

FOR THE **LOVE OF**  
*Villains*

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**FOR THE LOVE OF VILLAINS:  
ANTHOLOGY**

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## FOR THE LOVE OF VILLAINS

I shouldn't be falling in love...

Fear fuels my every move...the pulsating adrenaline tickling  
my spine.

I shouldn't sacrifice safe and secure for dangerous and  
deranged...

I shouldn't be attracted to morally corrupt...

*Yet...*

Desire is coating my traumatized heart...

And I'm running right into the arms of the wrong person. The  
**villain.**

Some of your favorite authors have teamed up to bring to you  
new stories in every shade of morally gray you can think of.

From mafia to bully, dark romance and age gap... you will  
find villains living in these pages.

*Do you dare to fall in love with bad?*

For the Love of Villains: Anthology

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## WARNING

These collections of stories contain triggers that are not limited to: graphic violence, bondage, stalking, kidnapping, explicit sex, non/dub con.

Reader discretion is advised.

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BAD HEIR

ALEX KING

## BLURB

*Ruining them was easy, surviving them was hard...*

### **CLOVER**

Cassius McCall wasn't supposed to die young. He was supposed to outlive me and give my curse the middle finger when I finally beat the odds.

Drowning in the guilt, I found a way to get even and punish the people responsible for his death.

*The Bad Royals.*

Revenge wasn't served best cold, or even hot, it was served best from a throne and filled with spite.

They were going to answer for his death even if I had to break every rule to get their confession. I never expected to find a cure to outliving the West woman curse while tripping over unbreakable oaths...

### **AMBROSE**

The Brotherhood of Bastards was as elite and as sinister as it got.

When Cassius, my twin brother, decided to take his own life I was forced to take his place on the throne no matter how much I rebelled.

Clover West broke my brother's heart by loving me instead of him. With my new found power I was going to force her to worship me the way she always wanted until she hated me for every demand.

He left me here, wearing his face, forced to deal with our bastard of a father, motherless and alone. I couldn't forgive him for it.

Neither of them...

# PROLOGUE

*Dying* isn't something you choose. No one chooses to die but in this case I had combed over every detail until it felt like the only logical choice.

Revenge wasn't served up cold or hot, it was best served from six-feet under a pile of dirt where I was no longer a pawn in the long game.

Taking myself out of the game meant not getting to fawn over the way I had puppeteered every possible outcome, even the negative ones, where losing Clover to the same fate was unavoidable. I had made peace with everything by the time I climbed on top of the old chair lacquered in a thick gloss and the colors muted the way only time controls.

Expecting to feel nervous, or at least anxious, I stood there on that chair in an abandoned building that was still scarred with damage from the fire over ten years ago. Not a single trepidatious thought entered my mind.

Tugging on the rope hanging from the exposed pipe above my head I secured every motivation I had to leave this place behind. I was exhausted from fighting with Clover all summer, beaten up by the other kings refusing to accept me as their king, ashamed to wear this last name, and more alone than I was before.

Being left alone with the kind of nightmare living inside my head was only a death wish for disaster. I felt like the harbinger of death having to die with all the secrets I was given when I accepted the throne.

Sworn to the secretary and bound by revenge, I didn't leave them anything behind but perfectly placed clues, directions they had to earn, and a death they had to feel down to the bone.

Leaving this place behind felt like an obligation but to them it was going to be an awakening.

Ambrose was going to crumble under the demands, Clover was ruining whatever pact the bad royals had, and everyone was going to be a loser the same way they forced me to be my whole life.

# CHAPTER 1

*SERIAL* KILLERS GET MANIFESTOS, CIVILIANS GET SUICIDE notes, so what the fuck does that leave for the entitled prick I've become?

There was no out. There is no relief of death or manifesto describing all the ways I came to hate my life. I wasn't picking out people to blame. I was still surprised that Cassius didn't...

I mean I was to blame, we all knew it and I blamed everyone else the way pricks do. Only when I imagine killing them I picture myself going up in flames right along with them.

A certain death by all the dishonor.

All the shame I could smear across my good name. All the power I could single handedly vanquish, and all the panties I'd ruin.

I was a walking nightmare somehow wedged between manifestos and suicide notes. Between my calculating father and my unstable twin brother I was being forced into being sane. My version of that looked like pushing people far enough away that nothing hurt anymore.

I was just a wheel in a big goddamn machine we kindly called the Brotherhood. It was more like a band of bastards, all of us motherless instead of fatherless, and all us worse for it.

She died giving birth to my twin brother and I. It felt weird calling her my mother when she wasn't ever mine.

She was more of a fantasy, a daydream - things that aren't real and weren't going to save any part of me. All that shit was

was a band aid, ways to stop the bleeding momentarily but never fixes the problem.

Clover West was too damn distracting with her homeschool naivety and failed attempts at making me jealous by befriendng the one person I don't control - *my twin brother*.

He was the colossal fuck up of a shadow following me wherever I went yet our father treated him like a prize he had won. Coddling him, praising him, giving him the world in hopes he'd finally just say yes to our legacy.

Cassius McCall was born first by two minutes and thirty-five seconds making him the bad heir to our corrupt throne. And I was just the bad omen.

My father treated him like a fucked up science experiment our whole life. Utilizing every resource he could, every prescription drug, every specialist who owed him a favor and he still couldn't fix him.

That was our father's speciality - finding weakness and erasing it. Not even just in his own children but every person around him.

He wanted to create a perfect world, one that had zero flaws and only reflected back his perfectly botoxed features.

Cassius was the kind of broken that pushed everyone away enough to feel bad but not motivate anyone to try harder. Trying only makes you feel like a failure when it changes nothing.

There was nothing actually wrong with Cassius. He just didn't bother faking; he hated everything about our life and cemented it by loving the wrong person.

*Clover-fucking-West.*

Too bad she was in love with me instead.

Too bad he was going to be the kind of king who is forced to use her for an heir before he has to kill her before she turns thirty.

Cassius knew the rules better than anyone. He had been training, studying, wearing that fucking ring like he was proud. I only found out when he kept sneaking out after hours. He swapped out, getting high and driving around town with Clover in the passenger seat, for becoming the perfect cult member. I knew the truth though, he was playing a different game and using their weapons.

Being the spare, I wasn't actually a part of the Brotherhood. I was simply here to step in if Cassius couldn't.

Gunner, Magnus and Lawson were first born - bound to the same laws as Cassius. They weren't spares, they were heirs.

Remembering all the fast cars he crashed, expensive clothes he ripped up just to proclaim he could, the messy hair hiding every emotion he was supposed to have but didn't. He had everything to gain and nothing to lose. He was the perfect king of kings.

Now I was forced to take his place as king, as the spare, as the only living heir carrying the McCall name.

Can't wear a crown to the grave and his grave was the exact thing I was looming over with the rose hanging from my hand dreadfully.

The one person I couldn't out run or shame anymore. The one person who was always going to be a part of me, despite the turmoil, had died.

Cassius was found four days ago, on the heels of our eighteenth birthday, days before the crowning ceremony, the day before we stepped foot on Heritage's College campus.

He had hung himself from the exposed pipes in the abandoned dorms hidden on campus, blending right into well-used buildings, right in plain sight.

Cassis McCall was dead and I didn't even see the warning signs.

Not even the ones I inflicted.

Everything he did was a quiet rebellion making it impossible to see the severity in his actions. It got easy to ignore his dark sense of humor and the way death never scared him.

Something I regret now.

Dropping the rose on the coffin lowering into the fresh grave I twisted so hard that my dress shoe kicked dirt six feet down like an insult I didn't mean. Whispering to myself I spoke like he could hear me from Hell.

*Rest well, brother. Raise hell down there.*

Hell was the only place we were ever going to end up. Our families chased the money, yearned for more hours in the day to be greedy with, and whatever power was up for grabs - well, we took it without asking.

The brotherhood was hated and for so many good reasons it was hard to pick one.

We were the elite. Everything we had was the result of hard work and sacrifice. Our lineage decided to not make it not optional, you had no choice but to rise to their occasion.

The Brotherhood was born out of their desire to stay on top and groom every other generation to rise to the challenge.

My brother was their golden boy and the pressure crushed him.

Now I have to bend without breaking.

Walking through the cemetery I practically danced around the lined up bodies with respect I rarely showed. I didn't need to piss off the dead and prove to Cassius he could in fact bother me from the grave. Either way it was going to bother me. I knew Cassius better than any one and I knew my brother would never kill himself. He would never leave Clover behind to fend for her fucking self.

Shrugging off the suit jacket I tossed it through the passenger seat window of my Porsche that sat along the curb like a sore thumb. Everything about the rich and elite meant

we couldn't cry about anything, including death. We had too much to be grateful for or some shit.

I didn't want any of it, they could exile me and I would throw a party to celebrate our emancipation.

The phone in my dress pants buzzed against my thigh when I fished it out before yanking on the door.

Another text message. From no other than Clover West on my brother's fucking ancient flip phone. Covered in duct tape and gashes on the cheap looking silver finish, I flipped it open and read the digitized letters: *I'm so sorry, Cas. Just call me so we can talk. I don't want to fight anymore.*

None of the other texts read like a bad omission.

Clover West was a bad omen, just like me, when she decided to make my brother her best friend just to piss me off but she just turned into an awful curse by saying sorry to a dead man.

Clover was going to confess every sin and I still wasn't going to absolve her.

Not even a little bit.

Tossing his broken, barely hanging on, phone in the passenger seat next to me I jabbed my finger into the push to start button that ignited the engine. I was supposed to be staying back, shaking hands and looking sad enough to count towards some kind of absent guilt but not so sad it made me look weak.

At Least according to my father who only cared about the Brotherhood.

Everything he said felt like a mantra, a rule, a code to live by.

He could force me to take Cassius' docile place but he couldn't change me fighting tooth and nail every step of the way. I wasn't Cassius and I wasn't going to do it simply because it was easier to be obedient.

I wasn't a dog that you could be housebroken, I was his fucking son. Not some kind of spare he could ignore my whole

life. There were no replacements anymore.

*He already broke that one.*

Slamming my foot down on the gas, I squeezed the emergency brake creating a huge storm of smoke while I peeled away from the curb. Cassius's death was an open wound my father was dumping salt into by crowning me king. Nothing about this was going to be easy, call it my own kind of salt.

Recklessly driving through the streets at speeds that seemed suicidal I dialed Gunner and waited for him to answer. "Where is she?"

"Library like the good little girl she is." His voice was easy like nothing bothered him even though he had the most to lose by pissing on our oath.

"Not when I'm done with her."

"Sounds like you have a plan," I could hear Gunner suck in an inhale off whatever he was smoking through my phone.

Making a quick turn I headed for the campus library she frequented, her dad worked on campus and it suddenly gave her the right to be there before we were freshman. "There is no plan. Her life was ruined the second his ended. It's just inevitable."

A female's voice chuckled and I could hear his attention fading. "No, no brother, that's just the beginning. Ruining her is foreplay. Ruining her forces her to step up her game. No one wants an easy target."

Hanging up abruptly I dropped my phone back into my lap with Clover West running circles around my mind. Gunner was right, ruining her was foreplay, I wanted to destroy her after she thought she was raised from the ashes. Not when she was weakest.

*Gunner Baron, Lawson Ledger, and Magnus Gamble* weren't going to wear the crown the same way I would have to. The first born of the next generation was King of Kings, groomed to be in charge. Everyone else was royal but in less profound ways.

I trusted them despite their willingness to comply with commands that trickled down from our fathers. Gunner had been keeping an eye on Clover West since the night they found my brother's dead body and I stole his phone from the remains.

The commotion drew everyone in, including me. I just never expected to find my friends standing there, holding me back from seeing the damage.

A drunk girl, maybe a fight even, but not my brother in a body bag.

Honestly, it wouldn't have mattered. A piece of me felt severed before I even made it over to the crowd forming. Every hard swallow against my dry throat only forced the feeling to sink in deeper. I knew it was Cassius. He was the one person designed to know exactly how to make it hurt.

I'm not gonna pretend to understand why he did what he did, I just know he broke a silent bond between us and it hurt more than I was willing to admit.

Cassius was dead and he forced me to keep living. He knew I didn't want anything to do with The Brotherhood and now I had no choice as the last remaining heir to their bad throne.

Campus was dead, the entire town was pretending to mourn a royal of The Brotherhood just out of fear. This entire town was our best kept secret, like a perfect hiding place for elites running the world. None of them knew Cassius, they knew his reputation, not him. Yet, all of them pretended to be demolished with mourning.

It made me want to burn the entire town down. Good thing I didn't have a match.

No one knew who or even why was behind the Brotherhood but we weren't hiding either. All four families lived along the hill in mansions that gloated, our cars screamed privilege as we sped through the streets, and the rules? Those didn't apply to us.

Everyone in Heritage just hoped to be accepted at one point in their life so they kept quiet. Praying to somehow make the cut. No one got accepted, that was the beauty of it. You had to be born into it, this wasn't skull and fucking bones.

Only the worst curses were genetic.

You'd never be good enough.

You had to be born a male with one of the four last names and pray you weren't born first.

Pulling into the parking lot in the back of the library I sat back, staring out the windshield and flicking his phone open again. Dialing into the voicemail after seeing the notification digitized on his antique phone, I heard the automated system read the timestamp of his last message before his voice soaked my eardrums.

*None of this is going to make sense. Even if it did, you wouldn't believe me. I can't wear the crown and neither can you. They want me to do things I can't do... There's no time to explain shit. Open your eyes before you sit on that throne. Mom didn't die giving birth to us. He killed her, Ambrose. I found her note.*

I listened to his voice sound desperate and fearful in ways Cassius never was. He was the epitome of calm and collected, always too carefree. Except in this moment gifted from his last living moments.

This new version of my twin brother was something I could never imagine. None of it felt like he took his own life, it felt like he had no choice. It was kill yourself or be killed.

Lifting my hips off the crisp leather I tucked the phone into my pocket when I stormed the library doors. I was determined to find her amongst her precious fucking books and make her confess in the silence of that place.

The library might as well have been a museum, full of art, old books on antique shelves and rows of long tables like it

wasn't meant for studying but plotting. Everything about HU felt like a fuck you if you wanted to not live in the past. Surrounded by the old it felt mysterious, every corner lurked a new threat, every hallway felt like a secret, and whatever sanity you have was always in question.

Heritage High was my stomping ground. HU was a tainted fucking kingdom.

Everything about the library on campus felt like an interlude to a pledge. The tunnels living underneath and branching out all over campus. Everywhere except the girl's campus that lived on the other side of my brother's crime scene.

His death divided us, literally.

I found Clover sitting by a window, the light pouring through before the sun disappeared entirely. All the burnt orange flooded my eyes yet she still looked tragically beautiful. That was the worst part, I wanted her more than ever and it felt like pissing on his grave.

Bracing all my weight on the table I leaned into her practically foaming at the mouth. "He was your best fucking friend and you didn't know he was going to -" Cutting myself off to lower my voice I continued, "*do that?*"

"What are you talking about? I'm not Cassius's keeper." Her voice was sharpened with innocence and lightness that should have told me she didn't even know his body was cold yet. Instead it only made me fight harder for a confession.

"Real fucking cute, babe. Like he wouldn't have told you he was going to kill himself." I stood up staring her down and watched her come undone like the perfect actress.

She was in love with me and let my brother die loving her. Her entire existence was an act to keep him happy and she failed.

Her lip trembled perfectly and I watched her execute the entire silent monologue. Finally spitting out, "That crosses a line, Ambrose. We don't like each other, that's clear but that's

downright cruel. You know your brother is different... You don't have to go out of your way to make our lives hell."

I watched her consider it to be true then discard my confession for my typical brand of cruelty. I couldn't blame her but lying to get a reaction was child's play. I only needed the truth to make it hurt.

"Cruel is fucking my brother knowing he has been pinning over you since freshman until it killed him. You're a fucking bitch and if you think I won't destroy you until you off yourself too then you're fucking insane, sweetheart." My body leaned over the table until my face was so close I didn't need to threaten her, she was already tensing up with fear.

Eye for a fucking eye.

"Ambrose," she pleaded, still not understanding how true it was.

"Don't fucking bother. You can't apologize for existing. It's not your fault that no one wants you here." Dropping my phone down in front of her on the table with his obituary on the screen that my father, no doubt, had his assistant write so it sounded human.

Begrudgingly her eyes found their way to the screen before gasping with her hand over her mouth. What a good actress, selling every little jagged breath.

Snatching up my phone, I left her there trembling, on the verge of sobbing and her best friend's death hand delivered in the worst possible way. She wasn't innocent and she deserved every guilty pleasure this gave me.

Clover West didn't know her place and now my brother wasn't here to sugar coat it.

Every emotion I normally shoved down deeper seemed to implode inside me until my eyes stung and my knuckles went white. I couldn't even bring myself to go to the archives and fetch my mother's suicide note. I just wanted to get behind the wheel and drive until no one knew who I was.

I spent my entire life blaming myself for being born, killing our mom in the process. Maybe if I wasn't born her

body could have handled laboring Cassius and she would still be here.

I acted like my life wasn't truly mine to live because I didn't deserve to live when she died.

None of that was true now. My mother killed herself to escape this family the same way my brother did.

Escaping wasn't a choice when I needed to know why they left me here to pick up their pieces.

## CHAPTER 2

*AMBROSE* McCALL WAS THE KIND OF EVIL THAT DIDN'T PUSH you to the brink of sanity, he pushed you right off the edge. Until the smallest mistakes felt catastrophic and irreversible.

Most people couldn't pinpoint the moment of abuse that turned into new awakenings but I could. It was the day I found out Cassius McCall had taken his own life.

My best friend.

The only person I trusted.

I had no doubt his vile twin brother had contributed to the mountain of reasons Cassius had to leave me behind. Every day was a war waging to be won between them and I had been playing referee all summer. It was a rock and a hard place - loving them both in completely different ways.

It became almost impossible to hold Ambrose accountable when Cassius took a turn for the worst. After his master plan our senior year, to somehow take control back it became the only thing he cared about. Every word, action, every idea, and every conversation revolved around getting them back for proclaiming us losers.

Cassius pulled away from me when I suggested moving on from his half baked idea. After that it felt like I had become the enemy too.

I deserved it for hooking up with Ambrose, for letting Magnus defile me just to have enough evidence to put him on house arrest with an ankle monitor all summer. Taking out

Magnus didn't even the playing field, not to Cassius, he wanted the leader of the bad royals - not their foot soldier.

He wanted the impossible. Like having me.

I agreed to be his queen without knowing what that truly meant. I wanted it to mean forever - just in a different way.

I wasn't stupid, Cassius was in love with me. It was obvious to everyone around us, even my own father who begged and bribed me to cut off the McCall boys entirely. He saw this kind of pain coming... just not this way.

I was always bound to get hurt by someone with the last name McCall.

It was some kind of fucked up fate as if I didn't have enough bad omens in my life,

Death followed me around, taking the people I loved most and leaving my skin just a little bit more tough.

Instead of drowning in shame and guilt, I decided I was going to set fire to everything I was and see what rose from my ashes. I couldn't be the next person Ambrose destroyed, just another stroke to his ego. He'd enjoy that too much. I needed to be his nemesis instead of his enemy, his target, his easy victim. No, I was going to be his rival.

I had to kill whatever feelings I had for Ambrose. I had to bury the memories of that one stupid night we had together that had fooled me into seeing a side of him that didn't actually exist. The nice parts.

Waiting until I knew he had left the library parking lot by peering over the window's edge I quickly gathered all my books in my arms and made it to an exit. I had lost track of the time and being late to the hospital for my treatment wasn't part of my agreement with my father.

Independence was a blow to his need to protect his very sick daughter.

Twisting my wrist I kept looking at my watch when I tugged on the door handle of my car and threw my textbooks in the passenger seat. Getting behind the wheel I wasted no

time in twisting the key into the ignition and reversing with no apologies.

Driving a dangerous speed I was enroute to the hospital for my treatment, one that had gone from weekly to ramped up to every other day. I was sick but never given a real diagnosis, not one that stuck. Instead, every year a new test had decided the doctors were wrong and it was given a new name.

*Same evil, new name.*

I was the kind of sick that didn't get better with some rest and Advil, I was terminal and it didn't matter what they called it. I called it inevitable death.

Sometimes I call it a curse.

Sometimes an heirloom.

Every woman in the West lineage had died young and I knew I wasn't an exception to that rule.

Parking in the front of the building I stormed the automatic doors and raced for the elevator. Jamming my thumb into the buttons I leaned against the wall listening to my jackhammering heart while I tried to catch my breath. Everything was covered in a dull haze of blurriness when I clamped my eyes down waiting for the unmistakable sound of the elevator arriving on the floor I needed.

Once the doors pried open I took a deep inhale and let my shoulders rise just to fall back down as I stepped out.

Everything about this wing of the hospital was colorful and fun, a good way to distract us all from dying. It was a valiant effort but nothing really distracts from dying, not even living.

Giving myself zero time to mourn Cassius I breezed through the waiting room, past the receptionists, and right into Dr. McCall's office. My treatments were a lot less red tape and professionalism, it was more a favor to my father for the years of friendship they shared in high school.

The last ditch effort to save his baby girl when all the others failed.

Crawling into the oversized, tufted, chair sitting in the corner I crossed my legs and tried not to cry surrounded by tributes to Cassius scattered around his office. Photos, pieces of art I recognized from class, things that were unmistakably his like the winning oar from last year's regattas. Dr. McCall's office was a shrine to his son. What would he do now? Build mosellums?

Recounting Ambrose's words in my head I scanned the room for signs of life but came up empty. It was almost like he didn't exist at all.

The entire room wouldn't stop shouting at me when I dropped my head down into my hands, letting the sob wreck through my body. I didn't even hear the door open before I smelled the heavy scent of his cologne.

Dr. McCall wasn't exactly your friendly neighborhood doctor. He drove a 1962 Rolls-Royce, was vocal about Botox prevention, his office was the lap of luxury, and was considered damn near royalty to this town.

He has more power than our mayor and that makes him dangerous when that many people are listening, following.

"Clover. I'm sorry for your loss, I know you two were close." He stood in front of me, hands on his hips and head down as he spoke to me about his own son's death like he didn't know him at all.

I wanted to tell him his *other* son broke the bad news.

I wanted to scream because I never got to say goodbye.

I wanted to argue that my invite to his funeral must have been lost in the mail but instead I swallowed my sobs.

Standing up, my legs felt weak and unstable as I hurled myself into Dr. McCall, forcing his arms around me, breaking my fall. All I could whisper was how sorry I was. Not for his loss but the part I knew I played, something his father would never understand.

He had twin boys, choosing one would be something he understood. Just not in this case. I was guilty and whatever guilt I was carrying around felt warranted.

I had fallen in love with Ambrose but that didn't stop me from flirting with Cassius or letting him love me while I pinned for his brother.

Dr. McCall's arms were tense and I could hear his heart oddly calm for something still sporting an all black suit reeking of death. "We were all surprised by this. Cassius was troubled but... not like this. Did he say anything to you?"

Say anything? No, I broke his heart into a million small pieces that rendered him speechless. He knew I loved Ambrose and the argument spawning from that deception left our friendship ruined. I had been texting, calling and leaving voicemails that were never answered.

Cassius made me the enemy.

Shaking my head. I forced myself to be silent.

"He'll miss you most, Clover." His voice deflated and I felt him pull away. Moving safely behind his desk, he sat down before fidgeting with the large ring sitting on his wedding band finger. "The scans don't look great. We need to be more aggressive with your regime in order to beat this."

The cold empty feeling he left me with in the middle of his office felt almost like punishment enough. Moving enough to let my body slip between the chairs and my ass crash into one. My face felt carved into by the hot tears still leaving my skin damp and my throat felt violated by dryness when I opened my mouth to speak. "I'm never going to beat anything. I've been sick my whole life. When do we call it quits?"

I had been living part time in hospitals as long as I could remember, pumping poison through my veins, and praying for miracles. No amount of good behavior was going to save me now.

I was cursed, doomed, and fated to die just like every other woman who wore the West last name.

"There's been enough improvement to tell us we are on the right track. You're still under eighteen, Clover, that decision isn't yours to make."

I had to be eighteen to make my own medical decisions. Eighteen in order to decide you rather die. Yet Cassius took matters into his own hands.

Not that I wanted to die, I just wanted everyone to stop saving me. I wanted the bruises, the breaks, the ache that came with living outside their definition.

My father was overprotective. So much that I was homeschooled until I begged my way into Heritage High. That's where I pissed off Ambrose by not realizing he was some kind of treasure by daring to sit with him at lunch until his twin brother saved me.

*See? Someone was always saving me.*

Playing human shield was just one of the ways Cassius and I became close enough that people would expect the other to arrive right after the other. We were inseparable. He would even come to my treatments to keep me company while they stabbed and pricked me better.

Now I was praying his spirit was still around and willing to haunt me just so I wouldn't have to be alone.

"It's my body being pumped full of experimental drugs, it's my choice." I snapped back realizing Cassius wasn't here anymore to bite after my bark.

Sitting up, folding his hands and letting his fingers interlace, he gave me a stern expression of pure pity. "Clover, you're never going to get better if you stop all treatment. Everything we are doing is to give you more time. I'm sorry but if you want more time then we need to continue."

As if I had agreed he sat back enough to pry open his desk and produce a syringe still wrapped in its proper packaging. Accompanied by a short vile of clear liquid, he set it down carefully and ripped open the packaging.

"I didn't agree to be jabbed with whatever that is..." I protested even if it was in vain.

Picking his face up to meet my gaze he smiled, "so much of Cassius has rubbed off on you." Standing up, he ambled

over to my side with the needle in hand. “It’ll only sting for a moment.”

Shrugging down my sweater and exposing my arm to let him sink the sharp object into my tawny skin. Not consenting would only result in him calling my father and those restraints I was already in would get tighter. Wincing only to myself I felt the shiver roll down my spine before the gauzy mountain pressed into my fresh wound.

“All set. Let’s meet the day after tomorrow to see how you’re doing.” The knock at his door couldn’t have been more perfectly timed for Dr. McCall’s less than warm bedside manner.

Dr. McCall had saved countless lives, performed countless surgeries, and had enough people praising him that his personality became the one thing everyone overlooked. Cold, calculated, and stubborn were the things I couldn’t unseen like everyone else.

Cassius was the only person not kissing the ground he walked on. Being his only critic and now gone seemed just as well timed.

Dr. McCall’s secretary stood in the doorway politely even though I knew it was a bad habit this whole town had. The division of the classes.

“Sir, your meeting is starting in ten minutes.”

Holding up a hand to dismiss her he turned his attention back to me, “Let your dad know we should set something up. He’s been hard to get a hold of.”

Reaching down beside me, I grabbed my messenger bag and fished for my phone mindlessly. “Sure, I’ll let him know. He’s been working a lot.”

My father and Dr. McCall went to HU together, carried their rowing team to championships, and were equally as rivals as I was with the living McCall. Just like the bad luck our name carries, we inherited their old feud.

Treating me was a favor that he owed my father, he made that much clear. It was business with no pleasure.

My dad was trying to maintain appearances, working extra hours to keep me fitting in with the crowd of kids I didn't even associate with, trying to find a way to dish out the money for Heritage College like Cassius and I planned on. Everything he did was in favor of some illusion he was hanging onto, a time when he was almost just as respected as the bad royals of this town.

It seemed pointless now.

A lot of life did when the glaring truth was staring me in the face. No matter what we were chasing, what we had, what we wanted - none of it was going with us.

All we had were our souls.

Dr. McCall patted my hand, "take your time, Clover. We can set something up with counselors if you need help getting through this."

Who was helping him? Why wasn't he falling to pieces that way I wanted to?

Nothing seemed real about Cassius being gone. Not even his own father.

# CHAPTER 3

*GIVING* UP ON FINDING MY PHONE I EXHALED BEFORE unfolding myself and sitting up. Standing up I rounded the large antique desk in Dr. McCall's office still, sitting in his office chair, and trying to soak up any reminiscences of Cassius I could.

A small vibration shook under my hands sitting on the top of the desk. Dr. McCall's phone must have been hiding in the desk and I knew it wasn't any of my business but I couldn't help myself. I wanted answers but something inside me required them. I was feigning for them. I was willing to accept losing a child was somehow less traumatizing than losing a parent.

If my mother lost me before I lost her, would it have not hurt at all? I refused to believe it wasn't a two way street. I was determined to find his shame, his emotions, his fucking guilt because Cassius didn't hate anyone quietly.

My thirsty hand drove into the drawers of his desk until I felt the cold screen of his phone, abandoned.

It wasn't until I felt two phones that I opened the drawer as much as possible, no longer sneaking, before placing them both on the top of the desk waiting for another wave of vibration to tip me off. Tapping the screens when nothing happened I saw messages from names like *Duke, Barren, and Knight* instead of actual names. Amongst the anonymous names I saw a text message from Cassius.

My heart sank into the pit of my stomach and I felt my throat close up.

Rushing to unlock the phone I waited for the screen to require a fingerprint, facial recognition or passcode I didn't have but a simple swipe of my finger unlocked it entirely. Suddenly all the secrets I wanted to swallow whole felt not so secret at all.

Unfeathered access to Dr. McCall's phone was sitting in front of all because I needed to know someone else was sad about Cassius.

Someone that counted more than his twin brother who wished him dead more than once.

Scrolling through countless threads I found Cassius amongst them.

Cassius: Take it as my official first move in this chess game, I resign.

Dr. McCall: There's no out of what your neck deep in. There's no resigning, no escape, nothing you can do to prevent wearing the crown.

Cassius: Taking the crown means killing her.

Dr. McCall: You can't save her, son. No one can.

Cassius: Ambrose will save her if he wants the truth bad enough. He's nothing but reliable when it comes to defiance. Getting him to wear a dead man's crown will be your downfall, old man. Everything you built will come crashing down and you'll have no choice but to save her life.

Dr. McCall: It doesn't matter who wears the crown when I hold every ounce of power.

Cassius: We'll see about that. Ambrose is no puppet and I'm going to give him enough to fight for... All of them.

I kept reading the messages over and over until I had committed them to memory. Until I could simply recite them back on demand. Enough for me to comb through every single vowel even though I was never going to understand.

Death was the only consistent thing in my life.

Death was the harbinger of every relationship I cared about and I couldn't fathom why someone would choose to end their life knowing so many never got the option to live in the first place.

His messages to his dad felt like a game, a gamble, a wasted amount of breaths I would have killed for.

I wanted to be angry yet all of me felt like a match: swiftly struck against the cold, hard, truth and now every nerve of me burned for more. I never had too many drinks, I never inhaled when offered a joint, I never let myself lose control but this felt like the one kind of vice that would bring me to my knees.

The truth was the frenemy I never had. Friendly yet underlined with insults and jabs.

Dr. McCall wasn't trying to save Cassius the way it seemed.

Ambrose wasn't his only enemy.

Cassius had a lot more secrets than the ones tucked into the corners of my heart.

None of these messages changed anything - I still felt guilty for loving his brother, for sleeping with them both.

Carefully putting the phone back into place I closed the desk drawer and almost tiptoed my way to the door. Keeping my head down I felt my cheeks flush while I avoided everyone's cheerful goodbyes until I had safely reached the exit.

Finally outside, I felt my lungs expand and the fresh air felt harsh in my esophagus. My arm was inside my bag, rifling through pens and discarded straw wrappers until I felt the cold of my phone. Pulling it out I felt my chest tightening, my heart

seize up in panic, and my hand go limp enough to let my phone fall to the cement.

*Cassius.*

His name had appeared across my screen like a bad joke. Standing above my phone I stared at it, willing the prank to be over.

One I had already blamed on his brother, Ambrose.

Reaching down, my hand shook as I scraped up my phone off the ground, feeling the screen shattered against my fingertips. Flipping it over in my palm I carefully swept around the jagged edges until it opened on his text message.

Cassius: I know. I've always known, Lover. It was never going to be me but Ambrose is gonna figure out I had you first. You aren't going to survive his wrath unless you become his rival. His equal. You have to survive for us both now

I didn't realize I was crying until a glob of liquid fell onto the screen, splatting down and obstructing my view like I didn't already memorize his words.

Ambrose knew and his cruelty was dialed up to ten now but for some reason I couldn't comprehend that being his only reason to continue to hate me. Not when Magnus has his belt around my neck in the woods, seconds away from becoming a full blown savage.

Cassius was gone, he couldn't act like a wall between our petty bickering anymore. I had to let my thick skin protect me now.

My hands were shaking as my thumbs closed in on the shattered screen on his message. The glass irritated my skin but his death disrupted my life more when I committed to typing out a response.

Cassius? Ambrose said you... Your dad held me while I cried.

I couldn't bring myself to even say the words: killed yourself. Those vile words made my skin crawl and I refused to give them life.

I waited for those dots to blink as someone on the other end typed but nothing happened. I just watched the screen go unchanged, no other text, and no signs of life. I had been texted by a dead man and it only stapled down how something wasn't right here.

Cassius McCall was damaged, that part was undeniable, but not broken enough to take his own life. Not without me noticing. No amount of silent treatment could make me less attuned to him.

Slipping into my car, I twisted the key and let it come to life around me with a guttural sound of my muffler trying not to kick the bucket. Everything about my life was on its last leg and it was no surprise my car was next to die. Hitting the steering wheel with my palm I shouted before curling inside myself when the sting spread across my hand.

"Damn it!" I shouted into the air before dropping my phone on my lap. I had given up on a response when I pulled out of the hospital parking lot close to Dr. McCall's office.

As I pulled out I cranked my head to the side to make sure no one was coming when I saw him, Dr. McCall, standing in the window holding a glass looking down at me. A wave of chills crawled up from my feet and I shivered against the feeling.

So much for his meeting, probably confirming I went to my overwhelmed father. Everyone kept tabs on me for me, nowhere became safe except Cassius's room. The maids, his father, his brother - no one dared to set foot inside his room.

It was the only place I could hide.

At the last second I flicked my blinker on, cutting off traffic and speeding down a back road that curved along the hillside of Heritage, the opposite side of town. The hills were reserved for the best Heritage had to offer - the bad royals.

Occupying mansions, cars that could put people through college, where worries evaporated into something else, and their grass? Well it was perfectly manicured, and yes, it was greener.

Faster than I meant to go I took every curve of the road dangerously until I landed on a dirt road that went along the backside of Cassius's house. That was our secret, how we came and went without being seen. I would inch my way across his plush lawn then I would climb up to his window unless treatment had obliterated all my energy.

Slamming the car door shut, I exhaled at the heat of the south bullying me to just go home. Each step I took I could hear the woods under my converse giving me away until I found myself at the edge of their lawn, not far from the pool house where I had hooked up with Cassius's brother, Ambrose, before we graduated.

It wasn't part of my plan when I showed up at his kick back, party in full swing, aiming for Magnus because he had beaten Cassius to a pulp after we waged a war against the bad royals.

We just wanted to be left alone.

Instead Magnus took his orders from Ambrose like a good foot soldier and beat any remaining hope out of my best friend.

They left me no choice but to hunt them back. I wore heart shaped glasses that night, dolled myself up until every head turned in my direction, and clothes became optional when I wore a vintage shirt from my dad's closet that barely hit below my ass without so much as a pair of panties underneath.

I gave Magnus something he couldn't resist - easy prey.

Letting him rough me up until his belt ended up around my neck I begged for him to go harder. Until it left me bruised and

battered enough to make him look guilty. I didn't mean to stumble into Ambrose in the pool house. Stripping down to nothing. I watched in the dark until he caught me, only the punishment wasn't anything like Magnus's belt. Ambrose punished me with his mouth, his tongue, his fingers and none of it felt like a punishment until later.

When the realization that I would never truly have him, he'd never be mine, because of Cassius, sat on my heart. That was the true punishment and Ambrose knew that.

None of that changed how much it didn't feel like a mistake. Not the way sleeping with Cassius did.

The cops showed up shortly after Ambrose left me there, after my convincing call that Magnus was assaulting anything with tits. I had to sell it to make sure they showed up, we were hillside and the McCall address wasn't a common stop on their neighborhood watch but if my fake sobs sounded genuine they would have no choice but to react.

I didn't care that the entire party saw the cops connect me to the crime, I wanted Amrbose and his followers to know I was coming for them. We both were, Cassius was done rolling over and playing dead so they'd get bored.

The cop reluctantly pulled a pair of handcuffs from the side holster, the metal rattling through the air when they asked Magnus to turn around. Right before they pushed his head down, aiding him into the back of a cop car, I blew him a kiss.

Signing out loud I continued past the pool house, passed the pool, and sneaked up to the back sliding door. No one home. Dr. McCall was in his office when I left and Ambrose was back on campus when I plucked the fake rock from the plant by the door.

Cracking open the back I carefully removed the key the way I used when I needed to escape. Pushing the key in the door I felt it loosen enough to push the sliding door open and carefully step inside. My head was on a swivel, looking over my shoulder, looking for the maids that knew me all too well.

The coast was clear when I raced up the stairs that curled along the wall, decorating the high ceilings and only making this house feel more luxurious than it already was. Looking behind me instead of in front of me I crashed into something soft and when my head snapped to see what it was I saw Maria on her ass with towels crashing down around her.

“Oh my god. I’m so sorry!” Reaching down, I grabbed at her hands trying to help her upright again. Once she was on her feet I clawed at each towel, trying to fold them back up perfectly the way I could only imagine they were before I came along.

“Miss West, is that you?” Her voice was a hushed whisper.

Looking up from the floor I held my finger over my mouth, silently letting her know I shouldn’t be here. Dropping down to her knees beside me, she picked up the towels with me, whispering still. “I heard about Cassius, I’m so sorry for your loss. I’ll light a candle for him, guide him home.”

She was always trying to save us from afar with her religion as a weapon.

We used to laugh but I lifted my face, let a small smile take over my lips and I thanked her. Cassius needed all the help he could get, wherever he was now.

Standing up I brushed myself off, I lowered my voice even more. “Maria, I’m not here, okay? Don’t tell anyone.” Nodding along I moved past her, down the long hallway, past Ambrose’s closed door. Cassius’s door was a lot like him, a warning sign of destruction.

Twisting the handle I smiled at the dent in his door where he hit it so hard it caved in. His father pitched a fit before replacing the door just for Cassius to replace it himself. He wasn’t blind to the fact that his father wanted everything to be perfect, he just didn’t care about it being him when Ambrose existed.

Sneaking inside I stopped dead in my tracks, my senses flooded with Cassius. Taking a big inhale I leaned into the door I closed behind me, taking him in and trying to not let go.

Before I could even relax in our safe place, away from our parents, away from the bad royals, away from this corrupt town, I heard a familiar voice. One I couldn't ignore. My father.

Squeezing the handle I let the door crack without a sound, carefully holding it in place, until I could see the hallway. My father came into view in his black button down, khaki slacks, and still wearing his badge from work that granted him access to the artifacts our Heritage University's library housed.

My brain and heart were in so many knots I felt I would never be able to relax. I betrayed my best friend, that same best friend killed himself, and now my father was standing in the McCall house after claiming to hate them. Nothing made sense anymore. Every piece of logic holding my world together seemed tampered with.

Forcing my breath to drop down to a shaky, shallow, one so I could hear every reason he was here.

Scanning the only visible field through the slit in the door I watched his arm rise and fall to his sides when he whispered. "We had a deal. I left quietly so you could take over. Me leaving quietly meant Clover gets spared. Nothing is changing that."

*Left quietly? Spared?*

Dr. McCall came into view with his features stretched into nothing but anger, something I had never seen myself, only heard the rumors. "I don't have to remind you why you left quietly. You left quietly because you couldn't handle the power. You choose to live your small, poor, life on the other side of town when Clover could have been a queen."

"A queen?" My dad snipped, full of rage. "You mean a martyr. You mean a child bride for your brat of a fucking son. Until they're done with her."

"Cassius chose her. I'm honoring that. You can reject your responsibility, you can run and hide, but Clover can decide what happens with what life she has left."

My own father was talking about me like I was nothing more than a blimp in their life. Someone that wouldn't be a problem forever because I was nothing more than someone who had an expiration date on their life so whatever happened couldn't possibly matter.

I didn't even have to be a part of their sinister conversation.

"She's going to die at home with me. Exactly how we agreed. She can't live and I have to live with that. I won't live with what would happen to her in the Brotherhood." I had never seen my father this way before. Not even when I pushed back, when I broke his rules, when I made the one person on this planet he hated my best friend.

Next to Dr. McCall's privilege all I saw was a scrappy man who had lived through so much he had no choice but to overcome it. Apparently he chose silent anger and even I missed it.

Nothing about overhearing their conversation changed anything. I was still dying, only the location changed. Forcing myself to swallow the harsh confirmation of my own demise I cherry picked the other words I heard and focused on them instead.

*The Brotherhood.*

*Can't live.*

*Cassius chose her.*

All those words echoed in my head until my temples pulsed with the threat of a headache. Enough to push the door closed and crawl out of the window. My safe place didn't feel so safe anymore.

Using all my strength I pushed the smooth window open, enough to squeeze myself through, and ended up on the sloping roof. Carefully stepping sideways I made it to the vines covering the side of their mansion, until my foot could reach a safe place to climb down the thick ivy. My arms were shaking and the sweat poured out of me like a leaky faucet but I kept going until my beat up shoe hit the ground.

With an exhale I forced myself to dash across the lawn, pass the poolhouse, until the curated illusion stopped and the dirt of the woods was clear. Stepping onto safety, I let myself shovel in new air and my chest burned from the excursion, I had used the last of my reserves and I could feel the poison he injected into my bloodstream starting to beat me down.

Whatever was in that needle felt like a wave of dizziness and nausea altogether. I could feel whatever strength I had fall right into the pit at the bottom of my stomach ultimately becoming useless.

Rushing to my car I stumbled to get behind the wheel before throwing my head into the headrest and cursing myself for even coming here. None of this was Cassius. None of this place represented him. It was all stuff, little distractions, the ways we survived - none of it us. None of it was going to soothe the wound he left.

No amount of stuff he left behind.

All I was left with was the Brotherhood bullying my every ambition to rip every shred of secrecy from their existence.

# CHAPTER 4

## CLOVER

EVERYTHING I KNEW ACTED LIKE A LIE.

The way it sounded, the way it felt, the way it made me want to pull my hair out and scream - all of it was bred from a lie and raised on eating innocence. Not that I had much left. Not that I wasn't already on the other end of screaming and losing my hair because I am.

I was already dying, killing myself to live better, and now I just wanted all of it to end. Even the good parts like noticing Ambrose before he noticed me, those brief seconds where it felt like we were the only two people in the room.

Now we had a funeral between us and nothing was going to feel normal until one of us ended up in the casket with Cassius.

There wasn't enough room in Heritage for the both of us, not the way we tugged and pulled at each other just to push you on your ass entirely.

When I inched past my own driveway, looking for my own dad's car to be parked in the driveway or even around the corner. I couldn't bear to see him right now. I couldn't look him in the eyes after hearing all the ways he knew the secrets of this town and kept me in the dark.

No flash light needed.

Storming inside my house I took the stairs slowly and carefully, let my shoe stomp into each one, before I flew into my barron room. I kept it neat, devoid of clutter, and refused to let myself own too much. I didn't want my father to have to

wade through all my belongings after I was gone. I was trying to spare him in entirely different ways than he was sparing me from the truth.

Crash landing on top of the plush covers I sank immediately and I let myself suffocate just for a few minutes with my face down. My body felt wrecked, ran over, and maybe even a little dead but I always felt like this the first week of new injections. Every poison had its own effects.

Dizziness, vomiting, temporary paralysis (don't worry Ambrose McCall made every cruel commit he could), hormone rages, and insomnia. There wasn't a symptom I hadn't had and disliked.

This poison felt different this time. I could physically feel it corrode my every artery, shattering every bone. I was sitting under a boulder of aches and pains with no way of making it stop.

My phone buzzed in my back pocket, forcing me to roll over and pluck it from my shorts.

Anonymous: You want answers? Well, so do I.  
Follow the breadcrumbs and get me mine.

Re-reading the text I almost wished it was Cassius from the grave again. Silent tears streamed down my face as the impact of today weighed me down. I wanted to sink so deep into my duvet that I disappeared entirely. A death I was avoiding was suddenly welcomed with open arms.

Cassius was making dying young look trendy, desirable.

Laying there until the sun disappeared I must have fallen asleep when I woke up even more achy as I sat up trying to wrench the drowsiness from my eyes. Letting my eyes adjust to the dark, I carefully let my legs sweep off the edge of the bed and a big stretch to iron out my spine.

I could hear my father pacing downstairs in our old house through the paperwalls. We couldn't even afford thicker walls, my medical bills were piling up, and my father was still attached to this image he once had.

Once my mother died things changed, we struggled to keep up with things, and suddenly we were maintaining some ridiculous illusion we couldn't afford anymore. I wasn't really sure where the money went or why everything crashed down around us at once.

Now it was making sense after overhearing my father speaking to Cassius' dad about being some kind of token of his escape.

Not the best prize when it has an expiration date attached. A prize that wasn't his anymore, I already agreed to being Cassius queen and every part of me intended on taking that crown. It was the last promise I made with our pinkies wrapped around each other and breaking it now felt spitting on his grave. I had no choice but to rise to the occasion.

Ambling downstairs I rounded the stairs, seeing my father pouring himself a glass of bourbon, the liquor almost glimmered under the lights. His features were tense in a way I had never seen and anger scarred his face. My shoulders rose to my ears, "Why didn't you tell me you were a part of the Brotherhood? Did mom know?"

Exhaling all over the countertop I watched him jug back the contents of the glass before answering. "I'm in no mood for your tone right now. My past and actions aren't up for discussion; however, yours are." He paused, collecting himself and standing up straighter, glaring at me like I disobeyed him. "A McCall? I told you to stay away from that family. Why is it so difficult for you to let me protect you?"

"Protect me?" My blood began to boil over inside me. "Protect me from what exactly? The same shit you were a part of?"

My dad was not only overprotective but now he was a hypocrite. He could be somehow a part of the Brotherhood,

full of people he claimed to hate, and yet still make this about how I fucked up.

Slamming his hand down on the counter top I flinched. “I am trying to fucking protect you but you’re making it hard, Clover. Those people don’t care about you. You’re nothing more than edible power and they’ll fucking take so many bites there will be nothing left of you. I got out after I realized that was exactly what I put your mother through. She was nothing but bait to keep me pliable, compliant, docile until I woke the fuck up.”

Pausing only to pour more liquor into his cup I watched in horror. This must have been who my father was before me. “I don’t even know who you are.”

“That’s the problem, Clover. You don’t know who I am yet you’re hellbent on defying me. Cassius McCall couldn’t even save himself, how was he going to save you?”

My mouth fell open and my eyebrows wrinkled, “How dare you. Cassius was always saving me! More than you ever did. He was there for the fallout of every single treatment you forced me to go through with. He was there helping me walk, helping me bathe, helping me not kill myself because that would be easier than what you’re putting me through.”

Everything I refused to say came spilling out of me in vicious assaults.

“The Brotherhood won’t save you, Clover. Nothing will. You’re destined to die. That’s my punishment, baby girl. All the women I love die while I live through the grief. The Brotherhood knows exactly how to motivate people into getting what they want. You think Cassius dying was some kind of great sacrifice? It’s never that simple.”

Glancing at the decanter still half filled I wondered how much my father had already consumed to be this drunk. My perfectly controlled, neat, dad who went out of his way to make everyone else comfortable was drunk and spilling secrets.

Dragging the glass off the island like it was too heavy to actually lift up, he twisted away from me, stalking his study and slamming the door behind him. I couldn't take my eyes off of him, watching in horror and unsure of who that was. None of him resembled my doormat of a dad.

The Brotherhood wasn't supposed to save me, it was to buy me some well-deserved revenge. We had been the underdogs long enough, I wasn't going to die that way too. Only I was supposed to do it alongside a King. Now that King was dead and I was questioning if it was murder instead.

For the first time in months, I pulled up the texts from Anonymous like it was a casual acquaintance instead of the nuisance it was. Letting my fingers dance across the screen I typed out: *Answers? I want retaliation. I'll get your answers if you get me in.*

I waited and watched the three dots come and go with every conflicting thought I was having. I was willing to get into bed with a complete stranger if it meant helping me bury Ambrose and his friends for pushing Cassius over the edge.

I didn't care who Anonymous was as long as they helped me get into the Brotherhood. Finally, my phone buzzed against the kitchen island, rattling everything discarded on top of its surface.

Anonymous: Deal. When I text, answer. When I say come, you ask how loud should I moan, got it?

Just worry about getting me in, not getting me off.

Anonymous: You'll move on from Cassius, don't worry. Oh, wait, you already did. Wonder if that's what killed him - having the hots for the wrong twin.

I re-read the message until the shame and guilt took over, forcing me to turn my phone over because I could make myself feel worse. Nothing anyone could say, no amount of cruelty, could replace the insults inside my head.

Shaking off my anonymous bully, I grabbed my phone and headed up stairs when I stopped dead in my tracks. I had almost forgotten my next dose of the life-saving meds I dreaded. My arm was still tingling and sore from the injection Dr. McCall gave me but that didn't change anything - I still had to swallow every bitter pill.

Rummaging through my bag I scooped out the pill box and popped open the tab, almost dropping its contents when my phone vibrated under my arm where I pinned it.

Anonymous: Skip the pills. I don't need you dying anytime soon. Might want to start questioning daddy from now on. The Brotherhood isn't the cure, it's the enemy.

I didn't bother to respond as I stiffened at the idea that these pills weren't going to cure me. Instead I felt the panic roll down my body as I tossed them into my bag, discarding them entirely.

Everything I knew was a lie but even the lies had faulty little landmines oh so willing to dismember everything you are. Unraveling them was going to be a bitch.

Anonymous: Don't seem so sad. I probably just saved your life. The only way you're going to survive the Brother's initiation is by being the girl who got Magnus in an ankle monitor.

My eyes shot up, my brows felt like a rubber band stretched out so tight it almost hurt as I scanned my house around me for strangers.

*Was he watching me? Did I know him already?*

A part of me always hoped it was Cassius, a version more confident and willing to put me in my place the way I loved about Ambrose. That same part of me wanted to fall for Cassius: to make things easier, to make wearing a crown he gave me feel deserved.

Maybe he was alive somewhere.

Maybe these messages were his way of still saving me even when I didn't need it anymore.

Maybe my mind was so warped I just wanted Cassius to be stalking me in the night because it felt better than being lonely.

A silent tear rolled down my face, melting every inch of skin in its wake and I did nothing to hold it back. Stepping back until my shoulder blades felt the cold wall behind me I let myself slip down until my ass hit the floor, wrecked with silent sobs.

Cassius was gone when I should be the one dying young.

# CHAPTER 5

*UNADULTERATED* POWER CAN FEEL A LOT LIKE LOVE IF YOU LET it. The only downside was finding a steady source of that power.

Looking back, I knew I should be thanking Ambrose McCall for showing me that power felt better than he did. Better than the never-ending cycle of tension and rejection we had been stuck in.

That was before everything happened, before I gave into the game he started playing without me.

*Winning doesn't last forever.*

*You can't win over death.*

After graduation, all the power I thought I had seemed to have faded quickly. It turned into something as meaningless as love, and suddenly, I was just a bitch with nothing to be a bitch over. All summer I ate up any amount of power I could get, letting my very public take down of Magnus fuel me until it ran out.

I felt strung out and hellbent just trying to uphold Cassius's dying wishes.

Now I was essentially starting over at Heritage University. All that work snuffed out and I had become a freshman all over again.

I had no allies, just enemies from high school. When you ruin the Gods they worship you become a pretty clear target for their hate. Everything about my new reputation was soaked

in fear and loath, all at once. None of it landed me in the inner circle. I was still an outcast, only now I was a bitch too.

The inner circle still consisted of Ambrose and his posse of followers still resigning as Kings among the masses even as Freshman.

Only they could swing out ranking upperclassmen.

My phone lit up in the dark forcing my eyes in its direction when I saw the warning emojis I assigned to my friend, *Anonymous*. My face was nearly level to the screen as I stood in the dirt when I rolled my eyes at the text staring back at me.

Anonymous: What's taking so long? Do you want to fail the initiation? Tick tock.

My initiation into The Brotherhood was going to be the start of a new era.

The secret society everyone wanted into was a source of untapped power that was what would solve my problems. No more chasing a crown Cassius promised. I wouldn't have to prove it was mine anymore. It would simply be mine and all the privilege it came with.

People would bow to me instead of pitying me for being a dying girl in a cruel world or bitch who didn't respect their Gods.

I had already ruined the bad royals. All but one. The only one left was Ambrose and getting into The Brotherhood was going to be the nail in his coffin.

*Nothing was going to bring him back.*

I just didn't think initiation would mean sweat clinging to me like a security blanket. It made my skin slick, the dirt sticking to me like confetti while I stood knee-deep in the grave I was digging up.

Poor bastard didn't even know he was part of the cruel games we were playing.

The shovel felt like it weighed a thousand pounds, and my arms shook as my muscles ripped to shreds beneath my skin. The scar on my bicep glimmered in the moonlight, and I smiled to myself as the memories washed over me.

*Reminiscence of high school. A scar for every year, a fucked up badge of honor.*

This one was a trophy for ruining Magnus Gamble's perfectly curated life more than once. Running from the cops after vandalizing Magnus Gamble's car for telling everyone I was a slut just to get caught on a rusty fence. *I was a slut... just not for him.*

I wasn't like all the other West women, comfortably awaiting an early death. Instead I picked a fight the same way Ambrose did with me when I was a freshman. I walked right up to death, gave it my finger and even blew a kiss after.

Every time I ruined their lives, balancing those scales, I earned another few months. Enough of those and I could kick the curse to the curb.

I ratted out Lawson Ledger for selling adderall so I would become valedictorian instead of him.

I fucked Cassius McCall because his brother, Ambrose, rejected me all too publicly.

I ruined Magnus Gamble's chance of getting out of this town when the police slapped an ankle monitor on him.

Tossing the shovel up, I dug through my duffle bag until I wrapped my hand around the crowbar. The metal was cold against my hot skin, and I took a second to enjoy it in the South Carolina heat.

It was midnight and still well over eighty degrees, but this was the only night it made sense for me to complete this task. Apparently, more people died in this town than anywhere else, and today was the only day there wasn't an open grave or men working in the shadows to make sure that in death these souls found peace.

This was my window. This was my ticket inside their walls.

I was given forty-eight hours to dig up this grave, steal the pocket watch of the dead guy, and place it in the campus tomb. The problem was most of the tombstones were nearly as decayed as the bodies that lay beneath them must have been, making the names hard to read at all.

Forcing the crowbar into the seams of the coffin, I used my bare foot to push down with enough force to crack the side open, and trying to not get dirty. A real lost cause now that I was covered in dirt.

My heels were kicked off in the grass above me since I couldn't risk walking back on campus bare foot without my signature heels. That would have been too much of a red flag that I was up to no good.

Gagging and choking on the vile stench wafting from the broken casket, my chest heaved with every necessary inhale. My lungs were already shit, cursed even, and bound to be my downfall if I just paid more attention to dying. Instead I pretended I was already numb, dead even...

Anytime my heart rate sputtered with feeling, my entire body would reject any kind of happiness I could have. There was no point. I was terminal, and becoming a bitch hadn't been a choice but a decision to survive longer.

I wasn't going to leave a trail of people crying over me when I died.

Piss on my grave — just don't cry.

Not wanting to open the coffin any more than it was, I bent down at a weird angle and tried to slip my arm inside to feel around for the pocket watch without having to see the body. The anonymity of this guy already gave me the kind of shivers that permanently stuck to my spine.

I was digging through a dead man's casket to get into a secret society where I could keep my armor shiny and hateful.

His body felt full and taut, like he might not actually be dead, and the shivers that had been running along my back

suddenly felt like bugs crawling just under my skin.

Patting him down, my fingers finally brushed the cold metal of the watch dangling from a thin chain. Using my fingernails to draw it closer to me, I pressed my cheek to the coffin even harder. When it was firmly in my grasp, I pulled it into the moonlight and took in the details etched in the watch.

*An heirloom someone could actually want.*

There was a pattern entwined in the design like a secret, one you had to earn noticing. I stood on the casket, letting the freshly dug up dirt stain my tank top as I started to climb my way out. Hearing the sharp echo of leaves crunching my head snapped toward the sound quickly, giving myself whiplash in the process.

Analyzing the shadows I wanted to tell myself there was nothing there, but that would be a lie.

*The Brotherhood* was always watching.

They knew things about you that you thought no one else knew. Things I was trying to forget about myself.

The footsteps drew nearer, and I ducked down chaotically, my phone—my only source of light—falling from my hand in the process. I grasped onto the smooth wood with one hand while my other searched for the crowbar in the dark to arm myself with.

A voice called out above me, causing me to flinch so hard I wondered if my heart stopped. “Dead guys treat you better?”

*Ambrose McCall.*

My high school competition.

My source of rejection.

The reason I wanted to live, to outdo him, to punish him with my very existence. Yet I was the reason he wanted me to die. Him and his merry band of followers, Lawson and Magnus, included.

“Better than you ever would,” I scoffed at him, knowing better than to take the hand he offered. I clutched the edge of

the hole I had dug and gripped the manicured grass to pull myself up and out of the grave.

“I wouldn’t even fuck your dead body, Clover.” His voice was venomous and harsh like I deserved to be down here.

*Too bad he didn’t know I would be in a grave of my own sooner than he thought.*

“Thanks... for that, asshole. If you’ll excuse me...” I had a grave to refill, even though that wouldn’t magically hide it had been tampered with.

I rose to my feet, looking up at his features bathed in moonlight. Everything about Ambrose was harsh. His cheekbones were hollow, and his eyes were always pinching at your soul. He had this undeniable strength that showed up in every crease, every sharp bone, and every taut muscle.

He was living without a death sentence, and I hated him for it.

Leaning against the thick tree branch next to the open grave, he crossed his ankles. “Do you even know whose grave that is?”

I had picked up the shovel and started pushing the heavy dirt back in the hole. At Ambrose’s words, my eyes drifted to the tombstone that had been vandalized so badly the name just looked like Morse code now.

“I don’t care whose grave it is, Ambrose. They’re dead and we aren’t — that’s all that matters.” I stopped shoveling the dirt, suddenly wondering how I looked. I quickly redid my hair into a perfectly messy bun and straightened out my clothes a little more.

All armor, all part of the part I was playing.

For some reason, love and power didn’t seem like shit if Ambrose wasn’t handing them over.

Snatching the pocket watch off the grass next to my heels where I tossed it, he held it up to moonlight cascading through the cemetery. “Trying to get their attention? What happens when you start losing it?”

“I don’t lose, remember?” I snapped.

Ambrose had this tilt to his smile that made me think he knew exactly what I was doing here tonight even if I was bound to secrecy.

The only logical explanation was that he must have been tapped... He was my rival in every way and letting us kill each other over a spot in The Brotherhood seemed like the best way to determine who deserved it more.

I let him get close enough to hate myself for it later, my body igniting as he neared. His hoodie had a smear of dirt on the hem that he didn’t seem to notice until I did.

Wiping it off, he stood toe-to-toe with me, staring me down and making me burn with arousal. “Dangerous game you’re playing.”

The way his eyes seemed to darken from hazel to a pure emerald green that flicked at those feelings I was trying to keep under my perfectly curated mask. The one that screamed bitch instead of dying girl.

“Better than the boring ones I’m playing with you right now.” The hot, sticky air almost felt like a trap when he took another step closer.

“I haven’t even begun yet. The Brotherhood is the last thing you should be worried about. I’ve had months to exact my revenge.”

*Cassius McCall.*

His twin brother who took my virginity then died the next day.

All I had wanted was to get back at Ambrose for rejecting me, and it ended with Cassius’s death convincing me I deserved everything coming my way.

Ambrose was making it clear that if I was going to step on his turf, I had much more than competition coming my way.

# CHAPTER 6

*WAS THERE HONOR IN REVENGE?* I WAS NECK DEEP IN FINDING out.

Clover was the last person to see my brother alive, and I needed to know whatever information she had before the induction ceremony.

Before all that freedom I had evaporates.

Before joining my father in Cassius's place wasn't a choice anymore, it was a requirement of my last name.

I refused to believe my brother wouldn't leave an escape hatch, a manifesto filled with loopholes, or some kind of message for me before doing what he did. We hated each other for all the wrong reasons but I never wished him dead.

Our family had been in The Brotherhood for generations. There were relics all over our house; my mother used to tell us scary stories about the men in charge and the monsters who pulled their strings.

I thought I was safe from ever having to endure their control by being born Cassius's spare. He grew up knowing he'd wear a crown one day, something changed enough to take the easy way out.

The paranoia was written all over his erratic text messages at two in the morning reeked of fear. Fear I didn't bother to decipher. I was too busy celebrating my freedom.

Clover had the answers. They were best friends, thick as thieves, always together. Apparently not on that night.

She was as guilty as my father for using him against me and deserved equal punishment.

I was going to deliver it in the form of fake fucking power, the one thing she chased the way other girls chased affection and guys they couldn't change.

She kept looking down between our bodies, holding that shovel even though I knew her arms must have been begging to drop the weight that her tired arms couldn't hold anymore. "Are you following me, McCall? Or babysitting me? Damn, you must be low on the totem pole. Maybe they're just not that into you..."

Her mask was on so tight I could barely see the girl I remembered from freshman year of high school. The shy girl who sat alone at lunch, smiled at bullies, and didn't seem to know the corruption of power yet. The girl I rejected because I had to, not because I wanted to.

"My loyalty isn't in question here, Clover, but yours is. Ready to kiss my boots yet?" She didn't need to know I was king now that Cassius was gone. I wanted her to think she had a chance.

Her golden skin seemed to sparkle and reflect the highlights of the moon as her cheeks grew ruddy. She was blushing so hard I was almost embarrassed for her.

Her throat bobbed on a hard swallow, and I watched so intently I could almost see the gears begin to turn in her head. Her face twisted in disgust realizing I was exactly who she needed to impress to earn a spot in the Brotherhood.

"Only in your dreams." She lobbed back.

Crossing my arms, I suppressed the pure elation of seeing my revenge play out in front of me. And to think, this was only phase one. "In my dreams? I fuck him name right from your vocabulary, erase him from between those legs and pretend he never had you first."

I watched her mouth collapse open in shock and her body seemed to melt into place. She wanted my confession to be

true instead of cruel but now that he was gone I wasn't even sure which it was.

Taking a step closer I could almost feel her chest take shallow breaths. Whispering between us I let my voice stay sharp, "Hurts being lied to, doesn't it?"

"When did I lie to you, Ambrose?"

"When you loved me but fucked him," I shouted back into her features I almost fell into. Forcing myself to stand in the discomfort I memorized her face cave in and her eyes well up. She claimed to be some kind of born again bitch but under that mask I knew Clover West was just a bad omen. "Oh I'm sorry, you didn't know? He told everyone what a bad lay you were."

The shovel dropped between us and her hands flew into my chest, pushing me backwards. "You don't get to be mad at me for fucking him. He was my best friend. He was there for me. He didn't make everyone miserable around him like you."

"How did fucking someone wearing my face work out for you?" I crossed my arms trying to hide how fucking disgusted I still am. If he wasn't dead already I would have hurt him for touching her or at least send Magnus to keep it all at arm's length.

"Fuck you. I chased you until I got tired of running. Cassius would never do what he did unless he thought it was the only way. You're the one who made life hell all his life for nineteen years, I was just a bad night."

Her eyes were welling up still, full to the brim with tears she was holding onto yet her words were sharp as ever. She wanted so badly to erase how weak she once was and I couldn't figure out which version I wanted to break more. "You knew exactly how much that would break him. You knew he was in love with you and you just sent him right over the edge, didn't you? All because I wouldn't fuck you."

"Cassius would never leave me here alone. He wouldn't do what he did all because we made a mistake. It was one bad night. He still asked me to be his queen after and guess what? I said yes. We were going to steal back what you and the other

bad royals stole from us. We were going to go to college and be new people, people you couldn't push around anymore. I'm keeping our promise, I'm taking the power we deserved even though nothing fills the void he left, that death leaves. Except power. Trust me, personal experience and all."

Only one person had to die for me to be king. *Cassius*. I didn't have to get tapped, I was recruited right after my brother's funeral. The last addition to the Brotherhood. Everyone else was already the single heirs, destined to hold up their last names by honoring the Brotherhood.

They had no choice but to accept our fate and become members the second we turned eighteen. Didn't mean it was just handed to us. We were the only heirs left but we still had to prove we could handle the power. Blindfolded, dropped in the woods, and given an invitation to a lifelong curse instead of a compass. Somehow, we survived and made our royal last names happy enough to let us suffer another day.

*For some of us, it was all we had left after Clover West ruined them.*

"You want power? Then earn it. You're a servant until I say otherwise because Cassius isn't king anymore. He can't save you from what's coming."

Clover was so desperate to dominate every loser around her that she hadn't even questioned the invitation to play with me.

It was almost too easy.

"I'm a slave to nothing but death. Especially you." Like it was the worst thing she could ever be, a slave to my every fantasy. I let my mouth turn up watching her push her face towards mine, her mouth move, and that stupid red lipstick taunting me.

Clover's eyes sparked to life like a match. I had pissed her off enough to motivate her into playing the game I created. It wasn't going to be over until one of our lives was burned to the ground.

Dangerously close to her, I twisted my head, my lips catching her ear before letting my hot words caressed her in ways I couldn't. "Call me Death, then, because you'll be my fucking servant if you want in."

After everything she had done, death held too much mercy for Clover, and compared to what I had in store for her, it was a reward.

Magnus had an ankle monitor strapped to his ankle until yesterday, chaining him to the confines of home and campus after she claimed he assaulted her in the woods. Lawson had become some new version of himself who preferred to consume Focalin instead of studying like the good boy he used to be.

She broke them both in different ways: self-destruction became Magnus's only escape and Lawson was hooked on humiliation of being too high to be smart anymore.

Looking at the pocket watch that had been buried with my brother only twisted the knife he had placed in my back. "It's his grave by the way."

I swore I could hear the sound of all her pride drop to the pit of her stomach as she snatched the shovel off the ground..

I could almost taste her on my lips. I turned on my heel, heading into the darkness and licking my lips. I imagined she tasted like every dark thought I had ever had.

"Happy hunting Clover West. I know I will." I shouted over my shoulder as I left her there the loser of tonight's game.

Leaving her there to rebury my brother was a start, but I needed more. She wasn't going to be my queen without paying for what she did first.

I approached the car parked at the entrance of the graveyard, I was still trying to shake the image of Clover standing next to that open grave. The way her pin-straight, charcoal hair was disheveled just enough to look like a post fuck, and her nipples had hardened beneath the thin fabric of her shirt the moment I whispered nothing but hate notes in her ear.

Behind the wheel of the car I inherited from Cassius, it was easy to understand how I missed every warning sign. He used every flashy thing in our lives to his advantage, and it was enough to distract everyone around him from the reality he was living in.

I felt guilty driving his car, wearing his ring, letting people think I bullied him into killing himself just for me to take his place in The Brotherhood. Guilt wasn't something I felt often but now that I was I felt suffocated by it.

Fingering the screen on the dashboard, I dialed in Lawson and Magnus. We needed to move ahead with our plans. Even though my friends didn't know I was working on a tight schedule to punish, crown and dethrone all in one humiliating sweep. I needed to know what I was bleeding for before the crowning ceremony. Damn sure it wasn't our father who couldn't be less bothered by Cassius not being here anymore. He moved on like he never needed the original because he had a spare, as long as someone with our last name reigned.

Not one tear.

Not one broken item.

Nothing but signing off on checks to make sure whatever secrets he held were buried with him.

"She took the bait." I spoke into the bluetooth speaker as I peeled away from the curb and headed through town back to campus.

Magnus's silence was louder than Lawson when he responded. "How far did she get before you stepped in?"

My lips peeled into a small smile as I sat back in my seat. "She got the pocket watch. Found her standing on his casket like the disrespectful bitch she is." Neither of them knew why I needed her to fish out this watch or that it housed more of Cassius's secrets.

Magnus finally inhaled, a cigarette no doubt pinched between his fingers. "Either way, she'll end up in the same graveyard. Where she belongs."

He went along with my plan because he hated her just as much as I did. Lawson was a product of fragile eagerness, not strong enough to lead but able to follow, and Gunner was supposed to be one of us, but I had seen his car tucked in the shadows waiting for her at the cemetery.

Whatever game he was playing was pissing me off. He would also be punished with my newfound power. It was intoxicating. Each time I snapped a demand, my soul longed for more.

“Gunner is here. No doubt being her little helper.” I looked behind me for his headlights, but he’d stayed put.

Lawson responded first again. “He knows it’s against the rules. He can’t tell her anything.”

“Gunner chose a side and it wasn’t shoulder-to-shoulder with us—it was against us.”

I pushed down harder on the gas, the engine roaring as I swept through the dead streets. There was a town curfew that made staying in the shadows pretty easy for someone like me.

Anyone out past curfew either had privilege or carried around a heavy heart; I knew all about heavy hearts. Mine was a cinder block with no sledgehammer in sight.

Cassius killed himself freshman year of college not long after I rejected Clover for what felt like the thousandth time. I knew he had a crush on her, and all I could do was protect him from realizing it was unrequited.

The weight of his crown suffocated him, not the designer belt he fastened around his neck when he hung himself in his dorm. The promise of power alone is what drove him over the edge.

That weight was enough to kill anyone, let alone someone already disturbed as him.

*Was. Was disturbed.*

That still felt weird, even now, after all the grieving I didn’t do. All I had were his text messages to keep me company now. Even the ones I left on read.

Cassius: She's mine. Don't ruin this for me.

Cassius: I'm sorry.

Cassius: You'll understand when you get tapped. Keep your eyes open. I'll always leave you a trail to the truth.

Following his truth was taking too long. That's when I decided she was equally to blame for his death and started texting her tasks under the guise that she was trying to impress us enough to be accepted into The Brotherhood. In reality I just needed her attention, then her loyalty, then the truth about what happened after graduation.

Her not knowing I was going to be king of the aristocratic assholes was just the kind of foreplay I liked. I needed the chase, the hunt, the breaking of pretty things just to feel less broken myself.

She wanted my dick but kept filling up her pussy with mediocre fuck boys who didn't understand women didn't want to just come. They wanted to be tortured until it was unbearable... then using an orgasm as their only escape.

Pulling into campus, I parked in the spot that sported a small reserved sign and collected the pocket watch from the seat next to me. I was convinced it was going to hold another clue, be the breadcrumbs Cassius left behind for me. I wouldn't be surprised if this was all some wild goose chase as a last ditch effort to piss me off from the afterlife.

I needed there to be an answer as to why he killed himself. I needed someone to blame, someone to punish... besides myself.

Tossing the watch out the window and looking at it lying there before adjusting my wheels and reversing over it. The metal and glass crunched under the tire and I threw the car in park before getting out.

Plucking through the remnants, I felt anger flare up in my chest, adding more weight to my heavy fucking heart when I finally noticed the crushed powder. The first pill was nothing more than dust when I picked up what was left of the second pill.

S50 was printed on the top, even though it was cut off just enough to make me think that wasn't the whole story. Reaching into my back pocket I pulled out my phone and immediately typed in the drug.

*Low dose antipsychotic.*

Cassius never took meds despite our father pushing and prodding him into every test he could. He was our father's personal science project, his secret patient.

The world-renowned doctor couldn't possibly have a sick son. How dare Cassius be anything but perfect. Our father couldn't risk ever needing the spare and the irony was clear my entire life. Chronic let down or not, I was stuck aiming to please in ways he refused. I became my father's carbon copy without trying, anger corroding my veins. I became relentless, disgusted by imperfection, and unforgiving.

I was his good little boy who was just minutes too young to be king instead of Cassius. That was the only imperfection I was willing to admit to. The flaw of timing.

But as imperfect as Cassius was, he wasn't taking pills to fix his damaged parts. He would have to care that parts of his mind were fucked up to begin with and that wasn't even on the short list of what he gave a fuck about.

# CHAPTER 7

*AMBROSE HAD LEFT ME THERE IN PIECES.*

The grave I was all too willing to dig up belonged to Cassius—the guy who took my virginity and decided to die not long after. Whether or not I wanted to admit it: *he killed a part of me with him.*

That night was still a drunken blur of anger, revenge, and ill-fated decisions. Ambrose's brutally consistent delivery of rejection forced me to retaliate when I agreed to ruin my friendship with Cassius.

Cassius was just an innocent bystander, simply a casualty of a war between his twin brother and me.

Then I found out Cassius had hung himself from an exposed pipe in his dorm room. The entire hall flooded in the abandoned part of campus almost like he didn't want to be found. He had been dead for ten hours by the time they found him.

Ambrose was drunk and between some girl's legs when he found out, no doubt while it happened. It became a bad habit all summer, each night a new girl and I was forced to watch if I wanted to keep the new found bad bitch status after ruining Magnus.

The blind rage he unleashed on me in the library still hadn't seemed to leave his side after all this time. I would never forget Ambrose storming through the library and finding me studying near the warm window. He was nearly foaming at the mouth when he hurled his threats and accusations at me,

all eyes in the quiet space fixed on me. He was paused inside of it and everyone was a target of his pain.

*“You were the last one to see him. How could you not know? I swear to fucking God I will destroy you if you know something you aren’t telling me.”* His eyes were red-rimmed and filled with sorrow, his lips were crusty as though he was dehydrated from crying in ways he probably never had.

Ambrose had declared me guilty.

And everyone else followed suit. I became the bad guy in his story, and I let him control the narrative. I let all the rumors feed right into exactly how much everyone assumed I’m a heartless bitch.

A part of me felt like I deserved it, so I had no choice but to own it. His death was another curse I had to live with.

Bending down I shook off my guilt as I scraped my palm over the tombstone where his name and some inspiring quote should have been, but there was nothing.

*An unmarked grave.*

His dad was notorious for disowning things that weren’t perfect, and as soon as Cassius died it seemed like Mr. McCall had forgotten he ever existed. Kissing my fingertips and pressing them to the anonymous stone, I tried to smile through a whispered apology into the night for interrupting his slumber.

He was the one person I regretted using to my advantage. Cassius was so much more than my best friend, he was an antidote, a shield, and someone to love without getting hurt the way Ambrose could.

The graveyard was still quiet when I stood up and gathered my belongings. Picking up the shovel and my bag trying to step around the dead leaves. Failing, the leaves were gunshots vibrating through the silent night as I made my way to the edge of the plush grass and over to Gunner’s car hiding in the shadows.

Yanking on the door, I slipped inside, dropping my bag into the back seat and facing Gunner in the passenger’s seat.

“Ambrose McCall is the most vile human alive.”

“Should be your mantra. Saying it won’t change your pussy’s mind about him.” Gunner said the words like a bad joke, but we both knew it was true. My pussy wanted to put him in a chokehold and make him feel anything but misery.

Gunner peeled off, wheels screaming against the pavement. His angular face had shallow graves where his eyes sat, and his cheekbones should have been, instead you saw glaring red flags. He was the kind of beautiful that you knew was legendary.

No matter what he was going to be someone’s ruin. That much was clear.

“I’m convinced he has me on LoJack. He always knows exactly where I am when he wants to personally ruin my day.”

Gunner was the only person I was unfiltered with. He knew almost everything Cassius knew about me, even about the pill bottle rattling around in my bag. He was also a member of The Brotherhood of Bastards. *A legacy.* My way in.

It wasn’t hard to extract the information when he had a few drinks and felt like showing off.

“Why does he hate you again? I’m drawing a blank.” His sarcasm was his twisted talent for making you feel the burn of your mistakes.

“*Very* funny. Tell me more,” I shot back, demanding he spill on The Brotherhood I was determined to infiltrate. All I knew was it was exclusive, and I was willing to dig up graves to get in.

They were watching, but I was bending to their every demand.

Thunder cracked over his purring engine. I had gotten in just in time; getting rained on would have been the cherry on top of this nightmare of a night.

“The Brotherhood is... not a sorority. I don’t know why you’re so hellbent on joining their lost fucking cause. It’s a *brotherhood*. It’s only a matter of time before your invite will

be rescinded. Never mind if you know anything of value... Then it'll be more than a rescinded invite... can't have you running around telling secrets..."

Gunner disapproved of me even entertaining the idea of becoming a queen amongst the kings of their little secret society. I couldn't really figure out why, and every time I asked, he simply bad-mouthed his own allegiance.

He knew something I didn't but wasn't willing to let me in. *Yet.*

The only reason he let me in at all was an ill attempt at avoiding my wrath, he was trying to go unscorned like Ambrose when he befriended me at one of their infamous summer parties on the barge only shown when the tide was low enough. Taking pity on me and saving me the same way Cassius used to.

"I can take care of myself, Gunner. I'm not some fragile daisy you need to keep in your pocket to protect."

"It's no secret. You made the wrong enemies." His head dropped to the side, his eyes staring into me. The honesty of his words stung, but I pushed my face closer to his and stared him down, steeling my soft features. "Protecting you is simply a way to save my own ass. Mutual assured destruction if necessary."

Reaching behind my seat, he produced my orange pill bottle and tossed it in my lap. The rattle of the pills keeping me alive seemed to echo through the car. "Tick-Tock, sleeping beauty. Not trying to lose you even sooner."

Falling back into the seat, I looked up and saw the library looming over us in the darkness. Snatching the pills from my lap and hid them in my bag, my face warming with shame. This stupid pill bottle felt like a well secured noose.

This medicine was supposed to keep me alive, but my new best friend, Anonymous, claimed it was only making things worse. None of it made sense so I kept taking every pill like clockwork too scared to stop.

Pushing the door open, I sat there on the edge of the seat before twisting just enough to smile at Gunner over my shoulder. “Immortality is overrated, *darling*. No one wants to live forever; we all just want to be remembered.”

Gunner didn’t return the smile. He never did when we spoke of death or my broken body. I accepted my fate in a way he never could: *with open arms and a hot kind of hatred that made me want to rule Hell when I got there.*

He didn’t have to accept anything he didn’t want to, though. From his mansion in the hills, expensive cars, dripping in designer clothes - Gunner was as spoiled as they came.

I was as unfortunate as they came.

“Don’t make me just remember you.” His head was turned enough to keep from looking at me when I slipped out of the car.

I strutted around to his window and tapped my nails on the glass, bending low enough to make eye contact. When he rolled his window down, I pressed my lips to his cheek, leaving some lipstick behind. “We’re all going to be just memories one day. It’s easier if you accept it.”

I watched his jaw tense as he shifted his gaze down to the electronic dashboard in his fancy car without responding. He had a small crush on me, but that bred from not wanting me to die without feeling loved.

Being committed to someone that wasn’t Ambrose felt like a cardinal sin.

“Go be a pain in my ass somewhere else. I’ll see you bright and early for our first day of hell tomorrow.” There was a spark in his eye that made his light tone seem genuine even if it wasn’t.

Straightening my spine, I headed toward the library with one more thing to do before I called it quits for the night. I had to drop off the pocket watch in the archives before those precious forty-eight hours were over.

I swiped my ID against the electronic keypad and waited until it turned green. Yanking the door open more aggressively

than necessary, but I didn't care. I was reckless with everything around me because nothing was permanent.

The library was deserted at this time, so quiet you could hear a pin drop and yet I couldn't bring myself to abuse the silence. I moved through rows of books that gave off an intoxicating antique smell until I stood in front of the small elevator that sat in the corner, almost blending in. When I stepped inside, I pushed the button for sublevel two and felt all the hairs on my arm stand as a chill skated up my spine.

The other levels of the library, where the archives lived, were restricted. I had to swipe my father's badge, which wasn't too hard since he had been a sloppy drunk since he confessed to being a part of the Brotherhood with whiskey on his breath.

Something about The Brotherhood made my bones rattle with a kind of exciting fear. A fear I was apparently chasing.

When the elevator came to a jarring halt, my stomach bounced inside of me. The doors opened slow enough to make me second-guess getting out on this floor, but I stepped beyond the doors and into the cellar of the library anyway. Moving through the cold, dark aisles, the overhead lights sparked to life with every step further. I had never been down here and I was understanding why.

My pace quickened, my feet carrying me faster to the display cases in the back that were safe-guarding the dark history of Heritage seemed to be hidden back here while everyone else acted like it didn't exist.

My mom used to tell me stories about Heritage, all the elitism and blood that ran through the streets. She never told me any names, only referring to them in her stories as the Heir, the Duke, the Lord and the Knight. Each one of them ruled with an iron fist and no trace of a heart.

The royals were the villains of her stories, not morally gray antiheroes, but the kind of villains people don't recover from. The kind that changes them inside and out, forever branding them.

I often caught my mind wandering off to her stories, retelling them in the same boisterous and playful way she would when I got bored in class. But wondering who these men were now seemed pointless when she wasn't here to confirm anything.

Running my fingers over the glass encasing filled with priceless artifacts of Heritage, I kept looking around corners for anyone to catch me. It felt too easy, not digging up the grave of my friend but not getting caught. Something about it felt like a trap.

The goosebumps covering my dirty arms hadn't let up, and the tingle in my spine told me someone was watching as my head snapped over my shoulder once more.

*They were watching.*

Digging through my bag that I'd dropped on a lone table, I rifled through it, turning it upside down, only to realize it was gone. The watch wasn't there anymore. Panic rose in my chest, and I could feel the tension squeezing around me. I had dug up Cassius just to steal a watch they were asking for all to lose the damn thing.

Swiping my arm across the table, I pushed all my stuff off the edge with a dense crash. I felt the bandage I had placed over my emotions fray at the edges. It peeled away, exposing me to everything I was avoiding.

The underbelly of the library seemed fitting: *dark, cold, and ominously quiet*. Forced to feel every painful thing I buried under being a bitch.

Whispering the words aloud, I forced myself to say his name the way I refused to anymore. Not outloud. Not without pinching the sensitive skin next to my elbow until I fought the tears, not letting them fall. This time was different when I let my eyes flood and my breath pause and make way for their grand re-entry.

“I'm sorry, Cassius. It was all for nothing.”

# CHAPTER 8

I HAD FINALLY BROKEN CLOVER. CRYING ON THE FLOOR, begging my brother to forgive her sins.

She didn't deserve to say his name, even in a whisper.

I preferred an eye for an eye... I was fractured so she deserved the same but once we were done with her, she'd be begging us to end her.

*An afterlife of torment, too.*

"Giving up yet?" I came out of the shadows, standing in front of her, arms crossed and my soul smiling while I hid my joy from her.

She looked up slowly, her eyes swollen and rimmed with red. Her voice came out as a dull whisper, "What are you doing here?"

The confusion mixed with her desperation in a perfect storm for me to crack her a little bit more. "Me? Just making sure our groupie turn slave completes their tasks."

Clover still didn't get it, not the way I needed her to. I wasn't just a part of what this town coined the *Bad Royals*, it was so much worse than that. All she knew was that I was angry enough to let my middle finger do the talking before my lips even moved.

We were more than bad. We were pissed off and out for revenge in any way we could get our greedy hands on it. We didn't pick this life, fortune did and I was more than willing to give every cent back for my freedom. I needed an escape hatch

and Clover was going to do the leg work for me thinking it was some kind of bad initiation.

Speechless, she continued to avert her eyes, looking down at her discarded things scattered on the floor. My brother's watch was nowhere in sight after digging it up.

We all had something passed down from Cassius that marked and connected us. Hers was shattered in the parking lot. Mine was standing in front of me.

Clover was more than my archenemy, the girl who fucked my brother to his death and ruined our lives. She was mine before I even knew what that meant. She was forced to be an outsider the same way I was when her father fled the preservation of the Brotherhood.

They never knew what a gift that was tied up in an attitude I had to break before I could even enjoy it.

Closing the space between us, I stepped on the pill bottle glaring at me like a neon sign begging for your attention. Crushing the hard plastic under my shoe, I kneeled, resting a forearm on my knee while I stared her down. Demanding she look me in the eyes, I let the words roll off my tongue, "The only thing you're going to be a slave to is my cock and the only reason you'll be crying is me. That's the real initiation, sweetheart, adding me to the scars you fucking collect like trophies. That's not living until you endure me."

Waiting for the weight of my words to sink in, I caught her chin, my thumb smearing her red lipstick outside the lines of her lips.

Leaning closer, feeling the hot breath of a deep exhale kiss my skin. "Keep the red lipstick, it's so slutty I actually like it. Not hiding it at all, huh. I want to see this color all over my cock." I felt like my lips were brushing the fucking air instead of her soft skin, and I hoped the knife of my resentment went deep enough to cause internal bleeding.

Her mouth was open, lips glistening from the way her tongue darted out slowly to swipe across them, and her face was turned upward trying to collide with my mouth when I

swiped the pill bottle off the floor and tugged it into the pocket of my hoodie without her knowing.

Whispering the words slower than I needed to, “You thought I would let you kiss me?” Laughing, I stood up keeping the bottle safely tucked out of sight. “The only place your mouth is going to touch is my cock. I’m just corrupt, not desperate.”

My fists were balled up so tight I felt the tendons in my hands stretch and pull in painful ways, it took every ounce of me to restrain myself.

*I wanted to fuck her, even covered in dirt and red lipstick.*

*I wanted to erase the thought of my brother touching her with my own.*

*I wanted to make a home between her legs and fuck her like I was homeless.*

“How is it possible to hate you more than I already do?” Pushing all her things into her bag, she straightened her spine and stood up like she was an equal when we both knew who was royal in this room.

“Hate me all you want. Hell, curse my name while you moan it, not going to change anything. You want something I have, and if you want into the Brotherhood then you’re going to keep playing my games.”

Her hands pushed against my chest as she plowed through me, catching me off guard. Clover had too much pride to quit now, storming his was just for show.

Waiting for the elevator doors to close before I walked over to the shelves filled with ancestry and secrets too big to carry around. Our fathers hide everything amongst the mundane and unwanted.

*Just like Clover.*

She was hiding so much more than she knew.

Running my fingers along the spine of a book bound in red leather, I pulled on its binding until the built-in bookshelf slowly swung open, revealing a set of decrepit stairs molded

out of stone. Jogging down the stairs two at a time, I pulled out Cassius's—*my* lighter. Receiving it after he died was my first step into his shoes as the soon-to-be king, engraved with their mantra and some bullshit about it always lighting the way.

The Brotherhood required you to burn everything in your life and start over. College was our clean slate even though none of us acted like it.

Pushing the flame into the lantern, I watched it grow until it illuminated the long hallway that led to the catacombs under our campus. It was how The Brotherhood moved without being seen, how we clung to the night. Everyone just assumed it was a rumor.

Holding up the lantern, I strolled down the hall. The light fawned over each skull embedded in the walls closing me in, each a former member with a gold plate recognizing them. Never nameless and always remembered.

Taking a right down another tunnel, I swallowed hard before forcing my eyes up from the ground. I read the gold plaque next to the set of bones not nearly as decomposed and weathered as the others.

*Cassius McCall.*

My father was adamant that his remains be somewhere we could all worship him like he wasn't broken and disowned by our father in his death, yet no one did.

Ducking into the room across the hallway, I walked in to find Lawson, Magnus, and Gunner sitting in front of the massive, man-sized fireplace. They were all sitting there with their various vices and looking defeated. "What the fuck is wrong with all of you?" I snarled the words already pissed off and fighting the need to punch everything now.

Walking over to the bar, I grabbed the bottle of brown liquor and splashed enough in a tumbler to wash down Clover and all the ways I wanted her but couldn't have her. The lantern was still glowing beside me as I swallowed the contents in a large gulp. I turned around and jumped up onto the bar top expecting one of them to answer me.

Lawson snuck a pill into his mouth before sipping on his water like the good boy he was. Magnus was staring at the spot his ankle bracelet had taunted him, no doubt seething that he had been on lock down all summer. Not that he missed anything, only his chance at pro ball, his escape out of the Brotherhood. Gunner was texting with a smile on his face, probably talking to whatever piece of ass he was currently taking advantage of.

He was the playboy of all of us, keeping our legacy alive one fuck at a time while we the rest of us quietly planned our revenge.

“Did you do what you needed to do?” Magnus asked before kicking his feet up on the ottoman in front of him.

No one knew I was collecting clues, only that I was ruining Clover. “For the most part. She’s convinced she’ll get in by doing all the dumbshit we want. Lawson is next, are you ready for that?” I threw my words in his direction even though he wasn’t paying any mind.

His leg was bouncing up and down repetitively, full of anxiety and anxious energy that made me want to hold him still. “I know what I have to do, Ambrose. We all do. You aren’t the only one hungry for revenge. She ruined my life, remember?”

Lawson was set to be valedictorian, ready to cash in all that scholarship money, follow in his father’s overachieving footsteps, and make him proud. That was his sole purpose - his father’s approval like some kind of lap dog who had outgrown your lap.

The week before graduation, our principal informed him that his scholarship had been revoked, and Clover would be dawning the sash and extra tassels instead. Clover has ratted out his study aides and stole the deliverance of his inspiring speech to the senior class, that was the day Lawson was burned by the flame of failure and never recovered.

Now he was popping twice as many pills when no one was looking, legs always bouncing uncontrollably, and staying up for days at a time just to study. Just to get it all back.

She didn't even know she ruined us.

"I'm going to crash. I'll see you guys tomorrow." Heading out of the room, I ambled down another long hallway until I reached the chambers my father liked to call mine. It was my private office hidden in the tunnels—once Cassius's and now mine.

My proverbially throne was really just a dramatic chair. The power was the real throne here.

I dipped inside the room before the guys could see, standing there against the closed door, looking around the barren room I barely stepped into all summer. It was too hard to be among his things. The realization he was gone was held in this room and that he was never coming back.

A large gold ring with our crest sat on the desk, but I had always been so unwilling to touch it. Cassius had been wearing it since our junior year of high school and seeing it there lonely only made my stomach turn.

That twin connection was real, and for most of my life I loathed it. I was always covering for him, taking the blame, protecting him—all just to end up in his shoes anyway.

My phone buzzed inside my hoodie pocket, cutting through my attention and the memories swirling around my head relentlessly.

Dad: They are doubting you, son. You need to show up in a big way. You need to prove yourself as the first heir.

More like their *bad heir*.

His messages were always covered in light threats and reminders that I could no longer hide in the shadows. I was king now, and I needed to act like it.

Picking up his ring off the desk, I slipped it onto my finger slowly, apologizing to my dead brother and hoping he heard

me through whatever dead connection we had. We could barely manage speaking when he was alive and now that he is gone I'm always talking to his ghost.

Setting the pocket watch on one of the empty shelves, I took a deep breath before making my way back up to the library. Climbing those steep stairs felt harder every time I came back above ground with more heaviness than I had going down.

Pushing the false wall enough to escape, I could hear the lights buzzing to life when I heard her voice. "Looks like I found my way in after all."

She sat at the empty table with her legs crossed and her eyes adjusting to the bright lights flawlessly. She spent that whole time still enough for the automatic lights to go off around her. Her dedication was impressive when it wasn't aimed at me.

I turned my back to her and pushed the built-in bookcase closed. I rolled my tongue across my lips and faced her, my gaze piercing. "You have no idea who you're dealing with." I took a step forward, my eyebrows dropping into my vision as I strutted closer to her, not stopping until my palms dug into the arms of the chair she sat so confidently in. "Every time you look into my eyes, I know you see him looking back at you, and that still isn't enough punishment. Do you feel cursed by my existence yet or should I make your life look a little more like hell?"

Her caramel eyes flooded with moisture, and I knew the verbal dagger had hit an artery. It was enough for now. Enough to help me sleep like a baby tonight.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Writer (mostly dark but who knows) who is better at writing villains you can't help but fall for. I'm a Gemini with a Virgo son and Capricorn husband who strongly recognizes her enneagram 4 in every situation. Currently residing where white Jeeps reign and Dunkin is consumed more than water and there's lots of beautiful views.



WISH YOU HELL

EM TORREY

## BLURB

The concept of good and evil is subjective. Children are taught from a young age the difference between bad and good but what's tolerable to one parent could be abhorrent to another; see, subjective. I won't tell you I'm the misunderstood good guy who has redeeming qualities because that would be a lie and if there's one thing in life that I don't tolerate it's a lie. I'm not talking about white lies or half truths, my life is built around omission. You see the truth is only as good as the man whose lips it came from. I'm not a good man but I tell the truth, even when I shouldn't. I realize the contradiction here but in my world, it makes sense.

# CHAPTER 1

WET LIPS WRAP AROUND THE TIP OF MY COCK AND I HOPED with everything I had that getting some blood flowing below my shoulders would ease my mind from racing but it doesn't. If anything this whole charade is pissing me off further, I want to grab a handful of her hair and shove my cock so far down her throat her eyes water and she has to hit my thighs to get me to pull back but I don't act on it. Acting on it would make her think I actually cared about her when in fact, she's just another mouth in a line of women attached.

I let her continue using my dick like a lollipop she isn't sure she likes the flavor of and she exhales loudly. The stack of receipts I need to go through glares at me from the top of my desk, the bar order form is half done with my pen still sitting on top of it. I've never faked an orgasm, I don't even know how but my mind runs scenarios of how I can get Chantel off her knees in front of me without hurting her feelings.

Feelings, why the fuck am I worried about her feelings? Because sexual harassment is real and if she walks out of here with tears in her eyes and tells the other bartenders that I didn't even finish it's going to look bad on all fronts. I don't need that kind of heat, The Fox Hole is an upstanding place and if people hear that I'm sexually harassing my waitresses and don't even finish the job, I'll be investigated and even worse, ridiculed mercilessly by the guys in my circle. A full roast session is not in the cards for me this month, or next. I don't have the time. Like someone upstairs was listening, my phone rings on the desk and Chantel, bless her heart, keeps sucking

like her daddy was Mr. Hoover himself. The vacuum guy, not the president.

I grab the device off the desk much to Chantel's dismay, she glares at me with my dick still in her mouth which shouldn't be comical, but it is. I smirk down at her as my phone opens from facial recognition, a text from a number I don't know appears in the notification bar and I open it. I scan the text quickly and sigh loudly before standing up. Chantel falls backward on her stilettos, her ass hitting the hardwood sounds throughout the room. Her mouth follows my cock like a baby bird in the nest waiting for its next meal. I'll give her credit where credit is due, she's determined.

"Sorry doll face, I've gotta go." I say tucking my half hard dick back into my black jeans .

"What?!" She squawks, "We were almost done."

"No, no we weren't." I correct, leveling her with a stare as she stands up from the floor.

"Um, I think I know when a guy is getting close," she jokes as I make my way towards the door, I turn the knob and open it before giving her the last piece of advice.

"And I think I know when I'm about to come. The finish line wasn't even in the distance. You should really start practicing, try a cucumber or a carrot. I don't give a fuck but the next guy you give a blow job to might not appreciate your tenth grade technique." I close the door behind me and the sound of what I assume is a shoe hits the door. I pop my head back in to check the damage, a hole sits in the door and I narrow my eyes at her.

"That's coming out of your pay, Chantel." I tell her, my eyes bouncing from the stiletto sized hole to her mortified face.

"Asshole!" She screams but it's muffled by the door closing again behind me. I smile briefly to myself as the wait staff stops what they're doing to stare at me. "Bad review." I say and they all nod like it's a reasonable response to her calling me an asshole. I check my pockets for my car keys and

realize they're not in my pocket where I left them, dammit. I must have left them on the desk, looks like I'm taking my bike instead of the Chevelle tonight. Oh well, a good ride would probably be good for my head, there's been a lot going on this past week and I can feel the tension headache coming in hot.

I grab my jacket off of the hook on the wall and head out the back door. Downtown Boston bustles around me as I throw a leg over my black Ducati, the summer crowd is waning and the fall crowd is coming back in full force. I love this time of year, the days are getting shorter and less humid and the nights are longer. I prefer the night, most of what I do is best cloaked under the shadow of darkness. People don't like to think the world has darkness in it but that's where I revel. My best paying customers bleed black and they have no qualms about it. They know what they are and I appreciate that, there's nothing worse than a snake that doesn't believe they're a snake. The engine of my bike roars to life as I set my sights on the docks. Tonight is another job, tomorrow will be a different one, they're never the same but the monotony of it all is starting to weigh on me.

## CHAPTER 2

My face disappears in front of me as I hold the plastic card between my index finger and thumb. Hot plastic drips into the metal garbage can, the last part of my previous life melting into a pool at the bottom.

My new ID, social security card, and birth certificate sit in the middle of the dilapidated press board table. The motel I'm calling home for the foreseeable future smells like feet and cigarettes and the noise from I-95 makes the single pane barred windows shudder with every car that passes, but it's better than where I was. A mask of red hair dye sits on top of my head and the mixture makes my scalp itch and I try my best not to scratch it. I don't need the flaming crimson color underneath my fingernails tomorrow when I go look for a job.

A job. The concept isn't one I've ever thought about. As a Beretta, I never needed one, my father took care of everything. I have no skills outside of shopping and Italian cooking, maybe some Italian restaurant needs someone to purchase their groceries, the thought makes me laugh out loud. Me, walking the streets, just another face in the crowd, picking out ripe San Marzanos for the sugo.

You may ask yourself, Ripley, how did you get yourself into this predicament? How did you end up in a scuzzy motel instead of the brownstone you've lived in your entire life? Why did you run away from a future that was so solid it could have been etched into your tombstone?

*Him.* My father arranged my marriage before I was conceived. I'm pretty sure the moment they found out I was going to be a girl he already had potential suitors clamoring at

the door. The problem wasn't the arranged marriage, even though it was straight out of the 1800's, barbaric and chauvinistic as fuck. No, the problem was the man they arranged for me to marry. A 'man' who had no issue "putting women in line". He was fifteen years older than me and belonged to one of the most prestigious families in Boston, he also had a terrible temper and a drinking problem.

*"Don't make him angry and you'll have nothing to worry about."* My mother told me on my eighteenth birthday six months ago. In what universe is that a reasonable thing to say to someone who's about to get married? Be the perfect wife and he won't smack you across the table for the pasta being over cooked. *Overcooked pasta? Pshh. I haven't overcooked pasta since I was a toddler.* Pasta flows through these Italian veins just as much as my blood.

One thing I knew for certain is that I would not be just another deal for my father, if he had any compassion, he would have found me someone in my own age group, not someone old enough to be my father. I would watch other girls my age laughing and enjoying time with men that were age appropriate, envious of their lives I decided that I would forge my own future.

I threw my phone out of the taxi window somewhere between my parents' estate and this hell hole. I left my car and ninety percent of my belongings in my room, with the overpriced wedding dress hanging on the hook next to my bathroom. Yes, you heard that right...wedding dress. Tomorrow, *I glance at the clock*, today is my wedding day. In a few short hours my mother will walk into my room to wake me up for the big day. I'd love to see the look on all of their faces when they realize the perfect future they curated for me completely falls apart. Serves them right, vaffanculo!

Realizing the time I make my way to the bathroom, flicking the light, reminding me of the shitty ass room I'm in. The yellow walls are nearly brown from filth, sending a shiver through me. Nasty motels were never something I thought about before, not when I had five star hotels at my fingertips.

The mirror shows my reflection, the reminder of my father staring at me, well kind of. I share his eyes, but my hair, it won't be like his, not anymore. Turning away, I grip the shower faucet and let the water cascade down until it's warm. Too hot and it'll damage the perfect color I've chosen for my new identity.

After the shower, I look down at the tub, seeing the stains I've left behind. The 1980s hair dryer that's attached to the wall, forcing a laugh out of me. Hopefully that damn thing still works and I don't end my runaway in a hospital from behind electrocuted. Surprisingly, it works like it's brand new. I've perfected giving myself a salon-like blowout, so as I work the round brush and dryer I do just that.

I should probably sleep, after all I've been up since six in the morning yesterday. Finally, I've managed to get away from them, away from him. Not bad if I do say so myself, especially after everything I've been through.

Tucking myself into bed, I do everything in my power to not think about all of the things that could be in this bed with me, or the things that have happened on this bed. No, don't go there, I don't have time to dwell on what could be. Not while I'm trying to reinvent myself.

Clicking the television on, I try to find something that's not an infomercial, reruns of Judge Judy, from back before she started going gray. A yawn splits my face and my eyes suddenly feel so heavy, pulling me into a dreamless sleep.

Panic fills me and I snap awake, sitting up in the bed the stench of stale cigarettes and sex hangs in the air. Slamming reality back into my brain, the skeevy motel walls greet me and after a quick glance at the clock, I realized I've slept in far too late. Dammit. I fling the blanket off me and rush to get ready for the day. Clutching the brand new Gucci purse in my hands, I leave to find my way to the nearest pawn shop.

When a person leaves behind almost everything they own, you take the most valuable things both sentimental and financial, the picture of you and your best friend from middle school, the diamond earrings your father gave you for your

thirteenth birthday. Because nothing says you're entering womanhood like a pair of sparkly rocks to put in your ears.

The walk to the pawn shop was nothing, well if you count six blocks in one direction only to learn that you took a wrong turn and proceeded to head in the opposite direction, nothing. What's a little exercise for a spoiled former mafia princess who is used to being chauffeured around her whole life. My legs burn as the pawn shop sign blinks over my head.

Rolling my eyes I push the heavy door open, the sound of a bell rings above me. "Afternoon." The grubby man behind the counter says as he scratches his balding head. Even though he's combed his hair over to try and hide it. Jokes on you man, you aren't fooling anyone.

"How much for these?" I ask as I pull out the two gold chains and a watch my father also gifted me from my pocket. They clank against the glass display case and he lifts the chain. He studies them carefully, looking from them to me like he's not sure how someone like me would have these.

"How much?" I state as he fumbles with the chains. I have more to sell, but I don't want to unload them all at the same pawn shop. I don't need to leave a trail for my father's henchman.

"Five hundred." He states plainly with a smirk on his lips. Five hundred wouldn't even buy one of those chains and he knows that. Do I have room to argue?

"A thousand." I reply, even though those three items retail for well over three thousand.

"Fine. Are you pawning or selling?" He cocks an eyebrow.

"Selling. You can make your money back easily and you know it." My arms cross over my chest, trying my best not to be suspicious about them.

He writes out a receipt and I sign away my right to the jewelry. Once we're both done, he takes the items and hands me the money. "Thanks." I count it out on the counter in front of him, even though I had just watched him do it. When I'm

satisfied, I load the money into my wallet and make my way out to find the next pawn shop.

The street is busy, and I'm glad to be a no-one here. Taking two steps I smile and then stop, a light nearly blinds me. Blinking quickly, I look around and notice a man standing in front of a business. The Fox Hole. The silver necklace gleams from the sun catching my attention.

When he opens the door, I catch myself craning my neck to see inside. Then I spot it, the white and red sign. *Help Wanted*. I need a job, and they need a body. Without second guessing my actions, I cross the street, weaving through the cars caught in traffic, step onto the sidewalk, and wrap my fingers around the handle. With a deep breath, I release any anxiety that might try to make itself known and plaster a shit eating grin on my face and prepare myself to swoon the owner so I can get myself a job.

# CHAPTER 3

THE DOOR OPENS TO THE BAR AS A WOMAN WITH DARK CHERRY hair waltzes through like she owns the place. Her demeanor is tenacious and she's carrying herself like it's her God given right to be here. She steps up to the bartender and asks him something, he turns his head and points at me. Fuck. Usually my manager handles the nuisance of hiring someone, but as of yesterday, I now have to deal with that again.

Cherry Red walks straight to the table I'm sitting at as I read the receipts from last night's deliveries. "No." I state nonchalantly, keeping my eyes glued to the papers.

"I'm not asking for a date, just a job." She responds with a sweet smile. Right, as if I'd date anyone, let alone her. She looks like a misplaced Princess, trying hard to not fit in.

Studying her face, she's young, like possibly not old enough to be here, young.

"How old are you?" I ask, sitting back in my seat. I pray she's over eighteen.

"You can't ask me that," she says with a single raised eyebrow.

"I don't see an application sitting in front of me, so yeah, I can ask that. I need to know if you're even old enough to be gracing us with your presence." I reply coldly, sarcasm drips from my tone.

"My presence is free currently but if you'd like to change that, I'm more than willing." She fires back and I feel my lips

twitch with what should be a smile. She's quick, I'll give her that.

"Age, Red." I say with a sigh.

"Thirty three..no...thirty five." She folds her hands in front of her like a prayer and either she has the best plastic surgeon in the world or she's full of shit.

"If you're thirty five, you either sold your soul to the fountain of youth or you have the best plastic surgeon in the entire world, neither of which I think is true so instead of wasting my fucking time why don't you tell me you're real age and we can continue this underwhelming conversation." I snip, annoyed to be even playing this childish game.

"Oh you meant my age," she says placing her hand on her chest theatrically, "I thought we were guessing yours."

*No you didn't.* I lean back in the chair and pinch the bridge of my nose with my thumb and forefinger. I can feel the headache coming on and I feel like it's going to last way past the end of this conversation.

"Are you an idiot?" I ask blatantly.

"Not professionally," she replies, "but I have played one on TV." Her dark green eyes sparkle with mischief and I, again, don't have the time or the mental capacity to deal with this bullshit. I stare at her for a long moment, inspecting her again. The overpriced bag on her shoulder doesn't match the clothes she's wearing. Is she a thief? Why the fuck is she so pretty? Cherry red locks frame her porcelain doll face. My cock twitches in my jeans as my eyes trail down her body. My stare must have an effect on her because she shifts her weight from one foot to the other.

"I'm nineteen," she says finally. I have no idea how long it's been since either one of us said anything. I was too busy wondering what she looked like under that striped button down and holed jeans. I say a silent thank you that she's over eighteen and I'm not a full size pervert...today.

"You can't work behind the bar, you aren't old enough but I do need another waitress. Where was the last place you

worked? Have you ever served before?"

"I've been serving my entire life," she mumbles more to herself than me.

"What was that?" I ask, my cock pressing against the zipper of my jeans so hard I'm afraid it's going to break free and try to go home with her like a lost puppy.

"I said, I've been serving my whole life, just not professionally." She repeats with a straight face.

"What's your name, Red?"

"Ri- Harley, Harley Beaumont." She stammers and I know well enough that the name she gave me isn't hers. I know secrets and the people who keep them and this girl just said her name like it was her dogs.

"Harley, I'm Bowen Fox." I hold my hand out to her to shake and she grabs it forcefully. Someone in her life taught her how to shake a man's hand and it's not a trait many women these days know. She holds my eyes as her palm leaves mine.

"Fox? Like..." she motions around her with her index finger.

"Yep, Fox like The Fox Hole." I state with a nod.

"Ohhhh," she says with a matching nod, "nice place."

"Thank you," I reply, "come back tomorrow and Chantel can get you set up. We open at eleven so if you're here about ten thirty we can get your paperwork done before your shift starts?" I say it like a question and I have no god damn clue why.

"Perfect, I'll be here at 10:30. Thanks Bowen...errr Mr. Fox." She corrects with a wide smile.

"It's just Bo." I state with a smile of my own. Why the fuck am I smiling?

"Bo," she repeats and the sound of my name in her voice does something weird to my insides. "I like that, it fits you."



I can think of four thousand other things I'd rather do than sit in the parlor of this dated brownstone in south Boston. Clipping coupons with my nana sounds more riveting than sitting here with these assholes but a job is a job and money talks.

"That little bitch ran away." Enzo seethes, knocking his fist against the table, the ice in the whiskey glasses clinks loudly from the force. "You should have let me marry her when she turned eighteen like we originally agreed."

"You mean when she was still finishing school?" Dominic replies coldly. These fat mafia fucks have been blubbing all evening about Enzo Moretti's runaway bride.

"I don't give a fuck if she was still in school or not. If she comes back tainted," Enzo narrows his eyes, "there will be blood to pay. Hers or yours, I don't care."

Dominic sets his whiskey glass on the table calmly before pulling a revolver from his breast pocket and shoving it against Enzo's temple like it's no big deal.

"You threaten my blood again and I will show you yours. You hear me? Nod your head or so help me God, Mr. Fox will have one hell of a mess to clean up. I assume brain matter is not easy to remove from a chandelier."

"It's not." I reply coolly, taking a long sip of the whiskey. Enzo narrows his eyes at me but nods his head in agreement with Dominic.

"Good, now apologize to our guest, I won't tolerate your rude behavior."

"I-" Enzo starts to refuse but Dominic pushes the revolver harder against his temple, pulling the hammer back.

"Apologize," Enzo grits out through his teeth.

"Good," Dominic puts the revolver back into his breast pocket and grabs his glass off the table.

“Now, can we get down to the reason I’m here? I’m not a bounty hunter, I don’t track people down. If you have a mess, I’ll clean it up but I’m not Liam Neeson and my particular set of skills will not help you in this scenario.” I state.

“No. We don’t need you to track Ripley down. I need you to take care of a former business associate. He’s gotten out of line recently and he needs to be dealt with.”

“Permanently?” I ask, I need to know whether I’m going to be sending a message or sending him home.

“Yes.” Both men answer in unison.

“Okay,” I stand from the chair abandoning the whiskey, “text me the info to the number you called me on and give me until the end of next week.”

“The end of the week? It’s Saturday.” Enzo guffaws.

“Yes, at the end of next week, much like bringing life into the world, taking life is a tedious process.” I walk out of the room, giving them no chance to ask extra questions or shoot the shit with me.

The engine of the car purrs as I sit outside the brownstone, I’m not stupid enough to think these men won’t double cross me. I’m waiting for Enzo to leave and head back to his apartment downtown. Yes I researched him, yes I know he’s just over fifty, he’s got high blood pressure, hidden offshore accounts and a mole he’s getting removed from his back next month because his doctor is worried it might be skin cancer. I don’t fuck around with the people I do jobs for, I’ll be balls deep in your life before you even knew I was there. Enzo was supposed to marry Dominic Beretta’s oldest daughter today, she was a no call no show. Smart girl, I couldn’t imagine a girl who just finished school being married to a man that’s days away from an AARP membership. The door to the house opens and Enzo walks out, lingering a little too long with Dominic’s wife as she hugs him goodbye. This guy is a slug. He walks down the steps after the door closes behind him pulling the fob for his car from his pocket. The lights of the car flicker as he unlocks it and he folds himself into the tiny sports car like an accordion. Red lights glow against the dark

of the night as he turns the car on and signals that he's entering traffic, I do the same, following him towards his apartment.

At the intersection he takes a right instead of a left and I continue to follow him, where are you going sir? When he stops in front of a familiar building and parks outside I watch him as he enters and snap a quick picture on my phone in the event I ever need it. That's the trouble with being a criminal doing business with other criminals, the lines drawn in the sand by the law don't necessarily apply anymore. I can't call the cops and neither can he. Everything has to be handled like the old west, quick draw and quicker thinking. I watch him for a few moments through the fogged glass of the window. What are you doing here, Mr. Moretti?

# CHAPTER 4

FLAMING RED HAIR FLIES PAST THE FRONT WINDOW OF THE restaurant, she's late. I don't normally greet my employees at the door but Chantel called and said she was running at least an hour late from a water leak in her apartment, so now I have to deal with this bullshit.

The front door swings open and Harley strides in like she owns the place, again. I don't know who in her life told her she has a crown on her head but her piece of humble pie will be expensive.

"Sorry, I'm late. I had to run all the way here," she says out of breath, she leans forward and then lifts back up with her hands on top of her head to open her airways.

"Why did you run all the way here? And from where?" I ask, she's not wearing trainers so I know it couldn't have been for the exercise. "You know there's an app that you can use to get a ride pretty much anywhere. It's called Uber."

She looks at me dumbfounded. "What?!? Are you serious? You mean I could just call a car to drive me instead of running everywhere like Usain Bolt. What a concept, next you're going to tell me we don't have to call people anymore and we can just send them words." Sarcasm drips from her tone and I don't like it. She's a mouthy little thing and it's going to get her in trouble...but why does it make me hard as a fucking rock?

"Yep, wouldn't you know it, you can send words now. Like 'hey I'm going to be fifteen minutes late because I have

no consideration for anyone else's time'. That would be appropriate for this scenario, don't you think?" I snap.

"Carrier pigeons still exist? Maybe I'll send a raven next time." She snaps back.

"Or a fucking text." I yell.

"I would have sent a text but A." She holds up a tiny finger, Jesus she has small hands. "You didn't give me your number. And B", she holds up her middle finger, "I don't have a phone to text you on anyway." She then drops her first finger and flips me off with her still standing middle finger. I grab her middle finger in my fist and squeeze.

"Do that again and I'll make you eat it." I seethe.

"How very Dahmer of you but human flesh isn't my kink, whatever floats your boat though. If I see your face on TV I'll remember this moment but don't worry, I won't tell them you threatened to make me eat my own finger." She winks, she fucking winks at me. I release her finger and take a step back from her. I don't normally lose my temper that quickly but this girl is getting on my fucking nerves. Without warning she shoves her middle finger in my mouth like the pint size psycho I'm realizing she is. I turn my head and she pulls her hand back. Why does her finger taste good? Like vanilla and something else. Something musky.

"You're lucky I didn't bite it off." I spit, "who the fuck puts their finger in someone else's mouth? What is that thought? Vanilla and...?"

Her smile is broad and it doesn't take a genius to crack the code.

"Happy to know you like the way I taste," she smirks at me and I just unknowingly tasted her pussy.

"Is that why you were late? Fucking your boyfriend?" I'm suddenly jealous and it's a foreign feeling to me. I don't get jealous, I don't care enough about the women I'm with to give a second thought to who else they're sleeping with. I mentally add getting tested to my list of things to do.

“Nope,” she says slyly, “I was late because I just had to trudge ten blocks to get here and I don’t know if you know this or not but it’s a freaking madhouse out there.” She hooks her thumb towards the bay windows. “There’s no boyfriend or prospects of boyfriends.”

So she’s single. I don’t know why I like the sound of that. I’m a decade and a half older than her, she can’t even go to a bar legally.

“If you really wanna know...” she pauses and I give her a blank stare.

“I’m enthralled,” I say dryly, my face not breaking its usual passive look.

“I had a super random sex dream last night and woke up with my hand already down my panties. You don’t happen to have a chest tattoo and speak Italian, do you?”

“No,” I narrow my eyes at her, what’s with all the weird fucking questions. I feel like she talks to me in circles and this is only our second interaction.

“Shame. In my dream you did,” she smiles and before I can answer or even form a coherent thought, Chantel walks through the door looking like she was rode hard and put away wet.

“I’m so sorry I’m late. What a shit show that was,” she says, pulling her bag from her shoulder. She walks past us towards the employee lockers. Harley and I follow her and as she grabs her apron and white button down.

“This is Harley, you’re going to be training her today.” I say as she pulls her shirt over her head, a white tank top covers her body but I still notice Harley blush at her exposed body.

“Hi!” Chantel says as she buttons the front buttons of the shirt. “Let’s get you a uniform and we can get started.”

As they walk off together, I can’t help myself. “Before you go Red, wash your hands.” I storm off and leave them to it.

Hours later I have gotten absolutely nothing done, I'm sitting at my desk in my office and I purposefully left the blinds on the window up so I could watch her. Chantel being the bitch that she is, gave her a shirt that could also qualify as a queen size bed sheet. My burner phone vibrates in my pocket, I barely peel my eyes away from the window long enough to pull it out of my pocket and read the name and location of the guy Dominic is paying me to take care of.

**Stefano Beretta**

**121 S. Dison St.**

I Google Dison Street on my open laptop, I'm not stupid enough to Google the actual address, a map of the city appears in front of me and quickly zeros in on Dison. It appears to be in a major subdivision across town and it's a gated community. I grab my phone off the desk and send the thumbs up emoji before pulling the battery and SIM card from the phone. I toss the device in the bottom drawer of my desk and break the SIM card in two pieces. Another day, another job, another new burner phone number.



I fell into this job by accident really. A mob boss was having dinner at the restaurant a few years ago and he rented out the entire venue for him and his men to dine, drink and plot. By the end of the dinner, I had sent the waitstaff home and I was basically just waiting for them to leave when a gunman shot through the glass window and killed the boss' second in command. The men scattered, grabbing their holsters and jackets from the chairs and coat closet and running out the door to get their revenge. The mob boss sat in his chair the entire time his men scurried around the restaurant, I watched him from my seat at the bar as he finished his clams, blood pooling onto the table as his second lay across his unfinished meal.

When he had finished his clams I got up, walked over to the table and asked him politely if there was anything else I

could get him, he looked up at me, asked my name. I told him and he nodded before pulling the ring from the finger of the dead guy. I was in total shock and wasn't sure if I should call the police or what to do with the guy who was currently ruining my new hardwood floors with his blood.

“You keep this between us Bowen, yeah?” He asked in a heavy Italian accent. I nodded my head because what the fuck else was I going to do?

“You got anywhere you can put him?” He motioned to the body and I thought for a second, coming up with nothing. I don't watch CSI or Criminal Minds, I didn't know how to dispose of a body without getting caught and ending up in jail for murder.

“I can put him in the walk-in freezer for now but I don't have anywhere else.” I confess. “And he'd have to be gone by morning because my staff would lose their minds if they found a dead body in the freezer.”

“You gotta basement here?” He asked and I nodded.

“Put him down there, I'll have one of my men pick him up tomorrow.” He stated as he wiped the sides of his mouth with a napkin. He stood up and pulled a stacked money clip from his front pocket. He pulled all the money from the clip and set it on the table. I eyed the money and then my gaze returned back to the fat bastard who just made me an accessory to murder.

“That should cover the meal and the window, I'll have my men drop more off tomorrow when they pick up.” And he left. He walked out the front door like nothing had happened. I locked the door after he left and on autopilot grabbed a large table cloth, wrapped the guy up and dragged him downstairs. I cleaned that table and the floors until my fingers and eyes were bleach burned and you could eat off the damn floor in the dining area. The next morning, just like he promised, two guys showed up with an envelope and took the dead guy to whereabouts unknown.

“You gotta number?” One of the guys asked after the body was in the trunk of his Lincoln.

“Yeah,” I said, with a question in my tone.

“Well can I have it?” He spits, almost like I should have known to just had my phone number over to a mobster’s henchmen when he strolled through the door to pick up the dead body they left behind.

“Why?” I asked, the notion not making any sense.

“Boss wants it, there’s good money in this shit you know? Especially if you have the stomach for it.” There’s a wicked look in his face, almost like he’s fucking daring me.

With a sigh, I gave him my number and the rest as they say is history. I started getting cleanup calls for all the mob bosses and their men then it became its own service along with killing. I’ve become numb to the entire exchange, I wish I could say I feel bad about it but I’m not killing school teachers or nuns, the guys I’m hired to kill are bad men, they’ve done terrible things. Do I feel bad for their families? No. They’re better off.

“Looking for a new house?” Harley chirps from her spot next to my desk. Her voice startles me, bringing me back to the present. A Zillow listing sits on the forefront of my screen, the listing is two houses down from my target. That’s how I’ll get in, I’ll schedule a viewing and the over eager listing agent will give me the code for the gate.

“Something like that,” I mumble, clicking out of the screen.

“That’s a real nice neighborhood. I know a guy who lives there.” She nods her head and I stare at her.

“How was your first day?” I ask, am I making small talk? I never make small talk. I never ask my employees anything other than if they’re doing their jobs.

“Pretty good, learned a lot, made some money so that’s good.” She says, pulling her red hair from the tie letting it fall around her shoulders. Her scent hits me like a Mac truck and I realize quickly I need to stay away from her. I’m too damn old for her, too jaded at this point.

“That’s good, was Chantel nice to you?” I ask, again with the fucking small talk.

“Chantel? Do you mean Chelsey?” She quirks any eyebrow.

“No, the girl who was training you.” I state, rolling my eyes.

“Her name is Chelsey.” She tries and fails to suppress a giggle. Huh. Is her name really Chelsey and I’ve been calling her Chantel for a fucking year and a half? Why didn’t she correct me?

“Sure, Chelsey, was she nice?”

“Nope. Look at this freaking shirt? My boobs are big but I think I could have easily fit into a medium.” She holds her arms out showing the shirt that is a sail at this point. I do notice her boobs though, they’re large on her small frame, with flared hips and an ass you could bounce a quarter off of. Yes I noticed, I’m a guy.

“I don’t think she liked that you were watching me all day,” she says with a smirk.

“Probably not.” I confess, why am I telling her any of this? She smiles broadly at me, oh that’s why.

“Well, I’m off unless you need anything else?” She leaves it an open ended question on purpose and I would really like to tell her I do need something else, like her bent over the desk sitting between us with that stupid shirt pulled up around her mouth so she can’t scream but I don’t. I look over to the map on the screen and a truly stupid idea forms.

“What are you doing this evening?” I ask, leaning back in my chair, I stretch the kinks out of my back and lift my arms over my head. She watches me with wide eyes and a partially open mouth, ah, so it does go both ways. Take a good look, Red.

“I don’t have any plans this evening,” she says almost whispering.

“Well, I’d like to go look at that house but apparently it’s a gated community and I hate real estate agents. It looks like it’s vacant, would you happen to know the gate code?” I ask, watching her face. She ponders the question for a long moment before giving me a slow nod.

“Yeah, I can do that. Are we going to be doing anything illegal?” Harley asks, her interest piqued.

“Define illegal.” I smirk and she claps her hands in front of her excitedly.

“Okay, I’ll meet you back here this evening then?”

“I can pick you up if you’d like.” I offer, and there’s another rule broken. Her face blanches slightly and she shakes her head no.

“That’s okay, I’ll just meet you back here, six okay?” She stumbles slightly over her words and now my interest is piqued, why doesn’t she want me to know where she lives?

“Six is fine.” I say with a smile. I don’t want to raise her suspicions but I’m definitely going to be looking into where she’s living. Maybe she still lives with her parents and doesn’t want to tell me? That’s plausible right? God, she’s young enough for that to be a plausible answer. Like she’s worried her dad is going to meet me at the door with a shotgun. My inner dialogue reminds me that I’m old enough to be her dad.

“I’m going to go get a phone today so if you wouldn’t mind giving me your number I can put it in there so if I’m late at least you’ll know.” She’s rambling and it’s fucking adorable. She wrings her hands in front of her like she just asked me out on a date and not the other way around.

“Sure,” I say and grab a sticky note from the desk, I scribble out the digits to my actual phone number not the one I give to clients.

“K, cool.” She says, grabbing the sticky note from my outstretched hand and backing out of my office. She smiles at me as her back hits the wall instead of the door, she blushes and I know without a shadow of a doubt, I’m in so much fucking trouble.

# CHAPTER 5

The guy at the phone store looks at my ID and then back to me twice before he inputs my information. I swear the *fake* ID is as real as it gets, I've ensured that my new identity is as real as my old self. She went to school, got decent grades, and is completely of age. So why is he looking at me like I'm not who I say I am, *maybe your face is giving away that you're not who you say you are*. I shut my brain down and wait for him to finish tapping away at his keyboard.

“What’s your social security number?” He asks, not looking up from the tablet in front of him. I pull the flimsy card from my still open wallet and drop it on the tablet screen. I haven’t memorized it yet and it would look suspicious as fuck to read it off the card.

“Thanks,” he says, sliding the card off to one side of the tablet and typing in the numbers. “Okay, looks like you’re all set. Go ahead and pick out a device and I can check you out... I mean, I’ll ring you up when you’re done.” He blushes and it’s adorable.

“I’ll take whatever free phone you guys have available.” I say, I don’t need anything flashy, just something that receives calls and texts. I realize I can’t download any social media and the thought feels like a lead weight in my gut. I can’t keep in contact with my sisters or my mom, I didn’t realize it would take this long for that thought to hit me but my chest burns at the thought. I clear my throat, squelching the pain that sits there.

“Are you sure? You’re approved for the max amount we can give someone in credit.”

“Huh?” I say, confused.

“Yeah, it looks like you’ve got dang near perfect credit, good job.”

Thank you to the real Harley Beaumont.

“The free one is fine,” I say.

“If you insist.” He rolls his eyes and walks towards the back room. He comes back a few moments later with an iPhone and an Android, I point to the iPhone several editions old and he sets it down.

We make small talk while he rings me up and then hands me my phone and a pamphlet on my new cell phone plan.

“Thanks again,” I say and exit the store. I find the sticky note exactly where I left it in my purse and type the digits into the screen. I don’t know why my hands shake as I type out the text but they do. I won’t say I’m not attracted to Bo, he’s gorgeous with dark hair that curls around his ears, bright blue eyes that seem to stare right through me, and his smile is something they write songs about but they’re so few and far between that it feels like an eclipse. Overall he’s a ten but there’s something dark in him that draws me in, I can’t put my finger on it but it’s a connection I’ve never felt before. I hit send on the message and wait on the sidewalk for him to respond. I should probably head back to my motel room and get changed from this god awful shirt Chelsey gave me but I want to see his response. My phone dings and vibrates in my hand and my insides feel like I’m at the top of the rollercoaster waiting for the descent,

It’s Harley, this is my new number.

Bowen: Hey, thanks for the number.

That’s it? No, ‘I’m looking forward to seeing you in a few hours’ or anything.

Ugh. I stuff the phone into the back pocket of my black jeggings and start towards the motel. This walk is getting old really quick, I ran the distance this morning and thought I was

going to die. Cardio and I are in a toxic relationship and I avoid it like the plague. The fall weather in downtown Boston is fickle, you can leave in the morning with a sundress and a light jacket and by the afternoon you'll wish you would have packed your parka and a couple of sled dogs. The cold air whips across my face as I make my way to the room. I didn't realize the real Harley Beaumont had such good credit when I bought her identity, maybe I can use it to my advantage and get into a little apartment or something. The possibilities are truly endless for me at this point, I have a completely different identity and because my father was so damn strict growing up, no one outside of our little network would notice or recognize me. The anonymity feels amazing, I've never felt more free in my life.

My father kept me in a gilded cage after my oldest brother was killed. I was like a collector Barbie, left alone to stare at but never allowed to be free from the restraints that bound me to the package.

The night before my wedding I heard my fiancé in the parlor with my father talking about how they had trained me well, how I would be a great wife because I don't know anything outside of this tiny life and how easily I'll fall into line. That was the moment I decided to run and never look back.

This sleazy motel reminds me once again, that I'm no longer the pretty princess in the ivory tower, which is totally fine and completely by choice. I just need to find somewhere else soon to avoid all of my clothes smelling like this place. The mirror never lies, and right now, it's screaming for me to shower.

When I finish, the mirror no longer wants to scream at me, and I feel refreshed. Well as refreshed as one could feel in a motel room that smells like a nineteen eighties sitcom. I flip my hair out of the towel and dry it as best as I can for now and traipse over to grab my clothes. One leg at a time, I'm slipping into my underwear, black skinny jeans with rips through the thighs and knees. I grab a lace bra out of my bag and put it on,

followed by my white under tank and then the cropped KISS shirt with a peekaboo shoulder.

Rotating, I give myself a once over, nodding my approval and then start on my make-up and hair. I opt for a low smoky eye and lipstick the same shade as the KISS logo on my shirt, I check my teeth after applying for any remnants of red. My new red hair compliments the makeup well and I decide to leave it down in its natural wild curls. I have no idea what we're doing tonight other than a potential breaking and entering. The thought of actually breaking the law for the first time sends a thrill through me that I could only compare to zapping yourself with a battery on your tongue. Okay, so maybe buying an identity from some skeezy guy I met on Craigslist was the first time I broke the law, but that was out of necessity. This? This is for fun. I grab my black combat boots that I now wear as often as I can. Mostly because they're something my father never would have allowed me to wear, and Harley would totally rock this outfit. I admire my new look in the mirror and although I barely recognize the girl I used to be under the clothes and the makeup, I feel more like myself than I ever have.

My phone buzzes on the nightstand, and I foolishly trip over my own feet to get to it. Landing awkwardly on the bed, I reach up and grab the phone, swiping the screen to turn it on.

Bowen: Ready?

Excitement fills me, I'm not sure why. Yes, he's hot as sin. Yes, he could ruin me seven ways from Sunday. And yes, I would let him. I've spent my life doing what I was told, when I was told to do it. Now that I'm living by my own rules, I have a few things that need to be checked off my *never have I ever* list.

I type out a response.

Yep, I'm on my way.

As soon as I hit send the door flies open with a loud thud as it hits the wall, forcing me to jump to my feet, a high

pitched scream leaves me and I throw the only thing I have which happens to be my phone. The phone sails through the air before it's caught in his palm.

“Careful Red, you just got this.” He waves my phone in the air. Bo stands in the entrance of my room in a black leather jacket and dark denim jeans and pissed off scowl on his face.

Stalking over, I rip the phone from his hand, stuff the device and my keys into a strapped clutch I picked up at the thrift store, it's black leather with embossed roses, I shove the tips I made today in too, just in case. Letting my heart settle as I collect my things, I turn back to see him standing there still, “What the fuck are you doing here?”

“Better question, what the fuck are *you* doing here, Red?” Bo arches an eyebrow, shoving his hands into his pockets. He looks around the room with unrestrained disgust.

“Well, my mansion is getting renovated so, I'm staying here for the continental breakfast, gotta save a buck where you can. Besides, why do you care? You've known me for less time than a Kleenex.” I loop the bag over my wrist and stare at him, hoping my face looks like I could karate chop him in the throat for scaring me.

He just rolls his eyes and nods for me to leave the room. With a sigh, I do it. I'm happy that we're dropping this issue for the time being but the look on his face says we will revisit it.

I step out of the room and into the parking lot and Bo pulls the door closed behind us.

“If I'm Red, does that make you the Big Bad Wolf?” I ask as he approaches his side of the black car parked in the space directly in front of my room.

“Guess you'll have to wait and see.” He's got one of those half cocked grins on his face, you know the one. I'm not sure if guys know that, that particular grin of theirs melts us women into puddles.

# CHAPTER 6

MY PALM SETTLES ON THE STEERING WHEEL AS WE PULL OUT of the parking lot of her shitty motel complex, I feel oddly uncomfortable. Not a feeling I'm used to with a beautiful woman sitting next to me. She's unsuspecting in sexy yet non-revealing clothes. But, she's not throwing herself at me like others have. It's refreshing yet unsettling.

We drive in silence as she picks her fingernails and I sneak looks at her while the city passes by the window.

“So,” I say, breaking the silence, “you want to talk about why you're living next door to a drug dealer and a prostitute?”

“Nope.” She says curtly. “Unless you'd like to explain why Chelsey thinks you're the scum of the earth?”

I decide quickly that this conversation isn't going anywhere and thankfully the gates to the private community are coming up ahead. I turn on my blinker and pull into the driveway with the keypad box on my side of the car.

“#6969,” she says and I type the digits into the keypad. “That sounds like a mess.” She giggles to herself as the gates click open.

“What's that?” I ask, already inspecting the tree lined streets for cameras and nosy neighbors.

“Pound sixty nine sixty nine, you'd think it'd be the other way around.” She shrugs but the smile on her face shows her embarrassment. I think for a second on what she said and she's right, that would be a mess.

I laugh, the sound coming out somewhat forced, I don't remember the last time I laughed outside of a guys night or faked it during small talk.

“That would be a freaking mess.” I say as we drive through the pristine cut grass and women walking their babies in twenty thousand dollar strollers. The listing sign appears on my right and I check the address of my target as well. The house is caddie corner across the street and would give a perfect view of the inside of the house. We pull into the driveway and hop out of the car together, Harley walks to the front door of the house as I appraise the neighborhood.

I notice her looking at the same house I was just staring at, a forlorn look crosses her face and if I wasn't staring at her I would have missed it.

“Which house does your friend live in?” I ask, trying to make conversation.

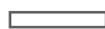
“Not a friend, but that one there.” She points to my target's house.

“Who is it?” I ask, my need to know gnawing at me.

“Someone I used to know a long time ago, but don't worry, he's in Italy for at least a month visiting his mother so we won't be running into them.” **What the fuck?**

“A month, huh?” I nod, my mind whirling with why the fuck I would be called to a job that the guy is out of town for the foreseeable future. Is it a sting? Is it a set up? Anger radiates through me at the possibilities.

“Yeah, they go every year.” She says, sadness lacing her tone. Is this girl for real, why would she know the owners of this house, the one house I was supposed to be going to. Yet here she is, pointing at it, stating she knows them, and that they're gone. She knows something.



“Let's get out of here,” I tell her, stalking back towards the car. I don't have time to run through all the possibilities of

different situations I could find myself in, so for now. Fuck this.

“But we didn’t even look at the house.” She whines, looking between me and the house.

“It’s not really my style.” I say, not paying her any mind. I’m livid and I’m trying to restrain it with her this close to me. She shrugs and heads towards the car door. I crank the engine over and tear down the street.

“Where ya headed Torretto?” She asks from the passenger seat, her body sucked into the seat with the speed we’re traveling at. “Are you a DoorDash driver on the side? Are we late?”

“Dinner at my place.” I grit out, my teeth mashed together so tight I’m surprised I haven’t broken one yet.

“Oh, I’d love to thank you so much for asking, such a gentleman.” She teases with a playful eye roll.

I hadn’t planned on taking her to my place but I need to get into my study and look at the documents I have on Stefano. My mind is running a thousand different directions and the only conclusion I can come up with is it was a set up. I look at Harley in the passenger seat, her eyes are locked on the road in front of us and her hands are wrapped around the sides of the seat so tight I’d be surprised if some of the stitching for the seats wasn’t loose when we stop. I lift my foot from the gas pedal as we approach downtown, the last thing I need is to get pulled over right now. Harley’s body softens as we slow down from breakneck speeds and when we come to a stop at the intersection she turns and looks at me with squinted eyes. “So, are you from Boston, or a transplant?” Small talk, I fucking hate small talk. I don’t answer, and instead keep my eyes on the road as I drive.

When we get back to my place, I don’t hesitate, parking the car and getting out. She follows suit, joining me as we make our way inside. Once my front door is open, I point to the living room, “Make yourself at home. I’ll be right back.” Just like that, I leave her to her own devices while I rush to my study on the second floor.

I fumble through the papers, flipping page after page, why the fuck would she know him? I'll have to go back over there, without her, I can't risk the job. Things have gotten a little bit more complicated now. I find myself thinking of her now, Harley and her cherry red hair. The bright red lips, and her goddamned smart mouth. I really could put that smart mouth to good use though, I'd love to see the red ring stained around the base of my cock as Harley gasps for breath.

No. No sir. Think of anything else, you can't return to her with an erection. I adjust myself, tucking my cock up under my waistband, making it so she won't notice and make my way back down. For tonight, I'll keep the *date* moving forward and I'll try again tomorrow.

I close the folder on my desk and a photo flies out, fluttering its way to the floor. I bend over to pick it up, noticing writing on the back. There are names written in cursive, Stefano, his wife Ella, daughter Maeve. Dominic, and his whole family including Romeo Beretta, who I accidentally killed after a scuffle with my intended target, and Ripley, the missing daughter that I heard them talking about before.

I turn the photo over, getting ready to place it back in the folder when I spot the daughter. Ripley. "Bo, what's taking you so long?" I hear Harley's voice, and I look up to see her, standing in my doorway. I look at the photo, and then back to Harley. No fucking way. All Beretta's get a tattoo when they turn sixteen. The same one Romeo is sporting in the picture on his forearm.

Ripley and Harley look nearly identical. But, I've yet to see her gun tattoo, the one they all have. And with the clothes she wears, she's obviously got it hidden. Or, maybe your mind is playing tricks on you, and she's not Ripley. If she is Ripley, then I've just hit the fucking motherload of leverage. Dominic will do anything to get her back.

Only one way to find out.

I tuck the photo back into the folder, and close the gap between Harley/Ripley and myself. "Just needed to see something." I lace my fingers in her hair, lifting her chin up to

meet me and press my lips to hers harshly. Fuck. She tastes like cherries.

# CHAPTER 7

MY ENTIRE BODY FREEZES, HIS LIPS ARE ON MINE.

What the fuck?

As his hands tangle in my hair and around my waist, I give in and kiss him back. Is this what it feels like to have someone actually want you? The heat between us is too much. My body purrs at his touch, the way he presses his body to mine leaves me desperate for more..

Suddenly he breaks the kiss, takes my hand and drags me down the hall. I follow, trying to not trip in the process. Where are we going now? I'm hungry.

"What about dinner?" I ask him as he opens a different door. I gasp, it's his bedroom. Oh, my god. Is this about to happen?

"I'll order some food later." he snarls, spinning me around to stand in front of him, face to face. My breath catches as he kisses me again, backing us up until my calves hit the bed. Before I know it, his fingers are pulling at my jacket and knocking it off my shoulders. Then he traces my sides, pulling my shirt up as he breaks the kiss.

It's happening, holy fuckity fuck, it's happening. This gorgeous man, yes man, is going to have sex with me. My shirt is thrown across the room and he kisses my shoulder, moving down to my collar bone and even further down as he kneels in front of me. My breath is shallow. He isn't a boy who's going to stumble through it, not wondering in the least if it's for me. No, he's a man who knows what he's doing... Oh god. His lips tease my waist as he pulls my pants down,

forcing me to step out of my boots, too. I stand there, in my underwear and bra, before him and he's going to make sure it's pleasurable for me.

I've heard horror stories from my girlfriends of boyfriends and husbands not being able to last or it being so bad they swore off sex all together, but Bowen looks like a man who knows his way around a woman. His kisses leave a trail of heat behind them as he makes his way across my skin.

When he stands back up, I reach for the hem of his shirt, and lift it over his head, revealing a well toned body. Fuck, I knew he was hot, but this is something else! It's like he was forged by the gods. Running my fingers back down his abdomen, over the valleys of muscles to his waistband, I feel my heart jumping in my chest. My fingers fumble as I work his belt and button, but when I look up at him through my lashes, he puts his hands over mine, guiding me carefully. Does he know I haven't done this before?

My nerves are dancing all through me and I'm so fucking ecstatic, I feel like I'm being electrified. The pulsation of heat between us only intensifies as we push his pants down and he kicks out of them. I can't help it. I look down, and holy mother of god. His dick is hard and sticking straight out. I lick my lips, wanting to taste him, wanting him to taste me.

With his pants finally out of the way, he reaches behind me with one hand and flicks the snap of my bra, and slowly pulls it down off my shoulders. I'm almost naked, with a man. With this man. I swallow hard as his face moves towards my neck, oh wow, that feels so good. His lips spark a fever in me as he wraps his hands around me, pulling me against his body. His erection pokes into my belly before sliding up against me.

Then, he starts leaning me back, laying me out on the bed, nipping and sucking at my skin until he gets to my nipple. When he takes my nipple into his mouth I arch up towards him, feeling the fire building inside me. I don't know what the others were talking about, this is the most erotic thing I've ever experienced in my life. Nothing could ever compare to this.

“Anyone ever tell you that you taste like cherries, Red?” Bo’s words are heavy as he breathes against my skin, sending a shiver through my body straight into my core. The ache between my legs is too much. How do people not live like this? Wrapped in each other’s embrace twenty four seven. I never want to feel anything beside the pure unadulterated bliss that is coursing through my body right now.

I don’t answer him as he continues down my body, I feel his fingers at my waist as he pulls my underwear down and I gasp at the sudden nakedness. I’m completely bare in front of him but I’m not given long to notice as Bo lifts my legs and moves his face between my legs. I suck in a deep breath when his tongue presses against my clit, sending sparks firing out throughout my entire body.

Each movement he makes causes my body to move towards him, craving more. Leaving me wanting, he pulls up and looks up at my body with a devilish smile. He places one hand on my stomach and then I watch his other hand disappear as I feel pressure at my entrance that fills me. “I want to watch you come undone.” He pulls his bottom lip between his teeth as I arch my back. He moves his fingers deeper inside me, it stings but in the most delicious way possible.

