very young. There's lots of time for you to meet the right man."

"How do you know I'll meet someone? What if there's no one out there for me?"

"There are plenty of good men out there."

"How can I make sure they'll like me?"

"By being yourself."

"Did you have a lot of boyfriends? Do you have one, now?"

"I didn't date."

"Why not? Don't you like men?"

“I was busy. I had my studies and a job.”

“Are you sorry now that you’re old?”

Valentina laughs softly. “I’m not that old.”

“Are you? Sorry?”

“Sometimes, but it’s no use crying over things we can’t change.”

“I want him back, Valentina. Tell me what to do.”

“You want my opinion? He doesn’t deserve to have you back.”

“If you don’t have experience with men, how do I know I can trust your advice?”

“You don’t have to trust me. Trust yourself. I’m sure you know you’re worth more than lies and deceit.”

“You’re right. I’m worth more than Tammy Mousy Hair.”

“And elegant young ladies aren’t nasty.”

Carly giggles. “You’re no fun. I can’t gossip with you.”

“See? You’re feeling better, already.”

“I guess. Thanks for...uh...putting things in perspective.”

“No worries. How about hot chocolate with marshmallows?”

“My mom won’t approve.”

“Hot chocolate *without* marshmallows?”

“I suppose, as long as it won’t make me gain weight.”

“You’re a skinny thing. You don’t have to worry about one hot chocolate.”

“Okay. Will you bring it to my room?”

“Only if you go say goodnight to your dad. He’s worried because he loves you.”

“I know. It’s just...I can’t talk to him about boyfriends. He’ll get upset.”

“Tell him how you feel. If he understands, he’ll be more patient.”

“Will you talk to him for me, like you did for going out with Sebastian?”

“I think you can handle him all on your own.”

“Thank you, Val.”

“You’re welcome. Go see your dad. I’ll leave your chocolate on your nightstand.”

I cut the security link and tip my hands together. Valentina was right all along. It wasn’t necessary to make a fuss about Carly going out with Sebastian. The problem took care of itself.

Valentina was good with Carly tonight. I’d trust my only daughter with her any day.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Valentina

After I opened up to Gabriel about my rape he became more possessive than ever, but he also lifted a weight off my shoulders. My parents' advice was to pretend that day never took place, and until Gabriel, no one knew exactly what happened. My mom didn't want to hear the details. She wanted to spare me the pain of reliving them. I would've confided in Charlie, but I didn't have a chance. After my attack, my parents did everything in their power to please me. When I said I felt like chocolate cake, my father loaded Charlie and me in the car, and then the accident that changed our lives forever happened.

Gabriel calls me to his study every night after dinner. I sit at his feet with my head on his thigh as he reads and comments on my assignments or watches the news while stroking my hair. Afterward, he takes me depending on how he interprets my needs and mood. Sometimes it's tender and sometimes hard. I revel in whatever he gives me, needing his body with an intensity that doesn't diminish, no matter how many times per night he makes me come.

Things are looking up in my life. Since Carly reached out to me about her breakup with Sebastian, our relationship is friendlier. Aletta said if I hand in my assignments, she'll hold onto my study cancellation, giving me a second chance at my dream. I can still be something other than a maid after nine years. With the bursary, I have more money to spend on Charlie and Kris. I can even afford to take them out to lunch

on Sunday. I choose a restaurant in Rosebank, close to El Toro, a delicatessen shop where Marie used to buy Spanish chorizo. Magda told me to make paella on Monday, and she only eats this particular brand of sausage in the dish. Since El Toro doesn't deliver, I profit from picking up my order while spoiling Kris and Charlie.

We get a table on the terrace at Roma's and order spaghetti with scallops in basil-flavored cream. Charlie is working his way through his second Coke float. His eyes shine, and his cheeks have a healthy color. He's even lost a bit of the flabbiness around his waist.

"The change in him is remarkable, Kris."

She takes a sip of her wine. "He's a good dog walker. Plus, it saves me a pack of time."

"It makes me happy to see him like this. I wish I could do more."

"So, what's with the lunch?" she asks after we've eaten, direct as always.

"I have good news. The university granted me a full bursary."

"I thought you dropped out."

"I did, but Gabriel said Marie should be back at work soon. I'll have time to study again, and with the full bursary I won't need to worry about the shortfall."

Leaning back, she crosses her arms. "What's going on with him, Val?"

"Nothing." I pick at my napkin, tearing off small pieces. "Why?"

I can't tell anyone what happens behind the closed doors of Gabriel's house. Especially not Kris. She won't understand. Hell, sometimes *I* don't understand.

"He's been to the practice."

I still. "Why?"

“To buy cat and dog food, apparently. He’s got a standing order.”

“He didn’t tell me.”

“You’re sleeping with him, aren’t you?”

I jerk my head up and glance at Charlie, but he’s engrossed in his drink. I can’t lie to her in her face, so I say nothing.

“He’s a loan shark, and you’re indebted to him for nine years. You want to know what I think? I think you’re his sex toy. His favorite toy. For the moment, he dresses you up—yes, I saw the parcels he carried to my house—and he covers your bills. Hey, I’m not complaining. I need the business. All I’m saying is don’t fall in love with him.”

I look away to where a mom and dad are having lunch with a cute little girl. “It’s not like that.”

“How is it? Are you parading around for him in a French maid’s costume? Is that his fantasy?”

I give her a chastising look. “Stop it.”

“Every boy eventually grows tired of his toys, even his favorite toy.”

“I don’t have a choice,” I say in a lowered voice. “He’s not all bad, Kris. I think he tries really hard to treat me well.”

She leans forward. “He’s a goddamn killer. A criminal. *The Breaker*, Val. Do you need me to remind you *how* he kills people?”

“No.”

“Don’t sugarcoat him because he’s nice to you. Never forget who he is. More importantly, never forget who *you* are and what you are to him.”

“What am I?”

“Debt repayment. You’re a slave.”

“Call it whatever you want, but I made a deal to save Charlie’s life. I’ll slave, whore, bust my ass, and work my fingers to the bone to keep him safe.”

“What about *your* life?”

Kris doesn't know my history. She doesn't know how Charlie picked me up in the gutter, battered and left for dead, and carried me home for more than two miles. She doesn't know he sat next to my bed and held my hand every night after my assault when I was too afraid to close my eyes to sleep.

“I made a choice, Kris. I made a promise to Gabriel Louw. You don't break your promises to Gabriel. Give it a rest, will you? I'm doing the best I can.”

“Jesus, Val. If this is your best, you're heading for a cluster fuck. You cut off your finger for Christ's sake.” She wipes a hand over her brow. “How is this going to play out?”

“After nine years, I walk away, get a job, a nice house for Charlie and me, and get out of your hair.”

“You're not in my hair, kiddo, but I worry about you.”

“I know.” I push my chair back, desperately needing air. “I'm taking Charlie for a walk.”

“I'll order dessert. Tiramisu?”

“Sounds good. Come on, Charlie.” I take my brother's arm and cross the Rosebank Square to stroll down the walkway past the shop fronts. Charlie stops to stare at every window. It's not as much the objects he likes as the colors.

“Charlie?”

He points at a red bicycle in the sports shop. “Loo-look.”

“What?” I want him to say it. I want to know what's going on in his head.

“Pre-pretty.”

“What's pretty?”

“Lo-look.” He points again, getting frustrated.

“The bicycle?”

He's already moved on, stuck in front of a shelf of colorful cycling helmets.

“Li-like.”

“Which one?”

He rolls his shoulders like he does when he gets annoyed and carries on down the path with a brisk pace.

I run to catch up, taking his hand. “Do you remember how you used to walk me home from school?”

He hurries on toward the street. Once Charlie is on a mission, it’s difficult to distract him. He throws his whole weight into a task and won’t stop until he’s accomplished what he’s set out to do. I’m longing for the connection we once had. I’m aching to have my brother back, to give him back to himself, but he’s in his own world, and I sometimes wonder if I’m even part of it.

We stop in front of a red Ferrari parked on the curb. This is what attracted his attention.

When he puts out his hand to touch the shiny bodywork, I snatch it back.

“Don’t touch the car. What did I say about touching things that aren’t ours?” “That’s all right,” a male voice says.

I twirl around to where the voice comes from. The man facing us has blond hair and a tanned face with friendly, green eyes.

“You can touch it if you like,” he says to Charlie. “It’s mine.”

The man is as beautiful as his car. It’s the kind of sinful beauty that will make a woman forget her male companion at a party.

I tug on Charlie’s hand. “We should go.”

“I can take him for a spin, if you like.”

“Spi–spin.”

“Uh, thanks,” I push my hair behind my ear, “but my friend’s waiting for us.”

“Pity.” He holds out his hand. “I’m Michael.”

I reach out tentatively, but before I can make up my mind, he folds his broad palm around mine and squeezes. When I don't say anything, he gives me an amused smile.

“Your name?”

“Valentina.”

“That's pretty.” He lets me go and shakes hands with Charlie. “You have good taste, eh...” He lifts a brow and waits.

“Charlie,” I say.

“Pleased to meet you both. Maybe we can talk about that spin. If you give me your number, I can call when it's convenient.”

“Our dessert is ready.” The word ‘dessert’ will catch Charlie's attention. “Thank you, anyway.”

Charlie lets me lead him back across the square to our table.

“Who's that?” Kris asks.

“I don't know. Charlie liked his car.”

“Ditto.” She waves her spoon at the plate in front of me. “Dig in. It's delicious.”

* * *

It's hard to say goodbye to Charlie. At least he seems happy. I let that thought soothe me as I cross the street to where Gabriel's Jaguar waits. It's Rhett who exits.

“Hi,” I say, surprised. Gabriel said he'd fetch me.

“Gabriel's busy,” he says with a wink, holding the door for me.

I wait until we pull off into traffic to ask, “Where is he?”

“Business.”

A shiver runs over me. Is he breaking someone's bones? Killing someone?

Rhett gives me a sidelong look. “It's better not to ask.”

“I wasn’t going to.” I glance through the window to escape his piercing eyes.

“On the upside,” he continues brightly, “we can train.”

I turn back to him quickly. “Really?”

“He’ll be busy until late.”

My mood picks up. I have to learn how to handle myself. Gabriel won’t be there to protect me forever. Like Kris said, he may grow tired of his new toy sooner than later.

Rhett changes gears and speeds up when we hit the highway. “Why the sad face? Is your brother all right?”

“Sunday blues.” I try to smile, but it’s a weak effort.

We don’t talk for the rest of the way. At home, I change into my shorts and T-shirt and join Rhett in the gym. It’s weird to be here out of my own, free will. The gym represents a place of erotic pain and deep-seated pleasure for me. My body reacts at the thought, sending moisture to my folds. I shake my head and jiggle my fingers, physically expelling the unwelcome arousal at the memory of what Gabriel does to me here.

“Ready?” Rhett walks around me like a boxer measuring his opponent.

“Give me your worst.”

He laughs. “You’re a funny one.”

I fling around and punch him in the stomach. “Like this funny?”

My knuckles hurt, and he doesn’t even flinch. Before I know what’s happening, he kicks my feet out from under me with a swift swing of his leg, making me land on my ass with a humph.

“This move is child’s play, perky tits. You’ve got a far way to go before you can handle my worst.”

“Okay, short dick.” I hold out my hand for him to help me up.

He only laughs at the diminutive name. When he's halfway in the motion of pulling me up, I yank hard, using the momentum to bring him down to the floor. He does a graceful shoulder roll and flips his leg over me, pinning me face down on the mat.

He chuckles. "You've got spirit, I'll give you that, perky tits."

"Fuck you, short dick."

"Wanna see? You'll take back your words."

"No thanks. Kicking you in the balls when your pants are around your ankles won't be fair play."

He laughs again. "Yep, you're funny." He gets to his feet and pulls me up by my arm. "We'll start with some basic defense moves, and when you've gotten the hang of them, I'll teach you how to use an attacker's strength to beat him."

The minute I'm up, I kick at his feet like he did with me, but he catches my leg, holding me captive.

"You're a quick learner, and you've got more courage than brains, but let me do the teaching. I don't want to hurt you."

I hop around on one foot to keep my balance. "It'll take a bit more than that."

"As I said, more courage than brains. You're small. You've got to learn to fight clever."

"Okay."

He releases me. "Ready?"

For the next hour, he drills me. By the time he calls it a day, I'm sweating.

"You better have a shower. Gabriel will be home soon."

"I want to learn to use a gun, too."

He props his hands on his hips and regards me from under his eyebrows. "Valentina."

"It's a big, bad world out there. I won't live here forever."

After a moment, he sighs and shakes his head. “In for a penny, in for a pound.”

I’m happy with my progress. Finally, I’m getting out of my vulnerable bubble. There’s just enough time to shower before Gabriel enters my room.

He walks up and stops flush against my back. “How was your weekend?”

“Good.”

He pushes my hair aside and kisses my neck. “We’re having a dinner party at home on

Tuesday. It’ll be a late night.”

“Okay. Do you have a menu in mind?”

“Magda will brief you. It’s important to her.” He doesn’t need to say more. He wants me on my best behavior. “Don’t forget your checkup tomorrow.”

I dress the wound religiously, but it’s still red and puffy.

He puts his arms around my waist and pulls my back against his chest. “Bend over and put your hands on the wall.”

His tone is clipped, like when he’s desperate and can’t wait. My body grows deliciously warm and wet. I bend my back and brace myself on the wall. He lifts my skirt up over my waist and jerks my panties down. The metal clang of his belt sounds in the room, followed by the scratchy pull of his zipper. His cock pushes against my folds. Without warning he plunges forward, impaling me in one, hard thrust. My back arches from the friction.

“Fuck, Valentina.” He holds still, either to give my body time to stretch around his too large penis or to get a hold on his control.

“Take me as you want,” I pant, unable to keep still for much longer.

“Oh, I will.”

Gripping my hips between his palms, he pulls out almost all the way and slams back in. Pleasure ripples through my

womb. He wastes no time in working me up to a climax, fucking me hard. When I come, it's explosive, but so is his release. He grunts and keeps going until his cock is too soft to stay inside me. Only when his shaft slips out does he go on his knees and suck my clit into his mouth. It's impossible to come again so soon, but he's relentless. He has his teeth on my clit and his fingers in my pussy and ass. Our sounds mingle until there's only the unique blend of our moans in the room. He makes me come again in his mouth, driving me to the edge of pleasure. My legs can't carry my weight. When I collapse, he catches me around the waist and carries me to bed. He holds me until it's dark outside, and then he fucks me on my back and on my hands and knees until my throat is hoarse from screaming. My body is depleted. I can't give him any more, but I want more from him. I'm insatiable, and he's to blame.

My heart aches with something I can't name when he leaves me. I lie in the dark until I can't suffer it any longer. There's only one thing to do. I sneak through the dark house to his room. He's standing in the doorway, waiting, as if he expected me. Jumping into his arms, I cling to him. I'm a stranger to myself, not understanding this woman who can't breathe without her captor. He wraps his arms around my ass to hold me up and kisses me long and sweet. Gently, he lies me down on the bed, pulling me to his chest. Only then, safe and happy, do I fall into an exhausted sleep.

* * *

The doctor's appointment is at four the following day. As I get ready, Gabriel calls me on the internal intercom and summons me to his room. If we don't leave soon we'll be late. Why does he want to see me now? Before I can knock, he opens the door. I freeze with my hand midway in the air. A disposable sheet is laid out on the daybed, and a gurney with monitors and scanners stands next to it. The same doctor from before, Samuel Engelbrecht, waits in the room.

I look at Gabriel for answers, but he says nothing. He only pulls me inside and closes the door.

"Undress and lie down," the doctor says.

I assumed I was going to see the doctor who operated on me at the clinic, and what

Gabriel's doctor demands doesn't make sense. "You need me to undress to examine my finger?"

Gabriel takes my hand. "After what you told me, I want to make sure you're all right. You could've suffered internal injuries you're not aware of."

A blush works its way up my neck, warming my cheeks. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't want to stress you."