God, if this is what it feels like with his fingers, I can’t imagine what he’s going to feel like when he’s buried deep inside me. I hold on to the sheet, realizing that there’s no blanket. But, I could have sworn there was before.

My breath catches as he twists his fingers inside me, “Oh god.” I moan. Feeling every single movement. I close my eyes, unable to keep them open as my entire body clenches, like the muscles inside are trying to strangle his fingers, and he lets out a growl. Up until that moment I felt like I was climbing higher and higher in a roller coaster, his growl sends me over the edge into the strongest orgasm of my life.

I feel empty after he removes his fingers and I peel my eyes open just to watch him suck on them. Did he just clean me off his fingers with his mouth? Is that normal? Fuck, it’s hot whether its normal or not.

The bed shifts under his weight as he lifts and moves me to the middle of the bed. I can't stop staring at him. There is fire in his eyes as he leans down, crashing his lips to mine. He forces my mouth open as he settles between my legs. I can taste myself on his lips and feel the urgency in the strokes of his tongue for me to open and allow him in, and I do. I open my legs and lips for him but when I feel the tip of him press against my opening, I freeze, just for a second. Before I can freak out, he's moving inside me, sliding into me. Stretching and filling me, the pain as he pushes further in, it forces me to hiss and dig my nails into his biceps. Surely he can't fit anymore in there!

Several deep breaths later, I'm looking back up at him feeling drunk on lust. My eyes feel heavy and my body is on fucking fire. "You should have said something, are you sure you want to do this?" He almost looks upset as he stops moving. "Your body wants to," He kisses my collar bone, "but if you aren't ready.." I grab his ass, pulling him deeper into me.

"I want to." I hiss out as he hits me so deep I let out a gargled moan. Now that he's in me, he pauses again. "Bowen Fox. If you don't move those hips, then I'm leaving." I lift my hips to his, giving them a slight rotation to tease him.

"Yes. ma'am." He smiles at me, dipping his head down. We kiss harder and faster as he moves inside me. Giving me everything I could have ever wanted from this moment.

This is how it's supposed to be, two people joining together. Feeling the heat and fire between them. Each thrust brings my body closer to another climax. One that I'm chasing through him, I claw and nip at his skin. Just when I think it can't get anymore exciting, he lifts one of my legs, propping it in the crock of his elbow and thrusts into me. "Scream for me, Red." This time, when he pushes into me, I do. His name leaves my lips, echoing through the room and I slip over the edge, grabbing the sheet as I feel him swelling inside me.

Several breaths leave my body after holding it for far too long as he collapses down next to me. "Food." I say breathlessly.

He rolls over, propping himself up on one arm, letting his other reach over and turn me to face him completely. “You go, take a bath, and I’ll join you in a few.” I crease my eyebrows at him. “Trust me, you’re going to be sore, Red.” He nods to the far door and then places a kiss on my forehead. “I’ll order some food and clean this up, then meet you there.” I let out a sigh and push up off the bed, my entire body feeling both like jelly and like I just did nine million crunches and lunges. Oh, god. Don’t fall over. I steady myself and head towards the door he showed me to take a bath. When I open the door, I see a large claw footed bathtub and smile. His house has one of those updated classic looks. Like it’s been well taken care of or renovated to look like it used to. When I turn the water on and climb into the bath, I let out a sigh of relief and smile.

I just had sex, and it was amazing.

# CHAPTER 8

FUCK.

She's Ripley and a virgin. Well, she was a virgin. My sheets prove she's not anymore. I stand looking down over my bed seeing the stains. Moving to my nightstand I open the drawer, pull out a sharpie and write, *WISH YOU HELL* in large letters just under the stain and then rip the sheet off the mattress. Gathering it all up, I head back to my study and stuff it into a box, write on a blank piece of paper, *PROOF OF LIFE* and add it to the box. Sealing it up, I write out Enzo's name and address on it, tape it up and make a quick call for a courier to come get it.

Setting it outside, I leave it for them and make my way back to my phone. I order us some food, and pay. It says it'll be about an hour before we get it. So now, I take my still very naked ass to the bathroom where Red is. I'll have to be careful not to call her anything other than Red for now, so I don't slip up. I'm not ready to reveal what I know, nor do I want her to know what I know. Or that I work for her fucking family, or that I accidentally killed her brother.

Shit, this all just got way more complicated than I wanted.

When I open the door, seeing her laying in my tub, I smile. Fuck, I can't help it. The sight of her is intoxicating and I want to keep her. I want to make her scream my name like that over and over again. I want to see what she looks like gagging on my cock, to see what her perfect skin looks like with the red handprints I want to leave on her ass, or even my hands around her throat as I fuck her into the mattress. I could fuck her ten

ways from Sunday and never tire of the faces or sounds she makes.

“Hey.” She says softly. Rotating to her side so I can see that gun tattoo again, the one that proves she’s Ripley. The same exact one her entire family has, they want her back. Enzo wants her. Clenching my fists, walking towards her and I climb into the bath with her, and just hold her, feeling her chest rise and fall beneath my hands.

I’m so fucking screwed.

## **ONE WEEK LATER**

I tap my fingers on the chair as I wait for Dominic and Enzo, who are currently arguing in the study about the sheet I sent Enzo. “Some one has her and has fucking ruined her!”

“Why do you think it’s her?” Dominic spits back.

“I had it tested. It’s her DNA, her blood, her fucking pussy juices.” There’s a loud thud.

“Were you able to extract the male’s DNA?” Dominic calmly asks.

“No!” I swear Enzo sounds like he’s about to have a heart attack and I’m doing everything in my power to not laugh. After all, the man they’re looking for is sitting right here, waiting to find out why they called me here. When the study door flies open, Enzo comes out, clutching the sheet in his sausage fingers, his face redder than the stains in the white material. “I want her found.” He shoves a finger into Dominic’s face.

“If you want to keep that digit attached to the hand, you’ll remove it from my face.” Dominic grabs his finger and twists, forcing Enzo to drop the sheet. And that’s when they both spot me. “Mr. Fox.” Dominic nods as he releases Enzo’s finger.

I push up out of the chair. “What’s that?” I ask, nodding to the sheet that Enzo is currently picking up off the floor.

“Someone has taken and deflowered my daughter. We’re trying to find her, but we can’t catch a break. It’s like she’s dropped off the face of the Earth.” Dominic scoffs and turns to go back into his study as Enzo stands there. I stifle a laugh, since I can’t exactly tell them that I’ve found her, and that I’m the one that enjoyed her and then sent them the sheet to taunt them further.

After our meeting, I find myself standing in the alley behind Fox Hole. I don’t like the way Enzo and Dominic talked about Red in the meeting, like she was just out whoring around like a bitch in heat. They came to the conclusion that she sent them the sheet. That she was rubbing their faces in it. They seem to think that because I’m on their payroll that I won’t betray them. Fat chance, not when it comes to her. Not now, not after what they said they were going to do to her when she came back.

We closed a few hours ago, and everyone has left. The late, or early morning depending on how you look at it lingers in the air, the thick fog laces the streets and alley’s. Sometimes, I’m not sure if it’s fog or smog, but either way, it’s heavy today. I watch as Red leaves, her perfect ass swaying as she walks away. She’s asked to talk about what happened, but I’m not sure what to say about it. I fucked the Princess of the Boston crimelord, ridding her of the purity her father valued more than his own daughter. I keep my eyes glued on her until I see a dark shadow suddenly following her, sticking close to the walls of the other buildings, but he’s after her.

I flip my hood up, shove my hands in my pockets and follow him, following her. I love the stench and unpleasantness of Boston, but this is where I draw the line. Stalking and hunting women. I’m not saying I’m a nice man, nor am I saying women should be coveted. But, I know the darkness that runs through a man’s head when they see a single woman walking alone in the dark. Especially when they look like Red.

I catch him quickly, put him in a quick chokehold and knock his ass out. I have no issues lifting his sorry ass over my shoulder and taking him back to the Fox Hole. I’ve worked

under less than pleasant restrictions. And this will be no different.

When I get back I lay him on the bar, and get to work, putting up plastic sheets, and setting a chair in the center for my guest of honor. I tie him down, and throw a bucket of cold water in his face. “Morning perv.” I grit my teeth, making sure I don’t kill him too quickly. I need him to admit to what he had planned first.

The cool metal of my rusty pliers rest in my hand as I approach him.

“The fuck?” He jerks at the ropes and tape trying to break free.

“What was your plan with her?” I ask, putting one hand on his wrist as I line the nose of the pliers up with his middle finger. The open prongs of it rests on his finger, waiting to crush the bone beneath the meaty bits.

“Who?!” He shouts, looking down at my favorite tool.

Wrong answer pal. I squeeze the pliers until I feel the bone crushing vibrations in the handles, giving me that sickening pleasure I feel everytime I get to do this. “Stop!” He shouts.

“What was your plan?” I move my pliers to the next finger. This time, higher up. The knuckle isn’t going to heal as well as the tip of the finger.

“Fuck you!” He spits. Disgusting, I use my shoulder to wipe away his nasty saliva and crush his knuckle, ripping the skin away this time. Fuck him. He doesn’t need his finger anyway. I look down, the blood has splattered up my hand and all that’s left of his finger as he screams, is the bone and some hanging, now broken tendons and skin.

“Who was she?” I ask, knowing damn well who she was. He had his eyes set on Red.

“I-,” He cries out as I adjust my rusty pliers to his pinky. “I don’t know!” The best thing about owning your own place, is that when you do upgrades or remodeling, you can slip sound proofing into the walls and no one would ever know.

“What was your plan?” I pinch the pliers into the knuckle where the pinky meets the hand, crushing it down, I feel it crunch and pop.

“To fuck her!” He shouts as I repeat the ripping motion, this time, taking the entire finger off. The blood spurts up on my face and my twisted ass laughs, letting the finger fall to the ground.

“Do you think she wanted that?” My blood starts to boil.

“I didn’t care if she wanted to!” He screams, saliva and tears dripping from his chin. He was going to rape her. I grab his face, forcing his mouth open. My rusty pliers find one of his teeth and rips it out of his jaw, forcing him to scream even more. With blood everywhere, I reach behind him to the small table and grab a knife. “She wouldn’t have done anything about it.” He cries out, spitting blood onto my shirt. “None of the whores that work for you ever have.”

“You’ve done this before?” I slam my knife down into his thigh.

“They love the attention.” He does this weird scream laugh thing that kind of creeps me out, but it’s not nearly as creepy as he is. This man, raping my employees, all because of what? He can’t get pussy any other way? What sick thrill could he possibly get out of taking something that isn’t his? Rage bubbles through me I pull the knife from his thigh and stab him in the one place I would never want a knife. Sinking it deep into his groin as he cries in pain. I twist the knife, and I must’ve hit something important, because when I pull the knife out, he bleeds. A lot.

“Oh my god.” He starts freaking out when he watches his jeans coat in blood. I watch his eyes, the life, slowly draining from him and smile. Knowing this will never happen again, he won’t hurt women against their will, gives me a sick sort of satisfaction. When the light behind his brown eyes fades, I stand up, dropping the knife and pliers. When I turn away from him, I roll my sleeves up and get to work, cutting him to pieces. Ensuring that each piece will be small enough to not be

noticed as a body part, but not too small to take all fucking night.

Once his body is tucked into several different bags, I start working on the clean up. Although, I'll need some bleach. Lots of bleach. Good thing I keep it stocked in one of the lockers. When I walk into the back room, I freeze. Running my hand across my jaw, smiling, knowing this is it. This is where I find out if she's ride or die material.

# CHAPTER 9

## HARLEY

I MAKE IT BACK TO MY MOTEL ROOM, AND FISH AROUND FOR my hotel key in my apron only to realize that I took my purse to work earlier. “Fuck.” My shoulders fall and I turn around, noticing that it’s pitch black now, in Boston, in a shitty area and all of my things are back at the Fox Hole. So, with nothing but my wits, I turn on my heels and head back to work. I was the last one to leave, making sure that Bo didn’t need anything before I left, he sent me on my way with a promise of more conversation later. It’s been just over a week since we were together. The thought of being with him again sends a wave of pleasure through my body.

Managing to walk home is usually nothing for me to worry about, because I’m usually prepared with my pepper spray and knife that I carry in my purse that I conveniently left at work. Luck is on my side as I hit the front door of the Fox Hole building and look in. There’s still a light on, which means Bo’s still here. I hurry around the corner and go back down the alley, he keeps the back door unlocked, I guess he’s not worried about someone walking in.

My fingers wrap around the cold metal of the door handle and rip it open. Quickly, I rush over to my little locker and snatch my purse out of the locker and turn around to see Bo. My eyes widen as I look down at his body, spotting the red knuckles, his sleeves are rolled up and he lifts his knuckles to his face wiping away a thick red liquid that is splattered across his face.

Now, don’t get me wrong, even though my father kept me under lock and key, that didn’t mean he kept me away from

the family bullshit. I've seen my fair share of blood, so I know what it looks like when someone is wearing it like this. I open my mouth to say something, but snap it shut immediately.

Run.

My inner voice is screaming for me to get out of here, for me to run and never look back. He's exactly what you were running from. You wanted to get away from all of this. To start over.

"Red." Bo's voice is cold, his eyes are watching me, calculating my reaction, and what I plan on doing. I can see it in his eyes, the same monster I was running from. He closes the gap between us, my heart races and my head is telling me to run, to get away and never look back. But my feet keep me planted, staring at him like... Like I want to know. But know what? Know what he's doing? For him to explain why he's covered in another person's blood. Or is it someone else's?

Why does he look so incredibly hot, painted red? There's something in me that sparks to life when he touches my cheek with his bloodied finger. This is like a scene from a movie, not real life. I can't be turned on by this, right?

"I-uh. Forgot my purse." I swallow the lump in my throat as he pushes my hair out of my face. He keeps stepping closer, pushing me back until my back hits the small wall of lockers. He's a killer, who, why. Oh god, his hand. He lifts my chin to look at him. "Who-?" I'm not sure what else I was going to say as he runs his thumb over my lips. The edges of his lips lift up, like he's testing me, almost asking permission. When I lick my lips, pulling my bottom one between my teeth I taste the metallic tang of his victim's blood.

"Someone who deserved it." He responds, hovering his lips over mine. The heat between us is undeniable and even in this fucked up moment, I know for a fact that if he was to reach between my legs, he'd find me soaked. I just nod, pushing up to my toes, God I want his lips on mine. He doesn't disappoint, kissing me so hard that I'll probably bruise.

After who knows how long, the kiss is broken and I'm left, feeling the chill of air where his body used to be. I open my eyes and he's gone. I trace my fingers along my lips, only to show the mixture of my lipstick, and blood on my fingers.

Shaking my head, I try to clear the fog the kiss left, I stand up straight and move further into the Fox Hole only to find that he's got a mess on his hands. There's bags, and plastic sheets. This shit is straight out of a fucking horror scene. "He was going to rape you." Bo states plainly, shoving bloodied plastic into black trash bags. "Hurt you like he has other women."

My eyes dance around the scene, this isn't his first time. He's done this before. "Who are you?" I squint at him, realizing that I may have just traded one monster for another.

"The man who makes you scream." Bo gives me a shit eating grin, like this is all a game. "My little Red, no one will put their hands on you. You're mine, whether you like it or not." He drops the bag and stalks back to me.

"You don't even know me." I reply, exasperated. "I obviously don't know you." My arms gesture out towards the chaos behind him.

"Story time..." He smiles at me, this fucker could melt my underwear off with a simple look. He goes into detail about who he is, how he met my father... although he doesn't know who my father is... Fuck. He works for them, the men I've been trying to escape. I have to get out of here, I don't want him to return Enzo's fucking property. I'm no one's property, I remind myself.

After he's done, he looks at me like he's waiting for me to confess my sins. "Come on Red, your turn." He lifts an eyebrow at me.

"I'm not telling you." I fold my arms over my chest.

"Had any of the other girls walked back into this restaurant and seen this mess, they would have screamed, cried, ran, and told the police. You just stood there, hell, you let me kiss you with blood on my face." His hand reaches up to my face,

smearing some of the now drying blood on my face with his matching messy fingers. “You aren’t one of them which tells me this isn’t your first rodeo, so tell me your story.”

He’s not wrong, there aren’t a lot of things that could scare me off easily. Well, besides being trapped in a loveless marriage with Enzo the fat sausage fingered old man. A shiver of disgust rushes through me.

I take a deep breath, but no words come out when I open my mouth. I can’t just blurt out who I am. No fucking way. He’s connected to them. I spin on my heels and start walking away. Get the fuck out of here, I tell myself, you can still pawn a few of the jewelry pieces and move to a different place, disappear again.

Hands wrap around my waist and I’m slammed into the wall, again. He’s so close, his breath tickles my ear. When his hands travel down my body, my breath hitches. I can’t help it, there’s something about this man that sets me on fucking fire and I respond to his touch. When his finger slips into the waistband of my leggings, I feel the tug of them. Inserting his hand into my pants, and running his palm over my tattoo. The one that signifies the family I belong to, the one I didn’t think to hide, since I didn’t think the owner of this place would be mixed up with my father. He traces the outline of the gun with his fingertips and my blood runs cold and hot at the same time, the combination heady.

“Tell me Ripley.” He breathes my name, sending a shock wave of pure pleasure through me. “Did you really think you could just hide in plain sight?” His breath skates over my neck and I shiver but his words hit quickly.

I shove him off me. “Fuck you, Bo.” I snarl. Now, I really needed to run. I kick at him, trying to make space. I will not be taken back to them, I can’t marry Enzo. God, please.

He captures my wrist and spins me back into his chest. “I will fuck you, Red. Hard, and without reservations.” His fingers lace into my hair, forcing my head to look up at him. “I will make you scream my name, the whole damn world will know who you belong to.”

I melt. There's no other word for it. I'm like putty in his hands, he could work me however he wanted and I'd bend to his will. God damn it. I hate it. I push him off, just enough to speak. "What about the body?" I croak, half drunk on lust.

"Wait in my office, I'll finish up." He kisses my nose and I'm not really sure what to do. Do I wait in his office, do I run? Where the fuck do I go from here?

# CHAPTER 10

AFTER THREE HOURS, EVERYTHING IS CLEAN, AND NO ONE would ever know that I lost my temper and killed a man in here. Pleased with my work, I turn on my heels, ripping my shirt off and shoving it into the last bag left. I'll dispose of all of that later, for now I'll shove them into the trunk of the car. I lift the last bag, heaving it into my trunk before slamming it shut, making sure to lock the car before going back into my office.

I need a shower and a change of clothes, but that will have to wait until I make sure Red didn't cut and run. When I open the office door, I'm surprised. It's empty. She's not here. Where the fuck is she? I rush through the restaurant to see if she's snuck off somewhere else, and she's nowhere to be found. Fuck.

Back in my office I pull out a change of clothes, run to the bathroom and clean myself up a bit before dressing myself and rushing back to the car. I drop in, and slam the car in drive to head back to her seedy as fuck motel.

Pounding my fist on her door there's no answer, so I do what I did before, I kick that bitch in, only to find it just as empty. Fuck. I look around and notice all of her things are missing too. Shit. Someone's been here.

Why is this fucking woman is so deep under my skin that I find myself worried about her. Worried that those fucking pricks will find her before I do. I will fucking kill them if they touch a single hair on her head. I scan the room once more, looking for anything that might have been left behind, nothing, not a trace of her other than her sweet scent. Before I know it,

I'm back in my car. I have to get rid of this fucking douchebag in the trunk before I can do anything else. That's the last thing I need, sorry officer I was looking for a mob boss' daughter, no I have no idea how a chopped up body got in my trunk, that's weird.

I peel out of the parking lot, pissed at myself for even leaving her alone. I should have known Dominic would hire someone else to find her, he hired me to kill his brother, why wouldn't he hire someone to track his daughter down? I will burn this fucking city to the ground, fuck everyone else. I will find her. I take a deep breath, attempting to calm myself before I spontaneously combust. I try to remind myself that I'm the one you hire when you have a problem to solve. I could easily set this city ablaze and make it look like an unfortunate accident, creating chaos everywhere I go just to find her.



Another two fucking hours have passed all because I had to get rid of a body, and now I have no idea where to even start to look for her, she did so well disappearing the first time. Hiding in plain sight, right under father's nose. She could be anywhere, jumped on a plane, got a car, fuck. I wrack my brain for places she could have gone, maybe I'm being dramatic and she went back to the restaurant but I checked the place top to bottom before I left. My fist hits the steering wheel as I turn down yet another street, searching for her.

Dominic's. I doubt she went there, but I could see if he's gotten any clues on her. Subtly, of course. I can't let him even think, for a second, that I've seen her, or hell that I've been with her basically since she left. I punch in the code to the gate that Dominic gave me, and make my way to his door, tucking my gun into my waistband.

I hear shouting from inside the house. "You little bitch!" I hear Enzo's voice, loud and clear.

"Get your fucking hands off me!" Red shrieks, she's in there.

I burst into the room, “Red.” I spot her, cornered against the wall, both her father and Enzo trapping her.

Dominic lifts a hand towards me. “Leave, this is family business.” His other hand grips Red’s arms tightly enough I can see that she’ll bruise.

“She’s mine now.” I snarl at him, letting a smile sweep across my face. He turns to me slowly as realization dawns on exactly who deflowered his princess, I pull my gun out and put a bullet between his eyes. I don’t give him a chance to speak, I don’t need to hear his rage or have him take it out on Red. His body drops to the ground with a loud thud. Red nearly falls and my eyes follow Enzo’s body, one hand gripping the bloody sheet I sent him and his other one is around her wrist.

“Remove your hand.” I hold my gun out towards him. He laughs, letting go of her wrist, only to reach back and smack her, hard. Anger boils in me as I look at her, keeping him in my sights. She holds her cheek, and looks up at me with a half smile, blood spilling from her now split lip.

Straightening my posture, I shift my gaze back to Enzo. My gun pointed at his face. “You won’t be able to clean this up.”

Red jumps to her feet, “No. Bo. Stop.” She puts herself between me and Enzo, her hands up like she doesn’t want me to shoot him. I stare at him and then her, my eyes ping pong between the two of them.

“See, Bowen. The bitch knows who she belongs to.” Enzo snarls.

I shift my eyes from her to him and back to her. Then I see it, the fire in her eyes. She takes the gun from me, and I let her. Her eyes are wild as she palms the gun, her finger laced into the trigger hole. Before I can say anything or question what she’s doing she spins on her heels and looks at Enzo. “Not to you.” She spits and the gun is fired. The bullet hits him in his cheek and he drops next to Dominic.

She stays frozen, the gun held in the air in front of her. I step up behind her, letting my long arm reach out and take the

gun from her grip. “I-” She’s frozen, in shock, but I’ve never been more turned on. My little Red just took a life, and although she’s part of the family, I doubt she’s done that before.

Suddenly she snaps out of her spell, walks over to Enzo and snatches the sheet out of his hands and turns to look at me. “Seriously?” She looks at me like I’ve just insulted her. “You sent him the sheet?” Ripley asks, bewilderment in her eyes.

“I thought it was funny.” I shrug, tucking my gun back into my waistband.

“You’re a kinky bastard, you know that.” She lets out a sigh, looking down at the dead bodies. Her father and her ex-fiance. “They thought I sent it to tease them. Enzo was about to take me upstairs before you walked through the door.”

“Good thing I showed up then.” I pull the sheet out of her hand and throw it back to the ground. “Now, next time I tell you to wait in my office, don’t go running off half cocked.” I raise an eyebrow at her. Her eyes widen before narrowing at me.

“If you think that you can tell me what to do, you’re seriously mistaken.” She pops a hip to the side, crossing her arms in front of her.

“I bet I could make you do anything I say.” I step closer, pressing my lips to her jaw, and she leans into me.

# EPILOGUE

IT'S BEEN SIX MONTHS SINCE MY FATHER AND ENZO DIED. There was a whole scandal that went down immediately after. Apparently my uncle Stefano, who Bo had been hired by my father to kill, was working with the Feds to take down Dominic Beretta. When I put the bullet in Enzo's face, I couldn't just let them disappear into the nothingness of what Bo does. I called Stefano, but I didn't know he was working with the Feds at that point. I told him what had happened, that Enzo hit me and was about to rape me. I was able to use self-defense, for Enzo. And because Bo feared for my life, he was able to dodge the murder charges for killing my father.

Everything seems to have fallen in place, except for one minor detail... My brother. His killer is still at large, and I've sunk some time into looking into it. So here I sit, going through my father's things, and Bo's name comes up so many times, for so many different jobs. The Feds wanted to raid the place, but with Dominic dead and everything being in my name, they didn't have grounds to search the property.. So I've been able to keep Bo's name out of the entire situation.

"Red." I look up from my pile of papers that I have spread across my father's study. "Whatchu doin'?" He asks with that panty melting smile.

"Looking for my brother's killer." I say softly, shuffling around a few more pages. "There's nothing in here. You'd think my father would've had an entire case on Romeo, trying to find the man who took him from us."

Bo walks into the study, pulls the papers from my hands and helps me stand up. "You won't find anything about it in

these papers.” He states so matter of factly.

I furrow my brows, looking up at him. Trying like hell to read his face. “What do you know?” I ask, pushing a finger to his chest.

“Don’t push this Red.” He warns through clenched teeth.

“Where is he?” I ask, talking about the man who killed my brother. I know where my brother is, he’s buried next to my father. Suddenly all the air is sucked from my lungs. I slam my fist into his chest. “You didn’t.” I tell him, because it can’t be true. This man here, that I’m falling in love with couldn’t have been the one to take my brother from me. Even though my brother was basically like my father, I still loved him with all my heart and he didn’t treat me like I was the key to the kings, or a business transaction. He may have been eight years older than me, but he loved me.

Bo pulls me into a hug as I hit and cry out, realizing the ugly truth. “There was an accident when I was sent after a target. Your brother didn’t make it.” His words aren’t harsh and unforgiving. There’s real pain behind the words. “I’m no different than them. I’m a monster, too.”

“Even in your darkness, there is light.” I cry into his shirt.

“The only light in my life is you, Red.” He kisses the top of my head, “Just you.” Even after everything, the death of my father, my brother, Enzo, and the truth of what he does. I can’t help the way I feel about him. Everything in me tells me that this is the man I’m meant to be with, the one that will help me keep my life together, even if he breaks it.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Em Torrey is a Pacific Northwest native who writes suspense, smut and sassy heroines. She's a book lover and a champagne enthusiast, with a few kids, a husband and a dog.



# A MONSTROUS DEAL

M. BONNET

## BLURB

One split second changed my whole life, transforming me into a fugitive and ousting me from the only home I've ever known. My boyfriend betrayed me, then tried to end me. I fought to save myself, and I don't regret my decision.

I flee to the Forbidden Wood, desperate to escape my mother's fate. I'm running for my life from my coven's elders, who are determined to punish me for my crime.

I've heard the cautionary tales growing up—the wood isn't safe for those with tainted souls—and mine is soaked in blood.

As I'm backed into a corner, a mysterious demon swoops in to save me, at a price of course.

Protection for my soul, revenge for my innocence.

Before she was executed, my mother told me “we only get one soul, my little angel, guard it carefully”. I'd like to think she won't judge me for handing it over to this villainous, dark monster.

I'll never stop fighting for my life, even if it means binding myself to him for eternity.

***A Monstrous Deal includes mature, adult content and is not intended for readers under 18 years of age. It is a dark, gothic MF paranormal romance. Please check the content warnings before reading.***

## CONTENT WARNINGS

Attempted sexual assault, murder, blood play, death of a parent, primal play, murder/torture/violence, dubious consent (dubcon), public sex, voyeurism, dominant/submissive behavior, dealmaking, orgasm play, mental health struggles, abuse from a parent, and other adult content.

# CHAPTER 1

BEN SAUNDERS ENTERS THE APOTHECARY SHOP THIRTY minutes late, letting in the cold, menacing wind from the storm raging outside. He runs his hand through his dark blond hair, smearing the raindrops through the strands before removing his leather jacket and hanging it on the coat rack by the door. The smell of ozone, dampness, and his usual warm bergamot and cedar cologne fill the room.

I used to find his scent comforting. When he held me in his arms, it cloaked me like a blanket that smothered all my worries and fears. He made me feel safe.

Now it's acrid in my nose, wreaking of his betrayal. He fooled me into thinking I could trust him. That he loved me. I thought he was the only person in my corner—who didn't judge me for my family's tragedy. I glance down at the princess cut diamond ring on my finger, silently cursing at myself for my own stupidity.

The world had proven to me in my twenty-one years on this earth that no one would protect me. My mother tried and it didn't end well.

Only I can protect myself.

Ben makes his way to the front counter, eyeing the compound I'm grinding in the mortar and pestle. He rests his hands on the countertop, curiously tilting his head. Ben's magic centers on emotions and energy. Although his magic is weak compared to mine, he can most likely tell that I'm upset. He knows something feels off.

“What’s wrong, Lily Pad?” His concern when he speaks the nickname he’s had for me since our childhood almost has me fooled. It’s another hit to my already abused heart.

*How long has he been faking it with me? Did he ever really care about me in the first place?*

I take his ring off, placing it on the counter between us. The stones on the band glimmer in the shop’s weak fluorescent lighting, cutting through the darkness from the bay window behind him.

Straightening and squaring my shoulders, I calmly tell him, “Our engagement is done.”

“What are you talking about? I know you’ve been grieving, but I thought we were okay?” Ben makes his way to the swinging door at the end of the counter, walking through it to stand next to me. “Talk to me, tell me what’s changed so I can fix it.”

“I took a different way home yesterday after work and saw you kissing Jasmine Pall in the park.”

I thought I’d cry as I ended an engagement with someone I loved since I was eight years old, but my face is free of tears. Calm resolve settles over me instead. I’ve accepted that I’ll never have anything good in my life, so why should my relationship be any different?

“I don’t think you understood what you saw,” he hedges, taking another step toward me. “She doesn’t mean anything to me, Lil. Not the way *you* do.”

Somehow he went from being my best friend, someone I depended on in my darkest times, to a man I can barely stand to look at. There was a time I’d look at Ben and my heart would swoon. His attention was like the sun—I felt its warmth...until he took it away from me to shine it on someone else.

“You took her into the gazebo behind the treeline, flipped up her skirt, and fucked her from behind. I think I understood what I saw just fine.” I turn away from him, grabbing my bag

and umbrella from under the counter. “You need to leave. I’m closing up the shop early so I can pack my things.”

“This conversation isn’t over, Lilith. You can’t think you’re going to leave me because I made one mistake. That’s not how this works,” he snarls. His fair skin reddens with frustration.

“That’s exactly how this works. It’s over.”

He spins me around, clutching my arm so hard that his fingertips press into the flesh beneath, making little white half-moons with his nails. “Pack? Where do you think you’ll go? You don’t have anyone else but me and my family, and they’ll take my side.”

“That’s not your concern. Just know that I’ll be far away from here. From my past. From *you*,” I bite out, struggling to free myself from his grip. “I’ll start over, build a new life for myself.”

“You’re a delusional fucking cock tease. I spent my whole life being there for you. Every time your father beat you, I held you as you cried. I stuck by you when your mother was tried and executed. I was *always* there for you!” he rages at me, his spittle landing on my face. “*You can’t fucking leave me.*”

The very mention of my mother is like rubbing salt into a gaping wound.

*“We find Bela Quade guilty for the murder of Adder Quade, via use of her magic. The convicted will be executed at the next full moon, and her remaining family—her daughter Lilith Quade—will be cleansed of her sins and malice.”*

I clear my throat in an effort to tear myself away from the tragic memories that loop constantly in my mind. The coven chose to believe my father’s legacy over her. Over the bruises plain as day on our skin. Over our memories they extracted and viewed as evidence.

Even from the grave, his money and influence still won. My mother never stood a chance. She died protecting me.

Staying with someone like Ben isn't the way I want to honor her memory.

His nails prick my skin and blood runs down my forearm. He backs me up against the counter, pinning me to the edge with his hips. I thrash to get away, but his hold is firm. He leans down, so close our noses almost touch.

"Your grief consumed you... you wouldn't let me touch you. What was I supposed to do?" he whispers. It's a complete one eighty from his frantic anger mere seconds ago.

"It doesn't matter now, the damage is done. Let go of me," my voice shakes, making my demand sound more like a plea.

He rips my hair tie out before gripping my long strands in his hand and pulling my head back. The expression of amusement on his face makes my heart beat out of my chest. His eyes are dead. Cold, without a flicker of life behind them.

"It's always been you and me, Lily Pad. Us, together *forever*. We'll get past this," he assures me in a low, even tone. He reaches down to slide his hand under my black skirt, up my bare thigh. His unwanted touch makes me nauseous.

I swallow down my fear and the sick, queasy feeling that's roiling in my gut. "Stop touching me, Ben. It's over."

When he gets to my panties, he rips them clean off, dropping them onto the floor. I try to push him away, but he won't budge. My breathing picks up as I start to panic.

*Why won't he stop?*

"You're never going to find someone better than me—who loves someone like *you* as much as I do. I can be with a dozen women who are prettier than you, thinner than you, smarter than you, and aren't the black sheep of the coven. But I *choose* to be with you. Be smart. Use your thick fucking skull and think before you throw away everything we have."

He rubs my clit with the heel of his palm. His violation has goosebumps prickling all over my skin. Cold shivers snake down my back, triggering my flight or fight instinct. I claw at his face with my almond-shaped acrylic nails, slashing them down his cheeks to inflict maximum damage. He screams in

pain when I graze his eye and slaps my hand away. Grabbing my wrists, he swings me around so my stomach touches the counter. He bends me over and flips my skirt up. The minute I feel his fingers graze my ass cheeks, I know he won't stop.

“You're such a stuck-up bitch, Lil. You made me wait *years* for your virginity, like you're someone special. Like you mean that fucking much, when you've fallen so far. Your place in this coven rests solely on the fact that my parents pity you. You should be *thanking* me.”

He runs his fingers through my folds, and I feel like I'm going to throw up. I've never seen him act like this before. “You *owe* me...I'm the reason you're not out in the woods, freezing your ass off.” He cups my sex, squeezing it possessively. “I'll take this as payment.”

I start to feel lightheaded, like I'm going to pass out. The whole store is spinning as bile rises in my throat. I refuse to lose my virginity to this disgusting, pathetic excuse of a man. I'm sick of men trampling on me and treating me like shit.

There are dishes soaking in the sink from potions I made earlier. Despite how anxious and fearful I am, I'm able to channel my magic to lift the water out of the sink, dousing it over his head. His shock gives me an opening. I wriggle out of his hold, then grab the knife from the cutting board to our right and whirl around to face him. Before I can make a move, he collars my throat. My air is suddenly cut off as his hold crushes my windpipe. I drop the knife, clawing and scratching at his hands.

“You're not getting away so easily, Lily Pad,” he grits out before throwing me on the floor. “I'm collecting what I'm owed.”

Before I can think of a way to escape, he's on top of me, tearing my shirt open. Buttons fly everywhere. As he gropes me, I try to stay focused instead of descending into a panic. I thrash around beneath him, kicking and screaming in case anyone walks by. We're sheltered from view because of the counter, but someone may still hear me.

“Get off me!” I scream. “Get the fuck off me!”

He backhands me so hard my head turns. My jaw rattles and the entire room gets blurry as tears stream down my face.

“This is *your* fault, Lilith. *You* overreacted. *You* drove me to this,” he accuses me while unzipping his pants.

The moment I see his length, I snap.

I rear up and slam my forehead into his. A web of sharp pain spiders through my temples, and black dots float around my vision. I flip over and army crawl to the swinging door at the other end of the counter.

*Just a few more feet. I'm so close.*

Ben's hand clamps around my ankle, dragging me back. I kick and strike out to shake him off, but he's so much stronger than me. As I feel the tile grout dig into my knees, I see the knife on the floor, just out of reach. I harness the wind from outside and use them to pull the knife closer. Ben's hands are on the backs of my thighs now, his nails digging in hard enough to leave scratches. As soon as I can grasp the knife, I use all my momentum to turn over.

He's on me as soon as I start moving, trying to pin me in place again. It's times like these I wish my magic could do real damage and truly hurt someone. Blood from his nose drips onto my chest and collarbone, but his groping hands smear it into my skin. It feels like an intimate marking he doesn't deserve. Before he can trap me underneath him, I slash his throat with the knife, and warm sprays of blood drench my face and chest, making the droplets look like child's play. The very idea of his essence—the life force that flowed through his brain moments before—coating me is repulsive.

As the blood drains from his wound and he slowly dies, his body slumps into me, pinning me to the floor. His rasping, gurgling breaths drown out the pounding of the rain against the window, my own shallow, frantic breathing, and the loud ticking of the clock on the opposite wall. The world is spinning and staying eerily still at the same time as thoughts of my impending doom have me frozen to the spot. I feel imprisoned, drowning in a puddle of his blood.

I lay there for a while, in shock. I killed Ben Saunders. I killed the son of an Elder. Even if I say it was in self defense, no one is going to believe me. I'm the daughter of Bela Quade. She had every reason to defend herself from my piece of shit father and evidence on her side, and the Elder Council *still* condemned her. No matter how fake-nice the townsfolk are to me, I know how they really feel. They're only tolerant of me because of my connection to the Saunders—to Ben.

My body shakes so hard, I can barely roll his body off of me. Before I rise from the floor, the bell over the shop door rings.

“Lilith! Are you still here, dear?” I hear Mrs. Carmichael shout over the whoosh of her closing her umbrella. The thud of her cane on the floor tells me she's moving closer to the counter...to my condemnation.

I lay there, quietly hoping and praying to the Goddess that she just leaves. She's the town gossip, constantly shoving her hook nose where it doesn't belong. There's no way she'll keep this to herself.

*Please assume I'm not here and leave.*

“Lilith? Are you in the back?” *Thud, shuffle. Thud, shuffle. Thud, shuffle.*

Her movements grow louder, and as soon as she gasps, I know my time is up.

“*Lilith Quade, what have you done?!*” she screams.

“S-s-self defense,” I stammer. “He wouldn't stop.”

“A likely story,” she sneers. “You're just like your mother. Evil, all the way to your broken, damned soul. I hope the Goddess shuns you, and you burn in Hell for your eternal sins, Lilith. He was a good boy! A pillar of our community. I'm calling the Elders.”

“No! Don't!” I shout, lurching toward her, trying to dissuade her. If she would only hear me out, she would know I had no choice.

She backs up until she hits the counter, eyes wide in fear. “Don’t touch me, you filthy whore. You were never good enough for him, and I told his parents you’d ruin his life with your evil ways.”

She pulls out her phone, dialing Morrow, the most longstanding Elder. He’s her brother and most likely who she would report me to.

My magic builds inside me, begging to burst free. I use it to knock her phone from her hand. She topples from the force, and I dash past her as I escape. I don’t know where I’ll go, but it has to be somewhere far from here.

This town isn’t safe for me anymore. It never really has been.

## CHAPTER 2

I TRY MY HARDEST NOT TO MAKE A SOUND AS I MOVE through the dense foliage of the forest, the light from the pale, silver full moon my only illumination. The rich soil, damp from the earlier storm, muffles my movements. I only had a few moments to pack a light bag and flee from my house before the Elders corner me. *But they may still find me.*

As I follow the path along the stream that cuts through the center of the woods, I take in my surroundings. The woods are a dangerous place for a woman to traverse alone in the dead of night. The darkness is rife with creatures big and small—this living, breathing place is a constant cycle of organic life and death. The majority of my coven are natural witches who derive their powers from that polarity. My magic depends on the towering trees, the crystal-blue flowing water, and the wind that dances through the leaves and caresses the detritus beneath my feet.

Unfortunately, I'm surrounded by the very source of my magic, and I can't even use it. So much as a light spell could alert them I'm here, and I can't risk getting caught. Once they catch me, that's it. I was condemned the moment my knife grazed Ben's throat, regardless of the reason why.

I walked the same paths and secret trails thousands of times throughout my childhood during the day and know this place like the back of my hand. But the night's darkness serves as shadows hiding the true, unbridled evil that resides in this forest. The last thing I want to do is draw attention to myself and attract something unnatural lurking amongst the trees beyond the coven's boundaries.

At the rituals, the coven's Women's Club always chatter about people going into the forest and never returning.

*"All the Elders found of him was body parts...a hand and a torn up thigh. Goddess rest his soul, the poor dear."*

*"That's just like when Jenny went into the woods, even though her mother told her not to. Her corpse was found with slash marks all over it."*

*"Instead of executing murders like Bela, they should send them into the woods to die a more painful, just death. That's what scum like her deserve."*

One may not see the beasts of the wood at first unless you truly search for them, but they are always there, hidden amongst the trees—waiting for a misstep so they can strike.

The physical damage they can inflict with their snapping teeth and jagged claws is the least of my worries. My real concern lies in how they can massacre my soul.

*"We only get one soul, my little angel. Guard it carefully."*

My mother told me that the night before she was almost beaten to death by my father. The bruises on her face, neck, and abdomen weren't enough to outweigh his influence and reach as a member of the Elders' Council. The High Priest, his childhood friend, condemned her for committing a cardinal sin... A sin she was forced to commit to save us.

*"Adder, please! Stop! I take it back, I won't leave. I'll stay."*

*"You're mine, Bela. You're never going to leave. I'll tie you to a tree in the woods and let the monsters have you before I ever let you leave me and embarrass this family."*

My mother tried to escape that night, like she had many times before. She couldn't bear to be my father's punching bag anymore. Every one of his moods and manic states ended the same way—with her laid out on the floor, unconscious. Bleeding from cuts and breaks so bad that the Healer my father employed had to know they weren't accidents. He brought her closer to death with every beating. Her body and mind were so broken, she could barely get out of bed on some

days. One day she had enough and finally killed him with a cast-iron skillet to the back of his head.

By saving her life and mine, she signed her own death certificate.

My father had always preached during rituals that our soul is the only thing that gives our kind any protection against the darker, deranged forces that intertwine with the fabric of our world. It's also the beacon that draws them in and constantly puts us all in danger. At twenty-one years old, my soul should be a sweet, untarnished treat for any monster. Life shouldn't have had a chance to taint it—disappointment shouldn't have weighed my spirit down.

Now it's mangled, stained with blood I had no choice but to shed.

Drawing my red cloak around me, I can't help but think that my father was worse than those monsters in the woods. They pray on random innocents in their path, whereas he abused his own family. He manipulated and lied to the entire town, playing the charming family man in public. In private, he was a living nightmare. When he'd beat and berate me, I'd lock myself in my room, praying he wouldn't pry the door open during one of his fits of rage and kill me.

Every man who should have loved me only hurt me in the end. Love is a farce, made to make the weak suffer. My mother's miserable life proved that to me.

With only my red travel cloak and backpack, I traverse through the wilderness, trying to focus on silently getting through these woods into the neighboring town alive. Then I can catch a bus to the airport and start a new life away from my troubles here.

I hear twigs snap in the distance. My breath hyperventilates, each inhale more shallow. The harsh thud of footsteps behind me gets louder. Someone—or something—is closing in on me. *Shit.* Picking up my pace, I take a right turn at a fallen tree, veering off the path into the thick tangle of trees beyond. Leaving the path is foolish, but it's a risk I have

to take. Whether it's a creature or someone from town searching for me, the best thing to do is get out of sight.

The ground slopes, and I struggle to stay upright as I keep moving north. I can barely see the sky above the canopy of leaves, but I know as long as I can see the North Star, I'm going in the right direction. The sounds of footsteps fade as I continue to move, pushing myself to go farther away from the path and into the shadows.

Suddenly, I trip and roll downhill. My body hits tree roots and rocks dig into my skin. Something sharp slashes into my forearm, and I desperately try to stop my forward motion. I feel as if I'm Alice, falling through the rabbit hole with no control over my descent into chaotic madness.

My head hits a large rock, which stops my fall. I lay there on my back, staring up for a few moments as the tree branches above me spin in circles. Everything seems so blurry and out of focus. I close my eyes, hoping that my nausea subsides long enough for me to get to the safety of the next town. If I vomit on myself, I'll have nothing to change into. I sit up, and see a light through the trees and hear the rustle of people moving through the thicket of branches and leaves.

"Miss Quade!" A male voice rings out through the woods. "You're wanted for the murder of Ben Saunders. Please surrender before we use force to detain you."

"There are footprints here. She's this way," a female voice shouts. Elder Carissa Welder.

Magic foreign to me reaches out, searching for me in the darkness. It's so hot and overwhelming that it makes me flinch. I frantically hop up, praying that they don't find me as I start to run again. Leaves crunch beneath me and sharp nettles wedge their way into my feet, but I work through the pain. If they catch me, I'll wish I were dead.

This time, I don't pay attention to what direction I'm moving in or where I'm going. I *need* to get far away from this place. My legs strain as I push myself to the brink, but I can't run fast enough. I hear more familiar voices and feel more

magic reaching out through the thicket of trees. The crash of the world caving in around me rings through my ears.

*They're so close... They're going to find me.*

In my haste, I slam into a tree and fall. This time, I roll my ankle on the way down and can't find my footing to get up. I try to crawl, but the throbbing pain immobilizes me.

The search party gets louder, and I pray to the Goddess to save me.

*Goddess, please—any deity willing to listen—please deliver me to a better fate. Please save me. I don't want to meet my mother's fate. I'll do anything, please help me.*

Nothing happens. There's no sign indicating She heard me. The Elders' voices get louder until I see them start to gather around me. The lights they carry cast their faces in shadows, making them look like the demented wraiths they really are instead of the coven's beloved leadership. One of them binds my wrists in magical restraints, while another levitates me to a standing position. Waves of pain ricochet through my ankle, and I struggle to stay standing. When I fall again, one of the men kicks me.

“Stay up, you stupid bitch,” he snarls. “You won't get away with this.”

“Lilith Quade, you have been found guilty of the murder of Benjamin Elias Saunders. You will be executed immediately.” Morrow states in an official, emotionless way.

*Condemned to death with no evidence. My fate is even worse than my mother's.*

“He tried to rape me. I said no, but he wouldn't stop. I was protecting myself!” I shout, but my protests are meaningless. Not one of their stony faces softens at my pleas.

The orbs of light they carry are suddenly dimmed, but none of the Elders notice. The crickets, frogs, and noise of the forest dies, leaving us in silence. A sinister feeling descends on us, and somehow, the night grows even darker than before. I slowly turn my head, scanning the forest for what could cause such a phenomenon. A pair of neon purple eyes with

slitted black pupils meet my gaze in the trees beyond. They narrow as a smile filled with sharp, white teeth appears beneath it, like a murderous version of the Cheshire Cat.

As quickly as they appear, they're gone. My mind may be so desperate to save me from the ugliness of my unjust fate that I just imagined those creepy eyes, and the gleaming, deadly teeth.

Dale Saunders, Ben's father, breaks away from the group of Elders, taking my captive state as a perfect opportunity to backhand me across the face. *I guess I don't have to wonder where his son learned the tactic.*

Any previous warmth or gentleness I've received from this man in the past has evaporated. His anger suffocates me. "You filthy, depraved whore. My son would have never done such a thing. He loved you, and you betrayed him. I'll take pleasure from ending your pathetic life myself, but not with magic. I'll kill you with my bare hands, choke you until the last bit of life drains from your eyes."

His mouth curves into an illustrious smile, like the idea of revenge for his poor, martyred son pleases him so much. His brother Bain, another Elder, nods in solidarity, as does most of the Council. No one asks why I killed him. No one cares. This is their golden ticket to ridding themselves of the spawn of Bela Quade.

Dale levitates me off the ground, then wraps his hands around my throat and squeezes, crushing my windpipe. My body starts to jerk from a lack of oxygen as black spots cloud my vision. My consciousness starts to fade as moments of my life flash before my eyes.

*My mother crying on the couch with a swollen, black eye. My father pounding on my door, demanding I face punishment for my embarrassing mediocrity. Casting my first spell. Going to my first PG-13 movie with Ben. Our first kiss. Baking cookies with Mom on her good days. Bonfires in the woods with my friends before my parents died. Getting my job at the apothecary shop.*

And now I've reached the end of the road—what should be the end of my worldly suffering and pain. I thought death would be more peaceful than this, but all I feel is an overwhelming sense of anger. Of being betrayed by my own coven, a community that's supposed to support me. Instead, they acted as judge, jury, and executioner and found me guilty.

Just as I'm on the verge of losing consciousness, a low, rumbling growl echoes through the woods, breaking Dale's concentration. His grip on my throat loosens, and I can finally breathe. The guttural, discordant sound seems to be coming from all directions, closing in on us by the second. It's followed by deep snarls that scare me so much, I'm frozen in place, but only for a moment. The sweltering hot magic from before reaches out to me again, thawing my iced heart. It feels oddly comforting in this fucked up situation.

I rather be an offering on a silver platter for a monster in the woods than serve as a revenge token for Ben's death. The old biddies at the rituals were right. This is how they should punish murders like the Quade women.

Branches snapping and a rustling to our right is the only warning we receive before a beast emerges into our little clearing in the woods. His presence brings a villainous, tense atmosphere that Dale Saunders couldn't compete with if he tried. The Elders pause their pony show to gather together and hold hands for protection.

My intuition tells me that no measure is strong enough to protect us from something as terror-inducing as the creature who crashed their revenge party.

Each step it takes is accompanied by a loud thud. As it gets closer, I realize the creature is glowing, like moonlight. He has the face of a man, with high cheekbones, a straight nose, and plush, perfect lips. But whereas men have regular, dull skin, his skin is perfect—not a mark or scar on him—and vibrantly luminescent. I would almost think he's an angel, if not for his vicious neon eyes, claw-tipped fingers, and the sharp teeth he displays as he smiles at the Elders. His whole face is alight with a deranged amusement that alludes to the carnage I feel coming our way.

He's easily seven feet tall, with muscles that could have been carved from marble, as if he was one of Michael Angelo creations—a vision of male perfection. I've never seen a man that ferociously beautiful in my life.

I should be terrified, in tears, sniveling for mercy from this lethal monster. My hands are still tied behind my back, cutting off my access to my magic. The Elders want me dead, so they won't help me escape. He can tear me to shreds if he wants to, or kill me with the flick of a claw across my carotid artery. *What poetic justice—meeting the same end Ben did.*

I'm looking at the Angel of Death, but I'm *not* afraid. The only feeling I feel is an intense, aching arousal pooling in my core. It spreads throughout my entire body. My nipples harden beneath my cotton tee and are visible with the way my red cloak drapes. His purple rakes over me assessingly from head to toe. He raises an eyebrow as his grin morphs into a cocky smirk.

Morrow steps forward, breaking the silence. "Creature, leave this place—we only want peace with you and mean no harm."

A gravelly laugh bubbles from him, spilling all over me and bathing me in lust. His voice is deep, chilling, with an edge that can cut you. "Hmmm, that's not what I heard. It seems that you were going to detain this sweet, innocent girl and kill her without a trial. How harmful indeed."

"This is Coven business," Mira, one of only two female Elders, shouts. "This young woman is a murderer and must be punished as such."

The demon strides over to me, unbothered by the Elders surrounding us. He leans down, so we're face to face, bringing his nose to where my neck and shoulder meet. He deeply inhales, then runs his tongue up the column of my neck, to my earlobe in a slow, sensuous drag that has goosebumps prickling all over my skin and moisture slicking my core. Black feathered wings spring from his back, spreading to their full, impressive length. Deep burgundy feathers are marbled throughout, giving them a reddish hue.

“She tastes innocent to me. Quite the delicious treat—so sweet and pure. I’ll take her off your hands.”

He grabs my shoulder, prying me away from Dale’s vise-like hold. One of the Elders strikes him with a bolt of fire magic that he swats away like a pesky, annoying fly. It doesn’t even burn his skin. He crushes my back against his hard chest, then breaks out into a menacing cackle.

“That had a little sting. You should have let me steal her away. Now, you won’t live to regret your bad decision.”

He throws me on the ground next to him and flaps his wings right in Morrow’s face, hitting him with a strong gust of wind. The man is caught so off guard, he doesn’t even see the creature’s claw slice into his chest. He crumples into a heap on the ground in a puddle of his own blood. Most of the Elders choose this moment to run, whereas others stay to fight. Mira shapes her magic into a lasso before attempting to subdue him. He grabs it, using it to pull her closer. When she’s in his grasp, he winds the magic around her throat and chokes her with preternatural strength, snapping her neck clean in two.

Dale runs in the opposite direction, too much of a coward to fight. His brother, Bain, however, bends over, yanking my arm so hard he almost dislocates it from my shoulder socket.

“You will die by my hand, you evil bitch. You killed my only nephew!”

He throws me stomach-first into a tree. I quickly reposition myself so I can see what’s happening. The monster has a hand on either side of Bain’s head. He struggles in the monster’s hold, screaming at the top of his lungs. Foam froths at his mouth as his whole body convulses. He stiffens briefly before dropping onto his knees and falling face first in the dirt. Then the monster slashes around his jawline and husks his face skin off, like a corncob, and tosses it at my feet like an offering. He smiles at me, then slaughters the only other Elder who was stupid enough to stay behind and fight.

I’m such a mess that I can’t bear to watch the slaughter unfolding around me, so I listen instead. A cacophony of screaming, begging, and wet, pained gurgling sounds around

me. His mirthful laughter cuts through it, reminding me that he's enjoying this...he craves destruction.

When it quiets down, the monster turns his back to me, searching the woods for something. I rise, standing on my feet like a baby deer caught in the headlights. This may be my only chance to escape. The North Star shows me I'm not drastically off course. It's not like this beast bought me. I don't belong to him and need to leave.

"Any ideas where your friends got to?" he questions me in a low, playful voice, dripping with malice. He enjoys inflicting pain, and I can't stick around to see what he'll do to me.

Instead of answering, I run, taking my only chance at freedom.

# CHAPTER 3

I LET MY NEW PET RUN THROUGH THE TREES INTO THE HEART of the forest—the lesser monsters know not to touch what's mine, but that doesn't mean they won't be curious about her. Who could possibly resist looking at such a tasty treat? *I know I can't.*

Once she gets a taste of what lurks in the darkness, she'll be begging me to come and rescue her again. She may have been disgusted by my little peace offering of her would-be murderer's face, but she'll soon realize I'm the best option she has if she doesn't want her coven persecuting her.

She won't get very far with her hands tied, anyway.

When I felt her magic as she ran through the woods, I had to investigate. Finally, she entered the woods at night, when daylight couldn't save her from me. Then I caught her smell—fear, desperation, and *desire*—and I knew this plump little creature was meant to be mine tonight. Her lust must have confused the fuck out of her—the virginal natural witch wanted a piece of the big bad demon. And she'll get more than a piece. I'm going to consume her. I'll take her soul and use her up until she's an empty shell of her former self, with nothing more to give.

You can run, my pet—as fast and as far as you can—but I will *always* catch you.

While she's gaining her head start, I crouch to examine the corpses on the floor. All that's left of them are piles of sinew and bones bathed in blood. I made sure one of them was intact enough that their coven members would spread the word.

*Don't wander in the woods after dusk.* Whenever you make something out to be forbidden, it's always more attractive to the mortals. Because they're weak, selfish, and a slave to repressing their baser desires. It makes it so much fun to corrupt them.

The man who tried to kill her was the only one of the five who freed his soul from the prison of righteousness. It was mangled and tarnished from all his sins, a tapestry weaved of wrongdoings, lies, and the arrogance derived from abusing those around him. After he backhanded my pet, I wanted to tear him apart limb from limb and rip his face off, but he got away. His brother and the other hangaround, however, were not smart enough to leave. They tried to keep me from my pet, thus, they had to be erased from existence.

A loud shriek echoing through the woods breaks me from my musings. My pet must have run into something that goes bump in the night. Poor thing is probably terrified, shaking in her little boots at whatever creature cornered her. She looked so tantalizing when she trembled in fear for her life in the dirt. The way her breasts heaved and her lips quivered with every ragged exhale sealed her fate with me. She smelled so intoxicating that I knew her mind was racing with flashbacks of her pathetic life.

My little pet may not know me, but I know her. I've seen her walk the well-traveled paths in the daytime. Sometimes she was alone, other times she was with the human boy, Ben. Every time she would look through the trees into the distance, like she was searching for something—for me. I've laid in wait among the trees, stalking her, watching her, waiting until she was dumb or desperate enough to travel the woods at night.

And now that she finally has, she'll pay the price.

She screams again, and I morph into smoke, following her scent until I find her. She's crowded against a tree, her eyes fixed on a Grimm guarding the path she had found in her escape. The large, black dog stands on its hind legs, growling at her and blocking her path as it stares her down with its glowing, blood-red eyes. As soon as it smells my scent, it

drops to all fours, scurrying away with its tail between its legs. Grims are all bark, no bite, whereas I'm all a silent bite. My prey rarely hears me coming before I take a bite out of them, unless I want them to, of course.

She may be smarter than I anticipated. Once she's assured that the Grimm is out of our vicinity, she spins around, looking for what scared it off. That's right, pet, only a bigger, badder monster would be able to save you.

I change back to my true form, opening my hypnotic eyes. I made them purple, just for her. When her gaze meets mine, she freezes for a moment, then takes off again. I trail after her, giving her some space so she thinks she has a chance. Breaking in a hopeful pet is much more fun than a dejected one.

The farther she goes, the faster she fades away, her movements growing tired and sluggish. She trips and falls on a rock and slices her hand open as she tries to catch herself. I flip her over, covering her body with my own, pinning her into the dirt with my hips. Breaking her restraints, I brace myself for her magic. She thrashes around, striking at my chest and pulling my horns hard, but I don't move. If she wants me to get off her, touching my horns is not the way to do so—now I just want to feel her grip them for dear life while I plow into her from beneath.

She tries to blast me off her, but I barely wobble. Her emotions interfere with her potency, it seems. *What a shame.* She slaps my face with her little dainty hands. Her blood paints my cheek and I use my long, forked tongue to wipe it off.

*Seems I picked a fighter—lucky me.* I bring her cut palm to my lips and lick the trail of blood running down her inner arm. Rich, delicious, and *mine.*

“You didn't say thank you when I saved your life, Pet.” She gazes up at me with defiance in her sparkling blue eyes. I want to drink her tears, swim in the crystal depth of her irises until I drown in them. I want to sink into her, fill her and tear

her open while I rob her of her innocence. Own her body and soul.

*Mine.*

She strikes me with a blazing, magical flame, straight from her uninjured palm as she snarls like a wild animal caught in a snare. It feels like a whip hit my face, and I love it. *Pain is the perfect way to show you care, Pet.* Her nails feel so good when she digs them into my chest, leaving little halfmoon indents. I want to feel them rake down my back, revel in the sting they'd leave behind before throwing her pain back at her tenfold. Her screams will be my own personal symphony, the theme music to my life.

I pin her hands above her head with one hand while trailing my finger along her jaw with the other. She's so young, so innocent. I try to take a moment to commemorate the end of her life as she knows it, but I only grow harder and howl into the night like the animal she sees me as. Her eyes go wide, and the cloying scent of her arousal permeates through the air.

Her magic flickers on and off, and I chuckle to myself. The poor babe. So scared of the inevitable, like she has a choice to be anything but mine. She *may* look scared—and her shame is screaming at her to run from me and save herself—but she wants to be my good little pet. Deep down, in the part of herself she locks away, she yearns to be ravished by the demon in the woods.

“Say thank you, Pet,” I order her. “Thank me for delivering you to a better fate.”

She thrashes in my hold, remaining silent as I tighten my grip.

I bury my face in the crook of her neck and inhale. Her scent is only going to make this so much worse for her. How dare she have the gall to run around in *my* woods, reeking of a virginal sacrifice. For years she flaunted herself in the daytime, walking the safe paths in her skirts and sweaters. The pain in her heart and fear in her eyes were beautiful—she was a living work of art. She often sat on the rock overlooking the

stream, staring through the trees as she searched for something, but never found it. Well, now she doesn't have to search for me anymore. *I'm here for eternity, Pet.*

Her body trembles beneath me, and her stone-hard nipples graze my chest with every breath she takes. I grab her jaw so she has no choice but to look at me as she struggles.

“You have two choices, little girl, so listen closely. You can do as I say and live a beautiful life where you're cherished and protected. Or you can defy me, and I'll make sure you're trapped in a living hell that makes your worst nightmares look like Eden. It's up to you...”

I brush my fingertips over her throat, over the fresh, angry marks and bruises marring her perfect, fair skin. They aren't from the walking corpse that tried to kill her in front of me. Someone else hurt her—they dared to touch what's mine. A low, hollow growl reverberates through the woods. She stills and her doll-like face blanches. I realize I'm the one making the noise, and compose myself enough to wait for her response. She lies beneath me, her breathing fast and shallow. Her magic crackles and ripples beneath her skin, trying to reach out to mine—failing to form anything consequential that can save her.

Several moments pass, and I bring my lips to her ear. As I nibble on the shell, her breath hitches. I move down her neck, following every tender kiss with my teeth digging into her supple flesh. Her fear eases and little by little she melts into my hold.

What happened to this poor girl that being pinned by a brute like me isn't terrifying her?

“Who hurt you?” I whisper into her ear. “Tell me who left these marks on my skin?”

“Who hasn't hurt me?” she replies, ignoring my claim on her. I'm not ignorant enough to think she's accepted it, *yet*. “He's dead now. That was the last straw...why the coven finally called for my execution...”

“They can't have you. You're *mine*.”

“I’m my own woman, and never again will I belong to someone else. I would rather face death than be under someone’s thumb.”

“True, but the Saunders family will continue searching for you, then sentence you to death just like your mother...” Her murderous scowl sends fissures of pleasure racing through my body. “Oh Lilith, I’ve watched you for some time now. I’ve waited for the day you crossed my path in the dark. Your precious coven killed your mother...sided with your abusive father even after he passed...and now they’re coming for you.”

I run my hand through her hair, twining my fingers through her curls before I grasp them and pull, hard enough that she gasps.

“What do you want from me?” she hisses. “I’m not going to thank you for throwing me from the pan to the fire.”

“No, but you’ll thank me for keeping you safe and eradicating your enemies. It doesn’t matter how far you go, or how fast you run. Magic will always find you. I’ll always find you. Wouldn’t you rather be safe?”

She eyes me with suspicion. “Nothing is free, and no offer from a monster is what it seems.”

*A fighter, and smart? How refreshing.*

“I’ll make you a deal, Pet. I’ll protect you from the Saunders family in exchange for your soul. I promise no one will hurt you.”

“Except you. If you have my soul, you’ll own me. You’ll hurt me.” She says in an indignant tone.

“Not in a way you won’t like,” I tease as I run my tongue across her collarbone. My claws tear her shirt down the middle, tasting the flesh at the top of her breasts. She betrays her fake fear of me with a feather-soft moan.

“No,” she huffs in a rushed, scandalized tone.

“I can sweeten the pot for you, my delicious pet. Protection for your soul, and revenge in exchange for your

innocence...”

“Revenge for my innocence...” she repeats, like she’s unsure of my meaning. She knows what I’m talking about, though. I never say anything I don’t mean or make an offer anyone can refuse.

“Yes, *your innocence*. Your maidenhead. Your purity. Your virginity. The prettiest flower in your garden, or whatever archaic term you want to call it. Give it to me and I’ll make sure everyone who’s ever wronged you—the Saunders Family, the Elders, and your entire fucking coven—will suffer a fate so painful they’ll beg for death.

Her magic roils inside, bursting free in little electric shocks that feel like kisses against my skin. *Yes, my pretty pet, give me your vengeance and I’ll wield it like a sword in your honor.*

“I don’t have that to bargain with,” she bites out, obviously lying. I can smell her virginity like a sickly sweet cloud of perfume. Its flowery, bright notes are a red flag waving in the path of a bull. A beacon of light for all the depraved sailors lost at sea.

My raucous laughter resonates through the forest, causing some nearby bats to scurry away to quieter trees. “I’m not a human boy who will fall for your tricks, Pet.” I run my nose along the column of her throat, scenting her until I hit her jaw. “I can *smell* your innocence. You’re untouched.”

“I would never want a monster like you,” she lies.

Her ample, round breasts spill free after I rip her bra off. I love the contrast of her soft flesh on my hard body—the way my teeth could tear her to shreds so easily. As I take one of her nipples into my mouth, she stiffens in my hold. She relaxes with each suck and flick of my tongue against the sensitive bud until she’s writhing beneath me.

“Liar. I bet you’re soaked for me. Dripping with longing for the dangerous monster who could tear you apart like paper.”

I hold up a finger, showing her how thick and rough it is, letting her imagine how it would feel inside her. When her

eyes go wide at my claw, I retract it, then pull her leggings off, and slide my finger under the gusset of her panties. Her folds are wet, coated in her arousal for the monster she'll *never want*. I gather some of it, bringing it to her clit in short, light circles. The more I tease her, the headier her arousal smells until every creature, plant, and animal lurking in this forest can smell how I drive her insane. Before she can catch herself, she moans, arching into me and spreading her legs slightly.

“Hmmm, it seems you want me, after all. You need to make sure lying doesn't become a habit, or else you'll be in tons of trouble, my naughty girl,” I rumble, my voice gravelly from having to hold myself back.

“I'm not yours,” she breathes as I slide a lone finger inside her velvety soft heat. She's tighter than a vise and her walls clench around the intrusion.

“Not yet. But why fight it? Why not get everything you want...protection, revenge, pleasure beyond your wildest dreams? Let me give you the world, Pet. It's a small price to pay, really.”

“Yeah, my soul is such an inconsequential thing to give away to a predator in the woods,” she laments, as if she's disappointed with the sole option she's taking.

I roll us over, letting go of her hands so she can balance on top of me. Winding my fingers through her hair, I wrench her head down so I can scent her again. She's fucking addicting.

“I hate to burst your naïve bubble, but your soul isn't pure or special. It's been battered and stomped on too many times. Tarnished with hate and starved of love,” I whisper in her ear. “You're the black sheep of your coven—and make no mistake—they'll come for you. They won't stop looking for you until you've paid with blood for killing their golden boy. You only get one soul, so why not use it to get justice? For yourself and your mother.”

Using her mother's memory isn't the only low blow in my arsenal. I let go of her hair, allowing her to sit up. She's sitting right over my hard, throbbing cock. I can feel how her arousal flooded through her panties, the flimsy fabric doing very little

to separate us. I slowly rut myself against her, letting her feel my monstrous thickness as it nudges her clit. She licks her bottom lip, nibbling it as she thinks.

*Make the deal, Pet, and everything is yours. Give yourself to me and your wildest dreams will come true...*

“You’re right. I’ve never been safe in my entire life. Not from my father. Not from the coven. Not from the Saunders family... You’re my only hope if I want to live. I *have* to live.”

I sit up, so we’re eye to eye. She gazes at my neon purple orbs, astounded by the color I chose just for her. Intertwining our fingers together, I offer her a deal.

“I, Chaos, will protect you until the end of days in exchange for your mortal soul. For the price of your innocence, I will exact revenge on those who seek to hurt you. Will you accept my deal?”

She hesitates for a few moments, then takes my hand. Her magic collides with my own, and a shimmering veil falls over us. “Yes. I, Lilith Quade, accept the terms of your deal.”

Thunder claps through the air, as an electric charge races across the forest. She jumps in my lap, like the skittish little thing she is...*for now*. Lilith Quade is in for a rude awakening to who she really is.

Thunder booms above the trees. I stroke her thigh on my way to pet her pretty little pussy.

“Get ready, my bad little pet. It’s time to collect.”

# CHAPTER 4

CHAOS IS AN APTLY FITTING NAME FOR THE MONSTER I'M straddling. He's an ever-changing cyclone of mayhem, leaving death and destruction in his wake. The sound of his maniacal laughter as he slaughtered the Elders still rings through my head.

His high cheekbones and glowing violet eyes may be hypnotizingly beautiful, but I need to remind myself that he's a predator. A creature who preyed on a young, vulnerable girl with little options or agency...*right?*

He admitted to *stalking* me. He knows about my mother... and he's forcing me into a deal so he can take my virginity in some barbaric display of ownership.

But he makes me feel so safe. He ended my enemies without a second thought as to the consequences. He makes my insides burn with the need to feel him thrusting inside me, pushing my body past its limits. When Ben had his hands around my throat, I felt like the curtain was closing. But when Chaos collared me with his rough, calloused digits pressing into my neck, he made me feel electric. Even without the protection he promises, he makes me feel alive. My magic clicks with his in a way I wasn't aware was possible.

He wants to make my deepest desires come true... So why not let him?

I'm done hiding. I'm done being pushed around and treated like dirt for wanting to be free. Why not let a man do something for me for a change instead of being a pushover?

I only hesitate for a moment, then draw in a deep breath before uttering the words that seal my fate. “Yes. I, Lilith Quade, accept the terms of your deal.”

Thunder roars through the atmosphere, and a charge ripples through me, down my spine and through my limbs. I startle, as the thunder continues to boom all around us. A lingering hollowness digs into my chest, but before I can work out what it is, a hand slides up my thigh, then cups my pussy over my panties. They’re embarrassingly wet, and I try to slap his hand away, but he doesn’t budge.

“Get ready, my bad little pet. It’s time to collect.”

His long, thick fingers wrap around my panties and tear them away. He throws them in a pile of decaying leaves, then goes back to petting me.

“R-r-right here? In the woods.... Shouldn’t we go somewhere more private?” I implore him. The forest makes me feel exposed, like a thousand eyes are watching me from beyond the trees.

“Nope. I’m collecting my payment here and now before services are rendered. Don’t you want to know what Ben and Jasmine found so riveting about public fucking?”

I gasp and avert my gaze, unable to fathom how he could possibly know about that. Finding them together was so mortifying, I couldn’t even muster the courage to call them out on their behavior. I ran off and cried, because it was another example of how I wasn’t good enough, even for Ben, my childhood sweetheart. His bringing it up is like throwing ashes in my face. His chuckling makes me feel self-conscious in so many ways.

He takes my chin, turning my head back so we’re eye to eye. “Oh yes, I know all about that. I see and hear all where you’re concerned. You’ll never be able to hide from me.”

I try to dislodge him. But he holds firm.

“Stop fighting me. The deal is made—I’ve already won. I’ll never allow you to hide from me, or from yourself any

longer, Pet. You're going to see who you truly are when all of your desires are unleashed from the box you trapped them in."

He repositions me so I'm lying on the forest floor, the rocks and bark digging into my back.

"I think we should talk about—" I'm cut off by my legs being wrenched apart and his long, poker-hot tongue trailing from my ass to my clit. He swirls it around my nub until my legs are shaking and any protest I had before is dead in my mouth.

"Has anyone ever pleased you this way before? Focused on you?"

"No," I exhale, failing to stifle a breathy moan. Ben never offered, and I was always too embarrassed to ask. He tried to finger me once, but it hurt, even with him barely inside me, so I asked him to stop. He never tried again after that.

"And no one else ever will, Pet. You have no clue what you signed up for, do you? Be my good little pet and keep moaning for me."

He sucks harder on my clit, short circuiting my brain enough that I don't protest him sliding two thick, calloused fingers inside me and spreading them apart until I feel overfull, like I'm stretched to bursting.

"Ch-Ch-Chaos," I groan as he nips at my pussy and shoves himself deeper, until he hits a spot that sends me bucking off the ground.

He pulls his fingers out, weaving his forked tongue around the digits. His eyes light up, their neon glow like beacons in the darkness. His groan is so loud, so animalistic, I worry what it could attract. We're so deep in the forest I wouldn't know how to lose him and find my way out—even if I wanted to...

"My pet is a filthy, decadent thing, aren't you? You tasty girl, always flaunting through the village in your short skirts, teasing the sweet, sticky heaven between your thighs." The malice and accusation in his voice should hurt me, but instead, my stomach clenches with need. My heart sings at the

compliment buried within his words. Wetness drips down my crease, and I whine because of how empty I feel.

His long, forked tongue slithers inside me, hitting that spot again so my entire body stiffens. My magic razes through my veins, my ears ring, and it seems as if my body is aflame as I scream into the silent void of the night. He keeps licking, sucking, and nibbling at me until I cry, begging him to stop. My entire body is oversensitive to his touch. He finally stops, pulling back to sit on his haunches. His tongue swipes the glistening evidence of my arousal from his face.

We stay still for a moment, eyeing each other. A beam of moonlight cutting through the canopy above illuminates his face, highlighting his calculating, hungry expression. I catch my breath, finally coming back to earth.

“Get on your hands and knees. Face away from me,” he orders in a stern, even tone.

“Why?”

For some reason, the thought of him seeing me from that angle heats my cheeks with shame. It’s more exposing than having his lips down there. He’ll see how thick my thighs are, how they jiggle. The cellulite I can never seem to get rid of, even when I manage to lose weight.

“Because I told you to...because you *want* to do so. If you thought that was earth shattering pleasure, you haven’t felt anything yet. I’m going to break you.”

His deep, scratchy voice makes my limbs tremble as the meaning of what I signed up for finally hits me. Equal parts fear and excitement boil within me. He’s going to take me in the dirt like a wild animal. He won’t go easy on me, even though he knows it’s my first time.

I roll over, rising onto my hands and knees. The cut in my hand stings as I bear my weight on it. His knees brush against mine as he kneels to find a comfortable position. His warm hand pushes in between my shoulder blades until my cheeks hit the dirt. Then he rubs both hands up my thighs, over my ass cheeks. His hands knead the globes of flesh as he growls

before spreading them. The cold night air hits my wet, sensitive flesh, sending a shiver up my spine.

“Are you going to take me like a good little pet?” he asks me, like I’m actually some kind of pet and not a human being. My pussy drips from a mix of his filthy words and the shame they stir within me. I’m too nervous to make a coherent sentence, so I just nod.

I peek over my shoulder, desperate to see what he does to me, despite how much what’s to come scares me. His hand works over his cock, from base to tip. After the shock of what he does wears off, I notice that his is...*different*. I had seen pictures of them before, and Ben would pressure me to watch him touch himself sometimes when we were alone. But Chaos’ length is bigger, thicker. Ridges run from the bulbous tip to about halfway down the shaft.

Our eyes meet, and a smirk curves his lips. He winks at me as he grips my hips, his claws digging in for dear life.

“You’re mine, Lilith. I’m going to have so much fun playing with you for eternity,” he croons before spearing me with his length in one punishing thrust.

A soundless scream is all I can muster through the searing pain. I’m too full—it’s too much all at once—the ridges, the thickness, the sensations. Tears stream down my face as he drives in deeper until his flesh hits the curve of my ass.

“You feel so fucking *tight*,” he rasps as he slowly slides back out, then drives in again. He thrusts in a measured, deep rhythm that makes my pussy squeeze and flutter around him.

Eventually, the pain blooms into pleasure, and I meet him thrust for thrust. This indescribable feeling races through me, and I feel as if I’m vibrating—it’s all *so much*. Collaring my throat, he lifts me so my back meets his chest. His other hand roughly grabs my breast as he bites my neck hard.

I scream, howling into the woods like an animal. He’s marking me, claiming me. As he pummels into me, I notice pairs of yellow and green glowing eyes around us, hidden in the trees. Watching us.

“Chaos!” I try to get his attention, but he only chuckles.

“Let them watch. The creatures of the night will know who owns you, Pet.” He licks the shell of my ear, swelling inside me. “Who do you belong to?” he rasps into my ear.

“You,” I moan. I should be mortified that other *things*—creatures that lurk in the night—are watching us, but I can’t lie to myself when my pussy gushes around his dick like a geyser.

“And who’s going to protect you?” His hands wrap around me in a warm, sweaty embrace.

“You,” I cry, tightening around him. The sounds of him moving through my wetness are obscene as they echo through the wood.

“You’re mine, Lilith. Your soul is in my hands, and I’m never letting you go.”

His words hit me deep in my battered heart. I’ve never felt like I belonged to anyone. Like anyone truly wanted me. I come with an earth shattering shriek. He pushed into me a few more times, then floods me with his release, claiming me inside and out.

I feel disoriented, so tired I can’t keep myself upright. The forest is spinning around me and I can’t get off the ground.

The last thing I hear is Chaos’ gravelly, preternatural voice. “Sleep, my pet. You’re in for a busy day tomorrow.”



I wake up in a stylish, understated bedroom. The gauzy, floor length curtains curtail some of the sunlight streaming through the window. Birds chirp outside, their melodies floating through the room like music. The pillows are fluffy, yet firm—definitely made of something swanky like memory foam.

It takes me a few seconds to realize that this isn’t my room. Or my house. I ran away from my life...into the woods.

*Oh Goddess, I remember.*

I ran into the woods to escape the Elders after defending myself against Ben. I left his body in the shop, packed up my things in a backpack, and left to go to the airport. But I was accosted by that *monster*. He took me in the dirt like an animal, with the trees and creatures of the forest as our witnesses. It felt...amazing.

I check myself over, hoping it was just a dream. After inspecting underneath the sleeves of a large, black men's sweater, I note the scratches on my arms and a cut on my hand. My whole body throbs in pain, especially when I shimmy to sit up in bed. The fabric of the cotton pants I'm wearing may be soft, but they're too tight to see if my legs are in as bad of shape as my arms. These could very well be from fighting Ben, or from my escape from the Elders.

*Last night was most likely a dream from hitting my head too hard against the rock when I tripped and fell. Monsters aren't even real...*

No matter how hard I rack my brain for answers, I still can't figure out how I ended up here, in a room with beautiful watercolor-flowers wallpaper and stained glass bedside lamps. Before I can think of it any further, there's a rapt knock at the door, then a deep male voice says, "May I come in, Miss?"

"Um, sure," I answer, pulling the blanket up to cover myself as much as possible.

A handsome man in his early forties walks in. Tall and broad shouldered, he's the perfect specimen of a man—so perfect that he could be a movie star, like one of the dreamy guys from the superhero movies. His bright hazel eyes, a mix between moss green and amber brown, are stunning, and I could get lost in them if I let myself stare too long. His chestnut colored hair is longer on the top with a wave and some gray hairs around his temples. Perfect dimples adorn his clean shaven face.

He's wearing black jeans and a sweater that looks similar to the one I wear, except it's a deep hunter green. His eyes focus on mine, and they're so caring...so gentle. Nothing like the eyes of the beast from last night, if that even happened.

“Hello. I’m Gabriel Bardin. I’m sure you’re confused...” he says in a soft voice, like he’s afraid I’ll spook if he’s too loud.

“Um...yes, Sir. I am extremely confused.” *Because I don’t know how I ended up here.* “My name is Lilith, and I’m not sure where I am,” I tell him, because it’s the truth. *Mostly.* Somehow I went from running through the woods to laying in this man’s guest bedroom. All the other stuff in the middle may not even be real—it may just be the remnants of a hard hit to the head or a fever dream.

“Please, call me Gabriel. Well, late at night, there was a loud pounding on the door, and when I answered it, you laid on the doorstep, wrapped in a red cape with just a backpack filled with clothes. You were out cold.”

“Um, yes. I was on my way to the village at the far end of the woods. There’s a bus station that can take me to the airport there.” I try not to meet his eyes, because even though he seems nice enough, men are rarely ever nice. Especially when they don’t want something in return.

*I’ve had to learn that the hard way more than once.*

Or he may be my savior, and I just don’t know it yet. Someone has to be a hero.

His kind gaze scans over me in an assessing way as he takes in all the bruises and scratches on my body. Then he takes my hand in his large one and lightly squeezes it, imbuing me with his silent strength.

“I promise you, you’re safe here, Lilith. If someone hurt you, or if something happened, you can tell me.”

His words are a balm to my soul. Maybe he is a good man who’s just trying to help me.

I try to keep the story as close to actual events as I can, to avoid incriminating myself. “My ex-boyfriend beat me up pretty badly, so I packed my things and left. My home isn’t safe anymore. Our village came looking for me and chased me through the woods. They don’t believe me...”

His other hand rests on top of mine as he locks eyes with me. The serious expression on his face does something to my insides. Warmth pools in my stomach, and a needy ache rushes through my core.

“I believe you, Lilith.” A sadness passes through his eyes, but he blinks it away. “You can stay here as long as you want to recover. I’ll make sure you’re safe.”

Tears spring to my eyes. I’m not sure why, but to hear someone believe me about Ben—even if it’s just a stranger—feels too good, like I’ve been vindicated.

“Why are you helping me?”

“Because everyone deserves to be taken care of in their time of need. The door to your right is an ensuite bathroom. Your clothes are hung in the closet. After you freshen up, I’ll make you breakfast. I’m not the best cook, but I can make eggs and bacon just fine.”

He gets up and makes his way to the door.

“Whatever you make will be delicious, I’m sure. Thank you Gabriel. I’ll meet you downstairs soon,” I assure him before he leaves, closing the door behind him.



After I shower and change into a pair of jeans and a tunic sweater from my bag, I make my way downstairs. The savory smell and crackling sound of bacon wafting through the air reminds me of my mother. On her good days, she would cook cheese and veggie omelets, bacon, and toast for us. Sometimes she’d even whip out the waffle iron or make pancakes, especially during one of my father’s sweet periods. They usually came after he beat her badly enough that people started whispering. He promised he would change, but never did.

*“I’m going to change, Bell-Bell. I’ll be a better man for you, and a better father for Lilith. You just have to work on being less difficult, and I won’t get angry again.”*

My father is dead—his words and fists can't hurt me anymore. I shake the bad memories from my head as I enter the kitchen. It's huge, with a large island with barstools, a dining set, and elegant pendant lighting one would find in a magazine. The island is filled with dishes of food, a pitcher of orange juice and a carafe of coffee. Gabriel gestures for me to sit, then gets to work filling up my plate with a little bit of everything. He pours me some juice and brings them to the table.

I take a bite of a savory cheesy eggs and a little moan escapes my mouth. "This is absolutely delicious."

His nostrils flare slightly and he quickly takes a sip of his juice. "Thank you. It's nice to have someone to cook for. Coffee?"

"Yes, please."

We eat in companionable silence for several minutes. Despite barely knowing him, I feel so comfortable around Gabriel. The ease between us is rare, and something I've never felt with anyone before, even Ben, who I knew since I was in diapers.

"Where are we?"

"Right outside the forest. This was originally my grandfather's estate, and when he passed, I moved in and started renovating the place. I just finished this kitchen a couple of months ago."

We continue talking as we finish up our food, then Gabriel gives me a quick tour of the bottom floor of the house. It's not quite a mansion in size, but it's obvious his grandfather came from money. The fabrics of the drapes, the craftsmanship of the furniture, and the decor scream of wealth. Yet everything is understated and classic in style. It's a complete flip from how I grew up. My father was also of means, but his taste was gaudy. He only cared about designer names and labels.

*"The Quade name means something, Lilith. You need to dress the part," he yells as he hovers over me. I stand on the scale, trying my hardest to pretend I'm not here. "You're*

*disgusting and you'll never fit into anything at this rate. If you don't lose three pounds this week, you won't eat for a week."*

"Lilith, are you okay? You spaced out for a while..." Gabriel says as he gently taps my shoulder to get my attention. Even through the thick cotton of my sweater, I can feel the heat from his touch.

"Um, yeah, sorry. Sometimes I lose focus." I look away, pretending to examine a book on the end table next to his reading chair.

"Ah, yes. Whenever I have a bad memory I tend to do the same thing. Just remember, the past is behind us, and we only look toward the future."

It's as if he can read my mind. I smile at him, and he leans against the front of his desk, his ankles crossed. He points to the shelves lining the walls that are full of books.

"You can take a book from my library whenever you want," he offers.

"How did you know I like to read?" I ask as my face lights up with excitement. The shelves are lined with old and new titles from every genre, including romance, mysteries, and biographies—my favorites.

"Just did. I guess our souls recognize each other," he replies.

A shiver runs down my spine, and a quick, sharp pain pangs at my chest. *What if last night was real, and I don't have a soul?*

I must be tired and recovering from a mild concussion, because my mind is running away from me again. There's no way last night happened. Monsters aren't real. *There has to be a reasonable explanation for everything.*

A knock at the door disturbs my thoughts.

"Wait here, I'll get it." Gabriel takes my hand, leading me to his reading chair. He waits for me to sit before he leaves.

I examine the book on his end table. It's a biography of one of my favorite actresses. I open up to a chapter in the

middle, and the title of her most iconic film stands out to me. I wish today's films still had the same grandeur as the classic movies. The cinematography and dramatic plot lines can never be bested by any recently made film.

"Thank you so much for your hospitality," a familiar voice says in the sitting room outside the study.

My heart rises to my throat as my stomach bottoms out. I can't breathe. I shoot up out of my seat and stand at the door, closing it so it's only slightly cracked. I can see Gabriel, sitting on a couch across from Dale Saunders. I may not be able to see his face, but I'd recognize his voice and hair color anywhere. Ben was his carbon copy, from the timber of their voices to their identical blond hair.

"Anytime. I'm so sorry to hear about your son, Mr. Saunders. Is there anything I can do?" Gabriel asks, his voice heavy with sympathy.

"You can answer a few questions for me. Have you ever seen this woman?" He hands Gabriel a three by five picture, and as it passes between them, I recognize myself immediately. It's a picture of Ben and me from our senior prom.

We looked so bright eyed and happy. So full of potential. That's the funny thing about photos, they only capture a moment in time, not the measure of time itself.

Gabriel quickly glances up, meeting my stare. I silently implore him not to tell the truth, to lie for me. His face is passive, without expression. I'm not even sure if he really sees me, as the space between the door and the jam is so small.

*Goddess, please. Don't let him hand me over to the Elders...*

"No, I've never seen her before. Why do you ask?" A sigh of relief escapes me. The tension I held in my shoulders eases.

Thank the Goddess, he lied.

"She murdered my son, my youngest boy. He was only twenty-one and had so much life ahead of him," Saunders fake-cries as he shifts in his chair. You couldn't pay me

enough to care about his crocodile tears. That man gave less of a shit about his son than my father did about me.

“I’ll keep an eye out. If I see her, I’ll detain her and call you right away. Do you have a cell number?” Gabriel reaches out and takes a card from Saunders, then sees him out.

I run from the library, climbing the stairs two at a time until I reach my bedroom. As I frantically pack my backpack again, I fail to come up with any solutions. My magic is natural. It’s not malevolent, and it’s shit for hurting people, unless I’m angry enough to force it that way. Even if I wanted to hurt Gabriel, I can’t. He’s been so good to me in the short time I’ve been here. I have to think of a way to escape without alerting him.

“Where are you going?” he asks. The tone of his voice is familiar, but before I can think of why, he hands me Saunders’ card.

I hold it, unsure of what to do or say. I’m not used to men being kind like this. My father was a bastard. My best friend may have loved me, but he had a mean streak that tore me down more and more often as he got older. Why is this man being so nice to me?

“I have no use for it, Lilith. I’m a man of my word—you’re safe here—and whatever you did or didn’t do to that boy, he obviously deserved it.”

I exhale a deep, weary sigh and lower my bag to the floor. I believe him, but it’s not safe or smart to stay here for long. Eventually Dale Saunders will come back. Once he finds me, I’ll be dragged through the mud and killed for my crime, if I’m lucky. There are worse fates.

“I’ll stay one night, but then I have to move on. The quicker I get away from here, the better. Thank you for your hospitality, Gabriel.”

He takes my hand again, then leads me to the stairs. “Of course. How about we get a snack and pick a book to read?”

As we make our way to his study, I silently thank the Goddess. I doubted her when my mother was tried and

executed—was convinced she abandoned me. But bringing me to Gabriel’s was a gift. She must work in mysterious ways.



*Thwack. Tap. Scratch.*

I wake from a dead sleep, surprised to find myself in bed. The last thing I remember was making s’mores with Gabriel by the fire. We had spent the better part of our day reading *The Great Gatsby* and discussed it as we tried to stack our graham crackers, chocolate, and marshmallows without burning our fingertips.

*Scratch. Creak. Tap.*

The noises from the wind outside startle me. It must be a branch from the tree next to the window. I snuggle back in bed underneath the pillowy soft duvet. I feel so comfortable here, more so than I ever did at home. Despite the short time I’ve known him, I’ll miss Gabriel. Something about him seemed so natural, but staying here will only put him in danger.

*THWACK.*

The windowpane vibrates with the force of the branch, so I check on it to make sure it didn’t crack. As I run my hand over the glass, I see a male figure stroll through the trees into the woods.

It’s Gabriel. I stare into the trees to see where he went, but a pair of neon purple eyes light up. They stare directly at me, blinking a few times before they disappear.

No. It can’t be. *He’s real.*

I think on a subconscious level, I knew he was. He branded me, after all. I felt him inside me, claiming every inch of me under the moonlight.

Gabriel has no clue what Chaos is capable of doing. I rush downstairs, not thinking, before racing out the front door and into the wilderness beyond the backyard. I run so fast, the

branches and trunks around me blur together. A guttural growl echoing from the clearing beyond stops me. *Chaos*.

Each step I take weighs heavy. I brush against some dried leaves on the ground, getting his attention. When his horned visage becomes clearer, I gasp. He seems bigger, all-consuming. His teeth are sharper. Somehow, his muscles became more swollen, stretching his skin tauter overnight.

We stand there, yards apart, staring at each other, then he moves, taking a step forward. For every step he takes toward me, I take one step back. When he rushes me, I flee. My bare feet hit the dirt as I fly through the trees, frantically trying to evade capture. I zig zag in an effort to lose him, but it's no use. He only gets closer. My breathing becomes heavy as my mind screams at me to keep going.

A warm, strong hand grabs my arm, spinning me around and slamming me into a granite chest. Blunt claws lightly scrape up my spine before fisting into my hair. He yanks my head back so I'm forced to see him.

"Were you looking for me, Pet?" *Chaos* rumbles. His voice naturally echoes, carrying through the wilderness.

"Yes," I lie, too afraid to provoke him.

"Tell the truth. You were trying to save your little lover boy, huh? *Gabriel*," he teases. "Gabriel! Quick, come back. There's a demon in the woods who's gonna eat you up, dimples and all," he mockingly cries in a falsetto voice.

*Chaos* licks his lips, and I can't tell if he's serious. The thought of him harming *Gabriel* makes my stomach as my anxiety chokes me.

"Did you hurt him?" I ask, even though I fear the answer.

"Not *yet*. I want to, though. Your breath still smells like the s'mores you two made. *Disgusting*," he spits. "I should hunt him down and force feed him s'mores until he chokes while you watch."

I struggle in his grasp, and the sting of my hair pulling at my scalp hurts. Banging my fists against his chest does nothing but make him howl in laughter.

“He did nothing but take care of me. He found me on his doorstep and took me in. gave me clothing and food. He was just being nice.” I plead his case, hoping Chaos will lay off, but it only makes him angrier. His smirk turns ravenous.

“He fed you and gave you clothes... Does this sweater belong to *him*?” Chaos tears it off me, leaving me in a thin bralette. The cold air hits me like a bucket of water and I start to shiver. He brings the torn fabric to his nose. “It smells like him.”

Chaos advances on me, backing me into a tree. He puts his massive forearms on either side of my head so I can’t escape him. “He touched what’s *mine*.”

“You have no right to be upset! You left me on his doorstep. If I was really yours, you should have taken care of me yourself,” I try to reason with him, but he only grows angrier. “I don’t belong to you!”

“You’re going to regret saying that,” he threatens, slamming my wrists above my head. “You’re mine, body and soul, Pet. You made a deal—you belong to *me*, and I think I need to remind you of that fact.”

He shimmies my leggings off, then tosses them. His coarse hands caress my legs, and his low, gruff grunt when he gets to the meaty part of my thighs makes my core clench in excitement. He scoops me up so my legs are thrown over his shoulder, and my back is leaning on the tree behind me. Ben had never tried to pick me up—and said he never would because I was too heavy for it—but Chaos balances me effortlessly. I want to feel his tongue inside me, his fingers, the smooth enamel of his horns.

*Why am I craving his touch?* I should be fighting to free myself, running for my life from this monster.

Before I can answer myself, he plunges into me, tongue first, hitting a spot deep inside that makes me scream into the night. I hold onto his horns and he voraciously devours me, like I’m the last meal he’ll ever have—as if I’m the only subsistence keeping him alive. I drip with arousal and adrenaline, reveling in the obscene sounds he makes as he

consumes me. His fingers spread me open roughly, just enough that I don't split in two. He pushes me down into the dirt on all fours and rams home.

I growl like an animal when I feel his skin slap behind me. He unleashed something feral inside me, something I fear and don't understand. Every thrust chips away at the version of me I thought I knew, uncovering a new incarnation that *needs* him.

"Harder," I demand. "More!"

Chaos' villainous laughter accompanies his slowing movement. He drags himself all the way out of me until just the tip remains inside. Whining, I try to push myself back, but his hands closing around my throat stops me.

"My needy little pet. Do you want this dick?" I feel so empty and disoriented without him and try again to push back, to get more than the little he's given me.

His hand comes down on my ass hard, leaving a burning sting behind. He spanks me two more times, and I scream out my frustration.

"Who do you belong to, Pet? Who has your soul?" he asks in a droll voice, like this entire situation is amusing to him.

"You," I breathe through his hold on my throat. "Please."

He slides in a bit more, and the ridges and grooves of his length ignite sparks of pleasure that burn me from the inside out. He takes one hand off my throat, rubbing over the raw handprints on my ass. "You're *my* filthy pet, and I'll play with you how I please. Do you want to say something to me?"

"I'm sorry," I blurt out, eager to feel him move inside me again.

"For?" He slides in another inch.

"For doubting that I belong to you," I swallow my pride, if only temporarily.

He pulls out completely before flipping me over and driving back into me to the hilt. With each thrust, he goes deeper, harder. His finger rubs my clit in fast, frenzied circles

until I'm writhing on the ground. He leans down to bite my neck, leaving behind a mark of ownership. That tips me over the edge.

"Yes, Pet, come for me," he whispers in my ear with a deceptive gentleness. He takes my face in his hand, running his thumb over my lip while he empties himself inside me. "That was your one and only nice reminder. If you ever doubt who you belong to again, you won't enjoy the consequences."

I nod as the canopy of leaves and branches above me goes in and out of focus. I feel my body being lifted off the ground, and gaze into his glowing purple eyes as he carries me.

"Where are we going?" My voice sounds weak, and my whole body suddenly feels like a lead weight.

"You'll see," Chaos answers.



My head pounds, pain vibrating within my skull. I nuzzle into soft sheets, and freeze.

*Where am I?*

There's no sound, just silence. I open my eyes, and find myself back in my guest bed in Gabriel's house. The day is breaking through the curtains, shining a lone beam of light across the duvet. The wallpaper is the same, and so are the lamps on the bedside tables. I roll over to turn one on, and sit up, wracking my brain to find some sense in it all.

*How did I end up here again? Did I ever leave?* My fingers brush over my neck, and I don't feel any bite marks or pain...

I think my abuse and trauma are finally catching up to me, plaguing my mind with tricks and falsities. What happened these past two nights must have been dreams. That's the only plausible explanation.

*Fairytale monsters don't exist in real life,* I remind myself. The only evil in this world is in human form. Evil like my

father. Ben and his father. The coven.

*Chaos.*

I tremble at the mere thought of him. Steadying my hands, I feel for his bite mark again, but only touch smooth skin. Is he evil, though? A villain, yes. But if he's so bad, why did I beg him for more? Why do I yearn to feel him inside me still?

Before I can spiral too deeply into my anxiety and self-doubt, there's a knock on the door.



*Enjoy the cliffhanger! A full version of A MOnstrous Deal will arrive in 2024. Keep up with my socials in the link below for a release date!*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

M. Bonnet is a calamitous, chaotic catastrophe on a literary rampage. She started her writing journey because she wanted to see more women like herself in romance books: curvy, sarcastic, and slightly off kilter. So she jumped into paranormal why choose with MM. Then she started writing MM, and has some mafia romance coming out soon under Mae Malone, her other pen name.

Check out her work here: <https://books.bookfunnel.com/bonnetmalone>



# ACTUS REUS

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## BLURB

In the chilling heart of a city gripped by fear, a relentless detective and a ruthless serial killer are locked in a deadly dance. The Scythe, a murderer who leaves no woman untouched and no secret buried, obsesses over the tenacious detective who matches him in cunning even as she conceals her own darkness.

Detective Arima Williams plays cat-and-mouse with a ruthless serial killer, blurring the line between hunter and hunted as their obsessions intertwine.

But will her pursuit of justice unmask The Scythe or will it unearth her own skeletons, hidden in the deepest recesses of her past?

## CONTENT WARNINGS

This book may contain triggers for some. Triggers include but are not limited to don-con, family love, PTSD, night terrors, violence, torture, abuse of power, cannibalism, choking, biting, blood play, captivity, restraint, morbid obsession, detached limbs, descriptive skinning, masturbation to snuff film and themes that may be disturbing to some readers.

# PROLOGUE

BLOOD COATED FINGERTIPS REACHED OUT AND GRABBED MY face as the skin began to peel away from bone, dropping onto the floor in loud, wet thuds. Screams couldn't escape me as I forced my body to emit any sort of sound, only to have it lost in the void of darkness before me. My eyes burn from a fork lodged in its socket, plucked away as the dark figure before me smiles. The moment his other hand reached for my hair, it jerked me awake with a racing heart. I tumbled halfway out of bed, wrapped in my sheets, when I realized my night terrors were at it again. I was soaked in sweat and the coolness of the floor gave me a small reprieve as I laid there awkwardly in a tangle of fabric, trying to catch my breath.

After a few moments, I righted myself and sat on the side of my bed, turning on my small lamp sitting atop my nightstand. I stared at my badge and 9mm firearm highlighted beneath the light.

The nightmares wouldn't let me rest. They haunted me for the past few months, pulling me into a world I thought I was ready for. Images of killers and demons obscure my reality in waking hours birthed from scenes that have burned themselves into my core. Countless women hanging by their feet like animals along the ceiling of a warehouse with blood pooled into a drain hole made me shudder. One of the girl's eyes was still open while her body swung lazily left and right as if the killer was there mere moments before our arrival at the scene. I saw nothingness as her life quickly faded. It was unlike anything I had experienced in my ten years as a detective. My mind's eye flickers through the gruesome murder scenes again

and again, like flashes of our cameras as my obsession over the case grows to uncontrollable proportions.

The killer was still out there. I had to bring him to justice.

We raided a known drug house, inadvertently stumbling upon the bodies. Jagged slits against their throat made by a serrated knife coated their naked bodies in crimson.

Nothing could wash that vision from my mind, no matter how I tried.

# CHAPTER 1

“SANTIAGO, I THOUGHT YOU WEREN’T COMING IN TODAY.”

I turned to find my partner swaggering in late as ever, still putting on his blazer to cover his side holster.

“There was traffic. You know how it is out there,” he smirks toward Garcia.

Sitting at my desk, I raised the hot cup of coffee to my lips, letting the burn slide down my throat as I discreetly watched him make his way to my desk. The moment he looked at me, I flicked my gaze back down, sorting through the pictures of the dead bodies.

We found some information about them. They were all homeless with no identities. They were easily erased as if they had never existed in the first place. But it was my job to make sure these women’s stories were told and justice was served. I hyper focused on every one of the pictures, searching for any sign or mistake the killer might have made. The forensic team found no loose hairs left behind or any fingerprint on any surface.

“Did you get any sleep, Williams? Or were you here all night?”

I sat back and took another sip of coffee. Santiago sat on the edge of my desk, pushing some of the photos around, looking at them too.

Our relationship had been tumultuous, to say the least. We knew it was a risk fraternizing, but one long night after overtime, we needed the stress relief. It was hot, heavy with

not much to say between us—strictly raw carnal desire. I appreciated the benefits, but I didn't think Santiago got the memo. His feelings ran deeper.

He threw me a grin, and I ignored it, taking another sip before talking about the case again.

“I've scoured through every one of these pictures again and again. The killer never leaves anything behind, not one mistake. How is that humanly possible? I might head back to the scene later to see if I find something there the cameras didn't pick up.”

Santiago's hand landed on top of mine and I jerked it back, glaring at him.

“Williams, I think you need a break. You've been at it for months.”

I jumped to my feet and leaned in as he leaned back. I told him with my eyes that he shouldn't test my competency again in front of the others before taking a sip of my coffee and leaving him there with the photos.

“Get back to work, nothing to see here,” he told the other guys.

I could hear his footsteps behind me, following me into the employee lounge as I poured some more coffee into my cup.

The moment his warmth covers my back, mine stiffens. He was making a scene. This was exactly why they warned us away from fraternization.

“What do you want, Santiago?” I gritted out.

“Why are you acting this way? If you need to loosen up, just tell me. Unless you've been getting it from someone else?”

There was a possessive edge to his tone. When his hand landed on my shoulder again, I moved away from his touch. The man couldn't take a hint. He was hot in bed, but that was all he was. One night of passion. He couldn't handle me in my darkest moments. He caught me when I had a lapse of judgment from overworking.

He stared at me a few moments with a frown before he lifted his hands up with his palms facing out. “I got you, Williams. I got it.”

I waited until he left the room before dumping the coffee into the sink and leaning against the counter. Whatever appetite I had vanished.

I was done with his antics and clinginess. I was going to have to put in for a new partner. Whether they granted me my request was a different story.

I grabbed my jacket off the back of my chair and left the station, making my way to the garage. The common denominator among the victims I could find so far were strange puncture wounds hidden by the jagged holes left in their necks. It took the third scene at an abandoned building to finally connect the dots. The woman was pierced through the chest by a forklift, the slit on her throat shorter than the usual we stumbled across. That was when we discovered the hole beside it.

Whoever the killer was, he was good. Getting into my car, I slammed the door and stared out the front windshield. The killer was always a step ahead. He’d been dubbed The Scythe since he was short of lobbing heads off.

I reached over to my glove compartment for my sunglasses in preparation for driving out of the garage when my hands landed on something wet. I jerked away, quickly turning on my interior light, and looked again.

Peeking from the glove compartment was a severed finger, freshly covered in blood. My hands trembled as I reached further to pull it out with my index finger and thumb.

It looked like it belonged to a woman. My heart hammered inside my chest. It wasn’t the first time I had been left gifts like this. I long since convinced myself they weren’t clues. The first time they appeared were a few yards away from crime scenes I was specifically called to—when I was a month into the case of this cold killer. Now these gifts began appearing in areas that had nothing to do with the crime scene, like now.

I turned it over to see an old tattoo of a blade on the side of it. This one came with a ring as well, speckled with her own blood.

“What in the world...”

I looked around my car and grabbed some leftover napkins from take out, wrapping the finger and shoving it in the cup holder before leaning over to see if there was anything else left behind. There was nothing. And my glasses were gone.

I couldn't tell the department. A gut feeling held me back. I also didn't want to lose whatever lead I had on this case, and I knew these gifts were connected.

Cursing under my breath, I wiped my hands and pulled out of the garage into the glaring sun. After a few moments, my eyes adjusted and I drove a few miles away to grab a quick lunch. As I pulled up to the burger joint, my phone vibrated in my pocket. I pulled it out and the screen told me it was the lead detective supervisor, Harris.

He didn't wait for my greeting and began speaking the moment I picked up.

“We got a crime scene. Get there in the next ten minutes. I'll send you the details of the locations.”

A chill ran down my spine as he ended the call as fast as he spoke. Swerving away from the drive thru, I slammed my foot on the gas and made my way back onto the road as other customers flipped me off and hollered from their windows.

The industrial fertilizing plant was easy to find. I pulled up alongside the other familiar cars and exited the driver side, checking out my surroundings. It was quiet out here, further away from the cities.

“Bout time you got here,” Santiago coldly stated when I arrived.

I ignored his petty attitude and looked at the scene in front of me. “Is it him?”

“Why else would Harris call you here?”

Note to self: get on that request for a change of partner.

There were shorn torsos hanging on metal hooks. Some of their limbs were strewn on the floor, while others were missing.

“It’s why the factory had to emergency shut down,” Santiago explained, solidifying my assumption that some of the limbs made it into the machinery.

As the camera flashes went off and tape was put up, I slowly walked around the area to see if I could find anything else we may have missed. Again, The Scythe was meticulous in what he did.

...not meticulous enough if I counted the finger I found in my glove box.

I made my way outside to get a bit of fresh air from the smell of the factory when specs of wet dirt caught my eye. They were out of place, and I followed the small trail until it abruptly ended.

“It has to be leading to something,” I mumbled.

A low groan from my left had me instinctively running and unholstering my pistol. Beyond the sparse line of trees, more loosened dirt appeared.

A feminine cry changed my direction until I came upon a dirty woman, weakly calling for help. “Please... somebody...,” she sobbed, her cracking voice making her words almost indecipherable.

She stretched out her hand in front of her and pulled herself a few more inches, dirt filled hair covering half of her face.

“Hold on! Stop moving! I’m coming.”

“Please! He’s going to kill me!”

I skidded to a stop, holstered my gun, and grabbed her arm, pulling her to find that she didn’t have any legs. The large hole in the ground was filled with loosened dirt, and half of her other arm was missing from the elbow down. She coughed up blood and her words began gurgling right before she

twitched and moaned, pulling her remaining arm out of my grasp.

The blood-curdling scream echoed through the trees as she coughed up more blood and took her last breath, dying in front of my eyes.

## CHAPTER 2

## THE SCYTHER

“NO, NO, NO!”

Darkness surrounded me as I moved around my basement. A couple of bulbs hung from the ceiling, coated with dust, not casting enough glow.

“Someone!” came a feminine scream beyond the wall that led into my secret room.

Slowly opening the door, bright illumination spilled out, clearly showcasing my blindfolded victim tightly fastened to a chair. She was among the more... well rounded girls I came upon, which singled her out. Long red hair and the scent of her perfume was what drew me to her like a moth to the flame. It was a scent I hadn't smelled in a long time. It reminded me so much of the other.

But here, in this room of wonders, my focus was solely on the woman before me. I had to have her, own her, and now she was in my hands. I dragged my sickle across the cement floor, the sound of the blade against the stone making my head twitch and her grimace in anticipation of what was to come.

When I circled her, she shuddered as a small whimper escaped her trembling lips.

“Don't whimper, my sweet. The fun hasn't begun yet.”

Her screams played like a symphony ringing through my ears as I ran my gloved finger up and down the side of her face. I made sure to keep her clean and the room at optimum temperature while I was away. When a drop slowly descended

on her skin, my tongue followed it. I took time to savor the saltiness of her tears as another shiver ran through her.

“What do you want from me? I’ll g-give you anything. Please, just don’t kill me.”

I inhaled her fear and exhaled pleasure. My cock pulsed behind my pants as I grabbed the back of her hair and jerked her head back.

“Did you say anything?” I whispered.

“Yes. I mean no. I mean, p-please, I’ll do whatever you want!” I jerked her head back further and she let out an ear-piercing scream. “Someone, please help me! Please!”

“Then bleed for me,” I chuckled, sliding my sickle across the flesh of her forearm until crimson bloomed, coating her alabaster skin and slowly trickling down to the floor.

With my grip still tightly on her wrist, I brought up her arm to my mouth and laved my tongue across the wound before sucking on it. The taste was delectable. There was no taste in the world like fresh game. With another slice of my sickle, her index finger was severed, squirting blood from the gaping hole where her finger was once attached. I always found it comical how it arched. Urine burned my nose as it dribbled into a small puddle beneath her chair.

The scent of my injured prey only heightened my need for her death. And now that we’d come to this part of our relationship, I found myself to be merciful. I removed a serrated hunter’s knife from the nearby table and returned. She whimpered and pleaded beautifully, but my eyes were focused on the blood splatters around her. Humming, I began sawing through her delicate flesh, watching as the skin stretched before it ripped apart, blooming open like a flower under my ministrations.

Her cries died down into choking sobs as I continued to slice her into pieces fit for consumption. When I hit bone, she screamed at the top of her lungs, irritating my ears. She really was ungrateful. She should be thanking me for removing her from this world.

I continued to saw her chest when my ears began to ring from her screams. Scowling, I gripped her hair once more, jerked her head back as far as it would go and sliced through the delicate skin of her throat, making sure she slowly drowned in her own blood.

I enjoyed her gurgles rather than her screams. Pity.

I watched as she bathed herself in her own life force, splattering onto my apron and shoes when her head finally dropped to the side. I sawed the rest of the attachment until her decapitated head fell in a wet thud like a bowling ball onto the pooled blood on the ground.

She had an annoying voice, anyway.

I should have slit her throat first, but I couldn't deny the fun it gave me when they fought and begged. Now that the room was quiet again, I hummed as I cut away her restraints, tossed her body over my shoulder and brought her to the table where I continued to cut. I always believed in utilizing every part of the meat harvested. I was highly environmentally conscious. There was enough waste that went around these days. Why add to it?

I carefully dressed her and skillfully removed the entrails, taking care to separate all the organs that could be used for my various purposes. The heart, liver, and kidneys were set aside for a hearty stew, while the rest of the organs would serve as my appetizers. The intestines had to be thoroughly cleaned so that I may use them as casing for the upcoming barbecue.

Skinning the meat was satisfying. It calmed my inner beast as I slowly pulled the outer flesh away from the muscle and fat.

"I chose a nice one. She should be quite flavorful with all this marbling." I looked over my shoulder with a sly smile. "You really did do a good job with how well you took care of yourself, dear. It's the perfect balance between softness and firmness. I applaud you."

She didn't answer. Her eyes stared blankly at me and I frowned at how rude she was to her host.

“You know, not all of us enjoy the amenities of where we are staying, but it’s quite rude to not at least say a simple thank you.”

Ignoring her rudeness again, I went back to peeling the skin away. Hers would be perfect for skin cracklings. With more precise cuts and gentle movements, I skillfully removed the remaining hide and made sure to cut the tenderloin, preserving it for filet mignon. I needed to thank my employees and this would be their bonus on top of their payment for all of their hard work.

Now skinned, I quartered the meat into manageable pieces, using my electric saw to set aside some bone for broth. Excess fat and tissue were tossed in a nearby bucket to be grounded and mixed in with the hamburger meat I had also prepared for the barbeque. After all, what’s a barbeque without an All American burger?

The tendons were my next purpose. I had plans for them. It was foolproof. I’d make her see. I wonder what she thought of the ring I got her today. She was too shy to admit our relationship was moving to the next level. I could understand that. She was timid.

She needed a man like me to coax her confidence out of her. I carefully intertwined the remaining tendons as a reef and set them on a large piece of wood to be put out to dry. Once they were stiffened, I would make a trip to the local florist for the best blood-red flowers to wrap around them.

I arranged the meat onto butcher paper, wrapped them and placed them in the cooler I had beneath the table.

“I should place the flowers on her car. She doesn’t go home often...” I mumbled to myself.

I was such a romantic. This city could use a role model on how a woman should be treated—and who better to show them than me?

# CHAPTER 3

THE CASE HAS BECOME AN OBSESSION, A RELENTLESS QUEST taking over every waking moment in pursuit of a killer who kept slipping through my fingertips, staying two steps ahead. I was consumed. The Scythe drowned out the other cases I should be working on. I had been on his trail for months, my days filled with endless interviews to people surrounding the crime scenes, and sleepless nights spent poring over evidence.

*Where am I going wrong? What am I missing? People are still falling like flies.*

The Scythe has been terrorizing the city, processing his victims like animals, leaving remnants behind. Hung like a butcher. I was surprised he wasn't referred to as one. Of course, that was probably my own imagination leading me astray, just like these photos, with no rhyme or reason.

Except for the puncture wound—the symbol of his reign of terror and brutal carnage.

My office turned into my new sanctuary, a place where I could immerse myself in the case. The nightmares that plagued my mind at home were less prominent here since I slept lighter with the change of shifts coming in and out of the building. It was the only solution I could find to the horrid images that danced through my head, morphing from reality to something inhuman. Demons that didn't solely belong to me.

The boards were covered with maps of the city, each murder location marked with a red pin, a string attaching them to the next. Photos of the victims' remains stared back at me from a corkboard—what was left of their faces a constant

reminder of the lives lost and the justice that was yet to be served. The case files, autopsy reports and witness statements littered my desk like a toddler unsure of where to start crafting... or a tornado waiting to come back and devour everyone in its wake.

It mirrored my current existence—chaotic.

But each piece of evidence and information that surrounded me was a potential key to unlocking the identity of The Scythe.

*If only I had been there. Always a minute too short, a second too late.*

Rubbing my eyes with the back of my hand, I hung my head backward on the chair as the smell of fresh roasted coffee beans filled the air, giving me enough energy to get out of my seat and make my way to the lounge for a cup to keep me going. The rustling of the other officers' day-to-day movements didn't deter me. I was hyper focused with blinders on, running on fumes.

*I had no choice. I was the only one who could catch him. There was more than one reason why the victims were all women, why the case was assigned to me... why my gifts appeared. What was he trying to relay that I was missing? Had the answers been in front of my eyes all along and I was just too blind and sleepless to see it?*

My shoulders slouched down with the weight of the pressure I placed upon myself. Santiago had hinted more times than not that it was going to turn into a cold case sooner or later. How could I stop now? The bodies racked up short of genocide. The media and the public had become frenzied by the story, whipping up the horrors laid before them to haunt every person's waking hours. Yet they all demanded answers, demanded justice while hoping nothing was solved so that they might continue their tabloids to their benefit.

I took the weight of their expectations like a blade to the chest. It made my own hands itch for retribution for the people. We weren't toys to be pushed and pulled, our emotions

to be played with as if we were puppets to a grand master of strings.

Snapping the hair tie on my wrist, the bite of pain grounded me as I pulled it off and maneuvered my dark hair with deft hands, putting it into a bun.

*Take a deep breath, and a big swig of coffee, Arima. Today may be the day I find one of his mistakes. No killer is perfect.*

Lost in the zone, everything around me turned into a buzz until one familiar voice rang out in a roar.

“Williams! Get your ass in my office now!” Harris’ militant tone matched his reputation. He was a man who was rigid in his approach to things, black and white. It was why he easily commanded everyone under him with his logical reasoning and why he was perfect for his position.

The other guys looked over at me and I ignored them all as I got to my feet, smoothed down the front of my wrinkled shirt and entered his office.

His face was blank, his mouth hidden by his clasped hands, sitting behind his desk.

“Have a seat.”

I did as commanded quietly.

“You’ve been working this case nonstop, kid.”

*Yes, captain obvious.* I knew where this was going, but it didn’t sting my ego any less.

“Listen to me, there will always be a case that needs to be solved and people that need to be saved, but don’t become obsessed with just one. There are other issues that need to be dealt with, other people we also need to help. You have a home. Go visit it.” His tone spoke of finality, leaving no room for any rebuttal... and I was a hardheaded woman whose filters had crumbled from lack of sleep.

“What do you mean? I’m so close. There are innocent women dying out there as we speak. We have to stop him! You can’t take me off this case.”

It was a pointless attempt and when he continued to stare at me with no change in expression, the battle was already lost. “Williams, for your own good I’m placing you on administrative leave for one week. Gather your things and go home. Psych eval is in two weeks. No one here doubts you love your job.”

I raged inside. I wanted to punch something, but I had to deal with the supervisor on the same playing field. I kept my emotions in check. “Okay, fine.”

Crossing my arms, I let out a slow exhale through my nose.

“I need your badge and gun now.” The tone of his voice accused me of not being able to follow simple commands. I wasn’t that far gone. Jerking my piece from my side, I laid it in front of him on the table and followed with my badge.

My tired brain was making me take risks I normally wouldn’t in front of my supervisor. “You’re making a mistake, Harris. I’m close, I can feel it.”

“You said that last month. The department can’t afford to lose you to your own obsession. Your health comes first, then the case. We’ll keep Santiago on it in your absence since he’s the closest one to what’s been happening. Take care, Williams, I’ll see you in a week.”

I watched with remorse as he placed my service gun and badge into his drawer, removing any evidence of it.

My eyes burned from unshed tears of frustration, sleeplessness and a healthy dose of emotions of betrayal. Without another word, I closed the door behind me. Blinking a few times, I kept my face steady as the other guys looked my way.

He didn’t understand. The job dictated a commitment to the city and people I had sworn to protect. I was driven by the desperate need to find this killer.

If he thought sending me home would stop me, he was as insane as the killer. I took out my phone and took pictures of all the scenes and paperwork on my desk. I had to become

resourceful. I left the office on a mission, with or without the department's approval.

The Scythe was mine.

Entering my car, a pang of disappointment hit me when I didn't find any gifts. What was wrong with me? How morbid was it to expect my secret admirer's attention? Slamming my foot on the gas pedal, I drove away from the building without a look back.

When I arrived at my apartment, my hands stopped midway, taking the key out of the ignition when I noticed a reef hanging on my door. Was it from the neighbors? They knew the line I worked in after the entire neighborhood was interviewed when I first got on the job.

*Maybe they noticed my absence and kept an eye out on my apartment for me.*

Harris was right. I was losing track of time, losing track of food and sleep. Little did he know he was condemning me to my nightmare demons the moment he sent me home, taking away my sanctuary from the night terrors that plagued me. The heavy sense of frustration and failure sat in my gut like a stone.

Taking a deep breath in and out, I exited the car and walked up to my door, examining the beautiful blood-red roses that decorated the reef. They smelled sweet, as if freshly plucked, their petals delicate to the touch.

Delicate like the women who kept dying in front of me.

I growled and tore the reef down with jerky movements as my thoughts swirled around my mandatory time off. Opening my door, I threw the flowers at the closest trash can as I began to divest myself of my outer clothing. Each day was bringing me one step closer to catching this sick bastard. Each piece of evidence, each witness statement, each autopsy report had been gone through with a fine-toothed comb.

*What the fuck am I missing? What'll bring me closer to solving this horrifying puzzle?*

My shoes landed haphazardly somewhere in the bedroom when I kicked them off. The final reality slap in the face was when I took my bra off. My chest expanded as if all my tension had been held in my shoulders and ribs the entire time I was at the station. With a loud exhale, I dropped face first into my fluffy comforter and groaned.

*Just a small nap. Then I needed to get back on the images. I think there was a spot I overlooked.*

Despite my mind fighting to think about the case, my body's needs won the battle and finally gave out...

## CHAPTER 4

“DO YOU DESIRE ME, ARIMA? IS THAT WHY YOU WATCH ME SO closely?”

Low and husky, I couldn't pinpoint its origin as I turned around in an unfamiliar room. What happened? How did I get here? Was I hallucinating from lack of sleep?

I reached out and the world wavered as chitter chatters of laughter came from all directions, sending a chill up my spine.

A hiss and sharp pain hit my outstretched hand, making me jerk it back to my body, cradling it. Nothing was around me but the still air of a room that was stagnant from lack of circulation.

*Where were the doors?*

“Arima...”

My hand throbbed and I looked down to see a very familiar puncture wound. My heart hammered inside my chest as my breath caught and my chest became tight.

“Where are you? Show yourself!”

My throat constricted and I couldn't utter another sound. Gasping for breaths, I clawed at my neck to fight... nothing but air.

The chitter chatters became louder as if the unknown being was sitting on my shoulders.

I sputtered when the pressure released, but I couldn't move, paralyzed where I stood. My eyes frantically moved as far as they could, left to right, to see what I was going up

against, but the only movement I could catch was the billowing of the lace curtain against the window that appeared before me.

“Sweet little hunter, you’ll never find me,” his warm breath caressed the back of my ear as he chuckled. “But I’ll always find you.”

Sharp pain stabbed the flesh of my neck, and a physical weight pushed me down to my knees. Claws and teeth tore through my throat and my voice finally shattered aloud with a scream of horror.

The image wavered like a mirage and white surrounded me while my limbs fought to claw at the demon trying to eat me alive. Except there was nothing there... and the white in my vision cleared to endless sheets and satin, cool against my sweaty body.

When the battle for air stopped, my eyes fluttered as my mind remained in a strange limbo between sleep and wakefulness. Moaning, I looked around my room through slitted lids and found comfort in the fact that I was back in my room—back in the safety of my apartment.

Letting my lids fall, I breathed in and out deeply, trying to calm my racing heart. Those night terrors were going to be the death of me. That thought alone made my pride rear its ugly head. *I’m too stubborn to let it win. I have too much left to do! I still needed to...*

A heavy weight pressed me onto my back. Warmth and hardness pushed me into my blankets as a familiar masculine voice floated through my mind.

“You didn’t like the flowers. And she screamed so beautifully...”

My eyes snapped open, but I couldn’t move. Terror laced itself into every fiber of my being. Was this sleep paralysis at its worst? I tried to scream, but it was useless as my mouth could only sigh.

His broad shoulders were silhouetted by the dim glow of the moon cast from my window. The curtains slowly billowed

with the breeze as he tilted his head to look at me. I couldn't see him, his face covered by a demonic mask that reminded me of the one I thought was clawing through the flesh of my neck.

When he caressed my temple with the back of his knuckle, a shiver ran down my spine.

“I'll make it up to you, little hunter. I'll make sure your waking hours are haunted by me just as much as your nights. Though I do enjoy you whispering my name in your sleep...”

The Scythe was in my bed. I wasn't sure if it was solely a part of my nightmare, but everything in my vision was clear. From the way his back muscles flexed as he crawled down my body, to the way his tongue felt across my abs as he lifted his mask half way, distorting his identity while he took advantage of my paralyzed state.

This couldn't be a dream or a nightmare. This was too real. Was I drugged and didn't know about it? How did he get into my house without making a sound? Was I that far gone in my fatigue to have missed everything?

Goosebumps rose on my skin when his large hands pulled down the waist of my panties, sliding them down my limp legs.

*Move, Arima!*

My finger twitched, but not enough to do much more.

“Undressing meat is the most calming act, don't you think, little hunter?” Teeth grazed the inside of my thigh, the horns of his mask the only thing in the darkness I could see moving as if they taunted me. “It takes expert hands to peel away the layer perfectly, in order to set it aside for other uses. And yours, my dear, yours is the softest of its kind, perfectly scarred from your self hate. How is it that one slices themselves so deeply, only to turn around and meticulously care for the skin to heal the wounds until its evidence diminishes, as if they never existed?”

My breath hitched. It was why I only did one-night stands—in the dark, if I could help it. The shame I held for my self

mutilation was hard to conquer, but over time, it lessened... until it came time for someone to explore me. I never gave them the chance and now I didn't have control over the situation.

I screamed inside my mind, struggling to shove him away from me, but all that came out was something akin to a whimper.

“There, there now. I'll take care of you. I'll take your mind off your self hate until you live and breathe me.”

He shoved the mask higher before he invaded me with his tongue. I shut my eyes as tears tracked down my temples, forced to endure whatever he had planned for me. The worst part about it was... it felt good. And I didn't need it to. Not like this.

My body heated up as he continued invading me with his mouth. Each suck on my clit sent a jolt to my core, and each nip of his teeth made me wetter.

My body was strung like a bow, ready to unleash, but my mind was clawing at me, wanting to kick him in the face. But if I did that, he would escape and I would lose my chance at finding out the identity of The Scythe.

His hands roamed my waist and hips, pulling me against his mouth as pleasure climbed with each thrust of his tongue. When I reached the precipice of no return, he chuckled against my inner thigh, tonguing the worst of my raised scars.

“Bad little girls don't get what they want. Hasn't your father taught you that?”

My eyes widened. What did he know about my father? No one knew except for my background investigators. It was something I rarely mentioned, if at all. The crime scene tape was vivid in my head, despite my young mind at the time.

The Scythe trailed kisses up my stomach and pushed my shirt up to my neck so that he could take a nipple into his mouth and suck. I involuntarily shivered, my body responding to him even in this current state. I had to be drugged. There was no possibility everything felt this real and it was a dream.

My hand shifted on the sheets when his warm breath reached the crook of my neck. “Meat shouldn’t taste this sweet, little hunter. But I had to savor your taste and find out for myself. You’ve bewitched me. My cock hardens every time you discover my gifts. The flowers were entwined from my best catch, but the others... I wanted you to know that there *would be no others* but you.”

Others? Was he not referring to the severed fingers and limbs he left behind for me? What was he saying? Was this what I was missing?

He kissed my shoulder and began to suck on my neck deliciously when a horrible thought struck me.

...the women...

But my thoughts were cut short when he pressed his hard length between my thighs while his hands massaged my naked breasts expertly.

“The human body is a fascinating thing...” he whispered against my skin, nipping at it firmly, sending a sharp pain down my chest. “Yet, there is simplicity when put against everything else. It’s all the same in the end...” His tongue laved where his teeth hurt me and a fire crept up my insides to meet him.

My hands shifted again, bending at the elbows until they landed on his broad shoulders. Whatever drug I was under was slowly diminishing, but not soon enough. I didn’t have the strength to push him away.

His hot breath against my jaw made my eyes flutter at the wrongness of it all. What was I doing? How could I allow this? This was the killer! He massacred countless people and left their bodies in pieces—sometimes not enough for their families to bury.

He needed to burn in the pits of hell, not take me with him.

## CHAPTER 5

I WEAKLY PUSHED AGAINST HIM AND HE CHUCKLED, GRABBING my face and slamming his mouth on mine. I wanted to bite his tongue off; I wanted to claw his face, but instead, as if under a wicked spell, my tongue danced against his as he coaxed out the worst sins within me.

Tears streamed down the side of my face as my body lit up in flames that threatened to consume us both. The hands that pushed him turned into nails that dug into his shoulder, wanting to inflict as much pain as he was causing me. My mind warred and my body began to tense up.

He groaned into my mouth as he grabbed his cock and rubbed the tip of it against my wet pussy, back and forth, hitting my clit and swirling it around with his own pre-cum.

I hated it, yet I had never responded to anyone like this, not even Santiago, when my pent-up frustrations brought me to a moment of weakness.

“I need you to hate me, little hunter,” he mumbled against my lips

I moaned, wanting my lips to tell him exactly how much I despised him, how much he deserved to be tortured and mutilated the same way he did to his victims.

Before I could try to bite him with what little strength returned, I gasped as he thrust inside of me to the hilt, taking my breath with him.

“I want you to imagine skinning me alive while I make you crave me to the depths of your dark soul.”

I shook my head slowly and he licked my tears, thrusting inside of me leisurely.

“You hide behind the badge, behind your vow of honor and justice, but I know you, Arima. You’re just as dark as I am.”

His chest deliciously rubbed against my nipples, making them hard and wanting. Another whimper escaped when he pushed the back of one of my legs to my shoulder, changing the angle and intensity of his thrusts.

“The more I unveil the truth about you, the wetter you get. Why is that, little hunter? Do you crave a man that sees the real you that lies beneath the facade?”

I didn’t like what he was insinuating. I didn’t like that he saw things I didn’t want to recognize within myself... every time I received one of his morbid gifts, my pussy fluttered. Every time the blood coated my hands as I turned the gifts over to inspect it, my mouth watered.

He pounded his hips against me harder, grinding us together as if he could meld our bodies into one, as if he could push his darkness into me.

His body glistened against the dim light of the moon and the curve of his lips was upturned into a smirk as he took from me without my ability to accept or deny him.

He groaned when his fingers found my clit, slipping against it from my arousal coating us both.

“You’re going to feel me long after I’m gone. You’re going to desire me to take you just like this, every time. Out of control, left with nothing but your carnal desires. You feel how wet you are? You crave it as much as I do. I bet you’d scream beautifully if I were to kill you.”

He groaned and I could feel his cock pulsing inside of me, my own body responding with flutters, gripping him and pulling him deeper. He began to pant, his sweat dripping onto my skin. I covered my face with my arms, unwilling to accept what was happening.

“You can hide all you want, Arima. But I’ll always find you. I’ll remind you of the demon that’s within and pull it out to play.”

He thrust again, pulling and pinching my clit with his hand.

“Are you scared you’ll love it, little hunter? Scared your soul would be tainted if you had a taste?”

His words shamed me, humiliated me. I couldn’t face it. My body tensed up in a fight-or-flight response of survival, but with my current state, I couldn’t run, so I had to take everything he gave me, everything he said to me.

He leaned over and ground his dick against my insides, smirking the entire time. “You’ll come crawling to me, Arima, and when you do, I’ll be here to feed you my cock, to feed your darkness with mine.”

Intense pain lanced my thigh, the warmth of my blood shattering me. The orgasm hit me like a ton of bricks and fractured the morality I fought so hard to hold on to. He groaned against my shoulder as my pussy clamped down on his cock, making him spill his evil inside of me.

I was lost in a subspace I had only been to once, when the deepest of my cutting made me want to pass out from pain and pleasure. Demons danced behind my lids as fires licked up the walls, threatening to burn me into ash.

Chitter chatters of laughter taunted me while I laid there, unable to move or speak despite my strength slowly returning. When I turned over to hide myself in shame behind my pillow, the sun began to crest the horizon through my open window. I wiped my face with the back of my hand, unsure if what happened was real or a figment of another one of my night terrors.

*Yet, it wasn’t terror, was it, Arima? It was deliciously wicked and you’re just too ashamed to accept the fact that you let a killer inside of you.*

I dozed on and off, not wanting to face the truth or lie. Not wanting to face anything at all.

But the universe was as cruel as The Scythe.

My phone shrilled, breaking the silence of the morning, jerking me awake, landing me on the floor entangled with my sheets. I was sweaty, my body shaking from something I didn't understand as I crawled to where my phone was plugged in and accepted the call and brought it to my ear.

“Williams, you were right.” I pulled the phone back, blinking a few times to clear my vision. It was Harris. I had never heard his voice this shaken before. “Turn on the TV.”

I did as he commanded, padding barefoot through my apartment in a shirt and panties, looking for the remote.

“I need you back here, now. We have to find this bastard.” Gone was the tremble, back was the tone of finality and command.

With shaky hands, I turned the TV on, wondering what this was all about and half afraid of what I would find. I stared at the screen as it came to life, my hand mindlessly rubbing what felt like a bruise on my inner thigh for comfort. There in front of me, on the morning news, was an image of Harris and his wife.

I turned up the volume as fast as I could.

He was being interviewed, fighting tears. He pleaded to The Scythe through the cameras to return his wife unharmed. The man who always remained stoic, the man who barely gave a rat's ass about emotions, was falling apart.

*Because he knew, like I did, that his wife was already dead.*

I hopped into the shower and quickly freshened up. My body was dragging a little, but my mind was focused on getting back to the station. When I exited my front door, my eyes glanced at the trashcan, but nothing was there. Were the flowers a part of the dream? I shook my head and got into my car, quickly backing out and almost hitting one of my neighbor's cars. I sheepishly threw a hand out as an apology and raced to work. I arrived back at my desk with a singular mission. My colleagues threw out greetings, but I ignored

them all when I saw our lead detective staring blankly at the picture of his wife on his desk.

My heart stopped for a second. It was my fault. I should have caught the asshole sooner. I should have done more. I should have never taken that week off because it put me a week behind.

“We’ll find her, Harris, I swear it.” My words fell on deaf ears. He didn’t move a muscle.

The entire office went silent out of respect for him. After a pregnant pause, I backed out of his office and let out a long exhale. Each face looking at me made me want to curl into a ball and hide from my failures.

Santiago stood near my board with his arms crossed and an unreadable expression on his face. Walking slowly to my chair, I sat down and hung my head in my hands.

A strong hand landed on my shoulder, but I didn’t feel the comfort it was meant to give.

“We’ll find him if it’s the last thing we do. We’re going to get his wife back. She won’t be the next victim, Williams. It’s not your fault.”

I wanted to upturn the table in rage, but I held it in and swallowed the bile down.

I craved death and destruction and wanted his blood on my hands. Maybe he was right. Maybe the darkness had always been within me because my hands now itched for his life.

## CHAPTER 6

MY DAYS BLURRED. I VISITED THE GROCERY STORE WHERE SHE was taken, and meticulously combed through every inch of the pictures for any clue that might lead me to him. There were no witnesses, the bloodstained car door the only thing out of place besides the missing woman.

Consulting with the forensic experts, their expertise helped me piece together the chilling puzzle The Scythe left in his wake. With the amount of blood left at the crime scene, if she hadn't received medical treatment by now, she would already be dead.

What was his reasoning behind not following his normal M.O.? I mulled it over my mind day and night until one evening when I got my answer.

A package arrived with no return address. I opened it quickly to reveal a letter written in old blood.

*Let the hunt begin.*

My heart raced as I pulled back the flaps and looked inside. A severed finger sat perfectly in the middle of the box with a wedding ring attached to it. I didn't remember hyperventilating. In fact, I don't remember anything. The world around me spun as chitter chatters followed me into my waking hours, confusing me with what was real and what wasn't. When things finally began to clear, I found myself in a hospital room.

“What happened?” I croaked out.

Santiago stood beside my bed, shaking his head.

“Williams, you’re the Scythe’s next target,” he told me bluntly, letting out a sigh of exasperation. “The forensic team determined that the finger sent to you belonged to our supervisor’s wife. The killer wants you.”

“Fuck that!” The exclamation sounded genuine even to my ears, but my heart skipped a beat for another reason. I didn’t need Santiago scrutinizing me. I jerked off my heart monitor and blood pressure cuff, interfering with the computer readings, sending the nurses in my direction.

I hopped out of the bed to see two officers standing at the door.

“What the fuck is this, Santiago? Am I under protection detail like a little girl who can’t take care of herself? Is that what this is? You bastard, I don’t need you babysitting me. I have a job to do!”

He grabbed my wrist and I backhanded him. The entire room fell silent and the officers stopped mid-step.

Santiago slowly turned his face toward me, a small trickle of blood in the corner of his lip. When he leaned into my face, I stood my ground. “The fact that we know you’re next gives us the perfect bait, Williams. You, more than anyone else, are desperate to catch him. You need to go with the program so we can end this now.”

I jerked my hand away and he loosened his hold. The officers at the door went back to their positions as I glared at everyone around me. When one of the nurses made a move, my patience tore.

“Bitch, step the fuck away from me before you become one of them,” I snapped. Was this how his victims looked when he stalked them? Her eyes widened to saucers as she lifted her hand up, palms out, and slowly backed away from me..

“To answer your question, Williams, yes, it was me who asked for extra protection for you. I can’t lose you. Our supervisor is a wreck and I don’t want to go through what he’s

going through right now, or feel his heart ache. Do you not understand that I lov—”

“Stop!” I bark out. I had to cut him off. I couldn’t right now. “Shut up.” I pointed at his face. “You knew what this was when we started and if you can’t handle that, it’s over. Where are my clothes?”

He flicked his head to indicate they were on the chair in the corner of the room. He didn’t speak another word as he gazed down at his feet with his hands in his pockets.

“I have work to do,” I mumbled under my breath as I jerkily got dressed. I threw the hospital gown onto the chair and stared at my two assigned guards. “Hey, dumb and dumber, I need to get back to the present. Let’s go.”

I snapped my fingers and swirled them around. They needed to get out of my damn way. They parted as I shoved my arm into the remaining sleeve of my jacket. The two officers followed close behind me, leaving Santiago alone in the hospital room.

If The Scythe wanted me then I could easily set a trap and use myself as bait to nail the bastard.

My ‘protectors’ drove me back to the department. When we arrived, the place was tense with silence. I ignored my colleagues and sat at my desk. A black reef decorated the Harris’ door. I stared for a while and didn’t see any movement. The room was empty. *I’ll find that bastard for you, Harris.*

The sun descended slowly while I stayed at my desk searching for any clue, making phone calls and looking for any new leads. Santiago made his reemergence while I was knee deep in photos of Harris’ wife’s case.

“Hey Santiago. Another long night ahead?”

“When is it not?”

I looked up and my partner walked past me without a second glance. *Maybe I was too harsh back at the hospital. But he pushed me into a corner while I was vulnerable and lost. Seemed to be becoming a pattern.*

He grabbed the other case files while I hogged my primary obsession. With hot black coffee in my hands, my nights were once again spent at the office, under the harsh glow of the desk lamp, sifting and searching through mountains of evidence and my notes.

Forensics informed me that Harris' wife's finger was the only thing that had been handled without gloves. The slipup we had been waiting for! They could possibly find a match within the week.

My heart sped up with a mixture of emotion as I looked again through each picture of his victims, each one a chilling reminder of the lives lost. This had become a haunting symbol of this case. Despite the grim nature of my work, it was moments like these where I found solace—unlike the cold coffee sitting beside me. There was satisfaction in knowing that with this piece of evidence uncovered, I was closer to catching The Scythe.

Santiago bored his eyes into mine every time I lifted my head from the files. Without a word, he said what everyone around me noticed. The case had taken a toll on me, both physically and mentally. I lost count of the sleepless nights, the meals skipped, and I was probably smelling a bit ripe.

Snarling, I grabbed my things and headed to the showers to freshen up and clear my foggy mind.

The rain fell in a steady rhythm, tapping against the windowpane of the office. The ominous, brooding darkness of the cityscape was obscured by the torrential downpour. The occasional flash of lightning illuminated the room every so often, casting long, eerie shadows on the walls. The rumble of thunder in the background became the soundtrack.

Each boom of thunder was followed by a crack of lightning, highlighting the photos of the victims hung on the board along with maps of the city, case files, and autopsy reports strewn across the surface of my desk.

Blinking a few times and taking another sip of stale, cold coffee, I got to my feet and stretched before walking back to the lounge to grab more liquid sustenance. As I waited for the

new batch of coffee to brew, I stared at the bulletin board on the wall. The gurgling of the machine and the thunder outside melded together into a soft hum as lightning flickered on and off through the window behind me.

The light pulsed like a heartbeat, an accusation staring me in the face.

Dead end after dead end, the pressure of the unsolved case and the girls' faces swirled inside me like my personal raging storm. I was stuck in an endless loop of the relentless pursuit of a serial killer, finding victim after victim I failed to save. While I waited for the prints to match to someone, I stood there in silence, staring at the wall filled with some flyers, wanted posters and everything in between.

Was there another pattern to the line of victims besides being a woman? A couple were parole jumpers, but that was probably because they were easier targets. What about the ones with missing identification? Both Santiago and I came to the conclusion that some of them might have been brought in from outlying areas. Lightning struck again and that was when I saw a detail that looked familiar. Some of the guys came in behind me to grab a cup of coffee as I took a step forward and leaned in to get a better look at the bulletin board. There was a very familiar tattoo on the shoulder of one of the wanted criminals that skipped town.

Forgetting my cup, I left the lounge with quick strides and hurriedly sifted through my papers and found what I was looking for. Her name was Nikki Robinson, and she had skipped out on her parole three months ago. She was from another one of my cases, chalked up to another missing person.

She had the same tattoo.

The steady drumbeat of rain against the window was like a metronome, counting the loss of time as I searched the other cases on my load for more clues.

Blood furiously pumped through my veins as I feverishly scanned everything in front of me again with new eyes and a

new mission. This was a significant lead. Why else would it jump to the forefront of my mind?

Was The Scythe targeting parolees and not random women? If my other cases were involved, why did his actions still seem so sporadic? Didn't serial killers all have patterns? What was the connection?

Going on instinct, I quickly pulled up the parolee database, sweeping through the pages. As my eyes began to blur, it hit me. An old memory filtered through my mind. My fingers flew across the keyboard to double check my facts. My heart dropped. Santiago's little sister was killed by a drunk driver while he was in the academy. We had been partners for years and he mentioned it in passing when we first got partnered up together when conversations led in the direction of why we chose this line of work.

I leaned back in my chair and ran a hand down my face. That wasn't a connection, just old memories. This was stupid. My sleepless nights were catching up to me. My brain wasn't fully firing. I needed to sleep desperately. Logging off and pushing myself away from the desk in frustration, I wanted to trash everything in front of me. It was useless. Mind games that led me to another puzzle that was worse than the last. My shoulders slumped and I hung my head in my hands.

*The gifts.*

I jerked my head up and stared at nothing. *You knew the gifts were from him. How exactly did he know your whereabouts at all times when you didn't even know when you went home or stayed at the station?*

*Harris? He tried to put me off the case, forcing me to take a short leave. He left the building on leave right after...*

*But why would the man send you his own wife's finger?*

Who else could it be? It had to be someone around me, someone who could easily observe when I left the building.