I pull my hand from his. "This isn't necessary."

His eyes turn hard. "Get your clothes off, or I'll take them off for you."

I'm so humiliated I don't know where to look. I don't doubt for a minute Gabriel will execute his threat. Angry tears burn in my eyes as I turn my back on them and pull off my trainers, uniform, and underwear. Draping my clothes over the armrest of the chair, I lie down on the daybed.

The doctor approaches with a probe. "Bend your legs."

I do so grudgingly, avoiding Gabriel's eyes. The doctor pulls a condom over the probe, lubricates it with gel, and inserts it gently in my vagina. The scanner beeps to life. He says nothing as he examines me. He only gives Gabriel a nod when he pulls the probe free. My abdomen is next. I am not sure what he's looking for, and I can't imagine why Gabriel wants to know if the rape damaged my body. After the ultrasound, the doctor takes my blood pressure and weighs me. It's when he brings a needle to my arm that I start protesting again.

"What's that?"

Gabriel takes my wrist, brushing his thumb over my pulse. "It's a vitamin boost."

"I don't need it."

"I told you already, your health is my responsibility."

There's a note of steel in his voice. He'll hold me down if he has to. I don't have a choice but to accept the injection and whatever is in it.

With the injection done, the doctor lets me get dressed and makes me sit on the bed to examine my finger. His face is blank, but he stares at the wound for a long time.

"I'm going to prescribe a stronger antibiotic. I want to see you every day."

"What's wrong?"

"A small infection," he says, as if talking to a child. "You've got to keep it still. Don't use the hand."

I bandaged it tightly when I wrestled with Rhett, and we were careful. I'm also cautious with the housework.

The doctor looks at Gabriel. "Any chance you can keep her still for a couple of weeks?" The set of Gabriel's jaw is enough to give us the answer. Magda will never let him.

"Well, then." The doctor starts gathering his equipment. "Tomorrow same time?" "Yes," Gabriel says.

When he's gone, I gather the courage to confront Gabriel. "Why?"

"Don't make me repeat answers I already gave you."

"Isn't he going to take his apparatus?" I motion at the gurney with the monitors.

"It'll stay here for a while."

"What are you doing, Gabriel?"

He cups my cheek. "Looking after you."

When he pulls my head to his chest, I can't resist. I can only melt against him, letting his erratic heartbeat seduce me into thinking he actually cares about more than my body.

* * *

From the careful menu planning it's obvious that Tuesday night's dinner is important to Magda. She chooses a caviar mousse starter followed by salmon and spinach crumble with

sweet pastries for dessert. I pay special attention to the cooking, ensuring I do nothing to jeopardize our deal. I twist my hair into a neat bun in the nape of my neck and scrub my nails, which are stained orange from the curry I often cook with. The mousse has just set when Magda rings the bell for me to serve. Balancing a tray on one hand, I push the swing door to the dining room open with my shoulder. Looking up, I freeze on the spot. The man sitting opposite Gabriel is the one from Rosebank, the one with the Ferrari. Next to him sits a pretty redhead with freckles on her nose.

“Valentina!” Michael jumps to his feet and holds the door for me to pass.

Gabriel goes rigid. Magda’s mouth turns down, her Pit Bull eyes drooping in the corners. “You know each other?” Gabriel asks, his ice blue eyes narrowed on me.

“We met on Sunday.” Michael takes his seat again. “She wouldn’t give me her number.” He takes the redhead’s hand and smiles. “Seems the fairy godmother of fate is still doing her job.”

“Valentina isn’t available,” Gabriel replies coldly. He turns to me. “Where exactly did you meet?”

I clear my throat. “In Rosebank.”

“What were you doing there?”

What I do with my free time is none of his business, and his jealous attitude is unwarranted and unreasonable, but Magda can still put a bullet in my head for back chatting or dropping a spoon, so I answer obediently. “I went to El Torro to buy the chorizo.”

“I went to El Torro to pick up a bottle of Magda’s favorite wine,” Michael says. “You see?”

Divine intervention.”

“She’s below your class,” Magda says. “We picked her up in Berea.”

I walk around the table, serving the people who talk about me as if I’m not in the room. I want to dump the mousse on

their laps. *Charlie. Think about Charlie.*

“I don’t care where she’s from,” the woman says. “We’re not snobbish that way.”

She has a rock of a diamond on her ring finger. She must be Michael’s wife. Are they into threesomes? I can’t get out of the room fast enough. In the kitchen, I inhale and exhale to control my anger. I’m sick of being looked at as a piece of meat.

For the rest of the dinner, the stress mounts every time I step into the dining room. Michael gawks openly while his wife pays me compliments on my physical appearance. Magda is red in the face with annoyance. The one who scares me most is Gabriel. He’s quiet. Quiet is never good.

By the time I serve the pastries in the lounge, my stomach aches with tension. My hope of escaping is squashed when Gabriel calls me back as I’m about to exit.

“Valentina.” There’s authority in his voice. “Come here.”

Four sets of eyes are watching me. Magda sits on a single chair at the short side of the coffee table. Her stare is both scornful and hopeful. She hopes I’ll disobey. The consequences should be fun to watch. Michael looks on with open curiosity while his wife has a glimmer of excitement in her eyes. My gaze locks with Gabriel’s. In silent instruction, he takes a cushion from the armchair and throws it on the floor next to his feet. I don’t have a choice. I walk over to him, the tightness in my stomach growing with every step. As I’ve done so many times before, I sit down next to him. A smile of approval warms his face. He looks at me as if he sees no one else. He cups my cheek and tilts my head to rest on his thigh. Then our brief, private moment is over. Gabriel continues his conversation in a businesslike manner while playing absently with my hair.

Magda looks like a puffed-up dragon about to spit fire. Michael and his wife are obviously used to this kind of behavior. My posture on the floor while Gabriel pets me doesn’t take up more of their attention, except for the occasional envious glance Michael shoots Gabriel.

While they're discussing a lease contract for new business premises, Gabriel feeds me sips of champagne. When the tray with sweet pastries is passed around, he takes his time to study the selection and chooses a mille-feuille that he pops into my mouth. His thumb lingers on my tongue. After I've chewed and swallowed, he wipes the icing from the corner of my mouth before licking his finger clean, giving the action his full attention. There's a smile in his eyes as he looks down at me. Again, we're sharing a moment the other three people in the room aren't part of.

After the dessert, he swaps the champagne for whiskey. I'm not a big drinker. Already buzzing from the champagne, I shake my head when he presses the glass to my lips, but his fingers tighten in my hair, pulling back to arch my neck. He takes a drink from the glass and brings his mouth down to mine. I only understand his intention when he spears my lips with his tongue, forcing them open, and feeds me the whiskey straight from his mouth. I gulp and swallow in shocked surprise. He keeps my head in place to drag his tongue over my bottom lip, licking it clean. Only then does he let go of my hair. My face is ablaze with embarrassment. If

Mr. and Mrs. Michael find it shocking, they don't show it. Only Magda shifts around on her seat. When Gabriel brings the glass to my lips the second time, I open without argument. Being forced in front of his mother and friends isn't an experience I'd like to repeat. It's as if Gabriel is making a point by demonstrating his ownership of me.

At the end of the evening, and three glasses of champagne and a whiskey later, I've gone from a buzz to feeling tipsy. I'm aware of what's happening around me, but I'm seeing double, and my nose is numb. I'm also extremely lethargic. I'm grateful when Michael gets to his feet and announces their departure.

He saunters over to us. "May I kiss the lady, Gabriel?"

Gabriel puts a broad hand on my shoulder. "You may not."

He makes a face of mock disappointment. "I understand. I would act the same if she was mine. You make me long for a

sub again.”

“She’s not a sub,” Magda bites out. “She’s property.”

Michael sighs, barely sparing Magda a glance. His eyes find mine. “Even better.”

His wife crosses the floor to lean her head on Michael’s shoulder. “If you ever grow tired of her, Gabriel, let us know. I’ll be happy to offer her a position.”

“That won’t happen,” Gabriel says through thin lips. “She’s too valuable to me.”