A chill ran down my spine and I could have sworn I heard the eerie sound of chitter chatter as I slowly turned my head

and cast a suspicious glance at every single colleague in the building.

My breath came out in short bursts. I mentally replayed the facts again and again, wondering if my eyes were deceiving me, wondering if my tired mind was playing tricks again. I was getting lightheaded, forcing myself to slow down my rapid breathing. He was here, this whole time, right in front of my nose?

Only one person watched me that closely. Was Santiago The Scythe? It would be the perfect cover. He knew our movements, how we worked and exactly how to trick the forensics. He was always at the scene before I was. He knew my patterns and exactly when I went home...

My legs led me back to my desk, and I fell back into my chair, trying to calm my racing heart. Santiago was obsessed with me. He could never let our one night go. I haven't heard anything back from my partner change request. He was there beside my hospital bed. Did that mean he was there at my apartment building? He ordered the protection detail. He was the one who kept telling me to chill on the case...

Santiago was the killer. He had to be.

Didn't the killer's crimes become more gruesome as the months went on? As if he taunted us in the fact that he was always a few steps ahead, no matter how he changed up his act.

...And the reason he was always ahead of the game was because he was one of us.

I needed hard evidence to bring him down. He thought he was slick and that no one would find out—but I did. Fucking me while I searched for his alter-ego was a smart move, but not smart enough. My pussy fluttered over the... incident I had with The Scythe in my bedroom, masked and in control of my body. I secretly rubbed my inner thigh. I was delirious for a few days before I realized the wound was real, sealed by a liquid bandage strong enough to withstand a few showers, letting me go about my day under the belief that it was all a

dream. The only conclusion I could come to was that I was under the influence of something.

How easily could Santiago slip something into my coffee cup when I was lost in the zone over the case? He was always there beside me, lingering in the background, whether I liked it or not.

Santiago was going down for murder. His reign of terror stops now.

The rain had stopped; the thunder had ceased; the wind had died down outside. But inside my office, the storm was just beginning—the storm of theories that finally led me to the identity of The Scythe.

My own partner.

## CHAPTER 7

I HAD TO BE CAUTIOUS, FOR MY OWN SAFETY AND FOR THE sake of the innocent lives at stake. I had to keep this discovery a secret until the time was right. Now, my obsession shifted from the photos and files of the case to Santiago. From this point forward, I watched him closely, observed his every move with new lenses in an effort to uncover any clues that confirmed my suspicions.

He was smart—too smart. He had evaded us all of this time, probably while laughing behind our backs, but all I needed was one mistake.

Minutes turned into hours, and my life had become a constant balancing act. I had to maintain a facade of normalcy, pretending everything was fine while my skin prickled and my heart leapt to my throat with what I'd uncovered. I needed to make sure to keep him oblivious to my growing suspicions.

I dove deeper into my investigation with him in the back of my head. Some of the guys said their farewells, while others came in for the next shift. I watched, quietly, with my new coffee against my lips. Santiago had a pattern to his behavior. What I initially took as sporadic truancy was actually timed. He came in late a couple times a month, but he would also often disappear for hours during his shift without me. When questioned by some of our colleagues playfully if he was sneaking in time for a hot date, he claimed to be working on gathering more evidence or following up on a lead.

I needed a break from sitting on my ass, anyway.

I got to my feet, slipped on my jacket and went to the lounge to dump the rest of my coffee into the sink. I kept my ear out for Santiago's voice.

"I'll see you guys in a few, going to grab some lunch."

"You mean going to get a quickie for your hot piece of ass?" one of the guys joked.

They bantered back and forth, but finally the conversation died and he left the building. I waited a minute or two before exiting the lounge and following him discreetly, careful not to arouse his suspicion.

Forcing myself to take deep breaths as I drove behind him with a different unmarked car, my heart raced as I watched him visit old crime scene locations. He lingered in the shadows as well as I.

I felt shameful for letting a man like him use my body for his pleasure. A man whose hands were painted red, who smiled each day as he came into work to serve the people in bringing justice.

He thought he had one up on me when it was the other way around. If knowing my whereabouts led me astray, I could easily do the same to him. After all, we were partners. With determination in my veins, I drove back to the department and took a hot shower, relaxing the tension in my shoulders. I needed to play this smoothly.

We'd been avoiding verbal communication with one another since the hospital. That was fine by me. I followed him home that evening and waited a few blocks down after driving around the area a couple of times.

I waited until he was asleep while I was high on caffeine and sugar. During my own late lunch break, I successfully slipped a tracking device under his car, ensuring that I didn't miss my chance.

Disappointingly as the days went on, following the little blip of light on my screen, it led me to nothing.

"Williams!"

I jumped in my chair and looked up. “What?”

It was Adams. “Forensics wants you. They’ve been trying to call your phone but said it was constantly busy.”

I looked at the mound of papers on my desk and pushed them aside to find the handle off the hook buried beneath my things. I mumbled a thanks and replaced the phone back where it belonged and let out a sigh.

When I made it to forensics, the guys told me there was an error in the fingerprint search.

“How can there be an error? Every human has a signature,” I told them.

He glared at me. “You think I don’t know that, Williams? I’m just telling you what it said. I’m not an idiot. Someone botched the results before it came back to us.”

It had to be Santiago. Who else could move that fast?

“Fuck!” I slammed the table near me and stomped back to homicide. That asshole was still a step ahead of me, even if he didn’t know I was onto him. How was that possible?

When I made it back to my desk, my head was tense. My shoulders bunched as I leaned onto my knuckles.

“Adams!”

“What’s up?” His head popped out from behind his computer screen.

“Where’s Santiago?”

“How the heck should I know? I’m not his keeper. I thought you were. Maybe he went to go fuck his new piece of ass or something,” he grumbled before refocusing back on the screen before him.

Shit.

I grabbed my jacket and ran out the door toward the garage. No one was around me, so I pulled out my phone and turned the GPS tracker on. My eyes narrowed. This couldn’t be right. His car was still here, in the garage.

Anger and frustration coursed through me as I stomped my way to my vehicle and shut myself in and screamed with the windows up.

I needed evidence and I needed it now! I was losing my mind. I didn't want to wait until another crime scene happened. I face planted my forehead against the steering wheel, the pain grounding and re-centering me. Maybe that was the only way. I needed another crime to happen to catch him. It was counterintuitive, but what other choice did I have?

I was at my wits' end, my mind blurring into sludge. I couldn't put off sleep anymore. I started my car and pulled out of the garage, heading home.

There were no gifts today, nothing to hint that The Scythe was watching me. I showered and fingered my inner thigh again, gently pushing it to feel its throbbing pain. Biting my lip, I hopped out of the shower, dried myself and made sure to continue to manage the healing wound.

Throwing on panties and a shirt, I tumbled into bed, not waiting for my hair to dry. My nightmares pulled me under quickly. Demons clawed at my skin, leaving red welts I shouldn't enjoy. I screamed as the victims around me were consumed by the flames of hellfire, their faces melting off until all that remained were bones and eyes of accusation for their injustice.

“Save us!”

“How could you do this to us?”

“I'm burning!”

Their voices taunted me, exposing my failures as I fell to my knees and pressed my forehead to the ground. The coolness of the dirt gave me a false sense of reprieve as the flames around me licked higher and higher.

“You left us to die!”

“It's your fault we're here!”

“Ahhh!”

My skin peeled away from invisible claws, gauging large wounds into my flesh until pleasure fell into the abyss of excruciating pain. Chitter chatters of laughter made my ear throb in tune to the frantic beating of my heart until strong arms pulled me to my feet. My vision wavered from the heat suffusing from every existing surface of this plane. Parched and bleeding, my mind slipped in and out of consciousness until everything stopped existing.

There, in the arms of a masked man, I was lost in a dark room with no escape.

“I’ll always find you...” He smiled wickedly as I kicked and screamed, scrambling to get away, only to fall into a void with no end.

My voice ripped from my throat as I jerkily sat up in bed in tears, sweating from the night terror that refused to leave me alone.

I patted down every inch of my skin, searching for the wounds the demons left behind. There was none, nothing but smooth skin and old scars on my inner thighs. I screamed in frustration as I fought against the sheets and stumbled out of bed, heading toward my adjoining restroom. The breeze from the open bedroom window cooled my skin, sending goosebumps in its wake as I frantically shoved everything out of my medicine cabinet onto the floor. The clatter of pill bottles and knick knacks made my head twitch until my fingers landed on the cold metal of what I was looking for.

I fell to my knees, almost hitting my head on the sink as my breath came out in shallow pants. I couldn’t calm my racing heart, I couldn’t make myself take in much needed air. My throat constricted and I sobbed, curled into a ball on the tile floor.

I needed this. It was the only way. The only solution. My saving grace. Lifting my head, I sat against the wall and opened my legs, placing the blade against my skin. Digging it in, rivulets of blood bloomed, but it was the glint of something on the flat of the metal that stopped me. I pulled it away,

slicing a few more inches of my skin with a hiss in the process.

I brought it up to my face and my hand shook. There were tiny words inscribed into the razor.

“I knew I’d be between your legs again...”

# CHAPTER 8

## THE SCYTHER

“WHERE THE HELL AM I?”

A smile cracked as I listened to his struggles.

“Tsk, tsk, tsk. You see, your problem is you don’t know how to take a hint.”

He reeked of fear and pride. Eddy Santiago was a thorn in my side. Initially, he proved to be entertaining, watching him flounder around my prize. But the more he needled his way where he didn’t belong, the entertainment became short-lived. It was always going to come to this.

“Who are you? Why am I here?” he growled, a pathetic showcase of whatever courage he had left sitting in this dark room.

I pushed the hanging bulb with a gloved finger, the creaking of the hinge loud and echoing, masking my position.

“Where are you?” he shouted again, his fear amping up with each tease. “Show yourself like a man! If you’re going to kill me, do it face to face!”

His head was covered in a hood. As much as he yelled and bluffed, he knew what he was in for the moment he came to awareness. They’d both been trailing behind me diligently, like lost puppies looking for a master. Too bad I played favorites. The GPS tracker she put on his vehicle only made my job easier in finding him.

He’d put up a good struggle, but in the end was no match for a tire iron to the back of the head.

Staring at him now with infrared goggles, I wondered... was it the face that broke through her walls? I leaned against the table and crossed my arms.

“You wouldn’t be able to handle me face to face,” I told him calmly.

“Who the hell are you? Why am I here?!” He tried again.

To think that he truly believed he had any authority restrained in his seat. I chuckled and took off my goggles, replacing it with the horned mask by my hand.

I straightened and pulled the beaded string overhead, the click loud as light illuminated the room. I watched him sitting there, chest heaving, tied to a solid metal chair bolted to the floor.

He should have known better. He should have stayed away. Jerking the hood off his head, he blinked a few times, waiting for his eyes to adjust.

“I know who you are!” he roared, struggling against his restraints, failing to budge. “When I get out of here, I’m going to make you pay for all your crimes.”

A maniacal laugh left me. “You truly think anyone would believe you *even if you did* know who I was?” I leaned into his face, glaring at him through my mask. “Pathetic. You have no idea who you’re dealing with or what I’m capable of.”

I ran a blade down the cord of his neck, watching the crimson line follow the tip of my blade. The darkness within me cheered, screaming for more pain, more death and destruction.

He grit his teeth, baring them at me like the animal he was.

Clearing my throat, I shoved the knife into his shoulder for safe keeping. He threw his head back and screamed as I slowly turned to readjust the tripod and made sure the camera was aimed directly at him and showed my good side.

“You see, Eddy, there are certain rules among men that need to be followed and never crossed.”

Grabbing a fileting knife, I circled behind him.

“Which means no man is given the excuse for the crimes he chose to commit.”

“What the fuck are you talking about? This is all nonsense!”

“Indeed,” I answered as I grabbed his hair and pushed his head forward, slipping the blade to the back of his scalp and bringing it upwards. Blood flooded over my gloves, pouring down like a waterfall as I continued to peel the flesh away from his skull. He screamed and choked, the position I placed him in not giving him enough leeway to breathe properly.

“Eddy, hasn’t anyone ever told you that once a man places his claim on a woman, she’s off the market?” He screamed as I reached the height of the top of his ears. “Of course, they haven’t because you’re a heathen. But I bet now... you’ll never forget.”

Ripping the rest of his scalp off, I stopped caring about my meticulousness, wanting instead to express the fury that grew within me thinking about him in her apartment.

Growling, I stomped to my table of tools and grabbed pliers. His screams had since turned into agonizing moans until I grabbed one of his fingers and snapped the bone, ripping it off his hand.

“Ahhh!”

I chuckled at his pitifulness. “That’s the difference. She never screamed for you the way she did for me.” I pulled another finger, twisting it and wrenching it until it popped out of socket, then dropped the bloody thing beside the other one on a silver tray with a wet flop. I wanted to make sure my next gift to her was everything she ever imagined. She was falling for me. She was just too stubborn to admit it. But I’ll make sure this time that my gift won’t go unnoticed.

“Though I may be a bit rusty in the... courting department, she didn’t mind so much when I buried my cock in her.”

I groaned, thinking about her hot pussy around me, squeezing me, welcoming me...

I sliced off his ear and threw it on another tray. He didn't deserve to breathe near her, let alone have the pleasure in listening to her voice. He squirmed, but couldn't get far. I shook my head at the poor fool.

Images of her soft skin beneath my fingers and the taste of her pussy on my tongue made me clear my throat. I could still smell her arousal coating the air. She was perfect. Tilting my head at the meat before me, I looked over my shoulder to stare directly into the camera.

"In fact," I continued, ignoring his stuttered moans of pain. "She *craved* it. Didn't you, little hunter? Your pussy choked my dick like it belonged buried inside of you, filling you up. I'll make sure to always give it what it needs..."

My cock pressed against the fabric of my pants as I leaned over to showcase my ass for her viewing pleasure as I jerked my knife out of his shoulder and began slicing down the muscles of his arm, piece by piece.

I grabbed one of his severed fingers and turned it over in my hands. *These wretched things touched her...*

"What kind of host am I, hmm?" I grinned. "My apologies Eddy. Need not fear, I'm not a man who can't lay down his pride."

Grabbing his hair, I jerked his head back and shoved my fist into his mouth until his jaw audibly popped. His teeth scraped my skin as he tried to bite down to no avail, but I couldn't care less. *Arima can lick my wounds the next time I see her.* When his mouth hinged open, I stuffed his face with his severed fingers, shoving his jaw shut and grinding his bones manually with my hands outside his face.

"I don't want you to leave here on an empty stomach."

His diaphragm spasmed as he gagged and struggled to spit out his meal. Grabbing a clamp from my apron pocket, I clipped his nose shut, forcing him to swallow in order to breathe. The sounds he made reminded me of memories that bubbled up buried emotions of betrayal and hate. The coolness

of the room failed to reduce my ardor as my body heated up from pent up fury.

Gritting my teeth through the demons that threatened to madden me with their incessant whispering, I grinned at his suffering as tears tracked down his face, falling onto the front of his shirt.

He never knew what he was walking into. But I knew. I knew the moment he was assigned to her that it was always going to come to this...

Walking over to the table, I made my way to the power supply attached to the lead connected to the clamp. This would have been our honeymoon if it wasn't for this small obstacle. I guess I would have to find other means to play with my little hunter when I end the game.

“How do you like your meat, Eddy?”

He choked right before bile and vomit spewed from his mouth onto the front of him.

“Tsk, tsk. How unsanitary. What did she ever see in a heathen like you?”

I switched on the power supply and crossed my arms as electricity coursed through him. He convulsed like the pig he was, his eyes quickly rolling back as the smell of cooked meat wafted in the air.

Waiting a few more minutes, I became bored with his gurgling and turned the power off.

Strapping his flopping head back, I made sure to give her a good show. Blood splattered on the ground and his screams echoed in the warehouse as I continued to show her exactly what happened when someone tried to touch what was mine.

# CHAPTER 9

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN, HE HASN’T COME IN THE PAST FEW days?” I asked Adams, shifting my eyes to his partner as well. “Where is he?”

The tracker was taken off his vehicle. I no longer knew his whereabouts. It was frustrating, but I left it alone. It would make it too obvious if I hunted the vehicle down to implant another.

“I told you, how the hell should I know? He’s *your* partner, Williams,” he scowled before going back to his computer.

I sat there, staring at my board. Maybe the partner change request went through and things were in motion. If that was the case, then I needed to get out of here and find his exact location. I got to my feet and grabbed my jacket. He could be planning his next move as we speak.

“Didn’t you just get here?” Adams hollered as I left the building.

I quickly got into my car and drove by his home. His vehicle wasn’t there. I circled around a couple times before heading to every single known crime scene location for the cases we had. Nothing.

The sun began to go down when I decided to call it a day and head home myself, continuing work there since I had copies of everything I needed. Tension built in the back of my head and I wanted to be in my bed before the headache fully formed.

Pulling up to my driveway, I noticed a box in front of my door. Looking left and right, I quickly picked it up and went inside.

Divesting myself of my outerwear, I brewed some coffee before turning to look at the box. Would it be a finger again? He always had a penchant for fingers. The rings were becoming a new pattern but I didn't see him doing the same thing three times. He never did.

Pouring myself a cup, I took a sip, burning my tongue, and braced myself for what I was about to find.

The box was the size of my hand. Flipping it over, I opened the flaps with the help of a kitchen knife, dumping out the contents onto my counter.

Amidst all the party confetti, a flash drive clattered out. With two fingers, I lifted it up and looked at it from all sides. Curiosity prickled across my skin and I scrambled to find my laptop and bring it to the kitchen. I booted it up and stuck the flash drive in, taking another sip of coffee and leaning back, waiting for whatever it was to start.

I covered my mouth as I spit out coffee, not wanting to splash on the screen. Quickly washing my hands behind me, I turn around and stare at the sight of a man tied to a metal chair with a bag over his head.

Wiping my wet hands down the front of my pants, my heart raced with every incision and every plop of dissected meat thrown onto silver platters.

My breath stuttered as he addressed me personally, calling me that wretched pet name.

After months of night terrors, the screams melded into background noise as I watched The Scythe meticulously and barbarically torture my partner. With my hand over my mouth and my eyes watering, I shut my eyes when his words infiltrated my head like uninvited maggots, wriggly against the gray matter of my brain.

I closed my eyes and let the tears fall. But I couldn't close my ears.

“You like that, don’t you, little hunter? The way it slides against my hand, the way you bled against my cock and pulled me in.”

My heart hammered so loudly, the throbbing of my heartbeat next to my ears threatened to distort his words.

“I’ve been thinking about you, about the way you whimpered against me, the way your soft breast tasted in my mouth. But nothing compared to the way your pussy marked me. Nothing will ever compare to the decadent taste of you. Not now. Not ever.”

I rapidly blinked, my head in a haze as my skull tightened to the point of wanting to smash it against the cabinets to rid myself of everything I was feeling.

“If you’re a good girl, I’ll let you suck on my cock, little hunter. I’ll let you get a taste of what you’ve been chasing this whole time. Would you like that? Like me to shove it down your throat the same way I’m shoving Eddy’s fingers down his? He wasn’t made for this kind of passion. But you, my dear, were made for so much more... and I plan on exploring every inch of you with my blade, slowly dragging it down until you scream my name and nothing else exists but me.”

Eddy choked and gagged on his own blood as The Scythe finally sliced through the front of his neck. Blood spewed against his apron and he groaned, making my pussy flutter uncontrollably. His guttural voice weaved its way into the depths of buried desires as I watched him slowly take off his apron, then his shirt.

Raised welts crossed his back and my mouth watered. What was wrong with me? Why was this happening? Hate was the emotion I needed. The man deserved to die with the rest of his victims, but as he ran his bloody hand down his chest and across the dimples right above his ass, my knees threatened to buckle. I caught myself with the counter and slowly dropped to the floor, falling to the side as my hands involuntarily slid between my legs.

He cooed my name, whispered all the dirty things he wanted to do to me. They were sickening and morbid, the

images consuming me as my fingers worked faster against my clit on the outside of my panties.

“I’m going to break you, little hunter. Cut you into little pieces, fracture your mind until you beg me to do it again and again... because you know as well as I, you’ve always been mine.”

I whimpered against the floor as my pleasure skyrocketed. Even without seeing him, he consumed me.

When he groaned, the sound of him stroking his dick with the blood made me choke.

“Are you hungry, little hunter? I wish it was your mouth around my cock right now, licking everything clean, making sure you get your fill from me... because, Arima... If anyone else touches you again, I will burn down the city and take you with me into the flames of hell.”

I fell over the precipice and screamed against the cool kitchen tiles as my body continued to spasm uncontrollably in the most explosive self given orgasm I had ever experienced. My hips thrust forward, seeking more friction, seeking more... of him.

When the waves of my orgasm died down to bearable levels, I cried. Shame and guilt washed over me as my heart broke for Santiago being his most recent victim. It was never him. I was wrong all this time and we both paid for it.

Sobbing, I pulled my hand out of my panties and wiped my eyes with the back of my hands, crawling across the floor. I was too ashamed to face the screen, too ashamed to see how the video ended.

When I crossed over to my living room carpet, I crawled and got to my feet, running to the bathroom to try to wash away the humiliation. I scrubbed, clawed, and left welts on my skin, but nothing would take away the violence I felt inside. The wrongness, the carnal desires, the primal urge to bring that man to justice in more ways than one. They all blended together as I stood there under the water, with my head against

the tile wall, watching some of my blood run down and swirl into the drain.

My hands cradled my tender breasts, pulling and pinching my nipples to the point of pain. I needed to be punished for liking what I saw. I needed my body to be taught to never do that again. My brain was faulty. I was broken. Biting my bottom lip, I mentally chastised myself for feeling pleasure, even in my own punishment.

I was dirty. I let him touch me. Sure, I was caught in a strange limbo while under the influence, but I could have struggled more. I could have done something more.

But I didn't.

I let him slide his hands all over me, the same hands that have strangled and killed. The same hands that touched my most intimate places, guiding his length into me, pounding into me as if I didn't deserve it, but he did for putting up with me.

I was hot by the time the water from the shower cooled on my skin. Hot after drying off and pulling my hair, trying to get my mind off what happened in the kitchen. I was burning when I tussled between my sheets, trying to force myself to sleep.

I was feverish by the time the night terrors came and tortured me with images of his mask, calling my name, making me crawl to him on hands and knees until I reached the master of puppets that pulled my strings like a cat in heat, ready to be used and abused.

“Open up for me, little hunter.”

And I did, under the blade of his ax as it cracked my ribs in two, right at the sternum. I watched in morbid fascination as he shoved his fist into my chest cavity and pulled out my still beating heart and brought it to his lips.

## CHAPTER 10

THE NIGHT TERRORS WOKE ME UP MORE THAN ONCE TONIGHT. Now, I couldn't go back to sleep, no matter what trick I tried. Despite the pure exhaustion my mind plagued me with, I laid entangled in my sheets, with my eyes closed but fully awake.

Clouds partially covered the glow of the moon as shadows danced across my lids. The sound of the night filtered through my cracked window and I prayed they would lull me to sleep. As my breathing evened, my eyes fluttered.

Wondering if it was the pounding of my heart behind my ear, I placed my hand over my chest to find that... it beat at a normal rhythm. What was that sound? It was akin to the cadence of footsteps. I cracked my lids open but continued to lie there, relaxing my body, simulating a deep slumber. Was my mind playing tricks on me again? Was I in limbo between wakefulness and sleep? Laying on my side, staring at the window, I watched the curtains lightly billow from the outside breeze.

But my gut needled at me. Something wasn't right. There was a tension in the air I couldn't put my finger on.

A weight landed on me from behind, shoving my shoulders against the bed. Judging from the size of his hands, my opponent was male. Familiar with this attack from previous training, I automatically countered his moves. I wasn't going to be caught unawares twice.

With the bottom of my foot, I lunged toward him, tackling him to the floor and wrapping my legs around his torso. Grabbing his head, I took away his leverage.

With one leg, I turned his entire body, but not before he threw a punch from behind. Dodging his aim, swung my body to the side of his and elbowed him in the face. Hissing from the impact, I realized he had a mask on.

The Scythe!

We continued to grapple on the floor, but he slipped my hold with brute strength and flexibility, scrambling to get to his feet. I swiftly brought a knee to his face before he made it, knocking him backward, sliding across the floor. Getting to my own feet, I held my fists up in defense. The clouds shifted and moonlight shone through my curtains behind me, highlighting his silhouette.

“Didn’t anyone ever tell you it’s not good being a peeping tom, Scythe? I thought you were better than this.”

He chuckled, standing there relaxed, with his arms to his side. He lifted his arm, and I tensed, but all he did was wipe the trailing blood from the corner of his mouth behind his partially broken mask.

“Then you shouldn’t entice a predator, little hunter,” he chuckled, licking the blood off his fingers.

My nipples hardened behind my shirt as I grimaced at the fact that all I had on was a shirt and panties. He moved and so did I. We circled each other like two beasts in the wild in a deathmatch.

“You always did like it hard, Arima,” he cooed, licking his lips.

“You don’t know what I like, you asshole.”

He tilted his head and crossed his arms, his muscles beneath his short-sleeve shirt glistening under the moonglow.

“I know more about you than you think, little hunter.”

My ears reddened, remembering exactly what he did to me the last time he snuck into my room.

“Thinking of my cock inside of you? I don’t blame you. I think about you often as well. No, little hunter, there’s more

between us than you realize. You've just been too stubborn to accept it."

My chest constricted with ugly emotions I thought went down the drain with the blood from the wounds I inflicted on myself. He threatened to unravel me, to bring me back to who I wasn't any more. I hated him for it.

"You don't know what you're talking about! Shut up!"

"Don't I? Tell me, little Arima, do you still see his face in your dreams? Do you see him lying in a pool of his own blood with his eyes staring into the distance, wondering if his little girl was going to come home to find him in that state?"

My heart stopped and my nostrils flared. Memories of my father's murder made its way into my mind like a sledgehammer to the skull. Vivid images of red everywhere and his mouth hung open as if to scream, but no one was around. No one saw who did it. His case fell onto the pile with every other unsolved one. It was what drove me, what made me choose this path so that I may find killers like The Scythe and make them pay for all they did.

"Embrace it, little hunter. Embrace the hate and fury. Let it guide you."

"Right now, I'm going to let it kill you," I growled before giving him the come hither motion with my fingers. "You want me? Come get me. Bring it."

He chuckled before his smile turned sinister. "There are plenty of other women out there who can serve my needs if you can't, little hunter. Do you actually think it matters to me how this all comes to an end?"

I gave him a humorless laugh. "Come on, bitch. Let's see what you can do to a woman who can defend herself."

He lunged but with his large size, he was slower than me. I easily sidestepped his attack and sprang into action. My heart pounded in my chest as anger surged through my veins with his audacity at bringing up things that should be left buried ten feet under.

He turned on his heel and threw a closed fist back right for my head. I ducked and swept my feet, but he anticipated the move and jumped back before throwing an elbow, hitting my jaw.

With my head ringing, he tackled me onto the bed, forcing me to my stomach. I bucked and he ground his hard cock against my back, making me scream.

“That’s it, Arima. Scream for me. Tell me how much you want to kill me and see my blood flow.”

He licked the side of my face, his mask scraping my skin, and I threw my head back, making him groan and loosen his hold on my arms. With a hard back kick, I knocked him off the edge of the bed and leaped toward my living room.

With more room at my disposal, I flipped the light on and turned, launching into a series of precise and powerful punches and kicks. My fists and feet moved with lightning speed, striking the asshole with a force he had never encountered before from any of his victims. Despite his initial surprise, he quickly retaliated, attempting to match my skill, but he was sorely over-matched. I was well versed in my layout and it played well in my attack.

The room became a whirlwind of punches, kicks, and evasive maneuvers. My years of training had given me both confidence and an advantage. Each punishing blow I landed pushed him to his limit. He scored a few hits, but it wasn’t something I hadn’t dealt with before. Pain and I had an on again-off again relationship and the asshole knew it.

*This motherfucker was going down tonight.*

I circled him as he wiped the blood from his mouth. I wiped some off my eyebrow as he lunged and missed. His broken mask exposed his five o’clock shadow as well as his smirk.

I lunged and jumped back, leading him astray before double legging him, taking him on the ground. With our combined weight, the fall was loud, rattling the items in my kitchen as I began pounding my fists at his mask. With

strength I didn't know he had, he flipped me. I caught my balance, driving a hard knee into his rib. He winced but continued to parry my attacks. I threw everything I had into the fight, using all the techniques I learned from my ground grappling arts to overwhelm him.

The Scythe struggled to break free, but my knowledge of the arts allowed me to effortlessly maintain control. I gained the dominant position and sat directly on his chest.

“You like killing women, bitch? Let's see how much of a man you are.” I punched him again and again in the face, cracking his mask until it revealed his cold, bloodshot eyes boring into mine.

It stopped me for a second. There was something familiar about them. I've seen those eyes before. My short moment of shock made me miss my next punch as he flipped over to his stomach, protecting his bruised ribs. Screaming, I slid my arm under his neck, suffocating him with a rear naked choke and locked my arm on my bicep. His body stiffened as I squeezed, making him gurgle right before he grabbed a fallen lamp and slammed it on top of my head, shattering it around us.

He seized that moment of confusion to kick me in the face with his steel-toed boot, dazing me. Blood ran down my face as I loosened my hold on his foot. He got to his feet and towered over me. Blinking a few times to get the blood out of my eye, I swept out his leg and rolled into a kneebar, wrapping mine around his left one and twisting his ankle under my bicep. Twisting his captured limb, I tried to separate it and destroy his knee, but he kicked me in the face once more, dislodging my hold.

I groaned, with my head in my hands, trying to smear the blood out of my face. With blurry vision, I watched helplessly as he hobbled out of the house, holding his side.

I didn't hear a crack in his rib but it didn't rule out it being broken. I screamed out into the empty room. I failed. I let him get away. I had one shot and I fucked it up. I rolled to my knees and slammed the palms of my hands onto the floor in frustration.

Screaming again, I clawed at my arms, punishing myself before I regained my senses and forced my breathing to slow. Once the adrenaline died down, I let out a sigh.

I had him. I spit out the taste of blood from my mouth, dripping from my injured nose. There was a large gash on my head from the lamp, but he was fucked if I saw him again. I would know exactly who he was because of his injuries.

“Keep running, Scythe. This hunter is going to take you down.”

## CHAPTER 11

I STOOD AT THIS WRETCHED BARBEQUE EVENT FOR THE JUDGE A few days later. Harris put me on another mandatory leave for recovery. I never mentioned the flash drive. The things The Scythe said on that video were too personal—I felt like an accomplice to his murder despite not having any part in it.

*Are you sure about that, Arima? He made him his next victim because of you, and you know it.*

I gritted my teeth and tried to smile at some of the locals as everyone celebrated together on the streets of the city. My pride wouldn't let me admit that Harris' mandatory days off helped. I locked my windows and doors, driving myself to a motel to catch up on some rest.

Standing here now, leaning against a light pole, I watched everyone laugh and talk about mundane things while stuffing their faces with hotdogs and hamburgers.

“Detective! I hope you're enjoying yourself. My campaign manager did an amazing job of putting this together, don't you think?”

I turned to find criminal court judge Roland Anderson giving me a charming smile. “Yes, I am. Thank you for asking. And thank you for providing the food.”

“I wouldn't have it any other way. Did you want anything from the grill? I'll even cook it to your liking.”

My mind was occupied with everything that had happened these last few days. I shook my head politely and gave him a soft smile. “No, thank you.”

I left my spot, not in the mood for small talk, and walked around quietly. I needed to find out what happened to Santiago's car and if there were any clues left behind by The Scythe. Damn him for removing his GPS tracker!

"Hey! I made sure the other guys knew about their bonuses and the dinner tomorrow, Judge. Thank you again," came a booming male voice, stealing my attention from my thoughts. I turned to see a man walking up to the judge, who stood behind the grill with a 'kiss the cook' apron on.

"No need to thank me. You guys did an amazing job setting this all up. Couldn't have done it without you."

When the judge raised his fist for a bump, his campaign manager winced when he returned it. I straightened and my eyes zoned in on him. He was about the same height and build, and his injury checked out.

"Got ya," I whispered, making my way toward him, pulling my duty weapon out. He wasn't going to get away this time. I knew he easily mingled with the public out in the open. I knew it! It was one of the few reasons why I agreed to come to this stupid barbeque. And now, all my waiting finally paid off.

He grabbed one of the hotdogs off the table and shoved it in his mouth. I let him chew for a few moments before I tackled him to the ground. The crowd screamed around me as we both wrestled each other for dominance.

"What the fuck is wrong with you, woman? Get off me!"

"You're under arrest for the murder of countless women, you asshole!"

"What the f—"

Some of the local police yelled for the crowd to remain calm as a few of them came over to assist me.

"What's going on here?" the closest officer asked.

"I don't know this bitch! I was minding my own damn business!"

"He's the Scythe!"

The people around us cursed as more officers tackled him and cuffed his hands behind his back. I winced at my bruises as I took a step back. The stone in my gut finally lifted as I watched with satisfaction as he was dragged away kicking and screaming.

“She’s lying! You need to take her in! Get your filthy hands off me! Do you know who I am?”

“Yeah, yeah. Shut your trap. Save it for court.”

A hand landed on my shoulder and I startled back to see the judge looking at me with soft eyes.

“After all these years working under me, I never knew...”

I pushed my hair back from in front of my face, avoiding him. I didn’t want to smear his name like this in public, but I wasn’t going to let the asshole slip away again either. “It’s not your fault. He’s evaded us all for a long time, always one step ahead. But now, his reign of terror ends today.”

“You’re good for the people, Detective. We need more like you out here in this world,” he said with a nod, running a hand through his hair before turning back to the grill. “I guess with the shift in mood, the party’s over. You want anything to take back home with you?”

I shook my head, too amped up for any sort of appetite.

“I’m sorry. How rude of me. I never introduced myself. I’m—”

I chuckled. “Everyone knows who you are, Judge. I’m Detective Arima Williams.” I shook his hand and quickly broke contact.

“Arima. That’s a pretty name. What’s a girl like you doing a job like this? Shouldn’t you be doing something... I don’t know... grander?”

I laughed aloud. If only he knew. “I knew I was going to be on this route since I was a young girl.”

“Is that right? Well, I’m glad. If it weren’t for you, who knows what that man would have done,” he said, handing a hotdog to a little girl who waited patiently beside the grill. She

ran off with a smile and a wave of thank you before heading back to her family.

“Yes, sir. I guess we’ll be seeing you in court soon.”

“Yes, indeed. It’s a date.”



“All rise.”

The days went in a blur, but Raymond Clark finally stood before Judge Anderson for his sentence. He refused to confess through interrogation, but more and more clues landed on our doorstep since he was captured. There was nothing more he could say to fight his case.

The courtroom was empty, with only a few people allowed inside. News media and the public stood at the ready outside the doors the moment the event was adjourned. I tried my best not to stare at the man in orange before me, hands cuffed in front of him.

I finally got him.

He killed my partner. He drugged and took advantage of me. He sent me a tape saying vile things I couldn’t purge from my mind. Raymond Clark didn’t give me a second glance. He kept his head straight and shoulders back as the judge leaned over his wooden pulpit.

The air in the room was filled with tension. Everyone was on pins and needles, despite knowing how this would all end. My shoulders bunched up as I rolled my head and waited with clammy hands for his final words. Would they be for me? Or would he go to the death sentence without one last devious whisper in my direction?

“I hereby sentence you to the death penalty. Any last words?”

Everyone turned to look at him, even me. He stood there stoically and remained tight-lipped until the judge nodded in understanding and slammed his gavel down. The two officers

grabbed him by the arm and led him away. Everyone in the courtroom stood and mumbled under their breaths about everything that went down and what we should expect to run into with the angry crowd, screaming for justice for the dead.

I was the last to stand, smoothing down the front of my shirt when a loud explosion echoed in the room accompanied by the slamming of doors shutting.

“What—”

Smoke rose and people coughed. I immediately dove behind some of the chairs as rapid gunfire flew through the air, taking the lives of anyone in its way. Screams clouded my judgment as I tried to look behind the seating area to see where the gunfire came from. Bodies fell to the floor like flies and blood sprayed every which way, splatters of it landing on my exposed skin. Officers tried to shoot back, only to be taken down with the rest of the innocent. When I looked back over my shoulder, orange bloomed with crimson as Raymond Clark laid face first on the ground, his wrists still chained together.

My chest heaved, my breathing came out short when I realized the screaming turned into low moans and then... finally silence.

I waited for a few bated breaths, hoping whoever the shooter was would leave, assuming he massacred the entire courtroom. After about ten minutes of silence, I slowly peered over my makeshift barricade of chairs and hissed when a sharp pain landed on my neck.

I grabbed the syringe and pulled out the needle, blood trailing down my arm.

“The fuck?”

My vision blurred faster than I could anticipate as I stumbled out from my hiding area, falling to my hands and knees and finally to my side. I told myself to breathe slower, to hold on to consciousness for as long as I can.

Through the blur of my tears, boots stepped toward me and a large hand reached down right as the darkness pulled me under.

## CHAPTER 12

“IT’S TIME TO WAKE UP, SLEEPING BEAUTY.”

That voice. Why did my head hurt so badly? The pounding was excruciating as I fluttered my lids open, only to be hit with bright light. I shut my eyes and moaned, covering my face with my arm to give my eyes a better chance of adjusting to it.

Something dipped the surface beneath me and I shot my eyes open, swinging my fist. He caught it in his palm and slowly trapped both hands beside my head. Whatever he hit me with still coursed through my veins, making me weak.

When he tilted his head, I sharply inhaled. The light above us illuminated his new mask. I choked and tried to kick him off, but all he did was press more of his weight onto me.

“You gave me a nice little gift to remember you by, Arima. Every time it twinges with pain, my dick gets hard for you.”

“Who the fuck are you?!”

The Scythe leaned in with Santiago’s face and I bit back bile. The eye holes were cut out wide enough to expose the killer’s true stare—one that bore into my very soul with its hazel flecks.

“I’m the one you constantly call for in your nightmares, little hunter, you know that. It would be wrong of me to not answer.”

Trapping both of my wrists in one hand, he ran his knuckle down my face. My nipples pebbled against his naked chest and

I realized I was stripped of all barriers from the top of my head down to my feet.

“Did you not like his face? Wasn’t that what drew you to him?”

“Hell the fuck no,” I gritted out, squirming to get away beneath him and failing miserably.

“Good girl,” he whispered before pulling the mask off his face and grinning down at me. I gasped. This didn’t make any sense. None of this could be real. I must still be caught in one of my night terrors and just needed to wake up.

“How? What? No...”

“You look just like her, you know?”

“Get away from me!”

“Your body never matches your words. I’ve come to learn that over the years while I watched you. I’ve come to learn everything that makes you tick...” He leaned in and placed a chaste kiss on my trembling lips. “... and everything that makes you hunger.”

He ran his hands down my arms and the moment he let my wrist free, I slapped him. He grabbed my chin and slammed his mouth onto mine, shoving his tongue inside my mouth, forcing me to take him in.

I screamed and punched him in the chin, but it didn’t stop him. It didn’t stop his hand grabbing my hips and pulling me against his hard cock. It didn’t stop his fingers from delving against my wet pussy, teasing it until shame washed over me from my body’s reaction.

“Your demons love mine, Arima. I want to control you, dominate you beneath me, command your body to crave mine the same way you’ve forced yourself beneath my skin every time I tried to kill you. Your insignificant life has tainted my very being.”

I screamed and sobbed as his soft lips traveled along my jaw and sucked on my neck, where he shot me with what I now assume was a tranquilizer gun.

“Every time you cry out for me in your sleep, I want to bury my cock in you, to fill that void you’ve been desperately trying to hide behind your badge.”

My hands landed on his shoulder to push him away, but he pressed me further into the bed.

“Your father never deserved you,” he whispered against my breast. “He caused his own downfall when he denied me. He had the same blood in him, the same darkness... the same one he gave you.”

“I-I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You don’t want to know. That’s the difference, little hunter.” He licked my belly button and goosebumps rose on my skin as his large hands gripped my hips and pulled me close to his face. “I let you blame me for the murder of all those women in cold blood. It tickled me to watch you come into your own.” He nipped the inside of my thigh, right over the freshest healing wound, and I whimpered. “Clever of you to intermingle it with my own kills. Clever of you to take them all on your caseload to lead everyone around you astray.”

I squirmed away and he pulled me right back against his hot mouth, devouring my pussy as if he was starving. He moaned against my lips and my eyes rolled back. I ran my hands down my face, wanting to slap myself for getting caught up again.

“I’ll never tire of this taste, Arima. You taste of *mine*.”

“Stop,” I said in a broken voice, leading him to chuckle and shove his tongue deeper into my pussy, coaxing me out with his wickedness.

“That heathen was onto you. You couldn’t hide the darkness from him, either.”

“No. You’re lying,” I tried miserably, my hips thrusting against his face, my hand threading through his hair.

“Tell me how bad you want it, Arima. Tell me to fill your holes so you’ll never go searching again. Because if it’s blood you want, all you had to do was ask and I would have given you the world on a silver platter.”

“You’re twisting my mind! Stop your manipulations!”

His tongue flicked my clit and my body wound up. When his finger entered me, my legs wrapped around his head. When he replaced his mouth with his thumb and bit the inside of my thigh, reopening my wound, I cried out in unwanted pleasure, sobbing into my arms.

Before my orgasm could die down, he grabbed me by the hips and flipped me onto my stomach, lifting my ass up against him and covered me with his body. His large hand circled around my throat, pulling my head back so he could suck on my earlobe with his hot breath against my skin.

“You let everyone believe she drove off a bridge from depression, you wicked girl. You let everyone believe in your sad little lies when I knew the truth. I knew you killed her in cold blood...” he whispered, and my pussy fluttered against his hard shaft.

He shifted his hips and slammed his dick inside of me as his hand gripped my windpipe. I shook my head in denial, but I couldn’t voice it. He laid my demons before me bare and claimed it as his own.

“That taste for blood never left you as you continued to hunt woman after woman, searching for that same adrenaline rush it gave you the first time.”

Each thrust shattered me, each slap of his hips put the right pieces back together... the one I had hidden inside myself for so long. Self punishments and mutilation only made my hunger grow to infernal heights as the demons in my mind became clearer and clearer each time I closed my eyes.

The way the souls of each victim stared at me, asking me why. All I could do was smile and do it again. The same way The Scythe drives his dick into me until I claw at the sheets and push my ass back toward him, seeking more.

“Poor little girl, hands painted crimson. She smeared the hate and blame everywhere she went until she found one that didn’t turn away,” he panted, thrusting harder against me with

one foot planted on the bed for more leverage. “Until she found *me*.”

“Shut up and fuck me!”

He groaned and chuckled, hammering inside of my wanting pussy, giving me everything I deserved and didn't. When a blade ran down my back, sending a spike of pain through my body, I cried out and spasmed around his hard cock buried deep inside of me.

He continued to carve something against my skin as my body responded and continued to milk him for all he was worth.

“Fuck, look at how well you take me, Arima. Look at how much your pussy weeps and cries out for more.”

The poison in my veins still coursing through me, I fell to my side, weak and exhausted. He fell with me, keeping his dick inside as he leisurely thrust and ran the blade down the outside of my thigh.

“You can never get away from me now, little hunter. You've been branded. Now anyone that looks at you will know exactly who you belong to.”

I wrapped my arm around myself and curled into a ball, but he didn't let me run. Not this time. His arms came around me and slipped between my legs, forcing me to ride another wave of bitter ecstasy as his cock hardened once again inside of me.

“You've made me wait too long, Arima. It's time to pay your penance.”

# EPILOGUE

## THE SCYTHER

SHE SURVIVED THE WORST OF IT AND IT ONLY MADE ME CRAVE her more. This house of torture I brought her to—our new home. She fights when the other half of her fights to gain control but keens and whimpers to my touch when she gives in.

The papers never did find the killer in the courtroom, nor did they find Judge Roland Anderson among the dead.

I didn't like the name, anyway.

Watching Arima sleep soundly on my lap with my cock in her mouth, I caress her hair back. She was always beautiful in her nightmares, calling my name. Gently pushing her aside, the chains attached to the cage beneath my bed rattles softly until it hits the sheets covered in blood. She tried to run again after putting a knife to my neck, giving me a brand of her own. I had to fuck her back into submission and remind her of who she was, choke her with my dick down her throat until she begged for forgiveness. Sometimes, I think she did it on purpose to rile me up because she liked being punished since she had failed time and time again to punish herself.

Did she not know how beautiful she looked when her demons took over? When she would look at me with bloodlust and carnal desire, I was willing to get on my knees and do whatever she asked me.

But she needed more coaxing, more nurturing before she could find that little girl inside of her again, the one that started it all.

Sighing, I get to my feet and leave her, making my way to the back storage room where walls were lined with glass jars filled with my collection. I twist the first jar, straightening the label to face out. Jared's, my brother, eyes float in liquid, staring back at me. Dusting off the second jar, his wife's ear floats peacefully beside him. It was hard finding her charred remains after the car's gas tank exploded into a wall of flame. But I did it... for her. The girl who haunted my memories with her blank stare when she caught me killing her father. Those big brown eyes sparkled with something that refused to let me go. And now... I refuse to let *her* go.

The third jar sits with a loose lid, waiting for me to add to my collection. I drop the piece of skin I cut off from our last sexual tryst into the jar and tighten the seal. She keened and mewled when I stitched her up. I had never seen her come that beautifully. Her urges made mine tame in comparison, but I lived for it.

And now, my niece would forever live *for me* until it was time for us to join our family on the other side of hell, where we would finally be reunited.



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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

If you get your kicks in a magical manner, order toys from websites like bad dragon, and prefer your monsters *in* your bed instead of *under* them, then Y. D. is your girl.

Writing everything from spicy dark fantasy to fluffier-than-a-cool-marshmallow romance, Y.D. La Mar has her fingers in all sorts of man-meat pie, and the sky is the limit. Somehow, this magical mistress manages to balance her spicy author life with her responsibilities as a mom, a wife, and a resident of Sin City—*oh, irony, you've felled me.*

When the world is full of black-and-white, Y.D. plays in the grey zones, spending her time creating new ways to shock and awe her editor, as well as her readers.

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# DEBTS OWED

TEEGAN WYLDE

## CONTENT WARNINGS

Dubcon, violence, cheating, kidnapping.

## BLURB

My fiance made a mistake.

A huge mistake.

Now, his family wants *me* as payment.

Ro's twin brothers and father look at me like I'm something to devour.

I shouldn't want anything to do with them.

But when they touch me I lose all sense of control.

Crossing this line is beyond taboo.

But what the leader of the Sokolov family wants, he gets.

And he wants me.

# CHAPTER 1

## GABRIELLE

THE SOUND OF MY HEELS CLICKING AGAINST THE WOODEN floor echoed in my gallery. I stopped, a sense of pride growing in my chest as I glanced around the space. Finally, I had reached the level of success I had always craved. This was truly *my* place. My fiance, Rodion, had helped me to get it, but I didn't feel as if that diminished my triumph. For a girl that had come from the slums of Detroit to an artist people drooled over, I'd had a hell of a good life.

"Can you move those new paintings to the front?" I asked.

Everyone was going to be arriving soon. It was the grand opening of *Critique!* and I couldn't get the butterflies out of my stomach. I laid a hand on it, trying to contain the anxiety that threatened to take hold of me. Instead, I took in three long, slow breaths before I exhaled. Ro would be here any moment. I couldn't wait for him to pull me into his arms, kiss my forehead, and tell me that everything was going to be alright.

"Gabi!"

I turned, a smile on my face. It faltered when it wasn't Ro, but one of his younger brothers. Mikhail. His dark hair, crystal blue eyes, and tattoos that peaked out of the sleeve of his button up were all familiar sights. I'd invited Ro's family to the opening of course, but I hadn't expected them to actually show up.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, fixing my smile into place. "Where's Ro?"

"Oh, he's out back. He wanted me to tell you to go see him."

I frowned before I checked the clock on the wall. “Why? The gallery is about to open in half an hour. I really need to be here to confirm everything is perfect.”

Mikhail pushed his hands into his pockets. “It won’t take that long. I promise.”

Sighing, I pushed some of my afro away from my face. I was already dressed in a long, black dress with slits up both sides. They showed off ample leg, and thigh, if I was being honest. My makeup had been done earlier by a girl I hired. And I was practically ready to go. I finally gave in.

“Alright, lead the way. I don’t know why he couldn’t just come inside,” I muttered.

I was used to Ro’s family being a bit... mysterious. There were rumors around them, the kind of chatter I tried to ignore. Whispers abounded about them being part of the mafia. I’d seen and heard my fair share of shady shit, but nothing was ever really confirmed. I chalked it all up to people having too much time on their hands.

Mikhail waved a hand. “After you. It’s straight back. He’s having a smoke in the alley.”

I groaned. “Of course he is. He’s going to smell like shit for the rest of the night.”

I detested the smell of cigarettes. No matter how many times I told Ro that, he refused to quit. I’d even asked him to switch to a vape or cigars, I loved the rich, deep smell of cigars. Still nothing. I loved my fiance, but he could be a stubborn man when he wanted to be. Some would say he could be a downright asshole, but I wouldn’t go that far. He had his good moments as well as his bad. That was just the way people were.

Mikhail and I stepped out into the alley and I glanced around. The emptiness was cloaked in shadows as the dim lights tried to part the inky blackness. It only partly worked, instead casting apparitions on the walls of me and Mikhail.

“Where is he?” I asked.

“Sorry about this, babe,” Yasha said as he stepped out of the darkness. “We gotta take you in.”

I raised a brow. “What the fuck are you talking about? Where did you come from?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Mikhail answered, as he pressed against me. He waved a hand. Lights clicked on, flooding us in too much brightness. “Get in the car.”

Confused, I stepped back from the twins. If you didn’t know them, you’d think they were the same person. They were good at pulling that off too. There was nothing either of them liked better than tricking everyone and laughing at their stupidity. I, however, could tell them apart. Mikhail was a bit more cruel and morose in his expressions. He walked differently, with a swagger that he couldn’t mask. Yasha, on the other hand, was prone to laughing and smiling. His steps were a bit quicker, more giddy. I always viewed him as the younger one, even though he was seven minutes older. I’d known them for five years at this point, it was hard not to notice the differences.

“Yasha, where’s Ro?”

“In the car.”

I groaned. “Seriously, what is this about?”

Yasha led me around the car. When I glanced inside and saw no sign of Ro, I straightened right back up. When I turned around, Mikhail’s hand shot out. He slapped it over my mouth before I could say a word.

“Get in the car, Gabrielle.”

I blinked. *What the hell is his problem?* There were times when I’d felt strange around Ro’s family, but this was... different. A shiver worked its way up my spine as I stared into Mikhail’s crystal blue eyes. He nodded toward the car.

“I don’t want to have to hurt you, sweetheart. Get in.”

My heart sped up. *What is this?* I glanced over at Yasha. He shrugged.

“Sorry, can’t be helped,” he said. “Better do what he says. Mik really loves breaking bones.”

“I love the way they sound when they snap,” Mikhail whispered, as he leaned toward me. “The crunch is better than getting my dick sucked. I love the scream too of course, but nothing hits the same as that crunch.”

My mind went blank when he pulled back. All I could do was stare at him. I opened my mouth against the heat of his hand, but I was too shocked to even speak. When he jumped toward me I turned and practically threw myself into the car. Mik slid in after me on the left while Yasha rounded the car and took the right side. They sandwiched me between them before they spoke Russian to the driver. The car lurched forward, pulling out of the alley and onto the street.

“W—what is this?” I asked, trying to conceal the tremble in my voice.

Mikhail looked me up and down. “Little family business, that’s all. Soon as we’re done you can go on with your life.”

“What does that mean? Mik?”

He refused to answer me. Instead, he turned and stared straight ahead, his face blank. I tried to calm my beating heart as I turned to the right and frowned at Yasha.

“Where’s Ro?”

“You’ll see soon enough. Might as well sit back and relax.”

“My gallery opening,” I mumbled.

“Afraid you’re gonna miss it,” Yasha answered. “But your night will be so much more interesting without it.”

When he winked at me, another tremble tore through my body. I glanced around, but I was stuck. My phone was still on the desk in my back office sitting on the charging plate. I kicked myself as I toyed with my red painted fingernails and bounced my leg.

I had to get out of here.

## CHAPTER 2

YASHA HELD OUT A HAND TO ME WHEN THE CAR PULLED TO A stop. I stared at it, before brushing it aside. Carefully, I navigated out of the Caddy and walked carefully on the cobblestone drive so I wouldn't bust my ass on it. When I dusted my dress off Yasha just chuckled.

“Stubborn as always. Rodion always says you're a handful.”

I glared at him. “Speaking of my fiance, where is he?”

A loud grunt reached my ears. Yasha held out a hand toward me, but I slapped it away again. “Don't touch me,” I warned.

“Okay,” he shrugged. “I was just trying to protect you.”

“I highly doubt that.”

They were acting normal, as if they hadn't just threatened me before we drove up to their ridiculously huge house. It was more like an estate, lined with huge trees and tucked away from the public eye behind a massive black gate. This had never been my favorite place to come and visit Ro. It always held an air of danger, as if something unexpected and devastating waited around every corner.

I put all of that out of my mind as I rounded the car. My eyes widened. Ro talked around the gag in his mouth, but I couldn't understand a word. When he glanced up at me, his dark hair falling into his face, I quickly moved toward him.

“What the fuck is this?” I demanded.

I glanced up. Yasha and Mikhail said nothing. They simply watched as I crouched down and began tugging on the rope that bound his wrists behind his back. I'd never seen something so bizarre. Rodion was their brother, why would they have him locked up in the trunk of a car?

"Get up, Gabi," Mikhail ordered.

I ignored him. Instead, I tugged on the ropes with more fervor, trying to loosen them the best way I could. A hand gripped my shoulder and pulled. Ignoring it, I worked harder until the same hand disappeared and returned to grip my hair. I cried out, my hands flying up to grab a wrist.

"I told you to do something. Tonight is not the night to fuck with me," Mikhail growled.

"Let go of me!"

"Shhhh." Yasha pressed his finger to his lips. "You need to stop all that screaming and bullshit. Our father isn't as calm as we are, you know?"

I stiffened at the mention of Dimitrios. The man was a six foot seven wall of muscle with a hard stare and not a smile in sight. He'd unnerved me from the first time we met and that feeling had never lessened. If there was ever a reason I would think that the rumors were true about the Sokolov's, it was because of him.

"Why are you hurting me?" I asked, my breath catching in my throat. "And Ro? Why Ro?"

"More moving, less talking," Yasha answered.

We marched toward the house. Mik kept his hand in my hair, directing me through the halls while Yasha forced Ro to walk. When he started to refuse and dig his heels in, my heart stopped. Yasha pressed a gun against his spine. He clicked off the safety and slapped Ro's cheek hard.

"Keep moving or you'll get blood all over your pretty fiancee."

"Oh God," I whispered.

Every step I took felt heavier than the last. I wished I could get out of my shitty heels and walk barefoot, but with Mikhail's hand in my hair I wasn't going anywhere. We stopped in front of a door that Yasha opened. He shoved Rodion through. My fiance fell in a heap, coughing as he shook his head and glared. I was ushered in and made to stand in front of the desk that Dimitrios was behind. He stared at us, his gaze hard.

"Finally," he said. "Took you two long enough."

"Someone wanted to put up a fight," Mik said, as he kicked Ro in the stomach.

I screamed. "Stop! What the fuck?"

I didn't give a damn about his hand anymore. Turning, I shoved my palms against his chest. When he stumbled back, his eyes wide with surprise, I took that chance to drop to my knees. I quickly yanked the gag from between his lips.

"Are you okay? Do you know what's going on?"

Ro cursed in Russian. "Get me out of this fucking rope!" he spat.

"He's still in a bad mood." Yasha leaned on Mikhail. "What do we do about that Papa?"

Dimitrios stood up. "His mood is the least of my worries." His gaze flickered to me. "Gabrielle, come here."

I stayed crouched near Ro. "Not before someone tells me what the fuck is happening!"

Dimitrios rounded the desk so quickly that I fell over. His massive body moving that fast wasn't something that I'd expected. Before I could get away, he grabbed me by the arm and yanked me to my feet. I yelped before I was dragged close to him. When he glanced down, I swallowed hard. Dimitrios looked just like his sons, only older. At forty-nine there was gray sprinkled in his beard, mustache, and hair. There was a furry patch of hair on his chest as well. I only knew that because I'd seen him half dressed only once by mistake. The image had lingered.

“My son has decided to betray his family. Do you know what that means in our family?”

I swallowed hard. “I— I don’t know. What does that have to do with me? What did he do?”

“He stole a lot of money.”

I stiffened. Was that where the cash had come from that he’d poured into my gallery? My heart squeezed. He’d really done that for me?

“Don’t make those eyes at him,” Dimitrios said.

“He was helping me.”

A deep rumble of laughter bubbled from his lips. He shook his head as I stared at him, confused. “This asshole didn’t put any money toward your gallery. He borrowed money from me for it. I gave it to him. Then he went behind my back and stole more so he could gamble it away. That’s *after* he decided to work with another family. One we don’t deal with.”

“What is he talking about?” I asked.

Ro had fallen quiet. I stared at him, waiting for him to say that none of it was true, that he hadn’t lied to me. On top of that, I’d asked him more than once about what his family was involved in. He swore it was nothing. That all of the things said about the Sokolov’s was simply rumors and bullshit. It didn’t seem that way now.

“Exactly, he has nothing to say.” Dimitrios snapped at his sons. “Take him to the room. Since we’re breaking loyalties and trust, why not go all the way?”

My fist clenched, but there was no fire in my chest. No matter what Ro had done, he didn’t deserve to be hurt. I couldn’t sit around and let them do something to him that they’d all regret later. I grabbed onto Dimitrios’ shirt. He froze and glared down at me. For a moment my grip loosened until I steeled myself against that dark gaze and the intimidation that came crashing off him in waves.

Someone whistled. “She might be stupid.”

Yasha. I ignored him and instead focused on Dimitrios. If anyone could stop what this was, it was him.

“Let’s just talk,” I said slowly. “I’m sure whatever Ro did, it’s all just a misunderstanding. Don’t go too far and do something you’ll regret.”

Dimitrios raised a brow. “I haven’t regretted a single action in my life. Remove your hands, Gabrielle.”

I sucked in a sharp breath and shook my head. “No. This is too much. What? Are you going to beat him up? Families don’t act like this!”

“Ours does.”

Dimitrios’ big hand gripped the back of my throat. I tried to fight and protest, but he walked me out of the room. Yasha and Mikhail were on our heels. My heart thudded in my chest as I realized I had no idea where he was taking me. I dug in my heels. Dimitrios stopped and glared.

“Keep walking, now.”

“Not until you tell me— Hey!”

Dimitrios didn’t bother speaking. He tossed me over his shoulder. Suddenly the smell of his cologne, woody and dark filled my nostrils. I balled up a fist and slammed it against his massive back, but it was like striking a wall. He just kept on walking, my words falling on deaf ears the whole time. We moved down the hallway before he dumped me onto a mattress. I bounced, confused as he straightened up and pointed to a chair.

“Tie him up there.”

“W— what’s going on?” I muttered.

“Like I told Ro, we’re showing him what happens when boundaries are crossed and loyalties are spat on.” Dimitrios undid the buttons on his shirt as I stared in horror.

My eyes flickered to Ro. He glared, the gag back between his teeth. As he watched, calm and glaring, coldness gripped my heart. *Why isn’t he fighting? Why isn’t he screaming at them? He’s all tied up, but why is he so fucking calm?*

“You might as well give up on him coming to your rescue. Rodion doesn’t care,” Dimitrios said.

“That’s a lie,” I hissed.

Dimitrios grabbed my face so quickly I startled. He shoved me to the bed, took up residence between my thighs, and grinned at me. The look on his face unnerved me. I swallowed hard, my tongue darting across my lips as I tried to crawl backward. I didn’t get far before he gripped my ankle and yanked me back down, my dress riding up my thighs in the process.

“He betrayed you too, you know.”

I shook my head. “Get the fuck off of me.”

Big, thick fingers swept beneath my dress. I stilled, my body in shock as I felt him rub against the fabric of my panties. He found my clit in seconds and worked it in soft, slow circles. Pleasure curled up my spine. My face grew hot.

“Did you really think I wouldn’t find out about you going behind my back, Rodion? All those chats with the Bunin’s behind closed doors. My eyes and ears are everywhere.”

I could barely focus on what he was saying. My head swam as I choked on a breath that refused to leave my throat. As Dimitrios chastised his son, he played me like a violin. Every stroke of his fingers was masterful. No fumbling, no hesitation, just sheer tingling goodness.

“What the fuck do you want?” Ro spat as the gag was tugged from his lips once more.

“You can earn your life back,” Dimitrios said. “All you have to do is watch us play with your shiny little toy.”

I sucked in a breath. “Please, stop,” I whispered. “No more.”

“Quiet,” he growled. He fixed me with a stare that could make other people buckle in a moment. I was no better. I shut up immediately, too scared to keep talking when he was so close to me. It didn’t help how thrown off I was at the pleasure

that assaulted me. Dimitrios turned back to Ro. “I know how much you hate people touching what’s yours.”

Ro’s teeth clenched. “Fuck you, old man.”

Dimitrios chuckled. “Should I show your girl what it means to be fucked by an old man?”

I snapped my thighs shut at his words. There was no way this was happening. I kept trying to figure out where my night had shifted from a dream to a nightmare, but I was at a loss. Why was I brought into the middle of their fucked up game? I didn’t care what this was about anymore or what Ro had done, all I wanted to do was go home.

“Don’t,” I yelled as I shoved him away.

Dimitrios’s hand wrapped around my throat. He slammed me onto the bed, glaring into my eyes. Slowly, he traced my face, my lips, my breasts.

“Such lovely brown skin,” he groaned. “I’d be lying if I said I didn’t want a taste the moment I saw you. But I was good, no? Kept my hands and desires to myself. You can thank my son for causing this.”

I panicked. Reaching back, I balled up my fist and slammed it into his face. Pain shot up my hand, reverberating over my bones as I cried out. Dimitrios’ nose dripped a few drops of blood. He wiped them away with the back of his hand as if it was nothing.

“My turn.”

The sting of his hand in my hair as he tugged it made me reach up. All I could do was hold on as he straddled me, forcing my thighs open. He leaned down, his lips pressing against my ear as he whispered in it.

“If you don’t hold still and be a good girl, I’ll kill him. Do you want to see that? His brains splattered all over the walls and floor?”

My throat constricted. No, I couldn’t handle something like that! Terror swept through me as my gaze flickered over

to Ro. I had so many good memories with him. Cherished moments I'd never had with anyone else.

“Ro.”

“Do it for me,” he said, pleading with his eyes. “Please.”

I choked on a sob that tried to escape. Instead, I nodded slowly. I didn't want to do this, but I couldn't watch Rodion die. I'd imagined a life with him, babies, a home, everything. There had to be some way to get over this and find that happiness again, right?

“Okay,” I whispered.

Dimitrios smiled. “Then let's get started. Stand up and undress for us.”

Slowly, he backed off of me. When he stood, a twin flanking each side, I shuddered. I slowly shifted to the edge of the bed as their eyes stayed on me. I reached down to undo the strap of my heel.

“Leave them on,” Yasha said.

I hesitated. When I glanced up, all of them watched me like sharks. I shakily pulled away from the strap and stood up. Slowly, my clothes slipped over my skin until they ended up in a pile on the floor. I stepped out of my panties last and stood there, naked and exposed before their eyes.

# CHAPTER 3

WAS IT A SIN TO WANT TO FUCK MY SON'S FIANCE?

Gabrielle was all of five-foot-six with creamy brown skin and dark eyes a man could get lost in. Standing there in front of us, her body on display, I couldn't help but to take in every single curve.

*Bozhe Moi.*

I couldn't take my eyes off of her as she tried to hide her body behind her hands. The red nails caught my attention, freshly polished and sleek. I continued to drink Gabrielle in from her fluffy afro, to her hips, to the strip of dark hair that ran down the center of her pussy. For some reason that attracted me even more. Women were quick to cut off every bit of hair on their bodies, but I liked a bit of something to run my fingers through.

“Fuck.”

I glanced over at my son. Leave it to Yasha to be unable to hold his composure in the face of someone so deliciously divine. Although he was only twenty-three. I couldn't hate him for being young and hot-blooded. It was how I'd been in my younger days.

“Turn around,” I said.

Gabrielle visibly shivered. Slowly, she turned around. The audible gulp from my left made me grin. Mikhail was no better. He admired her round, plump ass the same way that I did. When she glanced over her shoulder, our eyes met.

“Bend over.”

“Do I have to?” Gabrielle asked.

“Now.”

Slowly, she bent over and laid her palms on the bed. Bit by bit she lowered herself until we were gifted a vision of wet pussy, and an asshole that begged to be filled with my cock. I moved forward, drawn to her body like a moth to a burning inferno. My fingers trailed over her backside. She jumped, but she didn't move away.

“Does he mean that much to you? You would really give your body up for him?”

Gabrielle slowly nodded. “Y—yes.”

She'd calmed down now, her demeanor more laid back now that she knew what hung in the balance. I didn't have to be so heavy handed. Which was smart. I didn't want to mar her beauty with a steady backhand.

“Has he ever fucked you here?” I asked as I trailed my finger over her asshole.

Gabrielle stiffened. “No.”

“What a shame. I can see no one's touched it properly. Should I be the one to do it?”

“Fucking asshole,” Rodion hissed.

“That's what I plan to do son, yes.”

Yasha chuckled. “Can I touch her already? This is dragging on and I want to taste something.”

“Taste whatever you like,” I said. “You're okay with that, right Gabrielle?”

“Yes, it's fine.”

I took her word for it and buried my face between her cheeks. She gasped, her hips jutting back of their own accord as I licked her hole. A squirm, a sucked in breath, and a moan greeted me. I gripped her hips and held them more tightly as I feasted on her like a five course meal.

Taking Gabrielle was something I'd only dreamed about in my wildest fantasies. Those nights when my bed was empty and I was too hard and aching to stand it, I imagined her. Dripping wet, legs spread, plump lips parted as she cried to the heavens. More than once a growl had left my throat as I pumped my cock so hard and fast that I was often left sore afterwards. And still I imagined it was nothing like being stuffed inside her juicy cunt or suffocated by her tight ass.

"Ah, Yasha," she whimpered. "Please, not so hard."

I stiffened as I heard his name on her tongue. I wanted it to be my name that she shouted for the first time, not anyone else's. Sharing her with the twins was all fine and good, but there were procedures in place, things that needed to be followed. I was the leader of our family. And I should be the first one to make her break.

Yasha gazed up at me and straightened up. He'd been sucking one of her nipples steadily, his fingers and mouth as eager on her body as they were in everyday life. However, he knew what this was. The rules had been explained very clearly. He moved away.

"Sorry."

Mikhail clicked his tongue. "I told you to calm down."

"Okay, okay," Yasha muttered.

He went back to fondling Gabrielle instead, stroking her nipples with his fingers until they were hard and stiff. All the while he sulked. I couldn't resist the chuckle that fell from my throat. He was as petulant and crazy as always.

I turned my attention back to Gabi. My tongue traced her hole again as I let myself become fully captivated by her. Her hole pulsed against my tongue and I lashed at it more steadily, pulling her back until she was a mess of wriggling and moaning.

"Dimitrios, please," she begged.

My chest tightened triumphantly at that sound. I straightened up and glanced down at her as I massaged her hole with my finger. Taking Gabrielle had not been the

original plan. Punishing Rodion had originally taken on a different form. One too many drinks and a rowdy discussion with the twins and I had been talked into something else entirely. Although maybe talked into were the wrong words. I had wanted Gabrielle for too long. It hadn't taken too much convincing to take her.

"Please what?" I asked.

She made a noise, but that was it. No words. I took that as she was enjoying herself and buried my head in her ass once more. She rolled her hips back against me, her breathing in little pants. I shoved my tongue in deep and she jolted.

"Fuck!"

*Yeah, that's all I want to do to you.*

My tongue lashed her hole, twisting and turning as I opened my pants. I reached inside and wrapped my hand around my cock. It seemed I was just as bad as Yasha. My mind was only on one thing; the need to satisfy this powerful urge.

"She's so soft," Yasha moaned.

"Yeah. Soft and weak," Mikhail answered.

My two boys. They were as opposite as could be when it came to women. Mik loved to break them. Yasha loved to put them back together and never let go.

As I stood up I glanced over at Rodion. He glared at me, his eyes narrow, but he didn't ask us to stop. Like I'd told Gabrielle before, he didn't care. It was obvious in everything that he did. She was nothing more than a toy to him, but he was still a Sokolov. Being made to watch while we defiled what only he could touch? It would eat at his core.

*Good. That's what he deserves after being so fucking stupid.*

My son had crossed a grave line. Not only had he stolen from me like a common thief, he'd been moving behind my back, trying to unseat me from my throne so that he could take my place. Him. Rodion had no fucking backbone to speak of.

No discipline. He was as ill equipped to handle the family business as a stranger off the street. I didn't want to kill my blood, my oldest son, but I would certainly put him in his place. One more chance before I did end his miserable life.

And then exile him so that he could never return.

"Move out of the way," I said.

Both boys shuffled out of my way as I dragged Gabrielle up by her hair. She whimpered, the sound an aphrodisiac. My cock, if it were possible, became even harder until it felt like it would explode if I wasn't inside of her. I tilted her head up.

"Hands and knees? Or on your back?"

Gabrielle swallowed thickly. "Whatever you want."

"No," I said. "I asked you. Pick."

The look she shot me could have put holes in the wall. I saw that flame in her. She'd only pretended to be calm. The illusion that she had given in and would be a wet blanket for us to pass around how we saw fit. That gaze however said much differently.

"Answer, slut," I growled.

Gabrielle jumped, worry in her eyes for a moment before she blew out a soft breath. When she licked her lips again I wanted to taste them. Instead, I watched, waited. That was something my son also didn't have.

Patience.

Well I had it in spades.

"Hands and knees," she muttered.

"Say it again so I can hear."

Gabrielle raised her voice. "Hands and knees!"

I caressed her cheek. She flinched beneath my touch and it only made me smile. "Who wants her pussy then?"

"Me!"

The twins shouted in tandem. I shook my head. Would they ever learn to not be so eager?

“Yasha, you can go first.”

The look on Yasha’s face confirmed I’d made the right decision. He was a lot like his older brother. Five years younger, but still as brash and forward as Rodion. However this was a reward for us in a way, and what better way to show my loyal son’s favor than to let him have his way with the woman we each wanted to devour.

I wanted to drag this out; both for myself and for my traitor of a son.

“Get the condoms,” I instructed. I walked around the bed until I was in her view. “See how he hasn’t objected? Not even once? Do you really think Rodion gives a fuck?”

Gabrielle glared. “You have him tied to a chair. He doesn’t have a choice!”

“You’re in denial. Let me fix that.”

A wet glob of saliva landed on my cheek. I stayed still for a moment, stuck as to what the hell had just happened. Slowly, I reached up and wiped it from my face. On instinct I lashed out and slapped her. Gabrielle gasped, her eyes wide before tears lined her eyes.

“I didn’t want to do that. But you’re really pushing your luck. If you don’t want to do this just say so and you can walk away.”

“And then you’ll kill Ro.”

I shrugged. “Maybe, but that’s got nothing to do with you.”

She shivered. “I love him.”

“Do you?”

“Yes!”

I tilted my head. “You’re sure?”

“What the fuck? Are you high? I said yes and I mean yes,” she snapped.

I nodded slowly. “Good to know.”

I quickly fetched my phone and returned to my position. Yasha had returned with a couple of condoms, but I waved a hand. Instead of letting them proceed, I sat the phone down in front of Gabrielle.

“What is that?” Rodion asked.

“It’s a video. Should I play it for her?” When he only stared at me I smirked. “It’s one of you last Saturday. Remember?”

Suddenly, he stiffened. The cold, hard look he’d tried to hold on his face went away and was replaced with red as anger seeped through him. He jerked in his chair, tugging and pulling wildly.

“Don’t listen to him,” Rodion snapped.

“He doesn’t want you to see the truth.” I moved some of her hair from her face and hovered a finger over the play button. “Do you want to see it?”

Gabrielle’s eyes shifted to me and back again. I watched her reflection as she stared at the phone and ignored Rodion’s yelling. Finally, she gave a curt nod.

“Smart girl,” I whispered in her ear.

“Don’t you fucking dare!”

“Shut up,” Mikhail called. “No one gives a shit.”

I turned back to the video and pressed the play button. It started going and I watched as Gabrielle’s eyes widened. Sure, I’d saved the video for my own purposes, but this? It was a fucking bonus.

# CHAPTER 4

MY HEART CRUMBLED. THE CUTE, PERKY BLONDE THAT SAT herself on Ro's lap was all over him. They made out in the hallway of what I guessed was a hotel by the generic art on the wall. Her hands trailed all over him, and he laughed as he pushed a hand up her skirt and gripped her panty-clad ass. Ro squeezed, a groan on his lips as he fondled her.

"You look so good, baby," he purred.

"I missed you."

"Yeah? I missed you more. Let's go show each other how much."

Rage scraped up my spine. Those words were exactly what he said to me each and every time we were apart and got back together. Ro kissed me like that, making me feel as if I was the only girl in the world for him. How many times had I bragged to my friends about what a good man he was? Too many to count. Now, I looked like an idiot while he dragged the girl inside and the sounds of their moans filled the camera.

"Turn it off," I muttered.

"He's not so helpless, is he?" Dimitrios asked, his lips pressed against my ear. "I told you. He betrayed you too."

"I said turn it off!"

Yasha was the one to grab the phone and silence the moans of ecstasy. I gripped the bed more tightly. He'd tossed me to his father and brother's all the while knowing that he didn't give a shit about me. Dimitrios was right.

Rodion didn't give a damn.

Yasha's hand slipped over my skin. "Sorry you had to find out like that."

"Yeah, Rodion's always been a dick," Mik added.

I stared at both of them. Fuck Rodion. Fuck being good. Fuck missionary position and three short pumps before Ro rolled over and snored like a bear while I dove into the nightstand for my vibrator and at least *some* kind of reprieve from how horny I was. He always said he couldn't help how fast he was and I had accepted that. I loved him, despite the fact that he was a two-pump chump at best. To see he was out there fucking other women? Well it was insult to the injury of having to fucking deal with him in the first place.

Dimitrios toyed with a lock of my hair. "You'll have a hell of a lot more fun with us," he whispered.

I shoved back against him as rage clouded my judgment. Screw it. I didn't want to think, I wanted to feel good. More than that I wanted Ro to suffer.

"Don't listen to that shit, baby," he growled. "You know it's bullshit."

"I do?" I asked. "Same way I know it's bullshit that you can never get me off?"

Yasha snickered. "Really?"

"Never," I answered.

"Let's change that," Dimitrios said.

I was shoved forward, my face planting into the bed as something wet touched my ass. I quickly realized it was lube. Swallowing hard, I steeled myself. How many times had I asked Ro to explore anal with me? Every single time he turned it down flat and told me that good women didn't act like whores. All while he was screwing the ones who did. What the fuck?

Something stretched my hole and I groaned. Dimitrios mimicked the noise as he pushed his finger inside of my asshole more. He pulled it out and added another, stretching

me even more as I stared at him in amazement. Even though his touch was sure, it was more gentle than I had expected.

“He’s not so bad huh?” Mikhail asked.

I nodded. Dimitrios’ fingers were actually good. I’d fingered my own ass before, especially during those times when I was alone and needed that extra something to push me over the edge. Exes had done it to me, but not Ro. It felt almost taboo knowing that his father would be inside of my asshole before Ro would.

“I’m going to kill all of you!” Ro snapped.

I moaned as I pushed back against Dimitrios’ fingers. “Yes, more.”

He stilled. “Listen, just because you’re used to faking it with my son doesn’t mean I’m going to allow you to do it with me. Don’t play games, Gabi. Or I’ll punish you.”

I swallowed hard. “What does that mean?”

“I’m sure you don’t want to know.”

I shivered. Despite me being on Dimitrios’ side now, he was still a son of a bitch. Why had I expected anything else was beyond me. The man was still the same; just as cruel, calm, and demanding as he had always been.

Licking my lips, I took in a shaky breath. “Sorry, I was just —.”

“I know what you were trying to do.”

Dimitrios knocked all the words from my mouth as he plunged his fingers inside my hole. He fucked me hard and fast, his touch demanding and rough. My lips stayed parted, a shout on them as he fingered me with expert precision.

“Oh God.”

“I know,” he groaned. “Yasha, fill her pussy.”

Yasha scrambled toward the bed, but I stayed there dazed by how good I felt just by having my ass worked in and out of. The opening of a condom, fingers stroking my skin, a mouth on one of my nipples. Every single action came right after the

other and I was left with my head spinning while all I could do was hold on for dear life. Yasha took up position beneath me. The moment his cockhead speared my pussy I sucked in a deep breath.

*Am I really going to go this far?*

Thinking about it was one thing. Knowing that I was about to fuck my fiancé's brothers and father were an entirely different thing. Before I could even think about moving or changing my mind, I was shoved onto Yasha's dick. I threw my head back, pleasure racing up my spine as my nails dug into his chest. He hadn't even bothered to take the shirt off completely, just opened it up. My nails left half-moon designs in his flesh as I tried to catch my breath.

"Move your hips," Yasha groaned. "Come on, please."

The needy whimper on his lips sparked something inside of me. Big, strong hands gripped my ass and Yasha glanced up at me like I was the most beautiful prize. He spread my cheeks, exposing my asshole to his father as I started to bounce on his rock hard cock.

"Take her ass, Pop."

Fuck. I'd never heard something so hot in my life.

Dimitrios shoved me forward until I was flat against Yasha's chest. The smile on Yasha's lips was enough to make me raise a brow.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Can't I just like you being close?"

My face heated. I quickly glanced away from him. That was not why I was here. Right now it was all about crushing Ro's stupid fucking ego until he felt like less than a man. I wanted to watch him squirm.

Dimitrios' cock brought me back to life as he pressed against my hole. I grit my teeth, steeling myself for the intrusion until a finger rubbed against my clit, stealing all of my focus. Yasha worked it in a little circle, a groan on his lips as he captured my gaze. I stared down at him, my hips shifted

and rolling on their own as a warm, wet tongue engulfed my left nipple. When I looked at Mikhail, he nipped the tender flesh and I cried out.

“Fuck! Not so hard,” I panted.

“I’ll do whatever the fuck I want and you’ll take it,” Mik answered.

I shivered. That shouldn’t have been hot at all, and yet my pussy was so wet I felt like I would drown someone if their face was buried in it. I stared at Mikhail as he pulled back, lapped at my nipple, and then nipped it again. I cried out, rocking my hips hard as I tried to chase the pleasure that he’d just sparked in me.

The twins distracted me so much that I barely registered when Dimitrios started pushing his cock into my asshole. He gripped my hips, his dick splitting me open as he slid forward. My throat tightened, my eyes rolled back.

I shouted so hard my throat ached.

“More!”

# CHAPTER 5

I WAS ENAMORED BY HER. WELL, I HAD BEEN FOR YEARS. Gabrielle was the kind of woman that fascinated me. She was both strong and soft. Sassy and sweet. The way she whooped my ass at both chess and tennis had made me fall for her in a way that no one else had ever accomplished. She was the kind of woman I wanted on my arm, one I had craved fucking for so long she had made herself a permanent fixture in my dreams.

After tonight, how was I supposed to get over her? I wouldn't be able to just let her go, I couldn't. Every bit of Gabi was what I craved. Papa's words echoed in my mind. This was just a one time thing, hit it and quit it. I couldn't hold onto her the way I wanted. The clinginess that I'd worked so hard on combating would need to be thrown aside because this was nothing more than a fling.

No matter how much I tried to remember and listen to his words, I couldn't hold them. I wanted her. Why couldn't I have her? Ro didn't give a shit about Gabrielle, that much was clear. I would give her the world, hold her close, and defile every inch of her sinfully hot, curvy body. Was that so much to ask?

My father shoved his cock in deeper and Gabi's lips fell open. She stared down at me, eyes wide as a little squeak left her throat. Gabrielle shook her head, but she didn't try to run away. I'd seen that look before, it was the lost in ecstasy head shake that I loved to bring out in women. Gabrielle did it so much better as her nails dug into my chest. She scraped over my flesh, her thighs trembling as Papa toyed with her asshole.

“Fuck, yes,” I groaned as she lifted and dropped back down onto my cock.

Her pussy was so tight I wanted to be suffocated by it. The condom that kept us apart only served to piss me the fuck off. I needed to feel her. The wet, slippery, grip of her cunt around my length would be heaven on Earth if I was allowed to feel every bit of it. Instead, I watched pissed off that the condom was getting in my way.

A hard, heavy slap echoed and Mikhail grinned. He’d brought his hand down on her ass. We both watched it jiggle before he did it again. Gabrielle moaned, her hips twisting as she jolted back for more. Mikhail gave it to her.

“Don’t break our toy,” I laughed.

“I won’t. Not yet, anyway.”

Gabrielle whimpered. “I don’t know if I like the way that sounds.”

“Who gives a fuck about what you want?” Mikhail countered.

I shook my head at my brother. I loved toying with Gabi, playing with her. He was an entirely different breed though. Mikhail had always been a little off. While I was the laid back one, he loved pushing people to the edge and then immediately over it. Some people called him a sadist. I knew that was true firsthand.

Our father grabbed her shoulders and distracted Gabrielle all over again. The way he slammed inside of her must have rewritten her brain because she moaned without holding back. The sound of her crying out made my cock jump. I doubled down, rolling her clit beneath my thumb as her eyes started to glaze over.

“You can’t be serious with this shit!”

I glanced over at Rodion. My stomach tightened. I knew I should feel bad about the fact that my brother was right there watching me fuck his fiance, but I didn’t. Seeing him glare as I buried my cock inside of her was hot. Then again, Rodion had

always bullied the shit out of me. Now, it was my turn to make him beg for mercy while Gabrielle rode my dick like a pro.

“No one’s listening to you, son,” Papa said, his chuckle deep before he groaned. “Fuck her asshole is so goddamn tight she’s going to snap my cock in half.”

“I want to try it next,” I panted.

Mikhail growled. “This is bullshit. I’m shoving my dick in her mouth.”

He maneuvered onto the bed and grabbed a fistful of Gabi’s hair. She panted when she was yanked up, her eyes glassy as she stared at him. There was no fight left in her. Instead, he shoved his fingers into her mouth, opening her jaw and she went along with it.

Mikhail slammed his cock into her mouth. “Watch the teeth.”

She choked, sputtering and slapping his thighs as her pussy tightened up around my cock. I jerked as she gagged. Every inch of my skin burned as I drove my cock up hard and fast. Fuck trying to hold off. I lifted Gabrielle and dragged her back down, filling her with my cum. The only problem was the stupid condom that rested between us.

# CHAPTER 6

GABRILLE'S MOUTH WAS EVERYTHING I THOUGHT IT WOULD BE. What made it better was how she squirmed and gagged, how she choked on my cock while my brother bucked beneath her.

“I need a taste of that pussy next,” I said.

Yasha shook his head. “I’m not done.”

I growled. “Don’t start your shit, Yash! I want a taste and I’m going to have it.”

He glared at me, but I didn’t give a damn. Yasha knew I would kick his ass if he got in my way. We’d been together since the day we were born. It didn’t take more than a glance for him to know that I was serious about what I said. As much as he’d been wanting Gabrielle to save her, I’d wanted to break her.

I slammed my cock down her throat and rejoiced in the sounds of her strangled gagging. Her eyes watered as they widened to the size of saucers. Sharp nails scraped at my thighs, but I didn’t mind the pain. The red streak marks that popped up on my pale skin did nothing but spur me on.

Yanking her head back, I tugged Gabrielle’s lips from my cock. “Breathe slut.”

She shivered, drool dripping down her chin. “Wait.”

“No.”

The second my cock went down her throat again, she yelled. Vibrations ran over my cock. The sight of her struggling to breathe made my balls tighten. There was nothing better than tearing into some pretty little thing and

Gabrielle was the prettiest. I'd wanted to bend her over and rail each of her holes since the day we met. While Yasha saw a woman he wanted to spoil, dote on, and control, I saw one that I wanted to make scream and beg for my cock. I wanted to show her what a good fuck was and never let her forget it.

Gabrielle's hand wrapped around my shaft as she pulled back. I intended on dragging those sweet, plump lips right back down my dick, but she stroked me instead. Her eyes gazed up at me, a tear rolling down her cheek as she panted and jerked me off. I swiped the tear from her cheek and licked it off my thumb. The saltiness slid over my taste buds while she continued to stare at me with deep, brown doe eyes.

“Stroke harder.”

Her hand picked up speed, her grip tightening. I watched her tits heave, my eyes transfixed by the meal that was in front of me. Gabrielle's tongue darted across her lips and I was enamored with the thin, wet sheen the motion left behind.

“You're good at this,” I grinned. “Don't tell me you're all turned on from me fucking your throat. Your nipples are rock hard,” I mused as I reached out and stroked them.

“Her pussy clenched so hard,” Yasha said as he stayed inside of her, just resting there and enjoying her cunt.

“Same with her ass,” Pop grunted.

“Who knew that Gabrielle Adams could be such a whore? Oh, I did. I saw it the first day we met. An innocent face with nothing but lust in your eyes.”

She shook her head. “I didn't—.”

“Yes, you did sweetheart. I knew what you were immediately. Rub her clit again, Yasha.”

Gabrielle moaned. The sound went straight to my balls. My gaze flickered down to her hand as she stroked me relentlessly.

“You want to know something? It's so hot watching you stroke my cock with his ring on your finger. How fucked up is that?”

Her eyes darted to her hand. She faltered for a moment, as if she'd just realized what she was doing. I grinned at her hesitation.

“Don't stop now,” I laughed. “Show him how little he means to you.”

Gabrielle glanced over her shoulder at Ro. The anger on his face was clear, his skin red as he glared at the three of us.

“No, don't focus on him,” Pop said as he turned her face back toward me. “Show my son what your tongue looks like with his brother's cum on it.”

The way she shivered spoke volumes. Gabrielle was a bigger freak than I'd realized. I wanted to play with that more, to see just how far I could push the pretty little slut. There was no way this was a one time thing. After tonight I'd hunt her down if I had to and show her how much I wanted to do to her. My knife against her thigh, teeth against her skin, cock shoved into every hole alongside the fattest toy I could find; whatever fantasies drifted through my mind I wanted to fulfill with Gabi.

“Move, Yash.”

He groaned. “Just one more round.”

“Now.”

Yasha growled at me. “Fuck you!”

I stared at him, taken aback by him digging in his heels. He could be a demon when it came to other people, but he usually listened to me. Usually. Right now was not one of those times. As his glare intensified I reached for him. *If you want a fight, we'll fight.*

“Enough,” Pop roared. “Yasha you get to play with her pretty mouth.”

Yasha thought it over. “Fine.”

The tension bled out of the situation. I took up my place beneath Gabrielle after snapping on a condom. When I glanced at my brother, there was practically steam coming out of his ears.

“You hate this, right? You always did bitch about sharing your toys.” I smacked her ass hard. “I don’t think I’m going to give this one back.”

“Me either,” Yasha muttered, stroking her cheek. “Open up for me, beautiful.”

Gabrielle looked dazed. Immediately, she did what she was told, her lips parting effortlessly. Gabrielle took him in, her cheeks sunken as she bobbed her head back and forth. I wanted a repeat, but I settled instead for her hot, tight pussy.

*I can see why Yasha got so aggressive.*

Her hips moved as if she was on autopilot. Gabrielle rocked back and forth, planting her palms on my chest for leverage. I dropped my head to the pillow and took in the sight of her as she moved. My chest rose and fell as I tried to just focus on her movements to stave off the wave of pleasure that threatened to tip me over the edge. I was fine, until she dug her nails into my skin.

“Fuck! Hey,” I growled.

Gabrielle pulled her lips free. “Can’t take what you dish out?”

I stared at her as she smirked up at me. There was more than rage in that gaze now. Mischief danced in her eyes and I wanted to swallow it. I wanted to see more of that danger that promised to be exhilarating. An otherwise bright spot of entertainment among the dullness of life.

“Hey!” Yasha shouted.

I dragged her away from him to bring her down to my chest. As soon as her neck was in range, I sank my teeth into it. Gabrielle bucked, her whimpering moan sending shocks of pleasure straight to my dick. Yasha huffed as he sat behind me and directed her head back toward his cock.

“Share, asshole.”

I swore under my breath in Russian. “Can’t I ever have anything to myself?”

“Not a chance in hell.”

Pop laughed, the sound enough to draw both of our attentions. He slammed forward making Gabrielle yell.

“Neither of you knows what you’re doing. Let me show you how to really tip a girl over the edge.”

Excitement swirled in the pit of my stomach.

# CHAPTER 7

MY MIND WAS A BLUR. EVERY TOUCH WAS LIKE BEING ZAPPED with electricity. Lips ran over my flesh, teeth followed leaving behind marks. All I could do was go along for the ride.

“Over here,” Yasha groaned when I glanced away. “Please, Gabi. I’m so fucking hard. Touch me. I need you to touch me so fucking bad.”

Yasha’s whimpering moans were entirely too amazing. He looked at me with big, pleading eyes that made me want to give into everything he wanted. It didn’t matter that I was being a whore for him, for his father, and for his twin brother. All that mattered was that I gave him what he wanted. That I sated his desires, even if it was as simple as touching him.

I dragged my fingers over his spit slicked cock. As soon as I did, Mikhail grabbed my hair and made me face him again. He shoved his fingers in my mouth as he fucked me harder.

“Pay attention to me, sweetheart.”

I nodded, drawn into his gaze. *Is this who I am now?* Just like that I was taken by him. As bat shit insane as he was, my pussy didn’t seem to know the difference between good and bad. Neither did my ass.

“Fuck this tight little hole was made for my cock,” Dimitrios muttered.

“Yes,” I slurred. “Take it all you want. Fuck me!”

Dimitrios’ big, rough hand slammed against my ass. My flesh jiggled beneath his palm while the twins squabbled over me. I took one moment to glance over my shoulder at Rodion.

At some point one of them had gagged him again. He seethed, but he wasn't able to say a word. All he could do was watch.

My heart rate tripled at the thought of him being completely helpless, left to do nothing but stare as his family defiled me. Someone grabbed my chin. My head turned to the left and Yasha frowned.

“Pay attention to me.”

“I am—.”

My words were stolen as he kissed me so hard my toes curled. Yasha's tongue expertly slid over my lip, over my teeth. He pulled me closer, his whimpery moans going straight to my pussy. Mikhail dragged my head toward him and did the same. His kiss was different; sharp, hard, bitey. My bottom lip throbbled when he pulled away just in time for Dimitrios to grab my throat and tilt my head back.

“How do you like being our personal fuck toy?”

“G—good,” I moaned. “So good. Fuck me more. Don't stop.”

A grin tugged at his lips and I was mesmerized by it. When he kissed me however, I lost my mind. I completely understood what he meant when he said that he would show me things that Ro never could. The man even blew the twins out of the water. He kissed slow, sensually, with so much command and control that my knees went weak. When I pulled back to take in a breath he held my gaze as if I was a captive and he was my jailer.

“Good girl,” he groaned. “You take my thick cock in your ass so nicely. I know you've been holding back, overthinking. Let's shut your brain off, hmm?”

I stared, lost in his blue eyes. Slowly, I nodded. He was right, I'd been pissed at Ro, worried about putting on a show so that I could make him feel every bit of pain that he had inflicted on me. Now, I wanted more. I'd never felt so much gratification in my life. It had stayed in the pit of my stomach, growing as they passed me around. For the first time in my life I didn't have to hold back, didn't have to be the good girl.

They had broken me down into my baser self, one that wanted nothing more than to cum until my eyes rolled back and I lost consciousness.

All at once, the twins and Dimitrios attacked. My clit was rubbed, lips wrapped around my nipple as fingers toyed with the other. Dimitrios pulled out and slammed back inside, driving his cock in harder and faster than before. Every thought of Ro was knocked out of my head. All that was left behind was the need to feel more, to be taken until I couldn't be taken anymore.

“Fuck!” I cried out.

“That's right, give in,” Yasha moaned. “Show us how much you love us.”

A sharp sting of teeth drew my attention to Mik. “Tighten up sweetheart. I'm about to blow my load inside your pussy.”

I frowned. “What?”

He picked up the condom from the bed. “I plan on marking up your insides.”

I shivered. No, I shouldn't want this. Even as I shook my head, Yasha shoved his lips against mine. He only came up for air long enough to yell at Mikhail in Russian. I didn't have to know what each word meant to understand that they were arguing about me again.

*Why do I like that so much? Them fighting over me makes me want it more. Fuck, what is wrong with me?*

Before I could ponder anymore about how insane I was, Dimitrios' cock slid in deeper as his hand wrapped around my throat. My air was cut off as he fucked me, his groans loud enough to fill my ears as our skin slapped against each other's. The stinging was almost welcome. He was so hot, so thick, so perfect that I just wanted him to fuck me into oblivion. I never wanted Dimitrios to stop. Screw the blood on his hands. I didn't care. Not when he felt this amazing.

“Let go,” he whispered against my ear followed by a string of Russian. “Don't think. Just cum.”

My whole life had been doing the right thing. Behaving. I was always the one who did the right thing, who fell for the wrong one. So, who cared that if for one night I gave in and indulged with the bad guys? So far they had been more engaged than any other man I'd met. I could die from how good I felt and it still wouldn't be enough.

All three of them worked together to toss me over the edge. I went over happily, my moans mixing with theirs as electricity lit me up from the inside out. Hot cum splashed in my ass and pussy. I recognized, somewhere deep down, that there were no condoms involved anymore. I should have cared, but I loved how full I felt. Cum splattered over my face as Yasha smiled down at me, exhaustion on his face. I blinked, trying to stay awake but quickly losing the fight.

They had fucked me so hard that I couldn't think straight. The edges of my vision went dark and I fell forward.

Warm arms wrapped around me.



I blinked the sleep out of my eyes and groaned. Shifting my legs produced a dull ache that radiated from my core and wrapped around my muscles. I pushed myself up on one arm and forced myself to focus. When I did I was greeted by the familiar sight of my apartment. Frowning, I reached out. My phone was right there beside me, sitting on the charger as it always was in the morning.

Part of me expected to turn around and find Ro behind me. When I glanced over my shoulder however, it was empty. *I must have been dreaming last night.* The memory of the Sokolovs' touching me felt much too real though. Their whispered, dirty words and strong hands. Lips on mine. Skin pressed against skin. I pressed a hand against my face.

“No way. I must have had the craziest dream ever.”

My phone chimed and I jumped. I tried to remember what I did the night before. How had the gallery opening went? I wasn't sure. Panic settled in the pit of my stomach as I

prepared to call my friend to ask how things went. Instead, there was already a text.

**Opening went great. Got word about you being sick. Feel better soon.**

My assistant said I was sick? Who had done that? I frowned as I scrolled through my messages, but nothing was out of the ordinary. A memory flashed through my mind of Ro. His hands all over some woman, his face as he let someone else touch me.

*No, it was definitely a dream.*

I clicked out of my messages and froze. There, as my wallpaper, was a picture of me. Not just me though. Yasha, Mikhail, and Dimitrios surrounded me, their hands on my body as I cried out in ecstasy. I had no idea who had even taken the picture or who had set it as my wallpaper. Staring at it though, I knew everything that happened the night before was real. I pushed the sheet from my body and gasped. My skin was littered with bite marks, every one more prominent than the next.

Reaching between my thighs, I pulled my fingers up and realized that wasn't just me, up early and wet. It was them. How many times had they cum inside me?

I scrambled out of the bed. My first instinct was to call Ro, and I did. There was no answer, just the ringing of the phone. I paced back and forth. I froze.

The shower was running. I hadn't noticed it at first, but the steady spray of water against porcelain drew me to the bathroom. Slowly, I walked inside, my breath in my throat.

"Ro?" I called.

The water shut off before Yasha stepped out. He grinned at me. "Nope. Someone way better."

My heart dropped. "What are you doing here?"

Yasha's grin grew. "We're getting ready for round two."

My jaw dropped. "We?"

“Come out here, sweetheart,” Mik called.

“I think she’s busy with Yasha,” Dimitrios answered.

Oh. Fuck.

# HIS INCEPTION

DES SWEET

# CHAPTER 1

## CHRISTIAN-

THE ROOM WHERE I SIT WITH ABOUT THIRTY OTHER MEN IS ALL but empty, except for the rows of chairs lined up in front of a boxing ring. Today we fight for our spots, but I don't want mine. I swore I would never become a knight of Arkham. I screamed it in the middle of forests, whispered it in dark alleys, and vowed it the day I lost my parents. Yet I am knee deep in an initiation I tried to run from. Trapped in a destiny I tried to rewrite. Forced to become the monster I never wanted to be. Here I am, fighting every day not to let the darkness of my past consume me. Considering it's something I never wanted, I was surprised to find how fucking good at it I am. I trained for this my entire life, right up until the day I turned my back on it all. I tried to run away, but they were always right behind me, tracking my every footstep. In a way, I guess I was still training. Every time I fled, the knights of Arkham were dispatched to bring me in. At every turn, I outsmarted them, and every time they came for me, I escaped. I was still training; I just didn't know it. If anything, I am over prepared. Favored by the recruiters as the man to watch rise within the organization. A man fulfilling his destiny, and his parents' wishes.

Except, I'm not that man. The only thing keeping me from throwing this fight is that I want to stay alive. It's a fight to the death. Thirty men entered the warehouse tonight, but only fifteen of us are leaving. Tonight I will fight, but I'm not fighting for my Don. I'm fighting for my life, because I know my parents would want me to keep living. I'm fighting because I've heard the whispers and I've overheard the conversations. The Don is training me to become his

apprentice. A rook vying to become one of his right-hand men. Becoming a knight today is only a stepping stone to more power and more wealth. If I can't escape him, and I can't beat him, then I may as well become him.

I've thought a lot about my sentence with the Arkham Mafia. Playing out the options and opportunities. There's no ending where I don't belong to Arkham. He's made that clear. I've known that from the day he gave me my first mark. I shudder, remembering and around me others turn to stare. Before I can say anything, their necks snap and twist in the other direction as the Don takes his place in the center of the ring.

"Listen up boys, you've each been branded with a number on your wrist. The matches will be determined using randomization. If you try to run, we will kill you. If you are weak, we will kill you. If you are strong enough to outlast your opponent for thirty minutes, I've decided to let you both live. Good help is scarce these days." The Don glares at us as he speaks.

My ears catch the last bit. I wonder how many will go soft and throw the fight? Only time will tell. I still plan to kill. If I want to keep rising to the top, I must hold his attention, and one way to do that is to be the best, whether or not I want to be.

Around me there's movement and I realize I am the only one still sitting. The first match has been selected and the men around me have shuffled forward around the ring to look on eagerly at what's about to go down. I hang back. I have no need to see what happens. The only thing I need is to focus on my own fight. I have a butterfly knife tucked in my sock for emergency use, but I wouldn't be surprised if my opponent has something stashed as well. These guys aren't all upstanding citizens of our dear city. Some of the men in this room are die hard criminals fighting for a chance to be a part of the Arkham Mafia. Just because I am not hungry for Arkham doesn't mean the others aren't. They are driven to climb to the top because they all choose to be here. Not me though, Arkham wasn't my choice. I was born into this life.

That always gives me an advantage, I think as I lean back in my chair, ready to wait my turn, and motivated to kill. When my number is called, I walk to the ring solemnly. Mine will be the first kill. Everyone else has given less than their best, and it disgusts me. It is insulting. If I were the Don, I would punish them all for their weakness. I am just a servant, a pawn to the Don for another few minutes, until I become the only true knight standing amongst the men here.

My opponent looks nervous, and he should be. As soon as the buzzer sounds, I move on him. Backing him into a corner to gauge what he's made of. He swings on me, but I duck, shoving him into the corner pole and watching him fall. I don't give him time to get up. I stride over and kick him in the ribs. He coughs and sputters, gasping for air. He tries to crawl away, but I grab him by the hair and knee him in the face. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a small blade, which catches my arm. Blood drips, but it's not enough to actually injure me. Two can play that game.

I turn my back on him, taunting him to come for me, daring him to take the chance. Like a cunning fox, I pretend to trip, using the opportunity to grab my weapon. I flip the blade out in slow motion and turn with it pointed in the air just in time for my opponent to land on it as he lunges for me neck first. His blade drops next to my feet, and his eyes bulge. It doesn't faze me. I stare at him back with cold dead eyes, void of remorse or sympathy. I watch as he grasps at his neck in an attempt to remove the blade. At least that's what I assume he wants, so I pull it slowly from his incision. The moment the tip slides free, blood bursts forth everywhere, soaking the floor as my opponent falls, twitching and gurgling. I wipe my blade on the back of his shoulder, smearing the blood from the gleaming metal on his lifeless skin. I chance an unfocused look in the Don's direction, and I'm certain I see a small upward turn of his lip as if he's fighting the urge to smile.

I take my seat and wait for the next match to be called. Several men come over to comfort me. How weak they truly are to think I have one ounce of remorse for what I just did. The Arkham Mafia took the two most important people in the world from me. I will never grow tired of killing their men.

Call it revenge, call it perks of my new role, and all the other roles to come. Either way, I will never tire of it, instead I sit there and smile like some kind of jokester, pulling a well-calculated prank.



There were only three of us who actually killed tonight. We sit on metal chairs in the center of the ring. Below us, blood still coats the floor, sticky and foreboding. Behind me, the Don of the Arkham Mafia paces back and forth, his boots squishing through the blood with each deliberate step. Finally he speaks, addressing the crowd of men staring back at us in the metal chairs that line the floor. Most stare at us confused, but a few stare bitterly, jealous of our recognition.

His voice pierces the still silence that has settled over the warehouse. “Some of you are here for the wrong reasons. Don’t think I don’t know that. Others of you want to be here, but seriously lack what it will take to go far, and some of you were destined to arrive here. At any rate, henceforth, you all share the same rank aside from the captains you see sitting here in front of you. These men are obedient. These men follow orders, but most of all, these men are loyal to the brotherhood. The rest of you failed your task. Was it intentional, or do you need to train harder? Only you know the answer to this question,” He says, glaring past us and into the sea of faces. “These men are joining the knighthood tonight. They have shown both dedication and skill. Let me make this clear once and only once. They are your superiors now. Fail to recognize this and there will be consequences. Sometimes it results in death or dismemberment. At any rate, you’ve been warned and your new brothers have witnessed it. That will be all for now, gentleman, because you failed your test, you will not be receiving a mark tonight. Please leave. This just became a private event.” He winks at them and waits for everyone to file out.

Once the others have gone the Don snaps his fingers at us. “Rise and follow me,” he bellows. We dare not defy him. I

jump to my feet without hesitation and spring into step behind him. I don't look back or check on the others. I simply act, following commands like the perfect little soldier I've become. The Don leads us to another room in the giant warehouse. On one side, crates line the wall in piles. Stolen or dirty, there's no doubt about how anything is acquired. On the opposite wall there are lights hanging down, illuminating several tattooing spaces. He snaps his fingers again and a brigade of men wheeling out tool boxes arrive. Each one begins setting up for a session. This will be my second mark. The first one branded me as his. Not all pledges receive the mark, but I have always been an exception to his rules. It's as if he plays more aggressively with me, always afraid I'll run again. His trust will be the last thing I earn. "Sit." The Don snaps, motioning for us to fall in at one of the stations.

I do as I'm told, all the while emotionless, as I wait for the session to begin. A part of me aches to feel the familiar burn, to relish in the way it ignites my skin. I wait to be ordered to reveal a body part the Don has claimed for his taking. "Present your dominant arm," the Don instructs. "You are going to be knighted. Accept this recognition and join the brotherhood of the Arkham knights. Tomorrow, and in the days to come, you will receive your assignments." He nods at the men, ready and waiting to tattoo us. The sword template is applied and then the sound of tattoo guns overwhelms my senses.

Afterwards, as I sit basking in the pain, while the tattoo artist bandages me. I'm waiting for my last set of directions from the Don.

"Go to your new living accommodations. When you rank up high enough to require training, I move you into small apartments on one of my properties. There you will eat, sleep, and train to become distinguished leaders within the organization. You have the next few days to rest and recover. Use the time to move anything you need to your new home." His chest swells with pride as if he has offered us a million dollar mansion in exchange for our service.

I don't need to take much with me. When you spend years on the run and hiding, there's not much you hold on to for

sentimental value. Everything I truly need is in the trunk of my car. I have yet to be back to my family home since I set the alarm and walked away so many years ago. It's been heavily monitored for years. The Don swore to keep me safe, and he spared no expense keeping his word.

## CHAPTER 2

A KNOCK ON MY DOOR WAKES ME. I ROLL OUT OF BED, dreading what I already know will be my first assignment. When I open the door, no one is on the other side, but a thick, white envelope is attached to my door. I snatch it down hastily and close my door without making a sound. My body feels heavy as I trudge back to my small living room and plop into a leather chair. It's my first assignment. I know it is. The anxiety eats away at me, overwhelming all of my senses. The knife I used to earn my place here sits on the end table next to me. I left it there as a reminder. I also don't fucking trust these bastards. The fight for the top rankings is not only cutthroat, but deadly. During my stay here, I will eventually be put under the care of guards. They will protect me not from my enemies on the outside, but from my enemies on the inside. My head is already worth a pretty penny. I have acquired a mark of ownership from the first time my Don asserted his claim over me. A few nights ago, I was branded and assigned a random order to determine my entry into the knighthood. Most recently, I received the mark of a knight. The sword on my forearm is a reminder of who I belong to and my place in the order. I am but a humble servant. The Don's word is the only word. What he orders is to be carried out, or the consequence is death. Once he owns you, you are his for life. My death sentence feels heavy yet again, and it's only been a few days since my promotion in rank. Anyone stupid enough to try to take me out at this point is risking death to gain my spot. They better hit their mark or they will die trying. For every assassination I survive, I get another mark, making my rank even more valuable. That's how you climb to the top; survival.

I sigh. The weight is heavy on my shoulders. There's so much I have to prove, but I hate everything about it. I don't want to know what his orders are, not yet. I'm not ready. The envelope suddenly feels like a burden in my hands. I drop it on the table and sulk off to take a shower. When I turn the water on I set it to burning hot. The heat sinks into my muscles, subduing their aches from my rigorous workout routine. I need to be sure I can take down any threat to myself, the Don, and his daughter. Steam attempts to soothe my worries away. By the time I step out of the shower, I feel ready to receive my orders. Still wearing only a towel wrapped around my waist, I return to the living room to open the envelope.

I snatch it from the table and rip it open, ready to get it over with. It's only an address along with a time. I tap my phone screen to check the time. "Putain de merde, *fuck, goddamn it.*"

The Don has summoned me to meet him in thirty minutes. The address isn't one I recognize, but the Don controls so many gentlemen's clubs all over the city, it's impossible to know all of them unless you're at the top. I scramble to dress, quickly pulling on a fresh black suit from the dry cleaner, standard issue for all the servants of Arkham.

What could have such high status that I would be summoned so quickly? It could always be another test. The decision to take my motorcycle is easy. I'll need to shave some time off my drive if I want to be on time. Otherwise, there's no way I'm going to make it. I don't fuck up, and this isn't going to be the first time I do. I jog out to the garage and climb onto my bike, pulling out slowly as the deep rumble of the engine begs me to open her up and enjoy myself. I give the throttle a quick twist, just to hear her beg harder. Behind me, the garage slams shut and I kick off, ready to take on the streets of the city. Air whips across me as I speed in and out of traffic. The directions play in my earpiece, allowing me to stay focused on the road. I've become a master driver. It's a necessary skill to have when you're constantly running for your life. The engine revs and the tires squeal as I take the last turn way too fast. I fly into the parking space and stroll through the building door with five minutes to spare.

Inside, I am immediately escorted to the back of the building where the Don sits in his private section. Heads turn as I follow my escort to stand before the Don Father. We approach slowly. The Don is not alone. Several men sit at the table with him. One of which will become my mentor and superior. His responsibility will be to keep me alive and train me to become a better knight.

“Wait,” the escort orders, stopping us both a few feet away.

He walks in front of the table facing the Don, then bows his head as a sign of respect.

“Sir, the knight is here for his assignment. Are you ready for him?” He asks.

The Don nods and motions with one hand for me to join them. I take my place next to the escort and bow my head, diverting my eyes to the ground. I haven’t earned the respect to look him in the eye without permission.

“Leave us,” The Don commands, snapping at the escort, and waiting for him to be out of earshot.

“Christian, my boy. My, how you’ve grown. A fine job you did the other night. Don’t think your commitment to tradition went unnoticed. I’ve yet to have a prouder moment. Now let’s put these last few years behind us and get down to business, shall we?” His tone is dangerous and icy, yet he speaks to me from the heart.

I nod, acknowledging his request. It’s my last warning to knock my shit off and move forward. I’m here now, which is all that matters, and there’s nothing I can do to escape Arkham anymore.

“Excellent,” he replies, continuing our one sided conversation. “I have your assignment. I wouldn’t trust just anyone with this task, but it’s also an opportunity for you, Christian. Don’t fuck this up and don’t let me regret sending you.”

I nod again solemnly, unsure of what this important task might be waiting for him to give me the rest of the details.

The Don slides a slip of paper across the table. I look at the address, then pull a lighter out and set it on fire. I watch as it disintegrates into ash.

“Christian,” the Don booms. “Take good care of my girl for me. She will not be happy to see you. Take her back to that location. I see you still remember this one. I’ll have a team sent up there once you confirm your arrival. I have some business to tend to and I want to make sure my precious little girl is kept safe. You are to stay there with her until I arrive to grant you leave personally. Until then, you stay there with her, and you keep her safe. You will report to your superior here,” he says, pointing to the man sitting on his left. “He will run the team based on your reports and suggestions. He will only intervene if he feels your choices are reckless or dangerous. Do you understand?”

“I understand, Don Father,” I reply, keeping my eyes on the ground. Inside I am seething mad, but I focus on making my body language and tone unreadable.

“One last thing, Christian,” he says, rising and digging in his pocket. He pulls out a set of keys and tosses them to me. “You can take my car. I don’t want my princess riding on that death trap you call a motorcycle. Leave me your keys and I will see to it that the motorcycle is returned in one piece, exactly the way you left it in my care.”

I wince. I really don’t want to hand over my keys. The thought of anyone else touching my bike, let alone riding it, has me irritated. I hand him the keys despite this as he glares at me, demanding my compliance.

“I’m having it towed, Christian. You can stop worrying so much,” the Don says. “That will be all for now, my boy. We shall see each other very soon. Remember, I will come for you. Until then, stay put and keep her hidden.”

“I understand my orders,” I say with a bow and then take my leave.

The escort from earlier has reappeared and seems to be waiting for me.

“Follow me,” he instructs, leading us to the parking lot.



The escort walks alongside me nervously as he leads us to a back door. I pick up on his nerves right away. Any good soldier would. I analyze him, searching for clues. Do I make him uncomfortable with my presence? Is he jealous of the way the Don favors me? I search him for marks, but his skin is clean. The lack of branding sets me instantly on high alert. This man doesn't work for the Don. Either it's a test or a setup. The man has more enemies than he does friends. There are many who would stop at nothing to take out the most powerful man in the city. The escort stops at the door, pausing for a moment. At first I think he might be unlocking it, but then I spot the gleam of metal in his hands. He's no real escort, he's a trap.

I don't waste any time. I grab him by the back of the head and slam it into the metal door. It makes a loud thud, attracting the attention of other guards nearby. I hope they are more loyal than this poor soul.

“Hey, you stop!” A guard yells as he jogs in my direction.

The escort hangs hunched over and stumbling from the impact. He holds his head with one hand and his weapon with the other. I grab the escort, this time slamming him into the brick wall and delivering a fist to his face. One blow and he's still moving. I pummel him a second time and feel his body go limp. The man running has his gun drawn on me, but I ignore him and continue to subdue the threat. He's speaking into his earpiece. It won't be long until there's a swarm of guards. I drop the man to the ground, flaying out his body. I kick the gun out of his hand, then bend to examine it. It's a nice piece, and mine now. I shove it in my back waist band after clicking the safety on.

Right on cue, a swarm of guards surrounds me. “Stay right where you are.”

I do as I am told.

It's the Don's voice I hear next, "Christian, what is the meaning of this?" His voice is harsh and angry.

This time I push my luck, bringing my eyes slowly up to glare into his. "It was a trap. Look at this man. Go on, come closer. Where are his marks?" I ask, giving his limp body a kick. He stirs, but only for a moment. "He started acting strange when we got to the door, but then I caught this reflecting." I pull out the gun, brandishing it for the Don to see. When I do, several men draw their weapons, pointing them at me.

"Enough!" The Don snaps, waving his hand at the others. "Lower your weapons, you imbeciles. Christian means me no harm. He just did your jobs better than the entire lot of you. What if he hadn't been here? How long would it have been before this man before us shot up my club, or worse, put a bullet in me? You're a sorry bunch, all of you. Don't think this mistake won't go unpunished." He glares at the men who are supposed to be protecting him.

"What do you say, Christian?" He continues. "What do you make of this situation?"

"Sir," I reply, standing up straight and looking right at him. "I think this was an inside job. Someone here tonight let this man in. They told him how to dress and how to act. I wouldn't be surprised if, when the lights come on, you find the body of the real escort hidden away somewhere. This man had an accomplice, and the way I see it, no one should be trusted. Interrogate them all. Bring in a higher ranked team to go over the security footage, and you will find the mole."

"Explain yourself, Christian, if you thought he was a threat, why didn't you murder him and neutralize the threat?"

"With all due respect, sir, if I wanted to murder him, I could have, but those were not my orders, and what good is a corpse that doesn't speak when there are answers to seek? There's a time and a place for murder. Once he rats, you can fill his body with as many holes as you'd like. If you need me to come back and finish the job, let me know." My statement is matter of fact and it pleases the Don.

“Well done again, my boy. Christian, you never cease to amaze me with your abilities and your fine attention to detail. You’ve saved my life tonight and it won’t go unrewarded. Now, off with you. There’s another far more important job waiting for you. If I’ve been in danger tonight, there’s a chance she is in danger, too. Waste no time. Get to that address immediately and stay connected to Harvey. He will be your mentor.”

The man from earlier steps out from the Don’s shadows and hands me an ear piece. I look him over, cataloging his details. He’s got almost a decade on me.

“Put it in,” he commands, all business. “I want a report the minute you arrive. She’s with Selena. The pair won’t be hard to spot. Good luck, Christian. You’re going to need it,” he says with a twisted smile.

“Christian, on second thought. Keep the car. Consider my debt to you paid.” The Don smiles proudly, then turns and walks away.

I turn the keys over in my hand, unable to believe what just happened. Still shocked, I make my way in a bit of a daze to the parking lot in search of the car. The minute my eyes land on it, I know immediately why it’s mine. This car is sleek and fast. When I click the unlock button the taillights flash, it’s hard not to spend more than a few seconds relishing in my luck. The engine roars to life when. This is going to be a fun drive. The gps shows the address is fifteen minutes away. I wonder how fast I can get there. It sounds like a fun speed challenge as I head deep into the heart of the city.

# CHAPTER 3

ANOTHER ONE OF BRAXTON'S PARTIES IS ABOUT TO BE IN THE books. Hopefully tonight will be the night we finally hook up. I've waited for so long to find a man to take my virginity. I think I am the only one at this party who isn't having regular sex. I guess when you're a mafia princess, hot guys don't exactly line up to do the job. The minute any of them find out who my father is, they all go running. My mother has given me many lectures over the years about how it's important for me to preserve myself for the sake of the family business. I usually remind her that looting, dealing weapons, and the other illegal activities that my family practices on a regular basis are not a business. It makes me smile thinking about her. Aside from my best friend Selena, my mom is all I have. She means absolutely everything to me. She's taught me everything about how to behave as a princess. After all, I am the heir to everything. One day, the empire my father has built will be mine.

Selena bumps into me with a hip, interrupting my thoughts. She jerks her head back over her shoulder. I steal a glance in her direction and my heart sinks. Braxton's standing with the senator's daughter. Not only is she pretty, she's also perfect for him. She's everything I am not. A safe choice, the right choice. It still hurt to see him with her. The way she fawns and flirts with him has me balling my fists. Her eyes are trained on him like a crafty coyote. She's making a move on my man.

"He's mine, back off, bitch," I mutter through gritted teeth to no one in particular.

Only Selena hears me. “Calm down,” Quinn, she says, trying to soothe my wounded pride. “Remember, she doesn’t know the two of you are dating. No one does. You insisted he keep your relationship a secret, because if anyone finds out, then your cover is blown. Braxton will find out who daddy dearest is and what he does for a living. Plus, he will find out you lied about who you are. It will be even worse if he finds out you are also using him for a chance at a few hook ups.” Selena stops talking and shakes her head. She’s right, I am way too deep with my big lying mouth on this one. If I’m not careful, it will backfire. The senator’s daughter knows all about me. She would happily sell me out for a romp with Braxton.

“Fine,” I snarl, not at Selena, but rather at the situation. “If he’s going to flirt with other women, then I am going to make him incredibly jealous.”

“Quinn, honey,” Selena chides, “I don’t think that’s a good idea either, babe. You’re asking for trouble tonight. Maybe we should skip this party instead. We could swing by the store and grab some ice cream on the way back, then watch scary movies all night.”

Selena’s words sink in hard. I am on a roll tonight, but he insisted he wanted to see me. To slip away, and get lost in one another, the way we’ve both been wanting to. Well, maybe he didn’t say it exactly like that, but he invited me to this silly charity auction. I’m going to make it my personal mission to out bid her on everything tonight. I have plenty of disposable income. I narrow my eyes at the senator’s daughter and take a sip of my drink. This will be fun. Braxton catches my eye. I lift my eyebrow in return, giving him some of my famous attitude. His smile falters just enough for me to notice. Of course the girl does too, and quickly rakes her eyes over me, before I can look away.

“Shit,” Selena was right. I don’t dare look at her. I can already feel her icy steel glare washing over me.

“They are walking over here,” Selena hisses.

I watch on in horror as they get closer and closer to where Selena and I stand. Someone clinks a glass and Braxton spins around. My eyes scan the room, looking for my savior. When I spot the man, our eyes lock for a moment. I can feel the unease creeping in. He looks like he could be one of my father's men, but there's no telling for sure yet. I throw him a flirty wink, and to my surprise, he returns it. If he is one of my father's men, this might be a fun game, and if he isn't, this might be a fun night after all.

"Toast, toast," the crowd chants.

All eyes are on Braxton as he raises his glass, finishes it, and makes his way over to the microphone. He clears his throat, then begins his perfect little speech. It honestly makes me want to gouge my ears out. Who cares if a bunch of rich, snobby people are here to spend exorbitant amounts of money on extravagant items and call it charity?

"Ladies and gentlemen," his voice rumbles silky and smooth over the speakers. "I want to thank each and every one of you for joining me here tonight. Each item has a proxy bid. This enables us to ensure our clients get paid for their auction items. We will donate every dollar over the proxy bid amount to this year's charity recipient. I don't know about you, but there's something about helping other people that just fills my bucket. I am blessed to be able to give back to our community through events like these."

Everyone claps. He has them eating out of his hands. Braxton waits for the room to fall quiet once more before continuing his speech. "We have some rare items here. I hope you will find them as intriguing as I do. Thank you once more for spending the evening here with me tonight. Enjoy your night. The bidding is now open. If you would like to view the collection, head through the security check and across the hall to the smaller ballroom."

Once again, the sound of applause fills the room. I tug on Selena as everyone around us files off to the ballroom. "The guy who clinked his glass looks an awful lot like one of my father's precious knights. Be overly cautious, and if you notice

an incredibly handsome man following us, let me know right away.” I explain.

“Okay, got it, we might be busted. The plan is to feel him out, but tell me one thing: why does this involve looking at the silent auction?” She asks.

I stop dead in my tracks and smile at Selena. “I am so glad you asked, bestie. We are going to outbid the senator’s daughter on everything.”

“Quinn, babe, how do you know she’s going to bid?”

“Easy, I am going to bid first.” I shrug, pulling her after me to the security line.

“Fine, but let’s be fast. The food is terrible.”

“Yeah, yeah. I will be fast.”

Selena and I stroll through the silent auction items. I leave bids on a few items, watching little miss perfect to see if she takes the bait. A few minutes after she places her first bid, I waltz over innocently and up the bid by a substantial amount. “This is going to be fun,” I whisper to Selena.

“Mind if I play too?” She asks, nodding her head in the girl’s direction as she places another bid.

“Play away, Selena. There’s plenty of fun for both of us.” The two of us throw our heads together and share a quiet cackle.

Selena sashays her way through the room while I continue to browse the auction items. I keep scanning the room, watching for the man from earlier. I haven’t seen him yet, but it only makes me more nervous. I happen upon another item she’s bid on and up it to the proxy bid. She can make a donation if she really wants the item. Eventually, Selena and I reconvene where we started.

“Let’s do one more sweep on bids, then go look for the guy from earlier. I haven’t seen him in here yet.” Selena nods her head in response to my plan.

“I’m parched. We can look for him at the bar. We both still have our two drink vouchers. If he has the nerve to show up

with another girl after asking you to meet him here, then we may as well take advantage of his hospitality.”

“Deal.” I reply.



We circle back through the auction, upping our bids on each item she’s bid on, then make a beeline back to the main party room and head straight to the bar. At the bar while we wait on our drinks to be made, I scan the room, looking for the man from before.

“What did he look like?” Selena asks, trying to be helpful.

“Everything about him screamed Arkham, and I don’t know how to explain it. His eyes were deep, piercing green pools. He was tall, well dressed, and—“ My voice stalls as my eyes land right on him.

He’s sitting across the room at a table on the other side of the bar. From looking at him in better lighting, I am certain that I’ve spotted one of my father’s men, likely sent in by the recovery team, to draw me out peacefully. I weigh my options. If I make a scene, Braxton will find out exactly who I am, but if I leave quietly, only my pride is wounded and I can keep up my charade. I shoot a glance over at Braxton and the girl. They’ve rejoined the party and are mingling with guests again. Damn it, if they don’t look good together. Do I even still want to be involved with him? I wonder. If I don’t cash things in tonight, then chances are it will never happen. Not with little miss perfect over there, hanging on his arm like a lovesick puppy dog.

While I seethe in my jealousy and anger, a devilish scheme comes to mind. I can make this situation work to my advantage despite the disrespect I’ve been shown by Braxton tonight. Where does he get off inviting me to something like this, then attending with another woman dangling from his arm all night? Could this be a weird way of telling me we are over? That’s fine. If he wants to publicly humiliate me, then two can play that game. I am going to show him just how little

he actually meant to me. I want to make Braxton jealous, and this guy wants me to leave with him. It seems like we could make a trade. Braxton will think I am leaving with this guy, and be pissed. The knight sent to retrieve me will succeed on his mission, and that will earn him recognition. It's the perfect plan. All that's left to do is negotiate my conditions. I need to key Selena in on my little plan before I go rushing off to cause more mischief.

“Five o'clock behind you. Just do a quick look back, then smile at me like you think he's cute. I think we are busted, or at least I am busted, but there's still a way for this to work out in my favor.” My voice is a low whisper.

Selena does exactly as I tell her to. While I whisper my plan to her. “He's cute, right?” I ask her. “Don't you think Braxton might get annoyed if he sees the two of us dancing together? Then when we leave together, it will really push him off the deep end. He's going to be furious, and I fucking love it.”

She stifles a laugh. “Tell me you are not going to make Braxton jealous.”

“Oh, you better believe I am. I hope it teaches him a lesson. He should know better, a tit for a tat. Fucking glorious revenge.” I explain, basking in the evilness of it all.

“It sounds bat shit crazy, count me in,” Selena exclaims with a wink.

“Alright, watch and learn, baby. I'm about to turn his world upside down. Just be ready to make a break for it if things go south.” I say confidently, strolling over to the Arkham Knight come to ruin my fun.

“I can't wait to watch this go down, darling.” Selena hisses after me, trying to keep her voice low.

There's a small jaunt to my step. I can feel both men's eyes on me. Behind me, I can feel Braxton's cool, steely gaze as he watches me approach this other man. In front of me, the knight stares me down. Our eyes are locked in battle, neither one of us backing down. His eyes are such dark pools, I quickly find

myself getting lost in them. Far too soon, I slide into the open chair at his table.

“Don’t think I will go easily?” I warn him. “I know exactly why you are here, and I have no interest in leaving unless I get something in return.”

He scoffs at me, “*Qui suis je? Who am I?*”

“English, I don’t speak French.”

“Who am I?”

“A knight.” I say without hesitation.

“Oui,” he starts to translate, but I interrupt him.

“I know that one, thanks.” My sarcasm is thick and unapologetic. “Here’s my offer. I only want to make a teeny tiny appearance. In a few minutes, there’s a very important dance. Let’s call it revenge. I want you to dance with me, and look like you’re enjoying it. If you do a good job, I will go with you willingly.”

“A dance?” That’s all he asks, eyeing me suspiciously.

“That’s all, and it will start in a few minutes.”

“Okay, deal.” He replies, to my surprise. “But if you don’t come willingly, I am going to make a scene, and I can see you are trying to avoid that for the purpose of revenge.”

“I’ll keep my end of the bargain. It’s you we have to worry about. As you pointed out, I am deep in my revenge scheme with not much to lose. You, on the other hand—“ I say, standing to walk away.

To my surprise, he also jumps up from the table. “I always hold up my fucking end of a deal.” He growls, interrupting me, pulling me close to him, until our two bodies feel molded together.

“You’re all grown up now, and you don’t even recognize me,” his voice rasps in my ear, sending goosebumps across my body. “You like when I whisper sweet nothings in your ear, *belle fille, beautiful girl?*”

I have no idea what he said in French. Before I can melt into a puddle of goo where we stand melded into one another, the music stops, and a deep voice announces into the microphone. “Ladies and gentleman, please make your way to the dance floor, for a very special donor dance.”

“You donated to this?” He asks judgementally, gesturing around the room.

“Come on, you don’t need to know all my revenge plans.” I pull him to the giant ballroom floor. Braxton’s charity parties are always extravagant. They have to be, I guess, to lure all the city’s wealthiest people to one party.

The knight leads me on to the dance floor and we take our place as we are instructed. The music starts, and he offers me his outstretched hand, just like a gentleman. I accept, melting into him comfortably. His fingers trail up the small of my back, sending a sensual flutter through my already starving body. Despite the electricity pulsing through me with every touch, I lay my hand against his chest. I wonder who he is. How many men he’s had to kill to get to this position? To be sent on a solo retrieval mission, my father must have a lot of confidence in his abilities.

As if he can read my thoughts, he speaks in a deep whisper against my ear. “I’ve worked so hard to get to this point, to make my way back to you.”

My breath catches. Does he know me? He’s been trying to get back to me?

“Je t’adore, *I adore you*,” He rasps, before dipping me. When he lifts me back up, I cling to him like a wet, needy rag doll. “I adore you, Q. I’m sorry it took me so long to get my shit together.”

My smile is spreading across my lips slowly as the recognition creeps in. “Christian,” I gasp in awe of the man’s arms I find myself in.

“Tu me manques, I miss you, Q.”

“After all this time, you think you can just show up at some party, help me with a revenge scheme, return me to my

father to receive his praise, and all will be like it was? You left Christian. You ran. From me, from Arkham, from everyone.” I say hurt.

“I was going through a lot. It was a stupid choice, one I’ve paid for over and over. Once I accepted my destiny, everything changed.” His fingers reach out to brush my cheek lightly. It shouldn’t awaken anything inside me, it shouldn’t send me catapulting off a cliff, aching for more.

“It’s not like that. You can’t just come back and try to impress me. You left and now you’ve sold out. The way I see it, you’re enemy number one now.” My voice is dangerous, steeped in poisonous words.

The music stops, and I try to walk off, but he grabs me by the wrist, forcing me back into his arms. “Don’t make a scene, Q. I can make things right, just give me a chance. Now, if you really want a perfect ending to your revenge plan, why don’t you go ahead and kiss me?” He leans in on me, but he’s barking up the wrong tree. I no longer care about my revenge scene. This is bigger than petty revenge. I don’t care if I make a scene anymore. It’s time to go, but I am not giving Christian the satisfaction of bringing me into my father.

“No thanks,” I push against him.

He grabs me by the hair and forces his lips onto mine. I try to slap him, but he catches my hand in midair, stopping me. His kiss is hard and hungry. Christian’s lips claim mine like I am some kind of prize to be won. His grip loosens on my hair as my lips part and our tongues tangle together in a dangerous dance off. I shouldn’t be kissing him back, or falling into his strong arms. This man works for my father now. He’s not mine and he never will be. I need to run, to get far away from such a dangerous predator, but my feet stay firmly planted where they are as our tongues continue to tango together. When he finally breaks our kiss without saying a word, he throws me over his shoulder and carries me out the door.

# CHAPTER 4

THE VALET HAS MY CAR WAITING. I SPEAK INTO MY EAR PIECE again, "I have the package secured." I know my success won't make up for turning off the ear piece earlier, but it keeps me alive. Seeing Quinn again, feeling her in my arms like that, awakened something inside of me. I've dreamt of this outcome every day after fleeing. Leaving her was the hardest part of running from Arkham. When I turned my back on the world, it meant I turned my back on her, too. I fucked up, and I've had to live with it. There was no other way; I would have been his prisoner. Even now I am only free in the extent of my place on the inside. I can be at the top or I can be at the bottom. The Don Father has made his punishment clear: I will earn my seat. Quinn though, these feelings, they complicate things. I never expected seeing her again would have me catching feelings like this. We were going to run away from this life together and see the world. I left without her, and I know she still hasn't forgiven me for it. Not even after all this time.

I plop Quinn into the passenger seat as she curses at me. It's like we've picked up right where we left off. Growing up, she resented the way the Don Father took me under his wing. Looking back on it now, I am sure she felt forced to serve me, our love story non-existent. Now that I've sold out after all these years of running, I'm even worse in her eyes. I think she would hate me less if I had stayed. I couldn't stay though, not when everything about Arkham, everything about this city, and everything about myself reminded me of them.

When I slide into the driver's seat next to Quinn, I have to quickly turn my head to hide my smile. She's sitting there arms crossed, pouting and damn it if she doesn't look fucking

tempting. I ponder about it for a split second before shaking the bad idea from my head. These are the kind of terrible ideas that can get a man killed by the Arkham mafia. Quinn is strictly off limits. I may have a claim to her, and she may have belonged to me once before, but things are different now. He has no reason to keep his word.

She's not to be thought of. It's one of the Don Father's rules, but then again, rules are meant to be fucking broken. He made my parents a promise, one I've thought about over and over for years. One he's held over me at countless intervals during our back-and-forth exchanges. Every time I ran, he was there to send me a reminder. If I wanted him to keep a promise, then I had to play by his rules. It would also mean accepting my destiny instead of running. I wasn't ready then to accept what I would have to become or how many men I would have to kill, but I am ready now. Once my mind was made up, I knew what I had to do to stake my claim and win Quinn back.

The car engine purrs to life as I start it and rev up the motor. She sets her eyes on me to glare angrily. Quinn is pissed, and she's going to have no problem taking it out on me. I can't wait to get this car ride over with. Did I really think she would be happy to see me? Except she was, I think to myself, with a smirk. The minute I called her Q, my old nickname for her, she melted. I saw it flash across her face for a split second.

"What's wrong, princess? You said I needed to look like I was enjoying myself? I was only following directions." I say, pushing her buttons in all the right places.

"Twisted lies. What a surprise," she snaps at me.

"It's not a lie. I held up my side of the bargain. Let's get you home."

She rolls her eyes and turns away from me, grumbling. "What a good little knight you are, Christian. He says, 'fetch,' and you say, 'yes, sir.' What other new tricks do you know?"

My cock jumps the minute the words yes, sir roll off her fucking lips. It shouldn't turn me on, and yet all I can think

about is hearing her submit to me. It doesn't matter how many times I imagine it. It will never happen. She said it earlier, and she's right. We are enemies now. I sold out, taking an oath to protect her, and she just wants to spread her wings and fly free. I ignore her, choosing instead to concentrate on the road. I'm speeding, but in this city, I can do whatever I want. While in his service, I am untouchable. Most of the coppers are dirty, and we happen to work for the same boss. These days I can get away with murder, and what a fucking relief that is.

"Was this part of the bribe, too?" She snaps at me, waving her hand around at the car. Great, she recognizes it. I'm sure this already complicates things between us. Quinn's always been jealous of the way her father spoiled me. I can tell from the familiar tone of her voice she's not happy.

"Not that it's really any of your business, emmerdeuse, *pain in the ass*," I growl back at her. "This was actually a reward—" She interrupts me before I can finish my sentence.

"A reward? Oh well, that certainly changes things, doesn't it?" Quinn rolls her eyes at me, laying the sarcasm on nice and thick. "I guess all that time away didn't change you at all. Here I thought since you speak French fluently now you might have come back more cultured." Under her breath she adds, "What a waste."

I sigh. I can't win this battle. I may as well let her get it all out. "Go ahead. I deserve it. Tell me all the reasons you have to hate me. It's not like I haven't thought it all myself before."

"Well, that takes all the fucking fun out of it, doesn't it? Self righteous asshole much?"

I wince. This is still going better than I thought it might. We ride in silence. Rather than give me the satisfaction of hearing why she hates me, Quinn gives me the cold shoulder. It's fine. She can ignore me all she wants. Once she realizes where we are going, she's going to lose her shit. We turn off the main road and I begin the countdown in my head. Any second, she'll realize where we are going. Right on cue, I hear her suck a breath in.

“This isn’t funny, Christian. Take me home.” Her voice sounds tired.

“I can’t.”

“What do you mean, you can’t?” She asks, teeth clenched.

“I have my orders,” I reply, flat and emotionless.

“Fuck your orders, Christian, and fuck you. Fucking sell out.” Quinn shouts at me.

“You’ll never understand what I’ve given up to be a sellout.” My voice is deep and defeated.

“Why don’t you try me? No one made you come back. It was your choice.” She snaps back at me, annoyed.

I roll my eyes. “Yeah, Q. Let me tell you. Being knocked out, drugged, and stuffed in the trunk of a car is my favorite way to travel. Some kind of choice.”

“You should have never left!”

Tears are brimming in her eyes, threatening to spill over. I’m not going to apologize for leaving. It’s not like I expect her to understand why I had to, or that I came back for her. I let them catch me. Does she really think they caught me and dragged me back against my will? If I didn’t want to be here, I wouldn’t be here, simple as that. I purse my lips, continuing to drive in silence. The tension between us is thick. It was stupid to think that one kiss might smooth things over and mend some of the hate between us. I run my hands through my hair in frustration. It was deranged to imagine she might consider forgiving me. Fine. I don’t have to make it enjoyable. This can be all business. I am perfectly capable of performing my duties without an ounce of emotion. I came back to make amends, but if she doesn’t want to, I’ll just take what’s mine and she can hate me for it all she wants. I’ve said it before. If I can’t escape him, then I have to become him. If that means killing the Don to climb to the top, then I guess I won’t have any remorse over pulling the trigger. Arkham will be mine; it is mine, and one day I will control everything as the Don with her by my side or six feet under with the rest of her family. I steal another look at her. It would be a shame to lose her, but if

the only woman I've ever loved can't love me back, then it's not a life worth living with her. If I can't have her, no one else will.

My eyes dart to the rear-view mirror. A car with all the lights off just pulled out behind us. They might not think I noticed them, but my years spent fleeing and hiding mean I notice shit like that right away. Otherwise, the Arkham knights would have brought me in years ago.

"Get down on the ground," I snarl at Quinn, catching her off guard.

"Fuck you, Christian!" She flips me off.

A gunshot explodes through the back window, sending glass shattering everywhere. I'm driving the Don's car, which makes me a sitting duck for anyone who was planning to harm him tonight. I'm not sure who is behind these attacks, but somebody is going through an awful lot of trouble to try to kill him. I don't have the clearance level to know who our enemies are working for. My directive is to take them out using any means necessary. It's not just my life that is in danger right now. If I lose Quinn, I'm a dead man walking. There's no coming back from that. He trusted me tonight with his daughter's life, and if this is a test to see if I am worthy of my prize, then I won't feel a bit of remorse for taking out more Arkham men. Sure, I might want to rule them all one day, but until then I am going to have my fun. The way I see it is every soldier I drop is retribution for my parents. A debt that will never be repaid. Instead, the blood of my enemies will give me solace, and that is what fuels my every move.

"Get down, Quinn!" I shout again, this time shoving her body towards the floor of the passenger side.

I slam on the brakes and crank the wheel hard, spinning us around to face the assailants. Quinn screams, terrified.

From my breast pocket, I pull my Smith and Wesson, roll the window down, then squeeze out three rounds into the front driver's side tire. The car spins uncontrollably before slamming into a road barrier. I don't pull over to finish the job. We are taught two things during our initiation into the lowest

ranks of Arkham. Always protect the package; safety is put above all else, and never leave unfinished business, unless you are putting safety above all else. As we pass by the wreckage, I fire into the windshield and hope I put enough holes through the driver. It's the best I can do to finish my business and keep Quinn safe.

The tires screech as I spin us back around and floor it. I speak into my ear piece calmly, calling in the attempted assassination to Harvey. Quinn is pulling herself off the floor of the car. My first reaction is to comfort her, but then I immediately remember our predicament. I leave her to wrap her arms around herself protectively, trembling in the seat. My body is hyper-focused now as I scan the road as far as my eyes can see. He's bringing one of the top units to meet us and secure the safe house, but until they arrive, we are on our own.

I pull onto a smaller side road, catching the loose gravel and drifting the car around the corner. This route might take longer, but my instincts are telling me it's time to get off the main stretch. Someone is hunting the Don tonight and we are leading them right to the safe house. Harvey complimented me on the ear piece saying they believe I am correct. It's an inside job and some of our own men are dirty. It's not all that surprising considering how cutthroat the organization is. I'm their favored recruit and I've enjoyed every single kill I've made on members of the organization. The world is a fucked up place and the journey to the top comes with a cost.

“Putain, *Fuck!* I need to steal a mother fucking car and blow this one up.” My fist slams into the center of the steering wheel and the horn blares.

Go figure I get a nice fucking car as a reward and now I have to watch it burn. That's karma alright.

Quinn stares at me in a daze for a moment before the old her bursts through the shield she's been hiding behind. “What do we do? There's nowhere to get another car. I haven't been here since—“ Her voice trails off, unable to bring herself to say it.

“Je suis desolé c’est ma faute, *I’m sorry it’s my fault*. I should have checked the car after the attempt at the club.”

Quinn opens her mouth to reply to me, but I hold my hand up in protest. “Get on your phone and look for a neighborhood, a town, a gas station, anything nearby where we can steal a car.”

She does what she’s told. Within a few minutes, she’s found a gas station a few miles away. It’s not ideal, but at the very least we can steal the attendant’s car. The directions playing every few minutes are the only sound in the car. Our silence continues. If we are going to make it to the safe house in one piece, she’s going to have to speak to me and do some things that might make her uncomfortable.

“You’re going to have to distract the attendant,” I say, breaking the silence.

“What exactly did you have in mind, or do you just want me to take my clothes off so you can watch?” Her tone cuts into me like a whip.