“You mean her debt is too high,” Magda corrects, her glare communicating something with Gabriel I don’t understand.

Michael pats Gabriel’s shoulder. “Well, goodnight my good man. Next time dinner is at our place.” He looks at me. “You should bring your...” *Property. Toy. Four hundred thousand rand-asset.*

“Maid,” Magda says.

Gabriel gets to his feet. “I’ll walk you out.” He addresses me with a single command.

“Stay.”

While Gabriel and Magda see their guests off, I remain as Gabriel ordered. My head is spinning, and I’m not in the mood for punishment tonight. When they return, Gabriel’s shoulders are tense, and Magda’s mouth is pulled into a hard line.

“Goodnight, Magda,” he says pointedly.

Magda isn’t that easily dismissed. “You embarrassed me. I won’t tolerate this kind of behavior in front of our guests.”

Gabriel smirks. “They didn’t seem embarrassed to me.”

“I’ll remind you this is *my* house.”

“You insisted we live here.”

“For security reasons. There are a hundred or more people who’d have your head on a plate.”

“Agreed. It’s easier protecting us all under one roof. That doesn’t mean you can tell me what to do. As you said yourself,

I'm not twelve any longer."

Her nostrils flare. "Are you dealing with what we talked about?"

"I am."

"How long?"

"Soon."

She regards him for a moment in silence. I'm half relieved when she stalks from the room. The other half of me tenses now that I'm alone with Gabriel. His mood is dark. Is he going to punish me? He offers me a hand and pulls me to my feet. My legs are stiff from sitting in the same position for hours, and I stumble, crushing into his chest.

"Sorry," I mumble. Oh, God. My tongue is slurring.

He sets me on my feet with his hands on my hips, testing my balance before he lets go. When I manage to stand without falling over, he steps aside and points at the door. Interpreting it as my cue to leave, I take a few steps, but I have to hold onto the furniture to walk straight. I don't make it to the sofa before his hands stop me. With one arm around my shoulders and the other under my knees, he scoops me up and carries me to the stairs.

"The kitchen," I protest, pointing in the opposite direction.

His chest rumbles with his deep voice. "The kitchen can wait."

In front of his bedroom, he fumbles with his doorknob. When the door swings open, he carries me inside and kicks it shut. The medical equipment is still there. I vaguely wonder when the doctor is going to send for it.

Lying me down on the bed, he undresses me and then himself. His body is hard and rough, the broken lines and deep scars adding to his masculine, forbidden beauty. He climbs over me, pinning my arms above my head. The alcohol loosens my inhibitions. This is not a good idea. I may do and say things I'll regret in the morning.

“Gabriel.” His name comes out as a needy gasp. “I think I’m drunk.”

“Good. A drunk woman never lies.”

He moves down and takes my nipple in his mouth. I arch up, crying out as pleasure ripples through my body.

He licks over the pebbled tip. “Do you find him attractive?”

His raspy tongue sends goose bumps over my skin. I strain my neck to look at him. “W–what?”

He licks the other nipple before sucking it deep into his mouth.

“Ah, God! Gabriel.” I fall back, panting.

“Michael. Do you find him attractive?”

He grips my wrists in one hand and moves the other between my legs, parting my folds and stroking my clit. My hips lift to him, but he removes his touch.

“Answer me, Valentina.”

I gasp as he presses the pad of his thumb on my clit. “Yes. Yes, he’s very pretty.”

His face contorts in a mixture of hurt and acceptance, as if he knew the answer but wanted to punish himself by hearing it. It’s an unusual display of emotion. He’s an open book as he stares down at me, maybe because he believes I’m incoherent, but the alcohol sharpens my awareness and senses. Strangely, my fear retreats to the far corners of my mind, leaving me perceptive to everything else, to the feelings flowing between us and especially to his fingers as he parts me and slips one digit into my wetness, taking me slowly with his finger.

“Would you like him to fuck you?”

I frown, trying to imagine Michael in Gabriel’s position. The idea of any other man touching me fills me with distaste. “No.”

“You can be honest. I won’t punish you for the truth.”

I clench my inner muscles, trying to take his finger deeper, and grind my sex against his palm. “Don’t you understand what you’ve done to me? I want *you*, Gabriel.”

The pain in his eyes doesn’t ease. There’s relief, but grief still sets his face into hard angles that emphasize his harsh features. The shadows of the room hide the scar tissue on his cheek, but not the somber light of his ice blue eyes as he stares at me. To me, he’s perfect. I love the stark lines that define his unusual masculine beauty and even the sorrow that’s permanently etched on his face. Needing to touch him, I pull on his grip, but he tightens his hold.

“Please, Gabriel.” I beg him with my eyes, my voice, and my hips.

He groans as I rotate my lower body, trapping his hand between us. Slowly, the squeeze of his fingers on my wrists relaxes, allowing me to lift my hand to his face. I cup his cheek and brush my thumb over the devastating map of scars. It’s frightening to look at him, but when you find the courage to look, to really look, the power of the beauty that lies underneath the physical destruction is blinding. I’ve seen the beauty inside of him, too. He’s a good father to Carly, and he gives me much more than he takes, even if I’m nothing but property to him.

“I only want you,” I whisper.

For a moment, he leans into my touch, brushing his scarred cheek over my palm, but then he turns his head away, angling his face to the darkness.

“Gabriel.” I moan in protest.

He pushes my legs open wider, positioning his cock at my entrance.

“Gabriel.”

I say his name, trying to bring him back to me, to catch the moment we’ve lost, but he braces himself on his arms, putting more distance between us. The only connection between us is his cock that slams violently into my body. An ache spreads inside of me. He pulls back and does it again, stretching and

burning me with that dull pain that tells me he's too rough. He fucks me so hard my body shifts up to the headboard. Over and over he pounds into me, and all I can do is wrap my legs and arms around him, holding on while I give him everything I've got. With every thrust he growls, keeping his face turned away from me. He's never taken me this brutally before, and even as it hurts, my soul revels in his possession. For now, I don't care that I'm property. I don't care that I'm a price tag and an empty body. I just want to be his.

"Only you," I say.

He lances into me harder, his grunts louder, punishing me for something I don't understand. The rougher he treats me, the softer I mold my body around him.

"Only yours."

He snarls, driving into me with such force I'm scared he'll break me.

"Damn you, Valentina. Don't you dare lie. Not about this."

"I want to be yours."

He grabs my face between his palms and jerks his head toward me, putting our noses inches apart without slowing the hard pace of his hips. "Look at this face. Look at me!"

"I *am* looking."

Angers pulls his features into a fearful mask. His nostrils flare, and moisture brims in his eyes. "Stop it."

"Yours."

He utters a raw cry and grinds his groin against mine. Throwing back his head, he clenches his teeth and bites off the sounds as liquid hotness fills my body. He shakes with his release, his body slick with perspiration. I need him. He made a hole in my heart, and only he can mend it. Snaking my arms around his neck, I pull him down for a kiss, but he untangles my wrists and arranges my arms next to my body. He only rests his forehead against mine for the briefest of moments before he lifts up on one elbow to look at me. Our eyes remain locked as he lets his cock slip free to fill the empty space with

his fingers. Using his release, he lubricates my clit and brings me to a quick orgasm, all the while watching me.

When the aftershocks subside, he takes me to the shower and washes me. Too weak to stand on my feet, he sits on the bench with me straddling him, my head resting on his chest. The water stings my private parts, and I flinch when he soaps me down there. He towels us dry, carries me back to his bed, and then he disappears into the bathroom again. When he returns, he hands me a glass of water and a tablet.

I look at the white pill. “What’s this?”

“Paracetamol. You’ll need it if you don’t want to wake up with a headache.”

He puts the pill on my tongue and makes me drink all the water. The bed dips as he settles behind me, pulling me to his chest.

“I should leave,” I say sleepily.

“I set the alarm for five.” He kisses my shoulder. “Rest.”

I snuggle closer, enjoying the warmth of his embrace. Even if it’s only for a few hours, I’ll take what I can get. I’m used to living off scraps.

I’m almost drifting off when his voice pulls me back from my sleep.

“There was this cat.”

I lie still, waiting for him to continue.

“It was a kitten. Nothing special. Just an alley cat, but to me she was beautiful. She had a soft pelt, black as the night, and eyes like yellow moons. The cat showed up out of the blue at my best friend’s house. He called her Blackie. From that day on, Blackie always followed my friend around. She stayed in his room and slept on his bed.”

His chest expands with a breath. “I was jealous of him. I wanted the cat to come to *my* house. I wanted her to follow *me*, but she didn’t, so I smuggled pieces of fish and steak to his house, luring her through his bedroom window. She ate the food, but still wouldn’t follow me home. One day, when my

friend was at rugby practice, I went to his house and took the cat. I locked Blackie in my room, hiding her from Magda and our maids. I made a bed for her in my closet, and I fed her treats my friend could never afford to give her. I kept her closed in for two weeks. By that time, I reckoned she would have accepted her new, more luxurious home.”

“What happened?”

“The day I let her out, she ran straight back to my friend’s house.” He strokes my arm for a while, then says quietly, “He thought she’d run away, like strays do.”

“Did she continue to live with him?”

“I don’t know. I stopped being his friend after that day.”

“Why?”

“I couldn’t bear to look at that cat.”

What is he trying to say? I turn in his arms to look at him.

He kisses my lips softly. “If you set something free, it doesn’t come back to you, no matter how well you treat it.”

A deep sense of uneasiness settles in my gut. Is he telling me he won’t let me go?

“Sleep.” He kisses me again, the gentle act conflicting with the soreness inside my body that acts as a reminder of his earlier roughness. “You’ll be tired, tomorrow.”

I close my eyes to hide my turbulent emotions from him. His story shocks me. It tells me three things. One, he’ll take whatever he wants. Two, he believes himself undeserving of love.

Three, he’ll keep me for as long as my body serves him. What shocks me more is that I yearn to trust him. As long as he holds Charlie and my life in his hands, I can’t. For the first time, I consider that he won’t honor our deal. He’s not going to set me free like the black kitten. A man like Gabriel doesn’t repeat the same mistake twice. That’s what he was telling me with his story. Tears build up behind my closed eyelids. I turn my back on him again so I can shed them quietly into his pillow. He leaves me with no option. If he doesn’t let me go

when I've settled Charlie's debt, I'm going to have to run away.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Gabriel

Awake long before the alarm goes off, I pull Valentina's soft, warm body closer and mull over last night. Getting Valentina drunk wasn't planned. It's too soon for her to conceive, so I wasn't risking her or a developing fetus' wellbeing. The idea popped into my head while Michael fucked her with his eyes. Sylvia was always brutally honest when she had a drink too many. That was how I found out she never loved me. It shouldn't have come as a surprise. I wouldn't have been so damn gullible if I hadn't been desperate for a woman I could call my own.

Yeah, the truth comes out when a woman is drunk, and unlike men, they don't whisper lies in their moments of passion. When a woman is a second away from coming, that's when you see her true feelings in her eyes. Valentina needs me. That's what I trained her to want. Like the kitten, I lured her with pleasure and orgasms, driving her to her limits and beyond, ensuring that no other man can ever give her what I can, because no other man will have the balls to hurt her to make her come harder. Then why am I gutted? Women want me for my money, for sex, or for the security that comes with being connected to me. Valentina wants me because I designed it so. It's too much, hoping she'll ever want me for me. Girls like her want men like Michael and Quincy. It's nature. There's not a damn thing I can do about nature, except twist, force, and bend it my way. If I need to make her my captive

forever, so be it. Soon, she'll be bound to me in blood. Our child will be a connection she can ever break.

At five, I still my bitter thoughts, switch off the alarm, and start the sad task of waking her. If I could, I would've left her sleeping in my bed. I love having her between my sheets. She groans as I wipe her hair over her shoulder to kiss the gracious curve.

“Wake up, beautiful.”

“Gabriel.” Her voice is sleepy.

With much regret, I throw the sheet off, letting the fresh morning air cool our bodies.

Goose bumps break out over her arms. She turns on her back, rubs her eyes, and stretches.

“What time is it?”

I switch on the nightstand lamp. “Five.”

She sits up and swings her legs over the bed. Her back is a perfect portrait of frail vertebrae covered with silky skin.

She gives me a shy look from over her shoulder. “May I please use your bathroom? With all I drank last night, I won't make it to mine.”

“Go ahead.” I want her to touch everything that's mine. The thought of her fingers trailing over the objects that belong to me makes my skin contract with pleasure, as if she touches *me*.

Her slender hand brushes over the mattress as she gets up. She takes my shirt from the chair and pulls it on. Warmth at the sight of her wearing my clothes fills my chest. When she closes the bathroom door behind her, I get up to select my clothes for the day, but stop dead. Blood spots my sheets. It's not much, only a few drops, but enough to tell me I've broken her again.

I jerk a suit from a hanger with a scowl. God knows I don't deserve anything as beautiful and perfect as her, but I can't let her go.

The door opens, and Valentina enters. Her cheeks are pale, and there are dark circles under her eyes. She smiles at me as she crosses the floor with small steps. Before she reaches the door, I cut her off. I pull her to me with my arm around her waist, cupping her sex gently with my free hand.

“Are you all right?”

She winces at my touch. “Just tired.”

Fury directed at myself combusts in my chest. “We’ll go to bed early tonight.”

She gives me a weak nod. “I better go before Carly or Magda wakes up.”

Reluctantly, I withdraw my touch. “I hurt you.”

“You wanted to.”

“Not like this. You should’ve told me.”

Her gaze holds mine. “No, Gabriel. You didn’t want to hear what I was trying to tell you.” Without another word, she walks gingerly from my room.

I let her go because I don’t have a goddamn choice. Abandoning the suit, I pull on my exercise gear, go down to the gym, and slam my fists into the punching bag until they bleed.

* * *

It’s going to snow in the middle of summer. Carly is having breakfast with us. She’s unusually chatty, to the point that Magda escapes with her coffee to her study.

“Dad,” she says after an exceptionally long account of her week at school, “I’ve got something to tell you.”

My gut twists inside out. I’m not going to like what’s coming. I brace myself as I wait silently with a stoic face.

“I’ve decided to move back in with Mom.”

The blow hits me right between the eyes. I don’t know what I expected, but it wasn’t this. I lower my cup and take a long, deep breath to calm myself. Sylvia’s unexpected visits

and easy agreement to let Carly go out on dates suddenly make sense.

I'm careful to keep my voice even. "What prompted the sudden decision?"

"Mom misses me."

The guilt card is a dirty one for Sylvia to play. "You don't have to make a hasty decision.

Why not think it over for a while?"

"I've been thinking about it for a long time, already. It's not like you'll only see me every second weekend. I can come visit whenever I want."

"Of course. Your room will always be here."

"Thanks, Dad."

There's no point in arguing with Carly once her mind's made up. She takes after me in that regard. I don't trust Sylvia as a mother. She's only ever proved to me she's not capable of the job, and I don't like Sylvia's new boyfriend. All I can do is be there for Carly when she needs me.

"You're not mad?" she asks.

"Of course not." Disappointed, sad, but I'm not mad at my daughter.

"I'm packing some of my things today. Mom will fetch me tonight. Will you be here to say goodbye?"

So soon? "Of course." The day, which has started out bad, goes several shades darker. "Let me know if you need a hand."

"Thanks, but I'm cool."

Unable to contain my emotions, I push back my chair. "I'll pick you up after school." "Uh, Dad?"

I pause, waiting for her to speak.

"Me and some girls from my class are going to Mugg & Bean after school."

"Who's driving?"

“Mom.”

“I’ll see you before you go, then.” I walk to the door before she sees the anguish I’m feeling in my eyes.

“Have a nice day,” she calls after me.

Just like that, my daughter, my precious gift from Sylvia, is ripped from my house.