I can feel the hate in her words. She’s such a stubborn little brat, but she’s my stubborn little brat. I needed a way to secure my place, ensuring the Don’s word is kept and this little situation is a peace offering from the universe. A truce disguised as an opportunity to once again prove my competence. If I keep Quinn safe tonight, she’s mine and the Don Father will have no claim against my request for payment.

She doesn’t have to love me yet, but the hate she has proves she loved me once and is capable of loving me again. I’ll be the villain of her story, trapping her in an arranged marriage she doesn’t fucking want; forcing her day after day to remember how to love me. I’ll break her or she can meet a tragic end just like her father will one day.

# CHAPTER 5

WE GLIDE INTO THE GAS STATION PARKING LOT, AND I DO A lap around scoping out cars. There's only one car in the parking lot, and the look on Quinn's face says it all. An old Volkswagen bug sits in the employee parking space in the back alley. This is actually perfect. It will be easy to steal and she won't even have to go inside. I cut the lights and the engine, then park the Don's car next to the bug. Its paint is peeling and there's a giant pair of dice hanging from the rear-view mirror.

I motion for Quinn to get out of the car and follow me. "Keep an eye out," I whisper, pointing at the gas station.

"What are you going to do?" She hisses.

"Steal this car, duh." I roll my eyes at her and pull a knife from my pocket.

Luck really is on my side tonight. The car is unlocked. I creak the door open as quietly as possible and motion for Quinn to climb inside. She scrunches up her nose, absolutely disgusted with me, but scurries in carefully. When I turn my back, I roll my eyes a second time. "Just get in. I'm not looking," I hiss, trying not to laugh at her modesty with me. She's already mine. She just won't admit it yet.

"Ugh, for your information, I am trying not to rip my dress. Look all you want and then dream on. You don't have a chance, Christian." She huffs at me in disgust.

I chuckle and look over my shoulder quickly, like I'm dying to catch a peek at something. "It's okay, I can tell you're way out of my league Princesse, *Princess*. I mean, clearly a

woman in your league doesn't always need a revenge scheme, but when she does, it's to get back at the city's most eligible bachelor."

She scoffs at me again. "Fuck off, Christian. You're such an ass. This is exactly why I gave up on you. I told him not to bring you back, you know. I told him to let you go, because we didn't need someone as weak as you." Her words are venomous fireballs now as she hurls them at me one by one. "I was right; we didn't need you then and we don't need you now. I don't know what he sees in you, honestly. We've been doing just fine since you left, if you can't tell. So why did you come back? Are you here to poach off my inheritance? To get in my way?"

Fuck. Not here, not now. I've been hoping to get her to this point all night, but it's not good timing. "Putain de merde! Non, mon bijou. Mon princesse. Bijou de mon coeur. Je suis ici pour me rendre. *Fuck god damn it! No, my jewel. My princess. Jewel of my heart. I am here to surrender.*"

"Fucking English, Christian!" She whisper shouts at me. "You disappear out of the country and come back fluent in French. I have no idea what you are saying."

I shush her, and she opens her mouth to rip into me, but the car roars to life at exactly the right moment, drowning her out. I shift it into gear roughly, and back us out quickly. The moment I feel the gear grab, we are propelled forward as fast as this car can handle. We fly down the alley and back onto the main road, leaving the Don's car to self-destruct in five minutes. One perk of Arkham is having access to vehicles with a self destruct system built right in.

We are long gone by the time the car explodes, flying down the back roads to the safety of our childhood retreat. Why the Don picked this house to use tonight escapes me. There are others just as far outside of the city. He had to know this house would cause terrible memories to resurface for both of us. Unless he was being sentimental. It was the very last place we were together before I left. I shake my head, trying to turn off my thoughts so I'm undistracted. There's a lot going on tonight, and the last thing I need is to miss something

important. Our silence is eating me alive. I'm about to open my mouth to speak to her, but she beats me to it.

“Are you going to tell me what you said back there?”

“No.” I reply.

“Why not?” She pries.

“It's not important.” I answer.

“Fine, don't tell me. I don't care.” She crosses her arms and leans back in the seat.

I can't help but laugh. “Yes, you do,” I say with a dubious smile.

She ignores me. Refusing to say another word for the rest of the drive. Thankfully, we arrived twenty minutes later. We drove the obnoxious bug through the entire gated community around the mountain we flew until we reached the house at the very top. Another gate and metal fencing separated it from the rest of the mansions. This house sits regally on the top of the mountain, custom-built into the highest peak. Everything looked in order. The gate and fencing remained intact, the keypad untouched. I scan my thumbprint, unsure if I have clearance to be here still or not. The pad flashes green and the heavy gates glide open, inviting us back inside.

I blink and flashes of blood and bodies everywhere fill my thoughts. I wonder if Quinn is having the same reaction. Stealing a quick glance out of the corner of my eye, she's staring off into space with her mouth is twisted in a frown. The guilt is eating away at me, and I've finally had enough. I reach over and grab her hand, giving it a squeeze. “It will be okay. It's only for a few days. Your father had the entire house renovated. He completely gutted everything and changed the entire floor plan. It will be totally different when we walk inside. I know it's hard to imagine, and it might hurt to see all the spaces gone, completely transformed. It's protocol. Most servants don't even know this house still exists. There are maybe five living people who know about it and its whereabouts. It was redesigned so they could bring men in blind if it was ever necessary.”

She clings to my hand for a minute, as if she's forgotten how angry she is for a moment, and then she jerks her hand away.

"I don't care. I don't know why you are even telling me this," she sighs, annoyed with me just as we arrive at the top of the drive.

My breath catches. Even the exterior has been redesigned differently. If I didn't know for a fact, I grew up spending countless hours inside the walls of this house. I would believe it was a different location.

"Let's get inside and pull the car into the garage," I suggest putting the car in neutral and pulling the e-brake.

Quinn nods, opening her door and stepping out of the car. In her party dress, she's quite the sight against the backdrop of a mansion. My feelings stir in my loins again, reminding me how close I am to taking hold of what's mine- what's been mine for years.

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I'm looking at her and she's looking back at me. Fuck if it doesn't hurt to see each other this way. Raw and vulnerable, there's something so right about this moment. It's like the universe knew it would take something colossal to bring us back together again. We are both reluctant to admit our feelings to the other. She's still hurt from when I left and me, well, I'm guilty. I abandoned her when she needed me to stay, and she will never understand why it had to be this way.

I cut my eyes, breaking our connection. I can't take advantage of her, or can I? Do I dare take what's mine? Fulfilling my payment without permission? Would she keep our secret or would she use it as leverage for my death? Which she so admittedly argued in favor of. I'm perplexed and torn. Opportunity has presented itself and there's something thrilling about the idea of a secretive fuck. A consummation and claim all rolled into a dirty little secret we both shamefully protect. The wheels are spinning as I allow myself to admire my thirst for victory.

I move to key in the door code but Quinn brushes my hand to the side, typing it in herself.

“I want you to remember that I don’t need you, Christian. I haven’t needed you in years and coming back isn’t going to change that.” Her words cut into me like daggers.

I deflate, but only for a minute. Quinn reaches for the handle, but I beat her to it. “You may not need me, emmerdeuse, *pain in the ass*, but your father pays me to keep you safe and I know this doesn’t bother you, but I’ve worked hard to stay alive for all these years. I don’t feel like dying for you today princesse, *princess*.”

She slides out of the way and I throw open the door, placing my body in front of Quinn protectively. We make our way to the garage clearing areas as we go. Once the car is hidden safely in the garage so as not to draw suspicion from the neighbors, I drag her back inside to continue clearing the house. With the lower level done, I check all the bolts on the basement door. Satisfied, I set the motion detectors to on and we head upstairs. The brand new carpet cushions our every step. I’m fairly certain it’s the first time anyone other than the renovators has walked on it. We move efficiently from room to room in complete silence. Once I am satisfied the house is empty, I walk her into one of the guest bedrooms. The room is large and spacious, with an attached bath. Quinn flips on the television, which plays a security feed loop across the screen. I walk past her, glancing momentarily at the screen, then continuing into the bathroom. When I enter the bathroom, I sweep it one more time before turning on the shower for her. It’s the only peace offering I have. She pops into the bathroom, trying to see if she can sneak up on me, knowing full well she’s going to fail. I sensed her immediately and look at her with a smirk.

“Go get yourself cleaned up. The house is supposed to have spare clothes, and I started the shower for you. Let me know when you’re done. I’ll be here waiting for the others to arrive,” I instruct, pulling a towel from a linen closet and laying it on the countertop.

She says nothing. I shrug and walk out of the bedroom, closing the door behind me, then leaning against the wall in defeat.

“Putain, *Fuck!*” I curse under my breath. What am I getting myself into? Why am I here? Why did I come back? I run my hands through my hair, trying to calm my nerves. The time on my phone shows we have at least a few hours before anyone else arrives. We’re in the home stretch. The question really is, can I bring myself to trap Quinn in my revenge scheme? Do I have it in me to force her to comply? I curse again. The time has come to make my choice. It’s now or not this way.

# CHAPTER 6

I FALL INTO THE DOOR FRAME IN A DAZE. TONIGHT HAS NOT gone as planned. Now I am trapped alone in a house where all my worst nightmares came true. I'm fighting an internal battle between acting on my feelings toward Christian and continuing to resent him for abandoning me. Despite everything, I've longed for this moment for years. Always dreaming that one day he would swoop back into my life like a knight in shining armor and whisk me away. Except he's not here to take me away, he's here to stay. There will be no more running. There will be no escape. The only thing there will be is a lifetime of service. Christian belongs to Arkham now, and my father won't let him leave alive.

I have spent years yearning for this scenario and now I don't know if I can bring myself to forgive him. Do I want Christian or do I want freedom? Now that I know I can't have both, it makes the decision that much harder. Everything about him still gives me butterflies. The way he says my name, and the look in his eyes when he knows I've caught him staring at me. He's so very much the same Christian that I've longed for all this time, and yet he's also different. His body is that of a man's now, for starters. He's no longer this gangly teenager, swearing he'll keep me safe. He's a towering, muscular monster, with big strong arms and abs that can make a girl melt against them. His eyes are no longer filled with wonder and mischief. Instead, they are mysterious and secretive, holding all the details of his past. The most important difference, though, is that he wears my father's marks. He's no longer free.

I sigh, giving up on my thoughts of Christian and the way he speaks in French. The words roll off his tongue like a love song for my ears. It's been driving me wild all night. I reach for the zipper on my dress, only to realize it's broken. Here I've reminded him several times that I don't need him and now, in order to actually get in this shower, I have to ask for help. I debate for a moment, just skipping the shower and sleeping in my dress, but I'm uncomfortable and mentally exhausted. A shower sounds relaxing, plus it's a good way to pass the time until backup arrives.

I swallow my pride and head back into the bedroom to ask him to unzip me. Part of me hopes he doesn't get any ideas, and part of me hopes he does. I imagine him unzipping me slowly, then peeling my dress off until I'm standing in front of him, naked. He takes his time kissing every inch of me, all the while gently working his way into me and taking me as his. It sends a rush of adrenaline through my nerves, imagining how good it would feel. How right it would feel to finally give in to our desires. He doesn't deserve me though, I think, shutting down the images of my fantasy and stomping to the door. He doesn't deserve to have me, not after he left me here alone.



I open the door to find Christian standing in the doorway just as he said he would be. "Can you unzip me? The zipper must have broken at some point tonight, and now it's stuck."

I wait on pins and needles for a snarky reply from him. I fully expect him to remind me that I don't need his help. I'm surprised when he motions for me to step in front of him.

"Hold your hair up." His breath is hot in my ear, and his voice is a low raspy growl from exhaustion.

It makes my heart beat faster. I close my eyes, enjoying the feel of his warm hands as he slides his fingers down my back to keep the zipper from pinching me. His fingers trail all the way down my spine until they come to rest against the small

of my back. He lingers for a moment, then jerks his hand away as if touching my skin has burned him.

“There you go, mon princesse, *my princess*. Go take your shower.” His words are abrupt and emotionless. It feels like he’s holding back, but why, I wonder?

Maybe I’ve been too harsh, or perhaps there’s an undeniable pull between the two of us. Our body chemistry screams out with desire, begging us each to give in to the other and succumb to our deep, dark fantasies. I close my eyes and allow myself one more moment to imagine screaming out his name while he takes me beneath him. It will never happen. I’ve made it clear I loathe him and Christian is far too immersed within the confines of Arkham to break an oath. To touch the Don’s daughter the ways I am imagining without a blessing, or permission, it’s a bloody death sentence. He’s already said he won’t die for me.

I turn and lay a hand against his chest before staring deep into his eyes. “Christian, thank you, and I’m—“ I am just about to apologize when he stops me.

His body slams into mine, throwing me to the ground inside the room. Everything is happening so fast. I push myself from the ground to yell at him for shoving me and let out a scream. “Christian!” I shout as I watch a bullet go whizzing through the air and connect with his shoulder.

Tears immediately start pouring down my face. I can’t hear anything, because my ears are ringing, but I can feel the burn in my throat as I scream out my apologies to him. “I am so sorry. I never got the chance to tell you. Christian, please. Please pull through. Don’t die on me. You can’t die on me, you fucking jerk.”

Christian falls to the ground with a thud but within seconds; he is sitting up and pointing his gun across the hall from where the bullet flew through the air. He squeezes his trigger, rapidly firing several rounds. I can hear the attacker cry out in agony and I watch in horror as Christian stands. With one hand, he puts pressure on his shoulder and with the other, he points his gun. I crawl to the doorway, peeking my

head around the corner to watch. There's a man stooped over against the hallway wall. He holds his hand to his chest as blood pours from where Christian's bullets connected. He literally blew his hand off and I suddenly have the urge to vomit. I continue to watch anyway. Christian kicks the man in the ribs. The man falls forward and I realize he's bleeding from his stomach, too.

"Who sent you?" Christian snarls.

"Fuck you, fucking Arkham pretty boy," the man pops off.

Christian is close enough now he brings the handle of his gun down hard across his temple. He hits him with such force it stuns him and for a split second; I think he's dead.

"I said, who sent you? Who do you work for?" He snarls at the intruder again.

"I told you, I'm not talking. I work alone and that's all you need to know," the man pops off again, mocking Christian.

"That's fine. If you work alone, then you've already told me all I need to know," Christian teases, drawing his gun along the man's cheek, then shoving it in his mouth. "Any last words, Mr. I Work Alone?" The man starts to protest, but Christian pulls the trigger, ending him once and for all.

I yelp at the sound of another gunshot. I'm no longer sure how to feel. Part of me is absolutely terrified, but the other has never been so turned on before. This man just saved my life. He murdered a very bad guy in order to protect me.

I must be quite the sight when he turns to see me standing in the doorway. He takes a few steps toward me, stumbling just a little. "Are you okay? Are you hurt? I'm so sorry for pushing you."

Christian appears to be in shock. He must be dizzy from the trauma of being struck by a bullet. He drops to his knees when he gets to me and reaches for my hand, then falls to the ground just inside the room. I crouch next to him, tears streaming down my face. "Let me see how bad it is. Should I call an ambulance?"

“No,” he replies, stroking my jaw and wiping away my tears. “It’s not that bad,” he musters, wincing. “I think it just grazed me, but it burns.” This time he gives a light laugh.

“What can I do?” I ask.

“Turn off the water and grab a clean cold rag.” Christian’s words are calm, and the color is returning to his face. I don’t want to leave him, but he insists he will be fine.

I hurry to the bathroom to retrieve the cold rag, and bring it back to him quickly.

“Pull back my shirt. Go ahead, unbutton it and see if the bullet needs to be dug out,” he instructs.

My fingers tremble as I undo his buttons. When I have his shirt halfway unbuttoned, I stop for a moment to lay my hand against his chest. I can feel the steady thud of his heart against me and it brings some relief. His hand finds mine resting gently on top of it. “I know what you said. I heard you, I mean. What is it you never got to tell me?” His eyes are searching mine for some kind of juicy tidbit. There’s a glimmer of hope in them. Hope for my forgiveness maybe, or relief to see the way I do care for him still after all this time, despite my hurtful declarations of hate.

“I..I.” I stammer, not ready to confess.

I slip my hand from beneath his and pull his shirt back. On his chest is a mark. It’s one of Arkham’s, but I don’t know what they all mean. Seeing him branded like this makes my heart ache for him. He didn’t want this life for himself or for me. We had such big plans. Plans that will never come true now. A tear escapes, rolling slowly down my face and landing on his mark. I wipe it away and pull his shirt back even more, ripping it. I think we both knew that was inevitable. When I see the wound, I look away quickly, then force myself to look again. His skin is singed and red. It’s gruesome, but not deep. I think Christian was right. It only appears to have grazed him. I press the cool washcloth to his chest and feel him breathe a sigh of relief. He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath in. Against me, his entire body relaxes. With one hand still resting on the wound, applying slight pressure to continue to stop the

bleeding, I use the other to trace his chest lightly. He catches me mid swirl and brings my fingers to his lips. He kisses them lightly.

“Merci.” He whispers against them before kissing them again.

I can't stand it any longer. My walls come crumbling down. Gone is the pain and hatred. I'm fueled only by my cravings and desires. No longer holding back, I pull my hand away, replacing my fingers with my lips. I am kissing him. I am kissing Christian, and he's kissing me back. His lips devour mine. With his functioning arm, he tangles his hand in my hair and pulls me in closer. He kisses me harder and more intensely. I never want it to stop. My head is swirling and my judgment clouded, but this feels like a kiss better than all the others. It's long, hungry, sensual, intense. Everything I dreamed of if he ever came back for me. I've waited years for this moment and I never want it to end.

# CHAPTER 7

## CHRISTIAN-

OUR LIPS ARE CRASHING TOGETHER, AND IT'S AGONIZING ecstasy. I wince as I pull her body over mine until she straddles me. I've waited so long for this moment to feel her in my arms. Our bodies are betraying us both, slammed together, yearning for the embrace of the other, screaming for more. I can't get enough of her and the way her lips keep begging me. My hands roam freely all over her body while she straddles me. I know she can feel how hard my cock is. Her pussy is like fire melting on top of it, begging me to claim it as mine. She kisses me over and over as if making up for all the lost time when we should have been together.

Finally, I force myself to break the kiss. Things are getting too intense and I don't want to do this with a corpse across the hall. I press a finger to her lips. "Not here, mon bella princesse, *my beautiful princess.*"

She sits back on my cock, knowing full well what she's doing as her hips work rhythmically against me. A low moan escapes my lips.

"English, Christian. I don't know what you are saying." She leans over, purring into my ear.

I swing my good arm around her waist and maneuver us both up to standing. She wraps her legs around me, clinging on, refusing to let go now that we've given in to the tension between us. Her lips trail light kisses against my neck, peppering my skin. It makes it hard to concentrate as I walk us to the bathroom to look for a first aid kit. I want to rip this dress off her and admire what I've been missing out on, but I

don't; I set her down on the sink and unwrap her legs from around me. When I step back, she immediately protests.

"I have to bandage this, beau bijou, *beautiful jewel*. Why don't you slip this off," I say, tugging the fabric of her dress down her shoulder.

There's a first aid kit under the sink and I pull it out as she hops down from where I left her. She stands at my side with her back to me. I have to force myself to look away for a few seconds to grab supplies. Slowly Quinn pulls the fabric down off of each shoulder. It's driving me wild, watching her tease me like this. I'm so fixated on her, my hands are struggling to bandage up my wound without the assistance of my eyes. Reluctantly, I cut my gaze away to wrap some bandaging around the dressing. She throws a glaring look over her shoulder before dropping the fabric, leaving it hanging around her waist. I pat the tape holding everything together lightly, then spin my finger around and whisper, "turn around and stop teasing me."

I lay my shirt and jacket across the sink and check the time on my watch. There's still plenty of time.

"What's wrong, Christian? Are you afraid of what will happen if we get caught?" She asks, spinning around to face me.

"Take it the rest of the way off before I rip it off," I growl.

There's about to be no time to turn back. If I die, then I guess I will die a happy man. It's like I said, rules are meant to be fucking broken and I am about to break rule number one. I'm going to fuck the Don's daughter. I could be tempting fate for the last time.

In front of me, I watch as Quinn's dress lands in a crumpled heap. I take a step toward her and she's falling right back into my arms, exactly where she belongs. My lips find hers, then I'm losing my grip on reality as I lead us through the Jack and Jill bathroom connection into the room where a dead corpse isn't going to be watching from the hallway. I kick the bathroom door closed behind us. Her feet hit the carpet, and then she's wrapping her legs around my waist again. It's

too much. I slam her against the wall and slip one hand around her back to unclasp her bra. The clips spring free and my hands cup each breast. My fingers trail across her nipples over and over again, teasing her as she moans against my lips. She unwraps one leg, steadying herself as she slides her hips back to unclasp my belt. Her hands work to slide the clasp from my dress pants and soon I'm standing with the girl of my dreams pressed against the wall, begging me to ravage her. Here I thought I would have to force Quinn, taking what I want to stake my claim and instead she's submitted willingly. More than willing, she's practically demanding I do this to her, begging me to make her feel better than she's ever felt before.

I can't tell her no. I want it just as bad. We've spent years denying ourselves from one another, now neither one of us can fight it any longer. Her hand grabs my cock and firmly runs up its length, leaving me pressing into her and moaning. I need more and I need it now. I want to taste her. I want to feel the inside of her while her pussy clenches around me. My fingers tangle in her hair as I pull our mouths apart long enough to ask, "Are you sure you want me to do this?"

"Yes," Quinn pants, making it hard to take things slow.

I start to ask if this is her first time, but she beats me to it. "If you're wondering if I waited for you, the answer is yes. I always wanted it to be you, Christian."

"Putain, *fuck!* Don't tease me like that. It turns me on so much. I don't want to hurt you, but this might not be as great as you think it's going to be. I promise, I'll be gentle." My words are husky and needy.

"Don't be gentle. I want it to hurt. Make me hurt, Christian, but make it so good I never want it to end."

"Fuck," I growl, spinning us around and throwing her to the bed.

I can't even feel the gunshot anymore. My adrenaline is pumping through my body on overload. I'm leaning over her, bringing my mouth to each one of her nipples to run my tongue across them, teasing her until her pussy aches and she begs me to fill it.

“Beg for it, Quinn. I want you to be a good girl and beg for me to fill you.” I practically roar against her throat as I kiss her lips before making my way down her body and snatching the bikini string of her thong between my teeth.

She giggles as I give it a yank, eventually pulling them all the way down to her ankles. They fall to the floor and my hands slide up each one of her thighs. The entire time, our eyes remain locked on one another until I reach her. My fingers work to stroke her clit. I work her pussy until it’s slick beneath my fingers and she begs me.

“Please,” Quinn cries out, grinding into my hand as another orgasm pulses through her body. Her back arches and her eyes squeeze shut as it hits her.

She’s so fucking sexy when she cums. I need to taste her on my lips. I’m not ready to rush this. I’ve fantasized about this moment so many times that I know exactly what I want to do to her. I pull my fingers from her, dripping wet. It’s so tempting to lick them clean in front of her, but I think it might be too much for either one of us to handle. I hover over her and kiss her again. I could spend an eternity kissing her and it would never get old.

“I’m going to make you cum again. Would you like that?” I whisper against her lips, waiting eagerly for a reply.

“Yes,” she begs.

“Will you cum in my mouth for me?” It’s my turn to negotiate and beg for her compliance.

“I’ll do anything you ask, Christian.”

Fuck, hearing my name on her lips like that is the only motivation I need. I drop between her legs, using my fingers to spread her open. My tongue drags slowly across her throbbing pussy and she melts all over me. I lick, lap, and suck until I feel the familiar clench in her walls and she cums right on my tongue. She tastes better than I imagined. It’s sending me into a frenzy. The pre cum is leaking from my cock. It needs to feel her.

“Are you ready for me?” I ask, pulling my mouth from her pussy.

“Yes,” Quinn replies in a breathy voice. I know she’s nervous. “I promise I’ll take it slow.” I drop my boxers and watch as she stares at my cock bobbing freely while I walk to the bedside table. There should be condoms inside, and I know when to push my limits. This is not the time to push my luck. I pull one out, rip it open and slip it on. I climb on top and run my fingers around her clit. Dipping them in and out, getting her wet all over again. When she’s soaked, I start to talk her through it.

“Take a deep breath and relax.” Not realizing my intentions, she does as she’s told, relaxing against me. The moment she does, I slide in slowly. She’s so fucking tight. I have to fight to maintain my own self control. I slide deeper and deeper all the while, telling her to stay relaxed. I swirl my finger against her clit. It has her grinding against me, riding her high. It’s so hard not to plow into her. As if she can read my mind, she whispers, “You’re holding back. I told you I want you to make it hurt. I want to be begging you not to stop.”

“Fuck, you’re going to make me cum if you keep talking like that.” I groan, holding her still as I fight hard for control.

She smiles against my lips. “Well, then let’s see who cums first, Christian. Make me beg for it.”

“Oh, you’re going to beg for it and you’re going to cum at exactly the moment I tell you to, like a good girl that needs to be fucked.” I growl.

“Please.” She moans. “Please, I’ve needed to be fucked for so long. Fuck me, Christian.”

“Fuck,” I pant against her, thrusting in harder. It’s the friction I’ve been chasing. Her tight virgin pussy clenching around me, choke holding my cock, while I thrust into her deeper and harder. She’s pulsating so hard, one more stroke and she’s going to explode all over my cock.

“Beg harder for me, princesse, *princess.*”

“Please, Christian, make me cum. I need to cum all over you while you fill me up.”

“That’s my girl,” I moan. “Cum for me, Quinn,” I demand as my orgasm consumes me.

She does. She cums hard all over my cock as I explode and fall against her in exhaustion.

I kiss her softly, and brush a tear from her eye. “I’m sorry if I hurt you.”

“Don’t apologize. Don’t ruin this moment for me,” she hushes me.

We lay with each other, snuggled into each other until I start to fall asleep. “Christian,” she wakes me gently. “The others, it has to be a secret. We need to clean up.”

I nod, dressing and fixing the bed. I pull the duvet over the soaking wet sheets in an attempt to hide the evidence. It works. Quinn showers and dresses in clothes we find in the closet.

Things happened so fast after that. We went back to the other room and laid in the bed while we waited for the others to arrive. I don’t remember falling asleep, but Quinn must have kept watch over me while I did.

The alarms are going off downstairs and I open my eyes groggily. I wipe the sleep from them with one hand and aim my gun at the door with the other. “Get on the floor, Quinn,” I whisper, not wanting to take any chances.

I’m relieved to see Harvey and the Don walk through the door. The relief only lasts a minute. The guilt sets in and I worry about whether or not he knows. If he does, he’s not saying anything yet.

“Christian, my boy. I can’t thank you enough for what you’ve done to keep Quinn safe for me. There’s no way I can repay you for this, but I will replace the car.” He says with a wink.

“Actually, there’s something more you can do for me,” I say.

He lifts a brow at me, curiosity all over his face as he wonders what I intend to ask for, but we both know he already knows the answer to his own question. I want Quinn, and it's a request he won't be able to refuse.

## **The End**



*If you enjoyed this Novella prequel you can jump into the series with the full length book His Queen. Book 2 His Retribution is available for pre order and releases November 2023.*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Des Sweet lives in Denver Colorado with her family. She writes dark, fantasy, paranormal, and spicy romance stories.



ENSNARE

KRISTINA BROWN

# CHAPTER 1

THE ONLY THING WORSE THAN BEING A TEENAGER STUCK AT home during the summer was being eighteen and knowing there was no way, once summer was over, my life would look any different. I was stuck with having to go to a community college, telling me I was never getting out of this crap town. My parents couldn't be bothered with saving for college—or anything else, really, for my future. There had been enough drunken tirades from my parents calling me a mistake, ungrateful, and blaming me for whatever they could. That was, of course, when they took enough time to stop fighting.

I heard a crash downstairs and rolled my eyes. Well, they had started throwing dishes at each other. I guessed I could be grateful they took out their anger on each other, mostly. They never physically hit me, but they definitely yelled at me when there was no one else to use as a punching bag.

I didn't want to sit there and listen to them all night, so I opened my window, and being great at sneaking out, I climbed out and was a few houses away in no time. I pulled out my phone and called my friend. There was no answer, and I sighed. *Great, nowhere to go, either.* Well, fuck. I headed to the gas station close to my house and figured I could waste some time there.

I was perusing the shelves, for nothing in particular, when I noticed a head of dirty blond hair a unique shade. I knew who that was, so I headed toward them.

“Mr. Cressy,” I called.

The man in question turned around, looked at me, then smiled. “Brookelynn.”

“Please, just Brooke.”

“Well, I told you to call me Damion,” he said, the humor shining in his eyes. He still had that blinding smile.

Mr. Damion Cressy was a substitute teacher at Joseph High. He had filled in for teachers all over my high school since I was a freshman. I kinda had a crush on him when I was younger. No one could deny that he was attractive. He was tall, had a mop of messy dark blond hair, intense hazel eyes, and angular features. He was slender, but definitely looked like he took care of himself. His smile was always friendly and infectious. Once I got older, I realized how wrong it was to lust over a man so much older than I was and my teacher to boot. I had little experience with guys—there had only been one guy, boy, really—but I knew that wasn’t normal.

“Sorry, sir. Damion.”

“What are you doing out so late, Brooke?” he asked, his tone a bit disapproving.

I knew he was just looking out for me.

I looked at my phone. “It’s only 10 p.m.”

He chuckled. “Well, I guess it’s late for us old folks, right? Better be careful walking alone late at night; there are dangerous people out here. You never know who’s watching.”

I laughed too. He was such a nice guy and actually cared more than my parents did. He was a favorite sub of the guys and the girls in our classes. Everyone thought he was great.

“Yeah. Well, it was good to see you again. I should probably grab what I came for and get back home.”

He nodded and gestured for me to go ahead. “Night, Brooke. I hope to see you again some time soon.”

I smiled at him and waved, grabbing some snacks and heading to pay for them.

“Do you have a restroom?” I asked the cashier as I laid my items down on the counter. It definitely couldn’t wait until I got home because I wasn’t going straight there.

The cashier handed me a key and gestured toward a building that wasn’t connected to the main gas station, but it was in the parking lot. He gave me my bag, and I took the key.

Once inside, I tried to do my business as fast as possible so I could get out of this creepy building. As I stepped up to the sink to wash my hands, I heard the door open. Before I could turn to see who had come into the building, I was pushed up against the wall. I groaned, the air pushed from my lungs. There was a pinch in my neck; the world tilted, and then went black.



I came to and was confused to see Damion standing over me. I hoped that meant I had just passed out in the bathroom. Maybe Damion had scared whoever came in.

“Damion, what happened? Where am I?” My senses started coming back to me, and I realized my hands were bound, and I was on a bed. My breathing sped up, wondering why I was tied up. This was all wrong. I struggled to move, finding my ankles were also bound.

As he sat on the bed, he smiled at me—this one was less friendly and more primal. He leaned down, cupping my cheek, and said, “Welcome home, Brooke.”

## CHAPTER 2

I WAS COMPLETELY CONFUSED BY HIS WORDS. *WELCOME HOME*. I pulled away from his hand and stared at him in shock.

“What are you talking about, Mr. Cressy?” Dropping his informal name, and reverting to his formal one, was meant, hopefully, to remind him this situation was weird.

He looked angry, his mouth dropping to a frown, his hand falling from my cheek. Instead, he grabbed my arm tight, causing me to cry out in pain.

“I told you to call me Damion. You are at my home, where you belong.” He shook me gently.

“You’re hurting me,” I cried out, the tears springing forth.

He let me go and got off the bed. I was freaked out. This was so polar opposite from the Mr. Cressy I knew. Gone were the friendly smiles and the careful, professional jokes.

“What am I doing here? I don’t belong here. You need to tell me what is going on.” I tried to fight against my bindings; finding a way out of this nightmare was my priority.

He stalked toward me and grabbed me by my throat, pulling me close to his face. His dark glare was intense and mesmerizing. “Yes, you do. You fucking belong to me now.”

My stomach fluttered in fear.

He started pacing. He didn’t seem to be talking to me; it was almost an aside. “I wouldn’t waste your time. I know how to tie knots very well.”

“Kidnap people often?” I asked. I didn’t know why I said it, but I knew the minute it came out, it was a misstep on my part.

He came back over to the bed, stopping beside me. “You are the only girl I have ever wanted, Brooke. You know I only desire you.”

He caressed the side of my face in a soft and loving way, as though I was precious. I almost leaned into his touch, but reality caught up to me, and I pulled away from him again.

The look in his eyes was insane. Desperate, as if he wanted me to know he was serious. He needed me to believe him.

“You’re fucking crazy,” I spat.

His mouth dropped into a frown again, and I knew I was making him angry, but this was too much. He grabbed me by my forearms, pulling me toward him again. He gathered my hair into one of his fists and pulled me closer until my lips met his. I was completely trapped. My hands were bound, so I had no way to push him away. I did the only thing I could think of and bit his lip.

He jerked back from me. I knew he was unhinged, and I should have expected it after biting him, but I was still surprised when I felt him slap my cheek. It wasn’t hard, just enough to surprise me. “Don’t test my patience, Brooke. You’ve seen nothing yet. I’m trying to be nice, but if you continue to push me, I’ll show you fucking crazy.”

Shrinking away from him, I tried to make myself seem smaller. There was no doubt that he could follow through on that promise easily.

“I’m sorry,” I breathed. I didn’t mean to apologize, but it seemed the part of me that wanted to survive this rather than fight him was taking over.

His face softened, and he caressed my face again. I tried not to flinch away from his touch.

“I know this is probably confusing for you, but I just want to love you.” He rested his other hand on my thigh.

I blanched at his words and touch. Did he mean what I thought he meant? Surely, he didn't mean sexually?

"Damion, can you please untie me? It's very uncomfortable. I promise I won't leave."

Damion seemed to think about it. He smiled at me, but it was that primal one again, and it scared me more than the crazy look in his eyes. He looked like a predator that had just zeroed in on his prey.

"I can untie you, but you need to do something for me in exchange."

I was so unnerved. I had a horrible feeling because there I was, tied up in his house. What could I possibly do for him?

"What do you want?"

"You need to agree first. *Then* I'll untie you," he said, shrugging nonchalantly.

"I can't agree unless you tell me what it is," I clarified.

"You're really not in a position to be making deals, Brooke. That is the offer, take it or leave it."

My arms and legs were falling asleep, so I had no options. "Okay, I'll do whatever you want."

His answering smile appeared gleeful. He quickly untied my hands and feet.

I rubbed the skin, trying to get the blood flow back again and ease the discomfort.

"What is it?" I asked.

He pushed me against the mattress. I was so confused that I didn't even think to fight him before he was straddling me, his legs on either side of my hips. He flicked the button open on my jean shorts and pulled down the zipper.

I struggled. "What are you doing?"

"We had a deal. Do you plan to honor that, or do I need to tie you back up?" He had the audacity to seem irritated.

"P-Please, don't do this," I pleaded.

“I just want to play with your pussy and make you feel good. I’ve waited for this since you walked into that class four years ago. Now I’m taking what belongs to me,” he explained, as though it was the most normal thing in the world.

I shook my head, but I wasn’t strong enough to fight him. I whimpered once he got my underwear off in one swift pull, along with my shorts. His fingers slid along my slick lips, and I started to cry.

“Fuck, you don’t know how long I’ve waited to feel your hot, little pussy.”

He moaned desperately, grinding down on me with his hips, and I felt a hard bulge. Oh god, this was exciting for him. I wasn’t a virgin, but this was the ultimate violation. I almost wished he would hit me instead of this. His fingers found my clit, and he gathered the moisture that was embarrassingly collecting, and rubbed circles. I gasped at the sensation.

No, there was no way this could feel good. I bucked my hips up, hoping to dislodge him, but it just caused his fingers to increase the pressure, and I moaned involuntarily.

“Please, stop, Damion. This is wrong.”

He shook his head and shushed me. His free hand slid under my T-shirt, pulling the cups of my bra down harshly. I groaned and tried to roll away from him. Damion just let his weight hold me down, not allowing me to move at all. He rolled my nipple in between his fingers, pulling gently on the tip. Heat collected in my stomach, and I felt so out of control. Closing my eyes, I hoped this was simply a nightmare; I would open my eyes and wake up in my bed, alone and at my parents’ house. I felt a long finger enter me, and my eyes snapped open.

“Fuck, you’re so tight and wet. Just as perfect as I expected.”

My sobbing turned into moans, and I didn’t know why it felt so good. I was being held down against my will, with my ex-substitute teacher violating me, and I was enjoying it.

*No! Brooke, it's a biological response. You are not enjoying this,* my mind screamed at me.

A second digit joined the other, and he growled. "So, tight. I can't wait to be inside you." He groaned.

I started crying again. Oh god, he was going to rape me. Was I going to end up on the news as one of those people who was found murdered after being violated? Idly, I wondered if my parents would even show up to the funeral, let alone care, or would I be one of those people the city cremated. I came slamming back to reality when Damion's thumb started rubbing my clit again, harder this time, while pumping his fingers inside me, curling up. I opened my legs wider and moaned.

"Yeah, you love this, baby," he grunted. "You're so wet for me." He pulled his fingers out of me momentarily and sucked one into his mouth, sucking it and licking it clean, moaning. "You taste so good, so addictive."

The act was so erotic that I whimpered involuntarily. *No, wrong, wrong, wrong.* My mind wasn't allowing my body to betray me completely. He pushed my thighs farther apart, exposing my wet center even more to his heated stare as his hot palms kept me spread for him. Damion leaned down, giving me one languid, heated lick from my entrance to my clit. He swirled his tongue around it, pulling my sensitive clit between his lips before sucking on it.

"Fuck!" I exclaimed. I had felt nothing like that ever before. My hips arched up off the bed on instinct, shoving my pussy farther into his face.

He slid his tongue inside me and grunted hungrily, the vibrations heating me with a gush of arousal. Shock ran through me when he fucked me with his tongue. No one had ever done that to me. I felt thoroughly invaded by his tongue. He lapped everything up I had before he went to work on my clit again. He flicked it with his tongue and gently bit down on it. *Oh, god, no. He's going to make me orgasm.* I was so filled with shame that I was enjoying the feelings coursing through me. He bit my clit harder this time, and my body shook and

the walls of my pussy clamped down. I couldn't hold in the moan that ripped its way out of my throat as I came, hard. He continued to lap at my pussy, drinking every drop of me, even after my body went completely lax.

I felt aftershocks as my body twitched three times. When he was satisfied with taking everything my body had given him, he lifted his head, my juices glistening on his chin. I couldn't look at him. He looked happy and satisfied, and I couldn't reconcile that with the man who had just forced himself on me. He got off the bed, went to the bathroom while I turned on my side, and cried into the pillow.

I felt the bed dip, and he was trying to make me face him, his voice concerned. "Did I hurt you? I tried to be gentle."

Not only was I ashamed, now I was angry. I rolled toward him and met his concerned eyes. They were entirely sincere. No one was that good of an actor. Was he so deluded, so crazy, that he thought I wanted that?

*Well, it's kind of misleading if you're moaning your way through the entire experience, my mind screamed at me.*

God, maybe I was going crazy too, just like him. How did he seem so normal, every day, when he was hiding this side of him?

"Physically, no, but I didn't want to do that, Damion."

His face fell a little, and I felt a bit bad. How messed up was that? I wondered if he would get mad or continue to make me feel guilty.

"You had an orgasm. You were drenched, Brooke. I could feel how much you wanted that. You just needed to be convinced. You'll see you love me, too."

"How can you say you love me? You don't rape someone you love!" I shouted. I knew that was a mistake again. The fire that burned in his eyes scared me.

"Rape you! I'll show you rape!" he bellowed. "So, I try to make you feel good, made you come hard, and you accuse me of rape?" He fisted my hair in his hands again and ripped off my T-shirt and bra violently.

“No, Damion, please stop. I’m sorry. Don’t do this.”

I could see my pleading was falling on deaf ears. He grabbed me by the throat, cutting off my airflow and ceasing my pleading. He pushed me down on the bed and started getting undressed, letting go of me. I jumped up off the bed, totally ready to run. He moved quickly to block me, and when I tried to dodge, he moved in the direction I was going. He grabbed the rope he had taken off my hands from the nightstand.

“No.” I pushed at his chest and kicked and hit, only to be slammed against the wall, the air knocked out of me.

He took this opportunity to turn me around and tie my hands together behind my back.

“Why do you have to make me so angry, baby? I don’t want to hurt you, but you won’t let me be nice to you.” The soft tone of his voice and the agony in it, as if it was hurting him to do this to me, broke through my armor and made my heart clench.

I wanted to know who damaged this insanely beautiful man so much that he thought this twisted obsession and possession was love. Sobbing, because I was losing my mind, I wondered why he was so messed up. Hope was fading, and I was just so tired. There was barely any fight left in me to fend him off. I slumped my shoulders and dropped my head in complete defeat.

Damion dragged me to the bed, and I didn’t even fight him. He pushed the top half of my body onto the mattress and pulled my hips closer to his. I heard the clank of his belt and his zipper. I forced myself not to react. His hand came down on my ass cheek, and I gasped and clenched the blanket in my hands. It hurt, but not in a way that was unmanageable. His fingers slid inside my heat.

He chuckled. “You’re wet again, baby,” he whispered mockingly. “Tell me again how much you *don’t* fucking want this, sweetheart.”

I whimpered and refused to answer him. He dropped kisses along my spine before he thrust his thick cock inside me, stretching me painfully.

“Fuck!” I screamed.

I had only had sex with one guy, so I was still new to this experience, and it felt like Damion was huge. He didn’t give me much time to adjust to him before he pulled almost all the way out and slammed back in. His groan sounded so deep and masculine that I tingled. What the hell was going on?

“Holy fuck, your pussy was made for me,” he snarled, digging his teeth into my shoulder, probably leaving a mark.

I cried out in pleasure that flirted with the sting of his bites combined with his deep, hard thrusts.

Soon, the achy feeling subsided, and it felt different. I felt full as my walls clamped down on his cock without my conscious thought. He palmed one of my breasts and pulled my nipple. I moaned without even thinking of it—like a fucking whore. Once I stopped trying to fight him, my body completely took over, and she was enjoying every bit of what he was doing. My mind was screaming at me to stop, but I couldn’t summon the energy. The sensations were too much—too good. I didn’t *want* this to stop.

Damion’s other hand moved, no longer holding me down, and he started playing with my clit. He was going to make me come again. I just knew it. In my mind, even though I told him to stop, he wanted me to enjoy this, and that I could rationalize that fact was freaking me out.

“You’re clenching and dripping all over my cock. I know you love this. Stop denying it,” he whispered against my ear, tracing his tongue along it as his hot breath hypnotized me further into submission.

I closed my eyes and tried to shut off my mind. My legs shook as my stomach fluttered. Damion increased the pressure on my clit, and I cried out, my body feeling like it was shattering, my breathing erratic. The immense pleasure—

insufferable heat—spread through my entire body, causing it to feel like I was buzzing.

“Good girl, just like that. Come all over my cock, baby.”

Damion continued his thrusts, his pace increasing. I could only assume he was getting close to coming, more erratic—desperate for release. He surprised me by pulling out quickly, before wetness hit my ass. He groaned—guttural and raw. Oh god, he just came on me. I was horrified, but it was better than inside me since I was unprotected. I heard him rustling around before a damp washcloth wiped his cum off me.

“Now you’re finally mine and I’m never letting you go,” he breathed.

Without saying a word to him, I climbed into bed, covering myself with the blanket that was discarded on the mattress. I couldn’t look at him, and just curled into a ball, fighting back tears, wishing that sleep would claim me so I could escape this nightmare.

# CHAPTER 3

WHEN I WOKE UP IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT, I WAS surprised to find I was sleeping contently in bed and wearing clean pajamas that were comfortable. For a brief moment, I thought maybe I was back home, and it had all been a dream. But when I moved my legs, I felt a twinge of pain between them, proving it was all real.

“I figured you might be sore, so I left you some Tylenol and a glass of water on the nightstand,” a voice called out from the dark.

My head whipped to the right, and I saw the outline of someone sitting in a chair facing the bed. I knew it was Damion—I *felt* him.

“Have you been sitting there, watching me sleep?” I asked. “Obviously, you dressed me. I’m sure, to you, this all seems very sweet, but it’s creepy,” I told him, grabbing the painkillers and swallowing them down with water.

“I didn’t think you would want to sleep naked, and yeah, I’m watching you because I don’t trust you not to try to run. I know you want to paint me as the villain, little girl, but with the way your life was before, I think I did you a favor.”

“You did me a favor? By taking me away from my friends. By raping me, after declaring that you have been waiting for four years to do it. I was fourteen then.” I shuddered. “What is broken in your brain to think that is okay? Honestly, stop doing me ‘favors’ because I can do without them.”

“When you walked into that classroom four years ago, I found out everything I needed to know about you in about five

minutes. It was Freshman English. You were sweet and beautiful without even trying, but there was pain haunting your captivating eyes you couldn't hide. You hated when people called you Brookelynn; and you loved the classic love novels—Bronte sisters, Austen, and Hardy.”

“You seem to have me at a disadvantage ... because I know very little about you.” I sat against the wall so I could face him. “It's not like I'm going anywhere, so you have the con.”

“Star Trek fan? I wouldn't have guessed,” he said with a slight smirk.

I gave him a mysterious smile. “You don't know me as well as you think you do. Tell me, before you had sex with me, did you think I was a virgin?” I knew I was trying to piss him off, but if he wanted to make this hard, then I would push right back.

He tilted his head, looking at me. “I had hoped you were, but no, once I slid inside you, I knew you weren't. So, who was it? There can't have been many.”

“Why, 'cause my pussy was 'so tight' for you?” I said in a mock impression of his voice. “Kegel exercises work wonders, but you're right, it was only one guy, and he was the first. And the only one I've begged to make me come.”

I was waiting for him to explode. Show me the crazy asshole. That side of him scared me shitless, but it wasn't as disarming as this sweet and kind Damion that I thought I knew for four years. I knew what lay behind that facade now, so the illusion was shattered.

A slow, eerie smile spread across his face, and he chuckled humorlessly. “I know what you're trying to do, Brooke. But I won't have sex with you again until you're on your knees, begging me to fuck you so hard, you can't walk the next day.”

Against my better judgment, my breathing sped up, and I felt desire strike a match, lighting my entire body on an all-consuming fire.

“And you will, because you can still feel what it’s like to have me inside you. You know how hard I make you come. Whoever he was, he was a boy and is irrelevant.” He got out of his chair, tipping it over in his frustration, and came over to me. He gripped my chin, making me look up at him. His face was so close to mine I could smell his minty breath and earthy aftershave. “You. Are. Mine. And I never share.” He growled at me.

“How do you know he was a boy?” I challenged.

“Because I would never have allowed a man to touch you. I would have killed him. You didn’t have any boyfriends go missing, did you?”

Before I could respond, he slammed his lips to mine. I moaned, and he licked the seam on my lips. When I refused to open to him, he nipped my lip, and my gasp caused my mouth to open. He plunged his tongue inside, exploring my mouth until there was nothing but his taste. He retreated and finished with two closed-mouth kisses. His eyes were level with mine, and the emotion there made my heart stutter. Damion was intent on consuming me, and I was so close to just letting him. When he was near, I couldn’t think rationally. My body led the way.

“I will leave you to get some sleep,” he said, looking a little tired himself. “Don’t try to run, Brooke. I will find you, and I will make sure you regret it.”

His intense gaze held mine. I searched his eyes for any sign of hesitation. I couldn’t find any, so I nodded. He smiled, let go of my face, and turned on his heel, leaving me alone in the room. As much as I needed to be alone to process all that had happened, I was in an unfamiliar place, causing me to be a little freaked out. Scrambling across the bed, I turned on the lamp sitting on the nightstand. Lying down, I hugged the pillow to me. I was scared to fall asleep, not sure what tomorrow would bring, but soon my exhaustion carried me under.

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When my eyes opened, I knew it was morning. The sun filtering in through the windows alerted me it was at least 7:00 am. I realized that since I arrived, I hadn't seriously assessed my surroundings. Usually, I was more observant than that, but these weren't usual circumstances. I slid off the bed slowly, almost expecting Damion to come flying into the room, upset that I had moved. I was in a bedroom, which should have been obvious from the bed and matching nightstand.

There was a bookcase across the room, right next to two large pane windows. Other than those few items of furniture, there wasn't much more in the room. There was an open door near the bed, and upon further inspection, it looked like a walk-in closet and a bathroom. *Oh, thank god.* I took care of business, and even though I really wanted to take a bath, I didn't want to push my luck yet.

I turned and was surprised to see Damion standing there, watching me. "You can take a bath."

"Sorry if I'm not in a rush to willingly get naked around you anytime soon," I spat, trying to walk past him.

He grabbed my wrist, stopping me. "Is this attitude going to continue? I'm trying to be nice to you, but you act as though it gives you a right to be a brat. Do you want me to be mean, because it's all you seem to respond to? You know how brats are treated, Brooke? Hmmm?" He walked behind me, his hand palming my ass cheek, before pulling away and smacking my ass hard. The impact of the hit made me take a few steps forward, and my mind yelled at me to run from him, but his other arm snaked around my waist. "I wouldn't do that. I warned you not to run from me, baby. Do you need to be punished?"

"What would you do to me? Kill me?"

He chuckled, but it was not one of mirth but of ill intention. His nose trailed the column of my neck, nuzzling into my hair. "There are worse things than death, baby. I said

you were mine, so I would never kill you, but I might have to remind you whom you belong to. Who owns this pussy?" he asked, cupping my sex.

I shook my head and refused to answer the way I knew he wanted me to. I cried out when I felt the sting of his teeth pinching the skin at the base of my neck.

"Who owns it, little girl? I'll ask one more time before I get really angry." His left hand squeezed my sex, his other hand came back to slap my ass again.

"*You!* Fuck, you own it," I cried out.

"That means that I can take it whenever I want. Remember that, little girl. Don't give me a reason to remind you of that."

"What if I wanted it? Is it only your decision?" I asked.

He gripped me by my shoulders and turned me to face him. He seemed to study me. "Do you want me to pet your kitty and make you purr?"

God, the things that came out of this man's mouth should disgust me, and I should be horrified, but instead, I could feel the arousal gathering in my underwear. "I just want to know if I have the option."

"I told you that when you beg, I'll fuck you hard and make you come even harder."

His green eyes were hooded, and his breathing was labored. I knew he was turned on. Over his shoulder on the counter, I saw one of those pretentious crystal bowls filled with the clear and blue rocks. Pressing my body into his, so that he was pressed up against the counter, I reached down and palmed his erection through his pants. I kissed his neck and even nipped it with my teeth. He fisted my hair at the nape of my neck.

"Do you wanna play, baby?"

"Think you can make me call you Daddy?" I asked in a breathy voice.

Using his shock as a distraction to grab the crystal bowl. I hefted it in to my palm and brought it down over his head. I

knew it wouldn't really hurt him because it was thin. It shattered, and I pulled away from him and ran. My sock-clad feet slid on the tiled floor in the bathroom, but it helped me. I ran through the bedroom and made it to the hallway.

I had a moment of panic because I didn't know what the layout of the house was. I scanned what was in front of me and saw stairs. "Oh." Running to them, I jumped a few steps from the bottom to the landing, hearing Damion clomping around upstairs. I couldn't let him catch me because he was going to be pissed. Assessing that I was on the ground floor, just by the layout, I didn't have time to be impressed that his house was big. This wasn't bought off a substitute's wages.

*Okay, focus, Brooke. I need to find a door.*

I headed toward a hallway that looked like it might lead to a foyer, which would mean the front of the house. I found the front door, pulling it open, only to be met by Damion standing right outside in front of it. Trying to shut it, I was thwarted by him wedging his shoe inside before I could, and he grabbed me by the throat.

"Did I not make myself clear on what would happen if you tried to run?" he asked, the menace and anger not contained in his tone. He grabbed me by the waist and flung me over his shoulder, knocking the air out of me so I couldn't scream. "Hope you enjoyed that little taste of freedom, little girl, 'cause that's over now."

I tried to pound on his back, but each time I hit him, he smacked my ass, and he was far more skilled at causing pain than I could hope to be.

"You fucking naughty girl. You're going to regret running from me," he sneered as he groped and squeezed my ass, running his fingers along the crease of my thin cotton shorts. He shut the bedroom door, locking it, and flung me on the bed, causing my entire body to bounce.

I tried to scramble off the bed immediately, but Damion took my knees out from under me and flipped me onto my stomach. His knee came down in the middle of my shoulder blades, causing me to struggle to breathe. He gathered my

wrists together, tying them, then tied my ankles together. I was confused when he pulled my ankles toward my wrists. I struggled, not intending to make it easier for him to tie me in some weird position. He put more pressure on the knee in my back, then I felt a shock and a loud electrical pop sound.

“This is an electro wand. It builds current and then shocks you. I suggest you don’t piss me off more than you already have.” He finished tying my ankles and wrist together, leaving me in a hogtied position. “Now, this position isn’t great for penetration, but it is great for oral. You are going to suck my cock, little girl. I can make you call me Daddy, but how about after you choke on my dick?” He grabbed my chin again, crouching so that he could look in my face. “I can tell with you and your defiant spirit that I’m going to have to be very specific. If you try to bite my dick or any other cute idea you think you have, I will make you so very sorry. I said I’d never kill you, but I can devise ideas for you that will have you begging me to end you. Do you understand? Make no mistake, little girl. I will break you. I tried to treat you well and be nice. You continued to be a brat, so now I will just fuck you like a slut.”

Damion pulled a pocket knife out and unfolded it. Grabbing the front of my shirt, he slit it down the middle, ripping it the rest of the way until he could pull it off me. Doing the same thing with the bra, shorts, and underwear, I was soon naked. He took off his pants and boxers, followed by his T-shirt. He sat against the headboard, then pulled my head toward his lap. I was brought face to face with his dick. Not seeing it yesterday when he fucked me from behind, I was still stunned by how big it was. I’d had only one boy’s cock to compare it with, but I was sure that Damion’s was above average. It was almost unfair that the crazy guy had a nice dick.

I was surprised when he rubbed the tip against my lips and tapped them with the head. “Open, Brooke.”

“I don’t know how to do this,” I muttered.

“Well, I’m gonna teach you. Now open!” he ground out menacingly.

Scared but also exhilarated, I opened my mouth. I shouldn't enjoy the fact that I was tied up like an animal or that he shoved his dick down my throat, but I found myself getting wetter. I panicked when I couldn't breathe.

“Breathe through your nose and relax those throat muscles, baby.”

I tried to do exactly as he said, and once I drew in a few breaths through my nose, the panic subsided, and I could relax.

“That's it. Fuck, your mouth is so perfect.”

He used my head to control the thrust and movement. All I could do was use my tongue and suck as much as I could. My throat was getting sore, and I was producing a lot of saliva. I tried to swallow some, but his dick was still shoved down my throat. My eyes watered as I tried to breathe with his cock so deep. He moaned and sucked in a sharp breath.

“You better stop doing that, or I'm going to come down your throat, little girl.” His voice was low and husky.

*Wasn't that kind of the point?* I thought. Looking up at him, my eyes wide and innocent, I wanted him to come. I didn't want to admit I enjoyed having this power over him, and the quicker he came, the faster this would be over.

He ran his hand down the side of my face, his face contorted in pleasure, and smiled at me. “You try to act all sweet and innocent, but you're just a dirty fucking girl.”

It really was too bad that I couldn't speak because I wanted to agree with him. What the hell was going on? I had thought from the beginning of this that I was gradually losing my mind. Maybe my brain had finally snapped, and I simply embraced the crazy. I put my all into taking him deeper and increasing the suction. I gagged around him when he slid too deep, but I didn't stop.

“Just like that, baby, choke on my cock like a good little cockslut.”

His head fell back as a primal groan ripped from his throat, and I found him kind of beautiful in his bliss. He pulled my mouth off him, and I took in a much-needed lungful of air. He

ran his thumb across my lips. I wondered why he stopped, and I knew I must have looked like a mess. Damion pulled my face to his, kissing me deeply. This time I let his tongue in immediately, and I even massaged his tongue with mine. He gripped my hair tighter and moaned into my mouth.

All too soon, he was pulling away again and got up from under me. He pushed my face into the mattress again and undid the hogtie. He untied the rope around my ankles but kept my wrists tied behind me.

“Bend your elbows and bring your wrists up toward the middle of your back.”

I was hesitant to do whatever he said, and I wasn't down to be tied up in weird positions, so when I didn't do what he said, I felt a shock followed by the loud pop. He shocked me again on the side of my breast. He grabbed a fistful of hair and bowed my body to bring my ear toward his mouth.

“That wasn't a request. I guess I'm just gonna have to hurt you for you to get it.”

He held the wand against my nipple and pressed the button again. Pain shot through me, but it went straight to my clit, making it throb. I whimpered at the sensation, craving more.

“You're already learning to become my little pain Slut, fuck, you are perfect.”

He did the same to my nipples a few times. I was lost in a sea of pain and pleasure, not being able to tell one sensation from the other. He stopped and continued his task of tying me up. He attached the rope to my wrists, then wrapped it around my body, above my breasts and directly below. It was more complicated than that, I was sure, but that was what I could feel.

He pulled me to my feet, and I was a little wobbly for a few seconds. He turned me to face him, and I saw his eyes darken when he looked at my chest. My breasts pushed up and out from the ropes. He reached over and grabbed the wand thing from the nightstand. With his eyes never leaving mine, he shocked my nipples again, once on each nipple, then he

dragged it down my torso, hitting the button when he touched my stomach and above my pelvic bone.

When he rubbed it along my slit, I already knew what was coming. He started rubbing circles on my clit with the toy, then pressed the button. Electricity zipped through my skin, making my stomach and pussy clench. I moaned loudly and sighed. He continued in this fashion, making the same route. A shock to the nipples, stomach, pelvic bone, and my clit—over and over until I was panting, and I was thoroughly drenched. He got an evil smile on his face, then he pressed the button several times in succession, and I felt my orgasm come slamming down on me. My body tensed up, and it differed from before, more intense. I felt wave after wave of bliss and bone-deep relaxation roll over me, and I fell to the floor, losing my footing.

Damion picked me up and deposited me on the bed. I simply lay there. I was spent from that orgasm, and I was wondering how this could be my punishment, but when I saw him stroke his cock, I realized he wasn't done with me. Oh, right? His pussy to take whenever he wanted. He was showing me I was his to use because I had tried to run. That defiant spirit he mentioned earlier made me want to run again, to see how far he was willing to go.

Once the haze from my orgasm cleared, I looked up at him again with my bitch brow perfectly perfected.

“Tell me how you giving me an orgasm is punishment. You're kinda making me want to run again.”

I didn't know why, but the fact I was being held against my will by an ex-teacher I'd had a crush on, made me want to be mean. Why should I make this easy on him? Maybe I couldn't believe this devastatingly good-looking man had been obsessed with me for four years, and I had no fucking clue. Either he was very good at hiding it, or I was oblivious.

Damion climbed onto the bed, straddling my thighs. He gripped my hair at the base of my neck and pulled me close to his face.

“Who said I was going to stop at one? I want you fucking drenched, exhausted, and begging me to stop. For you to think you couldn’t tolerate coming again, and then to drag one more out of you. I want you to be drunk on the pleasure, and next time, you will fucking beg me to make you come again. You will be a slave to me and the pleasure only I can give you.”

“Why?” I asked, trying to control my voice.

His eyes softened, and he caressed my face. This guy. He was dominating and crazy one minute. The next he was the Damion I knew for four years. The fact that I knew he was both made my heart hurt a little for him. Why was he so damaged? Why was he so good at hiding the evil side that he was more often since I had been here?

“I already told you. You are mine.”

“Are you mine?” I threw back at him.

He pressed his forehead to mine. “Do you want me to be? I think you still want to see me as the bad guy in all this, baby, but I will set your spirit free. You don’t know what you’re capable of yet, but I do.”

# CHAPTER 4

AFTER DAMION CARRIED THROUGH WITH EVERY THREAT VEILED as a promise, I was exhausted. I thought I blacked out at one point, because when I woke up, I was dressed again. There were still ropes around my wrists, securing me to the bed, and I knew he wasn't going to stop tying me up anytime soon. I took stock of how I was feeling. Undoubtedly, I was sore everywhere, all from the enormous size of Damion, the electro wand, and the ropes, coupled with the five orgasms I'd had. I couldn't be sure, because I was clothed and my hands were unavailable to me, but I suspected I had bruises and bite marks. It seemed Damion was all about marking me, and he did.

I jumped when the door slammed open, and I sat up in bed. Damion was carrying a tray loaded with food, and it was then that I realized I was hungry. I hadn't eaten in a while. He set the tray on the nightstand and came over to free my hands.

“This is only so you can eat, and I will sit here the whole time, so don't get any ideas.”

I rolled my eyes with my head bowed so he couldn't see and watched him unravel the ropes. When my hands were free, he grabbed my wrists and massaged them, taking the ache away and making the blood return faster. I moaned at the sensation. Him touching me in this gentle way threw me for a loop. I looked up, his face still close to mine. His beauty made it hard to forget all the things he had done to me, even though it was merely hours ago. I dropped my eyes until he stepped away.

He pushed the tray toward me, chuckling. “You’re not gonna go all shy on me now, are you?”

“I was always quiet around you, Damion.”

“True, but that was before we both saw each other naked. Don’t you think we’re past all pretenses now?”

I shook my head and grabbed a handful of grapes. We kinda were, true, but I still had no idea what his end goal was.

“So, do you simply plan to hold me here forever? Someone will notice I’m missing, eventually.”

He snorted. “It won’t be your parents. I’m sure they’ll notice you’re gone, but they won’t be too torn up about it.”

I looked at him, my eyebrows raised. “You know my parents?”

He smiled and nodded his head. “Baby, Joseph is a small town. Everyone knows your parents.”

I looked down at my hands in my lap, my appetite dissipating. “Yeah, they’re good at hiding who they are.”

“I know.”

My head snapped up to look at him. I narrowed my eyes because, how could he possibly know?

He leaned forward, his forearms resting on his thighs. “Remember that pain I told you I saw because you couldn’t hide it? I’m willing to bet that it comes from them.”

I nodded. I didn’t know why, but I felt as if I could confide in him, as if he might understand that pain. He obviously had seen his share, or he wouldn’t be as he was.

“They fought constantly, and never missed a chance to tell me how much of a mistake, burden, and ungrateful I was,” I said, my voice shaking, a few lone tears leaking from my eyes. I angrily wiped them away. It still hurt that my parents showed such hostility toward me, but it made me angry that I still cared.

Damion was by my side in an instant. His arms wrapped around me and he stroked my hair. It felt comforting, and I

hated that I liked it. I hated how it felt right somehow to have his arms around me, holding me, calming me.

“They are fucking wrong, Brooke. They don’t deserve someone like you. Despite the horrible way they raised you, you turned out beautiful. You’re sweet, kind, and smart as hell.”

“Why are you being so nice to me? I can’t ...” I frowned. “It doesn’t make sense. You have me here against my will, but you obviously care. You couldn’t have fallen in love with me when I was fourteen because that is so wrong. Not only that, but you couldn’t have learned enough about me to want to be with someone who is almost half your age.”

“When I looked at you then, I saw myself. My parents died when I was twelve. Besides the fact that they set everything up so I would be taken care of, there was no one to step forward and raise me. So, I went into foster care. Despite all the unpleasant experiences and being treated as disposable, I was still kind and smart. Things happened, though, and it ruined the person I was. I knew your parents wouldn’t do that to you, but you were about to go off to college. I couldn’t stand the chance of you being hurt, so I took action.”

“So *you* could hurt me instead,” I blurted out without thinking.

His hand ran through my hair before his knuckles trailed a path down the side of my face, his thumb catching the apple of my cheek.

“*Have* I hurt you, Brooke? Really?” he asked, giving me that intense stare again.

His lips were so close to mine, and I found myself staring at his lips instead of his eyes.

“Tell me you were faking all the orgasms I gave you. Tell me you don’t want me.”

I took a deep breath and exhaled. I *wanted* to tell him that. I wanted to tell him to fuck off and let me go—return to the life I had before, where there was nothing to look forward to the next day.

Even though the crazy part of Damion scared me, I also felt strangely drawn to him. Maybe I could blame it on the crush I had on him, and say it never really died. Just more of a girl growing up and realizing you didn't always get what you wanted. Sometimes things didn't work out. Apparently, no one shared that memo with him.

"I can't say that and be completely honest. I wasn't faking, and I can't deny that I find you attractive, but there are parts of you that scare me, and I don't want to be your prisoner."

"Why do I scare you? Do you actually think that I would kill you?" He let out a throaty chuckle that reverberated all throughout my body.

I shook my head. "No, not kill me, but Damion, you can't deny that some of this is extreme." He opened his mouth to speak, but I held up my hand. "I'm not saying that I didn't enjoy some of it, because I didn't tell you no this last time, but it's just ..." I sighed. "You're so forceful and dominating."

He had moved to sit against the wall the bed was shoved up against, and I was sitting against the headboard. He was studying me, making me feel so exposed—vulnerable.

This man had seen every inch of me naked, and I spilled my guts about my parents, but he knew very little about me. The stuff he *thought* he knew was true and it was easy to see on the surface.

I put up a good front, but no one knew the truly dirty shit I thought about at night. The things I would never admit to anyone. Maybe it was a by-product of my childhood and having parents who never really loved me, but I wanted to be consumed—devoured, completely taken over by my *lover*, whoever they might be.

He smiled and leaned toward me. "I'm that way because it's what you want. I can be sweet and docile when the occasion calls for it, but you don't want that. You want me to force you and push you, and you don't want to admit you enjoy it. We can play this game all you want, Brooke, because I enjoy treating you like my prey, but you are not a victim. If I

truly push too far, I will know, and I will stop because, besides what you think, I *do* cherish you.”

“Then why tie me up? Why force me to be here? Why are you doing this?”

“Do you really want to go back home to be ignored by your parents, go to community college, and know every day will be the same for the foreseeable future?”

That right there was where the problem lay. I didn’t want to go back to that. “You didn’t answer my question.”

“I already told you why, little girl.” I could see he was getting irritated. It seemed he called me “little girl” when he was agitated and “baby” the rest of the time.

“You. Are. Mine.” He grabbed my chin, making me look at him. “You belong here with me, Brooke, but you don’t want to admit it or admit that you like it. So, until you stop trying to fight me, I will make sure you stay here.”

I shook my head; this conversation was just circling. I stood, and he grabbed my wrist, stopping me. “I need to go to the bathroom. Are you going to follow me in there too?”

He chuckled and let go of my wrist. He shook his head, and I went to take care of things. I was able to survey my body, and I had bruises that looked like little circles made from fingers. I also had hickeys and half-moon shapes from his teeth. It looked brutal, but I couldn’t think of a time when it had hurt. I had no idea I was a masochist, but the proof was definitely pointing in that direction.

I sighed, fixed my clothing, washed my hands, and went back to the bedroom. Grabbing more of the food he had brought in, I sat back on the bed.

“So,” I started, swallowing the food in my mouth. “Am I just doomed to stay in this room tied to the bed forever?”

He seemed to be studying me, but he didn’t answer.

“Please, Damion, if you love me like you say, then a part of that is trust. I *promise* I won’t run. I wouldn’t even be able to ‘cause I have no clue where I am.”

“You promised before, remember? You take my kindness as a weakness, and I’m not weak.” He stood from the bed and grabbed my hair at the nape of my neck. I wasn’t expecting the sting of pain, and I grimaced. He let go of me and stepped away, closing his eyes. He looked like he was at war with himself.

“I’m sorry. I was scared, okay?”

His eyes snapped open, and that look that was so hard for me to pinpoint was back. I couldn’t read him. Was he angry, turned on, calm, tense, mischievous?

Damion stepped closer, his face inches from mine. “And you aren’t scared now? You said you were?”

“I said parts of you scare me, and the part that wants to tie me up scares me. I don’t want to waste away, sitting tied to this bed, waiting for you to fuck and feed me,” I mumbled. He didn’t seem convinced, so I forged ahead. “I’ll get fat.”

He chuckled, and his hands fell to my hips, pulling my body flush to his. “No, I wouldn’t let that happen. Do you know that kissing and having sex burns calories, especially with the way I do it?”

I pushed against his chest to get away from him.

He wasn’t letting me go. “I told you I like it when you fight me. Put a little more effort in it. Make me believe it, Brooke.”

“I’m not just going to be your little fucktoy.”

He spun me around, my back to his front. His hand slid up between my breasts, and he grabbed my throat. “I think you will be, though. You want to stop thinking—resisting, and your little body will let me use you whenever I want. However, I fucking want. All you need to do, sweetheart, is come when I order you to. You’re going to be my cock-hungry cumslut,” he whispered into my ear, his breath tickling the shell, causing me to moan. “Because you fucking want to. Because you’re desperate for it—your little cunt soaking for me all the fucking time.”

I shouldn't like the things he was saying, shouldn't be getting wetter with every filthy word that came out of his mouth. I couldn't deny he was doing all the right things and getting his point across. It was the way his fingers curled around my neck, the closeness of his body, and the *words*. It was all used to dominate and control me. The only thing in this scenario I *never* fantasized about was being forced to be here, to be someone's prisoner, but it brought me to my knees—my resolve crumbling with every second that went by. Damion's hand slid up to lift my chin, making me look up as he towered over me.

“You like me talking to you like this, don't you?” He chuckled darkly. “You're just a dirty whore, craving to be used for the only thing you're good for: to be fucked; to have your tight, little pussy milking my cock—desperate for my cum. I bet your ass would be even tighter, like fucking heaven.”

Leaning down, he captured my lips, biting the bottom one. I moaned and bit his lip back. He quickly swung me to face him, pushing me against the wall by my neck.

“Don't play unless you are ready for what I want to do to you, baby,” he grunted. “You thought five orgasms was hard? Just wait until I bring you to the edge—over and over, and over, without letting you fall. Do you wanna be my toy?” His tone was hypnotic, lips enticing, as I stared at him.

I closed my eyes because I had to be sure I wanted this. I had to focus. He was actually asking for permission for the first time. I had no illusions he wouldn't do it even if I said no. *Did* I want that? Did I want to be used for his games? My body screamed *yes* at me, but my mind was more hesitant. I had no idea what I was even agreeing to, no idea what it would do to my mental state, but every fiber in my being wanted to say yes. Even though I wasn't absolutely sure, and I was terrified to give him the power, I heard myself agree with my captor.

“*Yes, I do.*”

# CHAPTER 5

WHEN I FINALLY BROKE DOWN AND AGREED, DAMION WASTED no time in ridding me of my clothes, but luckily, this time, he didn't rip them off. He attacked my neck with kisses, and when I was finally naked, I wrapped my legs around his hips and my arms around his neck. He palmed my ass before slapping it. I arched my body into his; pulling away from the wall I was pressed up against.

“You don't know how fucking sexy you are, Brooke. Your body was made to fuck and bring men to their knees.” He growled against my neck.

I moaned, sinking my hands into his hair and pulling on the strands.

More often than not, his words were filthy and naughty, but when he said things like that, it reminded me he had feelings for me. No matter that he went about it the wrong way, and it was extreme, I knew he believed he loved me. I refused to believe he actually loved me or I could love him because of the situation. It just wasn't feasible for this sort of obsession and possession to be love.

Damion gripped my ass and walked us over to the bed. He laid me down, then went to a cupboard and grabbed a few things I couldn't see yet, with his back turned to me. He came back over toward the bed, moving the food tray to the floor, and deposited his items on the nightstand. I saw a blindfold, a large handheld device, and handcuffs. He pushed me to lie on my back and snatched up the handcuffs. I tried to resist him when he grabbed my wrists to cuff them.

“You’re going to want to stop me. You said yes, so give me your wrists before I have no option but to force you.”

I huffed and offered them to him, palms up. He cuffed one, then brought my hands up to the headboard, threading the chain through one slat and restraining the other. I pulled on my hands, but I was effectively attached to the headboard. He straddled my thighs and grabbed the device, hitting a button, and it buzzed to life.

“What is that?” I asked with some trepidation.

After laughing, he put it back on the nightstand. Leaning down, he kissed along my clavicle, causing me to let out a soft sigh. He bit the juncture of my shoulder and neck—hard. I whimpered because it still stung when he bit me, but the jolt of pain went straight to my clit, making it throb.

“Fuck, Damion.” I groaned. It wasn’t lost on me that this was the first time I had called out his name when we were fucking.

Licking away the sting, he followed it with another nip of his teeth, moving lower. Trailing kisses to my breast, he licked my nipple with the flat of his tongue before pulling the tip with his teeth, causing me to arch my chest into his face and pant in pleasure. He paid the same attention to the other bud.

His eyes met mine and held my gaze as he slid his face down my body, nipping at my stomach as he headed toward my pussy. He pulled my thighs apart, eyes still trained on me. He licked from my entrance to my clit, sucking the nub in his mouth, flicking it with his tongue.

I moaned and rolled my head back, no longer looking at him. This wouldn’t take long. I was already so turned on that I was willing to bet he wouldn’t be able to stop my orgasm. I really wanted to grab his hair and direct him exactly where I wanted him. If I had learned only one thing since I got here, it was what felt good, and while part of the time I was scared or horrified, I had never hated anything he’d done.

“Damion, please, don’t stop.”

His dark chuckle met my ears, and I knew, at that moment, this was going to be a long night.

“You may regret asking that, baby. I love hearing you beg and my name falling from those sinful fucking lips.”

Yeah, I was so wrong—of course, he was going to control if I came. He had controlled everything from the start. This would be no different. I wanted his dirty fucking words, every time, and how they made me feel.

His tongue slid inside me. One of his hands remained on my thighs, still spreading me open to him, while his other hand glided up my body, and he palmed my left tit, pinching the tip. The little jolt of pain made my pussy throb. He went back to paying attention to my clit, and I arched up off the bed. I needed more friction—more of his mouth on me and his warm hands all over my body. My breathing sped up, and I could already feel the tingling heat building in my clit, ready to burst out across my body. Just as it was about to peak, he pulled away. His mouth and hands were gone from my body. I whimpered and wanted to scream at him, but I had enough sense to know that would be a mistake. I didn't even dare to ask him why he had stopped. I knew why. I had agreed to this, to let him torture me and use me. That was an oversight, I realized now.

I was trying to prepare mentally for what the entire experience was going to cost me. But Damion was more thorough than simply physically pushing me; he loved to taunt me, and this wouldn't be any different from any other time.

“I'm just gonna lock you in here and make you my little sex slave. Even though you won't admit it, you love being my personal dirty little slut.” He grabbed me by my throat, his face so close, all I could do was look in those burning green eyes. “Just being trapped here for my needs, to use your tight little pussy however and whenever I feel like it. Even when you're too sore and begging for me to stop, I won't. Because you're my little fucktoy and mine to use as I see fit.”

Growling, he kissed me, rough and needy. I felt completely consumed by him after he forced his tongue inside my mouth.

His hypnotic voice and eyes told me I wanted him to use me, bend me to his will, and own me.

Once my breathing returned to near-normal levels, his hands stroked up and down my body, causing goosebumps to pop up all over. His hands slid through my wet folds. Two fingers entered me and started pumping in and out of me slowly. Even though I was still turned on, I had to start from the beginning for my orgasm. I let out an exhausted moan.

“Who owns this fucking pussy and can do whatever they want to it? You better not touch this pussy without my permission, or what I’m doing will feel like paradise compared to how bad I’ll punish you.”

I didn’t really think he expected an answer, but when he thrust hard inside me, I knew he wanted one.

“I asked you a fucking question.”

“You own it, Damion,” I answered, already so programmed to give him this answer.

Of course, it was his. He made that pretty fucking clear already. His thumb rubbed circles on my clit, and I tried to close my legs. It was an instinct, but I already knew trying to stop him was a big mistake. I saw the angry glint in his eyes. That look and what he was doing to me caused a gush of arousal to coat his fingers. I couldn’t believe I was getting off on his anger and the things he was saying to me.

Damion pulled his fingers out of my heat and chuckled, licking his fingers. “You little horny bitch, making a fucking mess everywhere. I should make you lick it all up, for denying that you want me.”

“I-I’m sorry.” I tried to speak, but I was spread so thin that I was having trouble remembering how to breathe. “I want you, please.”

He resumed playing with my clit and pumping his fingers inside me, but the maddeningly slow pace was doing nothing but frustrating me, knowing he wasn’t going to let me come. I wanted to feel that burning heat start to bloom, letting me know that my release was close. Call me a masochist, but it

was what I wanted—no, what I needed. I thrust my hips toward his hand, forcing his fingers inside me faster.

“Remember last time when you pulled your smart-ass little stunt, asking me if I could make you call me Daddy? Well, I’ll fucking show you that the only thing you’ll be saying is, *Daddy, please make me come*,” he threatened, and started pumping his fingers faster and circling my clit at an almost inhuman pace. I was about to come when he pulled away again.

“Fuck!” I yelled out of pure frustration, not thinking.

He chuckled and gripped my chin, making me look at him. “You wanted this, baby. Just admit that you need this. That you’re nothing more than a cum hungry cockslut. That you feel empty without my cock inside you, filling you and making you complete.”

Stubborn until the bitter end, should be my motto, which was why I shook my head and pulled my head away from him.

“Fuck you!” I heard my mouth shouting before I could stop the words. My nerves were frayed, and my brain was in a haze from my denied orgasms.

He just laughed darkly and grabbed me by the nape of my neck. The evil look I had only seen once when he was shocking me took over his face.

“You’re being an ungrateful little slut. I’m giving your hungry little pussy all this pleasure, and you’re being a whiny bitch,” he hissed at me.

That insult actually hurt, but also turned me on. What the fuck was wrong with me? Why did my body tingle and burn when he touched me after degrading me? I wanted to apologize for being ungrateful, and I felt tears start to pool, before tracking down my cheeks.

“I’m sorry.”

“Sorry for what, baby. Say it,” he coaxed me.

“For being an ungrateful little slut.”

“Should I just fuck your tight little ass? Deny you the orgasm you are clearly so desperate for.”

“No, please, don’t do that. I want to come, Damion.”

“I’m not gonna be done with you until you’re a whimpering, sobbing mess, and you’re begging to feel my thick cock fill you up and stretch your tight little cunt. You want it so bad you can taste it, can’t you, baby?”

Picking up the handheld device from the nightstand, he clicked the button once, causing it to make a vibrating sound. He pulled my legs apart, straddling me so I wouldn’t be able to close my legs, even if I was stupid enough to try. He held my lips open so my clit was exposed.

He lowered the head of the device to my clit, and I moaned. It felt so good, but it wasn’t enough. It was like a tease, and I rolled my hips again, trying to get the friction I needed. Damion smiled and turned the speed up a few clicks. I sighed and relaxed. Just absorbing the feelings that he was trying to pull out of me.

He pulled the vibrator away from me before I had a chance to reach my peak. When he turned down the speed again, I whimpered. Using the slow, barely there pulses for a few minutes to torture me, he soon pulled away again and clicked it up to full blast. I screamed when he touched my clit with it, the denied orgasms causing my clit to be so sensitive.

“Please, please stop. It’s too much. I can’t take anymore,” I pleaded helplessly.

“Who’s the fucking one in charge? You don’t tell me what to do. Your body is mine to do whatever I please, and right now, I’m not even close to being done with you. Be a good cockwhore and take what I’m giving you.”

He continued to press the vibrator to my clit, and the pleasure overrode the spikes of pain. Yet again, he pulled away, and I cried, all my emotions messing with me. I knew the tears wouldn’t move him, but my body needed some type of release. He gripped me by my hair, towering over me.

“You know what I want. Give it to me, and I’ll give you what you want.”

He got off the bed, unzipped his pants, and popped the button, letting them fall to his feet. He leaned down, pulling them all the way off. I could see his very prominent erection. He wanted me to beg. Could I actually do that, beg and plead like a dog for him to fuck me, and make me come? My clit throbbed between my legs at that thought, and I knew I damn well could—would—beg him.

“Please, Damion. Please f-fuck me. Stretch my pussy with your gigantic cock and fill me with your cum. Please, Daddy, I want to come so bad, please.”

It was as though someone had taken over my body because words I had never spoken to another man came flowing out of my mouth as if they were the most natural thing. He really had turned me into a slut for his cock.

A victorious smile broke out on his face. He pulled his boxers down, then joined me on the bed again. I wrapped my arms around his neck after he freed my hands. Running his hands through my folds, he thrust inside me with no warning. The air whooshed out of my lungs, and I tried to suck in a breath as he set a quick pace.

“I’ll make you come, baby, but this isn’t gonna take long. I’ve been hard for you since we started all this.”

It was a testament to how warped I had become since he kidnapped me, because that confession caused me to moan and my pussy to clench around him.

“Fuck me harder, Damion. Make me take it.”

“Fuck, baby. Yes, come all over my dick,” he hissed, and he slammed into me harder, his pelvic bone hitting my clit, but it wasn’t enough.

His middle finger came down to rub my clit. I sucked in a surprised breath, and before I could get my bearings, I was shattering around him and moaning loud enough to make a porn star proud. He continued to thrust inside me while I tried to come down from my orgasm, and he soon pulled out,

spraying his cum on my tits. It was so erotic that I scooped some of it up with my finger and sucked it off. Damion kissed me desperately, and I pulled at his shirt that was still covering his chest, trying to get him closer to me. He pulled away, tugging off his shirt and wiping the remaining mess off my chest.

In a move that further scrambled my emotions, after turning off the light, he spooned behind me, covering us with the blanket. He kissed my temple and told me to get some sleep. I somehow found it easy to fall asleep after that.

# CHAPTER 6

I WOKE UP WITH A START, WONDERING MOMENTARILY WHY I felt a hard body next to me. Flashes of the previous night came to me bit by bit until I was aware enough to remember what had happened. I rolled onto my back and looked over at Damion. In his sleep, he looked entirely at ease, peaceful, and utterly gorgeous. It was a true testament that looks could be deceiving. I was slammed by shame and embarrassment at what had happened last night. The things he had said to me had turned me on, and I begged him to fuck me, just as he wanted me to. What was even more fucked up was I wanted it again. I could feel my clit throbbing, and that I was wet.

Sliding my hands down my body, I rolled the buds of my nipples in between my fingers, making them hard before continuing down to my pussy. Before I could touch myself down there, a large warm masculine hand was stopping me. I looked over at Damion in surprise, his eyes open and angry.

“I told you not to touch my pussy without permission, so I know that’s not what you were planning on doing.” His voice was raspy and rough with sleep.

Well, shit. Did I lie and hope he believed me, or did I tell the truth and hope he went easy on me? Honesty was the best policy, right? And I hadn’t touched it before he stopped me.

“It was a thought, but I didn’t touch it. I was just thinking about everything that happened last night. Sorry.”

The fact that I was apologizing to him about touching my own body was crazy, but he had already started

reprogramming me. When I touched myself, I had never felt half of what Damion had made me feel.

“I wanted to know if it would feel the same when I did it myself.”

“Have you never touched yourself before?”

“No, I have. It just never felt the way it does when you touch me.”

The sweet and proud smile that broke out across his face was so at odds with how he normally acted. It was things like this that threw me. Sometimes it was so *in my face* that he was my kidnapper and the man holding me trapped here, though I couldn't deny what he did to my body. Other times, it was as if he was the guy I remembered as being kind, attractive, and so fucking cool that everyone liked him. Sometimes, when my thinking got really warped, I was flattered that he picked me out of the hundreds of girls he came across subbing at my school. I knew there were prettier girls, sluttier ones, for sure, and probably more adventurous ones too. I was just plain Brooke.

I felt his hand cup my cheek and slight pressure to cause me to look. Those green eyes captivated me and held me paralyzed, only able to look at him.

“Where did you go just now, baby? What are you thinking about?”

“Why did you pick me? Out of the hundreds of girls you probably came across every day in that school, why me?”

His thumb started stroking my cheek, and without thinking, I leaned into the soothing touch. His rough treatment of me turned me on and excited me, but I also liked when he looked at me with adoration and being sweet.

“You don't see yourself clearly, baby, but I do. It's not only the physical attraction, but mental and emotional too. Tell me you feel it, Brooke. When I touch you, I know you feel it.”

I looked at his handsome face, and I knew I couldn't lie to him. I felt it; I had from the beginning, but I fought against it

so hard that I pretended it wasn't there. Last night, giving myself over to him was a turning point.

“I feel it, Damion. What does that mean?”

“It means you're mine,” he whispered.

He placed open-mouthed kisses on my neck. We were both still naked from last night.

“I want to watch you touch yourself, baby. I wanna see if you can make yourself come as hard as I can.”

“I can't, Damion. I know I can't.”

He grabbed my hand and sucked my middle finger in his mouth. It was erotic and hot as hell. He sucked hard, and I moaned. When he pulled my finger out, he placed my finger on my clit and helped me rub it in circles. Letting go of my finger, leaving me to do it myself, he gripped his already hard cock and started stroking it. His hooded eyes met mine, and I flushed, so surprised I was doing this in front of someone. I looked down, and he gripped my chin with his free hand, forcing me to look at him again.

“Look at me.”

I nodded and stared into his eyes as I rubbed circles around my clit. I moaned and bit my lip, trying not to embarrass myself with the noises I was making. Damion groaned as he continued to stroke his dick.

“Put your fingers inside your hot cunt, little girl. Imagine your fingers are my cock.”

I whimpered and slid two fingers inside me. It was so wet there was no resistance, but I knew already it was a sad imitation of his impressive dick. I added a third finger and ground my hips onto my hand, fucking myself with my hand.

“Fuck, that's so sexy. Does it feel good, baby?” His gravelly voice went straight to my core, making my pussy throb. I felt it clench around my fingers.

It felt so good, but I wouldn't come this way. “I need more. It's not enough.”

“Hmm, my greedy little girl. Use your thumb to rub that pretty little clit while you fuck your fingers.” He licked his lips and continued to look at me through hooded eyes.

Wanting to be seen as sexy and alluring to him, I did what he asked me to do and threw my head back, trying to lose myself in the sensations.

“Damion, touch me, please. I need you to touch me.”

I felt his body press up against mine. “If you don’t start listening, I won’t let you come, little girl. I told you to look at me.”

My head fell forward to look at him. We were now forehead to forehead. He gave me a cocky smirk, and I decided to play dirty. I used my free hand to grab his shaft, taking over stroking him, and moaned, licking my lips, smiling at him deviously.

“You know you want to fuck me, Damion. Feel this tight pussy milking your cock. Me underneath you, begging you and coming on your huge dick,” I whispered. I was proud of myself for not blushing as I said those dirty, filthy words to him. If anything, they turned me on even more.

Damion got an equally devious smile on his lips, and I thought I saw pride shining in his eyes. I took my hand that was still slick with my juices and slipped them inside his mouth, causing him to groan. He licked and sucked my fingers clean.

“You’re a dirty fucking girl, baby. I want you in my lap, riding me until you can’t move anymore.”

He pulled me into his lap and got me in the position he wanted. His thick cock thrust inside me, and I gasped. My head fell on his shoulder, the sensation too much. He weaved his hand into my hair and pulled my lips to his, thrusting his hips.

“Roll your hips, baby. Show me how much of a dirty cockslut you are. Make me come.” He growled at me.

I whimpered, but felt my body obey his commands with little conscious thought on my part. The fact that we were so

unevenly matched, sexually, reared its fucking head at that moment. Even though I could roll my hips, it was uncoordinated, and I started to get fatigued faster than I should have.

“Damion, fuck, I need your help. I don’t know what I’m doing,” I confessed, my face burning with shame and humiliation. I wanted to have the power to do what he asked me, but I was woefully inept at being sexy.

Damion’s hands fell from my hair, but my forehead still rested against his. He grabbed my hips and helped me to move against him. He slid his hands down to my ass, gripping and squeezing as he bounced me on his cock, picking up the pace. I rested my arms on his shoulders and got into a rhythm. Eventually, Damion was able to let go, and I took over by myself. I was climbing to my climax when Damion pressed his thumb to my clit and rubbed circles over it.

“Come baby, strangle my dick.”

His lips pressed to mine, and he swallowed my screams and cries as I fell apart in his arms. I had barely recovered from my orgasm before Damion positioned me on all fours and thrust into me from behind. I was exhausted, so I fell to my elbows.

“Yeah, stick that beautiful ass in the air,” Damion growled, and I felt his hand come down on my cheek.

I moaned and wiggled my ass more, trying to entice him. He took the bait and landed alternating slaps while he continued to pound into me.

Soon, I felt his rhythm faltering, and he sped up, chasing his own orgasm. I came again, and it set off his. Instead of pulling out like usual, I felt his hot seed spill into me. It was a unique sensation, but the thought that his semen was the first ever to be inside me made me feel even more owned than before.

Once I came down from my bliss, then the panic set in. He hadn’t used a condom, and I wasn’t on birth control. I couldn’t get pregnant, not now at eighteen and not by Damion. I still

knew so little about him, and he was a few nuts short of a full set.

“Damion—”

He held up his hand to stop me. “I know, baby. It’ll be okay. If you get pregnant, I have money. I can take care of you,” he said, cupping my cheek.

I pulled away from his caress. “No, it’s not okay. I don’t want to be pregnant. We’re not even together. How—”

“What do I need to do to get it through that thick head of yours, little girl?” He gripped my chin and made me look at him. He looked furious. “You. Are. Mine. This is not an empty promise or threat. Anyone or anything that tries to take you from me will have themselves a terrible fucking day. Not even you can fight this.”

“So, you’d force me to be with you? To have your child even if I don’t want it?” I asked, shocked that was his way of thinking. I could feel the tears pooling in my eyes.

“I told you from the beginning, and you haven’t been fighting me off, Brooke. I know you paid attention in school. With sex comes the chance of a baby.”

“This is so fucked up, Damion. I have feelings for you, yes, but I’m eighteen. I don’t want a kid. Please understand. You know how my parents treated me.”

Damion seemed to study me, then sighed, his expression softening. “This is a natural progression, baby. Sure, we aren’t married, but we will have nine months to remedy that. Everything will be okay.” He pulled me into his arms.

I shook my head. “Please don’t.” The tears finally fell. I was so confused because even though I didn’t want a kid, thinking of something that was part of me and part Damion growing inside me wasn’t unpleasant. I did eventually want children.

Damion leaned in and kissed me, wiping the tears from my cheeks. “I would never hurt you, Brooke. I would never force you to do something you didn’t want to do. You know that, right?”

I knew it wasn't the time to argue with him, and technically, he was correct. I nodded and gave him a small smile.

We were quiet for a few minutes; I was sure he was letting me process. His next words surprised me; I almost thought I heard him wrong.

"I know I keep you inside all the time. Would you like to take a walk with me outside?"

I looked up at him, half-expecting him to take it back. "Really? I would love that. I miss the fresh air."

Damion gave me the lopsided smile that made my heart stutter then speed up. He got off the bed, and even though we were naked a lot, I still appreciated his body just as much: the lean muscles; smooth, tan skin; and the beauty marks on his back. It all was just part of the Damion Cressy package, and I was still in awe that he was mine ... Wait. I mentally stopped myself. He was mine? When did I start to think that? Sure, Damion constantly said I was his, but the whole ownership thing was odd to me, and this wasn't a relationship.

He opened the closet and rummaged around before turning and walking back to me with a shopping bag. He handed it to me, and I was surprised to see clothes inside. There was underwear, a bra, a pair of jeans, a T-shirt, and a zip-up hoodie. Damion left the room to get dressed himself, and I did the same.

I was brushing my hair in the bathroom when Damion returned holding my pair of chucks I was wearing the night I was taken by him. I sighed in relief when I saw my shoes had survived. He gave me a small smirk.

"You seem pretty happy to see a pair of shoes."

"Yeah, I saved a while to buy these—they were a hundred dollars."

"Really?" he asked, surprised, turning the shoes in his hands, examining them from all angles.

"Yes," I replied, chuckling, and taking the shoes from him.

I exited the bathroom, then sat down on the bed to put on the shoes. I finished tying the laces, then stood. Damion grabbed my hand and led me from the room. I followed him through his house, taking in more than I did when I was running for my life from him.

“Your house is very nice,” I said, almost shyly.

“I’ll give you a tour when we come back. I want you to feel at home here.”

“I’m not a prisoner anymore?” I asked.

Damion stopped and cupped both sides of my face with his hands. “You were never a prisoner, Brooke, but you can’t go home now. It will make people ask too many questions.” Then his hand rested on my stomach. “I will take care of you.”

“I wouldn’t ever tell anyone that you took me, Damion. Please believe that I would never do that to you, and I understand what you are saying.” I was pleading for him to believe me.

“I know, baby,” he soothed, pulling my lips to his and kissing me.

We had kissed before, but not a lot on the lips until fairly recently, and it was always during the naughty, kinky sex we had. This was different. It was consuming and deep. I kissed him back with as much desperation, my tongue dancing with his. He threaded his hands in my hair and pulled it lightly. When he pulled away, I was desperate for him all over again. He kissed me again, chastely, and playfully tugged on the ends of my hair.

“Come on,” he said, reminding me we were doing something other than fucking each other.

I smiled, shaking my head as I followed him out the back door of his house. We stepped out on to the back porch, and Damion’s house was tucked into the side of a hill, his backyard nestled up right against a vast forest. My mouth dropped open because I wasn’t expecting this. His house was not only beautiful, but the setting was also beautiful. I knew

we were in the middle of nowhere; at least we weren't close to town.

To my surprise, we stepped off the porch and headed toward the trees. I looked ahead, where the woods were foggy, and it felt ominous. I zipped up the hoodie and pulled the hood over my head. Damion chuckled and grabbed me around the waist from behind.

“Believe me, baby. I’m scarier than anything that may be in there. I’ll protect you.”

Though his words made me shiver, I knew he wasn't lying. “I believe you.”

He let go, and immediately, I missed his warmth. He walked beside me again, and I gripped his hand, needing contact with him not to feel scared. We walked for a short while, and he told me a little more about his experience in foster care, and I told him more about my childhood. Needless to say, I realized we were a lot alike in that we had tried to avoid confrontation, and we isolated ourselves, preferring our own company than that of others.

I wanted to know what had broken this man, but I knew that was something that would probably take some time for him to tell me. It was fine. All we had now was time, so I could wait.

Once we got back to the house, Damion made brunch for us after giving me a tour of his house. I shocked him by helping with our meal, and enjoyed spending time with him in that capacity, realizing I liked Damion's presence outside of the bedroom. While I enjoyed what we did there, I still liked talking and joking around like any regular couple. Then I realized we weren't a regular couple. Regardless of what he claimed, I was his captive, and though I didn't enjoy living with my parents or my old life, it was still my life, and this wasn't. I was now more confused than ever.

# CHAPTER 7

DAMION AND I WATCHED A MOVIE AFTER WE ATE, AND I FOUND myself enjoying spending an afternoon together. There was no talk of me being his or anything else weird that had transpired between us. We actually had done a fair amount of teasing, sexually and otherwise. He was hilarious, charming, and attentive. I was so lost because it was as though he had more than one personality, and I was having a difficult time keeping up with which one to expect or which one I preferred. In the bedroom, he was in control, and I was his to use as he saw fit, and I was totally okay with that. I preferred it that way. Outside of the bedroom, he was more like his public personality, but the adoration and almost worship-like attention on me was there front and center, and it was difficult not to get swallowed up in that feeling. I was struggling to remember why I had fought him in the beginning.

After dinner, I straddled his lap, kissing him, shutting out everything but him and me. Even though I was exhausted, I couldn't stop. Kissing Damion was becoming one of my favorite things. His large, warm hands were on my thighs, his hands trailing up to cup my ass, then he pushed on the small of my back, pushing my hips closer to his. I moaned into his mouth, and he swallowed my cries.

“God, baby, you are so gorgeous. Your skin is all flushed, and I can see your pretty nipples straining through your shirt. I bet if I touched your pussy I would find you drenched.” He kissed my neck, and I could feel his smile against my skin when I whimpered. “Are you wet, baby?” He grabbed my hair in his fist and forced me to look at him. I nodded, and he frowned. “Say the words, little girl.”

“Yes, Damion. I’m so wet for you.”

He groaned and bit my neck, causing a gasp at the stinging pain to fall from my lips. I was soothed when he sucked the skin into his mouth, even though I still had hickeys and bruises from his mouth. At this point, he seemed to be a man possessed, so I didn’t even try to struggle.

“I want to make love to you, baby.”

I pulled back from him so I could see his face. The look on his face almost knocked the breath from my lungs. His eyes were gleaming, the small smile curving his lips—he looked happy, like stupid happy. I wondered if this was the love he spoke of, and I refuted it as obsession. I knew what we had been doing until now was having sex, fucking, releasing tension. But when he used the term “make love” to me? I knew it was going to be something completely different. All I could do was smile and nod.

He stood with me still in his lap, causing me to squeal. He chuckled and moved me into position so he was carrying me bridal style. I locked my arms around his neck. He hurried up the stairs with surprising ease, especially considering he was carrying me. Instead of him taking me to the room I had been sleeping in, he took me to another room, and when I looked around, I knew immediately it was his bedroom. He gently laid me down on his bed. I propped myself on my elbows. Damion slowly removed his clothes, letting me enjoy seeing his skin and body be revealed to me. He kneeled on the bed, crawling to me. I rose to my knees, peeled off my shirt, and removed my bra. Damion pulled me toward him by my hips, and I pressed my lips to his. He removed my pants and underwear, with me maneuvering to help him. My pants got stuck on my shoes, and we both ended up falling to the mattress and laughing. I pulled off the shoes and kicked the pants down the rest of the way.

When I lay back, he was on top of me again. Instead of playing with my pussy as I expected him to, he kissed me again, and I smiled. Again, I was so down with this. I loved kissing him. I fisted his hair in my hands and lost myself in his lips. His fingers started drifting lower, and he caressed my

sides, then started playing with my nipples, pulling the peaks into stiff tips. I moaned and arched into his touch. His lips slid from my lips, down to my chin, then down to my neck, my collarbone, and then his tongue was circling my nipples, pulling the nubs into his mouth, nipping them with his teeth. My hands were still in his hair, so I pulled his mouth closer to me, anchoring him to my breast.

Damion's face tipped up to look at me as he smiled before he leaned back down and licked my stomach, trailing kisses up my torso, following his lips with his hands. I let go of his hair and my hands roamed over his body, exploring the ridges and planes of his taut muscles. Damion kissed me on the lips again, and it was a consuming, encompassing, and devouring kind. Our lips meeting together and dancing was nothing new, but this felt more like connecting on a deeper level, and his hands cradling my head felt like I was precious to him, treasured, fragile.

"I love you, Brooke. I have for a very long time, and I know you're not there yet, but I will continue to show you how much."

I felt tears pool behind my eyes, and I smiled at him, cupping his cheek, and blinking to let the tears fall. He kissed away my tears and smiled. He gently grabbed my thigh, and after sliding his fingers in my entrance to make sure I was wet, he slid inside me in one smooth thrust. I inhaled deeply because the sensations were just so much right now. He pumped inside me with slow, long strokes, nothing at all like the frantic and frenzied sex we had before. Every time we touched, it was like little jolts of pleasure, and I knew, in that moment, we had moved to a whole other level in whatever this was between us.

"Oh god, Damion." I moaned, unable to contain my voice. He rubbed circles on my clit with his thumb. He rose on his knees so he could have more leverage. As he reared back and snapped his hips to mine, causing him to go deeper, he threaded his hands with mine. Holding them interlocked on the bed next to my head, his eyes never left mine. His pubic bone

kept hitting my clit, giving me stimulation without letting go of my hands.

My eyes fell closed, and Damion's commanding voice demanded I keep my eyes open.

"I want to watch you fall apart. Only I can make you feel this way, and you know it."

He could get that much deeper because I wrapped my legs tighter around his waist. I knew it went against everything I was mad at him for earlier, but I didn't want him to pull out; I needed to feel this through to the end. It was so good and so intense. Stiffening, I felt my orgasm barreling straight toward me.

"Damion, I'm coming, fuck!"

"Yeah, clench that pussy on my dick and come all over this cock. Show me how good it feels, baby."

I pulled my hands free from his and brought his lips to mine, needing him close when I came down because this one was intense. I moaned and cried into his lips, feeling like I was so high. After a few shallow thrusts, Damion stilled, pouring his release inside me. He fell onto the mattress next to me, pulling me into his arms. I curled up next to him, resting my head on his chest. He kissed my temple, then the top of my hair, and then nuzzled my face, causing me to giggle.

I fell asleep, sated and content.



I woke with a jolt, remembering the dream that was so vivid I was sure it was real until I awoke. Damion and I had two children and were married, but I was still constantly confined to this house and wasn't allowed to leave. My life was just Damion and the kids, day in and day out. I tried to calm down my breathing. *It was only a dream, Brooke*, I told myself.

Needing to stop or I was going to have a full-blown panic attack, I vaulted off the bed, jostling Damion. Over my shoulder, I told him I was going to the bathroom. I turned on

the light and shut the door. Sitting on the toilet and bracing my hands on my thighs, I forced myself to take deep breaths.

I didn't want the life I had with my parents, but I didn't want this life with Damion either. He wanted me to be his toy and his breeding machine, but I didn't want to be that. I had to get out of there now. That thought caused a pang in my heart. Despite everything, I was falling in love with Damion. His smile, his playfulness, the sex—I had to stop thinking about all the things I liked about him and focus on the deal-breaker. I couldn't be what he wanted. I wouldn't.

I heard Damion get up and the whoosh of the balcony sliding glass doors. This was the perfect opportunity to go. Slowly opening the bathroom door with the light off, I saw Damion standing outside with his back to me, his jeans slung low on his hips. Looking around, I realized it was too risky to grab clothes in here, but I grabbed my shoes. I scooted along the wall, hoping he didn't see me. Once I hit the door, I ran to my room. Grabbing soft sweatpants, a tank top, and my hoodie, I dressed as fast as I could, then threw on my shoes.

Quietly walking down the stairs, I looked between the front door and the back door. If I went out the front door, I would hit the road, but I would be exposed and out in the open. If I went out the back door, I could hide, and some of those trails had to lead to a road or somewhere. Before I could second-guess myself, I headed to the back door, opening it quietly. I was filled with horror when I realized Damion's balcony looked out over the backyard. Taking a few deep breaths, I ran as fast as I could. Damion yelled, but I didn't look at him. I simply kept running. I zipped up the hoodie and pulled up the hood as I ran, and once I hit the trees, I froze for a second.

Was I really going to go stumbling around the forest at night? I knew I had no choice now, Damion was coming, and if he caught me, I didn't know what he would be capable of. Stepping over fallen limbs, I made sure not to trip over knotted roots on the ground. Once I was well into the forest, I heard rustling and branches snapping. Either a terrifying big animal

was around, or Damion was close. I pushed myself forward, and that was when I started making mistakes, and I fell.

Before I could get back up, I was being pulled up by my ponytail through my hood. As I cried out at the sudden sharp pain, Damion's hand covered my mouth. I bit into his palm and drove my elbow back into his chest. He let go of me, and I kicked him in the shin, hoping to give myself an edge and taking off running again.

I didn't get very far before he grabbed me again. He only grabbed the hoodie because of my forward momentum. I shrugged it off and continued.

"Fucking bitch. You're only making this worse for yourself when I actually catch you, and I will. I won't stop."

"I won't be your prisoner and baby vessel. Damion, I refuse."

When I looked back, he wasn't there anymore. Shivering, I turned to keep going, but Damion was right there. He grabbed me by the throat and pushed me into the closest tree. The rough bark scratched my bare arms and shoulders, causing me to cry out. With my airway restricted, it came out more of a weak squeak. I looked at him, and he was angry. He was seriously pissed, but the emotion I hadn't expected to see there, that he was trying very hard to hide, was hurt. I was so thrown by this that I started to cry.

"Damion—"

He loosened his hold around my neck and clamped his hand down over my mouth.

"Shut the fuck up. You don't get to cry and play the victim. I would suggest that you don't talk at all, Brookelynn," Damion sneered viciously. When he used my full name like that, it made me feel like a chastised child. "Every time I try to treat you nicely, show you how I feel, you run away. I refuse to let you go, and you insist on running, so what do we do about that? The only time you don't try to run is when I have my dick so far inside you that you can't think of anything else. I think that is the solution right there."

He pushed harder into me, grinding his erection against me, and the movement caused more of my back to be scratched by the bark. I cried out again. Damion chuckled and ran his finger over my lips.

“Try to fool me all you want, but we both know how much of a pain slut you really are. Stop being a defiant cunt. There was no issue a few hours ago. I will make you remember.”

Damion surprised me by ripping off my tank top and pulling down my sweats. In one quick, rough movement, he turned me around and forced me into the tree. He held my head against it with one hand, my right cheek and bare, sensitive nipples scratching against the bark. Before I could process anything, Damion thrust his monumental cock inside me from behind, not letting me get in a more comfortable position or get used to the intrusion, and swiftly pumped in and out of me without mercy. My sweatpants gathered around my ankles constricted me, and I had no choice but to take his pounding.

Pawing at my breasts it seemed like he was trying to bite me anywhere he could, leaving marks on my neck, shoulders, and back. He unleashed a fury of spanks against my ass, slapping both sides with each brutal slam of his hips. He wanted to hurt me, make me remember why I enjoyed the pain, needed it even. I tilted back my head, crying out from the mix of pain and pleasure. I soaked his dick with my arousal. Damion pinched my clit roughly, and it made my pussy clench around him.

“Fuck, Damion. It’s too much,” I whimpered.

Damion grabbed my ponytail in his fist, my head pulled back, and my neck strained as he fucked me harder.

“No, from now on, you call me Master or Daddy. You need to earn the right to call me Damion again. You will take what I give you and be thankful. Thank Daddy for fucking your little hole.”

“Oh, god. Thank you, Daddy.” I was so close, all the tension and aching inside of me ready to combust.

Damion pulled out of me, right when my eyes rolled back, and I was about to come all over him, and sprayed his cum all over my ass. I whined because I hadn't been able to come yet; the ache of being deprived of that pleasure was unbearable.

“Get used to that empty feeling, slut. You won't come for some time now.”

He hauled me over his shoulder like a ragdoll. I tried to fight against him, and he smacked my ass, harder than he ever had before. He was still pissed.

“Remember the night I kept you on edge? That is going to seem like a walk in the park compared to what I have planned for you now. We'll see how you feel about being on edge for days.”

Damion slipped his fingers between my legs and rubbed slow, teasing circles on my clit, but not enough pressure to make me come, which frustrated me even more.

I couldn't believe I was going to call him that, but I didn't want to anger him more.

“Daddy, no, please you can't do that. I'll lose my mind. I'm sorry, I'll do anything,” I begged.

“I'll still feed you my dick, my little cockslut. You'll be fine.”

When we got back home, Damion threw me on his bed, which I took as a good sign. Taking my shoes and sweats off all the way, he then grabbed a dildo and masking tape from the nightstand. Grabbing rope, he tied me to the headboard. He took a bit of masking tape and covered my clit, then shoved the dildo inside me. After he covered my mouth with duct tape, he got close to my face.

“Try running now, bitch,” he said, and shut off the light, leaving the room and me, alone.

# CHAPTER 8

## DAMION

I HAD TO GET OUT OF THAT ROOM WITH BROOKE. IF I STAYED there, I would just end up fucking her until she couldn't move because I was fuming. Grabbing the vase I had sitting on a side table, I threw it as hard as I could at the floor, screaming a loud roar. Maybe the dildo was extreme, but fuck! She acted as though she didn't want this, want me. I knew she had a powerful spirit, and she was stubborn as hell. I had her in several classes I subbed for regularly. She had guys constantly vying for her attention, but she wasn't interested in any of them, which was safer for them, because I would have hated to have to kill someone and go on the run, taking her with me, of course.

When I realized she was getting closer to leaving for college, I knew it was the time to act. She couldn't leave me. The first college douchebag that touched her would die, and I would make it very painful. I knew it seemed extreme, but Brooke was mine, and that was the way it was meant to be.

I wasn't crazy, well, maybe not in the conventional way. The first therapist that my foster parents took me to said I had borderline personality disorder, the second deduced narcissistic personality disorder, and the third diagnosed me with antisocial personality disorder. It honestly made me laugh, making them scramble to try to figure out what was wrong with me. The fits of rage, the lack of empathy, the ability to fit in any environment, the obsession and fixation. No doctor could land on one diagnosis, and maybe that was because I was good at hiding.

With Brooke, I felt like I didn't need to pretend. She didn't seem scared of me, and when I took out my aggression on her body, she liked it—got off on it. We were more perfect for each other than we could have ever imagined. But fuck, she didn't see what we had, how I felt about her. How we needed each other. So, I would just have to continue to show her.

This afternoon, I saw the way she looked at me. The look in her eyes was changing, and I was sure she was falling in love with me. I could use that because she needed to be punished, and she was going to beg me to hurt her and make her come in the way only I could. I would remind her who was in control and who owned her body and soul. She was *mine*!

I let Brooke stew for a little bit longer because I had been lazy and lax in my security. Turning the security cameras and door alarms back on, I made sure everything was in working order. Now when anyone left, I would know instantly. I was lucky last night that Brooke wasn't thinking and ran for the forest. The smart thing to do would have been to snag my keys and take my car. But she also had no clue where we were.

We were on the outskirts of Joseph, which was good because if we were in town, the cops would have visited already. I was still expecting them to come, but it would take a little longer. I knew her cop father would report her missing; he had to by law, but she was eighteen, so it would take longer for the investigation to start.

I gathered some food and water because it was breakfast time, and I couldn't have Brooke hurting by being malnourished. She would need the energy for what I was going to do to her. Making my way upstairs to my room, I turned on the light, and Brooke was curled into a ball as much as she could. Setting down the tray, I stood by the bed. I couldn't help but stroke her hair, noticing the tear stains on her cheeks.

She woke up with a start and struggled. Kicking out at me, she caught me in the knee.

“Fuck!” I swore 'cause that fucking hurt, and it pissed me off.

Dodging her flailing limbs, I grabbed her legs, quickly tying them down. She yelled and grunted under her tape-gag, and I just chuckled. I reached for her again and she tried to scoot away from me, so I grabbed her hip and pressed the button on the dildo, turning on the vibration. She squealed and arched up off the bed, rolling her hips.

She didn't know how sexy she was and what her body did to me. I pushed her hips down to the bed and ripped off the tape over her mouth. She screamed because I was certain that shit hurt.

“What the fuck!” she yelled.

I grabbed her by the throat, my temper flaring. “You are on thin fucking ice, slut. I would think real hard before you let that mouth get you in trouble, or I'll just shove my cock in it.”

She gaped at me and swallowed hard.

“Sorry, Da—Daddy. I know that running was wrong, but I was freaked out. I was—”

Cutting her off, I put the duct tape over her mouth again.

“It was better when you couldn't talk. Your bullshit excuses are just gonna piss me off.”

After I pulled the dildo out of her harshly, I turned it off and placed it on the nightstand, the silicone glistening with her juices. I pulled the masking tape off her clit too.

“You must think I'm either really stupid or weak.” Squeezing my grip on her neck a little tighter, I felt the anger burning through me, but I was in control. I was all for scaring her a little. I kneeled on the bed next to her and got in her face. “Do you really think that I would let you get away with trying to run again? What did I do to you last time you tried to run?”

I peeled off the tape more gently this time, wanting to know if she remembered.

“You made me suck your cock. Tying me up, you shocked me until I came. Then you made me come repeatedly until I begged for you to stop. After that, you dragged one more orgasm out of me before you did. You punished me,” she

finished with a shaky voice. Her tears were flowing again, running down her beautiful face.

“And what do you think I’m going to do to you now?” I asked in a voice as tender as I could.

She wasn’t fooled, and started crying harder, shaking her head. “Please. Just let me go. I can’t do this—I can’t be who you want me to be.” She started getting hysterical.

I stopped squeezing her throat and gripped her chin, making her look at me. “You are everything I want. It seems you are hard of hearing.”

I pulled her face to mine, her breath ghosting over my face. Closing my eyes and groaning, I let myself get lost in her scent momentarily. “You. Are. Mine. Anyone else getting you or taking you from me will literally be over my dead body. And even if I have to fight you for you to get it through that fucking gorgeous head of yours, I will do it without hesitation.”

A hard look was in her eyes, and I knew she was pissed at me. At this moment, I really didn’t care. I was curious to see if she would voice it or not.

“So, you have no problem forcing me to be with you, even if I don’t want to. That’s not love, Damion, it’s obsession!”

“I told you not to call me—”

“I don’t fucking care! I have every right to call you that. Giving my body over to you freely, I also gave you my heart. It can’t all be on your terms; that’s not fair, and it’s not okay for you to treat me like my feelings don’t matter.”

I respected her a little bit for fighting back and refusing to cower and turn into the crying girl she had been. Yeah, I got off on her fear, but I desired her fire more. The fact that she had given herself over to me and was willing to admit it was progress, but I would be remiss if I didn’t point out that she was a fucking hypocrite.

“So then tell me why it is okay for you to do the same to me? You know how I feel about you; it isn’t a secret, yet every

time I open myself up and show you how much you mean to me, you use it against me and try to leave me.”

She looked at me in shock, as if this was news to her, but she knew I was right. I saw a few tears leak out of her eyes again. I reached over and wiped them from her face with my thumb, then stuck the digit in my mouth, licking off the essence of her sadness.

“Please untie me. I want to touch you,” Brooke whined.

I shook my head, not ready to let her off the hook.

“You can keep the cuffs on and my feet tied, I don’t care, just release my hands. Please.”

I wanted to hit something because her begging really fucking got to me. I huffed and untied her hands from the headboard, with her still wearing the leather cuffs tying her hands together. She reached out to touch my face, but I grabbed her hands, stopping her before she could. I shook my head. She dropped her hands, looking defeated.

“I brought you some stuff to eat,” I said, realizing my voice sounded detached. Grabbing the tray, I set it in front of her. After I untied her feet, I got off the bed and grabbed a shirt from my closet. Yes, I had to run after her with no shirt on, and I hadn’t thought to put one on.

“I’m not hungry,” she answered in a small, sad voice.

“You need to eat!” I snapped at her. “Stop fighting me on every fucking thing. Jesus!” Raking my hand through my hair, I tugged at the roots.

She reached for a muffin on the tray, pulling off pieces to eat, her stubborn gaze dropping from looking at me. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what else to say.”

“Just stop talking because apologizing for something you aren’t remotely remorseful about isn’t winning you any points.” I leaned against the dresser, gazing at her.

“Now who’s the one fighting everything? I tell you I’m sorry, but you can’t fathom why I might have freaked out, so

obviously, I'm lying? I'm sorry you don't have the ability to feel remorse, but not everyone is a sociopath like you."

I didn't even flinch at her calling me that. I had heard it enough. "Psychopath."

"What?"

"You're thinking of a psychopath. Psychopaths can't feel remorse; they can fake it, but they don't feel it. Sociopaths can feel remorse and empathy; they just care little for it. You think I've never been called that before in my life? Believe me, I have."

Brooke huffed and continued to eat, grabbing a cheese cube. She ate a few grapes, then put the tray on the nightstand, which was impressive with her hands bound. She grabbed the water bottle and stared at her lap, saying nothing.

"So, we're back to me being tied to the bed 24/7 again?"

"Am I supposed to feel bad for you? You did this, Brooke. You want it to be this way, then fine, but like I told you before, I can't let you go."

"Please, don't do this, Damion. I said I'm sorry. I'm terrified, okay? The way you make me feel, the shit that I'm rationalizing in my head, it scares me because I shouldn't be okay with the stuff you do to me."

"Why, because society says it's wrong or naughty? I don't give a fuck what everyone else thinks. The fact you get off on me hurting you, marking you, making you mine; that shit turns me on too and that's all that matters." I returned to the side of the bed and opened the drawer. I pulled out the electro wand I had used on her last punishment. "You liked this." It was a statement, but I still wanted her to answer it like a question.

"Yes." Her voice was small and she wouldn't look at me.

I sighed and shook my head. "Some form of punishment is needed for me to get past this. You need to show some penance. Make me believe it, and make it good," I said, uncuffing her hands. She immediately got off the bed and stood in front of me, staring at me. Bending over the bed, her chest was pressed to the mattress and her ass in the air.

“Do you have a belt?” she asked, looking up at me.

I nodded.

“Spank me, Daddy.”

I almost came on the spot. She was suggesting I spank her, with my belt, and calling me Daddy. Stalking over to my closet, I opened the door and grabbed a belt from the hook. I stood behind her, snapping the leather and watching her jump.

“Twenty, Brooke. You will count each one and thank me for them.”

She nodded, and I could see she was bracing herself for what was about to happen. Closing her eyes, she inhaled and held it. Then when she exhaled and opened her eyes, I saw the resolve there. Bringing the belt down over her ass, I relished the snapping sound and the sharp intake of breath from her. Then her fucking voice counting and thanking me for spanking her and teaching her a lesson. I wanted to imbed my dick in her pussy, bury myself in her so deep, and never come up for air. I wanted to devour and consume her.

Continuing to spank her, I watched her creamy white skin turn pink with each smack. She was dripping wet when I felt her pussy. I knew her tears were more out of guilt and sadness than they were out of pain. She couldn't hide from me; she was getting off on me hurting her.

“You are soaking wet, baby; my little painslut. Beg Daddy to continue spanking you.”

“Please, Daddy. Your little slut needs to learn her lesson. You own this slut's body. Please spank my ass.”

I grunted, unable to form a coherent sentence. She was absolutely perfect, all my fantasies rolled into one. The minute she said twenty, I dropped the belt, pulled my jeans and boxers down just enough to free my rock-hard dick. I thrust inside her with no preamble and pounded into her pussy.

“Fuck, yes, Daddy. You feel so good, filling my little pussy.”

“Take it all. Take Daddy’s cock in your slutty hole. Who owns your body and soul, little girl?”

“You do, Daddy. Fuck, you own my heart too. Don’t stop.”

Her declaration drove me into a frenzy, and I fucked her with abandonment. I grabbed her hair in my fist, pulling her ear to my mouth. “If you want to climax, you better get yourself there before I come, and I’m so fucking close. Your pussy is strangling my dick, baby. It’s so greedy to get Daddy’s cum.”

She moaned and cried out when I said that. I knew she was close when she began rubbing her clit. As she cried out, I bit down on the ball of her shoulder. Roaring, I reached my climax and poured my seed inside her. I thrust in deeper, eager for my cum to reach her womb. She had said she wasn’t ready for a baby, but I wanted to own every fucking part of her. We would let nature take over from here.

She was lying on the bed in an exhausted heap after I pulled out of her. I pulled her onto my chest and lay down with her. For her, it had been an emotional and physical ordeal, but I wasn’t tired.

“I’m sorry, Damion. I won’t try to leave you again,” she promised before she drifted off to sleep.

Pulling myself away from her sleeping form, I righted my jeans, re-buttoning and zipping them up. I left her in bed untied, trusting she was done with the stunts. The breakfast tray was with me when I headed back downstairs. I hoped our relationship would be better after this because it couldn’t take another setback like that again.

I was still keyed up, so I deposited the tray in the kitchen and headed to my home gym that I had shown Brooke on my tour—she had run her eyes all over my body and nodded when she saw it. Blaring some loud music, I lost myself in my workout, trying to put everything out of my head.

Halfway through my workout, I looked up to see Brooke’s sleep-rumpled form, smiling sweetly at me and my sweaty body. She had gotten dressed and put on a hoodie. I muted the

music with my remote, grabbed a towel, and walked over to her. Wiping the sweat off my face, she stopped my hands and grabbed the towel so she could wipe it off my chest, wanting to do it for me. She dropped to her knees in front of me, her hand going for my workout shorts.

I was so ready to let her suck my dick, but at that moment, there was a knock on the door, followed by the doorbell ringing. Brooke rushed over to the window and peeked out, her eyes widening in alarm. “It’s the police, Damion. My dad is out there with them.”

# CHAPTER 9

“WHAT DO WE DO?” I ASKED HIM.

I was worried about the ways this could go so wrong. Damion had kidnapped me, and I had tried to escape twice, but I didn't want to leave. I was being one hundred percent honest when I told him I wasn't going to try to leave again. I was tired of fighting how I felt about him, and I couldn't imagine being without him now.

“It's time for you to make a choice, Brooke. You can answer that door and tell them I kidnapped you and held you here against your will.”

“Or ... I'm not going to tell them that, Damion,” I said, grabbing his hands and squeezing them. “I told you I wasn't going to tell anyone that you kidnapped me.”

“But you don't want to be here. I love you and I don't want to lose you, but we can't keep doing this. I can't keep pretending that all the stuff you are doing is of your own free will.”

We walked to the living room, keeping our voices down.

I shook my head. Was I really that hard for him to read? I had felt so many times that he knew exactly what I was thinking, and that was why he would tell me to do stuff that I would never think to do, but I had no problem doing. Then I realized he was being ... insecure. He thought I didn't want him.

“No, I don't want to leave anymore. I told you I was scared, but I can't keep fighting how I feel about you. I don't

want to.”

“How do you feel about me?”

I inhaled, steeling myself to say the words that would tie me to him forever. We weren’t getting married or anything, but with the way Damion felt about me and the way he’d held onto that for years with no action, told me that saying the L-word to him was binding, and there would be no backing out. I didn’t care because I wanted him—him and all his crazy thoughts and feelings. The way he talked to me, the things he did to my body, I couldn’t live without it.

“I’m falling in love with you, Damion. You know I’m not doing these things against my will. I told you to spank me, not the other way around. Just follow my lead; I have a plan. But you need to answer the door, and I’m going to sit here on the couch. If they ask to come in or about me, then call my name. Then I will take it from there.”

Damion nodded, and I sat on the couch, picking up the book on the coffee table. I covered my legs with the throw blanket from the back of the couch, looking comfortable and at home. I heard the door opening, voices talking, then the door shutting followed by several sets of footsteps. Damion was with my dad and another cop. The guy didn’t look familiar, so he must have been fairly new. My dad saw me, and his eyes widened. I put down the book and got up off the couch, then headed toward them.

I was thankful I had put on a hoodie when I got dressed; otherwise, they would have seen the bruises on my neck from Damion biting me. Damion leaned back against the couch as I came toward the standing men.

“Brooke? What are you doing here?” my dad asked. “We have been looking for you since you disappeared.”

“I haven’t disappeared. I’ve been here the whole time. Mr. Cressy was nice enough to allow me to stay with him until I went off to college.” I turned my head to look at Damion and I smiled at him. He smirked back. God, he was gorgeous. *Focus, Brooke*, I told myself.

My dad looked back and forth between Damion and me. He seemed to get what we weren't saying because his brows furrowed and he frowned.

"Why did you leave without saying a word? All your clothes and stuff are still at home."

"I thought that would have been obvious. You and Mom made it clear that I was a burden, and you couldn't be bothered with me, so I left. I thought you would be happy."

"Happy?" The other man spoke up. "Your dad has been worried sick about you."

Since I had been here with Damion, that was something that had changed about me. I could stand up to him and tell him when something was messed up or wrong. My dad was going to be surprised because I had never talked out of turn to my parents or made a scene.

Looking at the cop I didn't know, I sneered. "Excuse me? Who the hell are you? You don't know shit about me and my parents, so just stop talking. I grew up with my mom and dad for eighteen years; believe me, I know them more than you." I looked at my dad and shook my head. "They are playing their part of the distraught parents, but really, all my dad feels now is relief. You're not going to fight me or ask me to leave and come home with you. Spoiler alert, I won't leave."

"I don't know how I feel about you being here with a man that is so much older than you."

"That isn't any of your business, Chief. Brooke is eighteen, and therefore she is an adult." Damion came to stand behind me. "I assure you, nothing is going on in this house that your daughter doesn't want." He gripped my hips and pulled me into his chest. I giggled because he was staking his claim, and like everything he did to me, it turned me on.

I loved how he got where I was going with my thoughts. "You can call off the search; you found me. But I'm not coming with you or going anywhere. I'm home." I knew my dad wanted to argue with me, but I knew he was going to give up. He didn't necessarily want the responsibility of continuing

to have me live at home, but he didn't want me to make him look bad in front of his colleagues. "Just let me go, Dad."

He nodded sadly; his shoulders slumped, playing the part of the grieving parent. "Let's go, Jake. No laws have been broken here."

Damion saw the two men out, and I stayed in the living room. When Damion came back, he pulled me to him. His hands sank into my hair and pulled my lips to his. I responded, wrapping my arms around him and humming softly.

"You truly want to stay here?"

I nodded and smiled at him. "Yeah, I've made my choice. I just want you." I kissed him quickly. "Now, let's get back to what I wanted before we were interrupted."

I sank to my knees in front of him, taking his shorts and boxers down with me. I had only done this one other time, and that was in different circumstances. Damion was already hard, and I stroked the smooth skin with my hand, surprised the skin felt soft with the hard muscle beneath. Licking from the base of his dick to the tip, I swirled my tongue around the head. I lapped up the fluid leaking from the tip, then sank down on him, remembering when Damion told me to breathe through my nose and relax the muscles in my throat. Taking him in as best as I could, I was encouraged by Damion's groan of pleasure.

Damion grabbed my hair in his fist and guided my mouth up and down his dick. "Fuck, baby, just like that; take all of my cock down your throat."

I was spurred on by his dirty words every time, and this time instead of wondering what was wrong with me and why I liked it, I finally got it. Since I wasn't fighting against my mounting attraction to him anymore, I wanted to please him. I wanted to make him crazy with lust like he did with me. Whenever we were like this, I lost all rational thought and I loved it. I hummed, knowing the vibrations would make it feel better.

“You’re such a good girl. You look so good with my dick in your mouth.”

Damion pushed my head farther down his dick, causing me to take him deep, and I had to focus on my breathing, so I didn’t pass out. My eyes watered, and I loved the feel of him inside me, even though he was guiding my head, I was in control of his pleasure. I hollowed out my cheeks and grabbed his ass cheeks so I could continue with the deep strokes that he was giving me.

“I love it when you choke on my cock, my little cockslut.”

I pulled him in as deep as I could get him and started swallowing around him. I applauded myself when I heard him gasp, and his breathing became erratic.

“Fuck, baby, keep doing that. I’m going to come down your throat, you dirty girl.”

I continued to deepthroat him and swallowed around him, and soon he was groaning and spilling his release inside me.

“Swallow every drop like a good girl,” he ground out.

I continued to suck on the tip to make sure I got every drop, as he demanded. When he was done, I bobbed up and down a couple of times, making sure I was licking him clean. He lifted me from my knees with a hand on my elbow and kissed me.

“I fucking love you, baby. This is it, you’re all I want.”

“Well, me and kids, right?”

He chuckled. “Yeah, but I’ll settle for just you right now.”

I giggled and wrapped my arms around his neck, then jumped up so I could wrap my legs around his waist. He gripped my waist and pressed his lips to mine again. One of his hands went to palm my ass, and he smacked it. I moaned and wiggled, grinding my hips into his.

“Is your pussy wet for me? Did you like sucking my dick and swallowing my cum, dirty girl?”

“Yes, I’m so wet for you, Damion. Fuck me with your fingers.” I moaned.

Keeping one arm wrapped around my waist, his other one pulled my shorts and underwear to one side and he slid two fingers inside me, going deep.

“Fuck,” I breathed, my head dropping to his shoulder.

“Did I say you could look away from me? Look at me while I make you come all over my fingers.”

I raised my head from his shoulder and struggled to keep my eyes open and look in his eyes. Damion pumped in and out of me, not holding anything back. He used his thumb to rub my clit while he worked in a third finger.

“Oh, that feels so good, Damion.” I pressed my lips to his again, fisting his hair in my hands, loving the feel of it.

Damion picked up the pace, pumping his fingers in and out of me, circling my clit faster. “Your pussy is clenching my fingers so tight, baby. Am I about to make you come? Beg Daddy to make you come.”

Without hesitation or embarrassment, I complied with his demand. “Please, Daddy, make me come. My pussy is so greedy for the pleasure it knows you can give it. I want it so bad.”

“You’re such a good fucking little girl. You are my little greedy cumslut. Take my fingers and come.”

He growled and pinched my clit, causing me to shatter around him. I screamed and moaned, shaking in his embrace. Damion fell to sit on the couch, still holding me. I laid my head on his shoulder and snuggled into his body, reveling in the feeling of contentment. Damion kissed my temple and ran his hand through my hair.

“So, what now?” I asked, looking up at him.

“Whatever you want. We don’t have to hide that you’re here.”

I straddled him and smiled at him. “You know what I want?”

“What, baby?”

“Well, right now, I want to eat. You were right about burning calories.”

Damion laughed, and we headed to the kitchen to make lunch together. Just because I wanted to revel in my newfound freedom and wanted fresh air, we ate outside on his back patio. I stared at the tree line of the forest with longing.

“You thinking about when I fucked you in the forest?”

“Yeah.” Pushing my plate away from me, I walked over to him, standing between his legs. I leaned down and kissed him on the lips, then trailed over to his neck—biting him, provoking him. He grabbed my hair into a fist, pulling on the strands, causing that sting I loved so much.

“Am I making you hard?” Running my hand over his cock, straining in his pants. “Do you want to fuck my pussy?”

“You better watch it, little girl, or I’ll fuck your tight little ass.”

I moaned and whimpered. “You keep threatening, but you never deliver, Damion.”

He pulled my head closer to his face with his grip on my hair. “I’ll fuck that tiny hole, but you’re gonna have to be prepared for it, and I will have so much fun stretching you out.”

“Well, I have another idea for right now.”

I gently pulled away from his fist gripping my hair. I kissed his lips again, then whispered in his ear. “Catch me, and make it fucking hurt.”

I turned on my heel and ran toward the forest, smiling when I heard him running after me, just waiting for him to catch me. He knew I wasn’t trying to escape him, and I loved that he never had to worry about that ever again.

I screamed when his arm wrapped around my waist. “Got you, baby. No escape now.”

“Never again,” I answered sincerely.

He pushed me against the closest tree, and I moaned. I was home.

HEIST

# A MARAUDERS SHORT STORY

HALEY TYLER

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

*Heist* is a short introduction into the world of *The Marauders*, a dark why-choose series coming 2024. Something to remember: these men are **not** redeemable. They're villains. They're criminals. They don't give a fuck.

They take what they want, they do what they want, and they don't care who they fuck over in the process.

*Heist* ends on a slight cliffhanger that will lead the story into book one. Be sure to follow my socials and sign up for my newsletter so you can stay up to date with releases and info for this series!

## CONTENT WARNING

This is a dark romance. Please take the triggers seriously and read responsibly.

Mask kink, degradation (**heavy**), humiliation (**heavy**), fatphobia/fatphobic comments, anti-military themes, PTSD, sexual assault, memory of sexual assault (alluded to, not on page), murder, violence, bank robbery, dub-con/non-con, blood/knife play, fear play, swearing, MF/MFM/MMF, explicit sexual content

# CHAPTER 1

There's something about standing behind the teller desk with aching feet, my fingers too dry from the money and glycerin that makes me want to get *fucked*. Just absolutely railed within an inch of my life. Like, bent over this desk, my fiery hair gripped in a fist while the faceless man behind me doesn't hold back.

He'd ram his cock into me as hard as he could, slamming into my cervix—and yes, I know that would be painful as fuck. But it's what I crave. The pain. The rawness of it. The filthiness and depravity.

I've fantasized about men in ski masks barging through the doors of the bank. They'd aim their guns at us and tell us to be quiet while they robbed the place. But before they left, one, or all, of them would decide to take one more thing. They'd take my body and be unapologetic about it.

With police sirens blaring in the distance, they wouldn't care. One of them would lift my skirt over my round hips, kick my feet apart, and shove his thick cock inside me.

And I wouldn't be dry. I'd be fucking soaked.

From the moment he stepped into the bank, his face fully covered by that mask, the only visible skin his mouth and eyes, I'd be soaked. The threat of danger, the fear coursing through my body, the adrenaline making my heart thump, would make my pussy throb.

His leather glove-clad hands would feel good around my throat, in my dripping cunt. I'd beg him to destroy me—I know I would. I would beg him like a needy whore, like a

bitch in heat, to fuck me harder, to not stop until he'd taken his fill.

I'd fall to my knees without question and wrap my red-painted lips around his cock, tasting me on him as he fucked my throat without abandon. He wouldn't care if I could breathe. He wouldn't care that my mascara was smeared all over my face, leaving black streaks in its wake. He wouldn't care that him using me as nothing more than a hole would make me come again.

He wouldn't care.

He would just take, and take, and fucking *take*, until he gave me his cum. And I'd gulp it down, slurping on his still-hard and sensitive cock like my favorite treat.

I'd see his lust and need burning bright in his eyes as he stared down at me, and I would know he'd be thinking about fucking me again. But his friends, the ones he'd robbed the bank with, would yell at him to hurry the fuck up, that the cops were almost here.

We'd stare at each other, and those eyes—those dark, dangerous eyes would imbed themselves into my fucking soul.

After that, I'd stare into the eyes of every man who entered the bank, hoping they'd be his. Every night, I'd fuck myself, wishing it was his cock instead. Sometimes, I'd use multiple toys, pretending his friends had joined us.

Fuck.

I need to go to therapy.

“Good morning, Blair.” I jolt at the voice and turn my attention toward the customer, nearly groaning when I see who it is. I shift on my feet, giving him a tight smile as I glance around, hoping no one can read my mind. Inwardly, I cringe at the wet mess I've made of my panties.

*What is wrong with me?*

Fantasizing about a bank robbery while working at a bank is probably not the sanest thing. Who wants to be in a situation

where they're held at gunpoint? Where they fear for their life? Where they'd be traumatized?

Apparently, me. *I fantasize about it.*

It's not even the robbery that makes me so hot. There's just something about criminals I love. He could rob anything, commit any type of crime, and it would make my pussy weep.

"How are you?" the customer asks. I turn my attention back to Brad and try not to let my fake smile fall. I want to grab Cindy and put her in my place because he's a total creep.

He's recently divorced and going through a midlife crisis. He has an excuse to come into the bank every day, sometimes multiple times a day.

He never goes to any of the other tellers. He only wants to see me. Even if I'm with another customer and everyone else is free, he'll wait. Do you know how fucking insane that is? It's really insane. And that's saying something, considering I'm actively fantasizing about getting railed by bank robbers.

For a while, I brushed him off as a lonely old man just wanting attention, but then he started throwing around *sugar baby*, and I stopped feeling bad for him. I've seen his bank account—he's *not* sugar daddy material.

"Hey, Mr. Thompson," I say.

"I've told you to call me Brad, honey," he gently chides, giving me a flirty smile. I lower my eyes, mostly because I know he'll be able to read my thoughts in them—*leave me the fuck alone.*

"What can I do for you this morning?" I ask, shifting the subject. He slides a deposit slip across the smooth surface, his loopy writing big on the paper. I glance at him, noting the large amount before he slides a stack of cash toward me.

"I need to deposit this," he says. "It's two grand."

*I can see that*, I think. But I keep my mouth shut.

I'm not bitter about his money. I grew up with more money than this man has probably ever seen in his life, but I chose to leave that behind. Now that I'm estranged, I don't

have much, but I'd sooner dunk my head into a pool of sharks than ever give him the time of day. Or go back.

"No problem." I type his account information into my computer, the task so mindless I could do it in my sleep.

"I was invited to a yacht party this weekend," he says, and I nod, pretending to care. "I have a plus one." My stomach sinks as I slide my gaze to him, my smile strained. "I was wondering if you—"

"I don't date customers," I cut him off. His jaw tightens.

"I was going to ask if you have any friends who'd want to go," he says, and I barely bite back my laugh.

"No," I say, turning my attention back to the computer.

"*Bitch*," he mutters under his breath. My brows lift at his tone. Slowly, I turn back to him. Hot anger spikes in my chest as I glare at him.

Yeah, that stereotype about gingers having fiery souls? Anger issues? All true with me.

"Excuse me?" I ask in a low voice. His eyes rake over me, but I force myself not to shift under his scrutiny.

This is new. He's never held so much disdain for me before.

"Every group of hot girls has a fat friend," he says. His words hit like a baseball bat to the gut. "You must have a few hot friends." I force myself not to have a reaction. That's what he wants and I won't give it to him.

"Even if I did," I sneer, leaning forward. "Why in the ever-loving *fuck* would I ever introduce you to them?" His mouth opens, but I continue before he can get a word out. Resting my hands on the counter, I lean toward him, my eyes narrowing. "You're a short, balding man with a tiny dick who's been harassing me for months. If I don't want you, the *fat girl of the group*, why do you think anyone else would?"

I give him a once over, my lip curling back in disgust before turning my attention back to the computer, angrily pressing keys as I input his information.

The fat friend.

I stomp down the part of me that knows he's right, the part that sounds like my mother's voice, my sister's voice, my ex-friend's voices.

Maybe he's right—maybe people keep me around so I can make them look good. It's what they've always done, and a part of me feels like it's what they'll always do, but this asshole doesn't get to make me feel like shit about my body. He doesn't get to take away my dignity because I don't want to fuck him.

Now, all I can think is that he was just using me as an easy target. To him, I'm beneath him. Not good enough to even pursue. He probably thinks I should fall to his feet and thank him for even giving me attention.

*Fucker.*

“Your money was deposited,” I say tightly. “And next time you come in, find a different teller to help you.” His thin lips flatten as he glares at me, but I glare right back.

I've gone through too much in my life to put up with assholes like him.

“I'll be speaking with your supervisor,” he snaps. “I've been coming to this bank for decades and have never been treated like this.” I fold my arms over my chest and his eyes drop to my cleavage peeking out between the few undone buttons on my blouse.

“Get the fuck out,” I scoff, rolling my eyes. I glance around, wishing the bank was busy for once, so I had an excuse to get rid of him.

I'm not worried about him going to my boss. I know Kris will take my side on this. I've told him about Brad's advances and comments for months and he's assured me he'll take care of it. He hasn't yet, but I know he'll have my back if Brad really goes to him.

Brad's face reddens, and it takes all I have not to laugh. For a man his age, he's acting ridiculous and embarrassing himself.

I lift my brows impatiently, waiting for him to either say something or leave. When he does neither, I reach for my phone.

“I’m calling security,” I mutter, bringing it to my ear. He gives me another glare, his jaw trembling as he turns on his heel. He throws another muffled *bitch* over his shoulder and I slam the phone down.

I shoot daggers at his back until he slips from the bank. Finally, when I can’t see him through the double-doors, I let out a long breath, letting my shoulders drop.

I refuse to let his words hit deep. No matter how many times I’ve heard them in my life, I left the girl that got hurt by them behind a long time ago. I won’t let him make me feel bad about myself or my body ever again.

Fuck him.

Fuck men like him.

## CHAPTER 2

Staring out the window, I watch the blur of buildings and people as we pass. Corbyn and Jace snicker in the backseat, their voices hushed as they talk with each other. Storm, unsurprisingly, is silent as he drives. He doesn't talk unless he has to, but even then, it's minimal.

"We should get a decent amount tonight," Corbyn says, drawing my attention. I glance at him in the rearview mirror and nod.

I know how much we're supposed to take home tonight, and I know exactly what we're using it for. Not all of it, but a few thousand dollars are going to Corporal Anderson for his medication.

My teeth grind together at the thought of him suffering because he can't afford it. What was the point of joining the military, becoming the government's personal killing machine, if they wouldn't take care of him when he got out? War fucked Anderson up, just like it fucked us all up. But when he got home, he had mental break after mental break, and he'd continue to break if he didn't have his fucking meds.

I take a deep breath.

*Calm.*

I need to calm down before we get to the bank. Emotions cause mistakes, and we can't afford any. Not tonight.