What I need is a fight. I take Rhett with me to drive around Valentina’s old neighborhood. The chances of finding the bar she mentioned are slight. Many of the old places don’t exist any longer. The neighborhood has, like so many others around, turned into a cesspool of crime. The buildings are dilapidated. Some are broken down to the ground. I requested the city plan for twelve years ago from the municipality, but like the rest of the government, they’re a corrupt bunch of uneducated officials. The records have long since been displaced with the collapse of the system. It’s a joke this country is still functioning. It’s people like me and the rest of the thugs on the street who pull the strings. Politicians are merely the puppets. There are a million ways to go to hell, and I’ve earned them all.

None of the old crowd who knew the neighborhood is left. My father’s cronies from way back who collected money on this beat are gone. Steven died of a heart attack with his pants around his ankles on the can. Dawie kicked the bucket when he fell down his front steps and broke his neck. Barney went out the old-fashioned way, gunned down in his front yard. Mickey passed away from cancer, and Conrad caught AIDS from the whores he pimped. My father’s death, going peacefully in his sleep, is the most gentle and uneventful of them all, contrary to the violent lifestyle he led. How will my end come? Will I die for the *business*, with a bullet in my brain, or like my father in my bed?

Rhett pulls up to the curb and nods at the flaky house with the missing roof tiles. “This one?”

“Yeah.” I cock my gun and slip it into my waistband. “Let’s go.”

Lambert has the door open before I'm strolling through the weeds in his front yard.

"Gabriel." He gives a nervous laugh. "You'll give me the wrong idea, calling on me all the time."

I motion for him to enter. Rhett and I follow. The firm click of the door when I shut it makes Lambert go tense. His yellow skin takes on a pasty color.

"What can I do you for?"

I hate his slang, but I swallow my insults. "Tell me about the bar that used to be around here."

"The bar?" His shoulders relax visibly.

"Neon sign, bald bartender, pool table at the back."

He scratches his head and thinks for a while. "Ah," he says after a moment, "that'll be Porto, but the place doesn't exist, anymore." He sneers. "Won't find much other than squatters living there."

"Who's the owner?"

"Bigfoot Jack."

The name rings a bell. My father mentioned him once or twice.

"Where can I find him?"

"Six feet under."

Shit. Another dead-end. "Who protected him?" Everyone in the hood had protection from someone. You couldn't survive otherwise.

"He was with the Jewish guys from Kensington."

"Jewish? In Portuguese territory?"

"His wife is Jewish. The big boss made a deal with the Porras to cut Bigfoot out of the loop. Why do you want to know all this stuff?" "I'm writing a history book," I say drily.

His nose wrinkles, burying his tiny pig eyes in layers of skin. "You're shitting me." The guy is really thick.

“Where can I find the wife?”

“Won’t do you no good. Sophia’s got Alzheimer’s. She doesn’t recognize an ant from a fly.”

This doesn’t help. I wipe a hand over my face.

Lambert doesn’t seem to know where to put his feet. He shifts from the left to the right.

“Want a beer?”

“Come on.” I nod at Rhett and make my way back to the car.

Inside, my bodyguard turns to me. “Do you mind telling me what’s going on?”

“I need Lambert’s phone records.”

“I’ll call Anton.”

“I already did. They’ve been wiped.”

“From how long back?”

I give him the date on which I first visited Valentina’s almost-husband.

“I know a hacker at Vodacom who’s discreet. I’ll call him and see what he can do.”

While I’m driving, he calls his contact. Before I pull into our driveway, he has a number for me. I park and punch the numbers he reads out loud into my phone. Already by the fourth digit, I know who the number belongs to. As I type in the last digit, Magda’s name pops onto the screen.

I fling the door open and make my way to the house with long strides.

“Gabriel!” Rhett jumps from the car and runs after me.

“Stay out of this,” I call back.

I find Magda in her study. “Why did Lambert Roos call you?”

She leans back, regarding me from over the rim of her glasses. “He wanted to know why we’re sniffing around in his

territory.” She folds her arms. “Why are we, Gabriel?”

“Did you know Bigfoot Jack?”

“Not personally, but everyone in the business knows who Jack was.”

“What do you know about him?”

“Same as you—not much. Why this sudden interest in Bigfoot?”

“I’m trying to piece together Valentina’s history, but it’s all dead-end streets.”

“Why?”

“I’m interested.”

“Don’t get attached to her, Gabriel. I’ve warned you, already.”

“So you have.”

“Are you?”

“Am I what?”

“Getting attached?”

“I don’t think I’m capable of attachment.”

“You’ve always been a soft boy, too soft for what it takes.”

“What does it take, Magda?”

“Do your job.”

“You mean kill her.”

“As agreed.”

I don’t agree at all, but a text comes in from Rhett, informing me the doctor has arrived. I order him to wait upstairs and go in search of Valentina. She’s walking Bruno with Quincy, and seeing them together in friendly banter only escalates my irritability.

“Hey,” she says when she sees me.

Her warm smile cools at my explosive state.

“The doctor’s waiting,” I say.

At my tone, Quincy mumbles a greeting and takes his leave.

“I know. I suggested we get started, but he insisted on waiting for you,” she tells me.

“I’m here now, so let’s go.”

In my room, I tell the doctor to repeat the same tests from yesterday. Yesterday, I wanted to ensure Valentina hasn’t sustained internal injuries that could prevent her from having children.

Today, I need to know I haven’t damaged her.

“Again?” he says, his voice not giving away his thoughts.

I raise my brow in challenge. I pay him enough not to ask questions.

He turns to Valentina. “You know what to do, my dear.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Do it, Valentina,” I say more harshly than what I intended.

She flinches at my tone but obeys. Only when the doctor tells me that she’s fine do I relax. I’d instructed him to inject her with a fertility treatment yesterday to increase her chances of conceiving. She’ll be ovulating a week from today, and my seed will be in her morning, afternoon, and night, until it takes.

I hold out her dress for her to step into and button up the front before guiding her back to the daybed. The doctor unrolls the bandage on her thumb, exposing an angry, red wound. I don’t need his confirmation to know the antibiotics aren’t helping. Neither does Valentina.

She looks at me with big eyes. “I hoped it would be better today.”

The doctor gives me a grim look. “She’ll have to go to the clinic. Now.”

My world comes to a standstill for a third time that day. I take Valentina's hand in mine.

Her palm is cold and clammy. "Is there a risk of her losing her thumb?"

"I don't know. I'm not a surgeon." He pulls off the medical gloves and throws them in the trashcan. "Do you need me to call an ambulance?"

"No." I squeeze her fingers. "I'll take her."

I get Quincy to drive us so I can sit in the back with Valentina, my arm around her shoulders. Her frame is tense, but she leans into my touch when I grip her chin to kiss her lips. From spanking her, I know her pain threshold is low. That's why she was so pale this morning. I want to tell her it will be all right, but there are already enough lies between us, and I simply don't know.

On the way to the hospital, I call my personal insurance broker and get her to arrange preadmittance at the clinic. It's peak hour traffic at five, but Quincy knows the back roads and manages to get us there in little over thirty minutes. With Valentina already admitted, we walk straight to an examination room where a young surgeon waits on us. He takes one look at her finger and orders tests to be done.

"What's the course of action?" I ask tightly.

"One thing at a time. Let's get the results, first."

"How long will it take?"

"An hour, maybe ninety minutes. We have the lab on site, and I requested the tests as a priority. I can get you a private room where you'll be comfortable, or you can wait in the cafeteria."

"Get us a room, please." I can't stand crowds, and I doubt Valentina is in the mood for hospital coffee.

A nurse shows us to a room with bright yellow walls and a single bed with a blue bedspread. Quincy takes up a position by the door while I make Valentina sit on the bed. I check the

time on my phone. It's almost six. I'm about to shove it back into my pocket when it rings.

Carly's name appears on the screen.

"Excuse me." I press a kiss on Valentina's temple and walk to the corner of the room.

"Hello, princess. Where are you?"

"I'm home. Where are you?"

"At the hospital."

"Is something wrong?"

"I had to bring Valentina. Her wound is infected."

"Oh, no. Tell her I hope it's going to be okay. Listen, Mom's here. Rhett is loading my stuff in the car."

"Already?" I glance at Valentina. "When are you leaving?"

"We can't wait long. Mom's got something on. I can stop by next week."

I'm torn in two. I don't want to let Carly go without saying goodbye, but I don't want to leave Valentina, either.

Valentina hops from the bed and lays her hand on my shoulder. "Carly?" she whispers.

I nod.

"Go," she says. "I'll be fine."

"Give me a minute, Carly." I put the call on hold. "I'm not leaving you. Not now."

"Quincy is here. You heard what the doctor said. It may take an hour or more. Go say goodbye to your daughter. I'm a big girl. It's just an infection. I'll get a shot of potent medicine, and then I'll be back."

I stare at her face, her full lips, and her sad, murky eyes. Rationally, what she says makes sense, but I can't get myself to tell Carly I'll be home in thirty minutes.

"Go on," she urges. "Your daughter is moving out of your house. You're not going to let her go like this, without even

being there.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose and take a second to make my decision before taking back the call. “I’ll be home in thirty minutes.”

“Okay,” Carly says brightly. “I’ll wait for you.”

I press a hard kiss to Valentina’s lips. It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell her I love her, but I swallow the words back just in time. A shiver of shock runs down my spine. What the fuck is wrong with me? The thought tumbled into my mind from nowhere. Habit. It must be habit. Whenever I had to leave Sylvia in a difficult situation, I always needed to reassure her of my feelings. I backtrack to the door and say, “I’ll be back later.”

Her smile is warm and easy. It’s a smile meant to soothe. I escape the feelings crashing down on me, leaving them in the confines of the hospital room as I flee outside.

“Stay with her,” I say to Quincy, “and call me when there’s news. Anything she needs, anything at all, don’t hesitate.”

“Yes, boss.”

“Give me the car keys. I’m going to the house, but I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

He fishes the keys from his pocket and hands them to me.

“Don’t move away from this door. Keep her safe.”

He flicks his jacket aside, showing me the gun that’s tucked in his waistband.

I leave the hospital with mixed feelings. If Sylvia was reasonable, I would’ve asked her to wait, but she’s not, and she’ll be especially difficult where Valentina is concerned.

The traffic is a nightmare. It takes me more than forty-five minutes to get home. Sylvia and Carly are waiting outside next to Sylvia’s overloaded convertible.

“Dad!” Carly runs to me when I get out of the car. “I knew you’d come. Told you, Mom.”

She lets me hug her, a rare occurrence. I look at the boxes and suitcases piled up on the backseat of the Mercedes. “Wow, when did you accumulate all this stuff?”

She jabs me with an elbow in the ribs. “You should know. You paid for it.”

“Can you even wear all of that?”

“It’s not only clothes,” she says indignantly. “There are books, too.”

“What, ten?”

Sylvia walks up to us in a tight-fitting, pink pencil-skirt suit. “We have to go.”

“Carly, if you need anything—”

“I’ll call.”

“No more than an hour on your phone per day and no dates without my permission.”

“Gabriel.” Sylvia gives me a hard look. “I’m her mother. I’m capable of handling these decisions.”

“But we’ll make them together.”

She moves away, doing her best not to appear abrupt in front of Carly. “She’s growing up.

Accept it.”

I’m not getting into a fight with Sylvia. Not today. I kiss Carly’s cheek. “I love you, princess. You know that, right?”

She wipes her palm over her cheek. “Yuk, Dad! Since when are you all mushy?”

“Since my baby girl is growing up.” I was going to say leaving, but I don’t want her to feel guilty for spending time with her mom.

“Stop it.” She swats my arm. “You’ll make me cry, and I don’t want my mascara to run.” “Carly.” Sylvia starts tapping her foot.

The two women make their way to the car and get inside. As the vehicle clears the gates, a feeling of desolation creeps

up on me. The house is empty and purposeless. Its framework stands like a big, white elephant behind me. The pool, garden, televisions, everything was for Carly. It's like a piece of me has left with my daughter.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, drawing my attention back to the present. There's a text message from Quincy.

Valentina's in surgery.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Valentina

I wake up in a hospital bed without a piece of me. It's not the end of the world to lose a thumb. Worse things can happen, but I'll never hold a needle and thread again. To be a veterinary surgeon, you need all your fingers. It happened too quickly for me to process. Twenty minutes after Gabriel left, the doctor returned with the news. The digit they sewed back didn't take. I had gangrene in my thumb. To stop the infection from spreading, he had to amputate above the knuckle. Fifteen minutes later, I was wheeled into the operating room.

The door opens, and a nurse enters. "You're awake." She looks at the chart by the foot of the bed and adjusts the drip in my arm. "Ready for visitors? Mr. Louw is anxious to see you." I'm not. I want to be alone to process what happened.

"Push the button if you're in pain." She leaves a call button within reach of my good hand and calls brightly through the door, "You can see her now."

When Gabriel enters, my heart shatters. His hair is messy and his shirt creased, like he slept in it all night. The skin under his eyes is a blue-ish color. He limps to my bedside, his face an unreadable mask. Despite his tall frame and all those muscles, he looks utterly vulnerable. A deep need to soothe him makes me reach out, cupping his cheek.

"What time is it?"

"Just after six." He adds, "In the morning."

“Did you stay the whole night?”

“Of course.”

“You didn’t have to.”

He says nothing, but turmoil suddenly twists his face.

“It’s just a thumb,” I say.

He grabs my fingers and squeezes so hard it hurts. When I cry out he lets go, seeming uncertain what to do with my hand. Finally, he places it on top of the bedspread.

“You’re not the only one who can brag. I’ve got my own scar, now.”

“I’ve already spoken to the doctor about a prosthesis.”

“I don’t want an artificial thumb.”

“Why not? It’ll look natural.”

“It won’t function.”

“No.” He avoids my eyes. “It won’t.”

“I don’t care about how I look.” When his eyes turn stormy, I try for humor. “Damn, I’ll never be able to hitchhike.”

A smile breaks through his dark expression. “You don’t have to. You’ve got me.” Not forever.

He traces a finger along my jaw. “There are other things. Veterinary assistant. Nurse.” It’s like telling me there are other men than him. “Yes,” I say softly, “there are other things.”

* * *

Time flies by during the next few weeks. Christmas comes and goes. I shared a quiet lunch with Kris and Charlie. Instead of buying each other gifts, we donated money to a charity for stray animals. Gabriel, Sylvia, Carly, and Magda had a party with their associates and friends. Magda hired caterers, so my help wasn’t needed. Gabriel gave me a spa voucher for Christmas that included every imaginable pampering treatment. My gift to him was of a more depraved nature. He asked to tie me up and film spanking and fucking me. He

didn't need my permission, but my free will was the gift he wanted. It was another way of twisting more submission from me, of making me fall deeper into the darkness that is us. Afterward, he made me watch it. Like the perverse being I've become, it turned me on, and the reward for my reaction was a tender marathon of slow lovemaking.

The house is quiet without Carly. She comes to visit every second weekend for a couple of hours. I can tell Gabriel misses her. After New Year, the house turns even quieter when Magda leaves for Cape Town. I don't know what kind of work she's doing there, and I don't ask. Gabriel is often out on business, leaving me alone in the mansion. Gabriel, Quincy, and Rhett treat me like an invalid, carrying the washing basket and anything else I can easily enough pick up. For some tasks, I switch to my left hand. Others, I manage with four fingers.

Marie comes back to work, her speech impaired and her disposition brusquer than before. As the traveling between home and work becomes too much for her, she moves into a bedroom in the house. I have a strong suspicion she tattles to Magda. She watches me like a hawk. For that reason, even if Magda and Carly aren't present, I still don't spend whole evenings in Gabriel's bed. Some nights he comes to me, and some nights I go to him. When we're together, I'm his sex object. His pet. When Magda enters the equation, I'm property. Gabriel is careful to tone down the affection he shows me in private when Marie or Magda is around.

Kris is supportive. She said I could still buy into the practice, even if we both know I'll never be able to afford it on a maid or veterinary nurse's salary. Aletta was sad when I told her the news. Shortly after, she informed me they awarded the bursary to another, needy student. Charlie got very involved with the dog walking. He takes the task to heart, and the responsibility seems to do him good.