We've been planning this heist for months. I can't be the one to fuck it all up. Even if the thought of all the vets the government has fucked over makes my blood boil with so

much rage I can barely see straight, I force myself to take another breath.

“You good, Sarge?” Jace asks, and I look over my shoulder at him, his hazel eyes bright with anticipation.

“You need to stop calling me that,” I grumble, but I know he won’t listen. He’ll continue calling me Sarge, continue thinking of me as his commander even though we haven’t been in those positions for a long fucking time.

“Feels weird calling you Aero,” he says, shrugging his shoulders. Shaking my head, I look forward again.

“That’s my name.”

“It’s a dumb name,” Corbyn mumbles under his breath, making Jace snicker.

“And it’s fucking stupid to spell Corbyn with a *Y* instead of an *I*, but here we fucking are,” I snarl. Storm chokes on a laugh, but when I look at him, his face is stoney and his hands are tight around the wheel. He’s like a fucking ventriloquist doll. Creepy motherfucker.

“At least mine is a normal-sounding name—”

“Alright, enough,” I bark, slashing my hand through the air. “Stop fucking around. We need to get ready.”

“We *are* ready,” Jace says, and I glare at him in the rearview mirror again.

“You know what I mean,” I say. “Shut up. Get your shit together and get your head on straight.”

“But—”

“Quiet,” I say. “*I* need fucking quiet. I can’t think when you two are squawking at each other.” Storm clears his throat, and I turn my head fully to glare at him. He ignores me, keeping his gaze solely on the road ahead of us.

The guys quiet down and I move my attention back to the window, staring at the blur of buildings again. There’s an odd sense of calm that washes over me before a robbery. Like,

despite my mind knowing what we're doing is illegal, my body knows it's worth it. That we're doing the right thing.

Honestly, I don't even care about doing the right thing. We didn't start robbing banks because we were worried about doing the *right thing*.

We wanted justice.

We wanted to take what was rightfully ours. But somewhere along the way, we started giving money to other vets who needed help, who had been wronged by our country. Just like we had been.

I grit my teeth together at the thoughts of all those people used and tossed out. Like they're nothing more than week old garbage. They're left defenseless, cast aside, helpless, without communities, and without hope.

They're left to pick up the pieces and try to rearrange themselves back to who they were before. But it's fucking impossible. I've tried for a decade and still can't remember the fucking kid I was before war. The men around me can't remember, either.

But does anyone care?

No.

They care when we're holding a gun and defending them. But the second our boots hit our soil, they stop caring. We no longer serve them or give them a false sense of safety. We're fucked-in-the-head because of our sacrifices, yet they refuse to help us.

I take a deep breath, trying to force myself to stop before I spiral too much deeper. This isn't a good way to think before a job. I know that—*they* know that. We have to be all here, all in. We can't have anxieties about it—about anything. We can't live in the past.

It's right here, right now, or we could die.

Storm pulls up to the back of the bank and I peer out the window, tipping my head back to get a clear view of the

darkening sky. The sun sets earlier now, which works perfectly for us. We can get in and out without being noticed.

I glance down at myself, re-securing the velcro straps on my chest before grabbing my black mask off the dash while the guys strap themselves into their bulletproof vests. Not that we think we'll actually need them, but we need to be prepared. Just in case.

"Everyone know the plan?" I look to Storm, who grunts his confirmation, then back at Jace and Corbyn. I lift my brows expectantly, waiting for a response.

"We've gone over it for months," Jace says. "We know the plan." I slide my eyes to Corbyn's blue ones. He gives me a grim nod.

"I know," he says. "Lookout." He points at himself. "Code breaker." He points to Storm. "Runner." He points at Jace, then looks at me. "Leader."

I cringe at the title. I never wanted to lead them, to be in charge. I never wanted them to look at me for direction or guidance. But everything just happened that way.

"Let's go then," I say, gripping the door handle.

My heart hammers in my chest as I shove the door of the fake security van open. It's our cover tonight. If anyone comes knocking, we tell them we're checking the premises. That we'd gotten a call and we're here making sure everything was okay.

We're dressed in black tactical gear, masks on, and the fake security company logo stamped on our chests. We can't risk our faces being seen, which is why we chose to wear masks. We have a cover story for that, too.

Jace and Corbyn grab the bags from the back while Storm goes to the back door and crouches. I stand in the middle, my head swiveling between the guys, keeping an eye out for anything that could go wrong.

Thankfully, Storm gets the door unlocked as Jace and Corbyn approach. He holds it open for them and we all rush inside.

It's dark and cold, and smells like disinfectant. But there's something else—an electric charge in the air that's only around when we're on a job. Like the anticipation and excitement coursing through our veins has electrified the air.

“We're good,” Storm mutters to himself. “No one's here.”

“You checked?” I ask, and he looks down at me.

“I didn't see any cars, and it's past closing. It should be—”

“Check all the rooms,” I say. “We can't have any surprises.”

“Yes, sir.” He straightens to his full height and heads to the middle of the floor, aiming for the door at the back of the room.

“You,” I turn toward Jace, “go to the vault.” He gives me a hard nod and turns on his heel. “Secure the doors and go to your post.” Corbyn salutes me before heading to the back door.

He's sarcastic at the best of times, but something washes over him when we're on a job. He's too serious, too deadly, like he's waiting for his opportunity to strike. I don't blame him. We're all on edge.

I turn, ready to help Storm look through each room. He shuts a door and moves to the next one as I make it to the center of the room, a giant crest of the bank printed on the cool marble tiles under my feet.

A muffled scream slashes through the silent air and we all freeze.

What the fuck?

Corbyn rushes back as Jace sprints from the vault. Their eyes are wide as they stare at me. I turn toward Storm, finding him moving toward the door the scream came from.

Another one rips through the bank, and we move on instinct. We run toward the scream, toward the danger. Toward the unknown.

# CHAPTER 3

I sit in the small uncomfortable chair across from Kris. He's an older man, maybe mid-fifties, with tanned skin, dark eyes, small lips. He's average-looking, nothing remarkable or memorable about him.

I glance around the office, taking in the generic painting behind him, the wall clock that shows it's twenty minutes past closing time. It smells like a terrible mix of his cologne, stale male-scent, and disinfectant our custodian uses to clean with.

*Can't he light a candle or something?*

"We've had a complaint against you," he says, pulling me from my thoughts. I blink. It's the only surprise I'll show him.

"A complaint," I repeat, and he nods. Lacing his fingers together, he leans forward, resting his hands on his dark-wood desk.

"The customer said you were quite...unprofessional." He gives me a withering look and I huff out a humorless laugh.

"Who was it?" I ask, even though I already know who it was. *Brad*. Of fucking course, it was Brad. Who else would it be?

"Not important," he says, waving dismissively. "What's important is that you have a complaint, and it was a pretty serious one. He—*they* said you were hostile—"

"Hostile?" I nearly choke on the word. It takes all I have not to scream.

My body heats and I try to force myself to calm down. It feels impossible, though. Like I'm burning from the inside,

like all the rage I've held in all day is bubbling to the surface and I'm about to explode.

"He—*they* said—"

"I know it was Brad," I say, cutting him off. "And *he* was the one who was inappropriate toward *me*. I've told you about his advances for months, and you've promised—"

"I've known Brad for a long time," Kris says, leaning back in his tall-backed leather chair. "I know what kind of man he is. He's not the type to harass women."

"Then you must not know him as well as you think you do," I say. Kris sighs again, like he's incredibly put out about this whole thing.

And honestly, same. I could be on my way home right now, stopping at Taco Bell to drown my shitty day in shitty tacos. Instead, I have to stay late and talk to my fucking boss, who apparently doesn't believe me that his buddy is a creep.

But that's how it always goes, isn't it? They never believe their friends are pervs, usually because they're pervs themselves.

I never got that vibe from Kris, though. Sure, he was always too nice to the girls, but I never thought he was a creep. Not until now.

And it's not anything that he's done that makes him bad. It's that he's choosing to side with Brad and not me that makes him a fucking asshole. He'd rather choose some guy than the woman who's actively being harassed.

"Look, we need to address it," he says.

"There's nothing to address," I shoot back. "Brad was inappropriate, and has been—"

"Blair, come on." He gives me an exasperated look, and my mouth clamps shut.

"What?"

"You really expect me to believe he's been hitting on you for months?" He lifts his brows. "You've done nothing to lead

him on? Nothing to make him think you're interested?"

"Are you kidding me?" I hiss. "Of course not."

"So, he's just been chasing you—" His eyes rake over me and I shift in my seat. I see a familiar look in them. One I hate.

It's a mix of disgust and lust.

Some men can't stand that they're attracted to big girls.

"He's been chasing you and you haven't given him a reason to believe he had a chance?" he finishes. My heart lurches into my throat.

"No," I grit out. "I want nothing to do with him—I want nothing to do with anyone."

"I just don't believe that," he says, shaking his head. He leans forward again, resting his hands on the desk. His head tilts to the side, staring at me too long, as if he's waiting for me to say something else. To backtrack and apologize for leading Brad on.

But I've done nothing wrong.

"I don't know what you want me to say," I mutter.

"I want you to tell me the truth." His voice is harsh—harsher than I've ever heard, and I glance up at him. "Look, it's fine if you've slept with him and regret it. I get it. I've had my fair share of mistakes. But you still have to be professional —"

"I've never fucked him!" I shout, my hands tightening into fists. "I've never been on a date with him. I've never had any interactions with him outside of the bank." Kris' lips tighten into a flat line.

"I don't appreciate being yelled at," he says, and my anger shoots through the fucking roof.

"Yeah?" I snarl. "I don't *appreciate* having my boss insinuate I've slept with a customer. I don't *appreciate*," I sneer the word at him, "being called a liar."

He stares at me for a long moment, the muscle in his jaw ticking. I stare right back and wait for him to say something

else.

“You need to apologize to him,” he says, and I bark out a laugh before I can stop myself.

“Apologize to him?” I say, shaking my head. “Why doesn’t he apologize to me?”

“What could he possibly have to apologize for?” he asks, sounding more irritated.

“Oh, I don’t know,” I say, “for being a creep? For making me uncomfortable?”

“And you don’t think you made him uncomfortable?” he asks, and I rear back in my chair. “Just apologize and we can move on.”

“I’m not apologizing to him,” I say. “I did nothing wrong.”

“Blair,” he says, his voice low. “Stop arguing—”

“I’m not doing it, Kris!”

His jaw tenses again. “Apologize, or you’re fired.” My mouth falls open.

“You’ll actually fire me?”

“I’ll give you two choices—”

“I’m not apologizing,” I say again, stubbornly.

“Then you can take the second option.” He leans back again, his chair creaking under his weight.

“Which is?” I hesitantly ask, my teeth grinding together. A leering smile curls his lips as he scans my body again.

“I’ve always heard big girls give the best head,” he mutters. My stomach twists into a tight knot, and my heart thunders in my chest. Fiery rage washes away my shock at his words.

“Go fuck yourself,” I spit out, shoving to my feet. Without giving him a backward glance, I whirl and head toward the door.

Something crashes against the wall behind me, but I ignore it and take the last few steps to the door. A hand wraps in my

hair and jerks me back, forcing me to swallow my shocked scream.

“Don’t be a bitch,” Kris snarls in my ear. “Just get on your knees.” I wrench my elbow back and hit him in the ribs. He grunts out a breath, but his fist tightens. “Fine. That’s how you want to play?”

“Let me go!” I shout, blindly swinging and kicking at him. He dodges most of the hits, but a sick amount of satisfaction fills me every time he makes a pained noise.

He shoves me forward, the dark wooden desk digging into my stomach as he shoves me over it. I squeeze my eyes shut, panic making my body tremble violently. I hate myself for the tears threatening to fall, but I won’t beg him to stop. I refuse to give him that satisfaction.

I’m nearly knocked off balance as he kicks my legs apart, my heeled feet skittering on the tilted floor. I reach back, shoving at him, trying to dislodge his body from mine.

His zipper is loud in the room, overpowering my hyperventilating breaths and his heavy panting. I almost lay my head on the desk, defeated. But I know that’s what he wants, too.

He wants to see me break, and I can’t do that. I’ll break later when I’m alone. But I won’t break in front of him.

Shoving my skirt over my hips, his hands paw at my soft curves. Hot tears burn my eyes as they begin flowing freely down my cheeks.

“Stop,” I rasp, the word barely audible. He lets out a low laugh as he fumbles to shove his slacks down.

“Bet you wish you would’ve gotten on your knees, huh?” he mocks.

I feel it, his hard cock rubbing against my dry pussy over my panties. I can’t help the terrified scream that rips from my throat. My body shakes as I brace myself for the feel of his unwanted cock sliding inside me. I slide my hands to the edge of the desk and wrap my fingers around it, needing something to hold on to. Something to ground me.

Another scream rips from my throat. “Get off me!” The words are cut short as the door bursts open. Kris’ body tenses, his fingers gripping my hips tighter.

“What the fuck?” he snarls. “Get—” Before any more words can leave his lips, he’s ripped away from me. I’m frozen, still bent over the desk, my mind struggling to catch up with what’s happening around me.

I feel a presence beside me, and I turn my head enough to look at it. My breath catches in my throat as I meet the hazel-green eyes of—

My mouth opens on a silent scream, and my nails dig into the desk, feeling the wood and paint embed itself underneath.

“Hey, it’s okay,” the hazel-eyed man soothes, his black-masked-face a stark contrast to his gentle tone. “We’re not gonna hurt you.”

I don’t believe him, though. How could I when he’s clearly here to rob the place? To...to hurt me? To hurt anyone who comes between him and the money?

The unmistakable sound of flesh hitting wet flesh fills the room and I turn to look. But I can’t see anything past the biggest, most massive man I’ve ever seen, blocking my view of whatever is happening on the other side of him.

Faintly, I feel hands gripping my skirt. On instinct, I shove at the hands, terror coursing through me.

“Stop,” I sob. “Don’t touch me.”

“Just fixing your skirt,” someone else says in that same soft voice. The green-eyed one hesitantly reaches for me. He smooths his hand down my back and I tense.

“St-stop,” I choke out, and he snatches his hand away. His eyes lift above me and I feel the hands on my skirt fall away.

Fresh hot tears pour from my eyes and roll down my cheeks as the reality of my situation dawns on me. My breath comes in ragged pants, and I can’t help but realize I’m trapped in this too-small room with strange masked men.

It's a fun fantasy, but now that it's happening, a fear like I've never felt rips through me.

# CHAPTER 4

I try to keep my panic at bay as I soothe the red-haired woman—or *try* to. Her body trembles violently, and that all too familiar terror-filled look in her eye has me shifting uncomfortably.

“It’s okay,” I say, my shaky hands tightening into fists at my sides. I can’t touch her again. I know more than anyone how awful touch can be after something like this.

I squeeze my eyes shut at the memories trying to take over, at the flashbacks clawing at my mind, begging to be let free.

Suddenly, I’m not in a stuffy little bank office. Instead, I’m back at the base and pinned over a generator. It’s too loud against my ear, and all I can hear is my heavy sobs and the grunting of the man behind me, the pain that shoots through my body with every brutal thrust.

“Hey.” My eyes snap open and I blink up at Corbyn’s covered face. “You okay?” His eyes are wild as he searches mine, worry clear in them. I look around. I hadn’t realized I’d fallen to my ass as the memories hit me.

“Fine,” I rasp. I glance over his shoulder, finding the woman struggling to get to her feet. Storm, like an immovable wall, stands between her and Aero.

Corbyn follows my gaze, inhaling sharply at whatever he sees Aero doing to the rapist fuck. The woman’s knees buckle and she falls against the desk again. I’m on my feet in an instant, but Storm is there first. He murmurs something to her, his deep, low rumble inaudible. She blinks up at him, her face paling as she nods before turning toward Corbyn and me.

Corbyn holds his hand out, and I stare at it, at the way it's trembling as much as mine are. She doesn't take it. Instead, she stumbles past us, catching herself on the wall before slipping out into the hallway. We glance at each other, then follow her.

She paces in front of the door, occasionally stopping to look into the room. Maybe to see what Aero is doing to the man, maybe to figure out if she's in a dream. Whatever it is, I watch as the tears stop and she wipes her face a final time. She steels her spine, pulling herself together faster than I've seen anyone do before. I glance at Corbyn, shifting uncomfortably at the expression visible under his mask.

He scans her body, and he sucks his full lower lip between his teeth. A surge of jealousy fills me, but I stomp it down and look back at her.

She is really pretty. *Gorgeous.*

With long, dark ginger hair, pale freckled skin, round rosy cheeks, and pouty pink lips, she looks sweet. But there's something in her emerald eyes that tells me she has a fire burning in her that isn't sweet at all. She has a full curvy figure—her breasts large and ass thick, with a soft stomach and full thighs. She's shorter than us by a lot, but tries to make up for it with heels.

She sends us glares as she paces, the fear in her face quickly melting away. It's morphed into something else... anger? Annoyance? It's quite the emotion to have around four massive men who are here to rob the place. Who could hurt her.

"Who are you?" she finally asks, stopping in front of us. Corbyn and I exchange a look. We can't tell her who we are, obviously. But maybe we can find out who she is.

"We're security," Corbyn easily lies. Her eyes narrow and she folds her arms over her chest, her round hip popping to the side.

"Security," she repeats, pushing onto her tiptoes to look over our shoulders. Aero isn't beating the man anymore, so

there's that, at least. But he and Storm are in a hushed argument, which isn't good.

Storm doesn't talk much, and if he's arguing with Aero about something, it means whatever it is is important.

"Yep," I confirm, pulling her attention back to me. Suspicion dances in her eyes. She's not an idiot. She knows we're not fucking security. "We came in to check the online system. Guess we were here at the right time."

"Right," she says, her eyes narrowing further. Her gaze slide between us, inspecting every inch like we're under a microscope.

"We're not bad guys," Corbyn chimes in, and I nearly laugh.

*We're not good guys, either.*

"If you're security," she drawls, "where are your badges? And why are you wearing masks?"

*Well...*

I blink at her before turning to look at Corbyn. He clears his throat and shuffles forward a step, ready to spit out more easy lies.

Before he can get a word out, Aero stalks from the room, Storm on his heels. Blood coats his black clothes and boots, leaving sticky footprints in his wake.

"Who the fuck are you and why are you here?" he snarls as he goes to the girl, his rage palpable. "The bank was supposed to be empty." Instead of shying away from him or his tone, she straightens her shoulders, tipping her chin back as she glares up at him.

Corbyn and I exchange another look.

"I'm the woman who was just getting assaulted," she snaps, pointing her finger at the room. "Who the fuck are *you*?" Aero's shoulders fall and rise with his sharp, irritated breaths. She seems to have fucked him up as much as she has us.

Her reaction caught us off guard. I was expecting to console her, to convince her to leave and go home, to wash this shitty day and shittier assault from her body. Instead, shockingly, here she is, standing her ground, her defiance palpable.

“I told you,” Corbyn finally says. “We’re—”

“I asked who *he* is,” the woman shoots back, jabbing her finger into the center of Aero’s chest, emphasizing that she means him. I step to his side, finding his eyes narrowed as he stares her down. Storm circles us like a shark, ready to intervene.

“Sarge,” I breathe, but Aero ignores me.

“You weren’t supposed to be here,” he grits out. I slide my eyes to her, finding her arms still folded tightly over her chest, her hands clenched in tight, shaky fists.

“Excuse me for fucking up your plans,” she says sarcastically. Finally, she turns her gaze to me and I feel it penetrate my soul. “Who are you really?”

“You’ll stop asking questions if you know what’s good for you,” Aero snarls, his voice dark. “Be a good little bitch and do what we say, and maybe we’ll let you live.” Her eyes snap to him, her mouth parting, the only sign of her shock.

“You’ll—did you kill him?” She tries to look around Aero, but he shifts, keeping himself in her gaze. That’s her answer—yes. He killed him.

Not that I’m surprised. Aero has killed men for less.

The woman’s throat bobs as she straightens again. “If I do what you say,” she says hesitantly, “you promise you’ll let me go? Unharmed?”

A slow smile spreads under Aero’s mask. Her breath hitches, and Storm pauses his circling to take a small step forward.

“Maybe,” Aero says quietly. “We’ll see.”

# CHAPTER 5

## STORM

My gaze narrows as I watch Aero's anger flare. I tried stopping him before he could kill the man earlier, but he didn't listen and now we have a dead body to deal with, on top of this woman.

Not that I'm complaining.

There's something about her that calls to me. From the second her big pretty eyes met mine, I was done for. Maybe I can convince Aero to let me take her home with us, tie her up and keep her as my pretty little doll. My little toy to use and play with as I please.

"Look," she sighs, pulling me from my depraved thoughts. "Just let me go. I won't say a word to anyone. I've had a long day and I want to go—"

"You're not leaving," I bark, and her mouth snaps shut. She blanches as she looks over her shoulder at me, taking in my imposing form towering above her. I'm not a small man. I'm the biggest of the four of us, the tallest and broadest. I know I'm probably terrifying her, but I can't force myself to back the fuck up.

"But—"

"You're not leaving," Aero echoes, still seething. His chest heaves as he continues glaring at her. She opens her mouth, but he turns on his heel and storms away. He doesn't stop until he gets to a wall and leans his hand against it, dropping his head forward.

I follow him, giving Corbyn and Jace a look to stay put. Jace gives me a slight nod and steps closer to the woman. It kills me I can't be the one near her, talking to her. Comforting her.

Figuring out a way to make her solely dependent on me.

I've never had such a visceral reaction to a woman before, but this one, there's something about her. I feel like a feral beast, but I've had enough training in my life to know how to keep my crazy under control.

Mostly.

When we came out of the office, I expected to find her terrified and still shaken. But she wasn't. She's defiant and fiery in a way I haven't seen from many people. I can count on one hand the number of people who have tried to go against Aero. That same list is the number of people who have died because of it.

The fact she's still breathing isn't lost on me.

Stepping beside him, I fold my arms over my chest. "What's going on?" I ask in a voice low enough for only him to hear. He turns enough to look at me from the corner of his eye, his mask obstructing the scowl I'm sure he has on his face.

"She fucked everything up," he says. "If she wasn't here, I wouldn't have killed that fucking guy. If she wasn't here, we'd already be on our way out. If she wasn't here..." He shakes his head, his lips twisting. "We've been here too long."

I've never seen him this worked up. He's right, though. We *have* been here too long, but we have a few choices: leave now and take her with us, or stay and use her.

The idea hits me like a semi and I shift my weight to my good leg.

"Let's use her so we can hurry and get the fuck out of here," I say. He turns to fully face me.

"Use her?" he repeats and I nod, trying to hide my eagerness. "How?"

“Instead of wasting time breaking codes, we can use her to get into the vault. We can cut our time in half. We can be out of here in...” I glance up at the clock above his head, “Less than twenty minutes.”

“What do we do with her after?” he asks, still sounding skeptical. I shrug and try to hold back my grin.

“We’ll figure it out,” I say. The longer we’re with her, the better chance I’ll have at convincing him to let me keep her.

He scrubs his hand along his jaw, over his mask as he eyes me. “I don’t know,” he breathes. “She’ll turn on us as soon as we leave her.”

“Maybe not,” I say. “We can give her a small cut.”

“No,” he scoffs, firmly shaking his head. “Absolutely not.”

“Then we can take her with us,” I say. His mouth opens, no doubt ready to object, so I quickly add, “Just until we figure out what to do with her.” He pauses, his eyes narrowing as he frowns up at me.

“We’re not kidnapping her, Storm,” he says slowly. I shrug again. I still have time to convince him.

“We can just use her then,” I say. “She’ll be an accomplice. She’ll be too fucking scared to rat on us if she’s involved.” He takes a deep breath. “Or we tell her if she turns us in, we’ll say she’s the one who killed the boss. That we saw it happen.”

“Shit, I don’t know, man.”

“You wanted a solution. I gave you one.” I hold my hand up in mock-surrender. “You have a better idea? One that doesn’t involve getting more blood on our hands?”

He rolls his dark eyes and looks over his shoulder at the woman again. He stares at her a beat too long, and it makes my body itchy. But before I can do anything insane, like rip his eyeballs from his fucking skull, he turns back toward me.

I don’t think any of us are truly worried about the police. We’ve long since been scrubbed from any databases, making us ghosts. But if she turns on us and they come asking

questions, it'll throw a wrench into our lives, one that'll be fucking annoying.

“Fine,” he breathes, and I blink at him, shocked. “But if she tries to pull anything, I won't fucking hesitate to—”

“I know,” I cut him off, waving my hand. “We'll keep an eye on her. We won't let her out of our sight.” He gives me another hard look before stomping his way back to her and the guys.

Letting out a long, relieved breath, I follow him. Before I get to them, he wraps his hand around her arm and yanks her close to him, making her trip over her feet. “You're helping us get into the vault. You try anything, try alerting anyone, I won't hesitate to put a fucking bullet through your skull. You understand me?”

Her jaw tenses as she glares up at him. She tries not to look scared, but her body is trembling and her face is pale. She puts on a good show.

She could almost be one of us.

“Fine,” she spits. “Whatever will get me out of here.”

He spins her around roughly. Her feet twist together, and she stumbles over them again, her ankles nearly giving out. I grab her other arm, helping her steady herself as Aero pulls the roll of tape from his belt and jerks her arms behind her back.

“What are you—”

“Shut up,” he grunts as he unrolls it, the sound loud in the otherwise quiet bank.

I hold on to her—mostly because I just want to touch her—and watch as he wraps the tape around and around her wrists, securing them tightly together. The position forces her shoulders back and her full tits out. I don't hide my ogling. She has great tits.

Bending, he lowers his lips to her hear and mutters, “Remember, if you fuck up, you're dead.”

“I know,” she snarls, jerking her shoulder forward, trying to get out of his grasp. His fingers tighten until she lets out an

involuntary sound, and instead of pissing me off, it just makes my cock jump.

He shoves her forward, making her trip again. Corbyn and Jace take up their positions flanking us, monitoring the rest of the lobby as she leads us to the back where the vault is.

Our footsteps echo off the walls, and I glance around, unease tightening my stomach. We don't have much time before we need to leave. We've already been here too long, and it's making us all nervous.

This woman wasn't supposed to be here. She fucked everything up, nothing more than a symbol of disruption, a reminder of the stupid fucking risk we're taking keeping her alive.

She should be dead.

But here she is, breathing—leading us to our treasure.

# CHAPTER 6

I watch as the buxom red-head stops in front of the vault door. She tips her head to glare up at Aero, her red lips pressed tightly together.

“How am I supposed to open it with my hands tied?” she demands.

“You don’t,” Aero says simply, dismissing her. “We do.”

“But—”

“Just tell us how to get in,” he interrupts. “And hurry up. I’m tired of listening to you talk.” Her mouth falls open.

“I wouldn’t have to talk if you just untaped my fucking hands,” she snarls. He snorts and folds his arms over his chest, his eyes lowering to her.

“Fat chance.”

Her throat bobs as she swallows. Aero is usually the most level-headed of us all, but right now, he’s the furthest from it. I’ve never seen him like this, and judging by Storm and Jace’s expressions, they haven’t either.

“You,” Aero barks, turning to point at Storm. Her body jolts at the sudden, loud noise, and a part of me wants to console her. But a bigger part just wants to get rid of her. I just want to undo her hands, shove her out the door, and leave.

We shouldn’t be here.

It’s too much of a risk.

This woman is too much of a risk.

I glance at Jace, finding him still too pale. “You okay?” I whisper, leaning toward him. His gaze slides to mine, and I see the demons he’s fighting in it.

“Yeah,” he rasps. “Just ready to go.” I nod my agreement before clearing my throat and turning my attention toward Aero again.

Storm is standing next to her—we should really learn her name. Or maybe we shouldn’t. That’ll give us too much of a connection, too much familiarity.

“Sarge,” I call, and Aero’s head whips toward me, his dark eyes hard.

“What?” he barks, and I tilt my head to the side, silently telling him to come to us. I don’t want to venture too far from Jace in case he spirals into another flashback.

Or worse.

Tries to fuck his demons away like he’s done so many times before. Like we do together. Like he does with anyone willing to play into his fantasies.

I never knew that pretending to relive your trauma could be cathartic. I didn’t know that reenacting your rape could help you heal from it, but with Jace, it has. It’s something we’ve done a million times. At first, I hated the feeling of dominating him. Hated the sound of him crying and begging me to stop.

But I knew it was fake. That it was just a role play, and we had a safe word in place in case it got to be too much for either of us.

Recently, he’s wanted to reclaim his power, to assert dominance rather than submit to it. Sometimes we play with other people, sometimes it’s just us. But he likes the way he can easily overpower them, overpower *me*. It’s an entirely different experience being the one who’s getting brutally fucked. You slip into a different mindset. With him, it’s like a switch flips, and suddenly I’m no longer Corbyn, I’m Jace’s prey. He stalks and hunts me down and takes what he wants without a second thought.

“What?” Aero grunts, pulling me from my thoughts. I blink a few times, shifting on my feet, and move my hands in front of my crotch, hiding the hard-on I’m sporting.

“The girl,” I say, jerking my chin at her. “What’s her name?” He just stares at me.

“You want to know her name?” he deadpans.

“I mean, if she’s working with us, shouldn’t we know who she is?”

I’m baiting him and I’m sure he knows it. It’s the easiest thing in the world to do, so Jace and I do it often. Right now, I think he needs the distraction. If he can be upset with us, maybe he can release some of the tension that’s about to bust a fucking bloodvessel in his eye.

“No,” he growls. “She’s no one.”

“But she’s helping us,” I say slowly. “So, she’s *someone*.”

“She’s a nobody. Just some random fucking bitch we found. As far as I’m concerned, she doesn’t have a name.”

“Damn,” Jace breathes, and I nod at the sentiment. “That’s a bit harsh, even for you, Sarge.” Aero shrugs, his mouth pressing into a tight frown.

“Don’t give a shit. I’m not her friend. She means nothing to me. I just want to get the fuck out of here.” I nod at that sentiment, too.

“Why don’t we just toss her out and finish the job?” I suggest. “Or we can just let her go and we leave? Find another bank? This whole job is so fucked.” Aero shakes his head as I speak.

“Not happening.”

“Why?” Jace asks, his hazel eyes narrowing. “If she’s nothing to you, then why keep her around?” Even beneath the mask, it’s clear Aero’s face is unamused.

“She’s somewhat useful,” he reluctantly grits out.

“But Storm can break the code like *that*,” I say, snapping my fingers. “We don’t need her.” Aero flicks his eyes between

us.

“Why aren’t you at your positions?” he snarls. “You’re lookouts. Do your job.”

“But—”

“I’m the boss,” he shouts. “I call the fucking shots, and if I say she’s going to open that fucking vault, then that’s what’s going to happen.”

“It’ll be easier if—”

“Go.” Aero points behind us, his chest heaving with his exaggerated breaths. He’s really riding the edge of his control, and a fucked up part of me wants to push and push until he topples over it.

Just to see what it’s like when Aero *really* loses control.

Him killing that guy earlier wasn’t losing control. He was still fully aware of what was happening and what he was doing. But maybe this girl can shake him enough for us to finally see him snap.

Jace and I have had a running bet for years about when it’ll happen and what will do it. But with every passing day that he stays his usual disciplined self, we’ve started to lose hope of ever seeing him truly lose himself.

Maybe we’re assholes for wanting it. But he’s always so intense, so serious. He hasn’t had a different breakfast for six years. He wakes up every morning at five-forty-five on the dot. He lives the same day over and over, practically down the minute.

We’ve always tried to fuck with his routine, and it usually just annoys him. But this girl? She’s completely thrown him through a fucking loop.

“Go,” he says again, his finger still aimed at the lobby behind us.

Jace and I glance at each other before I give Aero a slight nod, and we turn on our heels, heading away from him. When we’re out of earshot, Jace huffs out a laugh.

“You think it’s finally gonna happen?” he asks, and I grin.

“Yep.” I bump his shoulder. “All Hell’s about to break loose.”

# CHAPTER 7

The giant man circles me like a shark, his eyes roaming over every inch of my body. At first, the only thing I thought about being restrained was how annoying it was. But now, I feel every bit as vulnerable as they want me to.

“What’s your name, little bunny?” he murmurs, stepping closer. I retreat, and my back hits the wall beside the metal vault door. He hovers above me, his breathing ragged as he tracks me.

“What?” I breathe, my chest heaving as I stare up at him. His golden eyes sear me hotter than any flame would. Whatever he sees on my face makes him step even closer, his scent lingering around me. His gloved-fingers move toward me and wrap around a lock of my hair. Slowly, bringing it up to his nose, he inhales deeply.

“Your name,” he says again, just as quietly, the hair still wrapped around his finger.

It wasn’t the question that threw me off, it was the name. *Little bunny*. I don’t know where that came from, or why he called me that. Or why he’s touching me.

As if reading my thoughts, he drops my hair but doesn’t step away. He stays in my space, invading every one of my senses. I contemplate not telling him, but a quick search through my purse will reveal my ID and he’ll know my name, anyway.

Taking a deep breath to steady myself, I push my shoulders back. His eyes immediately drop to my tits, and I should feel

repulsed. I should feel insulted and sexualized—and a part of me does.

But I don't hate it.

I don't hate that his gaze is lingering, taking in every inch like he truly appreciates my body. The part of my brain that makes me a dumb slut preens under his full attention, and I feel my shoulders roll back even more, wanting to show off for him. Wanting him to love what he sees.

Wanting to tease him, just to see how far I can.

“Blair,” I breathe. Finally, his eyes lift again, his face staying expressionless under his black mask.

“Blair,” he repeats. “I like it.”

“What's your name?”

His lips tip up in a small smirk before he shakes his head. “You can't know that, little bunny.” I open my mouth to ask why he's calling me that, but the other big one, the grumpiest motherfucker I've ever met, comes stomping back over.

“What are you doing?” he barks. “Open the vault.”

“If my hands were untied, maybe I could,” I shoot back.

His black eyes are hard as he stares at me, not taking the bait. I try to read his face past the mask, but it's impossible. I think it would be impossible even with his face uncovered. He seems like the too-serious type. The type that never smiles and always scowls.

His gloved-hand smooths over the mask before he lets out a harsh breath. The sight of that mask, of *all* their masks, does something to me.

I know it's fucked up—I *know* that. But I can't help it.

It's not lost on me that only hours ago I was fantasizing about this very thing happening. It feels like I spoke this into existence, like I asked the Universe to bring me my very own harem of masked criminals.

And I guess I did, didn't I?

I could practically feel their cocks inside me while I thought about all the depraved things they'd do to me. I just didn't know it would be these men, but they're big and have hard, nice bodies. I'm not complaining that this is who the Universe sent to me.

Under other circumstances, like my fantasy, I'd be panting like a bitch in heat for them. I'd be on my knees, my ass in the air, begging to be fucked.

But this is real life, and they're dangerous men with guns, and at the end of the day, I'm fucking terrified.

"What's the code?" the dark-eyed one says, sounding more annoyed than he had moments ago. The tall one leans forward and whispers something in his ear. Dark Eyes glances up at the big one, and his lips part. In shock? In silent rage?

I shuffle a step to the side, ready to run and duck for cover if they're about to explode. But nothing happens, nothing other than Dark Eyes glaring back at me, his lips tight.

"The code," he says again. I glance at the keypad on the vault. I know it by heart, we all do. But it would be so easy to lie, to tell them I don't know it. That the only one who knew was the man they killed—*shit*. They killed Kris. I really should be more upset about that, but I'm not.

He was going to rape me if they hadn't stopped him, so I can forgive them for his death. Even if it makes me as much of a monster as them, I don't care.

I must take too long, because before I can even react, Dark Eyes' hand slides into my hair and clenches it in his tight fist, yanking my head back. His eyes scorch me to my bones as he glares down at me, but I glare right back.

I expect him to let go, to shove me away, but he doesn't. His hand only tightens, and I can't help it—I smirk.

His eyes drop, and his lip curls back in a snarl. "Don't get it twisted," he sneers. "We don't need you. You're a convenience, but we can do this without you." My cocky grin falters for only a moment. "I can kill you and take everything inside. You're nothing to me, to any of us. So I suggest you

start being useful before you wind up with a fucking bullet in your head, you understand?”

My lips open, then close, unsure of what to say. Is he bluffing? A part of me doesn't think so. He killed Kris without a second thought, so I assume killing is nothing for him.

But if he was going to kill me, he would've already, right? If he really can get into the vault without my help, then why hasn't he just gotten rid of me? I'm a witness. I could ruin their lives with one word. Even without seeing their faces, I've seen too much. I could tell the cops everything they need to know to put these men away.

Yet, I'm still here, living and breathing.

“Do it then,” I taunt. “Kill me.” His hand in my hair tightens further, and fury flares to life in his eyes. My smile returns, this time broader.

“You think I won't?” he grunts. Faster than I can see, his free hand pulls the pistol holstered to his hip, and he rests the barrel to my temple. My heart races and fear, true fear, settles in for the first time.

I was scared when I turned and saw their masked faces after they saved me from Kris. But once I realized they wouldn't hurt me, it disappeared. Even when Dark Eyes tied my hands behind my back, I still didn't think they'd hurt me.

But now, with the cold metal biting into my skin, my body begins trembling as terror fills my blood.

“What's the fucking code?” he snarls, emphasizing his words by pressing the gun harder into my head with each one. From the corner of my eye, I watch as the pad of his finger slides onto the trigger. He presses in enough for me to know that with just a bit more pressure, it'll go off and I'll be nothing but a dead heap on the floor.

“Eight-six-nine-five-two-nine,” I rush out, my voice shaky and barely audible.

“Smart bitch,” he says, dropping the gun.

A hard, relieved breath leaves me as he steps back. My shoulders round as I watch him stride for the vault. The faint beeps fill the silent room as he presses the button, then the vault unlatches, and he shoves the heavy door open.

There's another door on the inside, one that's bulletproof and clear, but he doesn't seem worried about it. He looks over my head at the big one, and I suck in a breath as he walks past me, his arm brushing mine. The big one kneels as he pulls something from his pocket, and Dark Eyes turns his attention back to me.

"That wasn't so hard, now was it?" he says sarcastically.

"You're a bastard," I say, and his lips tip up under the mask.

"I know." He moves slowly toward me and I shuffle back a step, my back hitting the wall again. "Now, the next question is, what do we do with you?"

# CHAPTER 8

I hate her.

I *really* fucking hate her.

Ever since we stepped into this bank, she's been nothing but a fucking nuisance, and I'm tired. Tired of her, tired of this job. Just fucking tired. I want this job to be over already, and with Storm picking the lock to the bulletproof door, all we have left is transporting the money to the van and dealing with this woman.

*Blair.*

For whatever reason, Storm thought he needed to know her name, that knowing it would change things. Somehow make her indebted to us, or humanize her.

I was in the military long enough to know that an enemy stops seeing you as a person, that you stop seeing them as anything other than a target. And right now, all Blair is is a target. Something we need to take care of and get rid of.

"Sarge!" My head whips to the side as Jace sprints toward us, his hazel eyes wide. "Someone's here."

"What? Who?" I turn fully toward him, adrenaline spiking through my body.

"I don't know." He rests his hands on his hips as he tries to catch his breath. "A woman."

"A woman?" I turn back toward Blair, finding her flicking her emerald eyes between us. "Who is she?"

“How am I supposed to know?” she sneers. “I’ve been here, with you, the entire time.”

“Yeah, but you probably know who she is,” I say. She glares up at me for a long moment, and fuck if her defiance doesn’t do something to me.

*No.*

I stomp that down, *way* the fuck down.

Before the end of the night, she’s going to be dead, probably by my hand, and I can’t allow myself to get attached. I can’t afford to have any feelings toward her. Not admiration at the way she’s handling her fear in the face of danger, and not lust at the way she’s so fucking defiant. I want to break her, bend her to my will until she submits to me like the good bitch I know she can be.

I can’t even remember the last time I wanted to fuck someone. It’s been years. There’s nothing wrong with me, but I hate the chase, the mundane conversation before we get to bed. I hate going on dates, and pretending like I give a fuck about the hole I’m about to stick my dick into.

Lust, being horny, it’s an annoying emotion. It serves nothing in my life. There’s no fucking purpose for it other than a brief moment of relief. But I can get that from running, or from doing literally anything else. I don’t have time for some bitch, and even if I did, I’ve always scared them away with the fucked up shit I’m into.

It’s easier to be alone, to fuck my hand when I have to, and live my life in fucking peace.

“What does she look like?” Blair asks, pulling me from my thoughts. She looks at Jace, her brows lifting expectantly. That expression alone is enough to make my palm itchy. She needs someone to take their belt to her ass, to teach her some fucking respect. It’s clear she needs some fucking discipline.

“She’s blonde, tall. Looks intense—”

“Cindy,” she breathes, nodding. “She works here with me.”

“Why is she here?” I hiss. “Did you call her?”

“When would I have had time to do that?” she shouts. “I’ve had my fucking hands tied the entire time, and when I didn’t, your goons were watching me!” She steps closer to me, her full chest heaving. It takes all I have not to drop my eyes to her lush tits. All the years of practicing control, from my training in the military, has prepared me for this exact fucking moment.

“Goons?” Jace repeats, sounding amused. “Gotta say, that’s one I haven’t heard.” She shoots him a withering glare, but I don’t take my eyes off her pissed-off face.

“Storm!” I call. He’s at my side in an instant, his only response a soft grunt. “You and Corbyn deal with the woman. Jace, come with us.”

“Wait—him?” Jace points at Storm, looking shocked.

“We don’t have time for this,” I mutter, grabbing Blair’s upper arm and dragging her away from the vault. It takes me two seconds to pick an office and shove her inside, Jace and I following in after. I don’t close the door all the way, choosing to keep it open enough for me to see what’s happening in case the guys need help.

“I can’t believe you let Storm deal with her,” Jace huffs, pressing his face closer to mine to look through the crack. “You know people like Corbyn and me better than the two of you.”

“Shut up,” I hiss, shoving his shoulder with mine. He’s way too fucking close. I didn’t realize I was still holding onto Blair until she shuffles in front of me. She’s so fucking short we can look right over her head like she isn’t even there. It’s unsettling.

“You said her name is Cindy?” Jace whispers, and Blair mindlessly nods. I watch her eyes widen as Cindy steps into the bank, her hand wrapped around her purse as she looks around the dark lobby. She doesn’t notice our bags still laying by the teller desks, which is a small mercy. All we need is for her to sound the alarm.

“How long have you worked here?” I ask, my voice just a breath.

“Eight months,” she whispers, shifting on her feet. My hand stays tight around her arm. I feel her restlessness bubbling inside her. With a single glance at Jace, I know he can feel it too.

“Don’t get any stupid ideas,” I growl. Her body stiffens, but she doesn’t acknowledge the words. “*Blair.*”

“Her name’s Blair?” Jace whispers, and I nod. “How do you know?” I shake my head, silently telling him to shut the fuck up. I already fucked up by mentioning Storm by name. And Corbyn. Shit. We really fucked up. We’ve never been so messy on a job before.

It just irritates me even more.

*This is all her fault.*

Blair shifts on her feet again, and I look down, studying her. I can see the gears in her head grinding, the way she’s hyping herself up to scream, to make a commotion. To get Cindy’s attention and blow the lid off this whole fucking thing.

Her lips part and my free hand clamps over her mouth and nose. Slowly, I bring my lips to her ear. “Don’t even think about it,” I snarl. Her mouth moves under my hand, but I don’t let up. “Move, or make a sound, and you know what I’ll do, don’t you?” She lets out a soft whimper as she nods. “Good girl.”

Jace shifts uncomfortably, but I ignore him, my attention solely on Blair. Her eyes are wide and her body is trembling.

Maybe in other circumstances, I’d feel bad. But right now, I don’t care.

“I knew you were a smart girl,” I whisper. Her body sways back into mine, and she’s so fucking soft, her ass so goddamn plump against me, I have to swallow a groan. As quickly as she came, she pulls away, steadying herself on her feet.

My gaze slides to Jace again, finding him staring at her with a familiar darkness glinting in his eyes. It’s one I’ve seen

before. Never aimed at me, usually aimed at Corbyn or whatever friend they've brought home for the night. But now it's aimed at Blair, and I don't know if I want to shield her from it.

A sick, fucked up part of me wants to watch Jace ravish her. Destroy her. Fucking own her.

But a bigger part of me wants to be the one to do it.

A low voice pulls my attention away from my spiraling thoughts, and I shift my gaze back to the crack in the door, watching as Storm approaches the woman, Corbyn by his side.

"Can we help you?" Corbyn asks, his voice faint but still easily audible in the empty bank.

"Who are you?" she asks.

Blair whimpers at the sound of her friend's voice, and I squeeze my hand tighter, threatening to cut off her air supply by pinching her nose tightly shut. Her body sways back into me again, but I don't move away or try to hide the hardness under my pants. I know the moment she feels it, because her body stiffens and she pulls away. But my hips chase her without me telling them to.

I press against her ass, letting her feel my aching cock. Her breath catches, but she doesn't look at me. She doesn't try to buck me off or protest as I grind against her, unable to help myself.

"Security," Storm grunts, and I shift my attention back to them again. The woman looks between the guys, and I know she knows it's bullshit.

"Security?" she repeats, looking around. "Is there a reason you're here? Was there a break in or—"

"Ma'am," Corbyn says, cutting her off. "We're going to need you to leave. We're in the middle of something—"

"What company do you work for?" she interrupts, and Corbyn lets out a long breath, feigning annoyance. He's always good at this. Storm looks ready to rip her head from her body.

I press harder against Blair, needing some relief from my sudden hard-on. Subtly, she pushes back against me, letting her ass rub against my aching cock. My hand slides from her arm to around her waist, and I hold her close.

My eyes shift to Jace again, finding him watching us. He doesn't hide it, the way his hand has mindlessly moved to his crotch. He grips himself over his pants, squeezing tightly.

I look back to the lobby as Corbyn shows Cindy the fake badge on his vest. She squints as she leans closer, reading the fake company name.

“Right,” she breathes, looking back at the guys, then around the room again. “No one was here when you got here?”

“Do you work here?” Storm snaps. “Why are you here?” Her brows lift at his tone, and I nearly groan. He couldn't be gentle to save his life.

But, to be fair, neither could I.

Blair shifts again, and I press harder. She shuffles forward a step and my arm around her waist tightens. “Easy, girl,” I whisper against her ear. She shudders against me, her entire body trembling.

I can't help but let my hand slide up her side to her breast, not touching her, but close enough to feel the soft curve. It's been so long since I've touched a woman like this, and I know this is not the right time, but my body doesn't give a fuck. My body just wants relief.

My body wants Blair.

With that stark realization, I move my mouth back to her ear. “I'm going to ask you a question, and I want you to nod yes or no. Do you understand?” She hesitates before she nods. “If I bend you over that desk right now, will you be wet?”

Her breath hitches, and I brace myself for her to elbow the fuck out of me. It'll be rightfully deserved. But she doesn't. Instead, she barely dips her chin in a nod.

“And are you wet because you want me to fuck you?” I ask, my voice guttural. She doesn't even hesitate this time. She

nods, and I let out a low laugh. “You want me to fuck you while your friend is a few feet away? She could walk in and see what a whore you are, letting a filthy criminal fuck your sloppy cunt.”

Her breath is ragged as she stares straight ahead. I don't think she's actually paying attention to the guy's interaction with Cindy. I think she's as turned on as I am and doesn't know what to do with herself. She confirms my suspicions by dipping her chin again.

“Do it,” Jace mutters.

Shit. I almost forgot he was here.

“Fuck her until she screams,” he continues, his voice guttural, and I shift my eyes to look at him. His hand is moving mindlessly over his crotch, stroking his cock beneath his pants. “Fuck her raw.”

She lets out a little whimper at his words, and I grin before moving my lips back to her ear. “Let's give the man what he wants,” I say. “Close the door.” I jerk my chin at Jace, and he jumps to it, stopping himself before he slams it shut.

Gripping Blair's hair in my fist, I pull her away from the door, my other hand still on her mouth and shove her toward the desk. Thankfully, it's not the same room I killed that guy in, or else we'd be fucking in a pool of blood.

I really need to call the clean-up crew.

“Cover her mouth,” I say as Jace moves toward us. As I slip my hand off, he slides his hand in place. Her eyes are wide as she flicks them between us, but she's not fighting. She's not making a sound. She's not doing anything but letting us manhandle her.

With my fist still in her hair, I shove her over the desk. Her cheek presses into the wood, and Jace puts more pressure on her face, making her cheeks squish together.

“Open,” he says as he pulls his hand away. I pause, watching as she hesitantly lets her mouth open. Without warning, he shoves two fingers in until she gags. Tears

immediately fill her eyes as she tries to accommodate the intrusion.

Chuckling to myself, I run my hands over her round ass and down the backs of her thighs. Gripping the hem of her tight skirt, I shove it up, watching the fabric strain as it stretches over her ass, then bunches around her waist.

I crouch to get a better look and find her black panties pressed against her pussy. And, sure enough, the fabric is soaked through. I run my fingers over her, and smile to myself at the sound of her gagged, muffled whimper.

“Keep her quiet,” I say, moving my hands to her hips. The flimsy fabric is easy to rip. I tear it away from her body and ball it up tightly in my fist.

Standing, I jerk my chin at Jace, and he removes his fingers, letting a pool of saliva pour from Blair’s mouth onto the desk. “Keep your mouth open,” I mutter, and she obeys, leaving her lips parted as she pants heavily. Leaning over her body, her eyes widen as I shove her damp panties into her mouth. “To keep you quiet.”

# CHAPTER 9

I stare down at her wide eyes, her lips stretched around the black fabric as it overflows from her mouth. Unable to stop myself, a low groan leaves.

“Are you going to fuck her?” I ask, flicking my eyes up to Aero long enough to find him straightening to his full height behind her, his attention solely on her ass. Giving me a hard nod, he roughly undoes his belt and the button of his pants, yanking the zipper down. I move my gaze back to Blair and slowly reach out, stroking her cheek.

“We’ll take good care of you, princess,” I murmur. She whimpers, her body trembling under my touch. I huff out a laugh as I move away, going back to the door to check that everything is fine with Corbyn and Storm.

They’ve somehow moved their conversation with the woman closer to the door, ushering her out. From the way Storm is standing, his muscles taut enough to snap, it looks like he’s more than ready to get rid of her.

It’s a feat in itself he didn’t say or do something to ruin everything. Not that he’d do it intentionally, but he can be a dick at the best of times. Add the fact that our job has turned to shit because of the interruption from Blair, then Cindy, it really is a miracle he didn’t say anything to fuck it all up.

She’s not out of the building yet, though.

Sighing, I turn back toward Blair and Aero. He grips his thick cock in his fist, stroking it harshly as he lines up with her. It’s not the first time I’ve seen his dick, but it is the first time I’ve seen it hard, and Jesus fuck, it’s big.

Poor girl.

Her hands ball into tight fists at the base of her back, still bound with the black tape. She looks so fucking hot, so helpless lying there. She can't do anything but take it, and we all know it. She could try to scream, she could try to stop us. But she won't.

She's just a little whore, nothing more than a warm, wet hole for us to come inside.

Making my way back to her, I watch as Aero shoves himself inside without warning. Her eyes fly wide open, her mouth going slack as she lets out a silent scream. He pounds into her ruthlessly, each thrust more brutal than the last. His gloved fingers dig into her soft hips as he fucks her, his lips pressed angrily together, like he's pissed that he's doing this. And knowing him, he probably is.

My cock aches, and I reach for it, gripping it tightly over my pants, wanting to pull it out and shove it down her throat. But I just watch for a moment, loving the soft whines she lets slip from her sweet lips.

The desk quietly thumps against the wall, her body sliding against the dark, hard wood as Aero uses it. It's almost too much—the sound, the way she looks, the sex-smell, the thought of the guys walking in and seeing this.

Everything is driving me insane.

Without wasting another second, I rip my pants open, the zipper loud in the room. Blair's eyes lift to mine, her mouth still slack. It looks like she's silently begging me to fuck her throat. To stuff her full of my cock until she can't fucking breathe.

I shove my pants down enough to pull my cock out. It's already rock hard and leaking.

"Fuck," Aero groans, his head falling back. "She feels so fucking good."

"I'm about to find out," I grunt as I pull the panties from her mouth.

“*Fuck yes,*” he hisses. He brings his hand down on her ass in a hard smack, making her whimper. “Be a good little fuckslut and keep that mouth open. Make my friend feel good. You understand me?” She frantically nods and stretches her body further, her mouth opening wider and tongue lolling out like she’s a fucking dog.

“What a dumb little puppy,” I laugh, bringing my cock to her lips. Eagerly, she sucks me in. Her mouth is so fucking hot and wet, and my cock slides right to her throat. “That’s it, princess. Take it all.”

My hand slides into her hair, and I grip it tightly in my fist. Aero isn’t holding back, so neither do I. I fuck her mouth, forcing the head of my cock further down her throat with each thrust. She gags around me, more saliva pouring from her mouth and pooling on the table beneath her.

“Eyes on me,” I grunt. “Don’t close them. *Look at me.*” I know she’s struggling to keep them open, and her forcing herself to obey me is just making me that much fucking harder.

“Jesus, I thought she’d never—” Corbyn’s voice comes to an abrupt stop from behind me, and Aero glances over at him, but I don’t. I keep my focus locked on the slutty princess swallowing my cock whole. “What’s going on in here?”

“Are you fucking my little bunny?” Storm asks, stomping forward, and I huff out a laugh.

“Seems you’ve got all our attention, princess,” I mutter. “How’d you manage that?” She lets out a low, pathetic-sounding whine, then gags as I force my cock further in, feeling her throat stretch to accommodate me.

“She wanted it,” Aero says, never breaking his rhythm. Blair is helpless to do anything but just lie there, getting filled from both ends.

“I want to fuck her,” Storm says, and I laugh again.

“Hear that?” I ask her, using the pad of my thumb to wipe the tear streaking from the corner of her eye away. “We all want turns in your sloppy little pussy.”

“That lady gone?” Aero asks. When no one answers immediately, I finally glance over my shoulder, finding Corbyn’s eyes with mine. He stares right at me, his chest heaving with each labored breath, and judging by his flushed cheeks, I’d say he’s turned on.

This isn’t new for us, watching the other fuck someone else. What’s new is the circumstance. We’ve never fucked anyone with Aero or Storm around. But I’m not complaining.

Aero pointedly clears his throat, drawing Corbyn’s attention. “Yeah,” he mumbles. “It took some convincing, but she’s gone.”

“And she won’t call the cops?” Aero groans. “Jesus fuck, this cunt is good.” He brings his hand down on her ass again, harder than before, and she cries out around my dick. The vibration shoots pleasure up my shaft and into my spine. My head falls back as a feral groan rips from my throat.

“Don’t think so,” Corbyn rasps. There’s a brief pause before he clears his throat. “How’d this happen?”

“She wanted it,” Aero repeats. “Didn’t you, bitch?” His hand wraps around her bound ones, keeping her pinned while he fucks her harder. “*Didn’t you?*” He smacks her ass again, hard enough to leave an immediate handprint, and this time, she screams. Maybe because she knows the bank is empty, or maybe because it truly did hurt, I don’t know or care. All I know is her scream is fucking hot and I want to hear it again.

I pull out long enough for her to scream an incoherent, “Yes!” Then shove back in, groaning at the bite of pain as her teeth scrape along my length.

“I wanna fuck her,” Storm says again, louder. “I’m next.” I bark out another laugh that turns into a moan when she hollows her cheeks, sucking me hard.

“Fuck, do that again,” I murmur. Her eyes twinkle as she does as she’s told. My hand in her hair tightens as my cock hardens further.

There’s something about a girl obeying orders with my cock down her throat that just does something to me.

“Fuck, *fuck*,” Aero groans, his thrusts becoming erratic. “Look at her taking it.”

“Nothing but a little whore,” I say, and Aero grunts his agreement.

“Shit, I’m coming,” he growls. “I’m filling you up.” Panic fills her eyes, and she tries to jerk away, tries to dislodge herself from us, but I tighten my hold in her hair, forcing my cock down her throat until she’s struggling to breathe. Aero thrusts again, then stills, his head falling back and eyes squeezed tightly shut as he comes.

Veins in his neck pop, and his face turns red as he spills deep inside her. She goes limp, accepting the fact that she’s full of a strange man’s cum, and lets me continue fucking her mouth.

“She’s all yours,” Aero breathes as he slides from her, slapping her ass again.

Storm wastes no time as he steps up behind her.

# CHAPTER 10

## STORM

I watch Aero's cum spill from her swollen pussy, and the sight *should* disgust me. It *should* make my dick soften, and it *should* make me not want to put it anywhere near her. But knowing she's already full and ready to accept another load has the tip of my cock leaking.

Sliding my fingers between her legs, I find her swollen clit and roughly rub at her. I wish I didn't have fucking gloves on so I could feel her with nothing separating us, but this will have to do.

I rub faster, watching her eyes roll back as Jace uses her mouth for his pleasure. Again, it really should turn me off that my best friends, my brothers, are in the room with us, all focused on this one woman. But it just turns me on more, knowing she's here to make us feel good. That she's here solely for our pleasure.

"Are you gonna come, little bunny?" I murmur. "Scream around my brother's dick." Jace groans, his hand tightening in her hair until she cries out. He silences her by jamming his cock further in, cutting her air off.

Her thighs shake, forcing more of Aero's cum to leak from her contracting cunt as she barrels closer to her release. With a final, pathetic whimper, her body goes taut as she whines with her orgasm. She can barely hold herself up, and when she finally goes limp against the wood, her eyes are closed and her mouth is slack.

She looks spent. Completely used up, but beautiful.

“Fuck,” Jace growls, his thrusts turning more frantic. I watch as he feeds her more of his cock, forcing her to take more than she physically can. She gags around him, but he doesn’t pull back. He just continues fucking her mouth, her weak protests seeming to spur him on.

“Gentle,” Corbyn coos as he steps behind him. “Be soft, baby.” Jace shakes his head, his grip in my little bunny’s hair tight.

The sight of her like that, helpless and weak from her orgasm, has my cock so hard it’s about to snap. Standing, I yank my pants open, shove them down, and fist myself, squeezing until precum drips from my tip.

Aero slumps in the leather chair beside the desk, his fingers locked behind his head and legs spread wide apart, his pants still undone but cock away. He watches us with a lazy, nonchalance like he doesn’t care what happens next.

Lining up with her swollen, messy slit, I rub my head through her. She whimpers, her legs instinctively shuffling closed. I don’t care, though. It’ll just make her feel tighter.

I slide lower, pressing against her entrance. Her body eagerly sucks me in, accommodating my thick girth as I force my way inside her tight warmth.

Suddenly, Jace is slammed over the desk, his and Blair’s faces inches apart. His cheek smashes against the wood, and his gaze locks with hers. Her mouth is wide open, like she’s too tired to close it, and drool spills from it, pooling on the desk below.

I shove inside her, hating that she’s looking at him and not me. Her cunt wraps around me like a tight hug, and I pull almost all the way out before slamming back in, my hips slapping against her ass. She cries out, her bound hands tightening into fists behind her back.

The need to fuck into her harder than Aero did overtakes me. Knowing he had her first, and now that she’s looking at Jace, it makes me want to stake my claim on her. To own her. To let her know that she belongs to me.

But a voice in my head sings that I'd love to share her with my friends, the only people in the entire world I trust.

I'm not insane enough to trust this girl. I don't know her. But she's hot, and she feels fucking incredible, and, judging from my brother's reactions to her, I'd say they feel the same way.

Again, the thought of taking her home feels right. The thought of doing this every night, each of us taking our turns in her little pussy, has my spine tingling with the threat of an orgasm.

Corbyn leans over Jace and swipes his fingers through the saliva on the desk, gathering it before pressing them against Jace's ass. He groans, his eyes rolling back as Corbyn's gloved fingers fuck him, stretching him.

I know they fuck. They're not shy about hiding it, and I've heard them more times than I can count. But hearing them and watching them are totally different things, and I find myself unable to look away.

My cock hardens more, and I fuck into my little bunny faster, chasing my release as I watch Corbyn stand at his full height behind Jace. He grips Jace's hair in his fist and aims his head toward Blair.

"Kiss her," he grunts out. He grips his cock tightly in his other fist as he presses against Jace's opening. I watch his cock slowly disappear into my friend's asshole, and I absently wonder how tight he is. How good his ass would feel around my cock.

The thought has a long, low groan spilling from me. *Do I want to fuck him?* I never thought about it before, but right now, with my cock buried in this little bunny, all I can think about is how much Corbyn is straining to force his dick inside and how tight Jace must feel.

*How would it feel to take them both?*

My thoughts are interrupted as I watch Jace press his lips against my bunny's in a sloppy kiss. She whines into his mouth, and the sound is almost too much. My head falls back

as I grip her hips, my neck straining as I fuck her as hard as I can, chasing my orgasm.

Her hips press into the unforgiving edge of the desk, her cries muffled by Jace's mouth. He grunts into hers, both of them taking what they're given.

"Fuck, she feels so good," I groan, my fingers digging deeper into her soft flesh.

"Fill her up," Aero says. I glance at him, finding his dark eyes on her. "She loves when you come inside her. Don't you, bitch?" He kicks his booted foot onto the edge of the desk, nudging her with his steel toe tip. When she doesn't immediately answer, his foot falls to the floor and he leans forward. He pinches her ass as hard as he can, and finally, she screams.

Jace pulls his mouth away as she cries out, "Yes! I want your cum. Please!" She bucks against me, her body begging for it.

Aero lets out a low laugh as he leans back in his chair, looking like a dark king observing his subjects. Corbyn's thrusts are harder, the desk scooting forward with every one. Jace grits his teeth together as he takes it, his fingers digging into the wood.

In one sudden motion, I pull out of her and grip her hair in my fist. She gasps as I jerk her upright, then spin her around. My hands slide under her arms and I lift her onto the desk before shoving her back. Her head lands beside Jace's again, her breath leaving her in a hard whoosh as she hits the wood.

I slam back into her, my hands immediately moving to her blouse. I need to see her tits. I need to see more of her. I need to own every inch of her.

Her buttons bounce to the floor as I rip her shirt open. With her hands still bound behind her back, it forces her shoulders back and tits forward, almost like she's inviting me.

"Knife," I pant, glancing at Aero. He grabs the knife sheathed to his thigh and moves forward. His eyes lock on

hers as he slowly brings the black blade up, dragging it down her cheek.

The pulse in her neck beats wildly, her eyes frantic as she watches him. He slides the tip along her throat, down to her collarbone, then down her chest. It glides between her generous breasts, and he stops when he gets to her black bra.

The threat lingers in the air between us, and with every thrust, her body presses harder into the blade. I almost beg him to cut her, to slice her open so I can drink her lifeblood down, but I don't. I just watch as she turns panicked eyes from him to me, like she's waiting for me to stop him.

He slips the blade under the fabric, his eyes still on hers as he applies the slightest pressure, slicing right through and letting her heavy tits fall free. Immediately, my hands go to them, groping them roughly. He grins as he rolls back in the chair, reclining as he watches her get used.

I grip her nipples between my fingers, pinching them as hard as I can. She screams, the sound echoing off the walls in the small room. I feel my cock leak into her, mixing with Aero's cum.

"Scream for me again, little bunny," I growl. "Let us hear you." I twist her nipples, pulling on them until her breasts lift away from her body.

Her back deeply arches, chasing my fingers to alleviate some of the sting, but I just pinch harder. The sound of her screams and Jace's grunts spur me on more than I thought they would.

I watch Corbyn slam into him, his face twisted with pleasure that probably matches my own. My attention shifts back to my little bunny, and I find her mouth hanging open, her eyes rolled back. Her thighs tremble, and I feel her cunt pulsing around me.

"Don't let her come again," Aero says, and I slide my gaze to him. He scrolls absently on his phone, barely paying any attention to the goddess getting railed in front of him.

I groan my confirmation and pick up speed, trying to find my release before she does. I don't know why Aero doesn't want her to come again, and I don't really care. She feels too good for me to think about anything other than my own release.

"Please," she whines. "Please, please." Slowly, Aero sets his phone on his thigh and stares at her, his expression impassive under his mask.

"What a pathetic little bitch," he says, his voice as low as a lover's. "Begging for it like a whore. You're a whore, aren't you, Blair?" She lets out another whine, one that's even more needy than before. "Tell me how much of a little slut you are. Tell me how badly you want to be filled with our cum. Be a stupid little cunt and keep begging for it. Maybe I'll let you come, maybe I won't. Either way, beg."

Her pussy tightens at his words, and it's almost impossible to fuck her through it. "She's close," I grunt, but don't slow down.

"Don't you dare fucking come," he growls. He slides his knife from its sheath again, moving closer to her. The blade trails along her throat, and her breath catches. "A dead bitch won't come, will she?" He presses the tip harder into her pulse, and her pupils blow so wide the green of her eyes disappear. His lips ghost over her ear, but he speaks loud enough for me to hear his threat. "If you don't want me to slit your throat and use your blood to fuck your ass, then don't fucking come. Understand me?"

Her mouth opens and closes, no sound coming out. The threat has my cock thickening, and my fingers dig tighter into her thighs. "More," I pant. "Cut her."

Aero's eyes flick up to me, and I nod frantically, silently begging him for it.

I *need* to see her blood.

He grins as he brings the blade to her nipple. The tip slides across her creamy, freckled skin, and red beads immediately

bloom to the surface. She screams as he cuts deeper, letting her blood flow freely.

I groan and drop forward, fucking into her as my mouth finds her bloody nipple. I suck hard, letting the tangy taste of her give me the final push to the edge. My cum spills deep inside her as I keep sucking, drinking down everything she'll give me.

“Lay there and let him do what he wants,” Aero murmurs. “Be a good fucking bitch.” My groan is throaty as the final spurt of cum shoots from me, and I feel it overflow from her tight hole and soak into my pants.

Finally, I pull away and wipe the dampness from my lips as I stare down at her. Aero is back in his seat, reclined as he scrolls on his phone again. My little bunny stares up at me, her breast still bloody, and her pussy gaping and dripping cum.

“Sweet little bunny,” I whisper, stroking her cheek. “I want to take you home with me and do this every day until I die. Would you like that? To be my personal little fucktoy?” She lets out a small whimper, but doesn't fight me on it. If anything, it looks like she likes the idea.

A lot.

# CHAPTER 11

Jace feels fucking amazing around my cock. He always does, but something about right now has me about to fucking explode.

Storm steps away from Blair after saying that shit about taking her home with us. He can't do it. We'd all have to agree, and I don't think any of us want her around forever.

Right here, right now, it's fine. But long term?

Blair lays her head back on the desk, blinking up at the ceiling, blood staining her skin. She pants heavily, her lips parted. Jace stares at her, his eyes dark and hungry, and I know what he wants. I know what he needs.

"You want her, baby?" I murmur, and he nods, his gaze still locked on hers like a predator.

Sliding my hand around his throat, I yank him back. His back bows off the desk as he's forced to stand, my cock still lodged deeply in his ass.

Everyone watches as I direct Jace to step between her spread thighs. He doesn't hesitate as he wraps his arms under her knees and jerks her to the edge of the table, her ass hanging off the edge.

Slowly, I slide my hand around him and grip his cock. I pump him a few times, watching as a bead of precum leaks from his tip and drips onto her waiting slit.

"Look at you," I say softly, my lips ghosting over his ear. "You're aching for her, aren't you? Making a mess and leaking

everywhere. So wet and hard. You need to feel her used up cunt, don't you? You're desperate for it."

He lets out a feral-sounding growl, jerking his hips forward, and I click my tongue. "Patience, baby," I whisper. Pressing my hand to the center of his strong back, I push him forward, my other hand still stroking his cock. He plants his hands on either side of her, arching his back for me.

Slowly, I drag my cock almost all the way out of his ass, letting him feel every vein and ridge. He groans, dropping his head forward. I squeeze him tighter, and the sound that comes from him isn't human.

He grunts, thrusting his hips forward, fucking my hand and cock at the same time. He's wild with his movements, each one more frantic than the last.

"That's it," I hiss. Blair whines, the sound pathetic, and I look around his shoulder, finding her gaze locked on where my hand is wrapped around him. "You want him inside you, don't you?"

Her eyes snap to mine, her lips parted. Jace's hand slams onto the wood by her head, and she jolts, shying away from him. He does it again, his thrusts bordering psychotic.

"Tell him to fuck you, pup," I mutter. "Tell him how badly you want him to fill you up." He snarls, his hips moving faster, and I know he's close.

"F-fuck me," she breathes.

"Louder," I say, my hand bunching the fabric of his shirt tightly in my fist. My cock thickens, and I feel myself riding that edge with him. "Louder!"

"Please!" she cries. "Fuck me."

Before I can give him an order, Jace slams into her, making her scream. Her back arches deeply, her tits swaying with each brutal thrust. He grunts and snarls like an animal above her, forcing her to take every inch of his big, thick cock.

I grip his shoulders, forcing him to stop. He bucks against me, and I lower my mouth to the back of his neck, sinking my

teeth deeply into his flesh. His movements pause, but his body still vibrates.

Pulling almost all the way out, I slam back in, forcing his cock to push deeper into her. She cries out, the sound needy as it echoes off the walls.

I glance at Aero and Storm, finding the latter with his cock in his hand again, stroking it furiously as he watches. Aero is on his phone, scrolling like he's fucking bored.

"You can have her mouth," I say breathlessly to Storm. His eyes snap to mine, then back to her. A wicked smile curls his lips before he steps forward.

"Open wide, little bunny," he says. He doesn't wait for her to follow his orders. He wrenches her mouth open and shoves all the way inside, her eyes bugging out. She gags, and struggles to take all of him, but he doesn't care.

Her body wiggles, but Jace slides his hands onto her shoulders and pins her to the wood. "Fucking take it," he growls, his teeth gritted. I slam harder into his ass, making him fuck into her deeper.

Tears stream from her eyes, soaking her pretty, fucked up red hair. Her thighs tremble, her back arching and body tensing.

"*Fuck,*" Jace groans, letting the word draw out. "She's coming." From the corner of my eye, I see Aero's head snap up.

"I told her not to fucking come," he spits, but it's too late. He can't do anything about it.

Faster than I can see, he's on her, metal clanking as he pulls his gun from his holster. Storm's gloved-hand snakes into her thick hair, keeping her head in place so he can use her as he wants.

Aero presses his gun to her temple, and more tears flow freely down her face, causing her mascara to run, staining her skin. "Since you want to come so fucking bad," he snarls, "then come again." His finger slides onto the trigger, and my breath catches.

He wouldn't actually do it, would he?

But the threat is there, lingering around us.

Storm lets out a low groan, and the sound of her choking fills the room. His thick cum overflows around his cock, still lodged in her throat. It spills from her lips, dribbling down her chin to her neck and soaking into her hair.

“Disgusting fucking bitch,” Aero says, his voice low. The words shoot a hot pleasure up my spine, and I slide my hand around Jace’s throat, chasing my orgasm. “You’re just a filthy little slut, aren’t you? Tell me. Tell us what you are.”

Storm’s cock slides out, his cum still on her lips and face, her makeup totally smeared and hair a sticky mess. “I’m a disgusting, filthy slut,” she croaks, her voice raspy.

“And you get off on this, don’t you? Being used by four strangers?” He presses the gun harder against her head. “Your cunt is so fucking stretched out I’m surprised he can even feel anything.” Aero jerks his head toward Jace, and he lets out another groan.

“I’m sorry,” she whimpers.

“Don’t tell me you’re sorry,” Aero spits. “I’m not the one inside your disgusting, gaping twat.” Her head shifts to Jace, eyes wide as she stares up at him.

“I’m sorry,” she says, and Jace’s fingers dig harder into her shoulders. “I wish I was tighter for you.”

“Your ass is tight, isn’t it?” Aero murmurs, his voice weirdly gentle. “Let him take that, if he wants.” Jace’s replying snarl is all the confirmation he’ll give. “Tell him he can do what he wants, use you as he wants.”

Her body trembles harder, the pathetic sounds she makes spurring me on. “You can do what you want,” she says. “Use me any way you want.”

“And why can he do that?” Aero asks.

“Because I’m a disgusting bitch,” she whispers, sounding ashamed.

“At least you’re not entirely fucking stupid,” he mutters as he stands, pulling his gun away. “Fuck her ass. Don’t stop until you want to stop. Even if she begs or bleeds, *don’t fucking stop.*”

## CHAPTER 12

With my mouth full of cum, a strange man's cock in my pussy, a cock in his ass, and the phantom feeling of the metal gun still pressed to my temple, I realize my fantasy has come true. The one I'd been thinking about only this morning, silently praying for it to happen, is currently playing out in a fucked up sequence of events.

I'm not complaining. Actually, I'm so fucking into it, I probably need to be hospitalized. It's wrong—it's *so* fucking wrong, but so fucking hot.

I can't stop a needy whine from leaving me as the masked man above me pulls his cock out, the visible parts of his face straining with the effort. I'm limp; nothing more than a few used-up holes for these men to fill.

"We can take her with us," the big one in the corner says to their leader, his voice hushed. The boss looks at the big guy, his dark eyes expressionless.

"No."

It's just the one word, but it's final. No explanation, nothing. Just, no.

A stupid zing of excitement jolts through me at the idea of being taken by them, to be used whenever they felt like it. That way of thinking is dangerous.

Who would ever want that? I shouldn't. It should terrify me. All of this should terrify me, it should make me feel violated, not horny. I should be screaming, begging them to stop, to let me go.

Instead, I widen my legs for the stranger, so it's easier for him to find my asshole with his thick cock. Instead, I beg him to take me, to fuck my hole like he owns it.

The words are enough to silence the men around me and I pause, unsure if I've fucked up. But then their leader clears his throat and jerks his chin at me. "You heard the bitch," he says, and my stomach does a stupid somersault at the word. It shouldn't sound endearing. It shouldn't give me the warm fuzzies.

But it does.

The man between my legs grips his cock tightly in his fist. It's red and angry and leaking so much cum, I know it won't take him but a second to finish. I feel him press against me, his eyes meeting mine. Giving him the slightest nod, he presses forward.

"Please," I whimper, even though I'm not entirely sure what I'm begging for. His hand moves to my lower stomach, and his thumb finds my swollen clit. My eyes widen before they roll back as he expertly rolls it against the pad of his finger.

"Fucking come," he grunts, forcing himself deeper.

"God," the one behind him says. "This is fucking hot. We need to find someone else to do it again with." He grunts his agreement, and the idea of them fucking someone else makes me irrationally angry. I clench around his head, tightening as much as I can, trying to stop him from entering anymore.

"Fucking Christ," he snarls. "You were right." He looks toward their boss. "Her ass is so much tighter." The Boss laughs, the sound throaty and raspy, making my cheeks heat.

The guy above me works his thumb faster over my clit, and even if I didn't want to, I feel myself barreling toward my release. Slowly, the tip of his cock slides in, and the feeling of him stretching me completely is the thing that undoes me.

I scream through my orgasm, my entire body convulsing in a way it's never done before. I feel all their eyes on me, even as the two in front of me grunt their releases. Knowing I'm

currently at the center of their universe is enough to drag my orgasm out further, to spur me on until I'm nothing more than a satiated pile of limbs.

Our breathing is harsh in the room, the sound echoing off the four walls around us. He gently pulls out as the other steps back, his cock already put away in his black pants.

"We gotta go," The Boss says, getting to his feet.

I jolt at the words.

"Go?" I croak, but he ignores me.

"The clean-up guys have come and gone," he continues. "We just need to grab the money and leave. Now."

"But—" The other three men stare down at me, but I stare up at their leader. "What if she talks?" the one who'd been fucking me asks. Their leader just shrugs.

"We can take her with us," the big one suggests again. *Storm*. His name is Storm. I think I like him the best. Even if he seems like the craziest, he has a softness to him the others don't.

"She won't," The Boss says, and my head whips toward him. The arrogance of that statement alone has my blood heating.

"Why not?" the one who'd been fucking me asks. The leader shrugs again.

"She doesn't know anything," he says. "And she's just as guilty as us."

"I—I'm not." I try to sit up, but with my hands still bound it's difficult.

"Maybe you were the one who killed your boss," he muses. "Maybe we walked in and saw everything, and we all made an agreement to cover for each other. If we go down, we're taking you with us."

My mouth opens and closes a few times, words lost to me. How could he do that? Lie and say I killed Kris? I didn't. I wouldn't.

Well...maybe I would've.

But, what matters is that I didn't.

"I didn't do anything," I say, but his back is already to me as he stalks for the door.

"Leave her," he says over his shoulder. The others hesitate, but they all shuffle their way after him.

After they disappear from the room, I finally stumble to my feet and follow them out the door. They work efficiently, gathering money in their bags. And before I know what's even happened, they're striding toward the back door.

I stand dumbfounded as I watch them load their bags into the back of their van, my mouth agape. They pay me no attention, like I don't even exist. Like they hadn't just fucked me within an inch of my life.

The Boss pokes his head in as the others pile in the van. I'm still standing stupidly in the middle of the bank, frozen as I watch.

"Remember," he says, his voice carrying to me. "Don't talk to anyone and you'll be fine." My mouth opens, then closes. I feel like I should argue with him, like I should push him.

Instead, I just stare.

"I hope to never fucking see you again," he mutters.

And, as if those words are the thing that breaks me from whatever spell I was just under, I step forward. Rage like I've never felt before fills me, and a grin curves my lips. His eyes—those dark, dangerous eyes, imbed themselves into my fucking soul.

"You will," I vow. "And when you do, I'll make your life fucking hell."

**TO BE CONTINUED...**

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Haley Tyler is best-selling dark romance author best known for her Salvatore Brotherhood MC series.

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MINE TO BREAK

VICTORIA ELLIS

## CONTENT WARNINGS

This book contains disturbing themes such as: non-con, somnophilia, and murder.

Please take care of your mental health. If reading this will impact your mental health in ANY kind of way, please find a book that is better suited to you.

Once again, this has NON-CON in it. It is between the two love interests. It is a dark romance with dark themes. Reader discretion is advised.

# PROLOGUE

## THE PRIVATE MESSAGES

Dollie: I don't know what I did to have someone like you care about me.

Stealth: I wish you'd stop saying shit like that, Doll.

Stealth: You're perfect. Fucking perfect. And if your family can't see that, fuck em.

Dollie: I don't know how much longer I can handle this, you know?

Dollie: I'm sick of being screamed at by my dad. Sick of how my mom just sits around and lets it happen. I don't know who I should hate more. Him for making me feel like shit or her for not stepping in.

Dollie: If I ever have kids I'll never treat them the way my parents treat me.

Stealth: I bet you'll be a really great mother, Doll.

Stealth: We'd make cute ass babies.

Dollie: 😊

Dollie: Think we'll still talk this time next year? I'll finally be in college.

Stealth: You aren't getting rid of me.

Stealth: Not ever.

Dollie: Don't want to. God...maybe we should just run away together. I need out of this town. I have to get away from my parents before I kill them. I swear...

Stealth: Don't tempt me with a good time, baby.

Dollie: Lol shut up. Don't joke around like that. I know we're both pretty dark people with fucked up senses of humor but I know you'd never.

Stealth: Never what? Help you stand up for yourself and give your parents what they deserve...?

Dollie: Why are you so perfect?

Stealth: Why are you so far away?

Dollie: Thank you for always letting me vent. And for not calling the cops and telling them I'm a psycho who needs to be checked in to a mental health facility. 😊

Stealth: We've got our own brand of crazy, baby. You're fucking stuck with me.

Dollie: No other way I'd want it. Talk soon, okay?

# CHAPTER 1

## STEALTHING\_REAPER

IT WAS EASY TO FIND HER.

The girl of my *wet* fucking dreams.

I never meant for my sick little infatuation to grow into a full on, life-changing obsession.

But we're here now. There's no going back.

Especially not after I've traveled all of this way to sink my fucking teeth into her beautiful, porcelain fucking skin.

If you know you're fucking batshit crazy...are you really *that* crazy?

I mean, the way I see it, if I'm breaking this down into a game of *whose fault is this* I'm really not to blame. At least not fully. Parents need to be better at informing their children of the dangers of online predators.

And yes, *I* am the online predator.

It kind of has a ring to it, doesn't it? I mean, fuck, it's better than some of the labels that've been slapped on me.

Anyway...this all falls back on her dear old mom and dad. They should have informed her. They should have sat her down and told her that a fucking creep online could figure out exactly where she was just from a simple photo. Each and every single fucking photo has metadata, *mom*. And if your location is enabled when you snap that photo? Well, *dad*...

I can get it.

Any of us can.

Any of us who are lurking in the shadows can immediately figure out exactly who you are.

Exactly *where* you are.

But as for me and my sweet little obsession...

She's none the wiser as she sits in front of that fucking camera, opening her legs for hundreds of thousands of men that are not me. I can just barely make out her form from the house I've rented across the street from her in her quiet little Bible thumping town. What are the chances, you say? What are the fucking chances that the house across the street from the cam girl I've fallen head over fucking heels for goes up for rent just as I get into town with nowhere to stay?

The chances are slim to fucking none, and that's why I had to off the old tenant who was taking up space in the place I needed to be in.

To watch her. To be close to her.

Sheer curtains separate my gaze from my sweet little obsession as I use binoculars to try to see her from this vantage point. I glance down at my laptop, where I can see her up close and extremely personal in real time as she reaches down and plays with her clit—I imagine a look of pure ecstasy spreading on her face. Imagine that her lips are parted just slightly as she lets out small gasps, her body racked with quick tremors as her anticipation builds.

Of course, I can't see her face.

It's covered, shielded behind a *Ghostface* mask—the trademark mask that she wears in every photo and video on her cam site; a way to keep her anonymity and lower the risk of being found out.

My cock grows hard against my thigh, and I reach down to strip off my boxers and palm myself as I watch her. This is no good, though. I could be back in San Fran-*fucking*-cisco watching her like a goddamn loser on a screen. Like the other hordes of people watching her right now.

“A lot of you have been wanting something darker,” she says, slipping just one finger into her tight hole before sliding

it back out and making an exaggerated show of licking off her juices. I groan with a feral want that has been building inside of me for far too goddamn long. “That’s how I know just how fucked all of you are.” She giggles as she fucks herself with two fingers now, rolling her head back as she pants.

I pump my shaft faster, imagining her fucking cunt is encasing me, squeezing me.

“Using those whips and chains during the last live show wasn’t enough for you. I don’t know what will be...but I’m willing to try.” She pauses as she heightens the intensity on her clit. “We’ll use trial and error, yes?” She lets out a loud moan and watches herself as she continues to use those fingers to fuck herself hard and fast, her other hand focused solely on that pink bud as she grinds her palm against it.

I’m so fucking close.

Being this near to her makes me lose every single ounce of control I once had built up inside of me. Suddenly, she’s squirting right into the camera, a perfect fucking arched waterfall splashes against the screen, and I come all over my keyboard, wishing I was filling up her tight fucking pussy.

“*Fuuuuck* yes,” I grunt out as she collapses on her bed. “Fuck yes, Doll.”

I glance over at her house and pick my binoculars up to check on her as my cock twitches in my hand. Her silhouette is gone as her curtains blow in the wind.

My focus catches back on the screen as she sits back up, her perfect tits quickly raising and lowering as she takes heavy breaths, completely spent. She’s so fucking beautiful. So fucking pure.

A slutty little cunt of a virgin.

Although, that’s just what she says.

Could she be lying? Of course. We’re all liars.

But I’ve gotten close to her.

I’ve inserted myself into her life, online, of course. And we’ve built up quite the friendship over the last year. She has

no idea I know about the cam girl account. Has no idea I chat with her and then get off to her as she shows her pretty little pussy for all the fucked up, deranged psychopaths on the site.

She thinks we're just friends who met on an online forum, Xangu, that connects lonely losers through the use of photos and poetic memes.

I found her through her cam site, of course, and my obsessive personality forced me to hire a web sleuth to find all the info he could on her.

He uncovered her *real* Instagram account, and I discovered photos of her at Bible studies and on church retreats.

When I dug even deeper?

I found out her father is the pastor of the local church here in Temple Bay, Iowa.

Too fucking sweet to be true. A pastor's daughter a tempting little slut? By day she's as sweet as pie, a good girl named Diana Dollinger. By night, she's a fucking relentless whore who goes by *Dollie\_Squirts* on OnlyFans. I wonder what her daddy would say about that? His perfect as a peach eighteen-year-old baby girl with her life in front of her and ivy league schools vying for her attention is a closet fucking whore.

I created an account on Xangu and reposted shit to make it look like I gave a fuck—then I direct messaged her, and the rest is fucking history.

Over the past year the two of us have shared everything.

And I mean *every* fucking thing.

Does she know about me?

Not the whole truth, but enough.

I know about her, though.

I know when she's had a hard day because her pastor bitch of a father is screaming in her face about her grades or about embarrassing him in public.

I know when she's stressed because the girls in her town treat her like she's a misfit because they're jealous.

I know when she's on her cycle for fuck's sakes.

I certainly know nearly every inch of her intimately, thanks to OnlyFans.

But that's my little secret.

Her fan base has been begging her for darker lately. They want to see her perfect persona get a little tarnished, and I can't say I blame them.

I just don't want her bringing in darker shit.

Darker people.

Darker ideas.

I want to be her fucking darkness.

I'm *going* to be her darkness.

And I cannot wait to consume every single inch of her.

## CHAPTER 2

## STEALTHING\_REAPER

FUCKING DOLL WANTS TO TEST THE BOUNDARIES TODAY.

I'm following behind her tight little body as she walks into the grocery store in a short skirt. Seeing her like this...close enough to reach out and touch her...it drives me insane.

I've been here a full week, just watching, waiting, and I've never seen her wear anything like this in public. She's usually khaki's or long skirts, floral print tops with not even a hint of cleavage on display.

She's a totally different person than she is online, with me—  
—with the rest of her fans.

But today it's like she's forgotten she's Diana.

She's in full-on Dollie mode as she saunters inside the store and grabs a shopping cart, flinging her long dark curls behind her as she walks.

God, I fucking ache to slam her body up against one of these stacks, lift that tiny skirt up and pound into her. Rage boils inside of me. Rage at the fact that I can't just take her now. That I have to have a plan and I can't stray from it.

That my brain refuses to just let me do something sporadic for once.

Even moving here was a well thought-out fucking venture nearly a whole year in the making.

Now I'm here, mere feet away from her, and I still can't reach out and touch her?

I'm a feral fucking mess of a bastard.

I love her like this, without the mask, like the photos she sends me on Xangu.

Love her with the mask, too, but seeing her—all of her—is what I fucking crave.

Tampering down my madness, I continue to follow her, thankful she seems blissfully unaware of her surroundings because I refuse to stay much farther away from her than I already am. The feeling of being close but not close enough grinds on my fucking nerves.

“Fuck, sorry,” a deep voice calls out as he practically shoulder checks me, bumping past me in a hurry as he races down the aisle toward my precious Doll.

“Good lord, Camden. What took you so long? I can’t be out wearing this for the fun of it!” She scream-whispers at him as I check out the newest cereals, not giving a fuck about the fact that Cheerios has won some dumb fucking award for the billionth year in a row. “Let’s just go. Here—”

I glance as discreetly as possible in their direction and see her shove her phone at him.

“Take a bunch and I’ll go through and edit them later. Please just hurry, okay?”

Nerves shake her voice as she quickly spins on her heel and sees if anyone is coming from the other direction. She gets into place to start walking toward me so I quickly leave the aisle, turning my back on her and damn near running around to get behind where they appear to be walking. As I circle around and get back to the aisle I was just in, only on the other end of it, I see Doll walking away and the man following after her. I stand off to the side just in case one of them looks back.

Suddenly, she flips her skirt up and flashes the man—he gets a full shot of her perfect fucking ass as she strolls slowly away. He takes a series of photos and she quickly smooths her skirt back down.

*Mmmm* so that’s what this is all about.

She’s trying to shoot content.

I'm one of her top-tier Patreon members, and there was a poll last week asking what kind of content we wanted. The majority voted for voyeurism shots or live shows, where she was out in public either naked or fucking or bringing someone onto her streams to fuck and let all of us watch. A large number of us voted for a public indecency photoshoot. We wanted photos of her naked in public, doing random things. Riding the bus, grocery shopping, flashing strangers... anything with the thrill of getting caught.

We're all fucking weirdos, and she's our goddamn queen.

But something I've noticed lately is...I don't want these other fucks to have her the way I have her. I want more. I need more. And I'll do anything to get it, too.

I don't mind her showing her body to perverted fucks on the internet but I want to be the one who is getting her behind closed doors. I want to tarnish her myself. Make her black and blue and then heal her with the same hands that ruined her in the first place.

And even more than all of that?

I want to put a baby inside of that fucking womb.

A piece of the two of us.

Something that will bind us together.

Forever.

# CHAPTER 3

MY FATHER SLAMS THE BIBLE ON THE TABLE IN FRONT OF ME.

“Ephesians chapter six verses one through three!” he screams, and it shakes my glass cup. The water sloshes around, spilling over the top, only making him even more irate. “What does the Bible say about children, Diana?” He pauses and I swallow down the growing lump in my throat. “Diana!”

The rage in his eyes is enough to make me lose every ounce of confidence I thought I’d built up while giving myself a pep talk in the mirror earlier.

I hang my head and say, “Honor your father and mother \_\_\_”

My father grabs hold of my chin and yanks my head upward so our eyes meet.

“Honor your father and mother—which is the first commandment with a promise—so that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth,” he spits the words, venom-laced and quick-tongued as his eyes nearly bulge out of their sockets. I look at him, my own eyes widening as the vein on his forehead throbs and turns an angry shade of purple.

Before I can even flinch away, not that I would because that only pisses him off even more, he drags me up by my chin. Once I’m standing, he hauls back and socks me in the eye. His knuckles connect with my skin and I stumble backward and into the wall as a sickening *crack* sounds. A

blinding white light fills my vision on the right side and I struggle to keep hold of my senses.

*Calm down, Diana. Calm down, calm down, calm down.*

Tears prick at the corners of my vision but I will them away.

I know better.

Clenching my eyes shut as I slide down the wall, I force them away before I open them again and see a blurry version of my father standing over me.

“Next time you defy your mother and I will be the last, child,” he grits while bending down until he’s eye level with me. He smooths a palm over his bald head, swiping beads of sweat away, and his dark eyes penetrate through every inch of me. “As the Bible states...if you want to live a long life, you will do right by your parents.” He stands as I struggle to catch my breath, the vision in my right eye going in and out. “Next time you defy us there may be an extremely...”—he pauses and cocks his head—“*unfortunate* accident.”

He storms away leaving me sitting on the cold wooden tile beneath my ass.

I thought I could do it.

Stealth, my best friend—my online only friend—has talked me up and made me believe I can speak my mind to my father.

He’s coached me, the only one aside from my mother to know what goes on in this house. Although, I haven’t told Stealth everything...he only knows as much as I want him to.

I’m afraid if I told him the entire truth of what my father does, that he hits me, Stealth would drive here from Arizona and confront my father himself.

Stealth.

The man I’m in love with.

God...I swear I’ve been in love with him since one of our first conversations on Xangu, and I don’t even know his real

name. He prefers anonymity but he promises one day he's going to come for me...

And for some fucked up reason, I believe him.

My thoughts return to the present as I hear my father yell something in the distance. I really thought I could stand up to the man who is supposed to protect me but only strips parts of my dignity away little by little.

It started when I was five years old, and I forgot the words in my church choir solo.

I'd embarrassed him in front of his congregation.

Then, it was when I got a C on a test he'd helped me study for.

I made a disgrace of our last name.

Then, it was when a boy called our house, we still have a landline, and he wanted to ask my father's blessing to ask me out.

And there were so many other small things in-between that sparked his madness...that caused me to believe in the exact opposite of what he teaches on Sunday mornings.

I've never been able to do anything right in his eyes, but unlike other parents that discipline their children with groundings or taking away their cell phones, my father believes of beating his children into submission.

It's why my brother left, after all.

It's why he's tried like hell to get me out of here too, but to no avail.

Once my father's steps have faded and I know he's back in his study, working on his sermon for next Sunday, I finally bring my hand to my eye and cradle it—even the gentlest of touches sting. My heart races, the aftermath of my father's anger finally causing my adrenaline to spike. I push against the wall and slowly slide myself up, keeping my eye covered.

It's going to take a lot of makeup to cover this one up.

I finally stand, my eye throbbing as my stomach spins, and something catches the peripheral of my good eye from out the window.

What the hell?

The garage door at the rental across the street slowly opens to reveal a person in ripped jeans, combat boots, and...

*My god he's fucking sinful.*

He isn't wearing a shirt and the abs he has on display are rippled to perfection. My eyes trace every ridge, from the steel cut edges to the creases between.

I'm so enamored by his chest that I almost don't even realize that I can't see the color of his eyes.

Can't see the color of his hair, either.

Because he's wearing a Ghostface mask, the same exact type of mask I wear on my cam site...and it looks like he's staring straight at me.

A glint of light catches my attention, and I realize for the first time what he's holding...

A butcher knife.

# CHAPTER 4

## STEALTHING\_REAPER

SCUM OF THE FUCKING EARTH.

I knew her father was bad news.

Knew it from the moment I found out he's just another brainwashed little drone.

But when I was watching Doll and saw her father straight up sucker punch her in the face? That's when I knew he not only is a low-life piece of trash...

He needs to die, too.

No one treats my special Doll like that.

I may have the urge to fucking break her into pieces, but I'll do it like the art form she is.

I'll fucking break her, shatter her, in a way only I know how.

And then I'll clean her up, put her back together piece by piece, and she'll beg me to do it again.

I grab ahold of my butcher knife and slip the mask over my face before heading out to the garage and slamming the side of my fist against the opener button.

Fury is swarming inside of me as the door rolls open and I catch Doll looking in my direction. Her father is gone now, and she's standing in front of the picture window, just holding the side of her face where her father's blow landed and looking at me as if I'm something special.

It's hard to tell what she's thinking from across the way.

Hard to see the expression in her pretty eyes.

But I can feel it.

Can feel *her*.

Then, she's gone.

She slides the curtains closed, and I'm left standing with a raging fucking boner and a knife that I want to use to slice her father's head from his body.

I can't.

I won't.

Not yet.

Because I have a plan now, and I need my precious little Doll to be part of it.

But seeing what he's doing to her when he thinks no one is watching, as bold as he was doing it in front of an open window, makes me realize I need to move faster than I initially planned.

I turn around and start walking back into the house, ripping off the mask I bought to match hers and discarding it on the cement floor.

I don't need it.

Yet.



Once darkness falls I head to her house. I didn't have a finalized plan when I came to this shitty little one horse town but the moment I saw my sweet girl in the flesh, I knew I couldn't stay away. I'm a fucking fool for thinking I could be this close and not claim every inch of her. I do have pieces of a plan, though, and I can only hope my sweet Doll is down for the ride with me.

It's darker than anything she's dealt with before.

*I'm* darker than anything she's dealt with before...

But if she loves me the way I think she does, she'll agree.

I smile as I walk up the sidewalk to her front door. I've already enlisted my cyber security friend to disable the Ring doorbell, so that's out of the way. I've waited until her parents' bedroom light has been turned off for the night, and I haven't seen any animals coming or going since I've been here. Doll's never mentioned any either.

Slowly, I turn the handle just to see if it's unlocked.

I know about people in small towns.

How they trust and trust and trust—to a fault...

Until something like this happens, that is.

The handle stops short, and I grunt out my frustration. Shit can never be easy. I'm always prepared, though, and I pull my trusty bump key and a screwdriver from my pocket and work my magic. Honestly, it's hilarious to me that anyone ever thinks their safe with or without a lock. In most cases, a locked door doesn't detour criminals. We have the tools we need and it's not as complicated as people think.

I insert the bump key to the hilt, then gently pull it out just a smidge before knocking it with my screwdriver with just enough force and pressure to cause the bolt to slide exactly where I need it to.

And I'm in.

Fucking easy.

I navigate the dark house easier than I expected to. From what I can tell, the house is spotless. There's nothing on the floor, counters are bare, and the entire place looks like something in a magazine spread instead of a lived-in home.

Slowly, I ascend the stairs after locating them, grateful as fuck that there's no loud creaks or tells in the floor to give me away. Once at the top of the landing, I notice her parents' door is closed and immediately make my way to her room.

*My special Doll.*

The door is slightly cracked, and I gently push it open, peering into the room as my heartrate accelerates to new heights. I can't fucking take this. Being so close to her. Knowing she's feet away has my cock stiffening and my mouth fucking watering.

The moment my eyes find her sleeping body, I lose every ounce of control I have left.

Not giving a single shit that my footsteps are now heavier than I'd like them to be, I close the distance between the two of us, falling to my knees once I've reached her sleeping form. Inhaling her sweet, forbidden scent, I get high from her pheromones as she sleeps away, unknowing that a relative stranger is inches from her.

My eyes roam over her as I carefully slide her blanket, one I've seen so many times on the cam site, down her body to expose her perfect, lithe body. She's wearing a white tank top with matching whit panties and it's enough to make me practically fucking pant with need. She's fucking curvy in the best of places, and her stomach isn't without extra weight—fucking perfect, beautiful, and all woman. I want to take in the areas of her room that I've never seen but I'm too enamored by her. Too enamored by the way her chest effortlessly rises and falls, her delicious tits moving in time to her inhales and exhales.

Moving my fingers to her panties, I test her response by hooking a finger underneath the fabric and gently moving them down her hips. The second my fingertips touch her soft, smooth skin, my cock swells and I have to adjust myself in my pants. I force myself to look away from where I pull her panties down and watch her face for any sign of consciousness. Her breath remains the same, eyes closed, peaceful and unknowing.

My gaze returns to her core, which is now completely free of any fabric.

She's bare.

I've seen her sweet pussy before but my desire for her is heightened in the flesh.

Once I've settled her panties around her thighs, I sweep my index finger between her folds, finding her slightly wet to the touch. As if she knew I'd be coming for her. Running my finger slowly up and down her slit, I play with her clit, gently, slowly, with the pad of my finger before fully dipping it inside of her. She's so fucking warm, and her hole is so goddamn wet and tight.

"Fuuckkk," I half-whisper, half-groan out, unable to control myself as I pump into her a bit harder. Then, suddenly, she lets out a soft moan and rolls to her side, taking my arm with her so I have to move as carefully and quickly as I can. My heart fucking nearly stops, I'm sure of it. It's not that I don't want to finally speak to her, claim her fully, but I have an idea of how I want to do it and it isn't like this.

I have to physically hold myself back once I untangle my limbs from hers.

Sucking my finger into my mouth, I finally taste her sweet juices and I decide I can't fucking wait. I fucking can't. I refuse.

I decide to do it.

I pull out the syringe from my back pocket and stab it into the tender flesh of her thigh. Her eyes flash open but almost immediately she's back out. She won't remember.

Although I brought the drugs and I thought it was a possibility, I didn't allow myself to get too excited. Doll is special. She's different from other women. Part of me wanted our first time to be together, coherent.

But the need I have to take her right now outweighs any of that shit.

And we can't have her screaming when her parents are only down the hall, can we?

I return to the door and flip the lock just in case her parents get any crazy fucking ideas.

Then, I strip out of my pants and yank my shirt off over my head as I walk back to where she lies on her back. Once I reach the edge of the bed, I throw the blanket to the ground

and peel my boxers from my body, finally freeing my raging fucking cock from the fabric. It bounces out, hitting my stomach, and I palm myself as I climb on top of her.

“So fucking good, Doll,” I grit out, kissing down her neck. I pull her tank up to expose her plump fucking tits and bury my face in them as I pump up and down my shaft. “My sweet fucking Doll.”

I can't wait any longer for her, and I know I'll have plenty more time to worship her fucking body, so I spread her legs and groan when I look at her pretty pussy on display for me and only me.

No fucking losers on the cam site.

Just me.

She's all mine tonight.

Forever, whether she likes it or not.

I continue to stroke my cock, pre-cum beading at the tip as I insert two fingers into her virgin cunt, pumping faster and harder, deeper, until I reach her sweet little cherry that's begging to be popped. I'm going to break her with my cock, though, I can't wait to feel her stretch around me and claiming her virginity with my fingers isn't what I crave.

I straddle my sweet Doll and line myself up with her entrance, begging my cock to calm the fuck down. I want to fuck into her at least a few times before I'm filling her with my seed. Need to fucking feel her walls squeezing my cock.

I push into her, and her pussy is like a fucking vise around my cock. She squeezes me into submission, a position I never thought I'd be in, as I fuck into her over and over again, the mere thought that I'm going to breed this woman enough to send me spiraling into goddamn oblivion. I reach down and grab onto her tits as she sleeps soundlessly, squeezing them hard before slapping them, watching as they bounce and her nipples tighten into perfect little peaks. Her body is reacting to mine exactly how I knew it would, and she isn't even fucking awake to see it.

“You’re fucking taking me so good, Doll. So fucking good,” I tell her, whispering into her ear as I tuck a stray strand of hair behind it. I feel my impending orgasm about to hit, and I rear back, arching my back as I sink deep inside of her and pull her down by her thighs so I’m impaling her on my cock.

“Fuck!” I yell a little too loudly, not giving a fuck, as I come inside of her pussy. My cum mixed with her blood and juices is the perfect fucking sea for my cock to drown in. “Goddamn, Doll. You and your perfect little cunt.”

I continue slowly fucking my cock in and out of her until I’m spent, and then I decide to be a good man and clean her up. It kills me to wipe the evidence of us away, but I want her to wake up in the morning as peacefully as she can. She’ll already have a banger of a headache, I don’t need to add to it by making her wake up with her pussy still dripping with her own blood.

I pull out of her with a groan and the sliver of moonlight coming in through the window allows me to see that my cock is covered in her blood. Turning toward the other side of the room, I make my way to the attached bathroom I know she has, she told me about remodeling it during one of our many conversations, and I grab a bunch of toilet paper and head back out to her. I bend down, getting eye-level with her still glistening pussy and use my fingers to shove the cum that’s dripped out of her hole back inside. Then, I gently use the toilet paper to clean her up, wiping her pussy and her thighs, and even trying my best to dry the bed sheet underneath of her.

She’ll obviously know something happened as she slept, but she won’t know it was me.

And I can’t wait to hear all about it in the morning.

# CHAPTER 5

## THE PRIVATE MESSAGES

Stealth: Been missing you, Doll.

Stealth: Message me in the morning.

# CHAPTER 6

## DOLLIE\_SQUIRTS

I'M STILL ON EDGE FROM THIS MORNING. IT'S BEEN SIX HOURS since I woke up with an intense ache between my thighs and a strange mixture of blood and...something else...in my panties. I went to the bathroom as soon as I woke up, already knowing something was different, and when I saw the blood and felt the pain I had to hold back my scream.

Someone violated me last night. Something happened and I have no recollection of it. This isn't my period. It's so different. And the scent...

The scent that filled the air when I came to this morning was unlike anything I've ever smelled before. A blend of tobacco and ginger, a woody, intoxicating mix that lingered on the air as I sat up in bed...it was almost as if I was still dreaming. But then I realized something vile had happened to me and all of a sudden the scent evaporated, and the tears flowed.

*My father would never, would he?*

I wouldn't put most types of abuse past him, but sexual abuse?

To his own daughter?

It's never happened before, and I just can't fathom it.

My stomach spins as I imagine him crawling on top of me and taking something that was never meant to be his. There has to be another explanation.

Suddenly, I remember Stealth's private messages. I need to message him back. I just know I'll start spilling everything,

and this is something I can't talk to him about. One of the only things I'm going to have to keep from him. He's usually my escape but I can't risk telling him what happened.

Dollie: Sorry, forgot to message you back. How was your trip?

We haven't talked much over the past week or so. Stealth had some kind of work trip and he's been offline. I was surprised to wake up to his messages this morning.

Only seconds later, I see a reply.

Stealth: I'm back. How are you? What's new?

I wish I could tell him. God, I really do. He's always been very private about himself and his home life but I know he's protective over me, it's part of the reason I don't tell him everything with my father. My biggest fear is him showing up here, finding me somehow and causing my father to follow-through with his threats to me.

Dollie: Not much. I've missed you, too, you know. Can't stand it when we don't get to talk.

Things have been flirty with Stealth and I from the beginning. He knows nothing about my cam side hustle, but I have sent him photos that are rather...risqué...of me. I've even told him I love him. And I do. We aren't together, we're not anything with a label. But we've talked every day for a year and it's impossible to not grow close to someone when you're

spending that much of your life conversing back and forth. He hasn't said it back, but I know he feels the same. I can tell.

Dollie: I've gotta go for a bit but I'll be back later and we'll have to catch up.

I send a winking emoji and a quick selfie I've just snapped and close out of Xangu. I'd rather spend my night chatting with him, but I have a job to do.

After my parents are gone, I decide I'll still perform on my scheduled live. If I don't, I'm out all the money the prepaid subscribers have funneled into my account, and if I want to get out of here, I need that cash.

And there's another thing, too...

Part of me needs this release. I need to get in front of the camera, need to claim what's mine and relieve the tension building in my gut.

I'm fucked up and teetering somewhere between disgusted and unwilling to even think about what potentially happened to me and somehow...also horrified that I'm turned on by the thought of someone coming into my room while I slept and taking my virginity. Not someone, though. That masked stranger from across the street that I haven't stopped thinking about since I saw him wearing a mask that matches my own.

How messed up is my brain?

How can I possibly even be turned on by such a sick and twisted act?

I've been ping-ponging between being grossed out and turned on all day—and each time one of the feelings pops up, I shove them down and refuse to think about it. If it weren't for the blinding headache and ache between my legs, I wouldn't think about it at all.

I'm sure of it.

I'd just block it out like I do with everything else...

After slipping on my Ghostface mask, I hit the red button and sit back on my bed, waiting for all of my fans to trickle in. I spread my still sore thighs to reveal pastel pink panties and fluff my hair a bit as familiar usernames start popping up in the live feed.

"Hey sick fucks," I say as I arch my back and roll my shoulders. "Thought I'd share a bit of a story time with you tonight as I make myself come for all of you."

I wasn't originally going to talk about last night, but I know it'll get me hundreds of tips and those dollar signs are too tempting to resist.

I play with the band of my panties, teasing the camera as I slowly lower and raise the hem.

"This morning I woke up and realized someone had been in my room last night," I tell the camera, knowing the people behind the screen are all going to lose their minds.

After sliding my panties down my legs, I start to slowly rub my clit and my head falls backward involuntarily as a sharp intake of breath escapes my lips.

"Someone came into my house and fucked me while I slept last night, you guys," I say. "And this isn't bullshit. I woke up drenched in someone's cum and my own blood."

Someone sends me an instant five-hundred dollars to let my mods turn his mic on. He grits through the speaker, "Prove it."

Prove it? How the fuck am I going to prove it?

I slide my finger up and down my slit and try to rack my brain for how I'm going to prove it to these people. I should've known some of them wouldn't just take it for what it is.

Suddenly, a loud slamming of my door shakes me to my core.

I turn toward the noise and die a bit inside as I realize my camera has a clear view of my—

Oh my god. Not my mother.

Not my father.

The man with the Ghostface mask from across the street.

He's come for me.

# CHAPTER 7

## DOLLIE\_SQUIRTS

HE CLOSES THE DISTANCE BETWEEN US AND KNEELS ON THE bed as my heart thunders away in my chest. Every fiber of my being is pleading with me to scream, to run, but I stay firmly planted on my knees and no sound escapes my throat.

It's like I'm not really here at all.

As if this entire thing is some delusion.

Maybe I hit my head in the middle of the night...that would explain the headache and—

“Hey, sick fucks,” he says, mimicking how I greet my viewers each time I start a live video. His voice is so deep and enchanting—mesmerizing.

I start to move as I glance out the window but the man grabs me by the neck and bends down, inhaling me before turning toward the camera and sidling up behind me.

“I believe our special Dollie girl was just telling you all a story about how she woke up with my cum dripping out of her pussy last night,” he says and I gulp back my fear.

Fear and anger and insatiable fucking need for him...

“Yeah, Doll,” he says. “Did you like my surprise this morning?”

He reaches around the front of me and rips my shirt from my body, exposing my braless chest before cupping my tits. I barely resist the urge to moan out in pleasure as he rolls my nipples between his fingers and thumbs. The fuck is wrong with me?

“Tell them how this makes you feel, Dollie. Our little whore. Our plaything. How does a man breaking into your home and having his way with you make you feel?” he says, urging me to answer as he slides one hand from my breast up to my neck and applies pressure, his other hand still firmly kneading my other breast.

“Cat got your tongue, baby?” he coaxes as he tightens his grip and I struggle to breathe.

The man turns us both so we’re facing each other, our sides to the camera so the viewers can watch as he takes his cock out of his pants...and holy shit. It’s unbelievable. So thick and long with the most beautiful curve I’ve ever seen. I can’t even imagine the spots that thing could hit inside of me...

“Suck my cock and then I’ll fuck that tight little hole until your begging me to come inside that pretty cunt of yours,” he says, that deep, gritty voice of his causing my core to clench as I start to hyperventilate. “Now, now, Doll. Don’t be scared. This is what whores like you want, isn’t it?”

Before I can even make a move, he shoves me downward by the back of my head and forces his cock inside of my mouth. I’ve never done this before. I have no fucking clue what I’m doing, how to suck a cock...

He’s so wide inside of my mouth and as I try to take him down my throat, I instantly gag and he lets out a long, drawn-out chuckle.

“Start slow, Doll,” he whispers and I freeze.

*Doll.*

The nickname.

Yeah, I’m Dollie to everyone online...but I’ve never had anyone else shorten it in such a familiar way.

No one except...

“Stealth,” I say so quietly I’m not even sure it’s audible, but he stops all movement. It’s a painful few seconds that feels

like the entire world stops spinning, but then, he gives a subtle nod of his head and I instantly calm.

He's here.

The man across the street.

The man from last night...

It's Stealth.

*My* Stealth.

“Suck me, Doll,” he says, and although his words come out semi-gently, his touch is anything but as he forces me back down again until I'm drooling and gagging all over his cock once more. Something has to be feeling good for him, despite my lack of experience, because he's groaning and pistoning his hips back and forth against my face, forcing his cock deeper and deeper into my throat each time. I look up at him through blurry, tear-filled eyes and his head falls backward as he lets out a long moan.

Just when I feel like I'm starting to get a good rhythm down, pumping his length with one hand and cupping his balls with the other as I suck him, he pulls me off of him and turns me so I'm facing the camera and he's positioned behind me once again. I'm on all fours as he talks to the camera.

“How badly do each of you sick fucks want to be me right now, huh?” he asks the audience as he slaps my ass. “I'm about to fuck your precious little Dollie from behind and make all of you watch as I come inside her tight, glistening cunt.”

And then, without warning, he slams his cock inside of me and I scream out in complete agony. It burns, the stretching of my hole to accommodate him with hardly any foreplay on my end. That in combination with what I now know happened last night, has my pussy aching. He continues to pump into me as he grabs each side of my head with his large hands and forces me to look at the camera from behind my mask. Picking up the pace, he uses my head as leverage and my pussy suddenly no longer hurts but feels so, so unbelievably good.

It's as if the pain is completely erased as my pleasure for the man fucking me settles in.

I squeeze him as he thrusts inside of me and he lets out a deep moan.

“Fuck, you feel how wet you just got, Doll? That’s all for me, baby.”

His words are like heroine.

So intoxicating and mind altering I don’t know whether I should give in to the madness or run from it.

But I can’t run.

Not even if I wanted to—he’s got a hold on me and despite how messed up this is...I want him fucking into me and claiming me as if I’m nothing more than his little pet.

You’re so fucked.

I mute my brain and let the ecstasy take hold of me, his cock swells inside me, and I moan for him as he grabs my shoulders and fucks me hard and fast, recklessly.

“Fuck yeah, Doll. Tell your fans how good my cock feels filling up your pussy.”

I don’t even know if I can formulate words right now...

He slaps my ass and I look at the camera.

“He’s filling me up so fucking good, you guys. Oh my god,” I moan the words, breathless. “Imagine it’s you who’s fucking me right now,” I say to the camera, and it earns me a steady stream of tips flowing in as our moans and my screams fill the air.

“I’m going to fill our little whore’s pussy up with my cum,” he tells the viewers as I start to feel my orgasm build to all-new heights.

“Fuck!” I scream, unable to take much more as the pressure in my core fills me with a warmth that ignites my entire body. I’m a blazing inferno of lust and desire and need. “Come with me,” I tell him, my filter fading away as I reach back and grab his hips as my face hits the mattress and he pushes even deeper inside of me. “Come inside of me. Fill me up.”

My orgasm takes control and I'm sent tumbling over the edge as I come all over his cock, bliss shooting through my body as I pulsate with the aftershocks of what this man has done to me. Seconds later, if that, he's burying himself inside of me, holding my ass against him like his life depends on it—I don't think he could get any deeper if it did.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” I say as I feel him explode inside of me. The sensation is unbelievable as his cock spasms and I clench around him, causing another long groan to escape from between his lips.

My laptop continuously dings, it's a flurry of tips nonstop coming in for what seems to go on for minutes as the two of us stay in the same position—him behind me and me with my ass in the air and my face against the mattress. We each do our best to catch our breaths, and I start to wiggle away from him on instinct but he slams my hips back down against him, shoving his still-hard cock back deep inside of me.

“Every single drop, Doll,” he says. “You wouldn't want to waste a drop of this cum, would you?”

# CHAPTER 8

## STEALTHING\_REAPER

ONCE THE LIVE FEED HAS BEEN TURNED OFF, I RIP MY MASK off and walk up behind Doll to do the same. After gently lifting it and finding those pretty green eyes of hers, I toss the mask to the side and cup her face in my hands.

“Fucking told you I’d come for you one day, Doll,” I tell her.

She sits on the bed and suddenly, we’re in the real world again.

There’s no camera, no fucking, no Dollie\_Squirts.

It’s Doll and me. And I’ve just inserted myself into her life in a way I’ll never recover from. I knew when I made the decision to come out here I’d never be the same. Knew Doll in person would be even greater than the woman I’d chatted with for the past year, but I couldn’t stop myself.

I have to have her.

“I want to be pissed at you,” she says, and I grip my chest as if she’s wounded me, but I can’t help the smile from spreading across my face.

“We’ve discussed this before. You can’t be mad at me,” I tell her, thinking back on one of the few arguments we had over messenger. “When will your parents be back?” I ask, knowing I have something much more sinister in mind for the two of those fuckers.

“Anytime now. I have so much I want to say to you...” she says. “I have so many questions.” She shrugs her shoulders as she attempts to fix her hair by running her fingers through the

long strands. “Why does knowing that you snuck into my father’s house and stole my virginity in the middle of the night turn me on?”

Her question is sweet, her voice even sweeter.

And her innocence?

Well, fuck me. It’s enough to fucking do me in.

I sit back down on the bed that we made a mess of and pull her into my lap so she’s facing me, straddling my legs.

“Because you’re just as fucked up as I am, Doll. That’s why we found each other,” I tell her, looking into her eyes. “Broken things are funny like that, you know? My broken pieces found yours, and I swear to fucking God you’re enough to make me whole again.”

She reaches up and traces my lips with her index finger.

“I’ve wanted to kiss you for so long.”

“What are you waiting for, then?” I ask, and before she can make the first move, I do. I claim her mouth as if it’s truly mine to take—and as far as I’m concerned, it is. She is mine. She is my broken thing. Mine to bend and break and put back together again. My perfect little Doll. And I’m hers, too. But good luck to her on trying to fix the fucking psychopath that lives inside of me.

Our tongues collide and I swear, if I weren’t the devil himself, I’d see fucking stars.

This woman, the way she feels, the person she is to her core...all I’ve learned about her over the past year—it’s exactly what I’ve been looking for.

“Fuck, I love you,” I tell her. Finally. And it feels so fucking good to say the words I’ve felt for so long out loud.

I bite down on her lip and she gently pulls away, causing her lip to tug away from mine. I only tighten my bite and she relents. She’ll break away from me when I allow it.

I kiss her softly before allowing her to pull back.

“I was beginning to think I’d never hear you say those words.”

I shrug.

“Wanted to tell you in person. I’m a romantic like that,” I say with a wink, which causes her to burst out in goddamn hysterics.

“Yeah, okay. Says the man who took my virginity in my sleep.” She shakes her head as I run my hands up and down her body, pulling her against me. “You’re lucky my brand of fucked up matches yours.” She rolls her eyes just as we both hear a car pull up her driveway. “Fuck!” she hisses as she looks out the window. “My parents.”

I just shake my head, knowing what I have in store for them tonight.

I don’t give a fuck that they’re home.

In fact, it’s about damn time.

“Listen, Doll,” I tell her. “Can’t blame a man for seeing you and needing to claim you. Look at this fucking body,” I say as I make a show of looking up and down at her. “You want a romantic ‘first time’ from me? I can give you a romantic time, but we both know that isn’t what feeds the monsters inside of us.”

She smiles and I swear on that fucking cross her father has hanging downstairs that I’d give up anything to make her happy. To see her smile like that forever.

Fuck, I am a bit romantic, aren’t I?

Poetic, at the very least.

“We don’t have a lot of time,” I say, glancing at the locked door as the garage door shuts. “I have something in mind for those pieces of shit you call parents. Care to hear a guy out?”

# CHAPTER 9

“EXCUSE ME?” I ASK, BECAUSE I THINK I’VE SERIOUSLY GONE goddamn crazy now.

Stealth just shrugs and smiles. God, he’s beautiful. His jet-black hair falls around his face. It’s messy and so very...him. His green eyes almost match my own, and I could get lost in them, I swear. He’s better than the photos. So, so much better.

“Did you honestly just propose that we kill my parents?”

My voice is barely a whisper as we sit together on the bed. My dad will be up soon, I know it won’t be much longer. He’ll have to come in and assert his authority to show me I need to be afraid of him...it’s a nightly ritual, after all.

“I’m doing it with or without you, Doll,” he says, his voice so low it sounds borderline demonic. “Your father deserves to pay for what he’s done to you. I know you haven’t been honest about everything. I saw what he’s capable of.” He shakes his head. “And your bitch of a mother who just watches and turns a blind eye is just as deserving of death as he is.”

We’ve talked about this before, although I thought we were both kind of half-joking.

Wasn’t I, at least?

*No.*

A voice in my head, one I’ve tried to shut out for years, sparks to life.

He deserves it. She deserves it, D. Give them hell, baby.

I swallow down the growing lump in my throat...

Excitement ignites in my veins as I think about it.

Part of me wants to stop this—stop him.

But so much more of me wants to make both of them pay.

“I...”

Stealth grins and a dimple forms on his left cheek.

“I don’t know how to come to terms with these feelings,” I tell him, honestly, just as my father’s footsteps thud on the stairs. A shiver rolls through my body as I glance at the locked doorknob again. “There’s something seriously wrong with me.”

“Shhh.”

Stealth pulls me against his chest and smooths his palm over my hair, calming me as the room spins.

“I took everything we’ve talked about to heart, Doll. This will bond us together forever, you know?” he asks, pulling away from me and searching for something in my stare. “All those messages, late at night. I had to calm you down after your father did who fucking really knows what. It’s you and me, baby. No one gets you like I do. If you don’t want to take part, I need you to leave. Go to my place. I’ll handle it and meet you there.”

I shake my head and he brings my hands to his mouth, kissing the backs of each one.

His scent, the scent I couldn’t place...woods and ginger and tobacco...it infiltrates my senses and I wish, so badly, that things could just be simple.

“But,” he grits out, “if you want to stay, if you want to help me make them pay...”

His words trail off as the door handle jiggles and my father’s voice calls out to me.

“I bet you’d look fucking gorgeous covered in their blood.”

# CHAPTER 10

## STEALTHING\_REAPER

“DIANA!” HER FATHER SCREAMS, HIS VOICE NASALLY AND whiny.

I can't wait to slit his throat so he can never speak to her again.

“She's in here,” I call out and Doll's hands fly up to her mouth. I smile at her and bend down to kiss her forehead as I stand from the bed and head toward the door.

“Who is in there with you?” the pastor screams. “Where is Diana?”

I slowly make my way to the door and flick the lock. He comes barreling in not even a second later, looking like a gangly fucking doofus, His brown dress pants are too short and I swear I can see my reflection on his bald head. His pedomustache is just the cherry on top.

“What the hell is going on here?” he lurches toward me but I'm ready for him. I dodge to the left and take him by surprise as I knock his feet out from under him and pin him on the ground.

“Hell is a bad word, pastor. You should watch that fucking filthy mouth of yours.” I laugh as he struggles beneath me. “Doll there's a backpack by your nightstand.” I motion to the bag I dropped when I walked in her room to fuck her on her live show. “Grab the rope and hand it to me.” She does as asked and my fucking cock strains against my jeans. She's such a good girl.

Her dad continues to thrash around, expletives and questions flying from his mouth, but I'm stronger than him—bigger than him—and I bind his ankles and wrists together so he's in a compromised position. Just as I move to find Doll's mother, she rounds the corner with her phone in her hand.

“Ah, ah, ah,” I shake my finger at her while wiping my forehead with the back of my other hand. “Don't be a dumb bitch.”

She screams as I lunge for her and tie her up in the same way I've tied her fucker of a husband. I see where Doll gets her good looks. Her mom is a smoke show. I could think of a few fun things I'd like to do with both of them, but unfortunately for this cunt, she's gotta go.

Doll is enough for me, anyways.

More than fucking enough.

“Alright, baby,” I say to Doll, out of breath from struggling with these two assholes. “It's your call now. You wanna stay and play with us or do you want to head out?”

I really do care about what she wants. What she's comfortable with.

But at the same time, I'm hoping she gets her hands dirty with me.

I watch as Doll looks at both her mother and father as they plead with her, screaming promises of never hurting her.

“He's a psychopath, honey!” her mother says, tears spilling from her eyes. “What are you doing? Help us! Run! Get help!”

I can't help the laugh that escapes me.

“Look at him,” her father says. He's significantly calmer now, no doubt changing tactics. “Diana, he's deranged. How did he get in here? Did you let him in? Did he force himself on you?”

His eyes scan his daughter up and down.

I want to gouge his eyeballs from their sockets.

Doll looks down at her breasts that are only covered by a tank she threw back on. Her panties are back on to, sporting a wet spot, probably from my cum leaking from her pretty pussy.

“It’s time, Doll,” I say, forcing her to make a decision. I want these assholes out of our lives so we can start fresh. Together.

“Time for what?” her father seethes as his eyes connect with mine.

Suddenly, Doll commands attention.

She digs through the backpack until she grabs hold of something and lifts it. The glint of the blade is like a salve to my fucking emotional wounds.

“Time for you to get what you deserve, daddy.”

My insides burst with something...joy? Happiness? Fuck if I know, but it feels euphoric. I watch as Doll walks over to her dad and straddles his back, using one hand to pull his hand backward by his hair. She’s in her element now, my special Doll. An element I don’t even think she truly believed existed until this moment.

Sure, I knew she was never truly serious about killing her parents when we talked in those private messages...but I could tell there was something deep down inside of her that wanted the conversations to be serious.

She just needed a little nudge.

“You’re going to fucking fry for this!” he screams as his eyes nearly bulge out, a vein throbbing on his forehead as he screams. He tries to buck Doll off him but it’s no use, the position he’s in leaves him with no leg up on either of us.

“And you’re going to hell,” Doll says as she pressed the blade to his neck and I unzip my pants to free my growing cock. Her mother gasps and I laugh again. These fucking people. “I’ll see you there,” she finishes as she swiftly slides the blade across his neck as if she’s done this hundreds of times before. His blood splashes, spurts, and splatters both of us as she nearly decapitates him. His eyes roll backward as I

palm my cock, using his blood as a lubricant. Perfect fucking timing.

Dumb bastard.

At least he's good for something.

“You're so fucking sexy, Doll.”

I watch as she stands upright, blood covering her skin as she rolls her shoulders, a blank expression on her face.

“You okay, baby?” I ask as she walks over to me and kisses me. I almost forget her mother is even here. I probably would if the blubbering idiot would shut the hell up.

I tilt her face up using her chin and we're suddenly a mess of fucking blood and spit and thrashing limbs as we each try to pull the other closer. She tastes like goddamn candy. I run my hands through her hair as she whimpers and then bites down on my lip.

“Good girl, Doll,” I praise her. “I need to know how you're feeling, though.”

I pull away from her and search her gaze. She's a wild mess of a woman, and I can't get enough of her, especially like this. No longer hiding behind that mask, no longer showing herself to the world.

“It's scary how fucking good that just made me feel... like...” she pauses, shaking her head as her body trembles with what I assume is adrenaline. “So powerful.”

“Power is addicting, baby.”

She smiles, and I realize I was right. She does look gorgeous in red.

“Honey...” the bitch on the floor wails the sentiment and I roll my eyes.

“Shut up, bitch!” I scream at her as Doll points the knife in her direction.

I pull my woman closer to me again and run my hand over her stomach—the stomach I'm sure will be sprouting a baby bump in no time. I've fucked a lot of cum into her over the

past couple of days, and something tells me I impregnated her that first night...the night when she knew nothing about me being inside of her because I drugged her and took advantage of her in a way only I can.

Doll grips my cock, fucking me with her hand as I let out a guttural moan I've been holding in. Her mother clenches her eyes shut and continues to cry as her daughter stands only feet from her, pleasuring the man who just convinced her to kill her own father.

“Care to do the honors?” Doll asks with a grin.

I nod and take the bloody knife from Doll and twirl it in my hands as she continues to pump me faster and faster. Then, I stick the handle of the knife into her pussy and find her drenched, soaking fucking wet.

Sweet, perfect, fucked up Doll.

And she's all mine.

My broken thing.

Mine to bend and break and put back together again...

Although, I didn't have to bend her much at all, now did I? We'll see what the future holds, though. There's plenty of time for me to break my precious thing...

Pulling the knife from her pussy, I lick her juices and what's left of the dead man's blood from the handle.

“I thought you'd never ask.”

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Victoria Ellis is a multi-genre author that publishes Psychological Thrillers, Suspense, and Romance novels. She is also the author of three poetry collections.

Victoria is the co-founder of Cruel Ink Editing + Design.

She resides near Chicago, Illinois with her husband, daughter, and an abundance of animals.



# MONSTERS WE CRAVE

NATALIE BENNETT

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

If you enjoyed this short prequel of Aidoneus and Macaria's story, the Maelstrom duet will be coming soon! There's tons of twists, spice, and unhinged antics throughout, which will contain the following tropes:

Dystopian/Gothic Utopia

Hades X Persephone Vibes

Deranged crime lord

Enemies-lovers

Some mind f\*ckery

Extreme CW

You can connect with me online to keep up with news and updates on future releases, or just to chat.

Reader's Group: [www.facebook.com/groups/natsnefariouss/](http://www.facebook.com/groups/natsnefariouss/)

# CHAPTER 1

THE STARS THAT PAINTED STORIES IN THE NIGHT HAD vanished. It was as if they refused to shine any light on the horrors unfolding beneath them. Their absence turned the sky into a canvas of black, pierced only by the distant glow of burning buildings.

I stepped away from the front window, leaving the fringed curtain to fall back into place.

“Are you sure you should go out there?”

“I have to. What if she’s hurt and needs help?” I adjusted my long-sleeved tunic and lifted the hood of my cloak as I walked towards the door.

“But—.”

“I’ll be fine, Effie.” The reassurance came out braver than I felt. I placed my hand on the brass knob and hesitated.

“Mac?”

Drawing a soft breath, I forced a smile and looked over at my sister.

Her deep blue eyes appeared almost obsidian due to the lack of light in the cabin.

“Remember, if anyone tries to come through this door that isn’t me or grandma, shoot without asking questions.”

She nodded and clutched the shotgun tightly, a look of fear and determination crossing her face. I pulled the door open and stepped into the night just as a chilling wind blew,

carrying with it the acrid scent of burning wood and the unsettling undernotes of charred flesh.

Every instinct screamed at me to turn back and hide away in the illusion of safety the weathered cabin offered. But I couldn't do that. The well had run dry the day prior, and our stomachs echoed the same sentiment. Grandma had ventured out hours ago to fetch food and water, but her absence grew heavier with every passing moment. She should have been back by now.

I didn't tell Ophelia, but truthfully, I had no idea where to begin searching for her. I just couldn't sit still any longer. There was a slight chance she really was in the woods somewhere. Even if finding her in these conditions would be next to impossible, I had to try.

I found my way to the overgrown path grateful the soles of my worn leather boots were sturdy enough for the uneven terrain. The haunting orange and red glow that emanated from the distant burning structures cast flickering shadows upon the ground. It was the only light I had to guide me and a grim testament to a city I'd heard tales of but never seen.

Fallen leaves crunched under my feet, their brittle decay a reminder of the season's change. Gunfire echoed like a sinister symphony, punctuated by the occasional boom and distant screams. I wondered how many would die tonight.

It was the cacophony of a turf war in full swing and every gust of chilled wind seemed to carry with it whispers of sorrow and despair, making the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

Grandma had foretold this.

Weeks before the notorious crime families began vying for power, spilling blood and pain in their wake, she'd told us how the city's grandeur would be tainted with violence and carnage. Rarely was Grandma wrong. This turned out to be no different. I *had* to find her. She was my anchor in this tempest of chaos. The thought of her being a casualty, snuffed out in this relentless quest for dominance wasn't a thought far from my mind, but it was one I refused to accept.

I pushed onward, each step a gamble. Sometimes my boots would land on solid ground, while other times they'd sink into a soft mound of decaying foliage, causing me to stumble.

As I went, the nagging voice of reason began to grow louder. *What if she's not even out here?*

The weight of my uncertainty as to where she could be or if she was safe made every step laborious. Grandma was strong and resilient. She knew these woods like the back of her hand. But that could be what was working against me. If she had hidden herself this truly was pointless, and I would have left my sister alone for nothing.

I could've brought her along but the idea of us lost together, or worse, had me deciding not to. *She's strong too.* I reminded myself, clinging to the belief that Ophelia could hold down the fort until I returned. The shotgun gave her a fighting chance against any threat. It was me, wandering these endless woods who felt utterly vulnerable.

Yet, I continued, making sure I stayed away from the menacing glow of the city.

The depth of grandma's warnings, and the way her eyes clouded with fear whenever she spoke of that place, had always kept me rooted to our sanctuary. Her tales painted vivid pictures of a world filled with danger, deceit, and darkness. Through her words, I could see the feuding families, the violence that touched every street corner, and the manipulative games.

Suddenly, a man came crashing through the trees, nearly knocking me over. He looked haggard, with dirt smeared across his face and a shirt stained with blood. He had an air of desperation and didn't seem to notice me at first.

As he staggered, trying to regain his bearings, our eyes met. He straightened and turned to face me. I remained where I was, a large tree at my back. My mind instinctively labeled him a predator, the very threat grandma always warned me about.

“Hey, there,” he began, his voice shaky as he tried and failed to feign calmness. “You wouldn’t happen to know of a safe place to hide out, would you?”

“No,” I replied firmly.

He continued to stare. A cold shiver raced down my spine. Something was off about him, and I couldn’t reach into my pocket for the folding knife grandma had given me without making it obvious.

“Have we met before?”

“No.” I eased away from the tree; he took a step closer, his eyes roaming over me.

“Yeah, yeah. I wouldn’t have forgotten a face like yours. Such a beauty shouldn’t be out here alone.”

*Ugh.* his voice was dripping with sleaze.

“I’m not alone,” I lied.

He ignored me and took another step closer, holding out one hand. “Come, let’s find somewhere safe.”

I wondered if he thought I was stupid and naïve, or if he was unaware that he looked like he got into a fight with a thorn bush and lost.

“That’s alright. I need to go.”

He abruptly lunged toward me, making his intentions crystal clear. I screamed, and a paralyzing fear threatened to overtake my senses, but my survival instinct pushed me forward. His sweat and grime-covered hand collided with my face as he attempted to silence me. I ignored the pain and bit into him, the taste of sweat and dirt filling my mouth just as his other arm wrapped around my back.

He jerked free with a curse and held me tighter. I didn’t know if he was trying to pick me up or take me down. We grappled and lost our balance, falling to the cold ground. The air was knocked from my lungs as he came down on top of me. My panic surged. Pinned beneath him, leaves and twigs dug into my spine as I continued to struggle.

I couldn't hold him off for long. My muscles were already beginning to feel heavy. Practicing self-defense with Ophelia didn't come close to this. I wiggled, and with a last-ditch effort managed to pull my knife from my pocket. Without hesitation, I engaged the thin blade and thrust it into his side, aiming blindly. He bellowed in pain and recoiled, blood seeping out and dripping onto the ground.

I scrambled to my feet and turned to run, but before I could get very far, a tight grip on my ankle halted my progress. It felt like the weight of the world latched onto me as I was dragged backward.

"Let go!" I twisted around and kicked at the man with my other leg.

His bloodshot eyes filled with rage. Whatever he was on made his wound nothing more than a minor annoyance despite how much it was bleeding. I fought as hard as I could, exhaustion threatening to take hold.

Branches began to snap, growing louder with each passing second. Before I could process what was happening, the weight of the man was abruptly lifted. Disoriented, I fumbled into a sitting position, breath coming in ragged gasps. An imposing figure stood over him, one distinctly different from my attacker. When he tried to get up a boot connected with his chest, sending him sprawling.

In that split second, time seemed to move in slow motion. The man tried to speak and was cut off by a deafening bang. The sound echoed, reverberating long after the noise itself had faded. The precision was chilling—a single bullet, right between his eyes. My ears rang, and I felt a numbing sensation as if the universe had momentarily lost its grasp on time. The man's body slumped lifelessly to the ground with a dull thud, blood pooling around him.

I remained cemented in place, panting heavily, torn between relief and a new deeper-rooted fear.

My focus was interrupted when my savior crouched in front of me and with a firm yet gentle hand tilted my chin, drawing my attention to him. Right away I knew this was not a

mere boy or one of the men Grandma complained of when she went on supply runs.

This was a man crafted from the dark tales she whispered on cold nights, a figure from myths. The tactical gear he wore hugged a physique that spoke of strength and discipline. His eyes, a deep shade I couldn't quite place, pierced through the semi-darkness, commanding attention. They carried the weight of things I couldn't even begin to understand. Wisdom? Pain? Power? Maybe all three.

But it was the emblem embroidered on his clothing—the majestic, almost lifelike dragon—that made my heart skip a beat. An icy chill ran down my spine.

This man, despite rescuing me was likely the most dangerous person in these woods. More so than his subordinates who stood by watching over us and keeping guard, armed to the max and donning tactical gear of a different variety. I'd heard of this family, but in the way one hears of distant storms: dangerous, powerful, and thankfully far away.

Until now.

“Are you alright?”

His voice was surprisingly melodic—deep and resonant with a slight accent but soft too, like the dangerous lull of a siren's song. There was an authority in it, one that demanded respect not by its volume but by its depth. That perplexed me. He wasn't old, but he wasn't young either. In his twenties, I guessed, but he seemed ageless in a way. As if time had chosen to be kinder to him, or perhaps he had mastered it.

The difference in our ages wasn't lost on me, but his attention wasn't predatory. There was curiosity there, maybe even concern.

As he gently turned my head to the side there was also something else. Something I couldn't put a finger on. One of the men with him approached, his face covered by a reinforced helmet with a sleek design.

“That was the last of the *Trefkar*.”

“Have the body skinned and strung up in the plaza alongside the others.”

My heart was still racing, hammering against my ribs in the aftermath of the nightmare I’d just experienced. His words did little to help calm it, the way he issued such an order with indifference and sheer lack of emotion...

It was one thing to hear whispered stories of brutality; it was an entirely different experience to witness it firsthand. The helmeted man turned swiftly, a soft glow emanating from the side of his helmet.

It was a bizarre and otherworldly sight for me, like watching someone speak to a spirit or summon magic from thin air. The realization dawned that this was some manner of advanced technology, leagues beyond anything I’d ever encountered.

My isolated world had kept me blissfully ignorant. But even as this revelation consumed me, the reminder of the now lifeless man lying a few feet away, the predatory gleam in his eyes, the violent grip of his hands—no amount of horror at the issued command could coax an ounce of sympathy from me for him. Given half a chance, he would’ve shown me no mercy.

Before I could be lost any further in my thoughts, I felt fingers under my chin, forcing me to meet his gaze once more. Those piercing eyes locked onto mine, leaving me trapped, ensuring that I could focus on nothing else but him as his command was followed.

“Why are you alone in these woods?”

His tone was soft, but there was an underlying coldness that made me feel obligated to respond.

“I’m looking for someone,” I managed to reply, trying to steady my voice.

He studied me for a moment, his grip never wavering. “It’s dangerous out here, especially for someone like you.”

“What do you mean someone like me?”

His other hand rose, pulling free a set of necklaces that rested beneath his form-fitting shirt. One was a dog tag, embossed with the emblem of the dragon—the insignia of the family he served. The other, a delicate pendant, formed in the likeness of the very same beast. He removed it and with a fluid motion, slipped the dragon pendant over my head, the cold metal coming to rest against my skin, sealing some unspoken pact between us.

“This was my mother’s. It’s said to protect the wearer from harm.”

“Why are you giving it to me?” I whispered.

He looked deep into my eyes, and for a moment, I felt as if he was peering into my very soul.

“Call it a hunch.”

One of his companions, a tall figure, stepped closer. “Are you sure about letting her go?”

“*Vedremo la di nuovo*,” he replied in a cryptic tongue, a cascade of melodic, mysterious syllables that held no meaning for me. I could only guess at their significance. “*Segui-la in silenzio*” Another exchange in that same language, and then, with a final piercing gaze, he released me and stood.

“Return to where you shelter and stay put. No one will bother you again.”

I didn’t understand why he’d helped me or how he could be so sure of that, but I wasn’t going to press further.

I nodded and allowed him to help me stand. Despite my instincts telling me not to, curiosity got the better of me. “What’s, what’s your name?” I asked hesitantly.

A sly grin danced on his lips. “You’ll know soon enough,” he replied cryptically.

I turned away, inadvertently catching the gruesome scene unfolding behind him. The man who’d attacked me had been stripped naked and was now undergoing the chilling process of having his flesh removed. Curved blades flashed beneath the

dim glow of lights the men wore as they worked. The way his skin peeled back reminded me of peeling boiled potatoes.

A visceral shudder surged through me, but I forced my feet to move, to carry me away from the horror. I could feel the weight of their collective gaze on my back. Every fiber of my being screamed at me to run from the mysterious man who'd saved me and his brigade.

I summoned all the strength I had to maintain a semblance of composure, putting one foot in front of the other. A million questions flit through my mind. I touched the necklace, feeling its cool metal against my skin.

## CHAPTER 2

## PRESENT

DEMETER PLAZA ALWAYS TEEMED WITH LIFE. THE convergence of history and innovation was palpable here. While old buildings stood regally with modern augmentations that barely altered their classical charm, the newer additions to the city, transparent towers of glass and responsive metal, captured the reflections of a past that existed long before I did.

Winding pathways illuminated with sleek, ambient lighting led to myriad stalls. The chatter of enthusiastic vendors peddling, and the gentle hums of tech-displays, combined with the sizzling and bubbling sounds from the food stalls created an orchestra of urban life.

“The skewers from FusionFire smell *divine*. Should we grab some?” Ophelia asked, her gaze fixed on the stall’s sign.

It glowed in fiery orange and electric blue neon above the serving window, flickering like a dancing flame.

Inside the stall, state-of-the-art cooking gadgets and equipment hummed and whirred, producing dishes that looked like they belonged in a five-star restaurant rather than a plaza stall. Robotic arms moved about, plating dishes, while the cooks monitored the fusion process and added final touches.