It's only me who's not doing well. On a non-physical level. My checkups are good. The doctor says the infection hasn't spread. I'm stuck in Gabriel's house, submitted to his mercy, and I can't say he's mistreating me. I've come to crave the spankings and beltings. He buys my food and clothes.

Anything I want, I only have to mention it, and I'll find it in my room the next day. It's as if he's trying to make up for the loss of my dreams and the dark needs he submits me to with material compensation. His gifts range from cosmetics to books and even a new iPhone.

Sex with Gabriel is always explosive, even when it's gentle. Lately, there's a lot of gentle. That's why I can't understand my growing sadness. The kinder he acts toward me, the sadder I feel. I can't bring the man in my bed together with the man who holds Charlie's future over my head. I want to hate both, but I know better. It's been a long time since I felt only desire for Gabriel. I care about him, and I hate that I do.

As always, Gabriel picks up on my mood. That night, he arranges my naked body on the mattress so he can look at me. He cups my breast gently, stroking his thumb over my nipple.

"Ouch." The sensation is almost too much to bear.

Testing the weight of my breast, he gives me a thoughtful look. "You're close to having your period."

He almost looks disappointed. It's not like he hasn't made love to me during my period. I don't understand his silent dejection.

"Yes." I turn on my side, facing the wall, relieved to understand the reason for my depressive feelings. It's just a heavy bout of PMS.

He rubs a palm over my stomach and presses his cock between my legs. "I'll be gentle." Without waiting for my consent, he rolls me onto my stomach and settles between my thighs.

"Open for me, beautiful."

I open my legs, giving him the view he wants. He strokes and teases me for a long time, until his fingers are soaked with my wetness. Only then does he push inside, slow and easy. It's then that it hits me. Since I've been back from the hospital, he's only taken me from behind. How could I have missed this before? He's fucked me against the wall, on his desk, in his armchair, in the pool, and in a variety of other, creative places,

but my butt was always pressed against his groin, my face looking away from him. Is it me? Does he find me unattractive? I twist under him, starting to squirm.

“Valentina.”

“Let me up.”

I don't expect him to, but he obliges. He watches me warily as I switch positions, turning him on his back.

“What are you doing?”

“Looking at you.”

“Why?” he says with a pained expression.

“Because I like to.”

I lower myself over his cock, taking him into the depth of my body. I let the pleasure show on my face, letting him see what he does to me as I start rocking, my nerve endings coming alive for him.

“You don't have to,” he says.

“Do you like to look at me?”

“You know I do.”

“Then stop talking and fuck me.”

It's as if a dam inside of him breaks. He growls and grips my hips, keeping me in place while he pounds into me, taking me to the edge I want to go.

As my body tightens, he cries out his climax. It's the quickest we've come together since the week he started fucking me. I drape my body over his chest, holding him inside of me. I wish I could stay like this, but I'm not naïve enough to let myself believe this will last. It matters nothing to him. He has no emotional obligation to me. He can fuck anyone he wants without explanation.

“Gabriel?”

He strokes my back. “Yes, beautiful?”

“Do you fuck other women?”

His hand stills. “Why?”

I shrug. “Don’t I need tests for STD?”

The caressing resumes. “There’s only you, Valentina. I told you before.”

“It was a long time ago. It could’ve changed.”

“I’ll tell you if it does.”

My heart feels like it has just gone through a blender. It can change. I was right. I swallow my tears, angry at my irrational feelings. I have no right to expect more from him. It’s my own damn, stupid fault I fell for my tormentor.

* * *

Three weeks later, I resume my secret training with Rhett. My amputated thumb has healed enough to undertake more strenuous exercise. I’m out of shape, even if I tried to stay fit by using the Walker in the gym. He floors me every time, throwing my ass on the mat. It’s during our session on Thursday evening when Gabriel is out on business that I burst into frustrated tears.

Rhett looks at me, aghast. “Did I hurt you?”

“No.” I wipe at my cheeks. “I’m just emotional.”

My damn period hasn’t started yet. The sooner it does, the sooner I’ll get over this depressed state.

He offers a hand to pull me up. I’m scarcely on my feet when the evening’s dinner pushes back up my throat. I rush to the bathroom, making it to the toilet just before I empty my stomach.

Rhett runs in after me, coming to a halt next to the toilet.

Dry heaves wrack my body, making my eyes tear up.

“Jesus, Valentina.” He takes a stash of paper towels and hands them to me. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine.”

Feeling slightly better, I rinse my face and wash my hands.

He touches my arm. “Are you...?”

“No.” I shake my head. “I’m not sick.”

“I meant are you pregnant?”

My lips part in shock. The blood drops straight from my head to my feet, leaving me feeling dizzy. “No, of course not.”

I’ve never missed my pill. I am however a little late. Oh, God. What if? Gabriel will kill me.

Impossible.

I’ve been careful.

I take another towel from the dispenser and wipe my mouth, noticing how much my hands are shaking. “I think I’ll call it a night.”

“Can I get you anything?”

“No, thank you. I just need an early night to catch up on sleep.” He watches me leave, not saying a word.

I crawl into bed after a shower, but I don’t close an eye. It’s late when Gabriel returns. He strips naked and climbs into bed beside me. I’m wet for him, but he takes his time to lick and tease my folds. He doesn’t stop until I’ve come twice, and only then does he fuck me. The way he loves my body is incredible, but my mind isn’t there. My mind is searching for solutions to problems I haven’t even confirmed, yet.

“Where are you?” he finally asks, kissing my breasts.

“I’m sorry. I’m just tired.”

He covers my body in kisses, all the way from my stomach to my feet. He’s so gentle, I want to cry.

When he’s kissed his way back up to my neck, he hugs me tightly and says, “Go to sleep.”

* * *

After breakfast, I walk to the staff unit. Rhett is sitting on the porch, sipping his coffee. He gets to his feet when he sees me.

“You look like shit.”

“Thanks.” I give him a wry smile. “I need a favor, please.”
“Anything.” He leaves the cup on the rail.

“I need you to go to the pharmacy.”

His look is pitiful. “All right.”

“Gabriel can’t know. Do you hear me?”

“Valentina.”

He walks down the steps and reaches for me, but I pull away.

“He can’t know, Rhett, not until I know for sure.”

He swallows and nods. “I’ll be back soon.”

* * *

A short time later, I sit on the seat of the toilet, staring at the two blue lines on the strip.

Positive.

I’m expecting Gabriel’s baby.

A mixture of feelings rushes through me. I’m faint with wonder. I’m also sick with fear. Will he blame me? He’ll be furious. Worse, he’ll think I did it on purpose to trap him. Gabriel will never want a baby with a woman who’s property. I don’t mind raising a child on my own. Gabriel doesn’t have to give me a cent. I won’t expect support from him, but what if he doesn’t want me to have this baby? What if he forces me to have an abortion? If he drives me to a clinic, there won’t be anything I can do to stop him. He still owns me, and now he owns the baby growing in me, too.

There’s only one thing I can do to save the little life inside me. I quickly pack a bag, my hands trembling so much I drop my phone twice. I wrap the pregnancy kit in a plastic bag, and discard it in the trash outside where no one will look. Only Rhett will guess, but by the time Gabriel confronts him, I’ll be long gone.

In Gabriel’s study, I write a quick note.

I can’t honor my promise. I hope you’ll forgive me.

Leaving it on his desk, I pull the door close, knowing Marie won't enter his study. Then I call a private taxi. It's going to cost an arm and a leg, but I can't afford to take a minivan. I need to disappear fast. Rhett left with Gabriel a short while ago, and Quincy is walking Bruno. I walk past the guards at the gate with a wave, my bag slung over my shoulder, acting as normal as I can. They've only seen me leaving the property on foot once, but I'm leaving on a regular enough basis for them not to stop me.

A block from the house, I pause to wait. Two minutes later, the taxi pulls up to the street corner I gave the driver. Looking over my shoulder to make sure no one is following, I jump inside.

“Go, please. Quickly.”

I don't glance back as the driver speeds away. I cup my hands over my stomach and stare straight ahead.

I have to.

For my baby.

Valentina and Gabriel's story concludes in Book 2, Consent.