“You said that about the sushi too. This is why you never go shopping hungry,” I joked.

“You know how I feel about food. I could eat now, in five minutes, and again at dinner.”

I looked at the line and shook my head. It was already midday. “Let’s come my next day off. Mom needs this sauce.”

“What about Kori?”

I diverted my attention to a little girl flying a dragon kite.  
“What about him?”

“I don’t know. You two haven’t seen each other in a while, right?”

“It hasn’t been that long.”

I wasn’t going to tell her he had me bent over four days ago.

The memory was vivid in part from the hideous décor inside the motel room we’d met in. I’d been more focused on the vintage comforter than Kori fucking me. I wasn’t sure he noticed.

Ophelia glanced over with a slight frown. “Are you two, okay?”

I lifted one shoulder in a shrug. “I think we were better off as friends.”

“Well, your relationship hasn’t changed that much, just the label has. Oh, and the sex. Now he gets sex.”

I laughed and shook my head. She wasn’t wrong. When it came to Kori, I found my feelings in a state of flux more often than not lately. He had been a constant in my life since I was seventeen. I’d just gone from living in seclusion to a more prominent area of Antheia. He befriended me during my first week at Haven’s Crest Academy and helped me adjust. He’d been a pillar of support and understanding ever since.

But did I love him for more than that? I didn’t think so. I deeply valued his friendship, and he was handsome, reminiscent of a modern-day Byronic hero, but it was as if we were both actors in a play, continuing our roles even though the script had become old and worn. A few days before we met in a motel room and became a tangle of limbs, I’d tried to break it off. The memory resurfaced, slicing through the haze of recent events.

We were in the park, Nixon Gardens to be exact, under the very tree where we became something more than friends. Kori

had sat across from me, looking somewhat disheveled, a stark contrast to his usual put-together self.

“Kori,” I began, my voice soft, “I’ve been thinking... maybe we’d be better off just as friends.”

He looked up, his blue eyes searching mine, trying to decipher if I was joking.

When he realized I was sincere, a mix of confusion and hurt clouded his expression. “Mac, are you serious?”

I nodded. “I just think... maybe what we have is more about friendship and less about...all the other stuff.”

He scoffed, trying to keep his emotions in check. “So, you want to downgrade our relationship? Just throw away everything we’ve been through?”

I didn’t understand what he meant by that. Our relationship was smooth sailing, easy and tame. “It’s not about throwing anything away. It’s about recognizing where we truly stand,” I tried to reason.

His voice had cracked, and he shifted closer, “You want to be with someone else, don’t you?”

I remember withholding a sigh, somewhat offended that this was the first conclusion he’d come to. “This isn’t about someone else. It’s about us, me and you.”

His eyes brimmed with tears, taking me off guard. Kori was strong-willed and seldom displayed vulnerability. “Mac, I can’t... I can’t just go back to being friends. Not after everything.”

There it was again, his alluding that we’d gone through some dire trials and tribulations together. I didn’t know where that was coming from. We weren’t each other’s firsts, no matter how many times he liked to think or pretend we were. That claim belonged to a former Redpeak Raptor we’d gone to the academy with.

His toned physique, evident even beneath the team jersey was the first thing I’d noticed, followed by a mischievous glint in his eyes. He was relentless, his flirtations persistent and

undeterred. There'd never been any real emotional connection between us. No shared dreams or whispered secrets. It was his charm and sheer persistence that wore me down. He became my first, and later, for some inexplicable reason, second and third.

Last I'd heard, he had moved to live with his father in Elysium, the esteemed sector 1. I hoped he was doing well. As for me and Kori, I was beginning to see we viewed our relationship very differently.

"Kori..." I'd hesitated, searching for the right words, "I'm sorry. I never intended to hurt you."

He swiped away a tear that threatened to fall. "Just... can you think about this a little longer? I can't imagine my life without you. And not just as a friend."

At that moment, my resolve wavered. The emotional turmoil in front of me, coupled with my intrinsic urge to avoid conflict pushed me into a corner. After sleeping together again he'd fallen under the impression everything was okay.

"I don't know what to do," I sighed, my thoughts returning to the present.

"You do whatever is going to make you happy. Don't stay with him if he doesn't," Ophelia replied, linking her arm through mine.

"Look at you being the voice of reason."

"I have my moments of wisdom."

We continued walking, heading back to where I'd parked. Amalthea padded alongside us silently, ears alert and her vigilant eyes scanning our surroundings.

At the plaza's heart, the fountain's water cascaded in orchestrated patterns. The inviting aroma of freshly cooked delicacies wafted around us, FusionFire's being one of the most prominent. It was a tantalizing blend of the familiar and the exotic. They boasted dishes from different parts of the world, but with a twist, merging flavors that traditionally wouldn't go together.

The skewers emitted smoky fragrances and were drizzled with a luminescent sauce that sparkled.

Pastas were upgraded with edible metallic glitters, and drinks bubbled and smoked with the addition of dry ice and flavored vapors. I could have gone for one of their combos myself, but if we didn't get this sauce home so mom could cook soon there would be no dinner later.

I half listened to my sister tell me about some new store opening at AstraMall, mentally going over the list of things I still needed to do before my afternoon shift tomorrow. My thoughts were interrupted when Amalthea growled softly, her gaze fixed intently on a figure approaching us.

"*Tykho*," I commanded quietly, stroking the top of her fluffy white head.

Ophelia shifted closer to me as an Emissary, dressed in a tailored black suit with a golden dragon pin—the Maelstrom family emblem—on his lapel, stepped into our path, blocking our advance with an air of authority.

"If you ladies would kindly follow me," he said, his tone courteous but firm.

Ophelia, ever the protective one, replied before I could. "Is there some sort of problem, Sir?"

His gaze, sharp yet unreadable, assessed us for a moment. "Mr. Maelstrom would like a word."

Ophelia and I exchanged a quick, worried glance.

"It won't take long," the Emissary added.

Drawing a deep breath, I thought carefully about how to respond. Pissing one of these men off could have dire consequences. "Thank you, but we're in a bit of a hurry."

There was a moment's pause, the silent weight of his gaze pressing on us. "Very well," he said, stepping aside.

As I walked away with Amalthea and Ophelia, the weight of the Emissary's gaze on my back was palpable. It felt like cold fingers tracing an invisible line down my spine.

I had encountered Emissaries before. They were the eyes and ears of the Triad Four that allowed themselves to be seen, unlike the leaders of the Cabals. They never let things go easily and were generally a pain in the ass, especially when they were on a mission. He'd allowed us to pass without any insistence.

I looked sideways at Ophelia, whose brows were furrowed in confusion, likely pondering the same anomaly. As we distanced ourselves, I couldn't help but sneak a glance back. I spotted him then, near a fleet of luxury vehicles on the far side of the plaza.

Riven Maelstrom.

A formidable figure in his own right, stood surrounded by a small entourage. They were met by members of Antheia's sector council, and even from a distance, the gravity of their conversation was clear, as was his aura of authority. He wasn't paying us any attention now, but he'd clearly noticed our presence here.

Feeling a twist in my stomach, my mind raced back to that fateful night in the woods years ago, and I involuntarily scanned the group for any sign of his younger brother. To my relief, he wasn't present. Even after all this time, the memory of our encounter and the revelations that followed was vivid.

I'd never told anyone about it except for grandma, and she was no longer around to advise or give her thoughts on what just happened. There was no way a Maelstrom wanted to speak with us just for the hell of it, but one also wouldn't have let us go if they felt the matter was urgent.

I kept my thoughts to myself, not wanting to alarm Ophelia, silently making a mental note to be on my guard. The Maelstroms and anyone associated with them were a web of intrigue and power plays. I had no intention of allowing me or my sister to be caught in their snares.

The gentle simmer of sauce mingled with the rhythmic chop of vegetables, filling the kitchen with a comforting cadence. As Ophelia finely grated a block of parmesan, I busied myself slicing fresh basil. Our mother expertly moved between the stove and the counter, layering sheets of pasta.

Amid the culinary ballet, Amalthea lay in a corner, contentedly gnawing on a meaty bone, her ears perking up occasionally whenever Ophelia's voice rose in excitement.

"And then this Emissary came right up to us," Ophelia said, her tone hovering between amusement and incredulity. "But you know what was surprising? Riven himself was there and..."

She trailed off and seemed to consider her words, "He's gorgeous, to put it mildly. The screens do him no justice."

"Riven Maelstrom?" Our mother stopped what she was doing, her gaze sharp and questioning. Her voice held an unmistakable edge, and her usually calm demeanor shifted to one of blatant unease.

Ophelia nodded slowly, picking up on her sudden change in mood. "Yeah, him."

Mom's expression darkened further. "You need to be careful. Both of you," she warned, a hint of panic creeping into her voice. "Stay away from the plaza, at least for some time."

Ophelia looked confused by the warning but wisely didn't argue. The seriousness in mom's voice was not lost on either of us. I got the feeling her alarm ran deeper than our chance encounter. I caught her eyes darting toward a faded photograph of grandma on the fridge. Her smiling face, now faded with time, reminded me of the void she left behind.

I missed her more than I often allowed myself to admit. She'd returned the day after I'd gone out to search for her with Amalthea at her side and then disappeared again shortly before our move from the secluded cabin to Antheia, the second sector of Nixon City. Understandably, mom had become a little prickly on certain subjects ever since.

Ophelia changed the subject, and I focused on the task in front of me, my mind beginning to wander. Everything had been so new and overwhelming when we left our cabin. The bustling pace of the city, the advanced technology, the myriad faces—it was a stark contrast to how I'd lived for half my life.

The memory of the man in the woods, with his imposing presence and intense eyes, was still fresh in my mind. I knew he was associated with the Triad, but the truth of his identity was something I learned much later, and it wasn't from me seeking it out.

One day, a propaganda reel had come on our Vistaview—a sleek, holographic television. His face had been unmistakably familiar. Realizing he was none other than the heir of the formidable Maelstrom family had been shocking. Their notoriety was no secret. The Triad Four were deities to the loyalists of not just Nixon City but across the nation.

Riven's sudden interest, after so many uneventful years, was unsettling. I'd done my best to put that eerie night in the woods behind me. With Grandma gone, the secret was mine alone. It was something we agreed never to speak about. I made her a promise I wouldn't.

After the incident, Grandma, having noticed my rattled state, pulled me aside. She had a way of seeing through me, of understanding things I hadn't voiced. When I recounted the tale, she listened with an inscrutable expression, then whispered words that have stayed with me since.

I didn't understand it fully then, and I still didn't now, but I trusted Grandma's wisdom. Surely the two couldn't be related, though. Too much time had gone by—seven, eight years at least. If this was by some slim chance the Maelstroms' attempt to let us know they were watching us, to what end? Why?

The weight of unanswered questions bore down on me, wrapping my heart in unease for the remainder of the evening.

## CHAPTER 3

DWINDLING LIGHT STREAMED SOFTLY THROUGH THE WINDOWS of Nectar & Beans, and the familiar scent of roasted coffee hung in the air. I'd been working here for two years and though the pay wasn't close to making me rich, I really enjoyed the job. I didn't dread coming to work.

The atmosphere helped, exuding an ambiance of vintage sophistication. After the restless night I'd had it was a nice buffer. Upon entering, patrons were greeted by a captivating mosaic of a woman holding a pomegranate, its vivid seeds spilling from her grasp, and embedded into the terrazzo floor.

The high ceilings were adorned with ornate moldings and gave the space an expansive feel, while the shimmering crystal chandeliers added a touch of charm. The walls, a rich forest green with intricate golden motifs, evoked images of orchards under a golden sun.

Dominating the space was the grand, aged wooden counter. A large chalkboard hung elegantly on the wall behind it and displayed the menu, its items written in delicate, flowing cursive. It was a sharp contrast to the more tech geared cafes, but that's part of what made this place so special.

I looked up from the espresso machine to see Mrs. Everhart, one of my regulars, shuffling to the counter, her fragile hands clutching her empty teacup.

"As always, thank you for the tea," she murmured, her voice quivering with age.

I smiled warmly at her. "My pleasure. Get home safe, okay? Curfew's starting soon."

She nodded and dropped a few silver drachmas into the tip box, her eyes carrying a mix of gratitude and something else I couldn't quite place—perhaps a nostalgia for a time before the world changed so drastically.

“You're a sweet girl, Macaria. Always looking out for an old woman like me.”

My smile cooled at her endearment, but I held it until she turned away. She always called me this and I innately had the same reaction. The term felt oddly fitting and misplaced all at once. I tried to be kind to everyone, and I definitely had my moments. But sweet? Not so sure about that. There were layers to me that even I hadn't figured out yet. Maybe she saw something I didn't.

As Mrs. Everhart exited the cafe, I turned my attention to finishing up the day's tasks. Tyler was on shift with me, but I hadn't seen him in nearly an hour. I assumed he was in the backroom, likely engrossed in one of his tech projects or sorting through inventory. I wasn't going to bother him. I could get everything done quicker without his interference.

While I enjoyed my job, going home and unwinding with a glass of *Vitis Nebula* wine was just as enticing. Sometimes I met up with Kori, but I hadn't heard from him since earlier. That was fine with me, though.

I didn't feel up to a late-night tryst at the Lunar Lounge. The sex wouldn't be worth the hassle.

I moved to the front of the café and flipped the sign from OPEN to CLOSED. Behind the counter, Amalthea lounged comfortably, her ears perking up every now and then. I often brought her with me to work, enjoying the comfort of her presence and the added security she provided.

I was in the process of cleaning the counter when the bells above the door jingled abruptly. I spun around, irritation forming on my lips, only for my words to die in my throat. Why was he here? Beside him stood another I immediately recognized.

Jae-Hee Yeon was rumored to be one of Aidoneus' closest friends and was also the heir of the Yeon family, another in the Triad Four. He was undeniably attractive, with sharp, chiseled features and a deep tan, but he couldn't compare to the man he stood next to.

"It looked like you were still open," Aidoneus remarked, a trace of amusement evident in his voice. His eyes, however, were serious, scanning the room before settling on me.

There was no way he thought that. Curfew had gone into effect almost an hour ago, triggering the Café's windows to automatically tint, transitioning from clear to an opaque shade that ensured nothing was visible from the outside. Tyler poked his head out of the back room, his eyes widening in recognition and fear when he realized who had just walked in.

"I—Is there a problem?"

Aidoneus' gaze shifted from me to Tyler, his expression unwavering. "You should leave," he stated, the command clear.

And just like that, Tyler practically scampered out the front door, not even bothering with his belongings. I mentally scoffed at his spineless retreat, feeling a twinge of anger.

Nice to know he had my back if something went down. I glanced at Amalthea, who was now on high alert, her gaze fixed intently on Aidoneus.

"Nice place you got here," Jae-Hee commented, his voice dripping with casual indifference.

"It is, but we're closed."

Aidoneus nodded. "That's fine. We wanted a quick drink before heading back to Elysium. You can manage that, right?"

He wanted more than a drink. Men like them didn't come to places like Nectar & Beans for a caffeine fix. Their sector had far better options. But all I could do was nod, a thousand questions and annoyance swirling in my mind.

Amalthea, always attuned to my emotions, slowly rose to her feet. Her large, icy blue eyes never left the two men. A

low, nearly inaudible growl vibrated from her throat.

I could feel the tension emanating from her, ready to pounce if I gave her the slightest sign. Aidoneus, to his credit, didn't flinch. Instead, he met her gaze head-on, an unspoken challenge passing between them. It was almost as if they were engaging in their own silent communication. The weight of the atmosphere grew heavier, a taut thread stretching to its limit.

"Thea," I murmured, using one of the silent commands we had been practicing. At once she settled back, though she remained alert, her protective stance evident.

"She's well-trained," Aidoneus remarked, breaking the silence. His eyes held a glint of admiration mixed with curiosity. "Not many can manage such a creature."

I forced a neutral expression. Thea was more than a wolf hybrid to me. She'd been a gift from grandma right before she vanished. She'd become one of my closest friends, more family than pet.

"She's loyal. We look out for each other."

A slow, approving nod made me feel like I had passed some unspoken test. He then motioned to his companion, indicating they should sit. "Now, about that drink..."

With a barely perceptible shift in the atmosphere, the two of them took seats at the counter, their presence dominating the small space. Amalthea's eyes remained trained on their every movement.

"Alright, what will it be?"

Aidoneus leaned in, eyes with depths that threatened to drown me locking with mine. "Something iced. Add a mix of dark and white chocolate and a touch of caramel. Just a hint of hazelnut. Swirl some whipped cream on top, but not too much. And sprinkle it with a dash of cocoa."

His order was oddly specific. Each detail seemed to be a veiled reference to me. The dual chocolates for my mixed heritage, hazelnut for the scent I often wore, and the delicate touch of caramel for my sun-kissed skin.

I turned to Jae-Hee, hoping I was wrong.

“And for you?”

“Just a black espresso, thank you,” he replied, his voice low.

As I turned to start preparing the drinks, I couldn't help but notice a dark stain on Jae-Hee's collar. *Dried blood*. I took a deep breath, steadying myself. I sanitized my hands and then set the machine to brew before moving to the cold section, glancing once more at Amalthea.

I tried to focus on the familiar routine of my work, but the quiet was stifling. I grabbed a glass cup, filling it halfway with ice. His voice, gravelly and controlled, broke the relative silence.

“Do you know who I am?” he asked, the underlying note of mischief in his tone making my skin tingle.

The way he said it, with such confidence, almost made me drop the milk frother. *Almost*. I caught myself just in time and frothed some milk until it was perfectly chilled and creamy.

“You're Aidoneus Maelstrom,” I replied, reaching for the dark chocolate syrup.

I poured in a generous amount. Beside it was the white chocolate. I added slightly less of this to balance out the flavors. After combining the other ingredients and finishing the custom concoction with whipped cream, I moved closer to pass him his drink, catching a whiff of his cologne.

It was an intoxicating mix of musk, amber, and a hint of cedar, both commanding and sensual, a scent that seemed to encapsulate everything that Aidoneus was. The pull towards him was magnetic. I placed his drink in front of him and met his gaze squarely, forcing a smile as every fiber of my being screamed at me to maintain my composure.

“Enjoy.”

He gave me a long look, his sage green eyes, sharp and assessing. “Oh, I will.”

Trying to recover some semblance of normalcy, I turned my back to them, focusing on Jae-Hee's drink. The sound of the espresso machine offered a brief respite, hissing and steaming as it worked to produce the rich, dark brew.

The scent of fresh coffee filled the air, momentarily drowning out the scent of Aidoneus's intoxicating cologne. Pouring the hot espresso into a small cup, I took a deep breath, mentally preparing myself to face the two men again.

"Here you go," I said to Jae-Hee, placing the steaming cup on the counter, grateful for the simplicity of the order.

There wasn't much left to do now that the drinks were prepared. I wanted to distance myself and seek refuge in the back room. Yet, their presence, especially Aidoneus's, felt like an anchor grounding me in place.

His gaze was unrelenting. It felt like he was mapping every curve, every inch of me. From the top of my head, along the line of my throat, past my waist, and down to my ankle-booted feet.

Boldly, I met his gaze, a flash of defiance igniting within me. But as our eyes locked, an uncharacteristic heat bloomed across my face, making me curse internally. What the hell? Why was I blushing?

"You're a pretty little thing, but that color in your cheeks makes you look so much more captivating." I could hear the faint hint of amusement in his voice.

How did one even respond to something like that? I almost thanked him out of habit, feeling absurdly off-kilter. Swallowing the knot of embarrassment in my throat, I started to turn away.

"That boy you see, Kori, how is he?" His question was casual, but there was an undertone of something darker.

I paused, taken aback by his knowledge. How could he possibly know about Kori? More pressingly, why would he care? Wait, had Kori done something to draw the Triad's attention? God, I hoped not. But that would explain why he was here and Riven's random interest.

“Kori’s not a little boy. And he’s fine. Why do you ask?” I retorted, attempting to keep my voice steady, even as my heart thudded wildly in my chest.

The natural defensive tone in my reply seemed to amuse him further. He leaned back, taking a sip of his drink, his gaze never wavering. “Just curious about the boy you’ve been seeing.”

The way he emphasized *boy* made it clear he found Kori inferior. He looked away from me and scanned the interior of the cafe, eyes lingering on the familiar items that had become a part of my daily routine.

“A talented, vibrant woman like you wasting her days in a coffee cafe. It’s almost tragic.”

“I like my job,” I countered, trying to sound confident and wondering what talent he was referring to. Slinging lattes and cappuccinos wasn’t rocket science.

He tilted his head slightly, a smirk forming on his lips. “Liking your job and deserving better are two very different things, Macaria.”

He spoke my name with such familiarity, that it disarmed me. All those years, all the people he would have met since then and he recalled a brief, seemingly insignificant encounter with a teenage girl?

“You remember me?”

I cursed myself the second I asked. His knowing anything about me at all could simply be due to the vast amount of information he had access to. It would make the issue of identity a simple one to resolve. He fixed me with a gaze that was both penetrating and chilling.

“I don’t kill for just anyone, but I killed for you,” he stated, his tone devoid of emotion, making the fact even more unsettling. “How could I ever forget that?”

I tried to process his words, my mind racing, but he cut through my thoughts once more, “And a face like yours... even then, it was one to remember.”

“I...” A whirlwind of emotions battled inside me. I’d never thought of our past encounter in that light. While the memory always came with fear and confusion, it never truly hit me that he had acted to protect me.

But why?

I was nothing more than a frightened teenager lost in the woods, an inconsequential girl in the grand scheme of things. And yet, he remembered me. Another memory, quick and sharp, flashed before my eyes. The intricately crafted dragon pendant. Was that the reason he was here?

The necklace had vanished some time ago, and I couldn’t ask anyone about it without revealing its significance and inviting a barrage of questions about what I had kept hidden. But even as that thought struck me, I knew there was something deeper in his motivations than that. I cleared my throat, forcing my voice to remain steady despite the swirling chaos inside.

“Why are you really here?” I asked, holding his gaze.

“You’re quite bold, but then, perhaps that’s what I remember about you too,” he noted, seeming impressed I had the balls to question him. “I wanted to drink a good cup of coffee. Isn’t that what people do at places like this? Drink coffee and savor the ambiance?”

I didn’t reply, fearing if I did it would reveal just how uneasy I felt. I cursed inwardly, thinking of Tyler who’d left me alone. Not that he would’ve been much help—in all honesty, I had a sneaking suspicion I could probably defend myself better than he could.

Thea was here, but the idea of putting her in harm’s way was unthinkable. I needed them to leave. Taking a slow breath, I forced myself to exude a calm I wasn’t feeling.

“Is there anything else you need?”

He leaned back, considering me with a look that made me feel like I was the only person in the room. His demeanor was casual, but his eyes were like a predator assessing its prey.

“You’re too good for this, Macaria. And far too good for him. You should aim higher.”

“I’m happy where I’m at,” I countered, my voice betraying a hint of defensiveness.

He chuckled, the sound deep and resonant, making the already tense atmosphere crackle with electricity. Jae-Hee’s scoff was barely audible over the pounding in my ears.

“That happiness is a lie,” Aidoneus stated simply, his eyes searching mine as if trying to make me see some hidden truth.

I swallowed hard, wanting to defend myself. I knew there would be no point. Every word he spoke felt like a calculated move, and despite my better judgment, I could feel the pull of attraction towards him. It was maddening.

“Thanks for the advice, but I’m doing just fine.”

He swirled the last of his drink in his cup, the motion slow, deliberate. Setting it down with a soft clink, he met my gaze once more. That piercing stare seemed to see right through me, holding secrets I wasn’t privy to.

“Macaria,” he began, his voice deep and velvety, drawing out each syllable of my name, “Sometimes, the choices we make lead us down paths we never anticipated. And sometimes, those paths have a way of circling back.”

He reached into his suit pocket and withdrew his wallet, a genuine leather Drachma Pouch.

He tossed four silver drachmas onto the counter, more than enough to cover their drinks. The circular silvery coins glittered under the cafe lights. He then dropped two gold drachmas into the tip jar, making it clear that this wasn’t just payment or any ordinary gratuity, but a statement. His eyes remained locked with mine, their depths hiding mysteries and malice, daring me to comment.

“I’ll see you soon.” With one last lingering look, and that ever-present air of confidence and control, he got up, his chair scraping softly against the floor.

Jae-Hee followed suit, giving me a curt nod. As they walked out, the door chime echoed eerily in the now silent café.

I was left with a heavy sense of foreboding and his cryptic warning.



As I locked up, a tension that wasn't there before wrapped around me, turning every shadow into a lurking threat. Two Triad heirs had just walked into my workplace as if it were the most normal thing in the world. I couldn't make sense of it.

As I walked to where I'd parked with Thea by my side, I adjusted my cardigan overtop my uniform—a chic, knee-length dress made of breathable, dark material—almost black. My Lunar Permit hung around my neck and emitted a faint glow. It was the only thing that allowed me to be out so late after curfew.

Being caught without this by one of the city's Enforcers wouldn't end with a minor infraction.

There would be far-reaching implications that could dramatically alter the trajectory of one's life. And if an Enforcer on patrol didn't come across you, there was always the chance of being caught at a checkpoint.

I wasn't sure how members of the Viel, the rebel group that pitifully attempted to undo a fortified hierarchy, were ballsy enough to network at night. There were citizens of the sector unlike me, that received a permit due to my hours of employment, applied for one, and with approval paid monthly.

That granted them the freedom to go out to the establishments that operated with their own specialized nighttime passes. Other than that, there really was no way around it. The degree to which permits were crafted made them next to impossible to duplicate or forge.

If a rebel was caught with one their level of punishment would be so much more severe than ours. That's if they

weren't executed then and there in cold blood.

They knew all of this before deciding to take the risk. And it wasn't just the Enforcers or sector surveillance cameras they needed to be wary of. Antheia, while portraying an image of modest grandeur during the day, had a dark underbelly that was always bustling by nightfall.

There were the Cabals, various factions that handled different tasks for the Triad. Everything from initiations to trafficking to peddling drugs. Each of them was unquestionably loyal. Rumor had it there was a faction solely dedicated to establishing dominance and gathering intel specifically on rebel movements and anyone else that wasn't being discreet enough in their refusal to conform.

And then there were the sector vagrants.

Those sick fucks were like cockroaches. They had managed to be resilient and disgusting as ever even after the carnage this city was subjected to.

You could tell them apart from the others by the various masks they wore, some more disturbing than others. They tended to engage in hunts and create trap zones.

The unpredictability of the Enforcers was the singular wild card they had to watch out for. One night, a group of vagrants might terrorize a block with no interference whatsoever, feeling emboldened. The next night, that same group might be brutally suppressed for a minor transgression.

It was all too much for me to ever feel safe being outside after dusk. I finally reached my Seraph, its pristine white finish gleaming like moonlight. An ambient glow began to emanate from beneath the vehicle, indicating its state of readiness. The car's advanced systems recognized me based on a range of passive biometric scans.

A holographic panel projected onto the window, displaying my name with a simple greeting. *Welcome, Macaria.*

I placed my palm on the interface, and the car swiftly scanned my handprint, ensuring my identity. With a confirmation chime, the door slightly rose and popped open.

“Come on, Thea.” I ushered her inside first. She leaped in and went right into the back, placing her large body on the plush, cream-colored leather seat.

I slid in after her and the door snicked closed, an automatic lock engaging. Sensing me inside, the interior lighting adjusted to a gentle hue, and my seat automatically contoured to my preferred setting. The dashboard lit with a blend of tactile surfaces and holographic displays—showing the vehicle’s status. I double-checked the Biofuel gauge and was relieved to see I wouldn’t have to stop and refuel.

I placed my hands on the steering wheel and the engine responded, activating with a gentle hum

I could use the onboard AI to navigate, but sometimes I needed to drive to help me think. I pulled away from the curb and headed towards home. A part of me wanted to send a message to Kori and ask him if he was okay, share with him what had happened tonight so that he had a heads up, but I hesitated.

Given the Triad’s ability to tap into the communication networks and Aidoneus’ direct questioning, who knew if Kori was already being monitored? Actually, I would be surprised if he wasn’t. But did he already know? It was unlike him not to reach out by now.

One of us had done something to capture the attention of Aidoneus of all people. Of the Triad Four, and all of their widespread branches across the nation, the Maelstrom’s were the pinnacle of power. If this was about the encounter in the woods, then Kori had nothing to worry about.

But if he’d done something, which I felt was more likely the case, there’d be no coming back from it. It brought a heavier thought to mind—the rebels.

Had Kori gotten involved with them? I recalled our late-night conversations, where he’d occasionally mention his mother, her mysterious disappearance a few years ago still a fresh wound. I sympathized with him, knowing all too well how it felt to lose someone and have nothing but unanswered

questions, always wondering what happened to them. But that was no reason to embrace the dangerous lifestyle of the Viel.

So lost in thought, I didn't see the woman running into the street until her scream shattered the bubble I was in. The Seraph's collision sensor engaged, and the car came to an abrupt halt, nearly throwing Thea from the backseat.

"What the...?" I trailed off as the woman rushed forward.

The LED headlights illuminated her in a faint blue glow. One side of her face was swollen so much it resembled a mylar. She was naked from the waist up, her chest completely exposed and discolored from bruising, and... was that blood? The piece of clothing she did have on offered no decency or protection—a black pencil skirt that had been savagely torn on one side, turning it into a mini barely covering the space between her legs.

She looked familiar. My mind raced to place her, and with a sinking realization, I remembered she worked at Eclat Bistro, a prestigious Nocturnal Pass restaurant. There was only one way she could have wound up all the way over here, she'd been taken or forced to participate in a hunt. Either option was harrowing and explained her state of undress and the shape she was in.

One side of her long blonde hair looked as if it had been torn out of her head by the root, leaving behind a bloodied clump.

"Help me!" She slammed her hands down on the hood of my car, staring at me through the windshield.

Every instinct I had urged me to leap out and assist her, shield her from whatever horrors had done this, but outside wasn't just dark; it was treacherous. Whispered tales of people lured into traps by anguished cries flashed in my mind. Judging from the way she looked and the pure terror in her pleas, this wasn't the case.

I reached for the door, but it didn't open. The Seraph's security system had synced with the vehicle's environment. If I wanted out, I would have to manually bypass it. I wasn't sure

how smart that would be. What if by trying to be a savior, I plunged myself and Amalthea into danger? The woman began making her way around the car, stumbling on bare feet.

Indecision warred within me. Apart from that one moment in the woods all those years ago, the brutalities of the night had always been distant spectacles.

I'd driven past the occasional skirmish between vagrants or witnessed the ruthless efficiency of the Enforcers in action, but they never directly entangled me.

Now, the safety of distance and detachment had evaporated. I glanced around trying to see who this woman was fleeing from as I reached for the door again. Thea chose that moment to jump forward. She barked and landed in the passenger seat, the sheer force making the car's interior vibrate.

“What is it?”

I followed her stare to an alleyway, grabbing the steering wheel again as two masked men emerged. One had his face concealed with a garish clown mask, while the other opted for a more understated balaclava. Before I could process the sight, the terrified woman screeched and began to sprint away.

The man in the clown mask exhibited surprising speed, quickly closing the gap between them.

He grabbed her by the hair and swung her around as if she weighed nothing. Feeling the need to do something, I slammed my foot down on the accelerator and aimed the car just right to clip him, overriding the car's breaking mechanism. I couldn't get out to save the woman without endangering myself, but maybe this small act might give her a chance.

“Hang on, Thea!”

The impact jolted through the vehicle. I gripped the steering wheel tightly as the Seraph self-navigated into the correct lane. In my peripheral vision, I saw him lose his grip.

Thankfully, he seemed to have taken the brunt of the hit. His body rolled a few feet away, while the woman, though disoriented, tried to crawl to safety. The Seraph's collision

sensors immediately reported the impact. I checked over the vehicle diagnostics, relieved the car's reinforced front panel only had a minor dent where it had made contact.

The damage would be mostly superficial and barely noticeable.

The roar of an engine reached my ears, and I quickly pulled to the side of the road, granting passage to an oncoming Enforcer vehicle that seemed to emerge out of nowhere. No sooner had the large utility SUV zoomed past, the unmistakable sound of gunfire erupted. The suddenness of it all had a fresh burst of adrenaline pumping through my veins.

I dared a glance in the rearview mirror, only to witness a chilling sight. The Enforcers gunned down both men with brutal precision. My heart dropped when they turned their weapons on the woman. I saw her arms go up as if surrendering, but it changed nothing. They gunned her down too. She landed beside her assailants and didn't move. As I jerked the Seraph away from the curb, a sick feeling settled in my stomach. The streets of this city held no mercy for anyone.

When I finally passed through the barrier gates of my gated community, I tried to shake off the horrors of the night.

I pulled into my driveway, the familiar sight of home bringing a small semblance of comfort. Parked safely, the glow from the city's towering skyscrapers painted distant, silhouetted horizons, their shimmer a stark contrast to the events that had just transpired.

Ophelia's Pulse sat in front of me, its familiar boxy shape oddly bringing another level of comfort. I shut the Seraph down, the gentle hum of its engine transitioning to silence. It felt as if I had been sucked into some twisted dream. The rhythm of my heart was the only tangible evidence of my existence at this moment until Thea nudged my arm, her warmth cementing me in reality. A sad laugh bubbled up from my chest.

"What a night," I whispered, stroking her soft white fur.

Taking a deep breath, I finally pushed open the door, the cool night air wrapping around me like a shroud. I longed for the embrace of my bed. I crept inside with Thea, not wanting to rouse anyone from sleep. The lights in our home were dimmed, a silent testament to the lateness of the hour.

I tiptoed up the stairs and was almost past Ophelia's room when the door creaked open, revealing her sleep-messed auburn hair, the tight ringlets in a disarrayed mess.

"Hey," she whispered, stepping out into the hallway.

"Hey," I responded, tired but welcoming her company.

She followed me and Thea to my room, her footsteps feather light on the plush hallway runners. Once inside, I closed the door, and the weight of the day seemed to settle between us.

"You look like you've had a rough night," she noted, her eyes sharp.

I sighed before recounting my strange encounter with Aidoneus, sparing her the details of what happened on my way home. As the story poured out, I watched her expression shift from curiosity to disbelief, and then concern.

She crossed her arms and worried her lower lip. "I thought mom was being her usual paranoid self, but after what happened in the plaza, this doesn't sound good, Mac."

I sighed and removed the clip from my hair. "I know. I'm not sure what to make of it all, honestly."

"Well waiting around to see if anything else happens isn't the way to go about things. So, what are we going to do about it?"

"We? *We* aren't going to do anything. I'll figure it out," I replied evenly.

She took a step forward, her eyebrows pulling together in concern. "Mac, you can't just—."

"No," I interrupted, holding up a hand to stop her. "I don't want you dragged into this any more than you already would

be just by being my sister. None of you. Promise you won't tell mom and dad. It'll only make things more complicated."

For a moment, she hesitated, clearly torn.

"Effie."

"Okay, fine. I won't say anything. But this conversation isn't over. Get some sleep."

And with that, she left the room, giving me some privacy. I moved to my grand armoire and grabbed some night clothes before I stepped into my attached bathroom. I started the shower, letting the steam fill the space. I shed my uniform and got in. The warm water felt like an embrace as it cascaded down, helping ease my tension.

When I was done, I brushed my teeth and started my final skin care routine. As I looked into the mirror, the warm light illuminated my features.

I took a moment to inspect my reflection. My Ukrainian heritage was evident in the tanned complexion I bore; it had the ethereal quality of being sun-kissed after a fresh snowfall and was a striking contrast to my stormy blue-grey eyes.

My glossy dark brown hair, damp from the shower, reached down to the center of my shoulder blades. I usually threw it up in a clip or styled it in a loose braid to keep it off my face.

And then there was the mark on my lower right jaw, faint but noticeable. It had an odd shape to it. Grandma used to apply a cream to lighten it when I was younger, telling me it was a burn scar. As I got older, I began to doubt the truth of that. I had no recollection of burning my face in such a way. It made me wonder why she wanted it hidden. My parents never denied or confirmed what she claimed.

I emerged from the bathroom, the warm steam from my shower dissipating behind me.

Amalthea had already made herself comfortable on the area rug beside my bed, her soft breathing serving as a gentle reminder of her unwavering presence.

Picking up my NyxPhone from the bedside table, I sent Kori a brief goodnight message. It was more for appearances than anything else. If we really were being monitored, I needed to keep up the facade of our usual relationship.

I switched off the lights and climbed into bed, but sleep was elusive. Aidoneus' unexpected visit to my job and that chilling scene I had witnessed on my way home played repeatedly in my mind, mingling with my already swirling thoughts. As I pulled the covers closer, I tried to push away the unease lingering in my chest.

## CHAPTER 4

THE TRILL OF MY NYXPHONE JOLTED ME AWAKE, DISPELLING the remnants of my dream. I blinked, letting my eyes adjust to the soft morning light filtering through my window. Grabbing the phone, I saw a message from Kori.

*“Hey, what’s your plan for today?”*

I responded vaguely.

*“Not much, just a few errands. You?”*

Before I could set the phone down, another notification popped up. This one was from Nefertari.

*“We still on?”*

*“Yes, about to get ready now.”* I sent back quickly, confirming our plans.

Stretching my limbs, I swung my legs over the edge of the bed. Amalthea, who had been curled up on her rug, raised her head and blinked sleepily at me. “Good morning,” I murmured affectionately on my way to the bathroom.

After brushing my teeth and washing my face, I selected a comfortable outfit suitable for the day’s activities and then headed downstairs.

My parents were in the kitchen, the familiar aroma of scrambled eggs and toast filling the air. Dad was at the toaster and Mom was at the stove, her chestnut hair piled on top of her head. She looked up as I entered, her warm brown eyes surveying me from head to toe.

“Morning,” she greeted, a smile playing on her lips.

“How was your night?” My father echoed her sentiments and asked.

I stiffened slightly. The question wasn't as innocent as it normally would be. They knew something. Fucking Ophelia. She had to have let them know about last night.

“It was... eventful,” I admitted, unwilling to lie but not ready to delve into the details without knowing how much she'd told them.

He glanced over his shoulder at me, stormy-grey eyes a little darker than my own meeting mine. His cropped hair, a peppered mix of black and silver was damp, but he hadn't shaved. His jawline still had a couple of days' stubble, giving him a stern appearance. I diverted my gaze and went to the sliding glass doors that led to the deck, pulling it open to let Thea out into the backyard.

“Were you busy?”

“Not any more than usual.” Walking over to the fridge, I pulled out a container of fresh raw meat, specifically tailored for Amalthea's unique diet. The delicate scent filled the air as I placed some into her bowl.

While I was occupied, my mother moved in closer, wiping her hands with a dishtowel. “Macaria,” she began, her voice gentle but laced with concern, “maybe you should consider rescheduling your plans today. It might be safer if you stayed close to home.”

“I can't. You know the housing officials set each appointment up individually weeks in advance. And Nefertari's already on her way to pick me up.”

“But why the rush to move out? Is there something we should know?”

I almost laughed. Neither of them had any tact whatsoever when it came to fishing for information or being discreet with their intentions. “Mom. I'm an adult. It's a part of growing up, making decisions. You and dad always preach how you want us to be able to stand on our own two feet.”

I paused for a moment, gathering my thoughts before continuing in a way that would give nothing away. “Whether I’m here or in my own place, it’s not going to change whatever is happening out there.”

They shared a look, and a familiar determined glint lit in both their eyes. I almost groaned. This meant they were gearing up for a united front, ready to pull out all the stops.

Rarely was I the one at the receiving end. Ophelia had been carrying that burden all on her own.

“Listen, with everything that’s been happening, we thought perhaps we could have a quiet day. Maybe watch some old films or play some board games?” Mom asked, her gaze hopeful.

“You mean just us two? Dad has to work today, doesn’t he?” I challenged, glancing at the wrist-comm my father wore that signified his association with the city’s central grid. “And Ophelia, she’s not even here. She must be at the boutique already. Why is it only me you want to stay home?”

“We worry more about you. You’re the one who more often than not faces dangerous situations head on. Your sister is less confrontational,” my mother responded, her hands wringing the edge of her apron.

I felt a twinge of guilt for keeping things from them, but I knew them too well to do otherwise. They wouldn’t leave this alone.

I’d never been a little girl who hid behind her parents, and I wasn’t going to start now as a grown woman. “I appreciate your concern, but staying home and hiding isn’t going to make any of what happened go away. If the Triad wanted me, they’d have me.”

“Don’t talk like that, Mac.” She turned towards dad. “Tristan, some help please.”

My father sighed, clearly not fully onboard with the tag-team method. “Macaria, it’s just—like your mother said. You’ve always had this spark, this fire. We fear that it might make things worse if you are approached again.”

I was about to retort I didn't completely lack common sense when mom added, "It's not that we don't trust you, honey. We don't trust the world around you."

The sound of a soft horn interrupted our conversation. "I have to go. Can one of you let Thea in when she's ready?"

"I got it," dad replied, shooting my mom a look that said leave it alone—at least for now.

"Thank you."

Grabbing a piece of toast, I quickly ate it while simultaneously collecting my documentation card and other essentials into a small satchel. As I approached the front door, my mother called out, "Be safe, Macaria!"

"I will, mom."

Stepping outside, Nefertari's distinct SUV waited for me at the end of the driveway, its design unique with sleek lines and ambient lights. The moment I slid in, she shot me a sidelong glance, her eyebrows drawn together in a mixture of concern and curiosity.

Her makeup was done impeccably. There was a hint of mauve on her full lips, light eyeshadow framed her dark eyes, and a touch of blush highlighted her enviable cheekbones.

"I know that look. What happened?"

"Long story." I heaved a sigh and leaned my head back against the seat. The inside of the SUV smelled like her usual perfume, Midnight Jasmine.

"We gotta long day, so start telling."

"It's been one thing after another. You won't believe what happened yesterday." I began sharing the tale of Aidoneus' sudden appearance at the café, my nerve-wracking journey home, and my parents' subsequent attempts to keep me under their protective wings.

Nefertari listened intently, her expressive eyes widening with every twist in my story. "Damn, Mac. That's... intense. What would they want from you, though?"

“I have no idea. If not for work or going out to eat with you I would barely leave the house.”

“Yeah, I know. Don’t get mad, but this seems more of a result of something Kori’s ass probably did.”

“I’m not mad. I thought the same thing,” I admitted.

“You know that would be fucked up, right? But maybe that’s why he’s been acting so weird. He did joke about you two running away to sector three.”

“Ugh, I almost forgot about that.”

Sector three, Tartarus, was the slum of Nixon City and a stark contrast to the other two sectors. Closer to the sea, its buildings were worn down by the salted air, time, and neglect. The only way to access it was by traveling through a dense woodland, passing the Enforcers manning its perimeter, and then getting over an electric and barbed wire fence.

I looked out the window contemplating whether I did this, or my boyfriend’s stupidity. I felt a little bad about not fessing up about the woods incident even to her.

Part of me wanted to believe too much time had passed for that situation to be relevant, but the other couldn’t get over what Aidoneus had said.

*He killed for me.*

I could only assume that made me indebted to him in some way. Thinking about all the what-ifs made my head hurt. It wasn’t like I could drive over to Elysium and knock on his door to demand answers.

“I don’t want to get into this now. Tell me how your internship with the city’s historical archives is going? Have you dug up any juicy secrets?”

Nefertari lit up at the mention of her favorite subject. “I’m having fun with it. And yes, some of the things I’ve come across are scandalous. Others are completely fucked up. Did you know there was a fifth family? I see why the Triad’s PR works so hard.”

Our conversation shifted smoothly as we drove around, viewing potential homes.

Before long, we found ourselves seated at Lunar Lagoon, a cozy bistro known for its eclectic mix of modern and traditional dishes.

Surrounded by green foliage and the gentle hum of diners, we indulged in plates of herb-roasted chicken, a medley of seasonal vegetables, and honey-drizzled baklava for dessert. Amidst bites of the flaky pastry, my NyxPhone vibrated, signaling an incoming message. I saw Ophelia's name on the screen.

*Mac, I'm really sorry. I shouldn't have gone behind your back. It's just... I was worried.*

I wiped my fingers on a napkin, debating what to say back. This was one of the reasons I didn't tell her anything. I trusted her in the sense I knew she'd never do anything to hurt me, but I didn't trust her to keep my secrets between us.

"Your sister?" Nefertari inquired.

"Yeah. Ophelia feels guilty. We'll sort it out later. Let's focus on the last place we're visiting. I have a good feeling about it."

We finished our meal and then headed out of the bistro. The waning sunlight painted the cityscape in shades of amber and gold, casting a surreal glow that made everything look like a scene from a vintage film reel. I could never get over how different the city was from day to night. It went from beautiful and picturesque to a hellish nightmare.

As we reached the SUV, I took a deep breath of fresh air and glanced over at Nefertari. "Thanks for tagging along with me today."

"Huh? You don't have to thank me. I wasn't letting you go house hunting alone or without me."

"I still appreciate the company."

She waved me off and voice-activated the radio.

Our next stop was Havenstone, an impressive high-rise and the place I was most looking forward to seeing. It stood tall, its reflective windows capturing the hues of the sky. Conveniently located near my workplace and the ever-vibrant Demeter Plaza, it seemed ideal. I could envision walking Thea early in the mornings.

Once inside, we passed through security at the front desk and then ascended to the thirteenth floor. A middle-aged woman with a practiced, friendly smile greeted us at the unit. She opened the door to reveal a luxurious apartment, meticulously designed.

The main living space was an open concept with a modern kitchen, sleek appliances, and a comfortable lounge area. Floor-to-ceiling windows bordered one side, offering a breathtaking panoramic view of the cerulean ocean surrounding the city, the waves serenading the shore in their age-old song.

I wandered through with Nefertari, listening to her commentary and trying to imagine Amalthea lounging in a sunny spot, soaking in the warmth, and watching the world below. I'd been adamant that every place I viewed allowed pets. I refused to leave her behind or live without her.

"What one did you like best of what we've seen?" I asked Nefertari quietly.

"Oh, this place for sure. It's beautiful and the location is perfect. If I didn't just sign a renewal for my place, I would be applying for a unit here."

Taking a moment to evaluate, I turned towards the showing agent who had been pretending she wasn't listening to our conversation across the room.

"What's the rent on this again?"

The woman smiled warmly. "It is 280 SD a month. That includes the protection fee and utilities."

I gnawed my lower lip and mentally did the math. It was doable. I brought home a base amount of 220 SD before tips, which usually brought me up to approximately 420 SD a

month give or take. I had savings of around 1000 SD, excluding the two gold SD Aidoneus had tipped me last night.

If I accounted for that my savings rose to 2000, but the idea of using his money rubbed me the wrong way. He hadn't given me that tip out of kindness. I planned to donate it to one of the Triad causes so in a sense, he would be getting it back.

I surveyed the apartment again, growing a little more excited. Before I could get too far ahead of myself, I would have to be approved. The bottom line was that I could afford this place and still survive.

"I'll fill out an application," I said, imagining life in an upscale space.

"Great!"

The agent provided the paperwork and quickly checked over my documentation as I filled it out.

"Everything seems in order. You should hear back shortly. We've had lots of interest in the place, but a few applicants have already been denied."

I didn't think she was supposed to share that information. "Oh, okay. Thank you for your time."

"My pleasure, you ladies have a good rest of the day."

Feeling cautious optimism, Nefertari and I headed back to her SUV. However, before we could even buckle in, the distinct ring of my NyxPhone interrupted us discussing the unit. I frowned at the OLED display.

"Kori?" she guessed.

"No. It's the agent we just left." I settled back into the seat and accepted the call. "Hello."

"Hi, Macaria. I'm sorry, but your application has been flagged." The voice on the other end was the same agent, but her practiced warmth was gone.

"What? I'm sorry, how is that possible? It takes two days for applications to process. I just saw you less than five minutes ago."

“It seems there are some ties to the Triad you failed to mention.”

Stunned, I responded, “*Thee* Triad? I have no idea what you’re talking about. And that doesn’t make any sense. I wouldn’t be denied for that *if* it were true.”

Without another word of explanation, she ended the call abruptly. A heavy silence enveloped the inside of the SUV. Both Nefertari and I left grappling with this unexpected turn. A tempest of emotions swirled within me as I stared at the phone screen.

“What the hell was that? The Triad? Mac, after what you told me, I don’t think this shit is random. Something’s up.”

She sounded so much calmer than I felt. I didn’t believe in coincidences, especially of this magnitude. I thought I had a slight understanding of why the Triad—Aidoneus himself, would step into my life but now I felt like I’d gotten it wrong.

“I don’t know what’s happening, Tara,” I muttered, trying to piece together the bewildering events of the past two days. “But you’re right, something’s wrong. I need to get home right now.”

“Right, okay.” She started her car and navigated out of the high-rise’s parking lot.

Neither of us spoke much on the way there. As we neared my house, my pulse quickened. The barrier gate was wide open, not a guard in sight. The typically serene street was now cluttered with Enforcer vehicles, unmistakable with their stark emblems. They let Nefertari’s SUV pass without a single question, increasing my unease.

Parked alongside them were two flashier cars that clearly belonged to the Triad. The very sight had my heart rate spiking.

“Tara, stay in the car,” I managed to say, my voice shaking.

Without waiting for her response, I jumped out and ran. Enforcers stood on either side of the driveway, but none moved to block my path. I pushed the front door open and raced through the house. I could hear the frenzied sounds of

Amalthea. She'd been shut in the utility room and was frantically scrabbling against the door. From the distressed noises, it was clear she'd been trapped there for a while.

I couldn't risk letting her out. If she tried to attack any of these men, she'd be killed. My steps faltered as I entered the living room. The sight before me was like a scene from some grim movie. My parents, Ophelia, who had only a towel wrapped around her, and our neighbor were all on their knees with guns trained on them.

Standing arrogantly in the center of the disarray was Aidoneus and the ever-present Jae-Hee. The chaos and terror of the scene around me faded for a moment as I locked eyes with him.

"Macaria," he greeted, the corners of his lips lifting slightly. "So glad you could join us. I was beginning to think you stood me up."

"What the hell is going on? Why are you here?"

His chuckle, low and almost melodic, sent chills down my spine. "Always straight to the point, aren't you?" he mused as he stepped closer and began circling me as if I was prey he was sizing up.

When he finally stopped in front of me, his fingers slid beneath my chin, gently tilting my face upward, forcing me to meet his piercing gaze. The touch, though light, had an unspoken authority. The amusement in his eyes was maddening.

"You," he stated simply, "I'm here for you, Macaria."

"Why?" The word was barely audible, but in the ensuing silence, it rang loud and clear.

He leaned in, close enough that I could feel the warmth of his breath against my lips. "Because business is business, sweetheart. And you've always been mine." He abruptly released me, taking a step back.

"I didn't just come for you though," he added looking away from me to stare at my mom. "Your mother baked her infamous lemon cake. I thought about trying to slice."

How did he know about that? Mom just made it last night for dessert. A cold realization washed over me. We'd been being watched, maybe for longer than I dared to think. What had we gotten ourselves into?

This couldn't be related to the incident years ago in the woods. The raw hostility in the room didn't fit the narrative of what happened back then.

My thoughts jumped wildly, grasping at any logical explanation. Had my parents or Ophelia done something unknowingly? Dad did work for the city's grid, after all. But would that draw the wrath of someone like Aidoneus? The Triad wasn't known for playing small games.

I thought of Kori again, trying to connect the dots. A sinking feeling in my stomach told me that the answer was far more complex than I was currently able to fathom.

"You've got four minutes, darling. Say your goodbyes. I suggest you don't go into overtime."

A fresh wave of panic settled in my chest, and I cast a quick glance at my family. Their expressions were stricken, especially Ophelia's tear-filled eyes. Our neighbor hadn't lifted his head since I'd stepped into the room and was trembling violently. It was clear to me then: they were hostages, and I was the intended prize.

My father, overwhelmed with terror, abruptly cut in. "Please, take anything. Take *me*. Just leave my family be."

Aidoneus' features turned frigid, his gaze slicing into my father. "A man begging while on his knees? How distasteful."

"Please, my father repeated.

He sunk even lower, trying to become one with the floor. "Please, don't take my girl," he murmured, the weight of his words tinged with terror. His once proud posture, the backbone of our family, now lay crumpled and humbled. It was soul-crushing to see him in such a state, any pride he had vanished, all to shield us from this looming catastrophe.

I hated that multiple people were seeing him like this. Surrounding us were Enforcers, cold, calculated, and trained to

obey Aidoneus' every whim. Jae-Hee stood to the side, his face expressionless, betraying no hint of his own thoughts while Aidoneus observed my father with an amused expression.

“Wow, Mr. Hearst. This is truly noble of you,” he remarked with feigned admiration. “This whole scene is touching, really. Shame it does absolutely nothing to change anything. Macaria belongs to me with or without your blessing.”

As he spoke, the frantic sounds of Amalthea still trapped in another room yet desperate to protect us, grew louder, echoing the heightened tension in the room. The door she was behind thudded, and creaked. I swear I heard splintering.

Aidoneus turned back towards me calm as ever. “Remember what I said about those four minutes? Well, at least two have gone by but because I'm such a compassionate man, let's just say it's only been one.”

He signaled towards Dominic, our unsuspecting neighbor, and in the span of a breath, the room reverberated with the chilling sound of a gunshot, ringing in my ears.

I could do nothing as Dominic's body crumpled lifelessly to the floor, and a pool of crimson began to spread. My mother reached for Ophelia as she began to scream, the side of her face stained with evidence of what just happened as well as her knees. The horror in her eyes was palpable. My father reared back and took one look at Dominic and the small hole in his head before he began to retch.

My heart thundered so loudly that I was sure it would burst from my chest. With a shattering realization, I understood how fragile our lives had become in Aidoneus's hands. The thought of resisting faded away. I needed to ensure the safety of my family before myself.

Taking a shaky breath, I addressed my parents and my sister, willing them to look at me and understand.

“It's okay,” I reassured them as confidently as I could. “I'll go with him.”

“See. She wants to come with me,” Aidoneus added smoothly.

He then turned to his Enforcers, speaking sharply and concisely using a language I didn’t understand. Their disciplined stance never wavered as they listened to his commands, a silent testament to his authority. Jae-Hee approached and he leaned in and said something to him I couldn’t hear. The other man simply nodded, his stoic demeanor betraying no emotion.

With that done, Aidoneus’s attention was back on me. He placed a possessive hand on the small of my back, leading me out of the living room and towards the front door. My mother’s anguished sobs followed after us as did Amalthea’s howl, as if she knew I was being taken away.

My eyes burned with tears, but I didn’t let them fall nor did I look back, if I did, I knew I wouldn’t be able to do this. The weight of Aidoneus’ touch helped me focus on what I needed to do.

It was a clear reminder of my current predicament. Each step felt like a descent into an abyss. As we stepped outside, my eyes darted around until they landed on Nefertari, her expression a mix of shock and worry. I was relieved she was still in her car unharmed.

She was blocked in, but they weren’t paying her any attention. As our gazes locked for a brief moment, a silent message passed between us, her eyes silently pleading with me to stay strong.

We reached Aidoneus’s vehicle, a sleek luxury car that seemed out of place amidst the chaos. I hesitated at the door, the reality of what was happening hitting me in full force. His voice cut through my thoughts, low and commanding. “Get in the car, Macaria.”

There was no room for defiance in his tone. Swallowing hard, I complied, praying for a way out of this nightmare. He forcibly closed my door and then circled to the driver’s side.

The smooth purr of the car's engine engulfed the tense silence between us as we pulled away from my home. Each turn and twist of the road took me further from the life I had known. The gated community faded into the distance, the once-familiar trees and houses becoming a blur of colors through the tinted windows.

“Will my family be safe?” I finally managed to ask.

He cast a sidelong glance at me, his eyes unreadable. “As long as they don't try to be heroic, they have nothing to fear. But that depends on you, doesn't it?”

I frowned, trying to comprehend his words.

“Cold?”

“No,” I replied briskly.

“Then why are you shaking? Don't tell me you're scared. We've barely begun, sweetheart.”

A sharp retort poised on the tip of my tongue.

I didn't like that term in general but coming from him it felt patronizing and was too intimate. We didn't share that level of familiarity. I didn't know if he was trying to unnerve me or what. I fought the urge to snap back, reminding myself to stay focused on the situation at hand.

As Aidoneus drove through Antheia, I could feel the weight of the city's gaze upon us. In the rearview mirror, the formidable fleet of Enforcer vehicles maintained a tight formation, their intimidating presence undeniable. Jae-Hee trailed in his own car, the tinted windows obscuring any glimpse of the man inside.

The plaza, which always buzzed with activity, now seemed to stand still. Vendors paused mid-transaction, pedestrians froze in place, and even the ever-present hum of chatter seemed to fade to a murmur.

We traveled away from the heart of the sector and all too soon the looming gates of Elysium were in sight.

Their intricate design and solid build reflected the elite status of the sector. Strangely, the road leading to the gates,

typically teeming with guards, was noticeably barren today. Only a few of the usual sentinels stood by.

From the circular towers above, I could see figures monitoring our approach, their silhouettes dark against the bright sky. There was no delay as we neared; the gates began to swing open, the guards granting us unhindered access. Thoughts swirled in my mind, each more confusing and terrifying than the last. My pulse quickened, a deep-seated apprehension squeezing my heart.

Without thinking, the name that had been haunting the fringes of my consciousness tumbled out. “Is this about Kori? Is that why you’re doing this?”

A sudden, jarring halt as Aidoneus slammed on the brakes was my only answer for a moment.

The aggressive screech of the tires was almost deafening. Jae-Hee caught off guard, swerved his vehicle in a last-minute attempt to avoid smashing into us. I heard him yell as he accelerated past. One of the Enforcer SUVs, also taken by surprise, swayed precariously, its wheels skirting the edge of the road.

Turning slowly, Aidoneus fixed me with a penetrating stare, the sudden weight of his attention almost tangible. “Macaria,” he began, voice dripping with warning, “I’ve never been one ruled by jealousy, but mentioning that boy isn’t the way to endear yourself to me.”

Refusing to be intimidated, I shot back, “We aren’t exactly on endearing terms to begin with.”

His response was a slight grin, filled with delivery and arrogance in equal measure. Placing the car back into gear, he cruised effortlessly through the gates that had opened for us as if he didn’t nearly cause a pile-up.

“We do have a relationship, you know?”

I decided the best strategy was to stay silent, not giving him the satisfaction of a response. But, unsurprisingly, Aidoneus was undeterred.

“I mean, there was that time I shot a man in the head for you and then had him skinned,” he continued, reminiscing as if discussing a fond memory. “And just last night we had a coffee date.”

Listening to him, a creeping suspicion settled over me. It wasn't so much about the content of his words, but the carefree manner he spoke. I didn't know if Aidoneus was unhinged, or just the kind of man who reveled in the power of his own unpredictability. Either way, it was becoming clear that navigating this relationship, or whatever he wanted to call it, was going to take an abundance of mental fortitude.

The vehicle smoothly transitioned from the main road into the meticulously planned streets of Sector 1.

Elysium in all its opulence greeted me. Tree-lined boulevards spread out in every direction. The people, dressed in the latest high-end fashion, barely glanced at the stream of Enforcer vehicles or the luxury car I was in, indicating how common such sights must have been. The world inside these gates felt vastly different from my own, it was a bubble of privilege and prosperity.

Our journey continued for a few more minutes.

Aidoneus made a turn down a particularly grand avenue that was a good distance away from the hustle and bustle of his sector's heart. A mile or so in, Jae-Hee's vehicle turned off and passed through a pair of gates with the head of an Amarok centered between them, the emblem of his family. The private drive led to a house that was as much an art piece as it was a residence.

Aidoneus drove past it without a second glance.

I reminded myself that he'd grown up with the other heirs and had probably been to their homes plenty of times. After another minute or two on the opposite side of the road, a different set of wrought iron gates was visible. There was an imposing gryphon in their center, the emblem of the Orpheus family.

Another few minutes and the second on the right-hand side of the tarmac were the gates that led to the Vesper family estate, their emblem a raven.

I'd always been told that each of the Triad Four had a symbol that characterized the traits and lineage of their respective families. It wasn't something I ever bothered looking into because it didn't have anything to do with me. I deeply regretted that now. Ignorance in this situation was not bliss, it was sheer stupidity.

Soon, the unmistakable wrought iron gates of the Maelstrom estate appeared before us, bearing the emblematic crest of a dragon. They silently swung open to grant us entry.

A cobblestone driveway stretched ahead, lined with intimidating statues of mythological creatures. On either side, manicured gardens flaunted exotic flowers in a myriad of colors.

The mansion itself was an imposing sight. It looked more like a palace, perched on a cliff with the tumultuous sea below as its backdrop. Made of dark stone and a blend of modern architecture, it had a classy gothic design.

It was adorned with balconies, spires, and stained-glass windows that captured the light in an ethereal dance. The expansive courtyard that lay ahead boasted a fountain, but what caught my attention was the unusual dark crimson water it spewed, a macabre yet fascinating sight. As the estate's grandeur became increasingly apparent, a coldness spread through my body.

"What do you want from me?" my voice wavered slightly, betraying the unease I felt.

"What most men want from a beautiful and intelligent woman," he replied smoothly.

I bit back a sharp retort, my thoughts all over the place. *Beautiful and intelligent?* If I were truly smart, I wouldn't be in this mess. Before I could press him further, he brought the car to a smooth stop in the roundabout.

“You were searching for a new place to live.” Aidoneus tilted his head, an amused smile playing on his lips. “Welcome to your new home, *Luzina*.”

“Home?” I echoed. “You’re the reason my rental application was denied,” I stated flatly.

“Denied is a harsh word. I simply made sure you didn’t settle for something mediocre.”

I glanced out of the window to find an impeccable line of staff, their postures straight and faces neutral, awaiting our arrival. Their black and gold uniforms were pristine, each garment echoing the dark elegance of the estate. It was as if they were lined up for the arrival of royalty.

As Aidoneus’s door opened and he stepped out, I remembered that in his world, that’s exactly what he was.

## CHAPTER 5

A TALL, DISTINGUISHED-LOOKING MAN IN THE TRADITIONAL dark uniform of the Maelstrom house staff, opened my door. Stepping out, I was momentarily speechless, taking in the estate from outside the car.

Aidoneus approached, extending a hand which I hesitantly took. With his grip both comforting and possessive, he led me up a set of wide stone stairs that culminated in grand wooden doors. They parted with the assistance of two men also wearing a staff uniform.

The opulence inside surpassed the exterior. Sparkling chandeliers dangled high above, their reflections playing on the polished marble floors below. Exquisite rugs with threads of gold and silver adorned the ground. The solemn faces of Triad deities gazed at me from their perches on the walls. Another lineup of staff members watched us with keen interest.

“Is everyone present, Cael?” he asked the tall man who had opened my car door.

“Yes, *Kyrios*.”

“Good.” Drawing a breath, Aidoneus surveyed the room. “You all know what this day means and how important the woman beside me is. Now you can put a face to the name. Macaria, my betrothed, and your future Elysian.”

The weight of his nearly bowled me over. Betrothed? Elysian? My mind raced, but a stern look from him silenced my emerging questions. With fluid grace, he switched to

speaking in the lilting Triad language, leaving me lost amidst its tones.

Then he turned to me, his expression gentler. “A group of Lysari,” he indicated a few elegantly attired women, “along with a few of our own, pointing to two women from the household, “will assist you in getting ready.”

“Ready for what?” I asked, my voice a mix of curiosity and apprehension.

His responding smile made me wish I hadn’t asked.

“For one of the best nights of your life.” Without another word, he placed a fleeting kiss on my cheek, murmured an order in his native tongue, and departed through the doors we’d just come through, leaving me alone with a group of strangers and overwhelming grandiosity.

I’d never felt so on display in my life, not even when I transitioned from homeschooling to an academy where half the student body had grown up together. I was relieved when a kind-faced woman, older and with a demeanor that radiated authority, stepped forward.

“Greetings, Miss. I am Meridith, head of the Lysaria.” Following her introduction, the other women chimed in with their names, each nodding politely in my direction.

“How about we get you cleaned up?” Without waiting for a reply, Meridith gently took my arm and began leading me away from the foyer.

As we ascended another wide stone staircase, my attention was drawn to the walls, which were lined with regal portraits of the Maelstrom lineage. There was an obvious gap on the wall at the first landing that caught my attention—a space where a portrait once hung but was now conspicuously absent.

Meridith seemed to sense my curiosity, but it was a younger member of the household staff who had an adorable mousy appearance who whispered, “The *Kyrios* ordered it removed some time ago.”

She was quickly silenced by a sharp glance from Meridith, but the seed of curiosity was planted. Who had been so

significant to have their portrait on this wall, yet so controversial to warrant its removal?

Reaching the upper floor, we navigated through a long corridor that framed a square-shaped balcony overlooking the foyer. The opulence continued with every step, every corner, every room.

Soon, we entered a particularly grand chamber, where it became clear that everything had been set for my arrival. All the way down to the pristine white dress that was displayed elegantly on a mannequin. The implications slowly dawned on me of the role I was being molded into. While my instincts screamed at me to run, I understood that resistance, at least for now, was not an option.

In what felt like mere moments, I was transformed. After the Lysaria finally deemed me ready, I was led toward a full-length, ornate mirror. I took in my reflection for the first time since the transformation. The face staring back was familiar, yet not—it was me, but a polished, refined, and utterly unrecognizable version of myself.

Every detail was perfected—from my freshly styled hair, adorned with a delicate white bow, to the flawless makeup that graced my features.

The dress was a vision. It was breathtaking, not like a wedding dress, but certainly more than just an ordinary evening gown. The truth of what it really was, a statement to all of Elysium hadn't yet dawned on me. Made of the finest white silk, it clung to my form in all the right places.

Delicate lacework adorned the bodice, with pearls and tiny crystals interwoven in an intricate pattern that shimmered under the soft lighting. The modesty of its high neckline was contrasted by the daring cut of its back, which plunged dramatically, drawing the eyes to the gentle curve of my spine.

The women gushed, their excitement palpable. “A true *Elysian* beauty,” one murmured. Another added, “The *Kyrios* will be beside himself.”

I couldn't respond to their compliments. I was barely keeping my rising anxiety at bay. I felt like a doll, a puppet readied for some grand performance.

I'd have to give the most convincing act of my life with no script to go off of. With Aidoneus pulling the strings, he was my master, and I was merely his marionette. I couldn't afford any slip-ups. The lives of my family and friends could very well depend on this.

After a few final touches, Meridith led me back downstairs. The staff still stood lined up in the halls with only a few having stepped away. I wondered if the rest had been standing here the entire time.

As the grand doors to the Maelstrom estate swung open, the outside world greeted me once more, along with the intimidating sight of Enforcer vehicles. A fleet larger than the one outside of my house. What truly caught my attention was the sleek, black limousine parked dominantly amongst them. Two Enforcers were stationed on either side of the rear door, their posture stiff and faces unreadable.

The closer one, a tall man with a chiseled jaw and steely gaze, stepped forward and the door lifted in a smooth motion, a silent invitation.

For a moment, I hesitated.

I was on a precipice and about to dive further into the unknown. Getting in would undoubtedly drive me deeper into a world of confusion and uncertainty. I still didn't know why Aidoneus was doing this. But I couldn't run from it either. Taking a deep breath, I approached the luxurious vehicle, the soft click of my heels on the cobblestones echoing in the stillness.

The limousine's interior beckoned with its dark leather seats that looked soft to the touch and plush carpeting, its luxury evident in every meticulously crafted detail. The lighting inside the vehicle was dim, lending an intimate atmosphere. The world outside seemed to blur, distanced by the tinted windows.

The door was closed gently behind me, encapsulating me in the hushed elegance, a quiet sanctuary before the storm. There was one noticeable absence. Where was the enigmatic kingpin now?

As the limo pulled away from the grand estate, I noticed a neatly set tray on the opposite seat. A small packet of crackers, a chilled bottle of pristine water, and a pill to alleviate headaches in a small unopened packet. Beside it lay a crisp note with precise handwriting.

Unfolding the note, I read:

*Macaria,*

*The evening ahead will be long and demanding. This should tide you over until later.*

*- Yours Truly.*

I scoffed at the sentiment.

He wasn't anything but my captor. I may have come willingly but it wasn't entirely of my own free will.

I took the pill, hoping it would stave off the impending headache I felt building at the base of my skull. Taking a sip of water, I nibbled on a few crackers, their bland taste somewhat grounding me.

The limousine smoothly navigated through Sector 1, providing me with more glimpses of its magnificence. Elegantly designed structures, and pristine streets—Elysium was clearly Nixon City's crown jewel. However, my attention was fully captured as we entered the grounds of a massive chapel.

Now, this was a place I'd heard of through whispers and lessons at the academy. Sacellum was the triad's exclusive church which only the most privileged and powerful could enter. It was surreal that I had been brought here of all people.

Towering marble columns, etched with intricate designs, greeted me, their stories obscured by the shroud of time. The Sacellum's alabaster walls gleamed in the fading light.

As we approached the entrance, vehicles bearing insignias of other Triad families became apparent, causing my stomach to twist. A man with a commanding presence that demanded immediate respect, opened the door for me and extended a gloved hand to assist me out. I accepted and was silently urged to move forward alone.

I clenched and unclenched my hands as I passed through arched double doors. Inside, opulence overwhelmed me. Gold and silver drapes cascaded from above, while the scent of white lilies permeated the air. Whispers ebbed and flowed around the room. Among the Triad's elite and their distinguished guests, I was able to immediately find the three heirs.

Jae-Hee had changed into a new suit and had the nerve to flash me a smile. I didn't return the gesture. Mordecai Orpheus looked equally intimidating and gorgeous. One of his eyes was the color of glistening gold while the faux one remained translucent.

His rich, raven-black hair was impeccably styled back. In the pew in front of his sitting amongst her family and devastatingly beautiful was Lucretia Vesper, the only woman amongst the four. Her eyes were a captivating mix of mischief and mystery. Dark and piercing, they were reminiscent of the inky blackness of a raven's feather, just like her family's emblem, and the long hair that cascaded down her back in waves.

Her full lips painted a deep plum, turned up when our eyes met in what felt like a surpassingly genial gesture. I swallowed and looked away, nearly coming to a complete stop as my eyes landed on my family. A surge of anger ignited within me at the sight of my father's bruised face. Nefatari was with them too, calm and composed as ever.

The fact that they'd been brought here was terrifying enough, but the guns directed at them are what truly struck fear into my heart and underscored the gravity of this situation.

Standing confidently at the front of the chapel, Aidoneus looked every inch the kingpin he was, exuding power and

control. By his side, a reverend in ceremonial robes waited patiently. As I approached, his demeanor softened momentarily, eyes taking in my appearance. I was acutely aware his immediate family sat opposite mine, a mere few feet away.

“You look exquisite, Macaria,” he murmured once I was in front of him.

Before I could gather my thoughts or respond, the ceremony began. The reverend’s voice echoed, deep and resonant.

“We gather here to solidify a bond of old.” The reverend turned and lifted something off the altar. When he faced us again there was an opened obsidian box in his weathered hand, revealing a ring that left me speechless. The soft illumination emanating from the box gave the large crimson diamond a surreal glow, amplifying its splendor.

“Do you, Macaria, agree to honor a promise foretold, to bind yourself in union with our *Kyrios*?” the reverend intoned.

His words indicated this was something that had been decided already, deepening the void of unknowns I was being sucked into. I didn’t have the liberty of piecing together the chaotic mess of a puzzle my life was becoming. My family’s dire situation was the only priority right then. I couldn’t look at them. I didn’t want to see their faces in this moment that none of us would ever forget.

“I do,” I whispered, knowing I could give no other answer.

With a satisfied grin, Aidoneus took the ring and slid it onto my finger. Its embrace tightened subtly, an ominous omen of things to come. The room erupted in applause, confirming that this wasn’t a wedding. He did all of this for a betrothal.

Just as I believed the night’s surprises were over, the atmosphere shifted.

Each member of the gathered crowd seemed to know what was about to unfold while I was wholly ignorant. With a practiced motion, the reverend reached into the pocket of his ceremonial robe and withdrew a dagger. It gleamed

menacingly, reflecting the muted light of the chapel. The carvings upon it told stories of honor, betrayal, and the profound weight of legacy.

He turned and grabbed a chalice that had been hidden from my view behind him. With it in one hand and the dagger in the other, he began to speak. His voice was deep and resonant, echoing through the chapel.

“Guardians of lineage and legacy, bear witness to this vow of blood and bone.”

He handed the dagger to Aidoneus, who hadn't taken his eyes off me for a single second. Without hesitation, he sliced a shallow cut across his palm, allowing the crimson drops to fall into the awaiting chalice of dark wine.

His face never registered the pain, his gaze never wavered, not even as he passed me the dagger. I hesitated for a heartbeat, the cold metal pressing against my palm. A sharp sting followed as I replicated Aidoneus's gesture, my own blood mixing with his in the sacred vessel. The reverend then passed him the chalice and took back the dagger, wiping the blade with a dragon-embossed cloth.

“Aidoneus Maelstrom, partake in this sacred union. Bind yourself soul and blood.”

He drank deeply, his expression unchanged. As the reverend accepted the chalice back and it was handed to me, I hesitated, taking in the depth of color.

“Macaria Hearst, drink and bind yourself soul and blood.”

My heart raced in a frantic tempo that felt louder than the applause from the audience had been. This wasn't just about the ring that now adorned my finger; it was much, much more.

Blood oaths were carried on from age-old traditions and powerful significance in our world. I had heard whispers and stories of these rituals, often told in hushed tones. They were unbreakable, binding, and not to be entered lightly. They signified a bond that surpassed all others, binding souls with blood and the weight of promises.

I was about to enter one with Aidoneus Maelstrom of all people because of some promise I was unaware of.

A torrent of emotions threatened to overwhelm me. Fear of the unknown, the ramifications this would hold for my future. Confusion as to why this was happening and what events had transpired to bring me to this moment. Anger too, at the situation, at Aidoneus and myself, but most of all the person responsible for promising me to him.

I wanted to throw this bloodied oath right into his beautiful face, but I knew that wouldn't go over well.

With a deep, quiet breath I brought the chalice to my lips. The metallic tang of iron was immediate, mixing with the sweetness of pomegranate. As I drank, the reverend continued his speech.

“In blood, they unite, in purpose, they bind. Two souls, two legacies, now intertwined.”

With the finality of his words, he gently pulled the chalice away and our freshly wounded hands were tied together with a gold silken ribbon, the soft fabric contrasting sharply with the sting of my cut.

Aidoneus' eyes locked onto mine, pulling me into their depths. The distance between us seemed to vanish in an instant, his presence consuming every bit of my awareness. The air in the chapel grew thick. Every muscle in my body tensed, my heartbeat echoing loudly in my ears as his lips descended upon mine with a tenderness that I hadn't expected from such a powerful man.

The kiss wasn't filled with fiery passion, it was precise, a dark promise more binding than any spoken word. I could taste the remnants of us in his mouth, a lingering testament to the oath we'd just taken. When our lips finally parted and the world around me came back into focus, Aidoneus gently turned us to face those gathered to witness what had just transpired.

The chapel had become enveloped in a hushed silence, a show of deep respect. Every eye was on us, every person

standing in acknowledgment of the sacred bond we'd just sealed. As he urged me forward, my gaze traveled, landing on my family. For the first time since this ordeal began, I truly looked at them.

My mother, her eyes wet with tears, tried to force a smile, but the weight of her sorrow and guilt was palpable. My father, bruised and with a defiant tilt to his chin, met my gaze with a complexity of emotions. He looked defeated, yet oddly proud.

Beside him, Ophelia's face was a mixture of horror and sympathy while Nefatari remained calm amidst the chaos, her eyes cool and analytical. Their faces were a mosaic of pain, pride, and a desperate kind of hope. But what were they hoping for? That I would find my way through this maze of power and politics, and emerge unbroken? Whatever it was, I would never forget that this wasn't just about me anymore.

As Aidoneus and I exited the chapel, the night sky lit up in a dazzling display of metallic black and gold fireworks. The loud booms and brilliant patterns left me momentarily stunned. Each explosion seemed to reverberate through my very bones.

Leaning in close, his breath warm against my ear, he whispered, "Welcome to our world, my *Luzina*." His words, spoken with a mixture of pride and possession, sent a shiver down my spine. I wasn't sure if it was from fear or a warped sense of excitement.

He guided me away from the chapel to where a different limousine was waiting. His hand lingered at the small of my back as I slid inside, the heated leather seats offering a brief moment of comfort. He joined me, and the limo pulled away smoothly.

## CHAPTER 6

THE CITYSCAPE WAS PAINTED IN MAELSTROM COLORS, creating a mesmerizing backdrop to the cascade of thoughts racing through my mind. The gleaming towers were lit with black and gold in tribute to the man who reigned over this entire city. A stranger, and now my future husband.

Aidoneus poured two glasses of an amber liquid from a crystal decanter, handing one to me. “To vows of blood and the beginning of us,” he toasted.

I accepted the glass and downed it in one go. The liquor burned its way through me, but it was a welcome distraction as I tried to find any semblance of clarity.

“Looks like there’s a lot on your mind.”

“Is that a joke? I can’t make sense of why this is happening or who promised me to you. My family would *never* do this to me. What’s the real reason you’re doing this?”

His gaze met mine, steady and unwavering. “I already told you that, before we even reached home—the estate.”

“That is not my home,” I shot back, my voice laced with bitterness.

He leaned closer, his voice low and assertive. “That is your home now, Macaria. And there, you will live like the queen you are, alongside me.”

I clenched my fists, feeling trapped and overwhelmed. “Why was my family dragged to the chapel? I thought if I went with you, they’d be safe.”

“*If* they didn’t do anything heroic. Did you not notice your father’s face?”

I ground my teeth and glanced away from him until he refilled my glass. I immediately took another sip, slower this time. Whatever this was had a potent effect. “Is that how it’s going to be? You use my friends and family to keep me under control.”

He laughed lightly. “I don’t need anyone to keep you under control, *Luzina*. I’m capable of doing that on my own.”

“Then why were they there?”

Aidoneus tilted his head slightly, scrutinizing me. “How could they miss such an important event in their daughter’s life?”

I barely stopped myself from swearing at him. “You can’t be serious.”

“I’m nothing but serious. You’re only doing this once. I think they should be there for all the milestones, even if it’s at gunpoint.” He glanced at my attire, his lips curling into a faint smile. “You look exceptionally beautiful tonight, by the way.”

“So you mentioned.”

He gave an amused smirk, clearly unbothered by my retort. “Look outside. We’re nearing our destination.”

I looked out the window just as the limo smoothly glided onto a secluded road.

Elysium’s noise faded into a distant hum as we drove further. Not long after, a sign that read *Horizon Resort* began to glow brighter the closer we drew to it. I’d heard of this place from Nefertari. The resort was renowned for its exclusivity and an oasis of opulence and privacy. It cost a small fortune to stay at and was nestled between the mesmerizing expanse of the ocean on one side and the lush, sprawling beauty of the Obsidian Gardens on the other.

The limo eased to a gentle stop at a secluded walkway lined with softly glowing lanterns. This path, I gathered, led directly to the suite reserved for us. I could think of only one

thing that would occur once we were inside. The door of the limo slid open; the mechanism controlled by an unseen driver.

Aidoneus stepped out first, extending his hand to assist me. As I took it, the reality of my situation weighed heavily on my heart.

The distant sound of waves crashing against the shore was somewhat soothing. The scent of blooming flowers from the gardens wafted toward us, making the setting even more surreal. A surge of nerves threatened to overwhelm me as Aidoneus led me up the pathway, his gait unhurried.

Reaching the suite's entrance, he used his fingerprint the resort would've gotten prior to us checking in, to unlock the door. It granted him access with a soft beep. Pushing it open, we were greeted by an intimate setting.

Deep red velvet drapes hung from the ceiling, pooling onto the floor. On a table to our left, a chilled bottle of champagne rested in a bucket of ice, two slender glasses placed beside it, waiting to be filled.

As I looked around, Aidoneus moved behind me, his fingers brushing lightly against the skin of my nape, sending shivers down my spine.

"Do you like it?" His voice, a deep, velvety murmur, held a note of amusement, almost as if he already knew the effect that he had on me.

"It's... overwhelming. A lot to take in," I whispered, my gaze drawn to the king-sized bed in the center of the room. Its covers were a deep black, contrasting against the crimson pillows and white narcissus petals scattered upon it.

He leaned down, his lips grazing my ear. "Perfect for our first night as an officially engaged couple, don't you think?" His words were imbued with an underlying dominance, holding a promise and threat all in one.

I pulled away, needing to put some distance between us, my heart racing. "Was the lavish suite necessary?" I questioned, trying to mask my vulnerability.

He slowly walked to the table, pouring the champagne into the glasses. The liquid bubbled and frothed as he spoke.

“I would’ve fucked you at the coffee house bent over the counter. At the chapel on top of the altar. The limo in any position that allowed you to feel every inch of me,” he paused and looked over at me. “I don’t need extravagance to fuck you, *Luzina*. It’s what you deserve.”

“Now you’re concerned about—.”

“If I wasn’t, things would have gone much differently and there’d be a lot more bodies.”

I held back my next retort, remembering how easily he’d had Dominic killed.

“But please, we don’t need to worry about that right now.” He handed me a glass, and our fingers brushed, an electric charge passing between us. “Tonight, we celebrate the beginning of our story. May it be dark, intense, and a little twisted, just as our love will be.”

His eyes held promises of pleasure, power, and an unknown depth. As sick and screwed up as it was, he had an undeniable allure to him, a pull I couldn’t deny.

“To us,” he toasted, clinking our glasses together.

I took a sip, feeling the bubbles dance on my tongue. The air held a scent of daffodil. More petals were scattered across the polished wooden floor in two different directions, one leading to a large window that framed a picturesque view of the ocean beyond, and the other the gardens.

The atmosphere in the room was thick with tension. The silvery light from the moon poured in, joining the soft fluorescent light, and casting ethereal shadows on the floor and walls. It painted both of us in a soft glow, adding to the surrealness of the moment.

He sat his glass down and stepped closer, I reflexively tightened my grip on mine. I could feel the warmth emanating from him. The heady scent of his cologne mixed with the natural musk of his skin was intoxicating, rich, and enticing—like the man himself.

“I’ve never been one for patience,” his voice dripped with dark intent. “But for you, Macaria, I might try.”

His words were a clear warning, but there was also an undertone of restraint, like a beast held on a leash. It felt like a challenge, a seduction, and a threat—all rolled into one. My heart raced, torn between the instinct to run and the impulse to surrender.

His fingers, warm yet firm, traced the line of my jaw, causing me to shiver involuntarily. His thumb brushed over my lower lip, hinting at a more possessive touch. I could barely breathe, every ounce of my awareness fixated on him.

There was a charged moment of stillness before he broke it by pulling me to him. Our lips met in a searing kiss, a mix of his command and my vulnerability. It was hard and demanding, an assertion of dominance, but also an act of possessiveness.

My glass fell from my hand. He had me in his arms, moving me to the bed before it shattered against the floor. My dress was removed in much less time than it had taken me to get it on. Once it hit the ground, he ran his fingers down my arms and took both of my hands into his as he stepped back, the new ring on my finger a reminder of what I was to him. I felt exposed, but also strangely exhilarated under his piercing gaze.

The lace undergarments still offered a semblance of cover while the heels I wore emphasized the difference in our statures. The bow in my hair seemed out of place, a symbol of innocence amidst the inevitable carnality.

“Look at you,” he murmured quietly. “Every inch of you—this beautiful body, belongs to me. Remember that. You’re mine.”

That wasn’t just a statement—it was a decree. I swallowed hard, trying to process his words, the suite, everything. It was all happening so fast.

He pulled me closer, his lips finding the curve of my neck. A shiver ran down my spine, a mix of fear and anticipation.

The room, with its luxurious decor and intimate atmosphere, felt like a world separate from the outside. Here, it was just the two of us. His lips trailed up my jawline and skimmed across my cheek before meeting with mine once more. A treacherous, breathy moan escaped as he deepened the kiss, his tongue gently seeking entrance.

There was no denying the heat between us, a connection that seemed both forbidden and inevitable. His hands traveled along the curve of my waist, each touch sending waves of sensation coursing through me. My fingers found their way to his hair, gripping the dark strands.

He broke the kiss, trailing a series of soft pecks back down my jawline and onto my collarbone.

The lace of my bra disappeared, joining the dress. As he continued to kiss his way down my body, my stomach dipped. He used his teeth to slide my lacy thong down my legs, his hands making quick work of his shirt.

When he shrugged it off, never stopping what he was doing with his mouth, I caught sight of the sleeve that covered his entire right arm but was too focused on what he was doing to study it. His lips and tip of his tongue moved over my center, the small triangular patch of hair that had been left on my body, teasing me with the lightest of touches. I breathed in and out, my thighs clenching in response to what he was doing.

Drawing back, he looked at me. I met his gaze, torn between right and wrong, and the whirlwind of feelings he evoked within me. There was a silent acknowledgment between us—a mutual understanding that tonight, boundaries would be pushed, and lines would be crossed.

I knew I could either accept this or fight it and be forced to endure. I didn't want to do that to myself. Not breaking eye contact, he spread my lips and slowly ran his tongue over my pussy from bottom to top.

“Mm,” he hummed appreciatively. “I’ve dreamed of tasting you for months on end.” He gently teased my clit before repeating the motion, going back down.

I rolled my lower lip between my teeth and closed my eyes.

“Look at me.” His hands went to my hips and gripped them harshly.

I forced myself to comply, gasping when he pushed his tongue inside me. He kept going, sucking, licking, and fucking me with his mouth. My body wound tighter and tighter. He closed his lips around my clit and began to stroke it with the tip of his tongue, back and forth until my legs started to shake.

I was hit with a sudden wave of pleasure that had me loudly crying out and grabbing handfuls of his hair.

Before I could come down and attempt to gather my bearings, his hands slid up and cupped my ass. He rose in one fluid motion, lifting me and dropping me onto the bed. The air whooshed out of my lungs, my body cradled by the plush bedding and large mattress. With barely a glance at it, Aidoneus pulled my thong over my heels and flung it aside.

His face was covered in my juices and cum. He didn't even attempt to wipe it off. With one hand he undid his belt and pulled it off. I ran my eyes over his gorgeous body, feeling them widen when his slacks and briefs came off. Gods he was *huge*.

His cock was long and thick, a thin vein ran up the side of it. He moved forward with a predatory grace and spread my legs.

“When it gets to be too much, when I'm fucking you so good you can no longer speak, I want to feel your heels digging into my back.”

He positioned himself over top of me and leaned down. His mouth connected with mine, and he began to ease his cock inside me. I whimpered against him and reflexively grabbed onto his broad shoulders. I couldn't hold still as he eased in further, beginning to slide up the bed. He drew back and wrapped his hand around my throat.

“Relax,” he commanded, pinning me in place as continued to push himself inside me.

I moaned intelligibly in response, barely registering him speaking to me. He was stretching and filling me more than I ever had been before.

“Please,” I begged, not even sure what I was asking for.

“Fuck,” he swore harshly. “I’m not even halfway in, *Luzina*.”

He repositioned himself, and keeping one hand around my throat, he hooked one of my legs over his shoulder.

“Take a deep breath, sweetheart.”

I did as he said, crying out loudly as he forced himself all the way inside me with another guttural curse, going so deep it felt like I could feel him in my stomach. He slightly withdrew and pushed back in, both of us moaning in unison.

He began fucking me savagely, every thrust elicited a cry from my mouth of immense pleasure mixed with pain. His eyes never left my face and when I dared to look into them, I could plainly see how affected he was by being inside of me. His smoldering stare and the grip he had on my throat only heightened my pleasure.

My body began to tremble. I was so close to the edge I couldn’t help but dig my nails into his back.

The sounds pouring from my mouth had to be coming from someone else. They bounced off the walls in tandem with the sound of our bodies coming together. His grip tightened and I began to feel light-headed. My body began to tense, and I instinctively pulled him closer.

“Fuck, you’re so beautiful” he groaned harshly, pushing himself impossibly deeper, hitting a spot inside me I could never find. He released my throat and reached between us, continuing to fuck me harshly. The moment his fingers circled my clit I flew apart, coming so hard spots danced across my vision. He kissed me, swallowing each of my ragged breaths, and continued to fuck me until I came again.

I was on the cusp of surrendering to sleep's embrace when Aidoneus' fingers began to weave through my hair, drawing lazy patterns on my scalp. I didn't bother protesting. After what we'd done in this bed, him playing in my hair was innocent. Just as I was about to drift off, his voice, cold and smooth, whispered in the dark.

"I have one last surprise for you."

Before I could protest, he was on his feet. I remained as I was, not wanting to move. His dark chuckle is what ultimately hooked my attention.

"Come on. You won't want to miss this."

Hearing him say that had a small ball of dread forming in my gut. His idea of endearing gestures seemed to come with plenty of chaos or bloodshed. Nothing with this man had been simple thus far. Not even sex. He had continued to make me come with his cock, tongue, and fingers again and again until finally allowing his own release inside me.

I sat up, ignoring the aches in my body as best I could. He handed me his black suit jacket before I had the chance to ask what I should put on. I could barely register the stark contrast it made against my skin as I pulled it around me.

The rhythmic crash of the ocean below filled the silence, punctuating each of his movements. He extended his hand, pulling me upright. My legs felt like jelly beneath me, but he held me firm, his grip unyielding. Without a word, he guided me to the suite's door.

As Aidoneus and I walked, cascading waterfalls trickled into pools, reflecting the pale moonlight, their depths seemingly infinite. Marble statues loomed around us, their stoic faces turned to the night sky as if in prayer or lament.

The air was fragrant with night blooms, their soft aroma enveloping us, and the gentle glow from fungi painted our path in ghostly luminescence.

We reached a central clearing, dominated by a black marble dais. The blue flames from the torches at its corners threw eerie, dancing shadows across its polished floor. Above

it, a gothic canopy stood sentinel, the intertwined vines and roses glistening in the shifting light.

But the sight that gripped my heart and froze my blood was Kori.

On the raised dais of black marble, he stood naked and visibly battered. His defiant eyes landed on me for a brief moment before looking away. Two imposing men stood on either side of him, ensuring he remained in place.

“What is this, Aidoneus?” My voice was barely a whisper.

He slipped an arm around my waist and leaned close. “This is your final goodbye.”

“What?”

He kissed my temple and stepped away. “Kori didn’t tell you he’d joined the Viel?”

I swallowed harshly as his rhetorical question confirmed my worst fear.

“He joined up with them and then got close to you, to get to me,” he continued.

My brow pinched and I looked between the two of them. “What do you mean?”

Aidoneus stopped and stood so that he was facing both of us. “Exactly what it sounds like, sweetheart. Kori was using you to get to me.”

Kori didn’t deny or confirm the accusation, but his entire body tensed in anger. I was naïve or foolish enough to take Aidoneus’ words at face value, but it was just the same for the opposite. My whole life was unraveling at a speed I couldn’t comprehend, and deceit and secrets were at the root of it all.

Whatever Kori may have lied to me about, I didn’t want to see him dead, but I had no idea how to save him from this.

“I, I don’t know what to do.”

Aidoneus tilted his head and looked at me with an inscrutable expression for a brief moment.

“You don’t have to do anything. I will handle it all.”

“I don’t want—.”

“Wait,” he interjected, beginning to circle Kori, a sinister smile on his lips. “You know, he always believed you and him had something special. That he could protect you from the world’s dangers. From me.” Aidoneus paused and one of the enforcers took a silent back.

“Look at her, Kori. Isn’t she beautiful? Does she look like someone that belongs in the slums?” He gestured towards me, drawing Kori’s gaze in my direction. I felt exposed under their combined stares, like a deer caught in headlights, wearing nothing but Aidoneus’ suit jacket. It covered everything while leaving no guesses as to what we’d been doing.

“She never sounded like that when you fucked her. Never begged for more or came so hard she drew blood.”

I clenched my fist, guilt gnawing at my gut along with a slow-churning rage. The windows in the suite were one-sided. However he made him watch—.

“He didn’t see anything, *Luzina*,” Aidoneus cut into my thoughts as if he could read them. “I would never allow another man to see you like that.” He reached out and took hold of Kori’s flaccid cock, gently extending it and brushing his thumb over the tip.

I blinked, taken aback by the act. Kori’s chest heaved like an enraged bull, but he made no move to stop Aidoneus from doing whatever he intended. “Did you know this itty-bitty cock did nothing for her? I almost feel bad for you.”

He held his other hand out and issued an order in his dialect that I couldn’t understand. The enforcer closest to him fluidly removed a gun from his side and handed it to Aidoneus.

The sight of it made my stomach drop. He cocked his head and ran the barrel up and down the length of Kori’s cock. I could do nothing as all the color drained from his face.

“It sickens me that you put your hands on what was mine, Kori. You’re absolute fucking scum. A bottom feeder I

wouldn't allow to eat a whore's ass."

"She, she isn't yours," Kori seethed, his skin becoming drenched in sweat.

"No? She's draped in my jacket, resting in my suite, and very soon," Aidoneus leaned in close to his ear, whispering loud enough for me to hear, "she'll be wholly mine, in every sense of the word. How does it feel? Knowing you couldn't protect her from the truth?"

I bit the inside of my cheek to stop myself from questioning him and clenched my hands into fists as they began to shake. I wanted to scream at Aidoneus to stop but his visceral reaction when I only mentioned Kori's name warned me from pleading on his behalf.

Kori's eyes met mine and I could see that his fierce defiance, now simmered with raw pain and rage.

The secrets he kept from me hurt us both. There was so much we needed to say, and I could feel it in my soul, that we wouldn't get the chance to do so. I opened my mouth to speak and the look that came across his face stopped me cold.

"You won't break her spirit, Aidoneus. No matter what you do. She's stronger than you think."

Tears sprang to my eyes, and I slowly shook my head. I wasn't strong, not at all. I wasn't brave either. From the time this had started, I'd been nothing but human, doing my fucking best. The idea that everyone had of me was nothing like who I believed myself to be.

"Break her?" Aidoneus chuckled coldly. "I'm going to make her fucking invincible." He moved so that his back was to me.

"I wanted you to have one last memory of her. I think her screaming my name is fitting, shame you won't be alive to cherish it."

The world seemed to stop. He raised the gun and pulled the trigger until it ran out of bullets. Kori's body fell limp, the light in his eyes fading away. A stifling silence gripped the gardens, the air thick with the finality of death.

I felt a scream building up inside me, but before it could escape, it transformed into gut-wrenching sobs. My knees buckled, and I would have collapsed had Aidoneus not caught me, holding me up with an iron grip.

“Now, now, darling,” he whispered, his voice cold and devoid of any comfort. “Let’s get you inside. The night’s still young.” He tossed the emptied weapon to the enforcer who had given it to him and then led me away.

My heart thudded erratically, and my mind raced, trying to come to grips with the cruelty I had just witnessed, Kori’s empty eyes haunting me.

Tears blurred my vision, each droplet carrying with it anguish and pain. Aidoneus silently led me back into the suite. The darkness of the room enveloped us, the outside world seemingly locked away once the door closed. He guided me to the bed, gently pushing me to sit.

“Let it out, *Luzina*,” he murmured, his fingers weaving through my hair in a soft caress that contrasted starkly with the coldness of his actions earlier. “Let it all out.”

I didn’t need his encouragement. I sobbed, raw and unrestrained, grief and guilt threatening to shatter me from the inside. It felt like an eternity passed before he cupped my face, his touch firm yet oddly gentle, forcing me to meet his gaze. I could see a flicker of something—admiration, maybe even adoration—that I didn’t understand.

“Even now,” he whispered, his thumb grazing my tear-streaked cheek, “you’re breathtakingly beautiful.”

I had no time to react, he leaned in, his tongue darting out to catch a salty trail of my tears. The sensation was both intimate and terrifying. The intimacy of the gesture felt like a violation, deepening the horror of the night. He pulled back slightly, his eyes holding a dark promise.

“This is the last time you cry over another man,” he declared, his tone leaving no room for argument. “Starting tomorrow, your new life begins.”

The weight of his words settled heavily on me. I was trapped in a world I didn't understand, with a man whose capacity for cruelty seemed boundless. My life, my choices, were no longer just mine. I was now entwined with Aidoneus Maelstrom, and nothing would ever be the same.



# MY DARKEST KNIGHTS

CASSIE LEIN & ALISHA WILLIAMS

# CHAPTER 1

“You’re so pretty when you cry, Sugar. I love that no matter how many nights I come to play, you always cry. Makes me want to come back for more or better yet, never leave,” my master murmurs as his hips still and the burning in my back from his carving stops. I hate him. I wish he would just die. I wish I would die. I don’t know how much longer I can take this.

He does this every time he visits. I can’t see the scars he leaves behind, but I know that if I were ever able to look in a mirror I’d see a bruised, battered, and broken girl. Scars cover my back, feet, and thighs. But he never touches my face or anywhere else that is easily visible. Because if he did, how could he parade me around to his associates when he needs to make a barter?

“I’m so glad I kept you, Sugar. You’ve always been my favorite. It’s why the others had an expiration date, but I’ve made sure my sweetest treat always remained.” He tucks his stubby cock in his slacks and zips them up. A shiver of fear mixed with wishful thinking runs through me at his mention of an expiration date.

I don’t say anything. I learned long ago not to answer him or anyone else he allows to visit me.

A sharp pain radiates from my skull as my head is ripped back, making me whimper in pain. My head is tilted so I’m forced to look into his dark, soulless eyes. “Haven’t I taught you manners? Say, thank you!”

I scold myself for being so thoughtless and forgetting the rules for a minute. “Thank you, Master,” I whisper, holding back the wince from the painful grip he has on my hair.

“Good girl.” He releases his hold and heads to the sink to wash his hands. When he’s done, he throws me a stiff, dry rag. “Clean yourself up.”

Picking the rag up from where it landed on the floor by my feet, I begin to clean his cum from my body, trying not to gag as I do. But after everything he’s done, the sight of his cum makes me feel sick. I won’t be able to tend to the wounds he inflicted on my back, but that’s nothing new. I’ve figured out a routine that at least helps keep infections away, but they still scar. I can tell by the raised skin when I run my fingers over the parts I can reach.

Cleaning between my legs is the best it’s going to get, so I set the rag back on the counter by the sink and wait with my head down and my hands behind my back like I’ve been taught. Master’s firm grip latches around my bicep, and he escorts me back to my room.

At least that’s what he calls it; it’s more like a pretty dressed-up cage. But it’s mine, the only place I get a reprieve from Master and his associates. He never touches me in my room, always dragging me to the ‘playroom’ which is set up like a mix between a doctor’s office and a sex dungeon of horror. My only sense of peace is in this room, every time the door opens my stomach drops and I get sick to my stomach.

He pushes me inside the room. “I’ll see you tomorrow night,” he tells me and slams the door closed. I hear the locks click into place and peace fills me, knowing that I’m once again safe for a few hours. But he’ll be back again tomorrow. He always comes back. And then my pain will start all over. I should be used to this by now, I’ve been here for so long. I should have grown accustomed to the pain, the assaults. But I haven’t. Somehow I’ve held onto a glimmer of hope that this isn’t my forever, but every night when that door opens and Master summons me to come with him, that hope comes crashing down.

I need to go to the bathroom and take care of my back the best I can. First, though, I grab the sliver of chalk I earned for being obedient and make the fifth tally mark, completing this set of five. Stepping back, I look at the cement wall covered in tiny lines; my stomach drops in shock when I see I'm creeping on three hundred complete groups of five. That means I've been here being used as Master's plaything for four years.

It seems like decades ago that I was sound asleep in my bedroom, my mom and dad just down the hall. I woke up to a gloved hand being slammed over my mouth. My heart was beating out of my chest as my eyes tried to adjust to the dark and see who was in my room. Master taped my mouth shut, dragging me from my bed in only my pajamas, and down the hall to my parent's room. I'd never seen him before that night and still to this day, confusion fills me at why and how he chose me.

I tried to scream for them, but it was muffled from the tape. I was shoved against the wall across from the foot of my parent's bed. The light flipped on and my mom bolted upright, letting out a feral scream when she saw me and the intruder. Dad jerked awake, but Master was faster. He crossed to that side of the bed, and he and Dad began to struggle. I remember being thankful and proud that Dad was going to save me. But Master was better, faster, or maybe just trained in killing because he stabbed my dad in the throat and chuckled as he fell to the floor, bleeding out. It felt like my heart dropped out of my chest; my hero, my daddy, was dying on the floor. Mom screamed; the sound no doubt woke and alerted the neighbors, but it would be of no use. Master slit her throat too, dragged me from the house, and brought me right to this room. Just like that, I was an orphan, alone in the world without anyone to love or care for me.

He came the very next night to visit. Out of the one thousand four hundred sixty days I've been here, I could count on my fingers and toes how many nights he hasn't visited me. Thankfully, not all of those end in me being in some sort of physical pain. Sometimes there are no beatings, no assault. On those nights, I'm paraded around at parties like a show pony for his criminal friends or I dance as entertainment, and

sometimes I'm just the babysitter for all the other playthings he's acquired. The dancing nights are my favorite and sometimes the smile on my face is real. I shouldn't feel joy in those moments, but I do. Babysitting is the worst. I fear that if I ever do get out of here, I won't be able to live with myself for 'assisting' in Master's crimes. I've never had a choice, and the few times I did voice my disagreement about being an accomplice to his sick games, he gave me the scars on the bottom of each foot. The first time, I had the bottom of my foot whipped so much that the skin broke, and I couldn't walk. The next time, he put cigarettes out over and over again on the tender flesh of my other foot. I'm just trying to survive, so I do whatever I can to make it through this.

Tears fall freely from my eyes, crying silently as I turn the sink on, letting the water get as cold as it can before grabbing some toilet paper and separating the squares. I cup each square gently in my hand and set my hand, palm up, into the sink, letting the water cover the square. Then I stick each square to the concrete wall like wallpaper. Once I have enough to cover my back, I press my bare back against the wet paper, hissing at the sting from the cuts. When I'm finished, I grab my towel, thankful that I get a fresh one every day, and wrap it around me softly to dry the skin.

I pad into the cell and rip my nightgown from the shelf I set it on every morning. Sliding it on, I crawl into bed and pull my blanket up to my chin. Instinctively, I curl in on myself and close my eyes, envisioning a day when I wake up and I'm not in some musty, dark basement used as a toy for someone else's pleasure.



"Please! It hurts so bad," I screech as Master rips my shirt off over my head. The fabric scrapes against my back, and I scream at the pain. The last three days have been more painful than usual during his visits, and I think something is wrong with my back.

“You’re more vocal than normal, Sugar. Excited to see me tonight?” he coos as he steps toward me, wrapping his arms around me. His forearms touch my back and I cry out, squeezing my eyes shut tight.

“What the hell? Your skin is hot and sticky.” He pulls his arms away from me and curls a lip in disgust when he sees the pussy goo that transferred to his skin. Master grabs my shoulders, spinning me around so he can look at my back. “Why didn’t you take care of this so you didn’t get an infection? What am I going to do now?”

“I tried. I did everything that I normally do. I’m sorry,” I whisper. I pray he doesn’t hurt me more because I really did try. Usually my routine works, but luck wasn’t on my side this time.

He wraps his hand around my wrist and begins to drag me back down the hall to my cell. “You will be. I’ll have to go play with someone else tonight, and you know when I don’t get my Sugar, it’s worse for the others.”

My stomach somersaults at his words. I wish that I could be the one to handle him tonight because I’m the oldest and should try harder to protect the others, but I can’t. I’m in too much pain, and I’m exhausted. The need to lay in my bed for a nap overtakes me. Master shoves me into the cell and slams the door shut behind me. I stumble to the bed, collapse onto it, and hug my knees, instantly falling to sleep.

The next time I wake it’s to someone shaking my shoulders, causing me to screech in pain. I’m drenched in sweat, but I can’t stop shivering. “Master!” I cover my mouth as I cough and whimper at the feeling. My whole body feels stiff and fuck am I cold.

“I’ve got someone coming to tend to you. Thought about just letting this be your time, but then I watched one of our videos and was reminded of how good you are. My favorite little toy. So I’m gonna go against my better judgment and have my nurse come take a look at you. Don’t get any ideas though, Sugar. She’s been on my payroll for years, and while

she may not know what happens down here, she's loyal to a fault."

Honestly, I don't care if he leaves me here to die, or better yet, he could just take out his blade and end this for me now. That has to be better than this, better than the life I've lived for the last four years. What kind of person would work for this monster willingly? Be loyal to someone with his desires? I roll over to lie on my stomach and drift back off.

"Amber. Open your eyes for me, honey," a sweet voice calls, reminding me of my mom. I smile slightly before reality comes crashing down on me. I slowly blink my eyes open and see a short, slender woman with light brown hair and soft eyes kneeling at the side of my bed.

"I'm Tara. I came to take a look at your back and help you out. Can you roll over for me, so I can take a peek?"

It takes every ounce of energy I have to turn and face the wall, letting her see my backside. I don't miss the gasp that escapes her at the sight. "Oh, honey. Where did Mr. Krylova find you? Does he know who did this to you?"

Is Mr. Krylova Master's real name? I've only ever known him as Master. If he is the same person, we know two very different people. My parents didn't raise a fool, so I keep my mouth shut, knowing if I utter one word the fallout could mean my life and this woman's.

She washes my back, and I try but fail to stifle the whimpers and cries that leave me at the pain she is causing. "Some of these need to be stitched. You'll scar, but from the looks of things you're used to that, sweet girl."

If only she knew. It's a good thing I'll never get out of here because no one would want some damaged girl like me.

I'm about to tell her that it's okay when the door to my cell flies open, slamming into the wall behind it, startling me. "Mom! What the hell are you doing? No one is supposed to be down here you, know that. I've been loo—Oh!"

"Jagger! What are you doing down here? How did you find me?" Tara asks the young stranger standing at my door. I

can't see him, but I can tell by his voice and the smell of his cologne that he's young.

"The damn Find Me app. You're the one who insisted we get it on our phones. It led me straight to you. I broke about eight rules coming down here worried about you," Jagger sighs. "Who is this and what the fuck happened to her?"

Oh no, I hope she doesn't tell him anything. I don't need any issues from Master. *Please, God, let her just send him away.*

"Manners! She is right here and can hear you. I don't know what happened or who she is. Mr. Krylova asked me to take care of her, so here I am. You shouldn't be down here. If he finds out you're where you shouldn't be, not even Rook will be able to get you out of it," Tara scolds.

"Amber, sweetie, can you stand up for me? I just wanna make sure your back is the only area we need to treat while I'm here." She taps me gently on the shoulder, letting me know she's now talking to me.

Biting the inside of my cheek to hold back a scream from the burning pain radiating through my body, I roll over as gently as I can and watch her drop her thread and needle onto the tray beside her. My body is so used to pain that I didn't even feel her do the stitches. Slowly, I stand up, taking the sheet with me so Jagger doesn't see my breasts. I've felt enough embarrassment for one night.

Tara moves around my body, inspecting every inch of my skin, while I stand there in a stare-down with Jagger. His dark green eyes and brown hair are a stark contrast to one another. He's cute, and in another life, I might have flirted with him. But that life was a long time ago. Now I know if I'm caught even staring at him, the next visit Master makes will be bad, so I avert my eyes.

"Who did this to you?" he asks. I ignore him. "If you tell us, Mr. Krylova will take care of them. He's a powerful man."

I shudder at his words because if anyone knows how powerful he is, it's me. Jagger's mouth drops open, and I pray

that he missed my involuntary reaction to his question. Thankfully, my prayers are answered when Jagger begins to back out of the cell.

“I just came to tell you that I’m going out tonight. One last hurrah before I head back to college this fall.” He leaves the cell, and I breathe out a sigh of relief.

“Sorry about that, Amber. My son has a mind of his own, and he’s bullheaded. Please don’t tell Mr. Krylova he was down here and saw you. He’s my baby, even if he’s a pain in the ass,” Tara begs. I look into her eyes and see she is desperate to protect her son.

“I won’t,” I murmur.

“Thank you.” She gives me a small smile. “I cleaned your wounds and put some ointment on them. The stitches will dissolve on their own, and I’m going to leave some pills on the sink in the bathroom. Take one three times a day and the infection should clear up.”

“Thank you, Tara.” I sit on my bed before lying back down. I’m still exhausted and feel like I could sleep for days. Closing my eyes, I hear Tara cleaning up her supplies. She rubs a hand down my hair before I hear the door shut, and I know she’s gone.

If I was smart, I would have used the opportunity to get myself out of here. Tara could have called the police or maybe just given me some pills to end my life. Instead, I was complacent and set myself up for a lifetime of pain and torture. I’m so fucked in the head.

I doze off and dream about my life before this, when my biggest problem was if I would make the volleyball team or not. A jingling noise breaks me out of my sleep and fills me with dread. I crack an eye to see who is unlocking my door. If it’s Master, I’m going to fake sleeping still so hopefully he leaves me alone and lets me heal.

The door opens and standing there looking determined, and maybe a slight bit anxious, is Jagger.

## CHAPTER 2

This is a bad idea. A really fucking bad idea. But I have to. There's no way I can leave her here after seeing what he's done to her.

I know Krylova is a sick man, but fuck, is he in the skin trade? Is Amber one of the girls he plans on selling?

Doesn't matter because I'm not going to let it get to that point.

Heading back upstairs, I do my best to act like I saw nothing out of the ordinary.

We've been told that downstairs was off-limits. No one ever asked why because who the fuck would question a mafia boss?

So when I saw my mom's location on the app showing her down there, I had to go see why. Never in a million years did I expect to find her tending to a poor beaten and battered girl.

She shuddered at the mention of the boss when I asked her who did this to her, mentioning Krylova would take care of them. Don't ask me how, but I just knew at that moment it was him who did it.

Something inside me changed, and in the blink of an eye, so would my life. I don't even know this girl, but the need to save her, to care for her, and kill anyone who tries to hurt her again is too damn powerful.

When my mom emerges from the basement, I duck behind a statue. "Hello, Tara," a maid greets her. *Shit, I didn't even hear the maid coming.*

“Hello, Marie.”

They chat for a while. I stand there, just out of the camera’s range, trying my best to listen. Just as they finish up, ready to part ways, my mom mentions something about updating Krylova on some things. I tense, not wanting that monster anywhere near her. But when Marie mentions he’s already left for the night and has some business to attend to, meaning he won’t be back for a few days, I let out a sigh of relief.

That gives me time to figure out what the fuck I’m going to do when I get Amber out of here.

Mom leaves, but I stay close by, making sure no one else goes down there. Hours pass and in that time, I think up a plan. From the looks of Amber, she’s on the verge of death. The thought makes my stomach roll. I won’t let that happen. She looked almost septic, which works in my favor for what I have planned.

Knowing I’m going to need supplies, I slip away and go to the barrel room, grabbing some plastic tape before heading back.

“Hey, Jagger.” Rocky nods his head in greeting. “Another body to take care of?”

“Work is never done,” I chuckle. “Always someone who needs a bath.”

He lets out a hardy laugh. “Isn’t that true?” We say bye and I wait until he’s out of sight before heading to the basement door.

I make sure the camera gets a good view of my supplies before heading down the stairs so if anyone checks, they’ll see me carrying everything I need to dispose of a body. It’s cold, and smells so fucking bad down here. It feels like death. I don’t like it.

Walking down to the end of the hall where Amber is being kept, I put the plastic down next to the door before opening it, determined to get her out of here. Thankfully, the door was left

unlocked by my mom. I just hope this is what she wants. I'm a stranger, will she even come with me?

My eyes find the bed, and Amber looks up at me through sleepy eyes. She looks pale and sweaty, worse than when my mom was here to tend to her.

"What are you doing here?" she asks, voice cracking from exhaustion.

"About to do something crazy that might get me killed," I mutter, more to myself. Her eyes widen, and I sigh as I slip into the cell, closing the door behind me.

My nose wrinkles at the smell, but I quickly try to hide it, not wanting her to be hurt by my reaction. "Do you want to get out of here? If I told you I could save you, would you let me?"

Her eyes widen in fear. "But..." She looks over at the door.

Reaching out, I place my hand on her cheek. Her eyes dart back to me as she sucks in a breath. "Don't worry about him. I won't let anyone hurt you again. Come with me. Please." I don't know anything about her. Not how long she's been here, or who she is past her name. Hell, maybe she has Stockholm Syndrome. *Let's fucking hope not.*

"How?" she asks in the smallest voice I've ever heard.

"Well, I'm going to need your help with that. Amber, I'm no doctor, but from the looks of you and the wounds on your back, you're near sepsis. It's not a far fetch that you will die from it. And that's what we're going to tell anyone who asks."

"You're going to tell them I died?" her brow furrows. "But how will you get me out of here?"

Without saying anything, I get up, open the door to grab the plastic, and bring it into the cell. "This isn't going to feel the best, but I need you to let me wrap you up in this and take you to the barrel room. I'm going to put you in an empty barrel and make it look like I'm going to bring you to the disposal grounds. Krylova is out of town for a few days. He won't be back to check on you. This could work, but I need you to want this, to be willing to do whatever it takes to get out of here."

“Why?” she asks, her big blue eyes piercing my soul. She looks so broken, so sad, and fuck, I want to take that away from her. To see her smile and fucking laugh. To give her the whole world. I have no idea what the fuck is going on with me but this girl, this fucking girl is already driving me mad. “Why are you doing this, why save me?”

“Because, Angel.” I give her a soft smile. “You’re worth saving. All the best things are.”

Her eyes well with tears, and I use my thumb to wipe one that falls from her eye. “Shhh. No crying, love, I got you.”

Standing up, I set the plastic up on the ground. “Here,” I say, holding out my hand. “It’s time to go.”

She bites her swollen lip and nods her head, giving me the smallest of smiles that makes my heart fucking soar. I’ve never felt like this for another person before, and not someone I’ve known for less than twenty-four hours. But no one deserves this fucked up fate.

Anger fills me as Amber whimpers, pain visible on her face as she slowly moves. I help her, laying her down on the ground.

“I need to go on my belly. My back hurts too much.”

“Okay.” She gives me one last look before I wrap her up in the plastic, making it look like she’s a dead body. But I make sure there’s enough space for her to be able to breathe.

“Ready?” There’s a mumbled response that I’m going to take as a yes. Sliding my hands under her, I lift her and maneuver her until she’s slung over my shoulder.

“This will be over soon,” I promise her.

Then we’re off. I leave with her out of the cell, up the stairs, and out of the basement. I do my best to keep a stoic look on my face as if this was any other job of mine, getting rid of the dead bodies Krylova piles up.

I pass a few guys on my way out who nod to me in greeting. My heart pounds in my chest as we get further away from the main house.

I've never blinked when it comes to my job, never feared anything in this life. I've grown up in this world, it's all I know. But there's a part of me that fears we're going to get caught, and the surprising thing is, I'm not afraid of what might happen to me for breaking the rules and betraying the boss. No, I'm afraid of what might happen to Amber. If this is something Krylova does to his playthings, I don't want to see what he would do to someone who crosses him.

Discreetly, I take a quick look around to make sure we're alone, before I grab one of the empty barrels. There are no cameras in here, but there were some outside recording me bringing her in here, and I need cameras to see me leave with a barrel. "I need to put you in one of these barrels and put it in one of the trucks. It's only until we are away from the property, then I'll get you out," I tell her as I do my best to carefully place her into the barrel. I look down at her, her wide, fear-filled eyes peering back up at me. "We're almost there. You're almost free." It's not the whole truth. There's going to be a lot of things on my end to make sure I get her out of here and as far away from Krylova as I can. I'll clean her up, get her better, then help her start over with a new identity.

She nods, and I hate that I have to place the cover over her. I bring one of the trucks around and park it as close as I can. There's no acid in here, but I use the forklift to lift the barrel, just so the cameras capture that I did everything by the book.

Making sure to strap her in as good as I can, I take out my switchblade. "I'm going to cut a hole in the top, so you can breathe. Make sure your head's down." I try to say as loud as I can, so she can hear me, but not loud enough anyone nearby could. I give her a second before taking the blade and cutting a few holes in it.

"Alright, Angel. Time to go," I say into the opening before jumping down from the back and getting into the driver's seat.

The engine roars to life and the headlights flick on, lighting up the parking lot. Putting it in drive, I head toward the exit, my key card in hand, ready to scan.

Just as I get to the gate, one of the guards steps up, his hand held up to stop me. “Fuck,” I curse, grinding my jaw. Fucking Jimmy. Stupid, kiss-ass fucker. I hate him.

I stop the truck and roll my window down as he steps up to the vehicle. “Jagger,” he says, peering inside. “What are you doing working so late? You don’t have any runs scheduled.”

“I didn’t have any plans tonight and thought I’d get a head start on tomorrow night’s runs,” I lie.

“Really?” he asks, raising a brow. “You’ve never been one to put in any more effort than needed. Why now?”

*Fuck you, dick face. I work harder than your lazy ass.* “I’m going back to school next week. Won’t be back for a while, you know this. That means Ricky is taking my place in my absence. And we both know how long it takes him to do anything. Just making sure the boss has less to worry about. Don’t want to piss him off.”

“Good point,” he snorts. “Ricky is a useless fuck. Alright, get going. Later, Jagger.”

“Bye.” I nod and put the car in drive as the gate swings open.

Pulling out of the property, I take the back road and regret it instantly because of how bumpy it is. Fuck, Amber must be in so much pain. “Soon,” I whisper. “We’re almost there, Angel.”

I take the long way to one of our safe spots. I pull up into the empty lot and throw the truck in park before shoving the door open and running to the back. Once I get the back door open, I hop up and rip the top off the barrel. “Are you okay?” I ask her. No movement, no answer. “Fuck!” I quickly pull her out of the barrel and carefully lay her down, pulling the plastic off.

“Amber?” I brush the sweaty hair from her face. “Amber, open your eyes.” She lets out a whimper but that’s it. “We didn’t make it this far for you to die on me.” I scoop her up and bring her to one of my cars that I have stashed around the city, laying her down in the backseat before running back to

grab the plastic. I'll come back and deal with the truck when I know Amber is safe.



“Jagger, are you home?” my mom’s voice drifts through the house.

“Shit,” I murmur, jolting upright. I must have fallen asleep after I got Amber settled. My eyes fall to the sleeping angel in my bed. She’s hooked up to an IV of the strongest antibiotics I could find.

Her heart seems to be doing good from the last time I took her blood pressure. It’s a little low, but nothing to worry about. *Yet.* Her fever has lowered a little bit too.

For the first time, I’m glad I paid attention to my mom’s job. I’ve learned a lot over the years by watching her. Guess it’s come in handy.

“I’ll be back,” I whisper, brushing the hair from her face before leaning over to kiss her forehead.

Call me crazy, but she’s mine now. I won’t let anyone take her from me. She’s already completely taken over my mind, heart, and soon my soul.

Getting up from the bed, I head out of my room and find my mom in the hall. “Jagger, there you are...” Her eyes widen when she looks over my shoulder. “Jagger!” she gasps. “Please don’t tell me that’s Amber.”

“It is,” I say, crossing my arms and lifting my chin.

“Jagger, no!” She shakes her head. “The boss isn’t a good man and taking a girl from the house is going to get us killed.

“No, it won’t, I won’t let it.”

“She’s Krylova’s. He will know she’s missing! We need to take her back.”

I grab my mom’s shoulders, stopping her from going into my room. “I love you, Mom. You’re so fucking smart and

strong, but don't be stupid."

She tenses and glares up at me. "What are you talking about?"

"You and I both know she was going to die. She was practically dead when I went down to get her."

"I know." Her eyes fill with tears. "I tried. I tried to help her, but I wasn't given enough supplies. I'm not used to this. The men... they've never needed this much care before. Bullet and stab wounds are easier to deal with. If a man is this far gone, and they're not a higher-up, we just let them die."

I could tell not being able to help Amber like she wanted to, killed her inside. "Did you update Krylova on her status yet?"

"No, he was gone for the night and his cell was turned off. I didn't want to leave a message with details," my mom tells me.

"Good. When Krylova comes back and asks you how Amber is doing, you're going to tell him she died. She was too far gone when you went to see her. You did everything you could, but she died. Knowing she was dead, you then asked me to come and deal with the body. It's my job, so he'd call me in any way to deal with it. I'm on camera going downstairs and into her room, then I'm on there coming out with a body wrapped in plastic. I'm seen bringing her to the proper locations. I did everything I would do with a normal body. So if he asks to see her, her body is already disintegrated in a barrel and disposed of properly.

Mom chews on her lower lip as she looks back into my room. "Okay. That could work." She nods. "It really could. But Jagger," She looks back at me. "Why? Why did you do all of this? I know you have a good heart and are way too good for this life, but you also know when to stay out of the way. Why her?"

I sigh heavily and turn to look at my sleeping angel in the bed. "I can't explain it, Mom. But there's something inside me screaming that she's mine." I look back at my mom and her

face turns into a look of understanding. “It’s like I want to do everything I can to protect her. To care for her. To make sure she never feels that kind of pain again.”

“I’m so damn proud of you, baby.” She puts her hand on my arm. “She’s lucky to have you. I know you will take care of her. But I’m wondering how?”

“I’m still working on that part, but I’ll start by getting her a fake identity. But first I need to find out who she is. Where she came from. What her real name is. Does she have family missing her? Does anyone care if she’s gone?”

“It doesn’t matter if she does. She can never go back to them.”

“I know,” I sigh. “I’m bringing her back with me to school. It’s on the other side of the country, and I highly doubt that any of Krylova’s men know what she looks like. As long as we keep her away from Krylova, we should be fine.”

“What about Rook and Krew? What are you going to tell them?”

“That I was on a clean-up job and when everyone left, I heard her crying out for help. That I saved her and brought her with me. I’ll make up more of the story behind it, but I’ll worry about it later. One thing at a time.”

“Do you think lying to your best friends is a good idea? It’s risky.”

“You think I can just say ‘Hey, Rook, your dad had this girl locked up, on the verge of death, so I saved her and now she’s mine?’ It’s not that easy, Mom.”

“I know.” She gives me a pitying look. “It never is. Just be careful, okay?”

“I always am.”

Mom tells me she will be in to check on Amber soon, so I head back into the room, needing to be next to her. Crawling back into bed, I scoot closer to her. “Sleep, Angel. Get better. Because when you are, I have a whole new world to show you. I’m going to give it all to you. You deserve it.”

# CHAPTER 3

I've been drifting in and out of consciousness, just letting the IV do its job. Jagger said it was supposed to help the infection, and I had no choice but to trust him at this point. I don't have anywhere else to go, or anyone to turn to for help. Cracking an eye open, I peer around to see if he's in the room.

He's been with me almost nonstop since he brought me to his home. I didn't miss the few times I woke up to feel his warm body next to mine in the bed. His bed. I'm guessing it's his because the pillows smell of his cologne.

I don't see him anywhere, so I decide to try and sit up. It takes a couple of tries before I'm successful. My body is so weak, and the room spins with every move I make.

Moving my body slowly, I turn slightly, adjusting the pillows so that I can rest most of my back on them and hoping it alleviates some of the pain from the pressure. I scoot back, so only my shoulders are touching the headboard, while the rest of my back rests on the pillow. I'm not ready to risk relaxing my whole back against it yet. The sting of the pain from the infection is still fresh in my mind.

"Good morning, Angel," Jagger's voice says softly as he pushes open the door and steps inside the bedroom.

I look at him cautiously. As much as I want to trust him, I can't; so far, my life has taught me not to. No one can be trusted, especially someone who has ties to my master.

I need to stop calling him that. I'm not in his dungeon of horrors anymore. He's not my master. He's a monster that took

everything from me. God, I hope I never have to go back to that place or see him again. I'd kill myself first.

I'm praying that Jagger isn't playing some sick game with me or that Master didn't put him up to this to test my loyalty. If that's the case, then I'm a dead girl walking.

"You must be feeling better if you're awake and sitting up," Jagger says with a half smile. "I'll call my mom, so she can look at your back, if that's okay with you? Hopefully, she can also remove the IV. If you're going to stay awake, then you won't be needing IV fluids anymore. You should be able to take oral medication." He sets a plate on his dresser and heads back out the door.

I sit there just looking at the door, wondering if his mom will be the one to come back with him or if Master will come strutting in with an evil glint in his eye. The thought of seeing him again has my stomach turning and tears filling my eyes.

Tara comes into the room with a huge smile on her face. "Hi, Amber. Jagger told me you were awake. Can I check your back?"

I nod once, giving her permission. Slowly, I turn so that I'm sitting, legs criss-crossed on the bed with my back toward the edge. Tara comes around to the side of the bed and lifts my shirt. "Things are looking much better back here. The wounds are not so red and angry anymore. The swelling has gone down some, and I would feel comfortable removing your port if you think you're able to drink on your own. You can take penicillin orally to keep the infection at bay. If we find it's not working, then we can go back to the IV.

"Thank you," I murmur.

"You're very lucky, sweetie." She helps me move so that she can get a look at my port. "I did what I could in that place, but I don't think you'd be here if it wasn't for Jagger helping you escape. The infection went deep into the tissue and your bloodstream, giving you blood poisoning."

Tara slips the port from my skin and holds a cotton swab to the area before sticking a pink bandaid over the spot. "I don't

know what happened back at that house, but I know that my son is a good man, and he's risking a lot by taking you and sheltering you. Please, don't hurt him. He won't hurt you, I can promise you that; his momma raised him right." She smiles while giving me a wink, and I can't help the small giggle that leaves me.

Instantly, I slap a hand over my mouth and stare at Tara wide-eyed. I haven't giggled or smiled in years. Honestly, I didn't think I even remembered how.

"Do it again," a deep voice says from the door. I cut my eyes that way and Jagger is once again standing in the door eating whatever is on his plate. He must have grabbed it from the dresser when I was listening to his mom.

I quirk a brow at him, confused about what he means.

"That's the prettiest sound I've ever heard. Do it again."

*My giggle?* It wasn't even a full laugh, I don't think. I'm so used to Master saying my cries and screams are the prettiest sounds he ever heard, so it's hard to grasp that Jagger likes my small giggle.

"Well, I'm going to head off to work. You two be good and remember what I said, Amber. I'll be back to check on you tonight. Make sure you eat something now that you're up, and keep hydrated. Jagger, make sure she takes those antibiotics I left in the medicine cabinet." Tara walks across the room and pats Jagger's cheek as she passes him.

When she's gone, Jagger takes two large strides to the bed and sits down, leaning against the headboard next to me. "I brought you some food, if you're hungry."

"I'll try," I whisper. I don't want to feel so weary and shy around this guy, but I just can't help being worried about what his end goal is when it comes to me. Why would he risk everything to help me? I reach for the plate, but Jagger has other plans. He stabs a sausage link and holds it out to me on the fork. Slowly, I reach up take the link from the fork and take a bite. "Mmmm," I groan, as the maple bacon flavors burst across my tongue.

When I was in my cell, I was brought meals, but it was always a PB&J sandwich, soup, or oatmeal. Jagger holds out another link. I snatch this one quicker, shoving it into my mouth. “Easy, Angel. I’ll give you as much as you want. But we shouldn’t fill you up too quickly or you’ll get sick.”

“Okay,” I reply, while chewing my link.

“Here, try some eggs.” He holds out the fork again, this time I lean forward and wrap my lips around the fork, humming as I take the eggs into my mouth. Covering my mouth as I chew and swallow the eggs, I can’t help but feel surprised at my actions. Never would I share silverware with someone. “What do you want to do today?”

“Umm... do you think I could shower first? I feel and smell gross,” I ask in a hushed tone.

“Of course. The bathroom is down the hall to the left. I’ll show you and make sure you have everything you need.” He stands from the bed, sets the now empty plate on the bedside table, and holds a hand out to me.

I feel mean, but I ignore his hand and get off the bed as gingerly as I can. When I’m standing up, I start to slowly make my way toward the door. It doesn’t hurt as much as it did, but my skin is still tender when it pulls as I move certain ways.

With a weary look, Jagger heads out of the room and takes a right down the hall. The very next door on the left is the bathroom. I step past him into the bathroom and my breath hitches at how nice it is. Everything is a light cream color and the shower has a bathtub too. I haven’t taken a bath in years. “Sorry, it’s not much, but even though we make good money, Mom wanted to stay in our first home.”

“It’s amazing,” I whisper. Honestly, anything is better than the cell I called a room that was my home for so many painfully long years.

“Let me grab you some clean towels, and then you’re free to do whatever you need to do.”

I turn the water on in the shower to let it get warm. Jagger comes back a few seconds later with two huge fluffy towels in his hands. He sets them on the bathroom counter and closes the door, leaving me alone.

Carefully, I undress, dropping the clothing to the floor, and now that I actually can focus on them, I see they're not mine and the shorts are definitely boxers. Jagger or Tara must have dressed me in his things when I got here. I'll have to make sure to thank them and offer to replace them when I figure out what my next move is.

Holding onto the wall for support, I lift my leg and step into the tub. Moving, I shift under the hot spray, and water hits my back, making me collapse to the shower floor in a heap, my body still not as strong as I thought. The door flies open, and Jagger's standing there chest heaving, eyes wide. "Fuck, Angel." He turns the shower spray off, then pushes the plug down to stop the water from draining and the tub starts to fill.

"What are you doing?" I ask cautiously. I'm not too concerned about him seeing me naked because there's nothing I can do about it; plus, I'm used to it. But my scars, I don't want him to see them and be disgusted.

"I'm going to help you take a bath." His face is a mask of concern. "No funny business, just helping you clean up. Is that okay? I don't want you to push yourself."

"I-I-I guess." I watch as he lowers himself to the floor beside the tub. I lean my shoulders back against the tub and wince as I slowly sink into the water, so he can't see my full back. I know he saw me in the basement, but there was blood, and swelling, and I'm sure he was focused on the open pus-filled wound taking up most of the space. The scars would have been harder to see in the dim light of my room.

Grabbing a cup from under the sink, he starts to dump it delicately over my dark brown strands. Once everything is wet, he squeezes some shampoo in his hands and starts to lather it into my hair. I groan at the feeling of his fingers massaging my scalp.

“Angel, you got to stop making noises like that for such small things. Feeding you and washing your hair is no big deal. I want to take care of you.”

“It’s a big deal to me,” I tell him, tears filling my eyes. “It’s been a long time since anyone has been nice to me.” I feel like I’m going to wake up and be back in hell. This is all too good to be true. Why, after all these years do I deserve better? There has to be some sort of catch. It can’t be this easy.

“How long were you down in that basement?” he asks. A dark look takes over his face, as the mention of the basement angers him.

I scrunch my face up not wanting to answer, but he deserves to know the truth.

“If my tally marks on the wall were right. Four years.”

“What the fuck!” he shouts, causing me to jump. “Shit, sorry Angel.” He lets out a harsh breath, running a hand through his dark locks. “I just wasn’t expecting that high of a number. I thought maybe a week or so, a few months tops, and that would be bad enough, but years?” He shakes his head. “How old are you anyway?”

“Twenty,” I sigh as he rinses the shampoo from my hair.

“You’re only a year younger than me. And Krylova did this to you?”

“I’m guessing Krylova is the same man who took me, but he made me call him master. I don’t know him by any other name,” I inform him, even though in my gut, I know they are one and the same.

“When you get out of the tub. I’ll show you a picture. I’m sure they are the same person, and I don’t wanna hurt you by seeing him again, but I have to know if it was him or not. ”

“Okay.”



Jagger and I are sitting on the couch as he flips through Netflix looking for something to turn on. He asked me what I wanted to watch, but I haven't watched anything in years so I have no clue what's even out. I'm in another one of his shirts and boxers. He put the other set of his things in the washer with his bedding.

I tried to help him strip the bed and get the sheets to the washer, but he scooped me up like I weighed nothing and brought me to the living room. He then got me a glass of water and some crackers and cheese for a snack while he finished up.

"Wanna watch a TV show instead of a movie?"

"Sure," I say softly, snuggling into the blanket Jagger covers me in.

"I think you might like this one," he says as the beginning credits begin. It's called *Ginny and Georgia*. I have no clue what it's about, but I'll see if I like it.

"You okay if I show you that photo now? Remember, I just need to know for sure that it was him who's been hurting you. I promise, you won't have to see his face ever again. Can you do that for me, Angel?"

"Yeah. I can do that," I tell him, my belly flipping with a sick feeling. He pulls out his phone and his finger swipes across the screen a few times before he turns the screen around for me to see. "Is this the man who hurt you? The man you call Master?"

My stomach revolts, and my mouth dries up as my body shivers. "Yeah," my voice cracks as tears fill my eyes. "That's him."

"God dammit!" he curses, tossing his phone onto the coffee table and running a hand through his hair roughly.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, hating that I made him upset

He looks at me, his face softening. "You don't have anything to be sorry for. I'm gonna be honest with you, Angel, because I need you to trust me to keep us both alive. I work for Krylova, and he's a very powerful man. While we all know

he's into bad shit, I never thought he'd have someone locked in his basement as a sex slave."

I figured that Jagger worked for him or with him in some way. It's the only way he would have been able to get into the basement. I've never had visitors to my cell before, only in the main area or when I'm taken off the property through tunnels and back doors. While it makes me cautious that he could work for a man like that, I don't get the sense that Jagger would hurt me as Master did.

I need to stop calling him that. He no longer has me. I'm not *his* anymore. Jagger saved me. I'm free.

"First things first, I'm leaving to go back to college in a few days, across the country in Washington. I have an apartment there, and I would like for you to come with me. We'd be driving there and you'd be able to live with me." He takes a seat on the arm of the couch, bringing one hand up to cradle the side of my face. "I'll take care of anything you need. If you want to just heal and disappear, I'll help you do that, but I hope you'll choose to stay with me. We can't risk you going back to your old life. We can't risk him finding out you're still alive." He worries his bottom lip when he finishes, and I look at him, really taking in his face and features.

I can hear the sincerity in his voice, and I feel safe when I'm with him. I can't explain it, but I do. On the other hand, I still have to know why; why me? Why not some other poor girl who won't put his life at risk by being associated with her?

"Why do you want to help me? Why didn't you just see me with your mom and leave me to my fate?"

His eyes dart back and forth between mine, and I feel butterflies take flight in my belly. That's a new feeling for me, usually dread is all I feel when the man's gaze is on me.

"Honestly, I don't know. I'm not a good guy, Angel. Not even a little bit. My job is literally disposing of bodies for Krylova and doing runs with him. I've known him my whole life. But when I saw you down there, I knew I had to have you,

to help you. It's like when I saw you, I knew you were supposed to be mine."

"I don't want to belong to anybody anymore. I just wanna be me," I tell him and a tear escapes my eye, trailing down my cheek.

"Not like that, Angel," he growls.

I don't know what to say to that. The thought of being his is scary, but also comforting with how he's describing it. Jagger being mine sounds really good. I could use someone in my corner, someone to fight for me and protect me.

"I'll come with you," I tell him.

Jagger pumps his fist in the air, "Yeeees!" I giggle again at how excited he is, but he quickly morphs back into his serious and stoic persona. "Well, if you're going to move across the country with me, we're going to need to get you a new name. Amber is what Krylova knows you as, and while he's going to be led to believe you're dead, I'd rather not take any chances. So, any ideas on a new name?"

Leaning back against the couch, I close my eyes and think about what I'd like my name to be. I'm going to miss Amber only because it's the last connecting piece I have to my parents. But I don't want to take any chances of ending back up in Master's presence, so I'll part with it. Maybe Jagger can help me find some pictures of my parents or see what happened to their house and belongings.

"Story."

"Huh?" Jagger turns to look at me, a brow raised like I'm crazy.

"I want my name to be Story. This is the first chapter of my new life and my story is just beginning. So Story is my choice," I tell him, already in love with the new name. It's fun and meaningful and way different than Amber.

"Story Williams. Williams is a popular last name, so it won't raise any flags. Is that okay with you?"

“Yeah, I like that. What about a middle name, though? Shouldn’t I have a middle name?” I ask, thinking I should. I mean, don’t most people have middle names? What would I put if someone asks for a middle initial or something?

“Yeah, okay, sure. What are you thinking?”

“You pick. You’re helping me and keeping me safe, I want you to choose it,” I tell him, and I see his eyes widen, his mouth parting in shock.

He copies my silence for a minute before he speaks again. “Grace. You move with grace and your voice is soft. Story Grace Williams.”

“I like it.” I smile softly at him.

“Good. I’ll call a guy I know and get the ball rolling on new IDs and legal documents so no one will ask questions. We’ll pick them up on the drive. For now, let’s watch TV. Tomorrow we’ll pack and head to your new home.”

# CHAPTER 4

It's been a week since I saved Amber. Sorry, Story. The first few days had me on edge. I hated seeing her so weak. But when she started to respond to the antibiotics, I could breathe a little easier.

This girl has quickly become the center of my life. My fucking heart. The only thing I want to do is make sure she's safe, loved, and cared for. I refuse to have her leave my side, so I'm bringing her with me.

I have a plan for what I'm going to tell the guys when I show up with her. And I'm leaving Krylova out of it. As much as Rook hates his father, I'm not sure how he would react to what I did with one of his father's playthings or the repercussions we could face for my actions.

It makes me fucking sick to think of all the stuff he did to Story. I saw the scars on her back. She's embarrassed by them, and I can understand why. But I don't think they take away from her beauty. They add to it. They show just how fucking strong she is and all the horrors she had to endure. At the end of it all, she survived. She overcame everything that asshole threw at her. And she will continue to do so with me by her side.

She won't ever have to go back to that life. Story hasn't opened up much about the details of what happened while she was in that basement, just thinking about it made her look physically ill. Seeing the way her body reacted each time I asked made me stop questioning her about it anymore. When she's ready, I know she'll share the details with me.

I do know a bit about her past. The way she smiles when she talks about her parents and her childhood is everything. Then I see the moment she remembers her parents are dead. When she told me what Krylova did, it took everything in me not to go back to his place and put a fucking bullet through his head.

But I can't. I can't do anything that would risk Story's safety.

I'm already in hot enough water with Krylova. Mom was going to tell him herself the story I fabricated, but I know that man has a temper, and I couldn't make her face it alone. We went together, and when he demanded to know where Story was, Mom told him that despite everything she did for the wounds on Story's back, the infection had already advanced too far causing blood poisoning, and she died before the antibiotics could do their job.

He asked why I was in the basement, and I told him that I went looking for my mom and wanted to make sure she was okay when I realized that she was down there. He beat me for it. Fucking hurt too. But I took my punishment without a word.

He saw me on the cameras disposing of Story's body. That one I took the blame for, said it was my idea because it's my job to dispose of the bodies.

Then he said something that had me seconds away from pulling my gun on him. The anger all but slipped from his face, and was replaced with a cruel smirk as he said. "It's probably for the better. She was getting too old for me anyway." Then he sent us on our way.

My mom had to grab my hand and squeeze it tightly in warning, to keep me from losing my shit as she pulled me out of the room.

I'm glad we're leaving today. I'm not expected to be back here until next summer. By then, the plans the guys and I have been making for the past few years should already be set in motion; better yet, completed.

“Hey, Angel.” I step into my room, where I find Story sitting on my bed, looking out the window with a duffle bag filled with everything I bought for her so far. I’ll get her more when we get to Seattle. But for now, she has the basics for clothes and toiletries. “You ready to go?”

She turns her head toward me and bites her lip. “I’m afraid.”

I walk over to her until I’m towering above her and cup her face in my hands. She sighs happily and closes her eyes as she leans into my touch. “Why? You have nothing to be afraid of. Not when you’re with me.”

“I know,” she whispers, opening her eyes. Her hand covers one of mine. “I trust you.” Fuck, hearing her say that feels fucking amazing. For her to trust me, after everything that’s happened to her, is a big deal. “It’s just. I.. I haven’t been in the real world for a long time. I’m not sure how to really live anymore.”

“We’ll learn together, okay?” I smile down at her.

“Okay.” She smiles and fuck do I ever love the sight.

Grabbing her hand, I pull her to her feet as I pick up her bag and sling it over my shoulder. I know we could have flown, but it’s too public, with too many cameras. Also, this way I get more one-on-one time with her before life goes back to being complicated.

Because of our delay in getting back, by the time we get there, I will have only one day before classes start back up. I wish I could give Story more time to get settled in, but I already had to pull a lot of strings to get her into this online high school and get the college administration to let her tag along to each class. I don’t want to start the year by missing the first few days of classes.

Rook and Krew have been texting me nonstop, asking where I am and what the hell is taking me so long to get back. I hate lying to my best friends, but fuck, everything is so damn complicated. And not just with Story. But also between me and Rook.

We've fucked around, but I want more. He said we can't because of the life we live. If his dad finds out, we're dead. *Literally*. We've seen his dad put a bullet through men's heads just for the simple fact that they were gay. It makes me fucking sick. This whole life does. I hate it. But it's the world I grew up in, it's all I know.

And now I have Story. No matter how I feel about Rook, she's *mine*.

"You two have a safe trip and call me if you need anything," Mom tells us as she pulls Story in for a hug.

"Thank you. For everything. You have no idea how much everything you did means to me." Story looks at my mom with glassy eyes before turning them my way. "What you're still doing for me."

"Hey." I reach up and wipe the tears from her eyes. "No tears, okay? And you don't need to thank me for anything, Angel. It's me and you against the world."

She smiles up at me. Every time she does, I'm reminded just how far I'll go for this broken soul.

If we were in a perfect world, I'd take Story to someone who could help her process her trauma. Because even though she seems to be adjusting, I know it won't last for long. Something is going to trigger her, and everything will hit her all at once.

I'd hide her away, just the two of us together; if I could. But *I can't*. Rook runs things in Seattle for his dad, and Krew and I are his right-hand men.

You think Krylova leaves a lot of bodies in his path? Yeah, he doesn't have anything on his son. Meaning, my job is never-ending.

Rook is what some might call trigger-happy. Sometimes it's something as simple as looking at him the wrong way. *We're working on that*.

"Take good care of her," Mom tells me. "And please, be careful."

“I will, Mom,” I answer to both while I give her a long hug. “And don’t let Dad get away with any of his bullshit when he gets back.”

Krylova has him running around the fucking country doing his bidding and I hate it. With me being gone for school, it leaves my mom alone most of the time. I don’t trust these fucking assholes. If any of them touch her, I won’t hesitate to fly back here and end them.

Once we get settled into the car, I make sure Story is comfortable and not in any pain. “You good? Are you hungry, thirsty?”

“I’m fine, Jagger,” she giggles, giving me the sweetest of smiles. “Thank you.”

“Are you sure?” My brows furrow. “If you need anything, just let me know, okay? Anything.”

“I will.” She takes my hand and squeezes it. “Let’s go. I think it’s time you show me the world.”

I can do something better than showing her the world, I’ll give it to her too.



“Hey, Angel,” I coax, softly waking Story up. “We’re gonna grab some gas and something to eat. Stretch our legs, okay?”

“Oh.” She blinks up at me, half asleep. “Okay.” She looked so peaceful sleeping, but it’s been a while since we stopped.

Getting out of the car, I go around to her side and open the door. She pulls the blanket off of her and tosses it in the back before slipping on her sneakers.

She takes my hand and lets me help her out of the car. I’m quick to tuck her into my side, wrapping a protective arm around her.

I’m on high alert. This stop isn’t busy, only a few cars in the parking lot, but I’m not taking any chances. Story doesn’t

seem to mind as she wraps her arms around me, hugging me close. I smile and kiss the top of her head.

Who knew I'd end this summer with a... a girlfriend? *Is that what she is?* No, she's much more than that to me. She's my girl, my *world*.

Fuck, the guys are never going to let me live this down with how head-over-heels I am. Hell, I'm not even sure what Rook's reaction is going to be. But when Story gasps, looking up at me with wide eyes filled with excitement, I don't even care.

"Candy," she whispers.

"Want some?" I ask, leading her to the rack.

"No. It's okay. I don't want you to waste your money on me. You have already done so much."

"Angel," I growl low. She looks up at me with her big blue eyes, biting her lower lips. My cock twitches, and I curse myself because I shouldn't be thinking of her like this, not yet. Not with everything that's been done to her. I need her to know I want her for her, not her body. "Money isn't an issue, trust me. So never think twice about asking me for something you want. It's yours."

She looks back at the candy and tentatively grabs the peach rings. "These."

Smirking, I reach over and grab one bag of every kind.

"Jagger," she whispers, eyes widening.

"We'll share." I wink, making her blush. *Relax, Jagger.* Now is not the time to have a fucking stiffy. We're in the middle of a truck stop for fuck's sake.

We grab some drinks and corner store sandwiches. After everything is paid for and put in a bag, I turn to her. "You need to use the bathroom? We can eat outside at the picnic tables."

"Yeah." She nods her head. "And I'd like that. I like being outside. The sun feels nice on my skin, and the air doesn't hurt to breathe."

My hands flex in anger, but I hide my reaction. I need to. Her past isn't just going to go away, and I need to be there for her. I can't let it get to me, no matter how mad it makes me.

We walk over to the bathrooms, and as she goes to step inside, I stop her. "Let me make sure it's clear." The amount of stories I've heard about sick men hiding in women's bathrooms and kidnapping women or children is fucked up. I'm not risking it with Story. She nods, and I push the door open, taking a quick look around. Once I deem it safe, she slips in while I stand guard.

The bell to the store chimes, getting my attention. I'm immediately on guard when I see some greasy fucker walk in, looking the girl at the cash register up and down. He licks his lips, and I sneer. He looks to be in his fifties, while the girl is easily in her early twenties. If she works here, I'm sure she's used to creeps. What has me pissed off is that she shouldn't be working here alone.

"All good." Story's sweet voice has me looking away from the man and over to her pretty face.

"Come on, Angel. Let's get you fed." She gives me a beaming smile as I wrap my arm around her shoulder.

The whole time we eat, I can't take my eyes off her. I hate how she takes every bite like it might be her last. She's skinny, too skinny. Not that it looks bad, but it's not healthy.

The first few days, she ate the food I gave her, but she had trouble keeping it down. She told me what she was being fed and it's no wonder. Her stomach isn't used to having real sustenance.

"We better get going before it gets dark. I'm going to get us a hotel. I don't want you sleeping in the car longer than you need to."

"Okay." She smiles.

"I just need to take a piss," I groan, realizing I've been putting it off. "I'll be right back. Stay here," I tell her, planning on going behind the bushes next to the picnic table.

“You’re going to pee outside,” she asks me with a surprised look.

“Perks of being a man, baby.” I chuckle. “It will be quick.”

I keep my eyes on her as long as I can, only turning them for a few seconds to pee, making sure I don’t get any on myself. After I’m done, I give it a good shake before tucking myself away.

When I look back to the picnic table, I don’t see Story. Panic and fear fill me as I scan the parking lot. It doesn’t take me long to find her. She’s standing by the garbage. The fucker from inside is talking to her, and the fear on Story’s face has my lip peeling back. I charge over there, my hand grabbing my pistol from my holster, and flicking the safety off. Finger on the trigger, I place the barrel of the gun to the back of the fucker’s head.

“Step the fuck away from her,” my voice is low and deadly.

“Hey there, buddy. I was just chatting with the lady. No need to get hasty.”

“I have every fucking need to be *hasty*. She doesn’t want to talk to you. So I suggest, if you don’t want me to blow your fucking brains out, you’ll leave right fucking now.”

He grumbles something but takes off running like the little bitch he is. If there hadn’t been witnesses, I would have pulled the trigger, ending his life, just like Rook would have.

“I’m sorry.” Story lets out a sob. “I just wanted to help by putting the garbage in the trash.”

“Fuck,” I whisper, putting the safety back on and putting the gun back in my holster. “Shhh, Angel.” I pull her into my arms, and she presses her face against my chest, holding me tightly. “You have nothing to be sorry about.”

“You told me to stay put. I didn’t listen. Please, I’m sorry. I won’t do it again. Just don’t hurt me.” Her cries break my fucking heart.

I stiffen, taking a few deep breaths to make sure I'm calm when I say the next words.

"Story, Angel, look at me." She pulls back enough to look up at me, her eyes are red and wet. "I will never, ever lay my hands on you like that. Do you understand? And if anyone else tries. I will kill them."

"You're not mad at me?" She blinks her long lashes.

"Never. I could never be mad at you, baby." I lean down and kiss her, needing her to know just how much I mean it.

She stills in my arms, and for a moment I feel like I pushed her too far. But a second later, she moans, wrapping her arms around my neck and pulling me closer. I keep it soft and sweet, not wanting to push it, but when I pull back, she's out of breath, and her eyes are filled with lust.

"Wow," she says in a breathy tone. "I've never been kissed like that."

The corner of my lips tilt up. "I plan on doing that more often. If you're okay with it."

She smiles, a little giggle slipping free as she nods her head. "Yeah. I'd like that."

"Come on, Angel." I take the trash from her hands and toss it in the bin. "Let's get going."

When we're back out on the road, I turn the music down and ask her. "Did I scare you back there?"

She turns her attention from watching out her window to look at me. "Scare me? Why would you have scared me?"

"The gun, threatening to kill that man."

She takes a moment to think before shaking her head. "No. I've seen much worse at the hands of your boss and his friends; people who would turn that anger on me at the drop of a dime. You said you would never hurt me, that anger wasn't for me. If that's the case, then nothing you do could ever truly scare me."

I take her hand, lacing her fingers with mine. “You’re never in danger when it comes to me, Angel.”

A few hours later, we check into a hotel for the night. I hate waking her up, but I don’t want to leave her in the car to go get our room keys. She leans into me, half asleep and using me for support. The moment I get the keys, I shove them in my back pocket and scoop her up.

She doesn’t protest, giving me a sleepy smile. She’s out by the time we reach our room. I place her in the bed, pulling her shoes off as well as my own before getting in next to her.

I lay there like a fucking creep and watch her peaceful face as she breathes softly. “Angel, what have you done to me?” I murmur, brushing the dark strands of hair out of her face. “Never did I think a girl could make me feel the way you do. Or maybe I was just waiting for the one who was worth feeling all this for. You’re worthy of it, Story. Baby, you’re so fucking worth it.”

# CHAPTER 5

## STORY

The rest of the drive to Seattle was uneventful. We got back on the road first thing in the morning after staying at the hotel. Once again, Jagger held my hand the whole drive here. He is so sweet and gentle with me, but I remember that he told me that he's not a good guy and disposes of bodies for a living. I'm not sure what that entails, but I can use my imagination. The guy talking to me at the truck stop showed me that Jagger is honest when he says he won't let anyone hurt me again. I just hope that as time goes on, he means himself as well.

I'm not sure what I did to deserve someone like Jagger, but I'm not complaining. More than anything, I dreamed and prayed to get out of that basement, and now that I am, I'm not looking back.

"Angel, we're here. Are you ready to head inside?" Jagger's voice breaks through my thoughts, and I look up at the large white house. I thought he said he had an apartment. This is a whole house. I look at him confused and then back out the window.

"Are you alright, Story?"

"Yeah," I whisper. "You said an apartment, but this looks like a huge house. It's too much, Jagger."

"It's a condo. Just the left side is mine. The right is someone else's. We have three bedrooms. You can have one all to yourself," he reassures me, and I nod at him.

Getting out of the car, I follow Jagger around to the trunk and watch as he grabs both of our bags with one of his hands.

He uses the other one to take mine in his large tattooed grasp before leading me up the steps to the door.

Not letting go of my hand, he holds his thumb up to the handle. The door beeps before I hear the lock turn, and he pushes the door open. That's fancy. *I've not seen something like that before.* "I'm going to get your thumbprint programmed for the door as well, so you can get in even if I'm not with you."

He sets our bags down by the door and leads me further into the condo. "This is the living room and the kitchen is through there." He points to the left. "Down the hall is the office and bathroom. Let's go upstairs, and I'll show you to your room." I look around, trying to take in every detail I can as we head up the stairs to the second floor. "These two bedrooms on the left are empty so you're welcome to choose whichever one you want." He faces me and takes a step forward, forcing me to tilt my head back to look up at him. I bite my lower lip as he tucks a stray lock of hair behind my ear. "My room is the master on the right. I hope you don't mind, but we share a bathroom. If not, I'll use the one downstairs," Jagger says, voice low and husky, making my belly tingle at his tone.

"No, we can share the bathroom." My heart beats a little faster with how he's looking at me. "I don't want to put you out. If I'm in there, I can lock the door." It's not like he hasn't already seen me in the tub. I'd like to believe he hasn't seen my scars, but I know he probably has. At least the ones on my back. The others are in places that are harder to see.

"Let's get your bag in your room, then I want to take you out to eat. After that, we can get some nicer things for you to wear."

I shake my head. He's already done so much. "You already bought me clothes and anything else I could need. I don't need more. You've done enough," I tell him firmly. I appreciate everything he's done, but he bought me some pajamas, shirts, and pants. I don't need anything else. I'll never be able to pay him back, so I don't want my bill to keep getting higher.

He lightly takes my chin between his fingers, holding my gaze. “Story, listen to me. Tomorrow, I start classes, and you’re coming with me. I bought you the basics to survive, but I want you to thrive. It’s college, so I want to take you to the mall and let you pick some nicer things *you* like.”

“I won’t ever be able to pay you back,” I whisper as my eyes start to water.

He wipes a stray tear with his thumb. “You don’t have to. I don’t expect you to ever pay me back. I want to do this, and so much more, for you.” He smiles softly.

We head back downstairs. While Jagger heads to use the bathroom, I grab my bag and head back upstairs to put it in one of the extra rooms. I pick the one with the big bed and lots of pillows.

Pulling the toiletry bag out, I bring it to the bathroom across the hall, so I can put everything away, where it goes. I might not have had much in that little cell, but what I did have, I made sure everything was in its place. It made me feel like I had control over something in my life.

“Story!” Jagger’s voice calls from downstairs, and I don’t miss the hint of panic.

“Up here!” I call out as I head back down. I find him standing at the bottom of the stairs, his eyes wide for a brief moment. But they quickly go back to his normal stoic expression when he sees I’m fine.



Jagger takes me to a little place for lunch called Concord. We order some burgers and fries with ranch, bacon, and cheese on them. I can’t remember the last time I had something so tasty. I eat until I think I’m going to burst, not knowing when the next time I’ll be able to eat like this again. After Jagger insists, we still head to the mall. When we get there, I’m instantly overwhelmed with how crowded and busy it is.

I have a death-like grip on Jagger's hand as he pulls me along to the first store. I want to make him happy, but I don't want to be here.

Thankfully, inside the store, the music is soft and the lights are dim. "Pick out anything, Angel. If you see it and like it, we'll get it."

Hesitantly, I peruse the racks, grabbing a few pairs of jeans and leggings. I'm still not used to wearing things like these because I was always forced to wear that night dress.

"Do you want to try those on?" he asks, pointing to the clothes in my arms. I know I should. After all these years, I have no idea what size I am anymore.

I don't want to have to make him take another trip if they don't fit, but I'm not comfortable taking my clothes off in a strange place. "Is it okay if I don't?"

His face softens, as if he knows my reason for saying no. "Of course, Angel, it's fine. I'm sure I know your size anyway, so these should be fine." He assures me, taking the clothes from my hands and heading to the checkout.

I'm trying to be strong for Jagger, but with all of these people, it's a lot. I cling to him as we hit a few more stores, filling bag after bag with clothes.

Jagger turns to me with a playful grin. "Close your eyes, Angel."

"What? Why?" I giggle, making him smile wider.

"Trust me?" he asks, his eyes flicking between mine.

"Always."

He winks at me before I close my eyes. I let him guide me around the store, making sure not to peek.

"Okay, you can open now." I blink my eyes open and look at what's in his hand. It's an all-black bag, and he's being very secretive about the contents. I don't pry, though, worried about angering him.

“Want to do anything else?” he asks me as we step outside the store.

“Would you mind if we leave?” I ask, looking around.

“Fuck,” he curses, making my eyes dart back to his. “I didn’t even think. Fuck, Story, Angel, I’m so sorry. This must be all so overwhelming for you.”

“It’s okay. I did have fun, really. But I do want to leave,” I say softly.

“Come on, baby, let’s go.”

Jagger tucks me under his arm, leading me back to the car. When we get home, he carries all the bags up to my room minus his top-secret one, and leaves me to put my new things away. I ended up bringing home jeans, leggings, sweaters, t-shirts, and dresses. I’m excited to try everything on and see what I look like.

By the time I’m done getting everything put away and I’ve picked out an outfit for tomorrow, I look out the window to find that it’s dark out.

I’m going to college tomorrow. *College!* I’m not attending for credit, but I plan on working on my online classes while I’m there. I’m determined to get my diploma no matter what.

“Story.” Jagger pops his head in the room. “It’s almost eleven and my class starts at eight, so we better get to bed. Are you alright? You’ve been up here for a while.”

“Yeah, I’m fine. I just finished putting my stuff away.” I give him a soft smile. “Thanks again. I’m gonna go to bed too.”

He steps into the room and wraps his arms around me before kissing my forehead. “Night, Angel.” Being in this man’s arms is the safest I’ve felt in so long. I almost don’t want to let go.

“Night.”

He hesitates for a moment, like he doesn’t want to leave, before he steps out of the room and shuts the door softly as he goes.

I change into some pajamas, then climb into my bed. Closing my eyes, I try to fall asleep, but it never comes.

Rolling over, I look at the clock and see it's one in the morning. Sleep isn't coming and the only thing I can think of is that in the short time we've been together I've grown used to sleeping next to Jagger. We shared a bed at his place, then again in the hotels we stayed at on our trip here.

But if he wanted to continue sharing a bed, he wouldn't have made it a point to give me my room, right? *Maybe he wants his space back?*

I don't like that. I don't like the idea of space. I've had nothing but space for years when I wasn't forced to be in the same room as that monster.

Warring with myself, I give up, throw the blanket off of me, and roll out of bed. On my tiptoes, I traipse to Jagger's door. Slowly, I push it open and see him lying on his bed, shirtless; his tattooed skin on display. He's stunning. "Jagger?" I whisper, inching closer. He doesn't answer so I try again, a little louder this time. "Jagger." But still nothing.

Taking a deep inhale and finding some courage, I move to the bed and slide under the covers. Instantly, Jagger's broad arm curls around me, pulling me closer to him. I freeze for a moment before letting out a content sigh and closing my eyes as I settle in his embrace.



Warm lips on my temple rouse me from my dream. "Angel, we gotta get up and get ready for class."

"Okay," I groggily reply. Then it hits me that he woke up to find me in his bed, uninvited at that. My eyes open, and I turn my head to look at him sheepishly. "Sorry, I came into your bed. I couldn't sleep. I tried to wake you, but you were dead to the world."

"Story. Angel. Baby," he chuckles, deep and sexy. He wraps an arm around me once more, and I look into his pretty

eyes. “You are welcome in my bed anytime you want. No invitation is needed.”

“I did try to sleep in my room, but I kept thinking of master. As soon as I got in here, I was out.”

“Story,” he grinds out through clenched teeth. I wince knowing that I angered him. I look at him, tears welling in my eyes, ready to accept my punishment. “Shit, baby, don’t cry. But you need to stop calling him Master. He is not your master and never will be again. Call him Krylova or better yet don’t speak of him at all. He is nothing to you anymore. I’m not mad, I just don’t like you calling him that. It’s disgusting he ever made you do such a thing, to begin with.”

Closing my eyes, I nod, taking a deep breath. “Okay. I’ll try to stop. Sometimes it just slips out though, out of habit.”

“That’s alright, Angel. Get ready and I’ll meet you downstairs for breakfast.” He kisses my temple before getting out of bed. Sliding out of the warm, comfy bed, I head back to my room and change into what I’m hoping is a good first-day-of-my-new-life outfit. *What do girls even wear nowadays?* I’m so out of the loop. I should use the phone Jagger got me to search online and learn a little bit more about how this new world I’m in works.

A small smile finds my face when I look in the mirror and take in how I look. I chose a black long-sleeve shirt with a brown suede pinafore skirt and some black ankle boots. My belly flutters and my heart races briefly as shock fills me that the girl, or should I say the woman, that I’m staring at in the mirror is me.

Using the little bit of makeup I got from the mall, I coat my lashes in some mascara, and put some lip gloss on. This will have to do for now.

Needing to do something with my hair, I comb through my dark locks. As I get to the kitchen, Jagger is at the table with a bowl of cereal in front of him and nods to the chair across from him where there is an empty bowl. “Eat. I don’t want you going hungry.”

As I pour myself some Captain Crunch and milk, he starts to talk. “So today, while we’re on campus, I want you to stay close to me. I have you coming with me to all my classes to sit through, but you can wear headphones and work on your diploma while we’re there.”

“Okay.” I nod. I don’t want to be away from him, so I don’t mind.

“Also, my best friends go to this University too. You probably won’t see them today, since they’re busy. I don’t want you to worry about them. They won’t hurt you. I’ll make sure of it.”

“Okay,” I say again around a mouthful of sugary cereal.

When we’re done eating, Jagger grabs two backpacks from the closet in the hall and then grabs my hand, pulling me behind him as we exit the condo.

As we walk across the campus, I’m overwhelmed with how big this place is and how many people are all around. Anytime someone tried to talk to Jagger or ask about me, he glared at them, making them scurry in the other direction.

Fundamentals of Accounting is boring. I can’t believe Jagger would take this class. The professor is monotone and the material he is preaching is dry. I find myself looking at the clock on the wall praying this class ends soon. Putting my headphones on and resting my head on Jagger’s shoulder, I close my eyes and tune the professor out.

“Story. Story. Story,” Jagger calls my name as he lightly shakes my thigh, rousing me from my sleep. “Class is over, babe. Let’s go home,” he chuckles softly.

I fell asleep in class and slept through the whole thing. At least it’s his, and I didn’t need to pay attention. We stand and gather our things, exiting the lecture hall and walking back toward the parking lot where Jagger left his car this morning.

The drive home is short and silent as I watch all the other students mill about the campus and town, heading to their destinations. When we get home, I hurry to sit on the couch and start reading my homework. I’m excited to learn again and

get a real high school diploma. I feel weird being in college and not actually being a student, but my time will come.

The door slams open, startling me as two large and very different-looking men step into the house. One is tall with piercing green eyes and dark sharp brows. His body is covered in ink, from what I can see, including his neck, and he even has a small tattoo near his left eye. The other guy has sandy brown hair and whiskey-colored eyes. He is also covered in tattoos, but he is sporting a dangly earring in each ear and a silver hoop through his left nostril.

Both are very attractive and their eyes are lasered on me as I sit here nervous, sinking deeper into the couch, trying to hide. They must be Jagger's friends.

"Well, who do we have here?" Sandy hair asks, moving to the couch and plopping down next to me. I whimper as he sets his arm on the back of the couch behind me.

"Don't be scared, Snow. I don't bite. Unless you're into that sort of thing." He winks at me.

Suddenly, he's ripped away from me and shouts in pain. My eyes widen when I see Jagger has grabbed him and torn him away from me. "Don't fucking touch her," he growls, getting in his face

"I was just flirting with the pretty girl you brought home." He turns to grin at me. "Wasn't I, Snow?" He turns back to Jagger. "So, is this why you've been MIA? Shacking up with this pretty little thing?"

"Fuck you." Jagger glares at the guy who keeps calling me Snow. "Story, these assholes here are the friends I was telling you about; this nimrod is Krew and the dark and broody one over by the door is Rook."

"Nice to meet you," I mumble as I stare at Rook. Why does he look familiar? I can't put my finger on it, but I feel like I've met him before. But I've never met anyone named Rook, not that I can remember anyway. He definitely wasn't one of Kylova's clients, since they were all over fifty, and I

would have remembered someone so heavily covered in tattoos.

Shaking it off, I pick my book up from the floor where it landed when they startled me. Giving them some space, I move over to sit on the bench in front of the window and get lost in the words of my history book while trying to ignore them as the three of them banter back and forth.

I smile to myself, feeling normal for once. But I also feel scared shitless at being in a room with three huge men. Yet, oddly, I also feel kinda safe. This is how my life was always supposed to be.

# CHAPTER 6

“Rook. He’s dead, come on. Stop playing around and let’s go.” Krew lets out an annoyed sigh.

“You’re pissing me off,” I snap, spinning around to glare at my best friend. “Live a little and have some fucking fun!”

“Fun?” He waves his hand toward the mangled body on the ground. “He looks like he’s been through a meat grinder. None of his limbs are even attached anymore. He’s dead. Long dead. And we need to go meet up with Jagger. This took all fucking day and we missed all of our classes.”

I run my tongue along my teeth as I look down at the fucker who thought it would be a good idea to steal from me and then back to Krew. “Fine. Get someone in here to get rid of the body.” Leaving Krew to deal with my mess, I head to the bathroom across the hall.

The light flickers as I flip on the switch, casting a low hue of light overhead. Looking at myself in the broken mirror, I grin maniacally at the state I’m in. Crimson red paints my black and gray tattoos, adding a splash of color. The only kind of color I want on my skin.

Turning the tap on, I wash my hands, watching red stain the sink as it goes down the drain. There are no showers here, so I use paper towels to clean my face the best I can. I’d walk out of here and wear it like war paint if it wouldn’t draw too much attention.

The downside of planning to take out my father is that, until we do, I have to keep my head in check. The boys are the brains of our operation because I’m too chaotic and

unpredictable. But I have to be the one who takes my father's place because I'm the heir to his throne. I'm also the one people would fear and not dare cross. Because if they do, they will very much end up like the dude in the next room.

He was one of my men. I didn't trust him, I don't trust anyone but Jagger and Krew, but I thought he would be smart enough not to fuck me over. I was wrong. Found out he was using my name to try and get some pull around the city before coming into my fucking home and stealing whatever his grimy hands could get a hold of while Krew and I were off on some... *Business trips*, you might call them.

Jagger had to go back to New York during the summer to work for my dad, to keep up the charade that we're all still his little puppets. When in reality, *we* will be his downfall.

"Hey, Boss," one of my men greets me, as I head up to the main floor of the warehouse. I'm not stupid enough to kill where I eat. At least, I try not to. But sometimes things just happen, you know? Like a twitchy-eyed little rat looks at you too long while you're at a dinner meeting and you take your fork and stab him in the eye with it. *Things happen*.

I grunt, nodding my head as I pass, and head out to the parking lot to my car. I'm sitting and waiting, answering text messages, until Krew opens the front passenger door.

"You know how long that's going to take them to clean up," Krew chuckles as he closes the door. He doesn't have time to put on his seatbelt before I'm putting my foot on the gas and getting the fuck out of here. "So many small pieces."

"I wanted to make sure he was dead," I say, breaking the law as I zig-zag around cars, no patience to be stuck behind fucking snails.

"Would you slow the fuck down before you get us killed?" Krew grumbles. "And dude, all he needed was a bullet in the head or a stab to the carotid artery and he would have been perfectly dead."

I yank the wheel to the left, nearly nicking the bumper of the car in front of me. They blare their horn, and I stick my

hand out the window to flip them off. “And where’s the fucking fun in that? It’s over in like a second.”

“We all know you like to play,” Krew chuckles. “Also, I’m driving next time. I’d like to live long enough to have kids.”

That makes me snort. “Kids, yeah right. You wouldn’t survive only having your dick in one cunt for the rest of your life.”

“I said I wanted kids, not to get married. I’m thinking maybe five baby mamas.” He gives me a toothy smile.

I shake my head. “You’re such a dirty little whore.”

“Hey, you have your fun and I have mine. You don’t have room to talk. What was it, girl number ten who was walking out of the house last night? Or should I say running?”

My lip twitches. “Wouldn’t be so high of a number if I could find a girl who can handle my needs.”

He barks out a laugh. “You would need someone just as fucked up in the head as you are to be able to come back for round two. I know the freaky, fucked up shit you’re into.”

There’s only one person who’s ever come back for more, but I’ve been keeping him at arm’s length since the summer. He makes me feel shit I don’t have time for. And the more I’m with him, the more I want to give in to those feelings. I can’t. It will get us killed, and I care too much about him to risk that.

But fucking hell, would I like to go over to his place, bend him over his kitchen counter and fuck his ass bare until he’s screaming for me, painting the cupboards with his cum as I fill him with mine.

“So home to shower first, or Jagger’s?”

“Jagger’s. Fucker’s been cagey as shit the past few days, and I want answers.”

Krew lives at the mansion with me, but Jagger opted to get his condo while we’re in Seattle for school. He takes school way too fucking seriously and apparently all the sex and killing are too distracting for him. *What a little bitch.*

Maybe if he got his dick wet more often, he would loosen up a bit. But Jagger is the one with the heart, the one who is quick to care. It's why he doesn't date. He doesn't want to get anyone involved in this lifestyle.

"You think he's changing his mind?"

"No," I grunt. "I just think he's hiding something, and we're about to find out what."

We pull into the condo parking lot and I pull into a visitor spot.

"Hello, boys!" Mrs. Davis shouts from her balcony. She's a sweet old lady who's been nice to us since the moment Jagger moved in. She sees past our tattoos and scary looks and treats us like we're her grandchildren. She might be the only person who's slightly softened my cold dead heart.

I'd kill anyone who dares to fuck with her.

"Hey, Barbara. Looking good!" Krew calls back. "Berny better watch his back or he might have some competition."

"Oh, you boys flatter me," she laughs. "You have a good day, you hear me. And make sure that young girl is taken care of. I'm worried."

Krew and I look at each other. "Girl?" I ask.

Krew chuckles. "About time our boy got himself some ass. Let's go." Krew takes off running, saying goodbye to Mrs. Davis as he goes.

If this fucking asshole has ignored us for days over a girl, I'm going to kill him myself. Like fuck I'm going to let some chic start to take over his life. Jagger is *mine*. Fucking mine.

Okay, so I'm a jealous dick. He doesn't need to know that.

"You think she's hot?" Krew asks as he bounces with excitement as he waits for me at the door.

I don't fucking care how hot she is, I want answers. Grabbing the handle, I throw the door open.

My eyes find her immediately and my whole world pauses as she looks over at us, big doe eyes filled with surprise.

She's not who I was expecting. Not Jagger's type at all. She shies away, making herself smaller by sinking into the couch.

"Well, who do we have here?" Krew asks, moving to the couch and seating his ass next to her. She lets out a little whimper that makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up as Krew throws his arm on the back of the couch behind her.

"Don't be scared, Snow. I don't bite. Unless you're into that sort of thing," he says playfully.

I haven't even noticed Jagger until he's storming over to Krew like an angry bull, ripping him away from the girl. "Don't fucking touch her," Jagger growls, getting in Krew's face.

"I was just flirting with the pretty girl you brought home," Krew mutters before looking back at her. "Wasn't I, Snow?" He turns back to Jagger. "So, is this why you've been so MIA? Shacking up with this pretty little thing?"

"Fuck you." Jagger glares at Krew. "Story, these assholes here are the friends I was telling you about; this nimrod is Krew and the dark and broody one over by the door is Rook."

"Nice to meet you," she murmurs, her eyes finding mine. She watches me closely, and I don't like it.

I don't realize I've been under some kind of spell with her until it's broken when she grabs her book off the floor and moves over to the bench by the window.

Jagger and Krew come over to me, and I look at my best friend. "Who the fuck is she?"

Jagger glares at me. "Relax, okay? And be nice. She's with me now. She's *mine*."

My brows go up. "Oh? So, what? Now you have a girlfriend? What the fuck? Where did she even come from?"

"Wait, so she's your girlfriend? Really?" Krew asks. "So sleeping with her would be a no then? But can I still flirt with her?"

“Would you shut the fuck up?” Jagger growls, punching Krew in the arm, making him cackle.

Jagger looks at me. “Your dad had me do a big clean-up, the Jamison’s, remember?”

I nod. We talked about it. It was his last job before he was supposed to head back here before school started. That was until he texted and said his plans were delayed, and that he wouldn’t be back on time.

“Well, as I was finishing up, getting ready to set the house on fire, I heard a woman’s voice shouting for help. I realized I wasn’t alone and your dad’s men didn’t search the house to see if there was anyone in there. I found her in the basement, locked up like a fucking animal. She was in bad shape, really fucking bad. I couldn’t leave her there. So I got her out, torched the house, and then brought her home with me. Mom helped me nurse her back to health.”

“And then what, you brought her home like a little pet?” I snap.

“Fuck you!” he gets in my face. “Story is *my* girl. I’ll admit, I fell hard and fast for her. And I’ll fucking kill anyone who puts her in danger. Anyone.”

Well, fuck. He has it bad. Whoever Story is, she’s won over Jagger completely. A part of me should be wary of that, to check out who this girl is and what she wants with my boy. But Jagger is the smartest of us all, so if he’s already like this, then Story is here to stay.

Jagger goes on to tell us how she’s been beaten and raped for years. I listen to every word, but my eyes are locked on the little fawn by the window.

As I listen to Jagger, each detail fills me with a burning rage that I don’t understand. But as I watch the little fawn by the window while hearing what she has been through, I get a feeling in my gut I’ve never felt before. I don’t know what the fuck is going on with me? But as she looks up, and her big blue eyes lock with mine, she gives me a soft shy smile with no hint of fear. I know in this moment, if I were to open

myself up to this woman she would have the power to destroy me.

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Lastly, to our readers, we appreciate all of you. Without you, we'd still be just playing these stories out in our heads. It is your support and enjoyment of reading our work that keeps us going.

## ABOUT CASSIE LEIN

Cassie resides in Northern Illinois on a farm with her husband and six kids. When not writing, she can be found reading, chauffeuring her kids around, or showing pigs. Cassie is a huge advocate for foster care and adoption. Enjoys a good horror movie, dark romance, and alcohol. Lots and lots of alcohol. You can find her sitting on her front porch enjoying watching her kids play while she writes. She has an English bulldog named Daisy and two kittens Buffy and Dill, along with a ton of chickens, 3 goats, and 2 horses.

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# ABOUT ALISHA WILLIAMS

Writer, Alisha Williams lives in Alberta, Canada, with her husband and her two daughters. She has three crazy kitties who she loves. When she isn't writing or creating her own graphic content, she loves to read books by her favorite authors.

Writing has been a lifelong dream of hers, and this book was made despite the people who prayed for it to fail, but because Alisha is not afraid to go for what she wants, she has proven that dreams do come true.

Wanna see what all her characters look like, hear all the latest gossip about her new books or even get a chance to become a part of one of her teams? Join her reader group on Facebook here - [Naughty Queens](#). Or find her author's page here - [Alisha Williams Author](#)

Of course, she also has an Instagram account to show all her cool graphics, videos, and more book-related goodies - [alishawilliamsauthor](#)



# NORTHLAND

A LAST OF THE FIVE NOVELLA

LOREN HART

## BLURB

In ancient times, five fiery shards streaked across the sky, their brilliant glow scorching the air before crashing into the primordial wilderness below. These fallen fragments emanated unfathomable power tied to shadow, energy, mind, sound, and light.

Tribes of early humans were drawn to the sites, compelled by whispers of ancient magic. Those who dared unlock the gifts of the fragments found power beyond imagination—but also corruption.

Many warlords arose, intoxicated by the fragments' might. The Shadow Kingdom spread fear through necromancy. The Mind Emperor's telepaths seized control of merchant trade routes. The Energy Queen reigned in Southland, championing her people with righteous crusades. The Sound Queen's hypnotic voice rallied nomadic clans to conquer new lands. And the Light Priestess harnessed the power to smite unbelievers.

Chaos engulfed the ravaged lands as warlords clashed. Slowly five kingdoms emerged victorious from the bloodshed—Dranoel, Louth, Atinahs, Northland, and Thoral.

But tensions simmered, and prophecies told of more conflict to come. There were whispers of a chosen one with the power to unite the fragments... or destroy everything.

Now the uneasy kingdoms eye each other warily, each hungry for greater power. Dissent festers in the shadow of the throne. And beyond the kingdom borders, an ancient evil stirs.

Omens speak of a looming clash between the light and shadow. But when darkness rises, even the light can be corrupted.

Only the fate of the world hangs in the balance.

*To every new reader who picks this up, reads it, loves it (or at the very least is intrigued by it), and decides to invest their time, energy, and money into the Last of the Five series to find out more about this world and its characters, I say thank you, and welcome to Mevgo.*

*And to my established readers who have followed this series through each book, you all are the reason I continue to let these characters touch portions of my soul I would prefer they didn't. A big thank you goes out to you, as you are what motivates me to keep going, even when I don't want to.*

## CONTENT WARNINGS

There are scenes in Northland that may be triggering for some readers including, but not limited to the following:

- Graphic depictions of violence and torture
- Physical, psychological, emotional and sexual abuse
- Manipulation and gaslighting
- Forced captivity
- Human trafficking implications
- Non-consensual physical sexual contact
- Explicit language
- On page murder
- Degradation and humiliation

The story contains very visceral scenes of physical torture, along with psychological torments like forced betrayal, conditioning, hallucinations and despair. The language is also vulgar and degrading.

Reader discretion is advised.

# CHAPTER 1

*Divad Dynasty*

*MANY YEARS AGO...*

The screams of the dying echoed in my ears, serenading me with the sweet agony that stirred something primal within me. Steel clashed against steel as Northlander forces ruthlessly cut down the outmatched Divad soldiers. Just for shits and giggles, I drew in my breath and unleashed a thunderous sonic blast. Not because I needed to, but because I was bored. The air rippled with the force of my Sonic Scream fragment power. The satisfying sound of shattering armor filled my ears, and I grinned as the enemies went flying back like rag dolls.

“Do you have to show off?” Tobin asked, his tone laced with amusement as he sliced through the neck of a Northlander soldier with his sword.

I shrugged, twirling my own sword in my hand. “It’s not my fault if they can’t handle a little noise.”

“They’ve never seen such power,” he replied, his voice cold and merciless as he moved to engage another enemy. Our fighting styles complemented each other well—my strength and powers combined with his finesse and skill made for a deadly team.

I snorted, my attention drawn to a group of Divites making their way towards us. “Don’t worry, I won’t let my ego get in the way of killing these bastards.”

As they came closer, I could see the fear in their eyes. It was almost too easy to dispatch them, their blood painting the already crimson ground. The battlefield reeked of smoke, blood and shit—the foul perfume of a hard-won victory. I surveyed the utter devastation we'd brought on the Divad forces. Broken bodies and discarded weapons littered the mud as far as I could see. It was a total conquest.

As the last vestiges of resistance crumbled before our might, I watched the remaining Divad soldiers lay down their arms in absolute surrender. I felt neither joy nor remorse at their defeat—only the cool satisfaction of a strategy successfully executed. Victory had been assured from the moment we took to the field, their feeble attempts at defending their lands akin to lambs thrown to ravenous wolves.

This war was over.

“Look at them,” I murmured to one of my captains, gesturing with a gloved hand toward the defeated enemy. “Cowering like beaten dogs. Let this be a lesson to any who would dare oppose us.”

“Sir,” he replied, his eyes alight with the same violent hunger that burned within me. “Their suffering is a testament to your dominance.”

“My dominance is Northland's dominance, captain,” I corrected.

“Sir,” he amended with a nod of understanding. “Of course, my lord.”

I allowed myself a cruel smile before turning my attention back to the battlefield. Amidst the carnage, a flicker of movement caught my eye—a lone woman darted furtively between the dead and dying, offering aid where she could. Her slender yet strong physique was coated with dirt and gore, tendrils of dark hair escaping from her braid. But her movements carried a grace and courage that seemed out of place on this hellish landscape. As I observed her, something stirred within me—a desire not for conquest or domination, but for...something altogether different.

“Who is that?” I asked, my voice betraying none of the intrigue inside. My captain squinted into the distance before responding.

“Appears to be a healer of sorts, sir. A brave, foolish soul to venture onto a battlefield such as this.”

“Brave indeed,” I agreed, unable to tear my gaze away. “See that she is taken alive. She may yet prove useful to us.”

“Understood, sir.” With a nod, the captain signaled for a group of soldiers to apprehend the woman.

“Wait,” I called out, my mind racing with the possibilities her capture might present. “I will take her myself.”

“Very well, sir,” he acquiesced, stepping aside to allow me passage.

I spurred my horse, the animal’s hooves pounding against the blood-soaked earth as I pursued the woman through the battlefield. Her lithe form wove between broken bodies and discarded weapons, her dark auburn hair streaming like a wild river behind her. Yet for all her grace and speed, she could not outpace me. I easily closed the distance, the raw power of my steed matching the relentless drive fueling me.

As I approached the woman, I could see her cool gray eyes widen in fear, her intelligent gaze darting between me and the corpses littering the ground. She made no attempt to flee, though I could sense the opposition that radiated from her very core.

“Stay your hand, woman,” I commanded as she knelt beside a fallen soldier, her fingers deftly working a tourniquet around his mangled limb. “Your people have lost, and you now belong to Northland.”

“Belong?” she spat, her voice laced with venom. “I am no one’s property, least of all Northland.”

“Ah, but you are,” I countered, leaning down to brush a stray lock of dark auburn hair from her face. Her skin was fair and sun-weathered, dotted with light freckles which heightened her exotic allure. “For you stand on the losing side

of this battle, and the spoils of war are mine to claim. You belong to me now.”

“Go to hell,” she hissed.

I dismounted from my horse, walked over, and gave her a taste of my open palm as it crashed across the side of her face.

Her head snapped to the side with the force of the blow. She stumbled, clutching her cheek as a small trickle of blood seeped from the corner of her lip. But she did not cry out, or show any weakness. Instead, she looked up at me with eyes that burned with a fiery resistance.

“You will regret that,” she said, her voice low and dangerous.

I laughed, the sound echoing across the battlefield. “I think not, *slave*. You may be a healer, but you are also a prisoner. And I am the victor. You will do well to remember that.”

“I will not be a slave,” she said, her voice fierce. “I would rather die than be at your mercy.”

“Oh, I have no intention of killing,” I replied, yanking her forcefully to her feet. “Though, you may come to wish I had.”

I gestured to my men, and they quickly moved to bind her hands and feet.

“You will address me as your lord,” I commanded. “And you will come with me.”

“I will never serve you,” she spat, her eyes flashing with willfulness.

I grabbed her by the arm, my grip tight enough to make her wince. “You will do as I say, or you will regret it.”

She didn’t respond, but I could feel the tension in her body as my men led her away. Her unique allure intrigued me—this exotic, defiant creature seemed a fitting prize to accompany my victory in these lands.

“Where will you take me?” she demanded over her shoulder, the sharp edge of her voice betraying her fear.

“Back to Northland,” I replied, my gaze lingering on the curve of her neck, the delicate arch of her collarbone.

“Fuck you,” she snarled.

“Ah, you keep this up, and I think you will,” I mused, my cock growing harder by the second at the thought of breaking her.

King Margan emerged, his spirit broken by the sheer force of my will, and knelt before me, offering the complete and unconditional surrender of Divad.

“Execute them all!” my captains urged, their voices hoarse with bloodlust. “Let us make an example of these pitiful wretches!”

“Silence!” I roared, my Sonic Scream fragment power shaking the very earth beneath our feet. The captains fell silent, cowed by the raw strength of my voice. “Total dominion has been achieved. Northland can always use more slave labor and we have no need for further bloodshed—for now.”

“Your mercy is as boundless as your wisdom, my lord,” one captain muttered through gritted teeth, his eyes glinting with barely-concealed resentment.

“You’re right,” I replied coldly, my gaze sweeping over the assembled prisoners. “You would do well to remember that.”

The thunder of our horses’ hooves resonated through my bones. As we crossed back into Northland territory, the shredded banners of our defeated enemies trailed behind my horse like bloody ribbons. My men roared with triumph, but the victory tasted bittersweet on my tongue—the fight had ended too swiftly to satisfy my appetite for conquest.

As we approached the palace, crowds of citizens swarmed the streets, hungry for a glimpse of their conquering hero. “Quinn!” they cried, their frenzied shouts barely discernible over the pounding of hooves echoing off the towering walls. I looked down at the surging crowd, feigning gratitude with a wave of my hand, but their adulation meant nothing. True

power was not to be found in the fickle hearts of the commoners, but within the gilded halls just beyond my reach.

As we entered the throne room, the nobles hailed me as the kingdom's savior, their false smiles and hollow words like daggers in my heart. King Filip himself emerged from the shadows, his eyes alight with a mixture of awe and envy.

"Ah, Quinn, my brave Commander General," he gushed, clasping my arm in a show of camaraderie. "Your victory has brought honor and glory to Northland!"

"Your Excellence," I replied, inclining my head in a gesture of feigned humility.

"And what's this I hear of captives from the conquered lands?" the king asked.

"Someone must shovel the shit," I answered. "Better them than the noble Northlander citizens."

As the nobles whispered amongst themselves, their gazes drifted to the captives who stood chained in our midst. Their eyes lingered on one particular captive, her beauty and defiance rendering her all the more alluring. A primal possessiveness rose within me.

"That woman," I announced, my voice ringing through the hushed chamber, "is mine, and mine alone. Any man who dares challenge that claim shall face a fate far worse than death."

"Quinn," King Filip warned, his voice dripping with barely-concealed disdain. "Remember your place."

"She belongs to me," I declared coldly, my warning clear. "I only wish to ensure no one will attempt to steal my hard-earned spoils."

Not even the king.

As the courtiers murmured their assent, I turned my attention back to the captive woman. Her gray eyes met mine without fear, her slender frame proud and unyielding even in chains. My pulse quickened at the sight of her—a prize more enticing than any jewel or trinket.

“Admirable,” King Filip said and waved his hand dismissively. “You may take your slave with you.”

I bowed to the king, my gaze never leaving the woman. “Thank you, Your Excellence.”

With a wave of his hand, the king dismissed us, leaving me alone with the woman.

“Come,” I said, beckoning her to follow. “We must celebrate my victory.”

“Where will you take me?” she demanded, her voice a sharp edge.

“I see little reason to keep you in this chamber,” I replied coolly. “You’re a slave, after all.” Without a backward glance, I strode out of the throne room, taking the captive woman with me.

As we crossed over the drawbridge, I saw the palace servants watching us with sullen eyes. Some glared at me, while others glared at her, but none dared raise their voice against me. I ignored their silent condemnation as I led my new captive away, shackled and intractable, into the dimly lit grandeur of my domus. For a moment, I stood there, entranced by her presence, framed by the flickering shadows cast by the room’s glowing hearth. She looked every bit, unbroken and untamed, even in chains.

“Get on with it,” she spat, her voice like sharpened steel. “Whatever you plan to do, just know I will not go quietly. I may be your captive but I will never be your slave,” she warned, eyes flashing.

Her bladed words ignited my desire. I struck her hard across the face.

I reached out, tugging sharply at her hair as I forced her gaze upward to meet mine. Blood trickled from her swollen lip but her steely glare remained. It stoked the flames within me.

“Your spirit may be fierce, but you are mistaken if you think it will save you,” I warned, my voice low and threatening. “I am your master now, and you will submit.”

“Never,” she hissed, her struggles only intensifying as I tightened my grip on her hair. With a swift, brutal motion, I threw her to the stone floor.

“Learn your place,” I growled. She landed with a gasp, but quickly scrambled to her feet, her eyes never leaving mine.

“Is this what you want?” she asked, her voice laced with contempt as she shed her rough-spun dress in one fluid motion, revealing her naked form beneath. “To take what you couldn’t win fairly on the battlefield?”

“Fair?” I scoffed, my eyes raking over her body, drinking in the sight of her sun-kissed skin and the curve of her hips. “War and conquest are rarely fair, slave. You stand here, nothing more than a prize for the victor.”

“I am a human being, not a trophy,” she glared, her voice trembling with rage and something else, something darker and more dangerous.

Her lip was split open and blood trickled down her chin. The sight of her, coated in her own blood, was profoundly arousing. My cock strained against the confines of my armor. “You are a slave, *and* a trophy. But what a glorious trophy you are.”

“Go to hell,” she spat, her eyes flashing with fury.

I took a step forward and she turned in anticipation of another strike, so instead of giving her one, I placed my shoe on her back, keeping her plastered to the ground. Leaning in, I pressed my weight onto her, making her choke out a breath. “You have no idea how close you already are.”

The moment I removed my weight and shoe, she scrambled to her feet, standing there breathless, staring at me with a hatred that made my cock twitch. I roughly pulled her into an embrace, my hand gripping her throat. “You forget yourself. I took you as a spoil of war, nothing more,” I hissed. “You are mine to do with as I please.”

## CHAPTER 2

*Northland Kingdom*

I AWOKE TO THE DEAFENING CLANG OF IRON GATES reverberating through my cell. Disoriented, I found myself in a bedchamber with tapestries and stained windows that surrounded me. My heart sank as the events of the past days came rushing back. It hadn't been a dream—I was now captive in the wealthy domus of the man who conquered my homeland. This cage belonged to him, and so did I.

Moments later, the heavy oaken door creaked open and a stern-looking woman entered, dour eyes appraising me. “I am Arri, personal attendant to the master of this household. You belong to him now.” Her tone offered no warmth as she tossed a simple slave's dress at me.

My feet still ached from the long walk from Divad to Northland, but I ignored the pain as my jaw clenched. I swallowed my rage and silently complied, maintaining a stoic facade as she locked an iron collar around my bruised neck. The weight of my new status settled like a shackle.

“What's your name?” Arri asked as she began to brush out my tangled hair.

I hesitated, unsure if I should reveal my true identity to this woman. But I knew it wouldn't matter in the end. “Leyanna,” I replied, my voice a whisper.

Arri nodded, her expression unreadable. “For now, you'll be working in the kitchens. A word of advice. Learn your

place quickly. Any disobedience will not be tolerated. The master has a... particular way of dealing with those who step out of line.” She trailed off, her gaze flickering to the iron collar around my neck.

“Thank you for your counsel,” I replied, my voice icy. I would not let her see how much I despised this new reality.

Arri laced her tone with disdain, “I’ve seen your kind before. Come here thinking you’re too good for this life, or you’ll be different. Thinking you’re special. You’ll learn the hard way.”

I reluctantly donned the rough fabric, hating the way it marked me as a possession. I traced the edges of my bone amulet, a reminder of my heritage and a symbol of rebellion against Quinn’s tyranny. In this den of depravity, I would cling to my sense of self even as my body became another’s to command.

As Arri led me through the sprawling domus, the opulence was almost overwhelming after a life of rural poverty. My senses were assaulted by grandeur and excess at every turn. Intricate mosaic tiles adorned the vast hallways, depicting tales of Northland’s military victories—their armies triumphant over the conquered. I searched the images for any trace of my village, but found none. Perhaps it was too insignificant to warrant being immortalized in one of the countless scenes of ruin.

My melancholic thoughts were interrupted by the burble of running water. We had entered an airy courtyard where rays of sunlight shone down on a central garden filled with vibrant exotic flowers and a marble fountain. The familiar scents released a flood of homesickness I fought to contain. What had once been simple joys were now forever lost to me.

“Watch where you’re going!” A voice snapped me from my thoughts.

“Apologies,” I murmured, my voice barely audible, as I stepped back from the woman before me. She wore an elaborate gown and her eyes raked me up and down with disdain.

“Ah, so you’re the new acquisition,” she sneered, her tone dripping with sarcasm. “I’d heard Quinn had taken a fancy to some Divad peasant girl.”

“Mind your tongue, lady,” I shot back, my anger flaring for a moment. “I may be a prisoner here, but I am not without pride.”

“Ha! Pride?” She scoffed, letting out a cruel laugh. “We’ll see how long that lasts under Quinn’s...tutelage.”

“Enough, Elara,” called a male voice from across the courtyard. I turned to see a tall man with a sharp gaze approaching us. His voice held authority, but his eyes betrayed a sense of weariness. “Leave her be. She has enough to contend with as it is.”

The woman named Elara huffed and stalked away, leaving me alone with the man. “Thank you,” I whispered, looking at him warily.

“Pay her no mind,” he advised. “She is but one of many who would see you brought low out of jealousy and spite. Learn to navigate these treacherous waters if you are to survive here.”

“I will,” I promised, though my heart ached with the knowledge that survival might mean sacrificing everything I held dear, both within and without.

“Good,” he nodded, before striding away, taking Arri with him and leaving me alone in the courtyard.

I wandered further into the domus, still wrestling with grief, my ears perked for any whispers among the servants. They spoke of Quinn’s imminent return, and my heart tightened in my chest. I returned to my small chamber to prepare myself for the confrontation that lay ahead.

As I smoothed my features into an icy mask, I swore I would not show weakness before this man who had torn me from my home and chained me in gilded servitude. My spirit might be battered and bruised, but it would never bow to him.

“Attend to your duties,” a voice snapped, startling me. I spun around to see Arri standing in the doorway. “He returns

soon.”

“Of course,” I replied, biting back my anger. I followed her with mingled awe and disgust. How many lives had been ravaged to build this glittering palace?

“Remember your place,” Arri warned as we approached the dining hall. “You are here to serve, nothing more.”

As I entered, I caught sight of Quinn, his tall frame draped in fine leathers and furs. He was deep in conversation with a poised, charming man. As I looked upon my captor, his jaw set with ruthless determination.

“Bring us wine,” Quinn ordered dismissively, his eyes barely flickering to me. I nodded and turned away to fetch it, my hands shaking slightly.

“Frederick,” Quinn said as I poured their wine, “you speak of dangerous things. Who else is aware of my ambitions? Who else knows of yours?”

“I’ve had conversations with Claude,” Frederick answered as he took the filled goblet from my hand. “And Ollan, though he will expect favors in return.”

“I do not plan to be indebted to any man, brother,” Quinn replied, his voice low and menacing. “I will eliminate any who stand in my way, even if it means spilling blood.”

“We both seek power, and together, we shall claim it,” Frederick replied coolly, his eyes narrowing. “But we must act carefully, lest our plans unravel before they’ve even begun.”

“I will eliminate anyone who stands in my way. As for Ollan and Claude, I will deal with them in due time.”

My heart thundered in my chest as I listened to their conversation. Quinn was planning something, something big. I had to find out what it was. It may be the key to my freedom.

As I moved away from the table, I felt a hand brush against my ass. I whirled around, my eyes blazing with fury, to see one of the guards leering at me.

“Mind your manners,” I hissed, my hand twitching towards the knife on the table.

The man sneered and reached out again. Before I could react, a strong arm pulled him back, knocking him to the ground.

“You dare,” Quinn barked, his eyes flashing with anger. “She belongs to *me*.”

“Apologies, sir,” the guard begged and attempted to scramble to his feet.

Quinn’s boot met the man’s face in a sickening crunch. “You dare to lay hands on my possessions? Mine!” He roared.

I watched in horror as Quinn continued to pummel the guard with his boot. Blood spurted from the man’s nose, and his cries became muffled by the force of the blows.

The room fell silent as Quinn’s rage filled every corner. A mixture of fear and disgust washed over me as I watched the violence unfold before me. Brain matter was splattered on the ground, threatening the little contents of my stomach. This was the man who held my fate in his hands, a man who saw me and others like me as nothing more than possessions to be used and discarded at his whim.

“Stop!” I yelled, my voice echoing off the walls of the hall. Quinn’s gaze snapped to me, his eyes wild with fury. “Stop it, please!” I begged, tears streaming down my face.

As he finished his assault, Quinn turned to me, his chest heaving with anger. “You think you can tell me what to do?” he snarled, advancing towards me. “You think you have any power here? You’re nothing but a slave, a possession to be used as I see fit.”

“Please,” I whispered, my voice barely above a whimper. I felt a hand wrap around my collar, pulling me towards him. His grip was tight, and I struggled to breathe. “Let me go,” I choked out.

He sneered, tightening his grip. “You are nothing but a peasant girl, a mere possession. You belong to me, and you will do as I say.”

I pulled away from him, my fists clenched. “I am not yours,” I spat.

Frederick chuckled behind us. “I like this one,” he mused. “She has spirit.”

“She will be broken,” Quinn fired back, his eyes ablaze with fury. “Get out,” he snapped, his voice cold and menacing.

I didn’t need to be told twice. I turned and fled from the room, my heart pounding in my chest. As I stumbled down the corridor, I heard the sounds of Quinn’s laughter echoing behind me, a chilling reminder of the power he held.

I retreated to my chamber, my hands shaking with fear and anger. I had to find a way out of this place, to escape the clutches of this tyrant and his cruel regime. I may wear a slave’s garb, but I refused to show fear or deference to the man who slaughtered my kin.

After a few moments, when my breathing returned to normal, my mind replayed the ominous bits of conversation they spoke of—a pact to claim unprecedented power by any means necessary, quiet machinations that could destabilize the kingdom itself. The conqueror aimed to seize even greater heights.

I was so caught up in my thoughts, I didn’t hear the door open until it was too late. I spun around and my gaze lighted upon Quinn. His chiseled jaw and cold eyes were set with determination, his large frame imposing as he stood before me.

“Come here,” he commanded, his tone leaving no room for argument. I hesitated for a moment, then stepped forward, my legs like lead. As I neared him, he grasped my wrist forcefully, the cruel grip sending a jolt of pain up my arm. His meaning was explicit.

Leaning down, his mouth claimed mine in a brutal, possessive kiss leaving me breathless. I froze, warring impulses battling within me. Should I resist and provoke his violence? Or submit to this humiliation to survive? I chose the latter, even as my spirit recoiled, knowing resistance would only bring worse consequences.

Quinn’s hand left my wrist to roam over my body, tearing away my simple dress until I stood naked before him. He

surveyed me hungrily, as if I were nothing more than a feast for his eyes. I felt exposed, humiliated, but I swallowed my pride and held my head high, refusing to let him see my fear.

The scent of blood and sweat lingered in the air, a testament to the violence that had taken place within these walls.

“Kneel,” he demanded, his voice like a whip. I dropped to my knees, trying to block out the wave of revulsion that washed over me.

Quinn gripped my hair, forcing my head back to meet his gaze. “You have no right to raise a hand against my men,” he growled.

“I will not tolerate such behavior,” I retorted, my own voice laced with audacity. “I am not some plaything for them to paw at.”

Quinn leaned closer, his breath hot against my face. “You are mine to do with as I please,” he hissed, his hand gripping my chin tightly.

I could feel the anger boiling inside of me, but I forced myself to remain still, to play along with his game. “As you say, *Master*,” I replied, my voice barely concealing the loathing I felt for him.

Quinn smirked, his grip on my chin loosening slightly. “Good girl,” he murmured.

I knew what would come next. I could see it in his eyes, the lust for violence, the desire to force me to submit to him. Quinn’s hands roaming over my body. I felt his rough hands on my skin, the pain of his grip, but I refused to utter a sound, to give him the satisfaction of seeing me cry out in pain as he threw me onto the bed.

“You will submit to me,” he growled, his eyes burning with fury. I tried to brace myself, but I could not stop a gasp from escaping my lips as he entered me from behind. His thrusts were rough and demanding—punishing. I struggled to contain my emotions, but the pain only served to intensify my

anger. I bit my lips, trying to keep from crying out in pain as he ravaged my body.

He grabbed my hair and pulled me up, his eyes wild with desire. “Do you like this?” he asked, his voice full of menace.

“I am yours,” I replied, my voice steady despite the quiver of my body.

Quinn chuckled, his voice filled with amusement. “Such a feisty one,” he mused, his eyes scanning my body hungrily. He wrapped his arm around my waist, pulling my back to his chest.

As he took me brutally, fueled by some dark rage, I focused on enduring the ordeal. I bit my lip till it bled, desperate not to cry out, but when the pain became too great, I couldn’t help myself. My scream echoed through the chamber, a sound of pure agony.

“Remember this,” he whispered harshly in my ear, “You belong to me now.”

At that moment, I understood the full extent of my captivity. This was not merely a physical prison; it was a mental and emotional one as well. Quinn sought to break me in every way possible, to strip me of any hope or dignity I had left.

And yet, as he pressed us forward and onto the bed, the weight of his body crushing me, as he continued to thrust, I clung to the fire still burning within me. I might be broken, bruised, and battered, but I would never let him extinguish the flame completely. Somehow, I would endure, waiting for the day when justice would find my captor and free me from his cruel grasp.

As he finished, Quinn pulled out of me, his member still rigid. He grabbed a fistful of my hair and forced my head back, his eyes boring into mine. “Learn your place, slave.”

I dressed hurriedly, my body still trembling from the ordeal I’d just endured. Quinn’s eyes followed my every move, his gaze predatory and unnerving. I couldn’t help but feel exposed under his watchful stare.

“You play a dangerous game,” he growled, his voice low and threatening. My heart raced within my chest, but I refused to be intimidated by him any longer.

“It’s no game,” I replied boldly, meeting his gaze unflinchingly. “You will never claim my heart, only my body.”

His eyes flashed with anger, and before I could react, he lunged towards me. The brutal force of his hand striking me was like a tempest unleashed upon my already battered body.

I collapsed to the ground, my head spinning from the blow. I could feel the anger radiating off of him.

“Try me,” he threatened, his entire body tense.

“I will,” I replied defiantly, pushing myself up off the floor, my eyes blazing with challenge. “And I will not surrender to you.”

The sound of his fist crashing into my face was like a clap of thunder, filling the room. I fell to my knees, my vision blurring, my body limp.

“You will learn,” he growled menacingly, his voice edged with fury. “And you will obey.”

I could feel the trickle of blood running down my face as the room began to spin before me. But I was determined to endure, biding my time and waiting for the perfect moment to strike. And when that day finally came, I would show Quinn exactly what I was made of—a woman who could not be broken, no matter how hard he tried.

# CHAPTER 3

*Northland Kingdom*

“HAVE YOU LEARNED YOUR PLACE?” ARRI’S VOICE CUT through the air like a whip, snapping me out of my thoughts as we went about our duties in the domos. I met her gaze, refusing to let her see my fear.

“Yes, Arri,” I replied, gritting my teeth.

“Good.” Her eyes narrowed.

As we worked, she sought to remind me of her position as personal attendant at every opportunity afforded her. I was the newest slave, with visions of living life beyond these walls. Why would she consider me a challenge?

Later that day, I sat stiffly as Arri dressed me in a fine scarlet gown chosen by Quinn for tonight’s dinner. The color of fresh blood—how fitting for my captor’s table.

“Quinn will be pleased with how you look tonight,” she said, her voice dripping with insincerity. Her fingers lingered on the delicate fabric, and she wore a pinched expression. Something more simmered beneath the surface. “But remember, you’re still just a slave.”

“Thank you for the reminder,” I shot back, my sarcasm evident. I refused to cower before her, even as she tightened the corset around my waist, making it difficult to breathe.

“Careful, girl,” she warned, her eyes flashing with menace. “Or I might forget my place too.”

I swallowed hard, biting back a retort. Instead, I focused on the night ahead, steeling myself for whatever trials awaited me at Quinn's side. His lustful gaze had followed me constantly since he'd taken me captive, and I knew tonight would be no different. But with each passing moment, my resolve grew stronger, and I vowed to use his obsession against him.

As I entered the dining hall with the other servants, an empty feeling formed in the pit of my stomach. The grand dining hall was ablaze with flickering candlelight, casting sinister shadows around the room. My heart thundered in my chest as Quinn motioned for me to join him, the heavy velvet of my scarlet gown brushing against my skin like a thousand whispered secrets. The scent of roasted meat and exotic spices filled the air, mingling with the delicate perfume of the noblewomen who flanked the table.

"Behold," Quinn announced loudly, his voice booming through the vast room, "the latest addition to my collection." His grip upon my arm was like iron. The eyes of his guests were hungry and cruel. I was nothing more than a decorative ornament, a trinket to be paraded before them all. I clenched my teeth and held my head high, refusing to let them see my fear.

"Oh, she's a beauty," one man exclaimed, licking his lips lasciviously. "Quite the prize you've captured. Much better than the emaciated stock I have."

"Isn't she?" another woman cooed, her fingers tracing the neckline of my gown in a way that made my skin crawl. "Such an exotic beauty."

Quinn turned to me, his dark eyes boring into mine. "You will remember your place, girl," he growled beneath his breath.

"Of course, Master," I replied, my voice barely a whisper. But inside, a fire raged, fueled by each humiliating moment after the other.

Throughout the dinner, I kept my eyes downcast, watching the way the nobles ate with their mouths open and spoke with

their mouths full. The decadence of their lifestyle was overwhelming, and I felt like an outsider looking in on a world that I could never truly be a part of.

I played my role dutifully, serving the guests and smiling politely at their crude jokes. But all the while, my mind was at work, plotting my escape. I had to get out of this place, out of Quinn's clutches. The way he looked at me made my skin crawl. As the meal progressed, I watched as Quinn drank and laughed with his guests, his hand constantly resting possessively on my thigh beneath the table. I fought the urge to flinch away from his touch, knowing that any sign of resistance would only make things worse. I was tired of being a pawn in their twisted game, tired of being treated like an object with no will of my own.

I knew what was expected of me once the guests had left. I tried not to think about it, tried to block out the thoughts that threatened to consume me. But as the last of the plates were cleared away, Quinn rose from his seat and motioned for me to follow him.

The lingering scent of blood and sweat hung in the air as Quinn closed the door to his private chamber shut behind us with a resounding thud. His calloused fingers locked around my wrist. I braced myself for the violence I knew would come, my heart pounding a frantic rhythm against my ribcage, as thoughts of the dagger I'd stowed beneath his mattress surfaced. But instead of the expected brutality, he released me and strode to a table where two goblets sat, filled with wine.

"Sit," he commanded gruffly, handing me one of the goblets. I hesitated, confused by this unusual turn. The goblet's cool metal pressed against my palm, its weight an uneasy reminder of my precarious position.

We drank in tense silence, the rich liquid staining our lips like the blood on our hands. As the warmth spread through my body, the bitter taste of betrayal lingered at the back of my throat.

"I've not met a slave like you before," Quinn began, his gaze roving over me hungrily. His words were a mockery, but

the glint in his eyes betrayed a deeper interest.

“My name is Leyanna,” I interrupted him, daring him in my boldness. “Not slave or girl.”

“Ah, Leyanna,” he drawled, savoring my name as if it were a rare delicacy. “The slave who forgets her place. But perhaps that is what sets you apart.” His voice was dark and seductive, beckoning me toward a dangerous edge.

“Perhaps,” I replied coolly, meeting his gaze head-on. My rebellion seemed to amuse him, and a slow smile spread across his face, revealing rows of perfect teeth.

“You intrigue me,” he admitted, taking another sip of wine. “But do not mistake my curiosity for weakness.”

“Nor should you mistake my submission for surrender,” I retorted, feeling the embers of my courage flare within me.

“Is that so?” He leaned in closer, his breath hot against my cheek. The scent of wine and musk swirled around me, intoxicating and repulsive in equal measure.

“Your body may be under my control, but my soul remains my own,” I whispered fiercely, my eyes locked with his. “And one day, I will reclaim what was taken from me.”

“Bold words for a slave,” he murmured, his lips brushing my earlobe. The electric current of his fingertips sent rivers of goosebumps rushing along my skin, a sensation somewhere between fear and something deeper, darker, more exciting. I found myself unable to look away from his dark eyes.

His presence was unsettling.

“Remember them well, Quinn,” I warned, my voice steady despite the trembling of my limbs.

The room seemed to close in on me, the flickering shadows of candlelight casting eerie patterns on the cold stone walls. I focused on my breath and tried to quell the urge to flee from this gilded cage.

“Forgive me, Leyanna,” he whispered, his voice barely audible above the crackling fire. My pulse quickened at

hearing my true name on his lips after so long. For a moment, I thought I glimpsed the man behind the monster.

“Your forgiveness is not mine to give, Quinn,” I replied, my voice steady despite the storm of emotions brewing inside me. “And even if it were, it would not change the past or the path you have chosen.”

“Perhaps not,” he conceded as he leaned closer, the heat of his body contrasting sharply with the chill of the air around us. “But it might change the future, for both of us.”

“Is that what you want?” I asked, unable to keep the hint of sarcasm from my tone. “A future together, bound by chains and forged in blood?”

“Chains can be broken, Leyanna,” he murmured, his fingertips tracing the curve of my cheekbone. “And blood can be washed away. But only if we are willing to let go of our hatred and embrace something new.”

“Something new?” I snorted, pulling away from his touch. “You mean submission? Obedience? That is not a life I will ever choose, Quinn. Not while there is still breath in my body and fire in my soul.”

“Then perhaps we should make better use of that fire,” he suggested, his eyes darkening with desire as he reached out to pull me close once more.

There was no tenderness in his kiss, no gentle exploration or soft caress. It was raw and brutal, a reflection of the man who held me captive and the world he had created. I tried to resist, to push him away and reclaim some semblance of control, but it was futile.

“Such passion,” he growled as he tore at the fine scarlet fabric of my gown, his fingers rough and unyielding. “It is a shame you waste it on defiance.”

“Defiance is all I have left,” I spat, matching his aggression with my own as I clawed at his chest and fought to escape his grasp. “And I will use it to bring you to your knees, Quinn. Mark my words.”

“Bold promises for a woman in your position,” he countered, his breath hot against my ear as he forced me to the ground. “But then again, it is what sets you apart from the other slaves, what makes you...unique.”

The fleeting moment of tenderness had vanished as if it had never existed. Quinn claimed my mouth with another savage kiss, tearing away the last shreds of hope that had flickered in my heart.

“Is this what you want?” he growled against my lips. I fought to maintain my inner fortress, refusing to let him breach the walls of my soul. “Do you crave my touch so much that you would defy me?”

“Never,” I spat, attempting to push him away despite the futility of it all. His powerful frame bore down upon me, fueled by some dark rage or anguish I could not comprehend.

“Then why do you persist in resisting me?” he demanded, as he pinned me beneath him. His breath was hot and heavy against my cheek, reeking of wine and fury. “You are mine, slave. Mine to use as I see fit.”

“Curse you,” I hissed, squeezing my eyes shut and going numb as he took me savagely. My body may have been under his control, but my mind and spirit remained my own. Even as I felt the weight of his hatred pressing down upon me, my defiance burned like a wildfire within my chest.

“Never forget your place,” he snarled through gritted teeth, each thrust a forceful reminder of the power he held over me. I bit back a sob, refusing to give him the satisfaction of hearing my pain.

“Perhaps one day you will learn,” he replied, his voice cold and devoid of emotion. The brutal act continued, and I retreated further into the sanctuary of my mind, praying for the strength to endure.

When it was over, and Quinn’s ragged breaths filled the oppressive silence, I lay there, battered and bruised.

“Damn you,” I whispered as the last vestiges of my resolve crumbled to dust. “Damn you to the depths of hell.”

“Your curses mean nothing, girl,” he replied, his voice devoid of any warmth or feeling. “But know this—I enjoy breaking you. And when the day comes when you finally bend to my will, it will be all the sweeter for your stubbornness.”

As I lay there, bruised and trembling, the last vestiges of my heart withered away. Quinn’s continuous betrayals were killing the part of me that still cared, leaving behind only an icy resolve to endure.

“Damn you,” I whispered under my breath, my eyes stinging with unshed tears, as Quinn’s breathing slowed and deepened. The moon’s beams streamed through, and my gaze flitted to the window. A full moon shone brightly in the night sky, its beauty belying the turmoil within me. My sorrow mingled with a simmering fury threatening to consume me whole.

I carefully eased out from under his arm, wincing at the pain that flared through my battered body. As I slid free, my mind went to the bed. It seemed fate had granted me a small mercy.

“Quinn, you foolish bastard,” I murmured, my lips curling into a bitter smile as thoughts of seizing my chance pushed through. Clutching my prize in trembling fingers, and driving it through his chest would be a dream come true.

“Perhaps one day soon, I’ll find the courage to use it,” I whispered, allowing myself a brief moment of disobedience before thinking better of it and crawling back to the floor beside the snoring beast holding me captive.

# CHAPTER 4

*Northland Kingdom*

I STOOD TALL IN THE LAVISH CHAMBER, CLAD IN FINE LEATHERS and furs obtained from the Kingdom of Louth. Garb befitting my station. The torches lining the walls cast flickering shadows on the cold stone floor as I waited for my brother and our powerful associates to arrive. With a confident swagger, I greeted Duke Ollan, Bishop Damlén, Elder Claude, and Frederick as they entered, men of influence in their own right. But today, they would bend the knee to me.

“Ah, Quinn,” Duke Ollan said, his voice rich with admiration. “A pleasure as always.”

“Let’s not waste time on pleasantries,” I replied with a smirk. “We have much to discuss, and the night is short.”

The meeting commenced, and we spoke of many mundane things—the vast sums of gold required, allegiances to secure, rivals to neutralize. The web of influence and fear needed to seal my ascendance. Bishop Damlén’s eyes gleamed with greed as he mentioned the wealth that would come with our plans. Elder Claude spoke of the alliances he could forge to ensure our success, his voice dripping with cunning.

“Remember, gentlemen,” I interjected, “the goal is not just power. Power is fleeting, it rises and fades like the sun but absolute control? That, gentlemen, goes with you beyond the grave.”

“Of course, Quinn,” Frederick replied, his eyes calculating. “We have no doubt you will lead us to greatness.”

As we plotted, sipping wine to ease our tongues, Leyanna entered the room, stealing our attention. She moved with grace belying her station as she refilled my glass. The sight of her stirred something dark and primal inside me. She was a symbol of conquest, a trophy, and yet... there was something more, a unruliness which sparked a twisted obsession.

“Your captive is quite beautiful,” Elder Claude remarked, leering at Leyanna. “I can see why you keep her close.”

“Do not ‘see’ too closely, Claude,” I replied, smirking as I watched her leave the room. “Your focus must remain on the task at hand.”

They nodded in agreement, their expressions serious once more, as we dove back into our plans, fueled by ambition and an insatiable thirst for power. The night wore on, but my resolve only grew stronger. In order to take the next steps, it was vital to gain their unconditional support. With these men, there would be nothing to stop me, so Frederick and I worked tirelessly to get to commit themselves fully. If one was in, they all had to be in. All the way.

The weight of destiny was upon me.

“The succession line may prove troublesome should the king expire,” Claude commented pointedly, stroking his beard as he eyed me with a calculating gaze.

“Not a concern,” I replied, my tone dismissive yet confident. “My brother and I will handle that matter.” I sipped my wine nonchalantly, letting the implied threat hang in the air like a noose awaiting its next victim.

“Bold words,” Ollan remarked, a wicked grin forming on his lips. “And what of King Filip? When the time comes, how do you plan to... hasten his demise?”

“Again, that falls to me,” I answered with a cold smile. “Gentlemen, you needn’t worry. I’m the Commander General of the Northland Kingdom armies, second only to the Supreme

General. The king will meet with me. And when the time is right, his reign will end.”

“Long live the king,” Frederick joked.

Laughter filled the chamber as the men reveled in our dark machinations. With each passing moment, the bonds between us strengthened—the threads of conspiracy weaving us together in a tapestry of blood and treachery.

“Your gold, Ollan, will ensure our soldiers remain loyal and well-equipped,” I said, turning to the Duke whose coffers were legendary. He nodded, the fire of greed burning in his eyes.

“And you, Bishop,” I continued, addressing Damlen. “Your influence within the church will help sway public opinion in our favor. The masses must view our ascension as a divine act.”

“Consider it done,” Damlen replied, his voice dripping with honeyed words and veiled malice.

“And Claude,” I said, fixing my gaze on the wily elder. “Your connections within the nobility will be invaluable. With your help, we shall ensure that any dissenters are silenced... permanently.”

“Of course,” Claude agreed, his eyes narrowing with sinister intent. “Nothing will stand in our way.”

My Sonic Scream fragment power coursed through my veins, elevating the intensity in my voice and making my words resonate with power. “The men in the military have fought beside me, known victory through me. They follow strength above all else, and with my brother, Frederick’s political pull, victory is assured!”

The men leaned in closer, drawn in by my commanding presence.

“Gentlemen,” I said, my voice low and dangerous. “We are not here to play games. We are here to seize power and crush any who oppose us. There will be blood, there will be death, but there will also be glory. Are you with me?”

The men nodded in unison, their eyes gleaming with a savage hunger for power.

“Then let us drink to our success!” bellowed Bishop Damlén, raising his goblet high. The others followed suit, and we toasted to the dawning of a new era—one that would soon be ushered in by our ruthless ambition.

I knew then that our bond was unbreakable, bound by our shared desire for absolute control. “Then it’s settled. We will rule this kingdom, and none shall dare oppose us.”

The laughter of the conspirators filled the room, like vultures feasting on the carcass of the weakened nation. I watched them revel in their newfound power, but as Leyanna gracefully approached to refill my glass, my thoughts went elsewhere. Her slender yet strong physique evident beneath her earth-toned clothing, our eyes met for a brief moment. I caught a glimpse of unease, perhaps even fear, within her cool gray depths before she quickly lowered her gaze.

“Your glass, sir,” she murmured, her voice barely audible above the din of conversation. As the rich red wine flowed into my goblet, I felt a dark and primal hunger stir within me—a desire not just for power and conquest, but for the beautiful woman who stood before me, trembling beneath my scrutiny.

“Thank you,” I replied curtly, taking a sip of the intoxicating liquid. The taste of the vintage was exquisite, yet it paled in comparison to the allure of the woman whose submission I craved.

With our plans complete, I had one last matter to attend. “Gentlemen, please indulge me a moment longer.”

“Eh?” Frederick remarked with a raised eyebrow.

“Oh, brother. You’re going to want to see this,” I responded. “Arri,” I called out, my voice booming through the chamber. “Come forth.”

My personal attendant appeared by my side, her gaze downcast and her body tense with anticipation. “Yes, milord?”

“Someone has taken my favorite dagger,” I said, my voice cold and deadly.

Arri’s eyes widened in shock, and she took a step back. “I-I have no knowledge of that, milord,” she stammered, her voice barely above a whisper.

I grabbed her roughly by the arm, pulling her closer to me. “Tell me who dared to enter my chambers unbidden.”

Arri trembled under my harsh interrogation, her fear betraying her loyalty. “I-I do not know, milord. None have entered your chambers, to my knowledge.”

“Is that so?” I sneered, my patience wearing thin. “Well, it seems we have a thief among us.”

She paled. “Milord, I swear I did not take it.”

“Then who did?” I demanded, my fingers itching to wrap around the hilt of the stolen weapon.

“I do not know, milord,” Arri replied, her voice shaking with fear.

“Arri,” I shook my head and blew out a slow gust of air, “you are responsible for all that occurs under my roof.” My gaze bore into her, as she trembled before me, unable to maintain eye contact. “Since you claim no one entered, then the fault must lie with you.”

“Please, my lord, I swear...” she stammered, tears streaming down her face.

“Take her to the courtyard and bind her to the whipping post,” I ordered coldly, relishing in her panicked sobs. My lust for control swelled within me, a dark and primal hunger. “You know the punishment for stealing from me.”

The guards unceremoniously handled her and set the scene as ordered. I watched with grim satisfaction as Arri was tied securely to the post. The conspirators had gathered round, eager to witness the brutal spectacle.

“Let this be a lesson,” I said, my voice carrying across the courtyard. “I will not tolerate failure, nor will I allow treachery to go unpunished.” As I spoke, I kept my eyes fixed on

Leyanna's face. Her fear and revulsion palpable even from a distance.

"Proceed," I commanded, nodding towards the whip-wielding guard.

The air was thick with anticipation as the first lash fell upon Arri's bare back—the sickening sound of leather meeting flesh followed by her anguished screams echoing off the courtyard walls. Blood began to flow freely, staining the cobblestones beneath her feet.

"Mercy, please!" Arri cried out between guttural sobs, but I remained unmoved. It was a necessary display of power, a reminder of the price of disobedience.

As the brutal spectacle unfolded before us, my eyes remained locked on Leyanna. Her skin had paled, and her eyes were wide with shock. But there, beneath the horror, I detected a flicker of both attraction and revulsion in her gaze. It stirred something dark within me, a primal hunger that demanded satisfaction.

"Enough," I commanded, my voice cold as ice. The executioner ceased his assault, stepping back to allow me a clear view of Arri's trembling, bloodied form. "Untie her, and bring a healer to see that she is tended to."

As she was released from the post, her body collapsing into the arms of those who had bound her moments before, I turned my attention back to the conspirators.

"See? My brother knows how to get things done," Frederick remarked with a smirk, casting a sidelong glance at Duke Ollan, Bishop Damlan, and Elder Claude. Their faces displayed a mixture of unease and newfound respect. A wicked grin spread across my lips as I saw their allegiance solidifying before my very eyes.

"Yes," Duke Ollan agreed, a chuckle escaping him. "A man who can command such fear and loyalty is precisely what we need."

"Remind me not to cross your brother," Ollan chuckled darkly to Frederick.

“Then let us cement this alliance,” I said, extending my hand to each of them in turn. They clasped my hand firmly, one by one, sealing our pact and pledging their loyalty to me.

“Your ruthlessness will serve us well,” Bishop Damlen said, his eyes gleaming with ambition. “Together, we shall place you upon the throne.”

“No doubt about it, he’s the right man for the job,” Frederick replied with a smirk.

“Let us toast to our future success,” Elder Claude suggested, raising his goblet. We all joined him, and the sound of clinking glass filled the air, mingling with the faint moans of pain still lingering from Arri’s punishment.

Throughout it all, I could feel Leyanna’s eyes upon me, her stare like a burning brand searing into my soul. The conflicting emotions that danced across her face only served to heighten my perverse desire for her. I planned to savor her reaction later, in the privacy of our chamber.

“To glory,” I said, my voice dripping with dark intent. With each sip, I could taste the power that would soon be mine, and it was intoxicating. The world was at my fingertips, and all who dared to oppose me would tremble before my might.

“To glory,” they echoed, sealing their fates alongside mine.

As the conspirators departed, I turned to Frederick. “You did well showing them the power of our allegiance.”

“Of course,” he replied with a wicked grin, his eyes gleaming with dark intent. “And you certainly know how to make an impression. They won’t dare cross us now. We have them exactly where we want them.”

“Yes,” I replied, my gaze finding Leyanna once more. “We won’t need them for much longer.”

“Oh, I know,” Frederick agreed, dabbing his mouth with a cloth. “I’ve already dispatched our scouts to find a suitable location for their executions.”

“I should have suspected as much,” I said with an indulgent smile. Frederick was as ambitious as he was cunning. He’d always been adept at reading the minds of our adversaries, as well as anticipating his own.

“I’ll see you on the morrow, brother,” Frederick said and took his leave.

I turned to find Leyanna standing there, her eyes meeting mine without flinching. The defiance that so often sparked my obsession glimmered in her gaze.

“Quinn,” she said, her voice steady and unyielding, “Why do you speak of dangerous things so openly?” I couldn’t help but grin at her audacity, even after witnessing the brutal punishment of Arri.

“Ah,” I began, sauntering closer to her, my boots clicking on the cold stone floor. Something about the way she showed interest surprised me. I felt compelled to answer. “The people follow strength, not weakness. And the ancient Sound Fragment grants many abilities that could be used for stealth.” I locked my arm around her waist, pulling her against my hardened body.

As I spoke, I noticed a change in her demeanor. She seemed... different, intrigued by my explanation of the Northlander fragmental powers.

“My people didn’t have the gift of the fragments,” she sighed. “I always wondered about them. The power they gift. It’s all so surreal. So alluring.”

I pressed her harder against my body. “Less than five percent of Northlanders can access the fragment, but those that do could have Sound suppression, voice mimicry, sound enhancement—any one of these powers enable clandestine opportunities. I decided long ago, it’s best to be open about one’s intentions and face the consequences like a man, than to hide in the shadows like a coward.”

Her breath hitched as I tilted her chin upward, forcing her to look into my eyes. “Do you understand?”

“I understand,” she whispered, her body trembling against me. My brazenness seemed to have sparked something within her usually defiant spirit. For the first time, as I took her right there in the courtyard, she didn’t recoil at my touch. Instead, her fingers curled into my hair, her nails scraping my scalp as she kissed me back with fervor. Our bodies entwined in a dance of lust and power, the walls echoing from our passionate cries.

“Fuck,” I muttered, as my climax neared, driven by the intoxicating blend of her submission and the promise of power looming on the horizon. “You belong to me, Leyanna.” I claimed her with a final thrust, our bodies shuddering in unison.

As she lay sleeping, her chest rising and falling with each breath, I stood over her, my body still slick with sweat. The world seemed open before me, ripe for the taking. I had only glimpsed the beginning of what I could become. And it was glorious.

Tomorrow, I would begin my ascent.

# CHAPTER 5

*Northland Kingdom*

I PREPARED A STEAMING CUP OF TEA, THE DRIED LEAVES releasing an earthy, aromatic scent as they steeped. Arri lay on the narrow bed, her pallid skin marred by vicious lashes, a testament to her punishment. I approached, carrying two glasses of the tea on a wooden tray, each step calculated and purposeful.

“Arri, I’ve brought you something for your pain,” I said, my voice full of concern. “I was once a healer in Divad, skilled in natural remedies. This tea will help speed up your recovery.”

Her eyes narrowed, distrust etched across her face.

“Drink this, it will help with the pain,” I said kindly, pressing the hot cup into her hands. Dark circles hung under her bloodshot eyes, and her movements were stiff with thinly-veiled agony. She accepted it readily, desperation and thirst overpowering any caution. The scalding liquid soothed her ravaged throat as it went down, the pain from her back evident.

I busied myself tidying the modest room, making idle conversation.

“Why are you helping me?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

I turned to face her, meeting her gaze with a solemn expression.

“Because someone has to,” I replied simply. “I’ve seen firsthand the brutality Northlanders inflict on innocent people, and I refuse to stand by and watch. You deserve better than this.”

Arri’s eyes widened in surprise, and a flicker of gratitude passed across her face. I knew she was suspicious of me, but I couldn’t blame her. The world we lived in was full of deceit and betrayal, where even the most loyal friends could turn on you in an instant.

“Would you like more tea?” I asked.

“Thank you,” she said softly, her voice weak.

I nodded, a small smile playing at my lips as I handed her my cup. “Rest now, Arri. You’ll need your strength for what’s to come.”

As Arri drank greedily, I started to leave the room when, quite unexpectedly, she confronted me.

“It was you who stole the dagger, wasn’t it?” Arri said, in a hoarse yet accusing tone, despite the agony wracking her body. She continued ruthlessly. “You are the only one who had access to the Master’s bedchambers.”

I was momentarily stunned, but I steadied my breathing and maintained an air of indifference. Her perceptiveness was unnerving. The room seemed to close in around us, thick with tension.

“You’re hurting,” I began, attempting to deflect her suspicions with a disarming smile. “I think you’ve suffered enough for one day. I’ll come visit you on the morrow.”

She was not dissuaded. “I see through your lies, Leyanna,” she hissed, her eyes blazing with defiance even as the pain threatened to consume her. Sensing she had gained the advantage, Arri pressed on, cutting off my feeble rebuttals. “I see how you look at Quinn, like a lioness in heat. You want Quinn for yourself, and you would do anything to have him.”

She was nearly shouting now, fueled by jealousy and outrage.

“Damn you,” I muttered, my heart pounding in my chest as Arri’s words sliced through me like a blade. “You think I love him? The man who abuses me and treats me as a plaything?”

“Love?” Arri scoffed, her battered face twisting. “No, you want him for power. You see him as a means to an end. I love him.”

The boldness of her words struck me like a thunderclap. And then Quinn’s words rolled around in my head.

*It’s best to be open about one’s intentions.*

“You’re right,” I whispered, leaning close to her ear, my breath warm against her skin. “I took the dagger. I want my freedom back, and I will have it. One way or another.”

Arri’s eyes narrowed, her gaze locked onto mine. I held her stare, refusing to back down. The tension between us was a razor-sharp edge.

“Then we are enemies,” she hissed, her anger giving her strength even as her body weakened from the punishment she had endured.

“Arri,” I replied coldly, my voice heavy with menace. “We’ve been enemies the moment Quinn touched me.”

“Your plan is madness,” she grunted and shifted in her bed, an attempt to relieve her pain.

“Perhaps,” I conceded with a shrug, “but my path is my own to walk, Arri. And I will be free, no matter the cost.”

“You aim to kill the Master!” she scoffed, unwilling to hear threats towards her beloved master, and shifting her position again. “I will tell of your treachery, and watch with joy as your body is burned.”

She moved to stand, but stumbled, confusion spreading across her features. The effects had begun.

“Ah, but you won’t,” I smiled coldly. My words seemed to hang in the air. She looked to the empty cup, the innocent-looking vessel she drank from earlier with widened eyes.

“Wha—what did y-you do?” she stammered, her eyes moving wide with dawning horror like the crumbling walls of a besieged city.

“Freedom,” I vowed, “must be won...at any cost.”

“Y-You poison me?” She choked out hoarsely, before collapsing back onto her cot. Her chest heaved with frantic, labored breaths. Arri’s face contorted as the herbs continued their work from within, her eyes darting from mine to the cup that sealed her fate. “Quinn will know you did this to me,” she said, her voice quaking.

I felt no pity, only cold satisfaction as I loomed over Arri’s helpless form. “Who do you think Quinn will believe?” I asked calmly. “His loyal servant, or the dead one he recently punished?”

Her breaths came in ragged gasps, as though each one might be her last. The poison’s work was insidious. I could see it etching itself into the very lines of her face.

“Monster,” she breathed, her cheeks drained of color. “You’re no better than him.”

“Perhaps not,” I admitted, my heart aching at the truth of her words. “But I will do whatever it takes to be free.”

“Freedom bought with blood and treachery,” she spat, her voice laced with venom.

I shrugged, locking gazes with her. “It’s a price I’m willing to pay.”

Arri’s body convulsed violently, the poison taking hold with unrelenting speed. She could only gurgle in response as blood-tinged spittle ran down her chin. Her limbs jerked and spasmed unnaturally, like a spider in its final death throes. Those bloodshot eyes bulged in one final plea, before dulling permanently as the last flicker of life left them. She shuddered once more, then lay inert.

The silence that fell over the room was heavy, profound. I had no time to contemplate the enormity of what I had done. After wiping her chin with one of the blood-soaked rags used as dressing for her back, I rifled through her few possessions

and found a small pouch hidden beneath the straw of her pallet. Quinn's stolen dagger gleamed as I placed the weapon among her belongings. Let any who discover her accuse a dead woman of this supposed crime.

I touched the side of my eyes until I achieved the desired result and then stumbled from the room, tears streaming down my face. The guards stationed outside looked at me with surprise and suspicion. "Help!" I sobbed, my voice choked with feigned grief. "I've discovered Arri's treason!"

They rushed past me into the room. I followed, watching as they took in the sight of Arri's lifeless form, the poison still fresh on her lips but disguised as simple tea, and the damning evidence of the dagger beside her.

"Hell," one guard muttered, his gaze flicking between me and the grisly scene. "This cannot be."

"Quinn must know at once," I insisted, my voice quivering with urgency. "His precious dagger lies beside her. She has betrayed us all!"

"Stay here," the other ordered, his expression darkening with anger and disbelief. He disappeared down the hall, leaving me alone with the first guard and the weight of my actions.

"Did she say anything?" he asked, his voice low and curious.

"Only that she stole the weapon," I lied, my voice heavy with guilt. "She... she did not say why."

"Damn her!" he spat, his disgust evident. "To think I trusted her..."

"Good," another replied coldly as he entered. "Traitors deserve nothing less."

I bit back a retort, fighting to maintain my composure. This guard knew nothing of my own treachery, and I could not afford to arouse suspicion. My freedom depended on it. The air in the room seemed to grow colder, as Quinn strode into the room, his powerful frame filling the space. His cold,

piercing eyes swept over the scene before him, settling on me as I cowered by Arri's lifeless form.

"Tell me what happened," he commanded, his deep voice resonating with authority.

"Arri confessed to stealing your dagger, my lord," I said, struggling to keep my voice steady. "The pain from her whipping must have been too much to bear, and she... she just expired."

"Did she say why she did it?" he demanded, his eyes narrowed in suspicion.

"Her words were few, my lord" I replied, swallowing hard. "She deliriously confessed to taking the dagger out of misguided hatred for you, and her desire to gain her freedom. One way or another."

Quinn's eyes blazed with wrath at Arri's purported betrayal. "After all this time?"

"Yes, my lord" I whispered, my heart pounding in my chest as I saw the rage coursing through him.

"And now she is dead, taking her treachery to the grave with her," he spat, shaking his head in disgust.

Quinn held me gently, stroking my hair as I whimpered and trembled. But beneath the masterful facade, I sensed something shift subtly between us. When our eyes met amidst the chaos, was that a glimmer of newfound respect in his piercing gaze? An unspoken acknowledgement of my ruthless cunning?

"You have done well to reveal this grave threat," Quinn murmured, lifting my chin. "Trust no one in these times, not even those you think you know." He pulled me tighter. "I suddenly find myself in need of a personal attendant."

"Th-thank you, my lord" I stammered, hardly daring to believe the turn of events. I hid my smile of satisfaction against his chest.

"Your loyalty will not go unrewarded" he said, his low growl sending electricity through my body. "You will find that

I am a generous master to those who serve me well.”

“Thank you, my lord” I murmured. If I wished to gain my freedom, I would need to walk this dangerous line between seduction and subversion.

“Come,” he commanded. “I would have you attend me further.”

Though my heart pounded wildly within my breast, I forced myself to remain outwardly calm. I’d been losing playing this game the way I had been, and learned any sign of fear or hesitation would only serve to strengthen his hold over me. I sought the opposite. I followed him into his bedchamber, my pulse quickening as the door closed behind us with a heavy thud.

“Disrobe,” he ordered, his dark eyes roving over my body with undisguised lust.

“Of course, my lord,” I replied, my voice steady despite the turmoil that raged within me. I allowed my fingertips to graze the hem of my gown before slowly lifting it over my head, baring my naked form to his hungry gaze.

“Beautiful,” he murmured, reaching out to trace the curve of my hip.

“Come and have it, then,” I said, meeting his eyes unflinchingly as I stepped into his embrace. Our lips met in a searing kiss, one that spoke of dominance and submission, of the tempestuous power struggle that lay at the heart of our twisted relationship.

As the night wore on, I gave myself to him fully, surrendering my body to his brutal ministrations while retaining control of my mind. His words from last night echoed through my thoughts, a mantra fueling my determination.

*The people follow strength, not weakness.*

Thank you, Quinn, for teaching me how to play. I would gain my freedom, one way or another.

# CHAPTER 6

*Northland Kingdom*

THE SCENT OF PASSION LINGERED IN THE AIR AS LEYANNA LAY beside me on the rumpled bed, her slender form heaving with each breath. Her skin glistened in the candlelight, and her hair fanned out around her like a halo. Our bodies entwined, sweat mingling, I could feel the strength and resilience that belied her delicate appearance.

I had broken this wild creature, and now her spirit belonged to me.

“Your new role,” I began, my voice husky from our recent exertions, “will require certain duties. As my personal attendant, your loyalty must be absolute.”

Her gray eyes met mine, and though she was captive to me, she possessed an aura of quiet power that stirred something within me. “I understand,” she replied softly, “and I vow to aid you, Quinn.”

“Good,” I said, tracing a finger down her cheek. “Because there is one man who stands in the way of what I seek.”

“Who?” she asked, curiosity sparking in her eyes.

“Supreme General Stanler Bracken,” I replied. “He is loyal to King Filip and leads the military. The fool has just returned from the Atinahs Kingdom, where he attempted to court Princess Everly. Your task is simple—you will get close to him and ensure tonight is his last.”

Her eyes widened in shock, but her voice never wavered. “Of course.”

“Let me remind you how I handle betrayal,” I growled menacingly, tightening my grip on her arm. She winced, and a flicker of fear crossed her face. Yet, there was something else in her gaze—insolence, perhaps. It made her all the more enticing to me. “Supreme General Stanler Bracken stands as the largest obstacle blocking my ascension. The man’s loyalty to the weak-willed King Filip make him a threat, one needing to be dealt with. But make no mistake, Leyanna. I will ascend to the throne, and anyone who comes between me and my destiny will be dealt with. Severely.”

“Very well,” she said, swallowing hard. “I will do as you ask.”

“Excellent,” I murmured, releasing her and rising from the bed. “Now, go and prepare yourself for the task at hand.”

As she moved to obey, I could not help but marvel at how this intelligent, resilient woman had come into my life. How her presence had ignited a fire within me that threatened to consume everything in its path. “Ensure tonight is his last,” I commanded coldly.

Her eyes betrayed a flicker of apprehension, as she nodded in understanding.

The time had come to finally set my meticulously laid schemes into motion. As I strode the vast palace halls, guards and servants alike averted their gazes, intimidated by the palpable air of power and danger surrounding me. As I walked, my boots echoed against the cold stone floor like a sinister prelude.

“Make way for Commander General Quinn,” one of my loyal soldiers barked, clearing a path through the throng of people who dared not meet my eyes.

“Tonight, this kingdom will be mine,” I thought to myself. None who wished to keep their lives would dare defy my will.

In the map room, my generals awaited my orders, their uniforms and blades immaculately polished. Their eyes

gleamed with obedience as they stood at attention, ready to receive my orders. It was time to choreograph the bloody coup to put me on the throne.

“Gentlemen,” I began, my voice confident and commanding. “The hour of reckoning is upon us. Tonight, we seize control of Northland Kingdom and eliminate all who stand in our way.”

A murmur of excitement rippled through the room at my declaration, and I could see the greed for power and glory reflected in their eyes. They were mine to command, and I would lead them into glorious victory.

“Supreme General Stanler Bracken remains loyal to King Filip, and he must be dealt with,” I continued, my tone cold and calculated. “Leyanna has been tasked with ensuring his demise.”

“Are you certain she can be trusted, commander?” one of the generals inquired, his brow furrowed with concern.

“Trust is a luxury I cannot afford,” I replied, my gaze unwavering. “But rest assured, she knows the consequences of betrayal.”

With that, I unfurled the map of the capital before them, revealing key strongholds to be seized in order to secure our victory. My generals leaned in, studying the intricate web of streets and alleys to paint red with the blood of our enemies.

“Here,” I pointed, my finger tracing the route our forces would take under the cover of darkness. “We strike at dawn’s first light, as the city sleeps, unaware of the approaching storm.”

As I detailed the plan, my mind raced with thoughts of Leyanna. I could still feel the warmth of her touch on my skin, her soft body pressed against mine as we made love just hours earlier. A tantalizing reminder of the dangerous game we were both playing. But now was not the time for such distractions. I had a kingdom to claim and a legacy to forge.

My generals listened raptly, their eyes gleaming with obedience and anticipation, reminding me of rabid war hounds

straining against the leash.

“Are there any questions?” I asked, my voice firm and resolute.

“None, commander,” came the unanimous response from my generals.

“Very well,” I said, rolling up the map and tucking it securely under my arm. “Prepare your men. Tonight, we change the course of history.”

The sun would rise on a new era, and Northland would bow to me alone.

The feasting table that evening groaned under the weight of decadent dishes, each more tempting than the last. Servants dressed in finery unsuitable for their station scurried about with heads bowed low, hoping to avoid attracting the ire or attention of the nobles they served. I caught Leyanna’s gaze from across the hall as she refilled goblets, her exquisite figure draped in an emerald gown I had selected specifically to compliment her unusual beauty. A subtle message passed between us, an unspoken understanding that sealed both our fates.

Leyanna began conversing with General Bracken who sat at the high table, expertly using her feminine charm and laughing delicately as she touched his arm with a familiarity that few would dare. I observed their interactions, my jaw clenched. The fool was captivated by her, nearly spilling his wine as he became lost in her smoldering gaze. The thought of Leyanna using her feminine wiles upon Bracken filled me with a mixture of jealousy and anticipation.

They soon excused themselves from the table, Leyanna leading Bracken by the hand down the shadowed corridor. My fists curled beneath the table at this necessary indignity. She had better not double cross me, or I would cut her treacherous heart from her chest myself. Nothing and no one would stop my ascension this night.

“Brother,” Frederick whispered in my ear. “It’s time.”

“See you on the other side,” I answered, my gaze never leaving the spot where Leyanna had vanished moments before. Using his Sound suppression fragment power which granted him the ability for stealthy movement and masking actions, Frederick slipped away from my side, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

As the unsuspecting nobles and royals indulged in gluttony and idle gossip, my forces stealthily moved into the positions I had selected for optimal tactical domination within the capital. Adrenaline coursed through my veins as I excused myself from the festivities and prepared to finally unleash hell upon this city and kingdom according to my vision.

The night was as black as a raven’s wing, the moon obscured by heavy clouds. My heart pounded within my chest like a war drum, as I stood at the edge of the palace grounds, my elite soldiers assembled in the darkness around me. The board was perfectly set for a swift and ruthlessly efficient power play.

“Tonight,” I whispered, addressing my loyal troops, “we claim what is rightfully ours. Northland will kneel before us, or it will burn.” A murmur of assent rippled through the ranks.

“Remember,” I continued, my voice low and steady, “mercy is for the weak. Those who resist us are unworthy of it.” As I uttered those words, I scanned the faces of my soldiers, each one a reflection of my own dark intent.

“Wait for my signal,” I ordered. There would be no turning back. The path ahead was paved with bloodshed and treachery, but it was a price I was willing to pay.

At the first glimmer of dawn’s light, I raised my arm high, and unleashed a powerful, deafening Sonic Scream blast shattering the silence of the morning air. Chaos erupted as my soldiers swarmed the strongholds like wolves, their eyes gleaming with savage hunger.

“Forward!” I roared, leading them into battle as cries and clashing steel rang out through the capital. We cut down all who resisted, our blades carving a path through the flesh of

our enemies. The streets ran red under the rising sun, the scent of blood and sweat thick in the air.

“Where are your loyalties now?” I snarled at a fallen guard, his eyes wide with fear. “See what a weak king does?”

“Please,” he gasped, blood bubbling from his lips. “Spare me.”

“Your pleas fall on deaf ears,” I spat, my blade glinting as it descended upon him, severing the final thread of his pitiful existence.

As we stormed through the city, my thoughts went to Leyanna, her treacherous beauty haunting my every step. Had she succeeded in her task, or had she chosen to betray me?

One by one, the key defensive positions fell before our hardened onslaught. None could stand against the raw, fearsome fury I commanded with sheer force of will. I was destruction incarnate.

“Have mercy!” a trembling noblewoman cried as my soldiers tore through her opulent home, ransacking the wealth she had hoarded away. Her begging grated on my ears, and inflamed the fires within me.

“Your pleas are as worthless as your pitiful life,” I spat, my words a final judgment as my men dragged her away, screaming into the darkness.

The king’s throne room loomed before me, a promise of both glory and retribution. Its heavy doors groaned open, revealing.

“Your Excellence,” I chuckled. “It appears our game has come to its inevitable conclusion.”

“Quinn,” he whispered, his eyes wide with shock and fear, unable to comprehend the full extent of my cunning. “What have you done?”

“What was necessary,” I replied, relishing the way my name dripped from his lips like venom. “Northland needs a new leader, one strong enough to drive her to greatness.”

“Please,” he choked out, the word barely more than a whimper. “Have mercy on my family.”

“Mercy?” I echoed, my voice a low growl. “There’s that word again.”

“Quinn, don’t do this,” he pleaded.

I unsheathed my blade and raised it high above my head. “Long live the king.”

The steel sang as it sliced through the air, severing the last remnants of the old order.

The last embers of resistance flickered and died beneath my heel as I strode through the blood-soaked halls of the palace. The air was heavy with the scent of fear and death, intoxicating me with the heady rush of victory. My men moved swiftly and silently, cutting down any who dared defy me with brutal efficiency.

“Quinn,” Frederick’s voice cut through the silence, sending a thrill down my spine. “It is done.”

“Good,” I replied, savoring the taste of triumph on my tongue. “And Leyanna?”

“Successful as well,” he said, a hint of begrudging admiration in his tone. “She has proven herself...useful.”

“Of course she has,” I murmured, feeling the heat of desire ignite within me at the mere mention of her name. “Bring her to me.”

“Your Excellence,” Frederick bowed, a smirk tugging at the corner of his lips as he retreated to fetch my prize.

I poured myself a goblet of wine, watching as the crimson liquid swirled like the lifeblood of those who had fallen in my pursuit of power. As I raised the cup to my lips, I caught sight of Leyanna, her silhouette against the dim light of the torches that lined the hall hardening my cock.

“Quinn,” she breathed, her voice a sultry whisper that sent shivers down my spine. “You have claimed your throne.”

I took a sip of wine, allowing its warmth to spread through me. “And you, my dear, have been instrumental in securing it.”

“Is that all I am to you?” she asked, defiance sparking in her eyes. “A tool to be used and discarded?”

“Perhaps once,” I admitted, setting the goblet aside and closing the distance between us. “But now, you are so much more.”

“Am I?” she challenged, her gaze never wavering from mine. “What am I to you, Quinn?”

“Everything,” I growled, my hands finding her hips and pulling her close. “Every damn thing.”

“Then prove it,” she whispered, her sweet breath filling my nostrils as she pressed herself against me.

“Consider it done,” I murmured, claiming her lips in a searing kiss that spoke of possession, power, and passion.

# CHAPTER 7

*Northland Kingdom*

MY HANDS ROAMED UNDER HER DRESS AND LIFTED IT AROUND her waist, her lips quivering as my fingers caressed her skin. She gasped, parting her legs to allow me access to the heat between them. I growled, my hips bucking as my fingers found her clit, my tongue tracing the contours of her lips.

“Quinn,” she moaned as she tore away from my lips, her voice ragged with desire. “I need you.”

I caught her in my arms, lifting her as we fell atop the king’s throne. Her eyes gleamed with lust and triumph, a hand finding my belt and undoing it with a practiced flick of her wrist. My cock twitched with anticipation. Her slender fingers traced the contours of my cock, squeezing it gently, her lips parted with desire.

I groaned, gently thrusting my hips into her hand as her fingers encircled my shaft, the heat flowing through it, pulsing with need. She lowered her lips to my cock, her tongue flicking out in a teasing motion. I moaned, my fingers finding her hair and gripping it tightly. She took me into her mouth, sucking, licking, and tasting my full length. Her tongue danced around me, her lips caressing the sensitive tip of my cock. I thrust into her mouth, savoring the sensations as she sucked on me, her tongue lapping at the underside of my shaft.

“Leyanna,” I groaned, my fingers digging into her hair. She moaned, the vibrations of her throat sending a wave of pleasure rippling through me.

I could barely stand as she continued to work her lips up and down my shaft, her mouth taking more and more of me with each buck. I let out a shuddering gasp as she took me deep into her throat, my fingers tightening in her hair. She moaned as my cock hit the back of her throat, her cheeks hollowing as she sucked and licked me.

“That’s it,” I groaned, feeling the pressure building within me. “Don’t stop.”

I took hold of her dress and lifted it off of her body, my cock twitching in her mouth as I took in her naked form. She moaned, her flesh pebbling as I ran my fingers along it, the softness of her skin setting my heart racing. I cupped her breasts, my fingers finding her nipples and pinching them. She moaned, her tongue flicking out to caress my cock. I groaned, my fingers playing across her skin, the teasing touch driving me wild with need.

“See what you do to me,” I growled, my fingers finding her core. She shuddered as my fingers slid between her lips, teasing her clit as she continued to suck on my cock. My hips bucked as I slipped a finger deep into her cunt. She moaned, the wet sounds of her lips on my cock echoing through the throne room.

“Quinn,” she gasped, her voice throaty with need. “Please.”

I groaned, my hips bucking as her lips tightened around me. Her tongue lapped at my cock as she rode my finger. She moaned, her hips bucking as my fingers played across her body. I grunted, my cock twitching in her mouth as she sucked me harder. Her hips bucked, her pussy gripping my finger as she quivered with pleasure. I moaned, my fingers working her clit as I undulated my hips.

I felt the pressure building within me, the swell of desire threatening to consume me. She whimpered, her tongue flicking out to caress my balls as I continued to pleasure her. My cock stiffening as she pumped her hips, my fingers massaging her clit as they thrust into her. My fingers slipped in and out of her as she sucked me, her tongue teasing my tip.

“That’s it,” I groaned, feeling the pressure building within me. “Suck it, Leyanna.”

I felt my muscles tense, the coiled spring within me ready to snap. She moaned, her tongue lapping at my balls as my shaft pulsed in her hand as she stroked it.

“Don’t stop,” I growled, feeling the pressure mounting within me.

She moaned, her pussy tightening around my fingers as she came.

“Leyanna,” I groaned, thrusting into her mouth. I gasped as she tightened her mouth around me, tearing a groan from my lips. Her moans of pleasure spurred me on as I plunged my fingers into her slick cunt. I felt her melt against me, her body yielding to my touch.

“Quinn...” her voice trailed off as I pulled her legs apart, her eyes smoldering with lust as I lowered my face and began to feast. She tasted even sweeter than I could have imagined, her pussy already slick with desire for me. My tongue lapped at her clit, her moans of pleasure filling the air as I drove her to the brink of another orgasm.

Her hips began to move as I worked my tongue in and out of her tight hole, her pleasure mounting with every thrust. Her moans turned into cries as her body tensed, her warm juices flowing into my mouth.

I lifted her legs over my shoulders, plunging my tongue deep into her pussy as I buried my fingers into her ass. She gasped, riding my face as I licked at her, my tongue dancing across her clit.

I drove her closer to the edge, her thighs quivering as she neared orgasm. She shuddered, her thighs squeezing my head as she came, my tongue lapping at her juices as they flowed from her quivering pussy. “Quinn...oh, Quinn...”

Her pleasure surged through me, as I drew her clit into my mouth, sucking it gently. I pulled away from her, her cries of pleasure ringing in my ears. She whimpered, her hips bucking

as I stood. Her eyes met mine, lust and desire burning within them.

“Quinn,” she whispered, her voice ragged with need. “Please. Fill me. Now.”

I buried myself in her, the tightness of her cunt squeezing my cock as I buried deep into her. She moaned, her nails digging into my back as I claimed her. I pounded into her again and again, my cock deep in her warmth. My lips found hers, claiming them in a searing kiss as I drove into her.

She wrapped her legs around my waist, her body responding to every thrust. I could feel my orgasm building within me, the muscles in my thighs tightening as they tensed. I groaned, my cock twitching as I thrust into her.

“Quinn,” she moaned, her voice pleading. “Please. Don’t stop.”

“Leyanna,” I groaned, my tempo increasing.

Her eyes met mine, filled with lust and desire.

“Please,” she pleaded, her hips bucking against me.

I groaned, my cock twitching as I felt the pressure mounting within me. My thrusts became erratic as I drove into her, my muscles tensing as I neared climax. She whimpered, her nails scratching across my back as I hammered into her. My cock throbbed as it neared climax. “I’m going to come, Leyanna.”

I buried myself deeply into her one final time. Her warmth surrounded me, the sensation of her pussy pulsing as it milked my cock almost more than I could bear. I groaned, my cock twitching as I spilled my seed into her.

We lay together on the throne, her head resting against my chest. “I’m glad I didn’t have to rip your tongue out for betraying me,” I told her as I played with her hair. “I’ve grown quite fond of you.”

“Yes, Master,” she breathed.

# EPILOGUE

*Northland Kingdom*

“Quinn seeks to defy the fragments themselves!” Rissa shouted, her voice booming through the packed temple hall. “He has strayed from the sacred path laid out since the dawn of our people. The ancient fragments chose the royal bloodline as stewards of their power, yet this usurper would hoard their gifts for himself!”

Her denunciation echoed off the stone walls as she pointed an accusing finger at Quinn. “He is no true heir to the fragments’ legacy! I call on all loyal followers to renounce this charlatan, this...heretic who would twist our most holy birthright to his own corrupt ends! His rule is not their will!”

“Enough,” Quinn commanded, his eyes narrowed. His tall, muscular frame towered over the gathered nobles and commoners alike. He signaled to his guards and they moved swiftly, grasping Rissa’s arms with brutal force.

“Unhand me!” Rissa struggled against her captors, her once-peaceful visage twisted into a mask of rage. “The truth will be heard!”

As she was dragged from the courtyard, her protests fading into the distance, the cold smile creeping across Quinn’s face told the story. Her fate was already sealed. None would be allowed to threaten his iron rule.

“In light of recent events, I believe it is time for a new High Priest to be appointed,” Quinn announced to the gathered crowd. “And who better than you, Bishop?”

“Your Excellence,” Bishop Damlen stepped forward, a calculating glint in his eye. He was an ambitious politician, hiding his ruthless ambition beneath a polished, dignified facade. He bowed deeply. “An honor I humbly accept, Your Excellence.”

Straightening up, Damlen declared in a booming voice, “The fragments’ choosing is clear—Quinn has been ordained! Their ancient magic courses through his veins, affirming his divine right to rule. Quinn shall reign!”

The conspirators’ cunning moves to solidify power under Quinn’s thumb unfolded before me as I impassively observed the ceremony.

“Long live our ruler!” someone shouted, and the cry was taken up by the gathered crowd. My lips remained sealed.

“Kneel, Your Excellency,” High Priest Damlen urged.

Quinn knelt, his chiseled jaw set with determination as the priest placed the crown upon his head. Quinn rose to his feet, his eyes scanning the crowd. He looked regal, powerful, and untouchable. But then, with a swift and brutal gesture, Quinn tore the crown from his head and crushed it beneath his boot.

“No more kings,” he roared, his Sonic Scream fragment power shaking the very air around him. “From this day forth, I am your President, and we are the Northland Republic!”

The masses erupted into cheers, their voices echoing through the courtyard. The fools. They didn’t realize Quinn just declared himself president in perpetuity. There would be no elections. There would only be him.

As the cries of adulation continued, the visiting King and Queen of the Atinahs Kingdom stepped forward, formally presenting their daughter, Princess Everly. She looked as if she’d been plucked from a story world, her hair cascading down her back and her eyes shimmering.

“Brother,” Quinn called out, gesturing for Frederick to join him. “Today, our realms become one. You shall marry Princess Everly of Atinahs, sealing our alliance and bringing prosperity to our people.”

Frederick, ever the poised and charming politician, smiled as he took Everly's hand. "It will be an honor," he declared, his voice laced with ambition.

I wondered what form of manipulation and fear had Quinn and Frederick deployed to get the rulers of the neighboring kingdom to agree to this alliance, rather than let their daughter experience true affection.

"The fragments will bless this union," High Priest Damlen intoned, raising his hands to the heavens. "And may our new republic thrive under the guidance of our President."

"Let the feast commence," Quinn announced, his dark eyes lingering on me as he spoke.

In the grand hall, laughter and merriment echoed. The air was thick with the scent of roasted meats and rich wines, as nobles and dignitaries feasted upon the spoils of our conquered lands.

"More wine, milady?" A servant girl, no older than thirteen, offered me a crystal goblet filled to the brim with crimson liquid as I stood in the shadows. Her hands trembled slightly, betraying her fear of this new regime.

"Thank you," I murmured, taking the goblet from her shaking fingers. As she scurried away, I turned to survey the room once more. Beneath the shimmering chandeliers, Frederick and Princess Everly danced gracefully together, their alliance sealed by deceit and coercion.

"Enjoying the festivities, Leyanna?" Quinn's voice, smooth as silk whispered in my ear. He appeared at my side, his muscular frame the embodiment of power and ruthlessness.

"Of course, my lord," I replied, my words carefully measured. "The elaborate public pomp and cheering throngs is quite... intoxicating." I sipped the wine, allowing its warmth to spread through my body.

Quinn chuckled, possessively placing a hand on my waist. "You have proven to be an invaluable asset."

"I am but a humble servant, President Quinn. My life is yours to command."

“Yes,” he murmured, his fingers trailing along the nape of my neck. “And you have served me well, Leyanna. Your compliance has not gone unnoticed.”

“Thank you, my lord,” I smiled, my voice laced with a hint of seduction. “Your approval is all that I desire.”

Quinn’s grip on me tightened, and he leaned in, his breath hot against my ear. “Is that so? Perhaps we should move to a more... private setting to discuss your desires.”

I let out a breathy laugh, my heart racing with excitement and fear. Quinn’s touch was both exhilarating and suffocating.

“Come,” Quinn took my hand, to lead me towards a private room. “Let us celebrate our victory in our own way.”

“You still have much to do, my lord,” I replied, my heart pounding in my chest. “Let us complete what you have set out here to do, and when all is said and done, I will see you well fed.”

My breath caught in my throat as Quinn stepped closer, his hand reaching out to brush a strand of hair from my face. I could feel the heat of his body against mine, and the scent of him filled my senses. “Good. Because I am ravenous.”

As the night wore on, I watched in discreet silence as Quinn forged his empire, demanding complete submission from all who crossed his path. With each whispered threat and veiled promise, the foundations of tyranny were laid, brick by brick. And I played my part in this treacherous game, complying with all that was asked of me in my role as his attendant and privileged confidante.

With the festivities drawing to a close and the nobles dispersing, I found myself alone in his private chambers. When at last he joined me, I stood before him, completely exposed, my hands behind my back—a naked feast for his delight. My heart raced in my chest, thudding like the drums of war.

“Ah, Leyanna,” he breathed, his eyes drinking me in with ravenous hunger. “You never cease to amaze me.”

“I live to please you, my lord,” I replied, my voice a seductive purr.

Quinn stepped closer, his hands tracing the curves of my body with a feather-light touch. “And please me, you do,” he murmured, his lips hovering just above mine.

With a sudden surge of desire, I pushed him back onto the bed with one hand and straddled him, pinning him beneath me. His eyes flashed with surprise, then darkened with lust.

“You are quite the handful, Leyanna,” he growled, his hands gripping my hips possessively.

“And you are quite the challenge, my lord,” I replied, a lustful smile spreading across my face.

His hands were hot upon my skin. “Before we begin—” he whispered.

I tilted my head to the side. “Yes, my lord?”

“Your loyalty has not gone unnoticed, Leyanna,” Quinn said, a predatory grin spreading across his handsome features. “You have shown yourself to be a valuable asset in these tumultuous times.”

“Thank you, President Quinn,” I replied. “I am honored to serve you.”

“I have come to see this,” he murmured, his eyes lingering on me as if appraising a prized possession. “And to reward your obedience, I shall grant you certain... privileges.”

“Such as?” I asked.

“From now on, you shall have free reign of the palace,” Quinn declared, his voice dripping with arrogance. “Attend any council meetings you wish, speak with whomever you please. Have access to my personal library. You are no longer merely a slave, but an invaluable advisor. Of course, on paper, your status remains unchanged.”

“Your generosity knows no bounds, my lord,” I replied, bowing my head in submission. “I serve at your pleasure, President Quinn.”

“Come here,” he growled, the lust evident in his voice.

As he reached for me, I fingered the hilt of his favorite dagger, hidden in my other hand behind my back. The fool hadn't realized I'd not shown him both hands the entire time. The cold steel kissed my skin, a lover's touch promising salvation. It was either his life or mine. His desire for my compliance, his weakness.

“Your beauty is intoxicating, Leyanna,” he said hoarsely, his breath hot against my neck as he pulled me close, his erection pressing against my thigh. “I cannot resist you.”

“Nor should you,” I whispered, forcing a sultry smile onto my lips, though bile rose in my throat.

Quinn's hands roamed my body, claiming every inch as if he owned me. But his touch only fueled my determination. I felt the weight of the blade in my hand and struggled to keep my grip steady.

“Tell me, what do you desire?” he panted, his fingers exploring my most intimate depths.

“Your touch,” I lied, biting back the urge to scream. “Your power.”

“Greedy little whore,” he chuckled darkly, pleased by my deceit. “Very well. Tonight, you shall have both.”

As Quinn moved to claim me, I knew the time had come. The flames of rebellion burned in my heart, and the dagger in my hand was the key to unlocking my chains.

I would have my freedom this night. One way or another.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Loren Hart is an author of high-stakes fantasy, supernatural, and paranormal romance who somehow finds time to write in between family life. Taking readers on journeys through twists and turns, where the women are strong, the men love hard, and the villains are charismatic is one way to ensure the story remains in the minds of all who read Loren.

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# PRIMAL GAMES

BEX DAWN

## AUTHOR NOTE AND CONTENT WARNINGS

Primal Games is a special, filthy novella excerpt that follows the full-length book, Primal Urges.

This story follows Rayvn and Wolfe, and picks up months after the original book ends. Reading this novella doesn't give much away, except of course, their HEA. But, if you know me at all, you know that was coming anyway.

After reading this, if you decide you want more of them, read Primal Urges. This story is a portion from a project I'm working on that will be released early next year. For updates, follow me on my socials. All links including my newsletter are at [www.bexdawnwrites.com](http://www.bexdawnwrites.com)

Enjoy and buckle up. This is a wild fucking ride.

This story includes content meant for adults. It's graphic, depraved and explicit.

Blood play, CNC, non-con/dub-con, somnophilia, paralyzation, knife play, primal play, birth control manipulation, mummification, force, hitting, horror vibes, mask play and more.

# CHAPTER 1

*“I do.”*

That’s it.

Two simple words and my world as I know it ceases to exist and somehow rebuilds itself all in a few short seconds.

Wolfe Nash is my life. Full stop. He has been since the day we met, though it took me much longer to admit it. He’s owned me—body, heart, soul, and mind. Not because of the extreme measures he took to implant himself into my life—ones he told me all about the day we reconnected outside of Remény all those months ago.

No, he owns me because he is the air that I breathe, and without him, I wouldn’t exist at all.

His fingers trace lovingly across my jaw as he absorbs my words, committing them to memory for all time. His eyes flutter closed, and the line between us, the one that’s kept us tethered since day one, goes taught with emotions.

*I can’t believe this is really happening.*

“And do you, Wolfe Nash, take Rayvn Porter to be your wife? To have and to cherish for all time, till death do you part?”

My heart slams against my ribcage, creating a staccato beat he can probably see through my tight dress.

Wolfe scoffs and rolls his eyes. His fingers grip my chin, and he tugs me forward, making my body collide with his. “As if death could drag me from her,” he murmurs before

smirking. “Death would have to fucking incinerate me, even in the afterlife, to keep me from you, little fox.”

The already chaotic organ in my chest swoons at his dark promise. God, I love this man.

The judge makes a choking sound, and from the corner of my gaze, I can see his eyes go wide behind his ancient-looking glasses.

“That’s not the line, Mr. N—,” he sputters.

Unperturbed, Wolfe goes on, interrupting him. “From childhood’s hour, I have not been. As others were, I have not seen. As others saw, I could not awaken. My heart to joy at the same tone. And all I loved, I have loved alone.” He swallows thickly as he quotes Poe, just like he did when all this began.

His beautiful crystalline blue eyes cloud over in a rare show of emotion. His hand slides from my jaw to my throat, and he squeezes, utterly uncaring of our audience.

“I believed myself to be a ghost—walking this earth in the shadows. Existing only in darkness. Bound to live alone and die the same way, but then you came along.” His hand tightens, and I suck in a breath when I feel wetness trickle down my cheek. Wolfe’s smirk widens as he tracks the tears with ravenous intent. “And now I exist for you, and you alone.”

“So do I,” I breathe, sinking deeper into his orbit. “You’re the air that I breathe, Wolfe Nash, and if I should perish, I want to do so with you in my lungs.”

Wolfe groans and drops his forehead to mine. Beneath the cover of my hair, he licks a trail along my cheek, swallowing my tears as though he can’t stand the idea of them going to waste.

His breath fans over my ear, and I shiver, tangling my fingers into his shirt. “*We loved with a love that was more than love,*” he whispers.

I nod against him, feeling the weight of those words down to my very bones as I finish his favorite poem.

*“But our love, it was stronger by far than the love of those who were older than we—of many far wiser than we—And neither the angels in Heaven above nor the demons down under the sea can ever dissever my soul from the soul of—”*

“Thee,” he cuts in, smiling from the slight change in words. *“And so, all the night-tide, I lie down by the side of my darling—my darling—my life and my bride.”*

I choke on a sob, and he cuts it off with a firm kiss that practically sucks the air from my lungs as if testing my vow already. I grin into his mouth despite my tears, tears that just won’t quit. I give myself a pass, though.

This is my wedding day, after all.

“You know that poem is about death, right?” the judge mutters, sounding as petulant as a child.

Wolfe kisses me once more, this one shorter but filled with so much promise, I shiver again. He doesn’t even look at the judge as he speaks, refusing to remove his gaze from mine. “Say the words, old man, so that we can get the fuck out of here.”

I smack his stomach lightly and shoot the judge an apologetic look

“Sorry, Judge Hamilton, we’re just excited.”

The judge, a man I’ve unfortunately known for years, narrows his eyes at the pair of us for a long moment but finally nods.

“Fine,” he huffs. “By the power vested in me by the state of Colorado, you are now husband and wife. I’d tell you to kiss the bride, but I’m afraid of what you might do, and we’re on a schedule here, folks.” He shoots me a look, his lip tipping up a fraction, telling me he’s joking. Kind of.

“Congratulations, Rayvn. I’m happy for you both.”

Wolfe, never one to disappoint, wraps his arms around me and, in a move more suave than I’d ever give him credit for, dips me backward as his lips collide with mine. I moan into his

mouth and sink into the feeling of his body against mine as gravity makes my head spin.

The kiss goes on for an indecently long time, but I don't care. Today is just for us and no one else.

Not the outside world or the couples in the courtroom waiting for their turn. Not for the judge, who I'll likely have to face in court again soon. Not for our families and friends, whom we should have probably invited or, at the very least, told.

It's about him and me.

My Wolfe.

My stalker.

My air.

*My husband.*

## CHAPTER 2

Last year, my life blew up.

Shattered into millions of unidentifiable shards.

First, a rape victim's case I'd been working, fell apart, leaving me hated by my law firm and torn apart by the media. After that, I discovered I had a stalker, though it ended up being the highlight of my year.

Yes, I know that's insane. I never claimed to be anything else.

Then, I was attacked, assaulted, and became the witness to a murder. Immediately after that, my dad was accepted into the Alzheimer's clinical trial at the foundation my then-stalker, now husband, created in New Mexico.

See. Insanity.

Though Dad settled in quickly and was doing well, I realized I hated the distance between us. Wolfe and I still had a ton of things to work through, and with me living in Colorado and him near the foundation, it was too difficult to connect the way we both wanted.

So, I did the only logical thing I could think of.

I dropped everything and moved.

Wolfe offered to come to Colorado so I wouldn't have to give up my job at the law firm, but I needed a change. I survived a lot last year, including the attack. I deserved a new start.

We all did.

Wolfe and I moved in together immediately, and honestly, it was the best decision I've ever made. Though we may have started off with a rocky foundation built on deception, we vowed to come clean about everything and work through it.

Now, here we are.

Married.

And standing in the middle of downtown Denver, staring at a nondescript building with no signs or clues as to what's inside.

My brows crash together as I slide from the car when Wolfe opens my door. "Where are we?" I murmur, tugging my jean jacket off.

It's just after three in the afternoon, but it's early June, so the sun is shining brightly, making me sweat.

Or maybe it's the sexy smile that settles over his face as he shrugs. "You'll just have to wait and see, Mrs. Nash."

My cheeks burn from the way Wolfe practically purrs my new name. Though I love my maiden name of Porter and the tie it weaves to my small but beautiful family, I love the sound of Nash even more.

Wolfe was adopted, and his mom, Kat, died last year from the very illness he's fighting to cure. The same one that's afflicted my own remaining parent, my dad. Wolfe has no one else in the world now but me. The last name is as much a claim as it is a symbol.

With a kiss to my jaw, he steps away to grab our bags before leading me toward the ominous, large, black door. My heart rate picks up, battering against my ribcage in a silent show of nerves and excitement.

Why? Because I know my husband.

I knew letting him have full reign of planning our honeymoon would bring out his crazy, his inner possessive stalker. He's unpredictable at the best of times, and not knowing what he has in store for me has a ball of anticipation coiling in my stomach.

Dim lights and a blast of cold air drifts over me as we step inside, and an unexpected shiver races up my spine, my dress doing nothing to combat the sudden temperature change.

The door clicks shut silently behind me, and my head practically bounces off Wolfe's back when he stops just a few feet into the empty building.

"How can I help—" a burly man in a suit that looks a hell of a lot like a security guard starts before freezing mid-sentence. I slide out from behind Wolfe and glance between the two men in confusion.

Wolfe smirks as the man gapes at him. He cocks his head to the side, giving the suited man an expectant look.

"Mr. Nash," he finally chokes out, clearing his throat twice before going on. "We weren't expecting you until this evening, sir, but it's nice to meet you."

Wolfe chuckles to himself and offers the man his hand to shake. "We're happy to be here."

"Are we?" I hiss, tired of being left in the dark.

I never said I was patient, especially after driving for so many hours this morning. I should have agreed to the helicopter Wolfe suggested instead of taking his cramped sports car for our sudden trip. I have a kink in my neck, and I'm quickly becoming hangry.

My husband simply turns his cocky expression in my direction and wraps me in his arms. Tugging me forward, he drawls, "I'd like you to meet my wife, Rayvn Nash. You'll be seeing her around here often, I'm sure."

The guard smiles widely and nods in greeting. "Of course. I hear congratulations are in order, Mrs. Nash. I'm sure you'll have a wonderful time celebrating your nuptials here."

I have no clue what's going on. How does this guy know who we are or that we just got married?

Swallowing down my questions, I pinch Wolfe's arm, irritated as hell when he continues to laugh at my expense.

“Thank you,” I say kindly, meaning it. I may be confused, but the dude is nice.

He smiles and looks down to fiddle with his computer. After a few taps and strokes, he reaches into a drawer beneath the reception desk and produces two red leather cuffs with something scrawled on them in gold. But it’s too dark for me to make out the words.

Wolfe lifts his arm and tugs his suit jacket up enough to expose his wrist, accepting the cuff when the receptionist, maybe guard, buckles it on. Following his lead, I offer him my arm so he can attach mine.

Before I can examine it further, the man steps out from behind the counter and gestures for us to follow him down a long hallway.

“If there are any changes to your paperwork, you can make adjustments with Giselle at the back desk. She’ll also check you into your suite when you’re ready. Of course, we’ve booked you the penthouse as requested.” He gives Wolfe a meaningful look. “As well as arranged the rest of your stay per your instructions.”

Wolfe smirks. “ETA on that?”

Checking his watch, the guard gives a perfunctory nod. “It’s ready now, sir.”

I swallow thickly, my brows hitting the middle of my forehead. What is he talking about?

The man walks briskly and quietly relays information I’m struggling to grasp. My eyes dart all over the place, hoping for context clues that’ll give me any leg up here, but there’s nothing.

It’s like a dark, modern castle with stained concrete floors, dark walls, and a massive dungeon-looking door at the end. But there are no signs and no other people to ask.

Wolfe, being Wolfe, is perfectly content to leave me in the dark. Literally.

I tug on his jacket, practically yanking his ear to my lips. “What the hell is this?” I whisper as my heartbeat picks up to an almighty pace.

Wolfe nuzzles into my throat as we continue to follow the suited man down the hall. His lips brush over my pulse, and I swear I feel him suck in a breath of anticipation.

He loves when I’m like this. It’s why he’s the hunter and I, his prey.

“You’ll find out soon enough, little fox.” His tongue darts out and laps at my throat just as our guide comes to a stop. “Now behave, or I’ll take you over my knee.”

I scoff, shoving his face away. “That’s no threat, and you know it.”

Wolfe bites his lip and adjusts his glasses. “Fine, then consider this a warning.” I cock a brow in question. “I’m keeping track of your defiance and attitude, wife. You’ll pay for every indiscretion before the weekend is over.”

Before I can ask what that means, the suited man turns to face us with a flourish. “This is where I leave you both.” He smiles at me and then offers Wolfe his hand once more. “Congratulations again, Mr. and Mrs. Nash. We’re looking forward to the upcoming changes.”

“What was your name?” Wolfe asks, gripping his hand firmly.

“The name is Hamish, sir.”

Wolfe nods with a kind smile that I know he reserves for the public, saving both his darker and softer side for me and me alone. “Well, Hamish, I’m sure we’ll see you around. Keep up the great work.”

With a blush, Hamish jerks a nod and bangs three times on the vault-like door before leaving us alone in the darkness.

“Seriously, Wolfe. What is all this?”

He tugs me into his arms, my back to his chest, and presses a kiss to my temple. “Since I couldn’t whisk you away like I’d planned, I had to make other accommodations.” He inhales

long and slow, like bracing himself for an impact I can't see. "But it's also a wedding gift of sorts."

"A gift?" I'm so confused. "We said no gifts. I didn't get you anything."

He smacks my ass, squeezing it hard enough to make me moan. "Consider this a gift for the both of us."

"Well, I'm intrigued," I murmur breathily, rubbing my ass into his palm.

The door creaks and groans as it slowly opens. "I love you, Ray," Wolfe breathes as a tall blonde woman in a sleek black dress appears beyond the door.

She grins widely. "Welcome to Omnia, Mr. and Mrs. Nash. Your new empire."

# CHAPTER 3

“Excuse me?” Ray splutters, her dark eyes wide as she looks around the massive space before us.

I run my fingers over my mouth to cover my grin, but it’s hard. She’s adorable like this, blushing like a virgin in her white dress.

It’s laughable, honestly, considering everything she’s willingly given me. Her body. Her trust. Her vulnerability while she sleeps. It’s enchanting—mesmerizing. And so fucking hot.

My cock throbs at the thought alone, as though it already knows what she’ll be giving up in just a few short hours.

She steps further into the empty room, and once again, I’m glad I shut Omnia down for the weekend. There will be plenty of time for us to observe the depravity that happens at the newly formed sex club in the future.

This weekend is just for us.

With no one but the skeleton crew to keep my bride happy and looked after, Omnia is utterly empty. And all ours. In more ways than one.

“What is all this, Wolfe?” she repeats, tracing her fingers over the wooden and leather pillory appreciatively.

My grin widens.

Of course, she went straight to a goddamn pillory.

If my little fox loves anything, it’s being completely and utterly at my mercy. Without responding, I kick back against

the far wall, content to observe her while she explores.

“Seriously. Tell me. You know I hate being the only one out of the loop,” she murmurs, moving to the glass voyeur tank in the center of the room.

Sighing, I brace myself for her reaction. I’m not totally sure how this is going to go.

Ray’s life has been in limbo for quite some time now. Just after she’d taken the leap to open Attenborough Law Firm, her father became ill.

She never hesitated to jump in and care for him after his dementia diagnosis. Being his only remaining family member, you’d think she’d done it out of pure duty. But Ray’s father isn’t just her parent. He’s her best friend, and she said caring for him was an honor.

She worked tireless hours to keep her portion of the firm going while looking after him at night, only hiring help when it became dire.

Then, the case with Tinsley Snow fell apart, and the whole shit show with that sick fucker Sutton.

My jaw clenches, and my heart hammers as I remember how he looked when I put a bullet through his rapist brain. He deserved everything he got and so much worse.

If I could have hacked him limb from limb and fed him to wild animals, I would have.

Unfortunately, that didn’t fit the narrative I had to build. Setting up his death to look like a suicide was easy with the help of some friends in the criminal world I’d done work for a few years back.

The Diablos are based in San Francisco, so it wasn’t a stretch to have them pick up and stage his body at his vacation home in Lake Tahoe. It kept my alibi clear, so there’d be nothing to tie me or Ray to the crime.

It was honestly too simple to set it all up the way we did, and the Diablos were happy to do it after all the hacking jobs they’ve hired me for.

You'd be surprised what kind of favors you can score in my line of work.

Like this one, for example.

"This is Omnia," I start, watching for her reaction. She continues perusing, but I can tell she's listening. "It was a concept club created by the people who own Kinksters."

That has her attention snapping at me.

I smile.

The dating app for people in our community is near and dear to our hearts. It's how we met, after all.

Well, sort of.

"That's why it sounds so familiar," she murmurs, her dark brows pinched tightly. "I got an invitation for their Valentine's party months ago."

I nod, running my fingers over the baroque red and black wallpaper. It has a velvety texture. I like it, but it also makes me chuckle. Can't be easy to clean in a place like this.

"That was their debut. They partnered with a boutique hotel that existed here. It'd been struggling, and they were open to any suggestions to keep their doors open. Kinksters, based out of north Colorado, scouted it and liked what they saw. After a few modifications, they turned it into a full kink experience."

Her lip twitches as she bobs her head. "I remember hearing about that, actually. Something about the rooms being fully stocked for whatever the guests might need."

"There's a store too." I wink. "We should check it out."

Ray rolls her eyes and moves to the set of glory holes—his and hers. "We have too many sex toys at home. We don't need anymore."

I wave her away. "We can always use more." Not to mention, they sell a certain something I needed for this weekend, which is part of what inspired the entire adventure to begin with.

Running a hand through my hair, I continue. “Anyway, Kinkster was testing the waters, seeing if the market and the city could handle such an event.” I scoff. People have no idea how kinky the world around them is. “It was quite successful, so they hosted a few more events. The hotel did better than ever before and—” I break off with a shrug. “They suggested a partnership.”

“A sex hotel that caters to kink,” she concludes, her lips splitting into a wild grin at my nod. “And so Omnia was born.”

Kicking off the wall, I close the distance between us. She gravitates toward me the same way she always does. Rayvn and I are like magnets. Have been from the beginning.

She’s not just my other half or my better half. She’s my entirety.

My world, beginning and someday, she’ll be my end.

I told her long ago that I always knew I’d be her ruin. I was hired to destroy her, hurt her, and honestly, I think if Sutton could have had his way, he’d have hired me to kill her. But with one look, one taste, Rayvn became so much more.

She became my ruin.

And I’ll happily burn to ashes at her feet.

“Omnia was born,” I murmur, grabbing her hand and tugging her body into mine.

Her fingers flex against my chest as she steadies herself, her deep, obsidian eyes peering up at me with so much love, so much trust, it humbles and soothes me down to my bones.

I smooth my hands down her bare arms, reveling in the feel of goosebumps popping up in my wake.

“So,” she breathes, her pink tongue darting out to wet her lips. “A wild weekend of sex and debauchery. That’s our honeymoon? My gift?” There’s a lilt to her tone, letting me know she’s teasing, but the gleam in her eyes tells me she’s not unhappy with the prospect.

I yank her even closer, aligning our bodies fully. My lips ghost over hers, moving slowly across her sweet, chocolate, and lilac-scented skin. Even after all this time, she still uses the same body wash and bubble bath combination I've long since become addicted to.

Ray sways, sagging into my body. "Wolfe?" She half-moans, half-chokes.

Taking a deep breath, I release it, letting it tickle over her ear. It's now or never. Pulling back, I meet her questioning gaze.

"Neither Kinkster, nor the hotel, could predict how successful they'd become. People were lining up at the door once word spread. But with safety measures, health screening, all the required paperwork, insurance, staff—" I shake my head. They truly had no idea how much would go into the whole thing if the idea worked. And it did. Really fucking well. "Omnia was looking for investors."

Her mouth gapes open in shock, and her body tenses. I wait for the words to sink in, wait for her to understand.

Ray's head cocks to the side, and her eyes narrow to thin slits. "So," she drawls. "You, being the kind samaritan you are, invested."

I smirk and press my lips to hers. Ray goes limp, giving me complete and utter control over her sweet body, like always. I pull back before I lose myself in her scent, her taste, and fuck her right here and now.

My lips sweep over hers as I speak. "No, little fox," I breathe. "I bought it." I kiss her again, inhaling her shocked gasp. "For you. Happy wedding day, sweetling."

# CHAPTER 4

IT TOOK SOME TIME TO GET THE SHOCKED LOOK OFF MY WIFE'S face, but after a tour of Omnia, I succeeded. The place is gorgeous, and the original owners clearly put tremendous thought into every detail. But I have no doubt Ray will have more ideas that'll take it to the next level.

"Wolfe," she sighs, shaking her head as we come to a stop at the elevators. She turns her big midnight eyes up at me, and I'm surprised to see the sadness there. "This was all so sweet. It's honestly one of the most—" she breaks off, her hands flailing adorably. "Interesting gifts I've ever been given."

I scoff, rolling my eyes, but I can't help the way my lip twitches. "That's a really nice way to say I fucked up."

She shakes her head and steps back, leaning on the wall. Her eyes slowly move around, taking in everything once more.

Even the halls are beautifully curated. The lighting gets dimmer and dimmer the closer you get to the elevator that leads to the private rooms, as though the building itself is trying to set the mood.

Ray bites her lips, her face scrunched up in that way of hers that lets me know she's deep in thought.

"No," she finally says, drawing out the word. "You didn't fuck up, Wolfe. I think it's seriously a brilliant business endeavor. I can see the potential. This place is a financial haven. I can understand investing in it, and I assume a lot of people were interested in getting involved."

“But?” I ask when she pauses again. I’m not a man who gets nervous.

Not really.

But when it comes to her, I have an incessant need to impress her. To keep her happy. It’s all I want. The only thing keeping me from truly freaking out is the fact that we have the money to withstand a resale if she genuinely hates the idea, even if we take a hit.

“But,” she sighs. “Buying a business is crazy. I understand your need to fill your time, especially since you’ve stopped breaking the—”

My hand finds her throat, collaring her against the wall before she can even finish her sassy comment. Her smile is genuine, even as I step into her body and squeeze softly.

“Breaking the law is how I found you,” I murmur against her jaw. “I make no apologies for what I did to get by and create this life for us.”

Ray’s face softens as her delicate hands circle my wrist, keeping me in place. “I know, baby,” she whispers, letting her body fully relax in my grip. “That’s not what I meant.”

I arch a brow, tightening my fist. My cock pulses at the feeling of her steady heartbeat beneath my palm. So willing. So pliant. So soft.

So fragile.

“Mmm?” I hum, licking my lips as the desire to completely consume her races through my veins.

Soon, Wolfe. Soon.

“I do think it’s a good idea. But, Wolfe, we don’t live here. What about New Mexico? My dad? Not to mention, I have a law degree. I don’t know the first thing about run—”

My lips crash into her, ending her little freak-out. Ray melts into me, from lips to toes, going lax against the wall. Even her hands fall to her sides, giving me complete control over her body. I groan. The visceral reminder of how much she trusts me is fucking hot.

There are so many things a person can do for their partner. Acts of service. Cooking meals. Providing financially. Taking care of a home.

But there is something about offering one's unshakable, unrelenting trust to another person. Letting go, knowing in the dark pits of your soul, with every atom of your marrow, that your loved one has you. That they will take care of you in every way...

I can't even put into words how much it means to me that Rayvn's offered it to me willingly, knowing what and who I am. Knowing what I am on the inside. What I'm capable of.

Yet here she stands, her lips pressed against mine, her body in my unforgiving hands, as my wife.

She moans, her entire body vibrating with need. My free hand drops to the bare expanse of her thigh. She's still in her wedding dress, and that knowledge does something primal to me.

It's white, short, tight, and lacy, almost understated and simple, yet with her hair tightly braided and pulled up into a perfect bun; she looks elegant. Timeless.

But it's the shoes that take it to the next level. They're white and tall, popping against her dark skin. Her legs are a mile long, toned, and shapely from her long morning runs. The dress hits her mid-thigh, teasing me with what's below.

She looks fucking edible.

"Fuck, little fox," I hiss, slipping beneath the hem easily. Her thighs part for me without a moment's hesitation, letting me in. Always letting me in. "Goddamn, baby. You're mine. You know that, right? There's no fucking getting rid of me now."

Ray licks across my jaw, moving her way toward my now tattooed throat. "I've been yours from the moment I knew you existed." She bites down, making me groan. "Probably even before that. I don't need a ring to know it. I'm yours."

Something inside of me shifts with her declaration. She's just as in this as I am. Just as invested. Just as fucked up over

me.

My cock is throbbing between us, and I can feel heat rolling off her sweet cunt without even touching it. I don't think I'll make it through my entire plan before I fuck her. I've needed her from the moment she said, "I do," and the anticipation of waiting until we got here has only intensified that need.

Ray bites down again, harder this time, and sucks my skin into her mouth as she reaches between us and palms my cock. My heart thrashes against my bones, scratching against the fragile cage separating me from my love.

I need her. Need her so fucking bad.

*Fuck her now. Fuck her now.*

With a snarl, I rip her body from mine, putting distance between us so I can think straight. She whines, blinking up at me with clouded eyes.

"Wolfe." It's a whimper of complete and utter need, making me dizzy.

Shaking my head to clear the fog, I slam my hand on the call button for the elevator while mentally working my way through my plans.

We've got the place all to ourselves for the entire weekend. And after that, we've got forever. We own the fucking place now. I can keep it closed for the rest of our lives if I want to.

There's no rush.

We can take our time, make our way through every room, every toy, every torture device. We can learn, play, explore, devour.

I lick my lips and roll my neck across my shoulders.

She needs to eat. Relax. Be pampered.

Rayvn pushes off the wall and saunters toward me, her body flush and slightly sweaty despite the cool air surrounding us. Her hips sway with every step in those godforsaken heels, making my mouth water.

Her finger trails down the black button-down beneath my suit jacket, in a slow taunt that has the beast inside of me roaring with primal need.

Claim her, fuck her, fill her, break her, fix her.

Mine. Mine. Mine.

“What are we really doing here, Wolfe?” She breathes, wrapping her tiny hand around my matte-black tie. She yanks, making me stumble a step, and smirks. “I know you didn’t bring me to a sex club just to talk business.”

My fists clench and unclench at my sides.

Keep your head. Stick to the plan. It’s your wedding night. It’s supposed to be sweet.

I repeat the words again and again, ignoring her obvious bating.

The car arrives, the doors silently gliding open at the exact moment Rayvn grips my cock in her free hand and squeezes hard.

My control snaps, and my hand lashes out, wrapping around her throat. I don’t fuck around this time, tightening my fist until she can’t breathe. She gasps, her body freezing exactly like the little fox she’s named after.

I take a step, pushing her backward into the awaiting car. For every quick move I make, she scrambles to keep her feet beneath her.

Her back slams against the elevator wall as her eyes glaze over, and tears begin to build. She can’t breathe. She’s completely at my mercy, and yet, she hasn’t once tried to fight back, to peel my fingers from her elegant throat.

“You honor me, wife,” I whisper, smiling softly down at her as she begins to cry. “You knowingly let me, a monster, hold your life in my hands.” A shudder wracks my body as the memory of the first time I said those words pulses through me. “Your submission is the most beautiful gift you can offer.”

With that, I release her throat and bend to lick up every single tear she’s shed for me. There will be many more this

weekend. Ray wheezes, gasping for breath, but doesn't pull away.

"Wolfe," she pants. "I need you. Please."

A rough chuckle leaves me. "Listen to how desperate you are when I've barely even touched you." I lick her jaw and whisper, "I bet your little cunt is dripping down your thighs. You're such a desperate slut for me, Rayvn."

She blinks up at me, a devious look on her pretty face, and I already know the next words from her sinful mouth will make me want her that much more.

"Why don't you stop teasing me and do something to earn my desperation?" Her lip kicks up as she steps away, her hands trailing over her body. "Or I'll have to take care of it myself."

A harsh laugh bursts from me. This little bitch has no idea what she's doing to me right now. If she knew what I had in store for her, she wouldn't be taunting the beast. Clicking my tongue, I slam the button to take us to the top floor.

I stare at her, refusing to respond to her goading. By the time we reach the penthouse, her chest is heaving.

The doors slide open, and I guide her out as I reach for the key to the only room on this floor. I press it into her hand and step back into the car.

"What are you doing?" Her brows crash together as she flicks her gaze between our room and me.

"You're going to go in there, freshen up, eat if you're hungry, and rest." I grin, crossing my arms over my chest. "You'll need all the energy you can get."

"I don't understand—" she starts, moving to follow me.

I shake my head, stepping back further. "In one hour, come, find me. Press the button labeled H in the elevator."

"Where are you going?"

Ignoring her, my palm slaps down on the row of buttons. "Do not touch your dripping cunt, Rayvn, or I swear to god,

you'll hate me for the consequences. Don't disappoint me, little fox."

The doors begin to close, and her gaze turns hazy with desire and anticipation.

"And don't change." I grin, my eyes raking over her body. "I want to fuck my wife in her wedding dress."

Not that there will be much dress left when I'm done with her.

# CHAPTER 5

My fingers slide over the mirrored walls of the elevator car, tracing the shape of my face as I slowly descend, down, down.

I have no idea what H means, but I'm beginning to think it stands for Hell with how far down I'm traveling. My hot breath coats the shiny glass in a foggy steam, and I grin, drawing my smile in it.

Despite Wolfe's warning, I was unable to rest or eat. I was barely able to sit, too filled with excited anticipation to do more than pace the length of the beautiful, massive suite.

A suite he apparently owns.

Or, I do, I guess. Since we're married now, and he said he bought it—for me.

I rub my forehead and sigh.

Christ. I haven't even pulled apart that particular revelation yet.

Before I can spiral, the elevator dings softly, and the doors silently slide open, revealing a dimly lit foyer much like the one that led to the penthouse.

Swallowing thickly, I step out and wipe my sweaty, shaking hands down my sides, smoothing out my dress.

"Wolfe?" I call out, my voice croaking slightly. I clear my throat, spinning to take in the small room. "Hello?" I try again.

Nothing.

The walls are tattered wooden slats, like you'd see in an old cabin or basement. The floors are rough, worn cement that

looks original and old. There's one light, an Edison bulb, hanging precariously from a cord suspended in the center of the room, illuminating it just enough to create a creepy glow.

The only other thing in the room is a door. It's not like the dungeon door that led into the group room on the main floor or the ornate red door of our penthouse.

Wooden, knotted, broken, with black scuffs that look like footprints, as though someone tried to kick it down and failed.

It's creepy. It's ominous.

It's also obviously where I have to go.

The longer I stand there staring at it, the quicker my anticipation turns to nerves.

I love Wolfe with my entire being.

I trust him with my life, my safety, my very existence.

But I also know him, and because of that, I know he's not opposed to putting my body and mind through the wringer until I don't know which way is up or who I am.

He may make sure I love every second, but that doesn't mean he won't scare the absolute shit out of me in the process.

With a deep, shuddering breath, I roll my shoulders and step forward. The click of my heels echoes off the floors, bounces against the walls, and somehow perfectly matches my erratic heartbeat.

My sticky palm wraps around the beat-up brass knob, and with a final breath, I step forward, falling into complete and utter darkness.

“Hello, sweetling. Ready to play?”

# CHAPTER 6

*“HELLO, SWEETLING. READY TO PLAY?”*

The mask muffles my voice, distorting it, and I grin. I can't help it. I'm so fucking excited to be here with her, doing this. It's been so long since she and I have played this particular game, and I've gone to great lengths to make it memorable.

I can see her push through the basement door and step into the pitch-black arena, but she can't see me.

She can't see anything.

My smile widens.

“Wolfe?” Ray calls out, her voice echoing off the cavernous space. “Wolfe, where are you?”

It takes everything in me not to go to her. To pin her to the wall and kiss her until she can't breathe. To bend her over and fuck her in that perfect white dress.

My gloved hands tighten to fists at my sides, and the sound of leather creaking has her head snapping in my direction. Her head cocks to the side, and she steps further in, letting the door slide shut behind her with a soft click.

Then, a second click when the automatic locks kick in.

She jumps.

I chuckle.

“You're stuck now, little fox. There's no escaping me.”

I slowly close the distance between us, careful to keep my steps silent. With the night vision feature on my mask, I can

see her trembling, her head darting right to left before suddenly, she zeroes in on me with unnerving accuracy. I stop just inches from her body, watching her watch me.

Even in total darkness, my wife is drawn to me. We're like magnets. Cloth cut from the same material.

Rayvn may be a brighter, less burdened human than I am, but she and I are the same at our core.

My hand slides out, unable to resist touching her, playing with her, owning her. My gloved fingers coast down her bare arm, and instead of jumping, she leans into my touch. Her eyes drift closed, her head tips back.

She's submitting already.

"You look so pretty when you give in, baby," I whisper, my mouth only a breath away from hers. "You know there's no fighting me. No world where you could exist without me and my demons to control your every move, your every breath."

Rayvn releases a small moan as her body sways into mine. "I know," she whimpers, not even trying to deny it.

I grip the back of her neck tightly, relishing the tiny cry that fills the meager space between us.

"I own you," I growl. "Say it. Tell me who owns every perfect inch of you."

Her hands fly out, landing on my chest. Her nails immediately dig into my skin, sending shivers of anticipation up my spine and along my scalp. She twists the material of my shirt, gripping it tightly like she's afraid I'll leave.

I'd never.

"You do." She licks her lips as she speaks. "Wolfe Nash. My Wolfe. My hunter." Her lips kick up in a slow, predatory smile as she leans in, whispering against my throat, "My killer. My *husband*."

Oh, fuck.

My hands drop to her thighs, and I grip her tightly before picking her up. Ray cries out, scrambling for purchase as I

slam her back against the door. My cock is rock hard between us. Has been since the second we walked into that fucking courtroom this morning.

But this...those words...

It's too much.

She's too much.

I want to kiss her, bite her, but my mask is in the way. And when she starts to grind her hot, aching cunt against my jeans, getting herself off, I want to say fuck this entire plan and take her back to our room so I can fill her again and again until she's begging me to stop.

"That's it," I growl, thrusting up into her, matching her movements. "Come all over me, baby. Mark me. I know you're just as needy for it as I am. Just as fucking desperate to feel me inside you."

Her hands quickly force my shirt up, giving her the first feel of my skin, and she doesn't waste it. "Wolfe, I need you so bad," she pants, the words ending on a moan as she quickens her pace and claws at my chest. "Wanna feel your cum sliding down my legs when we play. *Please.*"

I groan, my head rolling back on my neck as I try my damndest to clear my mind. It's nearly impossible with her this close, saying shit like that.

She knows exactly what buttons to press to get me to lose control. To turn fucking feral for her.

I pause, my hips stilling as my fingers dig into hers, halting her incessant grinding. Her mouth snaps shut, and her wild eyes dart toward my face. She can probably make out the outline of my shape now and can tell there's something different about my face.

"Fuck," I grind out.

My fingers tighten as my body goes to war with itself, and I know I'm leaving little bruises. Her lip twitches as a devious smirk blossoms. Little fucking brat.

I drop her to her feet and take a step back, needing distance so I can breathe, so I can focus.

My eyes scan the room, the entry to the maze, the concrete walls that reach about eight feet into the air, leaving a large gap between them and the ceiling. They're covered in plastic tarps, clear and black, mirrors, LEDs, though they aren't on yet. There are speakers tucked all over the underground playroom and various lights hidden for extreme sensory overload.

Seeing it again is a stark reminder of the end game here. The goal. What I've spent months putting together, building, *for her*.

Finally, the chaos she creates inside me every time we're together ebbs and is replaced with what I can only describe as the monster that exists in my soul. It's clawing to come out. Begging to be released.

It wants to play.

With *her*.

And fuck do I want to let it.

Charging forward, my fingers find her throat and band around it as though she truly was made for me. My name, etched deep into my skin, now collars her, owning her like always.

Ray's fingers dig into my wrist when I tighten my grip until her air is cut off, but she can't dig through my thick gloves or hoodie. She's like a wet kitten, batting at water with its claws uselessly.

Spinning our bodies, I back her up until her spine slams against the wall right next to the maze entrance. My free hand dives into my pocket, blindly searching for the controller that's wired to this room. Every light, every sound, every moment, curated, created, by me for her.

And I'll be damned if I let her fuck it up.

# CHAPTER 7

The room is pitch black.

Terrifyingly so.

I can't see anything, can't make out even the roughest of shapes in an attempt to orient myself. Just nothing.

I idly wonder if this is how death feels.

But then, he's there, touching me, grunting and growling out his depravity, and I know, *I know*, I'm more alive than I ever dreamt possible.

With him, my Wolfe, I'm free to exist. To be myself, wholly and completely. He accepts me and all my ugly pieces. The sticky tar that grows around my soul, tugging me closer and closer to darkness.

He more than accepts her. He embraces it. Draws me deeper into the inky blackness that begs to consume me because he lives there, too.

So, like always, I submit. I give in, going limp in his clutches, handing over my trust the same way I always will.

Wolfe collars my throat so unexpectedly in the darkness that my arms lash out, wrapping around his wrist. I cling harder when he pivots us, and I trip over my heels. I keep tripping, stumbling to keep up as he moves us through the pitch-black space until finally, I kick my shoes off completely.

I have a feeling I won't be wanting them soon.

My back slams against an unforgiving wall, the texture grating and scraping against my exposed skin. It feels like

cinder blocks. But that can't be right.

*Where are we?*

“Beneath the hotel,” he murmurs, and I realize I spoke the words out loud, though that doesn't make sense because his grip is so tight, I can hardly breathe.

Wolfe chuckles, and the slight gush of stagnant air tells me his head is cocked to the side in that way of his.

My lungs burn, and I close my eyes, focusing on not letting the panic consume me. My hands fall, and I grip his hips, digging my sharp nails into the skin just below the soft material of his hoodie. When he changed or how he had clothes down here, I have no idea.

But then I remember our bags.

I never saw them in our room, did I?

“I don't need your words or your voice to know what you're thinking,” he tsks, loosening his grip just long enough for me to suck in a sharp, long breath. Once, twice, three times, before cutting off my air again. “We're under Omnia in what was once a single-layer, underground parking garage. It's the size of two football fields and no longer resembles its intended purpose.”

I'm listening to his words but having trouble focusing. I know there's a deeper meaning, something he's not saying, but the room is starting to spin, and I can feel myself edging toward blissful unawareness.

As if he really is in my mind, he releases me, letting me breathe again as he continues.

“I spent months building this for you, Ray,” he murmurs, his voice distorted and creepy from what I assume is a mask, but all I can see is nothingness. My heart hammers at his words, and I blink up at him in confusion. Months? “I can't wait to see what you think of my gift.”

I shake my head, my brows crashing. But before I can ask what he's talking about, a bright light flickers on, sending me

into momentary blindness. My eyes burn, and I squeeze them shut, crying out in pain.

“Oh, fuck,” I murmur, shaking away the stars dancing behind my lids. “So bright.”

His leather-covered thumb ghosts across my jaw, soothing me until I finally blink my eyes open. The room comes into focus slowly, as if I’m looking through thick fog.

The first thing I see is Wolfe and the terrifying mask he’s wearing. It’s completely black, down to the eyes. There are thin slits below his nostrils to let him breathe, and it doesn’t sit snugly on his face, gaping around the neck, probably to let in clean air.

My eyes narrow as I try to make out the finer details. I can tell there are bumps and bevels all around the mask in a pattern I can’t make out. The eyes look electronic, like smart glasses built in.

I blink rapidly then scan his body.

Fully decked out in all black. Black jeans, black hoodie, black combat boots. The hood is pulled up and over his head, leaving the mask exposed. He’s wearing black leather gloves, hiding his skin from me.

But I know what lies beneath. I know every inch of his body. Every tattoo, every freckle, every scar.

I know him.

That’s probably why I knew his head would be cocked to the side. Why I know there’s a predatory smirk beneath the thick plastic. How I know there’s far more to any of this than meets the eye.

He does nothing half-assed.

Hunting me isn’t any different.

“What are we doing here, Wolfe?” I breathe, my eyes taking in our surroundings. Just like the room I was in before, I’m in what looks like a foyer or entrance. The room is tall but not massive. Maybe fifteen feet. There are crude cement walls that go up halfway, creating barriers, but I can’t see much else.

Below my bare feet, the ground is rough, covered in tiny rocks and dirt that dig into my skin with every shift.

Shit, maybe I should have kept my shoes on.

Wolfe's thumb traces softly over my lips, and my already wet pussy spasms around nothing at the feel of the smooth leather. "We're going to play a game, little fox," he murmurs as his mask comes to life.

Bright blue lights fill the bubbled pattern, and I realize it's a purge mask. Well, one he's created, probably custom. The eyes are green, and the only way I can think to describe them is electrical. I think they might be night vision.

I swallow around his grip.

That means it'll be dark. He'll be able to see me, but I won't be able to see him.

Or *anything*.

Nervous anticipation fills me, and my thighs squeeze together, looking, searching desperately for friction.

I love Wolfe's games.

His fingers tighten around my jaw before I feel the intense pressure of his thumb and forefinger squeezing the shit out of my cheeks. It hurts, and I can't help the hiss of pain that escapes me.

"Open up, baby. Tongue out."

I glare up at him, refusing to give in, even as shivers of lust and excitement roll through me.

I can't give in that easily. He would hate it.

"Fuck you," I murmur before tucking my lips between my teeth. My nails are still biting into his flesh, and I use that moment to drag them across his lower abs, knowing I'm leaving marks—making him bleed.

He doesn't even react to the pain, responding to my words instead.

Wolfe chuckles a deep, rumbling sound as his free hand digs between my lips, prying my mouth open with so much force I swear I hear my jaw pop.

“Tongue  *fucking*  out or I’ll shove it down your throat, Rayvn,” he hisses.

With my mouth now being held open by his punishing grip, I shoot him a withering glare and refuse him once more.

The angry sound that builds deep in his chest lights me on fire. This is my favorite part. Though I willingly give him my submission, give him every part of me, I make him work for it and he thrives on exerting his dominance. He loves using his size to force me to bend and I love when I finally break.

Maybe it’s because I know that as much as I’m giving up when I let Wolfe control me, he’s giving up just as much. The walls he built around his life, his soul, so long ago out of pure desperation, finally come crashing down when he’s with me—when I let him out of his cage and revel in his demons.

I may break but he breaks, too, and fuck if I don’t love the way we rebuild together.

Even with his creepy neon mask on, I can still picture his menacing smile as he pries my mouth open even further and shoves a pill down my throat.

I choke on the rough texture as I swallow.

“Show me,” he grinds out. “Show me how good you can be for your master, baby.”

My tongue lolls out as I tip my head back, showing him my empty mouth. Wolfe groans in pleasure and mashes his teeth together under his mask. “Such an obedient little slut.”

My heart is thrashing so hard in my chest that I feel like I might die, but I still smile up at him the second he releases my face.

He bends down, rubbing his textured mask across my cheek as he whispers, “Run, little fox, and pray you find somewhere to hide before the drugs kick in.” My entire body

turns to lava. “Either way, I’ll be balls deep in your perfect body before the night is over.”

Ah, so it’s a sleeping pill.

Wolfe loves when I’m blissfully unaware.

Over his shoulder, my eyes slide around the room once more. There’s not much here, but I did notice an opening in the concrete a moment ago that looked like a doorway, so I’m guessing this isn’t our final destination.

My gaze catches on the various cameras surrounding us, places all over the ceiling. I’m sure there are more inside, and the knowledge sends another zap of pure lust straight to my clit.

Fuck, I’m so turned on. So needy, I feel strung out. He keeps edging me, getting me closer and closer...

“What are the cameras for?” I breathe.

He chuckles as his hand slides down my body, grazing every one of my curves but never stopping to give me what I need. What we both need. Finally, his gloved hand lands between my thighs, and he roughly cups my aching pussy.

I push to my toes, moaning loudly as my hips begin to grind. I’m seconds from begging, seconds from giving in to anything, to everything he desires.

But then, he’s speaking again, and his words have me freezing in place.

“So you can see the way I use your body while you sleep.” He grinds his heel against my clit once more before ripping his hand away. He turns my body and shoves me through the opening, making me stumble. “*Now fucking run.*”

The main lights turn off seconds before the room illuminates with bright flashes of neon and strobe lights that are almost too much to handle. Then the music kicks on. The bass is so deep, so heavy, my teeth grind together.

It takes a second to orient myself, and when I do, I spot Wolfe over my shoulder. The lights are flickering, granting me

a perfect view of my husband one second before everything turns black the next.

My heart speeds up, threatening to beat right out of my chest, but then, I see him again just as he slowly pulls his favorite knife from his jeans and makes a slashing gesture across his tilted throat.

I smile.

Game on.

# CHAPTER 8

A maze.

It's a fucking maze.

My heart pounds in my chest, a relentless drumbeat echoing through the labyrinth of dimly lit halls. My breath comes in ragged gasps, and every step I take seems to reverberate off the concrete broken walls. My feet ache and throb even though I've only been running for minutes.

Or has it been longer?

Every dead end, every wall I run right into, every time the music or lights shift, it disorients me more.

We've only just started, and I'm already losing my grasp on reality.

He built this. For *me*. Even as I run, I can't help but smile. Wolfe, my Wolfe, is so damn thoughtful. He doesn't do a single thing without thinking ten steps ahead, and it's clear in the details of this place that he's thought of everything.

There's spray paint all over the walls as though it's made to look like an old alley, but it's the words he's chosen that make my heart clench. Quiet, secret words meant just for me. Anyone could come in here, run the same course, play the same game, and have no idea what it means.

*Kill* and *Poe*, our safe words from the very beginning.

Neither of us realized what they meant back then.

Everything. They meant everything.

*Ever thine.*

*Run.*

*Pretty little prey.*

*Smile for the cameras.*

*Mine.*

Every few feet, there's a cracked mirror that makes me jump before I realize it's just my reflection. But then I remember where I am and that it's betraying my presence to the masked man pursuing me.

I've never felt such raw fear nor such electrifying anticipation of being caught.

Flashing neon lights overhead cast eerie, shifting shadows that dance around me. The maze, an underground primal attraction, is a cacophony of pulsating music and disorienting visual effects. I never imagined a neon-lit playground could become a nightmare.

Or that I'd like it so fucking much.

The thumping bass shakes the very foundation of the maze, the music pounding in sync with my heart. I can hear the distant laughter of my crazed man trickling through the terrifying soundtrack he's created.

A chainsaw.

A scream.

Glass shattering.

His laugh.

Someone else's, maybe mine.

Another scream, maybe also mine.

My attacker keeps pace with me. His mask, a sinister creation of neon lines and jagged edges, conceals his identity, but his intent is clear in his relentless pursuit.

There's no escape from this maze, and I know it. Not unless it's under him, with him inside of me while I...

While I sleep.

Fuck, that shouldn't be so damn hot, but it is. It really is.

My skin breaks out in goosebumps despite the sticky humidity from all the fog machines. I turn a corner, stumbling as a wave of dizziness washes over me, and somewhere, deep in my broken, fucked up mind, I smile, knowing what it means.

I round a corner, my bare feet padding across the gross floor, and find myself at another dead-end. Panic surges within me as I frantically search for an escape route, but there's none. I'm trapped, cornered like a frightened animal. My chest tightens, and my breaths come in desperate, shallow gasps.

His heavy, booted footsteps are closer now, but it's impossible to tell where he is. The walls don't go all the way up to the ceiling. He could be in the row next to me, on the other side of the cement, or he could be just feet away.

I have no idea, and it's starting to fuck with me.

"Wolfe," I croak, my voice barely more than a whisper. "Please, whatever you want, I'll give it to you. Just spare me." It's all part of the scene, the begging, the innocence. He loves it.

His laugh is deep and booming. Close.

Too close.

My eyes are frantic as I search for a way out, but there is none. Nothing except for the way I came in, and I can't go that way because...

"You can beg and beg all you want, bitch. I won't stop 'till my cock is down your aching throat, choking the precious life from your lungs."

My eyes burn at the words, the adrenaline, the chaos raging inside of me.

I know it's him.

I know it.

But his voice is different, darker, colder. It lacks everything that makes my Wolfe mine, and that, coupled with

my surroundings, is causing my heart to squeeze painfully even as my pussy drips, soaking my white, lacy thong.

“Please, just,” I start, backing up a step, then another until my spine collides with the harsh, unforgiving cement wall. I swallow roughly. “Just give me more time.” This time, my words aren’t faked.

I’m not ready for this to be over.

Not yet.

Not when things are just getting good.

# CHAPTER 9

My masked man doesn't respond, his silence more terrifying than any threat. He advances slowly, the thick soles of his boots barely making a sound as he closes the distance between us. Each step seems to stretch time itself, drawing out the agonizing seconds.

As he reaches out a gloved hand, I close my eyes, tears streaming down my cheeks. I'm helpless prey, a deer caught in the headlights of an oncoming car. A fox laid out for her wolf.

But just as I brace for the inevitable, a sudden burst of light blinds me. It's not the neon glow that'd previously filled the maze, but a bright, blinding spotlight. The music shifts from heavy bass to gut-wrenching, deafening screams.

I cover my ears and squeeze my eyes shut as I drop to the ground, curling in on myself. My heart is in my throat, my entire body trembling. It goes on and on until I'm rocking and legitimately considering tapping out.

What the hell?

My brain can't compute what's happening. It can't make out up or down, right or wrong, safe or...

Hands wrap around my wrists, wrenching my palms from my ears. My eyes snap open and lock onto the black and blue purge mask, the neon burning my retinas.

"I've got you now," he sings, his voice barely above a whisper. His head cocks to the side, that creepy, permanent smile taunting me as he clicks his tongue. "I thought you'd last so much longer before you fell to my feet, little fox. Are you

that desperate for my cock, or are you just a weak little girl, too afraid of the dark to play with her demon, hmm?”

My mouth feels dry as I try to speak and nothing comes out but a croaked version of his name. I shake my head, forcing the cobwebs away, and try again.

“Fuck you,” I grind out, batting his hands away. “I’m not weak.”

It takes me a minute to push myself up and I’m blatantly aware he’s letting me move. When I’m on my knees, I reach for him, my eyes wide and locked on his. I may not be able to see him, but I know his gaze is riveted to me. It always is. He tracks me everywhere I go. Tracks me when we share a room, when we’re apart.

He’s my little stalker boy.

I whimper when my thighs rub against each other, putting pressure on my desperate pussy. My fingers glide across his cock, finding him hard and aching to get out.

He hisses when I take him in my grip, squeezing so tight, his back bows as he falls forward. Gritting my teeth, I bring my hunter to his knees, leading him by his cock like all women can.

It’s powerful. Heady.

Men try to pretend their size, their dominance, their deep voices, and heavy fists control us, but they’re wrong. So fucking wrong.

All it takes is one perfectly manicured flick to their precious balls, and they fall to a heap at our feet. Grip their beloved cocks, and you quite literally own them.

And Wolfe Nash? I own him.

My hand shifts, rubbing up and down his cock, giving him some pleasure with his pain, just how he likes it. We’re knee to knee now, as his head tips back on a long moan that I mimic as my free hand skates along my core.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

I was supposed to be doing something here, and it's not this.

Swallowing, I deny myself, just like he did and continue to jack him off through his jeans.

"I want you so bad, Wolfe," I moan, slowly shifting my legs. "I need you to fuck me, baby. I miss you. I miss your cock inside me." I whimper. "God, I'm so fucking wet for you right now. *Please?*"

I squeeze him harder, rotating my wrist. It's hard to feel him all like this, but I'm doing something right because with every second that passes, he falls deeper under my spell.

"Ray." His voice cracks. "I need you, Ray." He shakes his head, groaning, and moves to grab me. "Just once. Then we'll go back to playing." His body shudders as I finally get my foot under me. "Need to feel your cunt stretch around me. Fuck. *Fuck.*"

I moan, nodding wildly, jacking him off faster.

"Yes," I agree. "So fast. We'll be so fast. Right here on the floor. You can have me. Just fuck me hard. Make me feel it."

I'm panting now, the vision I'm painting makes me dizzy with need. Or maybe it's the pill.

Just as he dives for the button on his jeans, I spring to my feet and shove him backward, hard enough that his back collides with the unforgiving ground, making him grunt.

"What the—"

My foot collides with his cock, not hard enough to do permanent damage because, *duh*. I love his cock, and we haven't exactly ruled out kids, eventually, so I'd rather not break the thing. He cries out, and I instantly know I'll pay for that later. But seeing him curl into a whining ball, super worth it.

"Who's a weak bitch now, baby?"

Cackling, I take off like the devil himself is literally on my ass.

Probably because he is.

# CHAPTER 10

I'VE ALWAYS REVELED IN THE ART OF THE CHASE, THE DANCE of predator and prey. It's probably what fueled my love for online sabotage and eventually, stalking—though, that only ever happened once, with *her*.

But tonight, the chase has brought me here, to this underground maze, pursuing the woman who owns me mind, body, and soul.

Her fear is palpable, her heartbeats like a symphony of terror that quickens my own pulse. But there's something else beneath her fear. Something much more potent, so much so that I can practically taste it,

Lust.

So much fucking lust. It's filling her every step, her every frantic cry. It's in the way her thighs tighten when she stops to catch her breath. In the hardened peak of her perfect nipples. The way she hides and fights all while that devious little smile sits on her pretty face.

Christ, I feel like I might die if I don't get my hands on her soon. Especially after that stunt she pulled. She had me on my knees, ready to say fuck everything. Ray had me by the cock, literally, and I...I click my tongue, laughing to myself.

I really almost caved.

Then the little brat kicked me.

It hurt like a bitch, but I'd be lying if I said it didn't turn me on even more. What can I say? I'm a masochist for her.

When I finally corner her, her exhaustion is evident. Her chest heaves with each ragged breath, and her legs tremble as she collapses to the ground. She's pushed herself to the brink of collapse, caught between fear and the intoxicating allure of our pursuit. The game. *Our game.*

I can't help but admire her like this; sweaty and sticky, her bright white dress filthy and torn. Her legs are dirty. Her feet are covered in a white powder that coats the floor from the fresh concrete.

But that's just the surface.

Below that, I can see so much more.

Her dark eyes are wild, her pupils blown wide, and while some of that may be from the drugs, I know it's not. I know it's from being chased. Rayvn loves this, maybe even more than I do.

What I love is the fight that ultimately ends in her submission. And she knows it. That's why, even now, she won't stop. It's what makes her different, what makes her so perfect, so mine. I don't reveal myself just yet, content to watch her struggle to catch her breath, her body teetering on the edge of unconsciousness.

I think it might actually happen this time, but before she can give in, she springs upward, her eyes frantic, her body trembling. Her head swings from right to left, her fingers claw at the gritty wall, keeping herself upright.

Then, just like I knew she would, my little fox forces herself forward, refusing to give in.

Not yet.

# CHAPTER 11

As I continue to run through the dimly lit maze, my body reacts with a wild surge of adrenaline, igniting my senses and setting my nerves on fire. Every beat of my heart reverberates through my chest, thudding so loudly it's all I can hear. The adrenaline courses through my veins like a torrential river, sending a rush of tingling energy to my limbs.

My breath comes in ragged gasps, each inhale a desperate gulp of air. It's as if my lungs can't keep up with the frantic demands of my body. My throat burns, dry and constricted, as if I've been running through a desert rather than the pits of hell.

Sweat pours down my forehead, stinging my eyes as it mixes with the fear-induced tears. My skin feels slick and clammy, my dress clinging uncomfortably to my body. Every step I take feels like a monumental effort, my legs heavy and leaden, as if I'm dragging anchors behind me.

The maze seems to stretch on endlessly, the flashing lights and shiny surfaces disorienting me further with each turn. My mind races, trying to find a way out, but all I can focus on is the primal instinct to escape, to survive.

Fear coils in my stomach, a relentless knot that tightens with every passing second. It's a cold, gnawing sensation that threatens to consume me from the inside out. But above all that, above everything else, is lust.

Pure, raw, potent lust.

My thighs are sticky, coated with my excitement and need. Every time he comes near me, he edges me.

It's been like this all day.

Every *single* time.

By now, I'm seconds from spontaneous combustion, and this chase, this fight, isn't helping anything. It's making it worse.

The adrenaline-fueled combination of fear and exhilaration is like a potent cocktail, overwhelming my senses and clouding my judgment. Even as exhaustion begins to set in, my body rebels against the urge to stop, driven by the primal instinct to flee from the threat that lurks in the shadows.

With every step, my muscles ache and burn, protesting the relentless pursuit. But I can't afford to slow down. The maze is a maze of emotions, a labyrinth of sensations, and I'm caught in its intricate web, unable to break free.

Suddenly, the room goes black, and the music stops, bathing us in dark silence.

I slam to a halt, and my hands flail, catching on another wall to support myself. Plastic crinkles beneath my fingers when I curl them, forcing my legs to stay upright.

"She's air and light. She's poison in the night," a dark, sinister voice coos, followed by something that sounds a hell of a lot like skipping. I cover my mouth to stifle my panting breaths. "She's death and destruction. She's passion."

A breath of air wooshes across the back of my neck, and I jump with a shrill scream.

"She's everything I need and nothing that I want." My eyes sting with tears. "God and angels, burning with hellfire." His hand skates across my throat. "She is my life, my world, and every desire."

With the last word, I feel the cold steel of his knife press against my throat. My body tenses, my fists jolt out, ready to defend myself as primal instincts fill me.

"Fuck," I choke out, my eyes burning from genuine terror. It doesn't matter if you know who's chasing you. It doesn't matter if you love them, trust them. When fight or flight kicks

in, when the body's natural, ingrained need to keep itself safe at all costs kicks in, you can't stop it.

He chuckles as I feel a wet, warm tongue lave over my knuckles. "Are you going to hit me again, little fox?" Wolfe whispers, his voice muffled by his mask. "Are you gonna fight the big bad wolf in a weak attempt to keep yourself safe when he comes to take what's rightfully his?"

I swallow, my head growing foggy and choke when my mouth comes back too dry. "Screw you," I snap, shoving at him.

His laugh is husky, reverberating off the walls. "You sound sleepy, whore," he sneers. "You better run while you still can before I have my wicked way with you."

I blink against the fatigue and fear. It's hard, but I force it all back. Using the darkness to my advantage, I strike out with my knee, hoping to hit him right in what I know will be a very hard cock, despite the hit he took earlier.

If Wolfe loves nothing more, it's this. The taunting. The hunt. The fight.

It's all about the anticipation for him.

Maybe more so than the actual fucking that'll inevitably come.

I miss, sloppily hitting somewhere around his hip, but he grunts, so I push past him. Or I try to, at least.

I don't make it far before arms band around my waist tightly, tugging me backward into a heaving chest. I fight, claw, and scratch, but with every second that passes, I become more and more weak as exhaustion fills me.

Fuck. What did he give me? It's never been like this before.

He chuckles, running his masked nose over my throat. "It's like a stronger version of Ambien."

"The sleeping pills?" I slur. I've taken Ambien. It feels nothing like this.

His chuckle turns to a deep, menacing laugh. “Okay, it’s nothing like it. This drug is different. Special. It kicks in faster, keeps you asleep but slightly aware.” Wolfe grinds his cock against my ass every time I struggle and somewhere, deep in my confused mind, I find the strength to moan. “I think you’ll like this, little fox. You’ll be in a twilight state. Your eyes will see me, but your body will be at rest.”

My heart kicks up again as panic replaces pleasure and lust. “Paralyzed?” I hiss. “I’ll be paralyzed?”

He must hear something in my voice because his body stills and tenses. His arms around me soften as he turns me to face him fully. “All you have to do is say the word, and it stops.”

I bite my lip. But I won’t be able to say the word, will I? I’ll be completely immobile, trapped in his orbit but unable to fight back. That’s most people’s worst nightmare. It’s better when I’m fully unconscious and unaware. This...

This is *crazy*.

Wolfe’s hand trails softly down my cheek, a little bit of the man I know and love shining through the monster that haunts my dreams.

“Baby, if you don’t want to do this, we don’t have to. Just say the word, and it all stops. I’ll take you up to our room. Take care of you until the drugs pass your system, and then we can spend the rest of the weekend doing whatever you want. Anything you like, it’s yours.”

My entire body deflates at his words, the kindness in his voice. The honesty behind his declaration. I know he means it. He means every word. He spent months building this maze. Building this moment, this night, yet he’d throw it all away and end it just so I’ll feel safe.

It’s the push I need, the reminder of his unwavering love for me.

Wolfe will keep me safe, even while destroying me.

I sway on my feet again as the world starts to dim around me. Before I lose consciousness, I lean forward, pulling him

into me. It's easy to shove his mask up, letting it rest on the top of his head so I can finally see his beautiful eyes that I love so much.

I grip his cheeks, tugging his face down to mine. "I love you, Wolfe," I whisper, my lips ghosting over his. His hands grip my hips, aligning our bodies. "And I trust you with my life."

He shudders, his eyes fluttering briefly before snapping open again. "I would never do anything that you wouldn't be able to come back from, baby," he breathes, smiling softly. "You hurt, I hurt."

I glare at him. "You love when we hurt."

He shrugs, uncaring of the truth. "Because I always make the pain so fucking good."

The room spins again, and I faceplant into his chest, breathing deeply to fight the drugs. "Kiss me," I demand into his hoodie. "Kiss me and then fuck me."

His hands slide up to my jaw, wrapping around my delicate bones harshly. "Happily."

And then his lips collide with mine. This time, it's not as frantic as the elevator or claiming as the hall. It's slow melted chocolate and spicy cinnamon in the back of your throat. Decadent. Delicious.

And oh, so mine.

His tongue sweeps through my mouth, tangling with mine. He moves me where he wants me, demands that I give it to him, and then takes and takes...

And takes.

Until finally, I relax fully and give in to the darkness.

*My darkness.*

Wolfe.

# CHAPTER 12

WHEN HER EYES FLUTTER CLOSED, AND HER BODY FINALLY surrenders to exhaustion, I catch her just like I always will. Bending down, I heft her in my arms, cradling her to my chest. My gloved hand reaches out to touch her cheek, her skin warm and flushed. I can feel the heat of her fear radiating from her like a smoldering ember. So soft, so perfect.

I could fuck her right here and now, just like this, but even with the drugs warring heavily in her system, I can still see her eyes fighting the sedation.

I did a shit ton of research on this drug. I know it inside and out. I consulted the pharmacologists who work for Reményi, ensuring it would do what I needed. They looked at me with terror, but money truly can buy anything, including silence. A little blackmail doesn't hurt, either.

Ray's eyes flutter again before blinking open. Her body is limp in my arms, her hands hanging heavily at her sides, but her breathing is even, her heart steady.

Until she realizes she can't move.

A gasp leaves her parted lips, followed by a muffled scream.

Smiling, I press my lips to her cheek. "Ready to play, sweetling?"

Her pulse is hammering in her throat and her head gives a small nod as she blinks. I cock my head to the side, wondering if the drugs maybe weren't as potent as I'd thought.

Doesn't matter either way. I have plans for her—a game within the game. Without another word, I carry her unconscious body to a secluded corner of the maze, where plastic sheets hang from the ceiling like eerie curtains. With a soft touch, I lower her to the ground and move to grab my knife.

My fingers have just wrapped around it when she lashes out, her foot landing right in my gut. My head snaps toward her, my eyes wide in shock.

“What the fuck?” I rasp, my throat dry from all the smoke machines. Ray is fighting her own body, the drugs doing their best to keep her down. But even now, she won't go down easily.

“I-I” she starts, her voice a broken whisper. “I don't want this.”

My lip twitches as I drop down to my haunches before her. “Say it, then,” I murmur, watching her struggle to get to her knees. Every time she does, she falls back down, her head swaying precariously.

I keep my hands loose, ready to catch her if I need to. Ray and I might get rough—really fucking rough sometimes, but I'd never let her get seriously hurt, and in my concrete jungle gym, it's entirely possible.

Her hazy eyes blink slowly at me, and she finds the strength to shake her head in a barely there *no*. My grin widens.

“B-but I-I don't wa-want this,” she stutters, her teeth chattering with effort. “Do-don't touch m-me you f-fr-freak.”

My head tips back on a deep chuckle, and my fingers finally wrap around my blade. “Is that right?”

I launch forward before she can respond, shoving her to her back. My free hand slides under her, protecting her head. When she's steady, I straddle her thighs, keeping her locked in place, and press my blade to her throat.

“Slutty whores who run from their master don't get choices, do they?” I taunt, pressing the blade just enough to

create a tiny nick. I groan low in my throat when I see a drop of blood bead up and spill down her dark skin. “So pretty when you bleed for me.”

“Sh-shut up,” she protests weakly, trying to shove me off. It’s useless, but I let her fight. “Get o-off.”

I shake my head, tutting her. “I can’t do that.” Keeping the blade to her throat, I let my free hand drift up her bare leg. Her dress is rucked up to her waist, her white thong on full display for me. “I have to do this, can’t you see that? You’re mine. I can’t let you go.”

I shake my head, keeping up the game despite the reality of my words. I can’t let her go. I’d rather fucking die.

I cup her hot cunt, moaning softly when I realize how soaked she is. Her panties are completely drenched, the material useless—so I cut it off. She gasps, my movements too quick for her to track.

I grip the tattered material and tear it from her hips, jolting her body. Locking eyes with my love, my reason for living, I bring the sopping thong up to my nose and inhale deeply.

“Oh fuck, Ray,” I sigh. “Smells so good.”

Using the back of my hand, I shove my mask up and off, letting it clatter to the floor. I need to taste her, feel her, see her in all her vulnerable glory. I lick the material and a full body shudder wracks my every nerve.

“Tastes even better.” My lips kick up as I lean forward and pry her weak jaw open. “Here, taste.” I can’t not share. She’s too good.

She shakes her head feebly and tries to spit it out but can’t.

My fingers slide through her drenched core, freezing her protests. She coats my hand with the first touch, and I fight the urge to eat her sweet cunt, licking up every tantalizing drop.

I will later. When she’s recovering in our room.

Tonight’s not about her, though.

Oh, she'll get pleasure. She might even come a time or two. But tonight's about me. About my desires, my needs, and she knows it.

I slide through her sticky cunt, from clit to hole and back up again, taking in every desperate shiver and twitch like a man starved of oxygen.

Ray locks eyes with me, hers wide and panicked, and tries to say something around her gag. The frantic expression on her face is enough to have me leaning forward and ripping the panties out. She takes a deep breath, her body going lax once more as her eyes fall closed.

I smooth a hand down her body, tweaking her nipples as I go. I pinch the right, twisting it roughly until she whimpers before switching to the other and repeating the move.

My fingers between her thighs continue their slow exploration, teasing her, building her up again.

“N-no,” she gasps suddenly, even as her eyes flutter in ecstasy when I press against her throbbing entrance. “Do-don't. Not there.”

I pause, my eyes snapping to hers. “And why the fuck not?” I grunt, pressing in a bit more, not enough to actually enter her, not yet. I'm too interested in what she has to say.

She swallows thickly, chokes, then tries again. Her eyes close once more, but she forces the words out. This time, they're so quiet I can barely hear her, and I have to lean in.

“V-v-virgin.”

My heart and cock kick up at that. Oh fuck, she really wants to roleplay with the Devil, doesn't she?

Not only does she want to pretend she's being chased by a murderous stalker—okay, that's not a stretch from the truth, but that's not the point. The point is, my girl, my wild, filthy, slutty wife wants to pretend she's a virgin.

Goddamn that's so hot.

My tongue slides across my teeth as I slowly press in an inch more. “So, you're telling me that you're a virgin?” I

drawl. She nods once. Christ. “And you don’t want me to touch you—” I break off, shoving in another inch. “Here?”

Ray cries out, her back bowing off the floor a few inches. “Fuck,” she gasps, her voice breathless. “No,” she begs weakly. “No, n-no, n—” Her protest dies on her tongue as her body goes limp.

*Finally.*

# CHAPTER 13

I wait, watching her with rapt attention. Her eyes blink slowly as her pupils dilate to the point that her iris is no longer visible in the dim room. I wait and wait some more.

Ray continues to blink as her mouth sags open, but she doesn't speak, and she doesn't move.

Seeing her like this sends equal amounts of anticipation and fear through me.

Reaching forward, I check her pulse, just to be sure. I count, feeling the intensity of her heartbeat, the strength of it. Finally, I release a heavy breath, my head falling heavily.

It's perfect. She's perfect.

A tiny sound comes from her throat. It's barely audible, but it snags my attention. Her eyes dart back and forth like she's taking in her surroundings before finally landing on me.

"Can you hear me?" I murmur before remembering she can't speak. Her mouth is parted, her small breaths panting in and out. "Blink once if you can hear me, can you do that?"

It takes effort, but she successfully blinks, and when she does, a small tear ghosts down her cheek.

Smiling softly, I lean forward and lick up her sweet taste. Unable to help myself, I move to her jaw and bite down. Another tiny sound.

My fingers press against her wet pussy again, and this time, I don't stop when I slowly push inside. Licking up her cheek, I settle by her ear and whisper, "No man has ever been

inside this tight, virgin cunt, but you can't stop dripping for me, can you?"

Another inch, then another.

"You're soaked for me like the cock hungry whore you are. Your body's begging for it even as your mouth continues to lie."

Another inch.

I meet slight resistance, my three fingers too much for her tight channel. I lick the steady stream of tears, savoring every single sound she pushes out, every tear, every breath.

"You don't want me to touch you, to fuck you, to take what I want, but you're here, unable to move, completely at my mercy, and I'm not going to stop until I own every inch of this sweet body."

Leaning back, I meet her eyes. There's a constant stream of tears covering her cheeks, but she's still awake.

Still with me.

"Brace yourself. This might hurt."

With a smirk, I shove my fingers the rest of the way in and groan at her sharp inhale. Her body wants to move; she wants to scream, but she can't.

"Let's see if I can get you to come when you're like this," I muse, pulling out and thrusting back in.

My eyes drop to my fingers, to her wet pussy, and I find myself enraptured by the way she looks, swallowing me up. My cock is solid and painful between us, and I know I won't last much longer before I finally take her.

My fingers work her over the way she loves, building her up again and again before pulling back. There's a puddle of her pussy juice collecting on the ground beneath her, and her skin is covered in a sheen of sweat. Despite not being able to move, her pussy flutters around my fingers every few moments sending zaps throughout my body.

“That’s it, pet,” I growl, curving my fingers upward as my thumb circles her clit. “Come for your master right now, Rayvn.”

Her eyes flutter closed before springing open again. I’m not sure if that was a blink for yes or she’s started to truly fall asleep, but her pussy clenches around me. It’s so tight I struggle to move, and it lasts seconds before relaxing again.

I groan, picking up my pace. My free hand presses down on her lower stomach, and I apply pressure, making everything that much more intense. Her cheek is twitching, her breathing frantic.

“More,” I demand. “Come again. Give me more. You can do better than that.”

I’m greedy for her. Desperate for her. I know I said tonight wasn’t about her pleasure, but now that I’ve seen it, I can’t stop. I want more. I want it all.

“Cover my hand in your cum so I can fuck my cock with it.”

She blinks twice in rapid succession, and I take that to mean no.

“You don’t tell me no,” I snarl.

My hands grip her dress, easily tearing through it from hem to neckline, exposing her flawless skin to my green eyes. My eyes lock on her bra, and I flick her nipples through the flimsy material.

Unsatisfied, I grip my knife and gently slice through the band at the center. The lace springs free, and my eyes glaze over when I see the small cut I left behind.

Ray grunts low in her throat as her cunt spasms again.

“You filthy little bitch,” I chuckle, nicking her again, this time just next to her nipple. She tightens around my fingers, telling me wordlessly she wants more. “Tell me, Rayvn. Will you bleed for me if I ask you to?” She blinks twice, making me laugh. “Good thing I didn’t ask.”

I make a deep slash across the swell of her breast, and just like I knew it would, it sends her spiraling over the edge. Hot liquid coats my hand as she pulses around my fingers. It goes on and on, and this time, she's able to force a small cry from her dry lips.

Groaning, I slide my fingers free as I fall to my haunches. My hand is soaked, and I refuse to waste a drop. Ripping my jeans down with my free hand, I let my angry, deprived cock spring free and wrap my slick around my shaft.

"Fuck," I moan, stroking slowly.

The head of my cock is already soaked with pre-cum that leaked into my boxers, leaving a big wet spot. It won't take much more to get me off, and I can't wait a second more.

Leaning forward, I lift her knees, shoving them toward her chest as I position my cock at her wet entrance. The head slips in easily, and a heavy breath whooshes from my lungs.

She's so hot, so perfect.

"*Fuuuuuck*," I groan, pressing in even more. The sound of her fingernails scraping against the concrete draws my attention.

"You can take a bit more," I taunt. "Just a few more inches and you won't be a virgin anymore. You'll be just another slutty bitch with a used up cunt. Just another whore."

My shoulders tremble with the force of holding myself back.

"No one will want you anymore." Another inch.

She digs harder, scrapes more, leaving bloody marks across the ground. She's blinking rapidly, but I ignore her, using the cues her body's giving me.

Her pussy's clenching, throbbing, and leaking around my cock. Her chest is heaving. Her nipples are hard as stones.

"One more tiny inch, and you'll be *ruined*."

With that, I shove forward, bottoming out. My cock hits the back of her cunt, meeting resistance as she cries out, the

sound garbled. I slide back and thrust forward again before planting myself deep, letting her get used to the feeling of having me inside her.

Her tears are flowing again and I trace my knife over her cheek, collecting them. With my eyes locked on hers, I slowly lick up the side of my blade, drinking her down. A sharp bite of pain stings across my tongue as warm, coppery blood fills my mouth.

I slip my knife in my sheath and pull my cock back before slamming in again, hard enough to jolt her forward. I do it again and again, letting the blood collect in my mouth. When I'm satisfied, I drop down over her body and force her mouth open just like I did earlier before spitting the mixture of my blood and saliva into her mouth.

Her eyes widen a fraction. My eyes are riveted to her mouth as I watch my blood slide down her throat.

“Swallow,” I choke out, my body trembling. I help her jaw close and tip her head back. My thumb presses against her throat and I feel the slow bob of her swallow. “Such a good, perfect girl for me,” I whisper.

My fingers pinch the large cut still leaking above her nipple, forcing it to bleed even more. My hips roll as I latch onto the wound and suck, my eyes still locked on hers. She tastes so sweet all over, inside and out. The realization that we're sharing blood does something to the possessive monster inside of me, egging him on.

*Mine.*

*Mine.*

*Mine.*

Ray's pussy squeezes my cock so hard, I think it might snap and my orgasm gets impossibly closer. I moan around her blood, shivering in ecstasy.

Pulling back, I swallow audibly and stick my tongue out, letting her see what I've done. I give her a big, bloody smile, and then, I fuck her.

## CHAPTER 14

My hips hammer into her hot cunt as I go back to sucking her blood. With every warm swallow, I grow closer and closer to ecstasy. My spine tingles, and my balls throb. My hands travel over every inch of her skin, taking her in, reminding my fuzzy, lust-filled brain that she's really here, really mine.

My tongue laps at her cut, drinking her down as I continue to fuck her with everything I've got. Ray's eyes flutter closed just as I feel her tiny hand shakily slide through my hair. I tense, unsure how she'll react to what I'm doing.

But then, my girl surprises me once again by tugging on my strands and pressing me harder against her chest, silently begging for more.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Fuck.

I lose it then, the knowledge that she truly is just as depraved, just as sick as I am, too much to take. Ripping my mouth away with a snarl, I drive forward, covering her mouth with mine.

I kiss Rayvn.

I fuck Rayvn.

I own Rayvn.

I *ruin* Rayvn.

"I told you I was going to destroy you, little fox," I whisper against her frozen mouth. "But you didn't listen, and

now you've made a deal with the Devil. You're mine. I'm never fucking letting you go. You're stuck with me. If it means I have to put a baby in you to lock you to me until we both die, so fucking be it. I'll knock you up, right here and now, birth control be damned."

This time, her cunt clenches so fucking hard, she milks my cum from my body against my will.

A loud, guttural roar spills from deep in my blackened soul as I force her to take every drop, every single molecule of my DNA.

"God-fucking-damnit," I snarl as she cries and whimpers below me. "You liked that, Ray. You fucking liked me talking about knocking you up. About breeding your slutty little cunt, didn't you?"

She pulses again and gives me a tiny whimper.

"Take it, then," I choke out as another jet of cum is ripped from me. "Take it all, little fox. Every drop is yours."

Leaning back, I keep myself planted deep inside of her, refusing to break our connection. A wave of pure possession fills me. It's deeper, more chaotic, and unnatural than anything I've ever felt before.

I'm always crazy for her.

Always greedy for her.

But this is different. It's almost scary how much I want her right now. Want to knock her up. Fill her again and again until I know she can't fucking leave me. Until she's big and pregnant with my baby. Until every single person who looks at her knows who she belongs to.

Before I know what I'm doing, I'm feeling around her bicep for the tiny device she switched to a month ago, after her pills started to make her sick. It's still fresh, and the chance that it hasn't taken yet, that it's ineffective, fills me with sick excitement.

My blade makes a tiny cut the size of a matchstick. Ray whines and shakes but doesn't protest or try to stop me. I'm

not sure I could, even if she wanted me to.

Her birth control clatters to the floor and rolls away before I give into the desire to smash it to bits.

“Now there’s no getting away,” I whisper, licking the wound. I meet her gaze and press a soft kiss on it, making her shudder.

I quickly rip a piece of her dress off and tie off the cut so it doesn’t bleed too much before I can tend to it properly. My hand smooths over her face, her lips, her eyes.

“Go to sleep now, baby. I’ll take care of you.”

With one last look, her eyes drift closed, and her breaths finally even out. Smiling softly, I slip from my girl’s well-used pussy. A gush of our combined cum spills from her, and I quickly shove it back in, fingering her thoroughly. My eyes flit to her ruined panties, and I grumble in frustration. I should have kept them so I’d have a way to keep this all in place.

Shrugging, I push to my feet and tuck my cock away.

Guess I’ll have to keep filling her until my cum takes.

With a wicked smile, I collect my belongings and pick my bride up. Her destroyed dress falls to pieces at my feet, leaving her completely naked.

My jaw ticks.

I have to get her to our room somehow, and I fucking refuse to let anyone see her naked. Just as I’m about to wrap her in my sweatshirt, my eyes catch on something across the corridor we’re in, and a maniacal laugh leaves me.

The walls are covered in tarps and plastic of various colors and thicknesses. That’ll fucking do.

I slowly set her down on a bench shoved against one of the far walls and use my knife to get what I need, making sure it’s safe to use. I wrap her in one of the sheets, cocooning her in a shroud of plastic. The dark material spans her entire body, including her face, and I pause, eyeing my work.

Seeing her like this, wrapped and unmoving, makes my heart squeeze even as the sick, broken side of me revels in her utter vulnerability. If anyone saw her, they'd think she was dead.

My stomach clenches, and my cock throbs.

I rake my fingers through my hair, wondering how I got her to love a fucked up person like me in the first place.

Dropping to my knees, I click the button on my controller, bathing the room in bright light so I can see what I'm doing. Using my knife, I gently slice a hole across her mouth and nose before switching to my fingers to make the hole bigger, ensuring she can breathe.

Her slumbering form is vulnerable, helpless, and I can't resist taunting her even in her unconscious state.

I lean in close, my face inches from hers, and whisper, "You wanted the chase, Rayvn. The game. The monster. Now you're caught in my web, and I'm never letting you go." I press a kiss to her sleeping lips, absorbing her breaths. "Just know that if you ever try to leave me, I'll fucking kill you."

And I will.

Before killing myself.

But that's not news to her.

Her chest rises and falls in a rhythmic pattern, her unconsciousness masking the turmoil within her dreams. I lift her, cradling her to my body as I make my way to our room. I'm content to let her rest for now, knowing that when she awakens, she'll find herself well fucked and beyond exhausted.

I didn't think it was possible, but somehow, my obsession with Rayvn has grown, and I don't think it'll ever stop.

# CHAPTER 15

USING MY ELBOW, I HIT THE BUTTON FOR OUR FLOOR AND lean against the wall. I'm exhausted. Today's been a long fucking day. We got up early to go to the courthouse, then drove a few hours to Denver. We had breakfast, but Ray didn't want to stop for lunch, too nervous about our surprise plans, and to be honest, I didn't want to stop either.

But now, it's well after midnight, and Ray's passed out. Without the heavy haze of lust settled over me, guilt starts to trickle in.

She's my wife. My world.

I need to take better care of her.

I adjust her in my arms and run my hand over her head. It's covered by the slick plastic, only her mouth and nose exposed. Her rhythmic breathing relaxes me, and I sink further into the wall.

The elevator dings, and my head snaps up. I expect to see the letter *P* illuminated above the door, but it's not. Instead, the number fifteen is glowing brightly. My brows crash together, and my heart rate picks up. The doors slowly slide open, and I tighten my arms around Ray.

The fifteenth floor? What the hell is going on? That's the security team's floor. It's supposed to be vacant this weekend. I dismissed them.

The doors tuck into the walls just as a suited well-built man comes into view. His hair is black and greasy, slicked

back behind his ears. I rapidly take in every inch of him, committing him to memory, just in case.

He's taller than I am, bulkier too, but it's mostly heavy weight around his gut. He has no muscle definition to speak of, his suit fitting him like a stretched potato sack. His jaw is covered in patchy hair, exposing a map of pockmarks. His brows are bushy, his face red and sweaty. There's a tattoo of a rose on his neck.

The man's gaze is on his phone as he steps into the car, oblivious as to who lurks in the corner. Or so he'd like me to think. But I study people, I read them. It's what I do, what I've done for years.

He's lying. Poorly.

He's a threat.

The doors slide closed, and I try to calm my breathing, try not to jostle my wife as I figure out how to play this.

He beats me to it. The man's eyes slide up to mine, homing in on me like he knew I was there all along. My gaze snags on his phone screen right before he puts it away, noticing the square grid of grainy images, and I instantly want to kill him.

"Hi, there," he drawls, his eyes flitting from me to the black sack I'm carrying in my arms, its shape obvious.

I could play her off as trash, but it's clear I'm holding a body. Dead or alive is the deciding factor.

I swallow slowly, narrowing my eyes as I heft her higher. "Who the fuck are you?"

He doesn't respond as his lip kicks up. Then, he makes the worst mistake of his life and steps closer. Before he can think his actions through or realize he's in imminent danger, his grubby hand darts out, smoothing over the length of *my wife's body*.

I would kill for Rayvn Nash. I *have* killed for her. And judging by the way this fucks touching her right now, it looks like I'll be doing it again.

My jaw ticks as I rapidly work through my options.

I have my knife. I could kill him here and now.

I can wait and have him fired the second I get back to my room.

I can kick his ass. Then fire him.

Then kill him.

But then, he makes mistake number two and speaks.

“She’s so beautiful like this,” he whispers, his eyes riveted to her body. “I never thought I’d like ‘em all wrapped up and sleeping, but fuck.” He chuckles, meeting my gaze. I think he thinks there’s some sort of sick comradery between us.

There’s not and never will be.

There’s a difference between me and men like this.

The difference is consent.

My wife and I may play rough. We may hurt each other. I may take from her while she sleeps. But everything I do, every touch, every cut, every slap and thrust of my hips was agreed upon. Every single thing she gave me permission for, if not in that moment, the moment before.

This guy likes to take without asking. Likes the fight, the screams, the honest no’s that are ripped from unwilling lips.

I can see it in his beady eyes. Can tell by the way he’s panting at the sight of her. I can practically smell his desire on him.

He’s lusting after my wife, and for that alone, he’ll die tonight, but first—

My head cocks to the side as the elevator dings, reminding us to select a floor. I shove my elbow into the stall button, locking the elevator in place with the doors closed. He gives me a questioning look but doesn’t panic.

He’s cocky.

He thinks nothing can happen to him.

Idiot.

Smiling, I jerk my chin at him. “Fuck yeah,” I agree, my mouth filling with acid. “Love when they don’t want it. Can’t stop me. Best part, huh?”

He licks his lips, moving to touch her again, and I can’t bite back the snarl.

“*Mine,*” I bite out.

The man pauses, his meaty hand hovering in the air. He chuckles, nodding in understanding, but doesn’t step back.

“I get it man,” he laughs. “I’m possessive with my toys, too. But you can share, right?” He clicks his tongue. “Things are changing around here. It’s not like it was a few months ago. I gotta get it while I still can.”

“What are you talking about?”

Ray takes a choked breath before sinking deeper into my arms, making my slight shift nearly imperceptible. He’s too distracted, too arrogant to see what’s happening right in front of him.

He takes his hand through his greasy hair and scoffs. “The original owners sold a month or so ago,” he grunts, rolling his eyes. “New owner’s been making changes. Word is, shit’s changing. Tightening up.” He gives me a smirk. “I used to get to play with the guests. Perks of my position.”

He waggles his brows and taps his security badge on his belt, showing me his name.

*Lester Dashiell.*

Good to know.

I nod as I reach into my overnight bag that’s slung over my shoulder and tucked behind me. I brought it downstairs since it had Ray’s pills and the other shit I needed for the scene. It also has a few extra items I’d purchased as a backup. I didn’t think I’d need them, but...

“Quick question,” I drawl, taking a step closer. His hooded eyes immediately dart to Ray as he licks his lips. “What was that on your phone? I didn’t know there were cameras.”

He freezes, his body locking up.

That's all the answer I need.

I let Ray slide down my body, keeping her tucked tight to my chest with one arm as I jab out with the other, plunging the paralyzing agent right into his neck. It's the same version of what I gave Ray without the sedation. It's also much stronger.

His eyes gape, his mouth falling open as he stumbles backward, his hands frantically grabbing at his neck. Seconds later, he slumps to the floor.

I slap his cheek a few times, making sure he's still awake. His jaw goes slack, and within minutes, drool is leaking to his chest.

Smiling, I lay my wife down on the floor, her face near his body, her legs spread out behind me.

Clicking my tongue, I shove my fist through the prick's face, once, twice, three times, until blood mingles with spit. He whimpers a pathetic sound but can't move to defend himself.

Dropping to my knees, I straddle Ray's upper body and lean my face into his. My fingers dig into his fat face, and I use my other hand to yank his phone from his pocket.

"If I see what I think I'm going to see, you'll be dead before the drugs even wear off," I promise, pinching his face until his jaw cracks.

My eyes flick down as I flick open his phone. No password. Idiot. The camera feed is already up, and just like I thought, every image is from the basement. I press the scroll button, rewinding the live feed.

Every second that plays out is a second his disgusting eyes don't deserve to see. No one does. No one but me.

"How did you tap my feed?" I murmur absently, watching as I fuck Ray ruthlessly.

I hadn't gotten a chance to watch the videos yet. I'd planned on doing it with her in the morning. But as I watch

myself, watch her, I'm reluctant to turn it off. Fuck, we're so hot together.

My cock thrums to life between us and starts to pulsate angrily. I smirk. That's all it takes. Just seeing her, hearing her throaty moans, watching her run, cry, scream out.

His phone falls to the floor, and I release his face, shoving it back so hard, it bounces off the wall.

"You don't deserve to see what you're about to see, but I need this," I mutter, more to myself than anything. "See this woman here?"

I grip his head, forcing him to look at Ray splayed out under me. Her breaths are still even, but she's twitching more and more like she's waking up.

"She belongs to me. There's not a part of her delectable body that I haven't touched or worshipped or fucked. It's mine, all of it, and you," I break off, rage consuming me. "You looked at what's *mine*."

She makes another little noise, and her arm shifts below the plastic. I smooth my free hand over her exposed cheek. "Hi, baby," I whisper. "It's time to play again."

# CHAPTER 16

RAY'S MOUTH MOVES ON A SILENT WORD, SOMETHING I CAN'T make out, but it's enough to tell me she can hear me. Good.

This is just for us.

Looking up at Lester, the dead man before me, I smile. "Consider this your final meal," I taunt. "You can see, but you can't touch."

I push him away, letting him fall sideways and land on the floor, slumped over.

"This is what it looks like when a man deserves what's given to him." I unzip my jeans, freeing my throbbing cock, and turn to face Ray. "Open up, my love."

Slowly, her mouth opens an inch. It's not enough, but it makes my heart burst. She knows what's happening, and she's on board with the lesson.

*Fuck, I love her so much.*

My thick cock presses against her lips, the tip already leaking. My hips shove forward, pressing into her mouth until I hit her throat. I groan, my head tipping back.

*Holy shit, every time, she kills me.*

"Sweetling," I choke out, refusing to say her real name in front of him. "That's it, take me down your throat."

I keep pushing and pushing until I'm fully seated in her tight throat. A strangled sound leaves me as I fall forward, catching myself on the floor. I quickly adjust, making sure her

nose can catch air before pulling back and slowly sliding in again.

Unlike when I fucked her downstairs, the frantic, chaotic way I destroyed her cunt, I take it slow, making love to my wife's mouth.

It's not about coming; it's about teaching.

This is how you own a woman the right way.

You give only what they're willing to take, and then, you make sure they love it.

It doesn't take long before I feel the familiar tingle of my approaching orgasm. Her mouth, her throat, it's just too much. I flick my gaze at him, seeing tears tracking down his cheeks, collecting in a salty puddle on the elevator floor.

The sight of his tears has me barreling toward the edge, but then, I feel her tongue wrap around my cock as she lightly sucks, and I lose it. Pulling back so just the tip's between her teeth, I fill my wife's mouth with jet after jet of cum.

Ray whimpers quietly, her back arching under my weight. I reach below the plastic and wipe the sticky baby hairs from her forehead, soothing my sweet girl.

"You're so perfect," I breathe, slipping from her mouth. Looking up at him, I snarl, "That's how you treat a woman the way a real man should."

With that, I quickly jump up, tucking myself away before cradling her to my chest. My leg shoots out, colliding with his face. His head hits the elevator wall, and he's instantly out cold. With a grunt, I smash my arm into the penthouse button. I need to get her out of here, and then I need to take care of him.

And her.

I kiss her face all over, loving her the way I need to right now.

Less than a minute later, I'm walking us through our door and stomping my way into our bedroom.

Sighing gratefully, I slowly let her down on the big plush bed and unwrap her body, tossing the plastic sheet to the side. Ray releases a happy sound, her eyes shifting rapidly beneath her lids as her fingers tighten in the comforter.

Smiling, I press a kiss on her forehead, then her lips. She tastes salty, and I groan, licking my cum from her mouth. She's so perfect, so covered in me, and she has no idea.

My eyes flit to the bathroom. I really should bathe her, but she's sleeping so peacefully, and with every breath, every second that passes, the deep-rooted need to go back and slaughter that fucker consumes me.

As if she knows the battle I'm waging inside, Ray makes a little groaning sound and slowly rolls to her side, clutching a pillow to her chest.

"So fucking sweet," I murmur, reaching down to grab a blanket. I cover her naked body, tucking her in and kissing her once more.

Before I leave the room, I place two bottles of water next to the bed and some Tylenol. I quickly jot down a note that I'll be right back, just in case she wakes, along with instructions to order whatever she wants from room service but not to open the door.

It seems I'll need to do some housekeeping of my own before we spend any more time here.

With one final kiss that I'm unable to resist, I leave my bride in her deep sleep, sated and ruined in the best way, just like I promised. My hand wraps around the door handle as I tighten my fingers around my knife.

I have a wife to protect, and if that means killing anyone who dares to look at her wrong, so fucking be it. She's mine to love, and I'll do it however I damn well please.

Just like I always will.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Internationally Best-Selling Author

-California Dreamin'

-Mom of 5 furry rescues

-Building my dream harem one book bf at a time

-Dark Romance and Why Choose obsessed

-Tattooed and bearded alpha-possessive enthusiasts

-No kink is too kinky

-I read daily like the addict I am

-Coffee and smut are my guilty pleasure

For more, follow me at [www.bexdawnwrites.com](http://www.bexdawnwrites.com)



RAVENOUS

J. M. ELLIOTT

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Everything about this story is dark, cruel, and crude. The characters, their behaviors, and circumstances walk a very wobbly line between gray and black. Morality is questionable and at times non-existent. There are more triggers than there are fish in the sea.

Ravenous is not a love story, you will find no romance here nor a happy ever after. Please read responsibly and enjoy this Erotic Horror.

*For those who love them messed up stories.*

*“For murder, though it has no tongue, will speak with the most  
miraculous organ.”*

*-William Shakespeare*

# CHAPTER 1

*PUTRID.*

The word that best describes the smell of rotting flesh—decomposing proteins, breaking down of tissue, and the liquefaction of organs—that odor.

It hits my nostrils like a tidal wave, an aroma so overwhelming I can taste it while the tiny hairs in my nose singe and eyes water. Slowly fluttering open my lids, I'm greeted with complete darkness. At least I think they're open. Blinking rapidly, I panic.

*Scream.* It's the first instinct to trickle in; open my mouth and let shrills play at my vocal chords. Instead I clench my jaw at the impulse. I don't know who's out there.

Frantic breaths release as adrenaline erupts throughout my body. Oh my God. Am I blind? *I'm fucking blind.*

There's a dull ache throbbing at my shoulders, and I wiggle to soothe the pain only for more to build. My collar bones and biceps are prickling with fire. A rattle and a clink reverberate in the dark space. It's then I realize I'm strung up in chains or shackles by my wrists, suspended from who the fuck knows.

This isn't real. It couldn't be.

Cold seeps into my bones, as if I've swallowed ice water. It ripples through my body at a notch higher than a snail's pace. A strange sort of chill, almost empty.

Am I scared? I don't get scared. What is this sensation overtaking me?

A deep breath in, then back out. My pounding pulse dissipates as the darkness looms all around me. Where am I?

*What is that fucking smell?*

My nose crinkles as I'm near ready to gag. The possibilities running havoc around in my brain of what this place is sends another detonation of panicked adrenaline. Anxiety and desperation take over filling my mind with morbid scenarios. I'm not sure I can get myself out of this situation or how I even got into it in the first place.

I squeeze my eyes shut, desperately trying to ignore the pain in my shoulder blades that slithers down my spine and up my arms. The only sense I can rely on right now is my hearing. With my heart hammering against the cage of bones in my chest, it's impossible. Each thud echoes as if it were skipping down a long narrow tunnel.

*Deep breaths, Erin, deep breaths. You can handle this. You're strong. You can survive anything.*

Gritting my teeth through the pain, I focus on ebbing my breaths and listen. Quiet, dull noises float through, still muffled in my ears by that throbbing muscle. The creaking of the chains is barely audible as I slowly pivot, cool air brushing against my skin causing it to billow with goosebumps.

There's someone there.

Another frazzled sensation crawls its way from the depths of my stomach—it can't take over. Not right now. I need to remain calm and stay focused—level-headed. Even though there's an ache becoming more prominent behind my ears.

“Hello?” My voice hoarse, a mere whisper, fracturing the silence in the blackness of wherever I am. “Is someone there?”

A stillness settles between me and the pitch black of this nightmare. I know someone is there, I can feel it. Closing my eyes, I breath in deep through my nose, holding it for a few seconds before releasing. My head is pounding now. I'm sure if I could reach my skull, I'd feel a lump or gash.

*Who the fuck did this? What do they want with me?*

Racking my brain, I sift through the rubble, the pain, and try to remember what the fuck happened before I got here. I vaguely recall being at the wrong place at the wrong damn time.

*Fuck*—this is bad. This is really, really bad.

## CHAPTER 2

### 39 HOURS PRIOR

Sex is fun.

Orgasms rock.

Fucking twin brothers, well that's...

*Intoxicating.*

A small gasp rolls up my throat while tiny circles trace along the sensitive flesh of my inner thigh. Each hot breath tickling the skin. My center heats. Soft, sensual lips inch slowly toward my pussy, taunting me.

*Goddamn, Brody makes me wild when he does this shit.*

“Fuck, you smell good,” he purrs into the crease of my groin area. The vibration alone drives me mad.

“Stop sniffing it and eat it already,” I grit through clenched teeth, grabbing a fist full of his dark hair, and slamming his face to my entrance.

His wet muscle juts out and travels its way from clit to cunt causing a shiver to ignite every nerve within me. My hips buck upward as Brody flattens his tongue, swiping playful flicks against the swollen nub. Sliding his hands down my outer thighs, he digs his fingertips into the skin of my ass cheeks holding me in place. My legs spread with his shoulders as he dives in deep, gorging like a starved vulture.

My head drops back. “Good boy,” my voice breathy, as a moan rumbles from my chest. *Such a good fucking boy.*

Flicks, nibbles, sucks. He fucks me with his mouth—lips, tongue, teeth. My eyes roll and I grind greedily on his face.

“Yes, devour that pussy,” I mewl through a mouthful of heady groans. “Mmmhhh...” Fuck me, *that* tongue. If dining on poon was a competitive sport, he’d be an Olympic champion.

Lifting my head up as an orgasm builds, I pin my eyes on Brock. He’s standing across from us, legs spread, with his hand down his pants. Fuck, he’s sexy.

I tip my chin toward my chest, widening my smile, then bark an order, “Unzip your jeans.” My brow flits up. Dark gray pools never leave mine as his thumb and forefinger quickly lower the metal bead.

“Pull it out.”

Without the slightest of hesitation, he straightens and does as he’s told. Handsome stands over me now, fisting himself. Licking my lips, I salivate at the sight of his thick, hard length. *Damn, that’s one beautiful cock.*

The Jericho twins are something else and such good pets. They know how to take a command, make me squirm, and get the job done.

Brock is taller than his brother by an inch or two, it’s barely noticeable. They’re hard to tell apart until I see their dicks. Brother numero uno, whose nose deep in my cunt, has a strong upward curve that hits my g-spot with shere precision. I shudder just thinking about it. Whereas, number two’s is straight as an arrow—perfect for my ass.

My hand pushes up his shirt, running my fingers along the grooves and valleys of his abs. I blow hot puffs of air on that splendid appendage standing at attention for me. A soldier it is, attending to my every need. Always at my beck and call—they both are.

Baby boy takes a breather from my pussy as I lean back on my elbows ready to play with Twin number two’s veiny cock—rock hard and straining.

“Drop ‘em.” Gesturing to his pants as I hang my head off the carbon fiber. “Come closer.” He heeds my request, taking a step forward and leaning into the steel.

My fingers sink into the back of his thighs as I open wide, drawing a ball into my mouth, spitting it out with a ‘pop’, and sucking it in again. A long, quiet growl releases from his lips. He loves it when I do that.

Flipping my body, now on my knees, I curl my fingers around the base of Brock’s cock and run my tongue along the bulge of the large pulsing vein on the underside. Spit left in its wake as I make my way toward the head.

The swaying of my ass in the air has my pussy scorn with neglect. I’m about to accost Brody when a finger plunges into my slick opening, the middle one. His thumb, pointer finger, ring, and pinkie are pressed against my ass as if he were signing ‘I love you’ while stabbing over and over into my wetness.

Withdrawing it, he shoves back in with two fingers this time, curving them downward to find the soft textured spot that sends me over the edge. A hiss rolls off my tongue with equal parts pain and pleasure.

Wet lips lower to my ass, biting at the flesh, while the strength and tempo increase in his fingers. My mouth drops, releasing loose small moans. I stroke Brock’s shaft as my back bows, my derriere lifting to the sky. Brody’s tongue slides up and down my crack, his free hand spreading one of my cheeks. He circles the rim like he’s licking at an ice cream cone on a hot summer day.

“Eat that ass,” Brock dones at his brother. The boy can toss a mean fucking salad.

Reaching down between my legs, I circle my clit with a finger at the same time I mirror the shape with my tongue around the head of Brock’s cock. It slips in across my lips then cruises down my throat and I moan. Not from a mouth full of twin number two but the tickling sensation spiking from my asshole. The sound is muffled though, since there’s nowhere for it to escape.

Pure bliss radiates from where Brody's tongue laps at my anus, strong energy moves up and down my spine with each passing of the wet muscle. Small figure eights weave around from my neck as Brock's dick slides in and out. Drool forms in the corners of my mouth, some dribbling down my chin as my legs start to tremble from the intense pleasure expelling from my core. A breathy groan releases from Lover Boy's throat as my cheeks hollow and I suck long and hard at the engorged flesh.

Flicking my eyes up, I love watching him unfurl, it's just as erotic as having my pussy destroyed by one of their kinky maneuvers. His mouth is propped open, eyes staring down at me as hunger radiates off him like scorching beams of sunlight.

Rapture builds, gathering and swirling. My stomach dips and dives, overwhelmed with intense pleasure as my body tightens ready to burst like an over filled balloon.

Thump.

I still at the noise, then quickly ignore it, desperate to not lose this high. Brody senses the change in my body language and swivels his hand so his thumb toys with my dark hole. Face tingles, chest heating, breathes sporadic as the orgasm crests once more. I'm going to come.

Thump, Thump. *Mother fuck.*

The hazed layer of euphoric atmosphere breaks as sparks of anger ignite and my arousal slowly deflates. I'm going to kill this piece of shit. Pulling back, I release my mouth from Brock's cock, misery flashing in his deadened storm cloud eyes, and slide off the trunk.

Chuckles weave through the air as Brody speaks in a wry sort of way, "Almost forgot we had a guest." I know he's just as enraged we were interrupted as I am. Which is good, he will inflict more pain upon this sorry sack of dog piss.

The person in the trunk is now thrashing and shouting. I grunt, kicking at the steel. I'm antsy, my blood running hot and thick under the skin, ready to rip out a throat. Brody pops

the compartment and the three of us lean over, douche canoe is bound up tight with a black sack over his head.

My eyes narrow on the piss ant. His chest rises and falls while the thick, black fabric presses against his face with each daunted breath. Freckled arms are bound behind his back, ankles tied the same way where his knees are bent. The two points of contact twisted together in a fierce hog-tie so he can't kick or move much.

Martin Benedicte, *Doctor, Martin Benedicte*. He's a creep and a half. The city's top surgeon, who's been up to some shady shit and I'm going to find out what that is. Every time he and his colleagues are at the club, girls go missing.

He curves his head up toward us. "Who's there?" His voice is crackly and muffled by the sack.

A deep breath fills my lungs, then I nod at my boys. They reach in and drag Martin out by the rope we've tied him with and toss him to the ground. The doctor is unmoving at first, the slam to the dirt must have knocked the wind from him. Before long he's thrashing helplessly and howling behind the sack.

I watch him squirm, flailing what he can of his body, and shouting. He resembles a slimy worm twitching on a hook before lowering it into the water. My eyes rove over him, taking in every inch of his naked body. The pale flesh of his hands and throat stand out against the earthy tones of the dirt and gravel.

Gripping the tire iron in my hand, I pull it slowly from the trunk not taking my eyes off the filth lying before me and twirl it around. Excitement flutters in my chest, pulsing through every vessel, setting my insides on fire as I swing the metal cross above my head and slam it down against his.

The Doctor thrashes and squeals like a little piggy. *Squeal piggy, squeal*. I climb on top of the parasite, resuming my stance.

"This little piggy..." He wriggles some underneath me as I sing the nursery rhythm, "...went wee, wee, wee all the way to

hell.”

His disgusting body squirming beneath me repulses me but the fluid streaming from under the sack makes me quiver. I love the sight, it floods back what he took from me moments ago.

I bring the tire iron down with all my might, plunging it deep into his skull. Lifting up, I slam it a few more times. Blood and brain matter fling about, my body tingles with delight. His goes limp...nerves misfire, fluids expel from orifices.

This is *so* much fun!

Yanking the steel from his head, I slip into beast mode and start stabbing frantically.

Mutilation makes my core pulse. The feel of ripping and tearing through flesh and bone—fucking orgasmic.

At some point, I lose myself, my eyes roll back and pure bliss shudders through my entire body. Within seconds I'm riding my blood stained fingers, high as fuck off the kill. Euphoria slams through my spine and a moan roars from my center. I come—hard.

Continuing to grind my hips against the doctor, I draw out my orgasm and wring every last drop from my pussy over his lifeless corpse. My juices mixing with brain spatter and crimson. The taste of my kill is fresh on my lips as I bite down. I *need* more.

“You good, Babe?” Brody mutters from beside me.

Am I good? *Am I good?* I'm fucking fantastic!

I'll let it slide just this once he called me an atrocious pet name. I hate that shit with a passion. It flicks my psycho bitch twitch and that's not a button you want on. Trust me.

A smile grows on my face as I side eye him, new excitement drumming in my chest. My gaze slides to his brother. Brock doesn't speak, he just stares at me. His cock pulsing with need as he jerks it. Ravenous and starved for me, as I always am for them.

My glare ping pongs between the twins, their stoney eyes filled with hunger, soaking up my body covered in cum and entrails. Licking their lips, they're eager to get me off like I just did myself. Such good boys, always putting my needs before their own. I want them to rip me apart, split me in two.

Heat gathers between my thighs, I need them inside me *now*.

Eagerly, I lean down, sinking my teeth into the doctor's shoulder, ripping a chunk loose. Throwing my head back, I bit down before spitting it out allowing blood to cascade over my lips down, my chin, and throat. A breathless moan escapes, and my eyes roll to the sky.

Brock steps toward me, his cock firm in his grip as he guides it along the red streams. Lathering it, getting it good and wet. A leer is all the confirmation they need from me and the three of us move in such a fashion a Chinese fire drill would be too slow.

Brody is flat on his back as I straddle him, I catch a glimpse of the thick, veiny curve of his dick before he plunges inside. The sting immediately sends an ache to my stomach and a shudder through the rest of me. His chin tips, a long, quiet groan hisses from his throat.

“Fuck your pussy's tight and so damn wet.”

Dropping my head, our eyes connect as he creates a steady rhythm.

Not wasting anymore time, twin number two shoves his cock in my mouth. A few quick pumps has my saliva mixed with the blood of our kill, making sure there's enough slickness coating it. He pulls out and rubs the throbbing flesh across my face and neck, adding more fluid to the mix.

Brock is behind me now, lined perfectly with my ass. He grabs my hips with one hand, sinking the pads of his fingers into my skin as he guides myself with the other until the tip is crowning my hole. I squeeze my eyes shut, readying myself for what comes next.

In one thrust, he seats himself deep inside. A scream ripples through my chest as my pussy clamps down on Brody's cock while my ass slowly adjusts to Brock's.

"Tight ass too," Brock murmurs from over my shoulder to his brother.

Hips slam into me... from under and behind. Pain consumes every inch of my being, my backside engulfed in flames. The edges of my not-so-forbidden entrance steam like molten lava. They both pull back and slam into me, staying in time with each other as they repeat the process until the pain subsides and pleasure slides in to take its place.

Our breathing picks up as we're entwined, my boys drilling me into the next universe. I rub my clit with haste, literally seeing fucking stars. My head lulls toward Brody's glistening chest. Pressure building as the twins thrust their hips frantically.

Heavy breaths and slapping skin fills my ears. A wave of pleasure slams into my core, causing me to lose all control. Black dots my vision and I fall onto twin number one, convulsing as an orgasm slices through me in strong vigorous swipes.

My boys' thrusts become sporadic and sloppy, as their own climaxes build. Brody's peaks first, groaning long and low as his cock pulsates within my womb. Brock following suit a few seconds later, spurting hot cum deep inside my ass.

We all collapse within each other, Brody taking the brunt of mine and his brother's

weight. Sandwiched between the hottest twins on the planet, I twist my head to the side, my cheek smooshed against a hard sweaty pec. A smile pulls at my lips, so much so my teeth peek through. Peace settling deep within my chest.

It's silent for a moment besides the ebbing of our breaths. "You forgot to get information from the doc, Erin," Brock titters, the laugh barely above a whisper. I open my eyes, raking them along the mutilated body of Doctor Martin Benedicte laying beside us.

“Whoopsies,” I giggle. “My bad.”

## CHAPTER 3

BLOOD COATS MY BOOTS, LEAVING A CRIMSON FOOTPRINT trail behind me as I approach the abandoned paint factory. One twin in front of me, the other in tow, dragging what's left of Doctor Benedicte. Crushed rock crunches beneath our feet littered with glass and broken bottles from partiers. Some speckled with bullet holes—great location for target practice.

Summer is decaying into fall. Gold and scarlet leaves pirouette through the air before carpeting the ground. The air is crisp yet still fairly warm with a cindery aroma. It's the smell of rot...of death. I love it.

Which is ironic given what I did moments ago. A grin sneaks along my lips.

*Am I meant to feel remorse for killing someone?* Something hot swirls through my insides, slicing up the middle. Heart skips a few beats. *Nah.*

I enjoy it too much. It's exciting. Pleasurable.

I'm fascinated by death. It's become part of my identity; even thoughts of killing someone make me giddy and my pussy throb. I crave it like an addiction, another drug to wash away the harshness of reality.

The act itself is a rush. When I take a life, the moment of death, where their eyeballs go dim as the essence excretes from their body; a creature within me awakens. Pulsing and swelling until it bursts into a thousand tiny particles—losing myself in the frenzy of torture and mutilation. I revel in it.

The gurgling, slurping, and other intriguing sounds the body makes when enduring extreme pain and foreign objects being plunged into it is the perfect ASMR. I lose myself in dismemberment, taking something whole then dicing it up into bits and pieces. We all have our fetishes. Some weirder than others.

Some people get off on pictures of feet whereas I get off on ripping them clean from the bone.

Slowly, I glance over my shoulder at Brock. Head bowed, both hands curled around the ankles of my kill. Huge veins bulge from his rippling biceps. A sheen of sweat forming along his dark hairline.

He's such a good boy.

My gaze drops to the Doctor. He's unrecognizable, his pulpy skull bobbing up and down over the rough, uneven terrain. He deserved to die.

I don't give a flying fuck if he has a family. A wife and kids waiting anxiously for him to come home to shower with love and support. I did them a favor, ridding their life's of a monster.

My eyes flick back to Brock's, he shoots me a wink. A vigorous smirk on his face. I reciprocate the gesture. Transferring my focus back forward, I ready myself for the task ahead.

The factory looms before us like an ominous monolith, filled with dark secrets and dirty lies. Empty spaces are scattered about where windows once stood. Shards of glass lie along moss covered rubble. The crumbling walls are stained with graffiti, some of which are beautifully designed. Amongst the art rests sooty stains from unknown sources, allowing our acts to remain disguised.

We enter an urban jungle, vines scale the stone walls, shrubs and trees have found sanctuary amongst the heaved slab and remnants from the collapsed roof. It's as though the earth is slowly swallowing the building whole, reclaiming what once belonged to it. Captivating.

A shaft rests almost dead center, dipping into the ground, completely made of concrete. I'm surprised the earth hasn't eroded it more, like it's done above. My eyes light up when a man appears at the end of the pit, zip tied and duct taped to a wooden chair.

His chin is resting on his chest as if in prayer, shoulders rising and falling with each quick breath. Thick, flaxen hair disheveled atop his head. Some strands standing on end, others matted to his forehead from sweat and grime. Damp, soiled clothes cling to his skin.

He's a scrawny fuck, unlike Martin who had more meat on his bones. It won't be as fun killing this one.

I take a deep breath, observing the bean pole oblivious to our presence. Several bruises and cuts mar his flesh. The boys roughed him up a bit before leaving him here to extract the doctor.

When the man eventually notices the three of us, his gray pools round with hysteria. Blood drains from his face. He's petrified. It makes me warm and fuzzy inside.

"So," I start, wasting no time. "You're Stephan Popovick." My voice surprisingly calmer than I expected. "May I call you Steph?" An amused smirk cracks at my face as a brow cocks up.

He stares at me, terror radiating from the depths of his large eyes. It's strangely unsettling, yet adorable at the same time. He's scared. Aww.

Bending over, I peer back at him as I slide a knife from my boot and flick it open. My tongue glides along the edge of the blade as I straighten, holding his gaze. A predator savoring its prey. Slowly, I stalk forward, stopping right in front of him then swing a leg over both his knees, straddling them.

I sway my waist in circular motions as I rest upon his lap, grinding my hips with relentless fervor. The man strains against the ties binding him, his eyes puffy and red, glazed over from constant sobbing. He mumbles something, it's difficult to hear through the duct tape covering his mouth.

The twins are alongside me now, envious I'm humping our captive. Greedy boys. It warms my chest and a smile creeps at my lips.

"Did you understand him?" I ask them.

"Not a single word." Twin number one responds in a gruff tone.

Number two adds, "Nope."

Scraping up a corner, I rip the tape from his mouth in one quick swoop. The man winces, his lips raw and cracked. Little beads of blood dot across them like a painful rash. He sputters an unintelligible string of words, trying to speak through the hoarseness of his throat.

Clenching my teeth as my patience wears thin, I lean forward until our noses touch. Warm breaths puff against my face, reeking of sour milk and panic-induced sweat. I scrunch my nose. Bad move on my part.

"Your gibberish does nothing for me, Steph. You need to use your big boy words." It's more of a command than a statement. "Okay?"

Slowly, his head nods in agreement before muttering, "A—Are you going to k—"

"Tut-Tut." I cut him off, forcefully pressing a finger to his lips. He jolts back, his arms jerking against the zip ties, the plastic scraping along the wood of the chair. "I'll be asking the questions."

His eyes follow the movement of my knife. "Each time you don't answer I'll shove this blade into your body," I warn, inching the point toward him. The tip skims across his cheek as I stand. His Adam's apple bobs as he works to swallow, tensing under my hand.

I glance down at his trembling frame, fear oozing from him like a punctured yolk. Tingles build in my stomach, sending the sensation straight toward my core. My fingers close around the metal hilt as a surge of power courses through my veins.

“Like this!” I thrust the steel point into his thigh and twist before yanking it out. A deafening howl fills the stale air. Liquid spurts from the hole, soaking his pants like a bucket of spilled red paint.

“Oops...it slipped,” I titter, my bottom lip protruding a teeny, tiny bit.

I crouch in front of him, cocking my head with a malicious grin. “Are you ready for the first question?” I say, already visualizing where I’ll stab next.

Puppy dog eyes gaze up at me, he’s too scared to move a muscle. His fear makes me feel alive. He opens his mouth, no sound escapes. Should I plunge my blade into his eye for not answering me?

Leaning closer, I ask, “Where are the girls, you and your fucked up colleagues take from the club?”

Mr. Popovich’s pupils expand, breaths come shallow. Pale hands start twitching as his fingernails dig into the wood of the chair. White, crusted lips tighten into a thin line. Fucking piece of shit knows exactly what I’m talking about.

“Answer me,” I snarl through gritted teeth, pressing the blade to his throat, dragging just enough red speckles the surface.

Whimpers release as he finally manages to stammer out his response. “I—I don’t know what yo—”

Pressing harder, I narrow my eyes. Brody and Brock crowd us now. “You sure about that?”

“I... I... I don’t do the work. I’m just an anesthesiologist.” His words grow high-pitched and tense as they spew from his tongue.

“Your job is to administer a pain suppressant, right? I guarantee you you’re going to feel every bit of what I’m about to do to you.”

“Pl—ea—se, God, pl—ea—se...stop.” Panic seeps through each syllable.

I line my mouth up with his ear and whisper, “I assure you he’s not here to help you.”

Standing straight, I grab one of his fingers.

The excitement of what comes next fish flopping in my belly while terror swirls through his muddy gaze. I bend it back with all my strength. The crunch as it snaps in half is orgasmic.

My eyes roll to the back of my head as a moan rumbles from my chest, drowning out his screams of anguish. More... I need more.

Gripping another finger, he shouts, “Okay, okay, okay.” I release my hold a little. “The women come willingly. They’re not forced or kidnapped.”

My head tilts, volleying my eyes between his. “What do you mean, willingly?”

“They’re offered luxuries...cars, jewelry, money...all the things.” He sucks in a deep breath, letting it out in slow choppy puffs. “In exchange—”

The man’s head drops, as if in shame.

“For what, Steph? In exchange for what?”

“To—to smuggle illegal and prescription drugs.” He coughs, speaking into his chest. “Inside their bodies.”

“Excuse me, what?”

“Women and some men undergo a small procedure where bags of morphine, oxycontin, ecstasy, rohypnol, heroine, or cocaine are implanted into their abdomen.”

A chill creeps along my insides, freezing everything in its path. I shiver and take a deep breath, trying to calm the avalanche that speeds within. I lose the battle.

Memories catapult themselves forward. Visions of my best friend blue and lifeless on her apartment floor, the medical examiner telling me her autopsy results, flashing like a strobe light.

*Flash.*

*Flash.*

*Flash.*

*“She passed from acute pneumonia and liver failure. High levels of heroin and morphine were also found in her bloodstream.”*

*Flash.*

*Flash.*

*Flash.*

*“Did you know of a minor surgery prior to her death. She’s missing vital organs.”*

*Flash.*

*Flash.*

*Flash.*

Ruled as an overdose and tossed in a pile with all the other addicts. She wasn’t a drug user, just chose a different lifestyle. Stripping isn’t an ideal career choice. Little does society know dancing at The Sapphire Gentlemen’s Club comes with a hefty paycheck—only members who make above six figures are allowed.

*I will avenge her death.*

Bile threatens the back of my throat, stomach heaving as the horrible flashbacks spiral like a vortex. Chest-crushing pain so immense I can no longer breathe. Rage unfurls, thick and heavy, bursting through my veins at cyclonic speeds, rendering me blind. Until all I see is red.

*Psycho bitch mode activated.*

Using the knife’s blunt end, I start slamming it on top of the man’s hands. The bones in his fingers and wrists give way upon each punishing strike, crumbling beneath the metal. Over and over, I hammer my arms down until my sides ache. Anger still boiling inside me.

Screaming in rage, I flip the knife around, and slice through the flesh. Easily cleaving its way through tissue,

tendons, and ligaments until it reaches bone. The mutilated meat is enough to quell my fiery wrath, allowing the boys to step in and finish off the man's hands. Slowly, the nightmare fades and my vision returns to normal.

I'm standing in front of the man now, hands no more than shattered stumps. His pitiful cries have died down to a low whimpering. The pain on his face still evident. Wide, tearful eyes lock on mine.

"Let's continue..." I say, my voice cold and devoid of emotion.

Steph's lids flutter as he licks his purpling lips—stalling. I purse mine, watching the blood drip from the mangled mess of his arms. His skin has a pale gray sheen to it. Death is near.

"Your eyeballs are next," I state, brows furrowing.

The man trembles, water brimming his eyes as he chokes back a sob before speaking in an anguished tone. "Most of the girls are prostitutes or junkies; the one's carrying the drugs." His throat bounces with a hard swallow. "The strippers from the club are usually used in a different way."

I stare at him.

"As entertainment." His sunken eyes tell me everything. No need for him to elaborate.

"What happens to the women, the ones who deliver the drugs?"

Air is sucked through his teeth with a shaky breath. The adrenaline coursing through his body is slowing down. Ashen eyes heavy.

"They're killed. Organs harvested."

What in the fuck. That's savage and vile. I will find and eradicate these monsters.

Exhaling, I grab his shoulder jostling him awake. "Where, Stephan?" His head rolls side to side a few times before he pops it back up. "Where does this all happen?"

“A t—text...” His teeth chatter, the body shutting itself down. “...is sent with the location.” He glances at me, guilt glittering in his eyes. “We each bring a girl.”

“When’s the next—”

“Tomorrow.” His voice almost too faint to make out.

I’ve heard enough. Grabbing a fist full of his hair, I yank his head back, my knife pressed firmly against his neck. The man’s pupils shrink and dilate between slow blinks.

“How many of you are left?”

Taking one last glance, I slice my blade across his throat as he breathes his last breath. “Thr—”

Hot, liquid projects across my skin. The act sends a slither of satisfaction snaking up my spine and an euphoric surge straight to my pussy. I stand corrected, killing Stephan Popovick was a lot more fun.

## CHAPTER 4

LIGHT BEAMS ACROSS MY FLESH, HEATING MY SKIN. IRRITATION flares. How does that damn ball of fire still manage to peek through despite my best efforts at keeping it out?

A sigh escapes my lungs.

I just want to *fucking* sleep. Is that too much to ask?

Sitting up, I stare off watching the dust particles dance in the sunbeam. My eyes drift downward following the swirling flecks. Brock is sprawled across one side of my bed—stark naked, face first into the mattress, feet toward the headboard. He’s a odd fucking duck—hot, but a weirdo.

Tousled hair is strewn about his cheek. The contour of a chiseled jawline peeks over his broad shoulder, giving off a flawless air. My gaze skims further, tracing the ridges and valleys of sculpted muscles, complemented by intricate ink adorning his left side.

Cocking my head, I gawk at his plump ass. Peach fuzz glimmering in the sun’s rays. I want to smack it, better yet, sink my pearly whites into the perfectly round bubble. Hesitation slides in for a moment while I contemplate my assault. A faint smile creeps on my face, almost forgetting the fucking scorching sphere of death woke me up.

Brock and his brother are strays like me save the fucked up childhood full of abuse and neglect. Lucky enough, they had loving and supportive parents until the boys chose a lifestyle their family refused to get behind. In their defense, I’d have an OnlyFans too. Come on... hot twins with sexy bodies and big cocks—cha-ching.

I never knew my father. My mother, a real winner, practically ignored my existence from the day I was born. Alcohol was more important and she had a penchant for writing bad checks. The corner of my lip curls into a half-assed snarl and I toss myself back onto the mattress. Throwing a mini pitty party inside over my horrible upbringing.

My mind is scattered in so many directions, anxiously awaiting for the text of the location to those fucks secret hangout. Curling my fist tight around the duvet to abate the rising anger, I focus on the task. There's four left. All some type of doctor or affiliated with the medical field.

My eyes follow the tiny protruding particles of the popcorn ceiling, the ways I'm going to end their sorry life's becoming visible in my head as I stare at the bumpy surface.

Drawing in a breath, I sit up again and instantly stare at the mountain of rock hard—*focus*. I can't, knowing Brock is lying beside me...naked. If he wakes, I won't be able to resist.

Pins and needles run havoc beneath my skin, ready to penetrate the flesh at any given moment as remnants of yesterday's kills invade my mind. It was outer worldly. The excitement contained within itching for the next blood baths.

A ping sounds beside me from the little wooden table. I reach for the doctor's phone, attached is a string of texts coming through.

## **Salomon Bypass**

**8pm**

**Black SUV**

Snarling at the silver rectangle, I grate my teeth, cracking the enamel on each grind. The cursor blinks at me in time with the thumps of my heart. I'm going to kill these motherfuckers tonight.

I toss the phone back on the table and stealthily climb off my bed, quietly making my way to the bathroom. Gently closing the door behind me, I tug up the hem of my oversized

t-shirt, toss it to the floor, and reach for the nozzle of the shower.

Quickly climbing in, I close the frosted glass door. It's steamy inside, eerie almost. My array of shampoos and body washes barely visible across the quaint little space—hardly room for two.

Closing my eyes, I step back under the hot spray, wetting my hair. Rivulets of stifling water burn my skin. It relaxes the muscles and my mind, bringing me some type of peace amidst the raging storm inside. Not for long though as thoughts of the next victim and the kill to come weave and zigzag.

I know killing another without good reason is a crime—a sin. Well, what these men are doing is one too and soon I'll have proof of that, making what I'm doing all the more acceptable. To me anyways.

These pieces of shit deserve every bit of what's coming to them.

Flitting open my eyes, Brock is there, looming at the entrance into the shower. An arm slung over his head gripping the steel frame, a brow lifted ever so slightly. Water droplets form across every inch of his mouth watering body. A simple breath becomes difficult to find.

Finally dragging in a deep one, my body ripples with awareness as he shifts his weight. Dark eyes watch me as mine lower. Beads of water streak down the cords of his throat, gathering at his naval before spilling out and running down to the semi flaccid hunk of meat dangling between his long legs. My pussy swells at the sight.

Rolling my gaze back up, Brock stares down at me. Lips parted, eyes hungry. Within seconds he lurches at me, his fingers curling around my neck. I'm yanked against him, our mouths crashing into an amorous kiss—the kind that hurts.

His tongue juts into my mouth, fucking it with strong fevered strokes as he pushes me back up against the acrylic wall. Deep, raw kisses force their way around, dominating my mouth. My hand finds the back of his neck while the other

palms his ass, pushing us together so tight his now firm cock presses against my stomach. A breathy jumble of moans release from my chest and I bite his bottom lip, trapping it between my teeth, letting him know who's still in charge.

The next thing I know, I'm flipped, tits and face slammed against the wall. A hand still pressed firmly against my esophagus, with the other gripping my hip. Brock's hard body presses along the length of my back, dick nestled against the crest of my ass. Fervid breaths fan across my ear, sending goosebumps to pillage along my skin.

"I'm your daddy now," he rasps, his hand constricting around my throat like an iron vice. The air trickling from my lungs as he tightens, my heartbeat thumping in my ears. Mmm...so fucking hot. It's cute he thinks he's the boss.

Stars begin to sparkle my vision before Brock loosens his grip a fraction just enough for me to take a deep breath then tightens it again. At the same time the tips of his fingers brush against my clit, my legs damn near giving out by the touch. Knees and thighs tremble. If it wasn't for his hand around my neck, I'd be a heap of convulsing mush on the floor.

Two fingers spread me open, dipping easily inside with how wet I am. Drawing back, he mixes the stream from the shower and my wetness up to my clit.

Head growing light, eager for air.

Mind fussy, wanting to fight him to relieve the pressure.

"You like it don't you," he groans, "when Brock's in charge." Of course, being submissive is every bit arousing. I open my mouth, to object—set him straight but the air rests in my windpipe barricaded by a stifled moan.

Digits press against the sensitive bundles of nerves, flicking and twirling around, sending shock waves throughout my entire body. Grinding hard on his hand, rabid for a release of any kind, I struggle in his hold. Desperate to breathe. More desperate to come.

Plunging deep inside, I arch my back into him, eyes rolling upward. Fully gyrating on his hand as I grind my palms into

the wall. The erotic movement causes the pads of his fingertips to dig into my throat. Tense pricks heighten the harrowing bliss.

My clit pulses and throbs in time with the beating of my heart. The lack of oxygen playing a role in the elevated sensitivity. A burn singes my chest, radiating outward. Darkness rims my vision.

In a matter of moments I'm hanging dangerously on the edge of consciousness. Just then the coil in my stomach snaps and euphoria blasts its way through my core. It tears up my insides, ripping the moan from my compressed throat and the orgasm from my pussy.

Without warning Brock releases his grip, hoists me up, and drives his throbbing cock inside. The hard muscle cocooned by my cream. A little startled by his choice in location and the fact I can breath, I gasp long and hard before gulping up the air.

"Mmm, so wet," he coos, licking my neck before biting it as he thrusts at a hard, brutal pace. I allow it. Raw is a favorite of mine.

Each slam of his hips is harsh, fingers digging into the flesh as he impales me. My tits rub and scrape against the wall, the friction almost wanting me to stop the welcomed assault. *I don't*. Tightening around him, Brock pounds harder and faster—punishing.

He rarely fucks my pussy, a pace of this nature is unnatural to him. The sound of our bodies slapping together under the spray of the cooling shower is loud, filled with his guttural animalistic noises.

"Uh, daddy," I cry out. A little bit humor, the rest pure pleasure.

Tilting my pelvis, he hits that deep spot inside that makes my toes curl and eyes cross. I'm loving this. Him owning me.

"Yes," he growls, running his teeth along my shoulder, "you ready to come for me, again?" The fact his voice is as

rough as his touch has me shivery, maybe I'll let him be in control more often.

“Please,” I mumble between inhales.

Dropping my hand, I slap it onto his thigh. Nails slicing through the flesh. Hips punch upward, my muscles quivering so hard they might explode. I bite my lip, my insides raging a war.

Brock drops his head to the juncture between my neck and shoulder, his breaths shallow. Heat roars from my chest. The pressure erupting through me like a geyser at a national park. My pussy walls clench around his engorged cock.

Cum spurts through his shaft as his release mimics mine, the pulsing flesh jerking wildly inside me. Our chests heave as the thick muscle slowly softens inside me. Immediately my spine snaps straight, my mind focused and razor sharp. Fucker distracted me with breath play and orgasms.

*Naughty boy.*

“Get out,” I demand, jabbing my elbows into his gut. “I need to finish up.” Hovering defiantly, his shadow looms overhead. I snap my head to the side, narrowing my eyes. “Do I need to repeat myself?”

It's quiet for a moment, save the timbre of the now cold shower. A gust of cool air pebbles my skin from the door opening and closing.

I release a long sigh and lean my head against the wall.



You've got to be fucking kidding me.

“Ugh, Lar,” I grumble through my teeth, staring at an empty milk carton in my hand. “Every goddamn time.”

I slam the frig shut, giving it the finger as if it were the one to just betray me. *What good is a bowl of Golden Grahams without milk?* My roommate/boss loves to piss me off on the

regular, he knows how ornery I get when my breakfast routine is disturbed. It ruins my whole fucking day.

He can get his own coffee now—fucker.

There are three things, okay four, in this world that don't piss me off... hot showers, music, tattoos, and puppies. Everything else irritates the fuck out of me, especially people, namely a bald, portly one.

Larry Lovejoy, more like Killjoy, owns the shop below our apartment. Larry Love Tattoos and I'm his delightful assistant. The glue to his entire business, without me he'd be screwed.

I do everything—literally. You name it, I do it. The least he could do is leave me some fucking milk for my goddamn cereal.

Down in the shop, I see Larry bent over Brody running the tattoo gun across the back of his calf. While Brock's on the black leather sofa, leaned forward, his hands dangling between his parted legs picking under his nail with the tip of his knife. Why is that so hot?

Larry pops his head up, taking his eyes off the skin canvas. The gun still buzzing away. "Woah, who pissed in your Cheerios?"

I roll my eyes, ignoring the stupid comment as I lean up against the door jam—arms crossed.

"Where's my coffee?"

My blood boils. Instantly. I clench my jaw forcing my reaction to be minimal. Don't test me Lar, not today, I'm feeling a little stabby.

"Where's my milk?" I bite back.

"Well if you joined the world of the living before three in the afternoon you might've found yourself some moo juice for your precious cereal." He winks at me and I shoot him a death glare from across the room.

"Boys, lets go."

The stout fuck laughs, grabbing a papertowel, dousing it with the liquid from his bottle and wipes away the blood and ink on Brody's leg. Brock rises off the couch and saunters toward me like the good boy he is. Number one joins shortly after.

"Bye." Larry waves with his fat sausage-like fingers clapping at his palm.

I flip him the bird.

## CHAPTER 5

GRAVEL AND STONE CRUNCH BENEATH THE TIRES OF MY UBER as it pulls off the highway onto a darkened pathway. Hidden from view of the road. It widens into an open lot, almost like a small rest stop minus the bathrooms. The butterflies flapping around inside my stomach echo the crackle and pops, knowing I'll have to do everything in my power not to kill these fuckers where they stand.

Two black SUVs sit off to the back side facing the entrance. Parking lights glowing bright orange in the night. If that doesn't scream 'danger', a huge 'red flag', I don't know what does.

Glancing quick at my face in the mirror of the compact resting in my palm, I apply an extra stroke of lipstick, then adjust the top of my strapless dress so it sits properly on my chest. This ensemble isn't my favorite, a vivid hue of red that emphasizes the faint curves of my hourglass shape. I'm sure I'll be adjusting it all night.

I opted for a more sophisticated look than the usual fishnets, combat boots and smokey eye makeup. The natural route, even curling my ebony hair and letting it cascade over my shoulders. I suck in a deep breath before exiting my ride—it's show time.

The fullness of the moon casts enough illumination to silhouette a man leaning against one of the vehicles while another approaches. I can make out his features as he breaks away from the shadows, drawing closer. He's tall, slender, dressed in a charcoal gray suit tailored perfectly to fit him. I will enjoy slashing holes in it later.

Dark, wavy hair is mussed atop his head and a pedo stache slapped across his thin upper lip. Although his slightly square jaw kind of compliments it.

“Hi there.” The man grins, strolling forward.

His eyes scan over my entire body, taking in every inch of me, no attempt at making it subtle. Totally giving off a *Martin* from *Sleeping with the Enemy* vibe. Right down to the way he stares with a crazy possessive eye. There’s no other way to describe the ambiance he emits.

I knew my love for *Julia Roberts* movies would haunt me one day.

Smiling, I clutch the handbag in front of me, my thumb hastily tracing tiny circles over my wrist, trying to drown out the thumping of my heart.

“Hi. I’m supposed to meet Doctor Benedicte. Is he here yet?” I lie, flicking my eyes to the other man, still leaning up against the SUV. He’s harder to see but looks preoccupied with his cigarette. The glow of the stick lighting up every few seconds.

“He’ll be along shortly. You’ll come with me in the meantime.” If only he knew his friend is worm food. I laugh internally, my mouth tipping in the corner. “What’s your name, Darling?”

The acid in my gut roils at his use of endearment causing the pad of my thumb to circle faster, filtering down all the building rage. Blood is scratching at the skin, screaming at me to end him here and now. It’s too soon to expose myself.

I blurt out the first thing that comes to mind. “Widow, Black Widow.”

The man cocks his head slightly, a brow lifting to his hairline. He’s quizzical. Shit, why did a name like that have to come out. My insides coil, anxiety constricting me like a snake’s infamous vice grip.

Pedo stache man is silent a moment before a sly grin appears across his lips. “That’s different.”

“All the good ones were taken,” I reply, my shoulders rising casually as I give him the biggest fake smile I can muster. “And yours?”

“Charles.”

“Doctor?”

“Yes, Love.” I bet he wouldn’t be showering me with pet names if he knew I made myself cum atop the mutilated corpse of his business partner the night before. That I tortured and removed the hands of another one right after.

Charles brings his feet together, slicing his hand through the air in the direction of the two vehicles. “Shall we,” he murmurs, spinning on his heels.

A hand slips down my spine, settling onto the swell of my back. Shallow breaths pull at my lungs as my heart goes dead in my chest. The unwanted touch crawls beneath my skin like tiny beetles tunneling under the dirt.

My eyes dart to the other man, barely registering his more relaxed fit and glasses, before he disappears out of the twilight into the blacked out SUV.

Charles moves to open the back passenger door for me, gesturing to enter with his outstretched hand. I press my palm in his as I ease myself in, turning slightly toward him with a subtle glance as he shuts the door behind me. Another woman awaits inside, loaded with extensive makeup, doused in citrusy perfume, and a very revealing dress made of shiny rhinestones—if you can even call it one, it barely covers any of her.

Jade eyes assess me as I settle into the warm leather seat. Soft auburn hair, round rosy cheeks and a nose peppered with freckles she tried desperately to hide makes her look angelic. Despite long-legs and her choice in attire, her delicate, youthful appearance calms my nerves.

I overhear Charles speaking with the man in the other vehicle about how Doctor Benedict and Stephan would be meeting them later. Little do they know my boys are the ones who will be the ones they meet. They’re nearby I can sense it.

The man climbs into the SUV and pivots facing us. It's easier to see his face now under the interior light of the vehicle. Cool, metallic-blue irises stare at me, cold and hard, shifting swiftly away to the woman next to me then back. The corners of my mouth curl and a rush of heat slithers through my body when I think about plucking them from the socket.

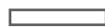
“Ready ladies?” He asks in an overly cheery voice. Gross. “Before we ship off I must ask you to turn off your cellphones, out of respect for our enchanted evening of course.” Uh, huh, real whimsical. Sick fuck. I think I'll kill him first.

Charles leans over the passenger seat then turns back, with decorated gift bags, giving us each one. The woman beside me wastes no time pulling out the items inside—a brand new Louis Vuitton purse and other accessories. *They come willingly. Offered luxuries...*

“There's more at the cottage,” he hums, flicking his eyes to me with a grin before facing forward.

My gaze rests on Charles' profile, his mouth is tautly set into a fine line. I flick my eyes to the rearview mirror where he's staring back hungrily at me. As soon as the dome light fades into darkness, my smile drops, face aching from the charade.

Satisfaction flows freely through my veins, the taste of vengeance fresh on my tongue.



“Stick that thing in my mouth and parts of it will be missing when you pull it back out,” I sneer.

The man with the glass laughs a hearty chuckle, his smile reaching his eyes, before pressing his cock to my lips. He obviously wants to be dickless for the rest of his pathetic life. It'll be a good look for him.

Charles and another man hold my shoulders down, arms bound behind my back, causing my knees to dig deep into the unforgiving floor.

“Open up, slut, it’s what we’re paying you for,” tailored suit man says, squeezing my cheeks with his other hand.

A smile grows on my face, and excitement drums in my pulse as I spot Brody and Brock out my peripherals. Slowly my lips part, letting the piece of shit slide his short dick in just past the ring of his head. I flip my eyes to my boys then suck in a deep breath and clamp down on the tip of his cock with my teeth grinding and grating.

His two friends came crashing to the floor beside me, their throats ripped clean out by my boys, before they can begin to pry me off. Blood leaks out in rivulets from the pulpy mess their necks used to be.

The man wails, tears streaming down his cheeks as he bucks off the chairs pushing and clawing at me. Blood spurts in my mouth, coating the back of my throat as I bite the end of this misogynistic asshole’s dick off. I warned him.

I glance up like the whore I am, a light bluish paints his pale cheeks. Gripping the man’s thigh, I dig my nails in and rise to my feet, spitting out the tiny piece of flesh.

Four-eyes flops to the floor like a fish out of water. I watch for while, flipping about, shivering in delight at the silly sounds coming from him. I want to see the innerspring of his balls.

I saunter to Brock, who’s already fisting his cock roving over my blood soaked body. It’s not the only thing that’s soaked. I bend and slide my mouth down his thick cock giving it a few licks then grab the knife from his pocket and skip back to Billy the Bass.

Kicking the piece of shit on his back, I knee and position the knife over his balls. Slice off with ease. I dissect like Science glass, pulling the stringy stuff out and wrapping it around his neck. Boo not long enough.

I slice his belly letting the steamy pile spill out onto the floor, cutting a piece of his small intestine long enough to strangle him with. Grabbing my fish friend, I sit criss-cross

applause with his head in my lap and wrap the slimy entrails around his neck and pull.

Some wriggling, blubbers, and gurgling come from the man as I pull tighter. Within seconds, his fights for life cease and it is silent save for my heavy breathing. My eyes land on Brock, white spurts sailing to the floor as he pumps faster at his cock.

Brody looms over me now.

“Are you wet, for me?”

I grab the dead man in my lap hand, push down two fingers then insert the other two inside me. A moan releases as I begin to fuck myself with his fingers, then pull them out and lift them toward Brody.

“You let me.” He bends down sucking the man’s fingers into his mouth.

## CHAPTER 6

### PRESENT

A faint sound of magnets rubbing together presses into my ears. It's a vibration or a type of static electricity. The humming grows louder and louder. Lights begin to flicker from behind me, rolling overhead in a slow domino effect, illuminating the space in a dull yellowish-orange hue.

I release a breath, one I didn't know I was holding. A smile pulls at my lips.

*I can see.*

Narrowing my eyes, I rake them over the room I've been imprisoned in. It's a chamber or cellar. Maybe a basement of some kind. It's hard to tell, my vision is blurry and sensitive, even under the bleak lighting.

Tiny plumes fan from my mouth like little clouds of smoke. It's cold in here, yet I'm no longer chilled. Swallowing, I bounce my eyes around the space now that they've had more time to adjust. I blink repeatedly, trying to focus on seeing clearer.

The air is thick and heavy. It's as though I'm breathing through a damp sponge. That same sour odor lingers, like something has recently died. Panic wells; my mind races.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I force myself to take deep calming breaths. After several moments, my pulse slows down to a reasonable pace. I flit them open to survey the area once more.

Barren walls, lifeless and obsolete apart from cobwebs. Pipes running this way and that. A mangled heap of metal is off in one corner. Boxes and crates piled in another.

The cement floor is dank—dingy and soiled. Cracks litter it like an overgrown garden, revealing a rusty grate below my dangling feet. They're bare. Shorn skin all the way up. All my bits on full display.

*For who? More of those doctor fucks?* Thought I killed them all. Anger builds for a short moment, then my eyes shoot wide as the memory floods my brain. Fear flowing through my chest.

I'm with...

A creak interrupts my thoughts and I instinctively turn my attention slowly toward it. My breath hitches in my throat. There's a person hanging next to me. I can't see their face due to the head being tipped backward.

They're covered in blood—all shades. Red, maroon, black. Restraints binding their wrists, strung from a gambrel hook. The same way I am.

It's a woman that much I'm sure. The breast tissue is severed, what's left are two jagged holes. My gaze drops to the black straps hugging her thighs clipped to a metal device spreading her labia apart.

*What. In. The. Fuck?*

The blood stains from the woman trail to the drain beneath me.

Exhaling a deep breath, I whisper, "Hey."

No reply, no movement. Through the sting of my shoulder blades, I sway side to side until I'm able to nudge her with the heel of my foot. She's cool to the touch. I think she may be dead.

The hook she's on swivels in my direction as the chains clank. A strangled gasp expels from my throat. Her head is missing. I'm in big trouble.

A body is beside her, hung differently, by a nylon rope through a large metal hoop. I'm unable to see much of that person save for their guts in a pile on the floor directly underneath them.

This is a goddamn meat locker. An abattoir of humans.

There's yet another. I suck in some air, turning away. After a few seconds, I mentally instruct myself to breathe. Very slowly my eyes trace back to the person slumped in a chair. Limbs missing, flesh ripped from bone; a mangled mess.

An eye is dangling from the socket where the other is bulged, staring sightlessly at me. A chunk of meat hangs limpy from the person's mouth. As my eyes trail lower down, I find out what it is—his dick.

I recognize those tattoos. It's Brock.

My heart clenches through chaotic beats; anger, confusion, and fear battle it out inside me—hostility wins. I scream, overcome with anguish and ire. The room exploding into violent waves of red. A tsunami of rage crashing through me, swell after agonizing swell. I'm going to kill the motherfucker who did this and burn this hell hole to the ground.

Thrashing wildly, I twist and writhe. Contorting my body to loosen or break the chains free from the hook. Pain stabs down my neck, along the stretched ligaments and tendons in my shoulder as they tear, separating from each other.

“Fuck!”

Closing my eyes, I inhale through the searing pain. Numbness spreads, and nausea replaces the white-hot rage. My mind goes silent, I start to drift off into delirium. Flashes of ripping apart whoever did this, limb by limb, with my fucking teeth until there's nothing left except for unrecognizable pieces of flesh.

A snarl forms. Puffs of air spurt through my nostrils like a bull ready to charge at a matador.

The grating of boots along the concrete yanks me from the state of madness I'm in. An eerie chill slices through my soul like a ship through dense fog and I stiffen. Every muscle

vibrates so hard yet I appear still as a statue. The tiny hairs on my arms stand erect like spikes.

I strain my ears, trying to hear over the unsteady beats of my heart, the pain swelling in my arms and shoulders like a water balloon. Whoever is here comes to a halt, it's quiet for only a moment before clanks and clunks fill the room. They're rummaging through something—tools or scraps of metal I'm not exactly sure, I can't quite make out the sound.

The tinkering stops and a man comes into my line of vision, he's dark and ominous. Tall, almost level with me as I hang a foot or two off the cement. Well-muscled and lean, bare chested save a dark pinny hanging loosely over his torso. His skin is dusky, scribbled with ink. A clear shield of sorts is flipped up, resting above his head.

The man whizzes past me on a mission, a hand curled around a device hanging at his side. There's a long cord coming from the blunt end, the other has a long toothed saw protruding from it. He stops in front of the women beside me.

Keeping my eyes trained to the floor, I watch him from my peripherals, trying my best to slow my breathing, to center myself, and not make any obvious movements. My eyes shift slightly in his direction, he's standing there, staring at the lifeless corpse. I want to suck in some air to hold my breath, but I fear it may be too much with the close proximity.

Without warning the saw roars to life, jostling me. I squeeze my eyelids tight, praying he didn't see until I'm sprayed with luke-warm liquid. Blood, chunks and fragments of flesh and bone coat the side of my body. I blink droplets and pieces from my lashes.

I can taste it on my lips. Remaining still and motionless, I stare off in front of me not really focused on anything in particular. Then... I scream.

It's blood-curdling. A release of everything I have built up inside.

The vociferous buzzing halts, my scream lingers a bit afterward. Throat raw and lungs ache as my chest heaves. I

turn my attention to the man beside me, his neck cranes slowly in my direction. He doesn't speak, just stares at me. I swallow—hard.

The daggers he throws are scary beyond recognition yet I find myself lost in his eyes. The lightest shade of green I've ever seen, complemented by sharp angled brows. Even the line of his nose, high cheekbones and razor-fine jaw, all relieved by the flawless curve of his lips keep my attention—I've never seen such perfect balance. I think I'm hallucinating.

Blinking, I shake my head when I realize I've been too caught up in his features to notice he's coming at me. A long fingered hand reaches toward my lips as he stands beside me, never making eye contact. I'm hypnotized by his appearance, tracing the lines of his face with my eyes. Swiping a thumb under my nose then back over my chin, he drops his hand from my mouth then slaps tape across it before walking back to the legless body and finishing what he started.



It's been minutes, maybe hours since the man with the periorbital eyes left, arms full of boxes with pieces of the woman he dismembered tucked inside. I don't know when he'll be back for me. Tape covers my mouth so tightly, I can't even pull my lips apart to swipe my tongue out and loosen it.

One of the lights above is threatening to go out as it flickers, hums, and struggles to stay alive. I've been transfixed by its Morse code for a while—*on, off, on, off*. My eyes hurt, all of me hurts.

I close my lids, only for a moment it seems, and open them slowly. A sharp gasp pierces the still air from my lungs. The muscle inside my chest races as if it has some place to go. Two men stand in front of me.

How long have they been there—staring, watching, judging?

One is tall and scrawny, with a sharp angular jaw and slicked back black hair. He'd be attractive if it weren't for his

beady ice blue eyes. They're creepy.

The other is quite the opposite, a bit shorter with broad shoulders and a bald head. He's muscular, in the stalky kind of way.

They circle me like wild hyenas on the prowl. Eyes swirling with hunger, taking in every single inch of me. I'm violated, chastised.

The most desperate part of me, the part that refuses to believe what's happening, whimpers behind the tape, begging for whatever they have in store for me doesn't happen.

They stare. Unmoving. An eyebrow raises on the shorter one as their lazy ass stares continues to assess me.

I scream behind the tape, my throat raw, the sound echoing in my mouth. Glaring at the two fucksticks; confused, furious.

Fingers rip the tape from my mouth. Damn near taking the skin with it. I wince, licking my lips. When my eyes flit back open They're still gawking.

Taking a fuckng picture.

"What do you want?" I snap, refusing to be intimidated even though I have the disadvantage.

"We heard there was a new playtoy down here," the taller of the two says with a hearty chuckle.

My brows furrow. "I'm no toy you'd want to play with," I snarl.

"Says the one strung up like a piñata." Raucous laughter erupts between them.

These men look dangerous, but not as much as the one standing behind them. Where the the fuck did he come from?

Panic rises. I've never seen such coldness in a human face. Features motionless. No flicker of sympathy. He gives them a scowl.

"Sorry, Viper, we were just... leaving."

## CHAPTER 7

THE STRONG MASCULINE PRESENCE DEVOURS THE SPACE whole. He's massive, fierce, and everything about him screams danger. Way more in control and powerful than the two fuckwads I just encountered. Our eyes clash, my steel blues with his dark ones—black and lifeless, not a single spec of warmth to be found.

Tattoos cover his lightly tanned skin. A Valkyrie rests dead center on his throat, its wings wrapping to either side of his neck, catching my attention first. Tousled, medium length shag covers one eye. High, sharp cheekbones and a chiseled jawline speckled with stubble frames his plump lips. He's quite tall and brawny—attractive.

A rush of heat whisks through my body causing my pussy to clench. Goddammit. I hiss, sore from those two morons forcing multiple orgasms from my body.

The leather of his jacket shines under the dull lighting. Dark jeans mold to his thick legs, and a black button-up shirt stretches over his muscular chest. Ink swirls on his large hands, down to each of his fingers, leaving me to believe he's covered in them. Curled in one of his hands is a large, hooked knife completing his feral appearance.

My breath stills, the sensitive flesh of my core fades as fear slips in to take its place. He's itching to see me flayed apart, not watch me come undone by his touch.

Amusement bubbles from the depths of his dark soul. The scrutiny he casts is primal. It invigorates me, yet unnerves me

all at the same time. He thrives in a world of power, chaos, and sin.

“Now it’s my turn to have some fun,” he goads, the roughness of his tone like steel wool on a metal surface. Scraping and scratching.

The man, looms over me. His broad frame engulfs my size, even as I hang a foot above him. He gives the two men lying on the floor a grueling look and they scurry away. My eyes follow them briefly then focus right back to the monster in front of me.

“How’s that cunt?” His mouth curls into a grotesque smirk.

“Fuck you,” I snarl.

Snatching my chin in his large hand, he squeezes my cheeks together, until my lips pucker. “Such a dirty mouth. Be patient. That’s coming.”

I try to knee the fucker but he wraps an arm around me forcing his huge body against mine, pinning my legs together. Heat radiates off him, warming my skin. The thumps of his heart beat against my ribs. I hate the intimate feeling. Even more, I hate his warm breaths against my bare flesh.

Viper’s eyes snap up, locking with mine then down to my chest. Bringing the blade of his scythe upward, he circles the point around my nipple as he speaks. “Unlike my inexperienced brothers, I won’t let you have the upperhand.”

He presses the tip just under the ridged peak, puncturing the skin enough to draw blood. I winch and a hiss sucks past my teeth, blood spills down my boob and drips onto my ribcage. Dipping his head, his wet tongue juts out and licks up the red liquid, stopping at my nipple before drawing it into his mouth. The sting is slight but manageable.

His tongue circles the pierced bud, lapping at the fluid before drawing the flesh between his teeth. A whine escapes my lips when he pulls back then releases it to give playful flicks. My nostrils flare as heated breaths release.

A derisive snort rumbles against my chest. “You’re liking this.”

“It’s fucking cold in here,” I retort.

Viper drags his oblong hook across my belly, a deep gasp rips from my throat as the skin separates. Blood trickles in a wake behind the blade. His arm drops, then swoops back up, lathering the handle with the blood before spreading my legs.

I freeze, wide-eyed, as he pushes back into me, pressing the thick wooden hilt to the folds of my pussy. “This will warm you up,” he chides.

“No!” I shout, twisting and turning.

I begin to fight, ignoring the pain bursting through every muscle. The searing burn blazing at my shoulder doesn’t even slow me down. I wage a war against the shackles, my body cannot stop this man from defiling me with his weapon.

There’s nothing I can do. The defeat that coats my skin like acid fucking burns. In one thrust, he shoves it deep inside me.

A scream rattles through my chest at the burst of pain ricocheting off my fragile nerves. Loud and piercing, the shrill echos off the walls of this prison. I’m not given a moment to adjust to the stiff object before he drags it out and plunges back in. The metal bead at the end of the handle scraping up my insides.

More harrowing screams rip from my throat between pleas of mercy. No matter how much I twist and strain, it doesn’t stop, he prods harder. Fire erupts, my vision volleys between reality and blacking out.

Over and over, the handle slams in and out of me. A gush of liquid runs down my thighs as if I’ve just peed myself. I’m going to kill this fucker. Some way, somehow, his blood will be on my hands.

I contort at the waist, sending my knee soaring into his neck. Stumbling backward, he coughs through his nose. The scythe releases from his grip and dislodges from inside me, clanking against the concrete. My pussy left throbbing from the assault.

Viper lurches forward, rising on his tiptoes until our noses touch, pressing a thumb into my esophagus as his hand encases my throat. Warm spurts of air, fan along my cheeks. “So, you want to play do you?”

He reaches above me, releasing the hook and I fall to his feet, like a sack of potatoes. My shoulder slams into the cement. A metallic twang sounds as instant relief vibrates through my arm. The fall seems to have knocked it back in place. Swallowing the scream that barrels itself up my throat, I bite my lip, and whimper.

“Owe,” I cry out, a tear slipping down my cheek.

“Get up,” he barks, hoisting me to my feet.

I’m too weak, too fragile, my legs buckle from underneath me and back to the unforgiving floor I go. I lay there, my entire body burning, throbbing, slashed, and bruised. I know I’m bleeding and it’s smeared between my thighs. My body was unaccepting of what he was doing, making the intrusion raw and ungodly painful. Under different circumstances, I would have welcomed the idea.

Viper stands for a moment glaring, then turns and walks away, removing his jacket. Tossing what’s left of Brock’s body to the side, he sits down in the chair scooting his ass to the edge as his legs fall wide.

“Crawl to me, cunt,” he orders, rubbing his cock through his jeans.

Long fingers reach up to unbutton his shirt, keeping his gaze trained on me. My arms are like jello, it’s hard to hold myself up. The sides of his shirt slide off his body, showcasing grooved muscles cloaked with black and gray art. Silver bars glint under the dim lights, his nipples are pierced like mine.

“No,” I breath, defiance fresh on my tongue. The moment the word left my mouth, I regretted it. I don’t have the slightest bit of strength to fight him. My fingertips tap along the concrete, still fairly numb.

Slowly and methodically, he rises to his feet, pinning me with possessive eyes. My heart ceases. I’m fucked. Truly

fucked.

In desperation, I blurt, “My body is too weak. I can’t.” It’s half true, the feeling in my arms is pricking back to life like a swarm of angry hornets penetrating the skin.

“You have until the count of three.” A shiver ripples at the cold, threatening edge of his voice.

Who the fuck does he think he is? I’m not a child. I don’t take orders.

“One.”

I stare at him, unmoving, my own twisted form of self-preservation. My stubborn ass is glutton for punishment, one that’s more than likely going to kill me.

Viper takes a step. “Two.” My eyes narrow into tiny slits, arms shaking as they bear my weight.

When he reaches three, I’m going to run. Where, I haven’t quite figured that out yet.

Without warning, he lunges at me, I don’t even have time to scramble to my feet before he reaches me, grabbing a fist full of my hair and twists it in his hand. Out of instinct I pitch my frail arms up, clawing at his to set the coiled strands free. Kicking and struggling only causes him to grip harder.

The asshole drags my body across the concrete; elbows, hip, and knees skidding along the ground. Pain flares as the friction from the floor burns my skin.

I flail my legs around, reaching for the scythe as we pass by the item he brutally fucked me with moments ago. Noticing my attempt out of the corner of his peripheral, he yanks up my head. I growl in the discomfort and retreat.

“Don’t think about it,” he seethes, kicking it. The hooked knife spirals along the ground past the chair.

He throws me forward and I collide with pieces of my best friend and lover scattered across the cement. I sit up, trying not to gag from the rancid order. All the rot, the decay is worse at ground level. It’s nauseating near the grate.

Grabbing my hair again, Viper jolts my head to the side. “On your knees, whore.” I obey and slip my legs under my cold, bare ass as he takes a seat. Hungry pools of sable peer down at me, his gaze dropping to my mouth as he shifts in the chair. My eyes travel along his body, every inch stacked with muscle, to the large bulge in his jeans then back up.

He yanks hard, the scalp taking the brunt force this time. A hiss rolls from my tongue and I narrow my eyes. His brow cocks. I’m going to bite the tip of his dick off and enjoy chewing on it while he flops around like a fucking fish.

I keep my glower focused on him as I reach for the zipper, lowering it in one clean swoop. A flash of silver glints, another piercing. His cock springs free. Oh, my God!

It’s big.

Really fucking big.

Too big.

Viper fists the thick, hard shaft a few times before prying open my jaw with the hand not entangled in my hair. Ass fuck shoves two fingers in, forcing my head back as the tips reach the tight ring of muscle to my throat. Tears brim my eyes and I gag slightly.

Laughs roll off his tongue. My brows furrow. Fucking piece of shit.

Upon removing his fingers, I suck in a quick breath and he back hands me for it. The force throws my head to the side, face scrunching from the sting. Fuck, that hurt.

Fingers grip my chin, drawing me back to face him, my mouth open from the pressure in his squeeze. Inching forward he spits, the wad coating my tongue. I winch, if his finger didn’t activate my reflex that surely will. Nasty.

Viper lowers my head in a flash, plunging his dick inside, straight past my teeth, stabbing at the muscles. Hips pump in a cruel, punishing rhythm, the swollen flesh sliding far down my throat and depleting the oxygen from my lungs. I hold on the best I can, pushing against his thighs to release the pressure.

Saliva spills from the corners of my mouth, streaming down my neck, and pooling on my chest. Some slipping between my tits.

Rough and hard, taking what he wants. My lips split, his thrusts filled with pure hate. He pounds into my swollen and bruised mouth, uncaring my oxygen supply has exhausted itself. I punch at him desperate for air.

More slams of his pelvis into face as he pushes down with his palm before he stills; thighs clench, abs roll, and he roars his release, shooting hot cum down my throbbing throat.

With a satisfied snarl, he pushes me away and I land on my elbows, feet kicking out underneath me. Sucking in air, I gasp for more as my chest heaves.

Licking my damaged lips, I notice the person strung from rope, the one that was next to the woman. A large hook is wedged up the ass, nylon looped through a ring wrapping up the body. I catch a glimpse of the man's profile.

My heart twists violently in my chest—Brody. Shock rushes through me like an electrical current, clashing with the flash of my rage until they combust into an explosion of fire and heat. A wrath so potent it sings a path through my veins.

Rising to my feet, I step forward hammering my heel down into Vipers groin, smashing his balls. As he crumbles to his knees from the impact, I sprint to the scythe, then back to the motherfucker. Jumping on his back, I shove the blade in his mouth, and yank, slicing through the flesh of his face—lip to ear. Within seconds of my attack, I'm snatched up and whipped through the air.

Viper gurgles and spits out blood as he stalks toward me with a murderous stride. A fist comes barreling toward me, I don't have time to duck with Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dumb latched to me. It smashes into my face and its lights out.

I come in and out of consciousness several times as the three men have their way with me, destroying my body, mind, and soul.

*This is my karma from killing those men, I know it.*

After they've finished, I'm left in a heap on the cold, hard floor like dirty laundry, covered in ropes of cum and blood. I bring my knees to my chest, curling up into a tight ball, holding myself as I shiver uncontrollably. Pain and anger overriding the fear.

*I'll get them back.*

*The End...*

*...for now!*



*Erin 'Widow', Viper, Rat, Roach, and the man with the light green eye's story continues in The Brotherhood releasing spring 2024. A why choose with erotic horror elements. You will also find these characters in Scythe, a reverse Stockholm (Lima) Syndrome Dark Romance releasing late this fall.*

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

J. M. Elliott is new to the writing scene, making her debut in the fall of 2020, and writes romance. The steamy kind.

Secretly, she had always wanted to be an author, even setting many New Year's resolutions to tackle that dream. Between family life and a busy schedule, time to write was out of reach. One day, J. M. sat down, wrote a book, and has been writing ever since.

She enjoys writing stories that reflect parts of her own life, using those experiences as inspiration. You can find heat, heart, and humor in her contemporary books. Twists, morally gray villains, and lots of triggers in her dark stories.

Beyond writing, Elliott spends her days in Northern Minnesota raising a family out in the middle of nowhere, adding two large dogs, mini cows, and too many chickens to the mix.



SIX FEET DARK

A SIX FEET UNDER PREQUEL NOVELLA

ELICE NANGE

## CONTENT WARNINGS

Six Feet Dark is a dark, contemporary romance and all characters involved in this story are villains. All of them, no exceptions. There is no redemption to be found in these pages.

It contains mature and graphic content that is not suitable for all audiences. It also touches on incredibly sensitive topics that may be difficult to stomach, so **Reader discretion is advised.**

However, if you would like an abbreviated content list, here are some: childhood neglect, dysfunctional family dynamics, sexual assault (graphic), abusive parents, murder, explicit sex, pregnancy (alluded to, non-graphic), etc.

For a comprehensive list of content warnings, visit:

<https://elicenange.com/sixfeetdark/>

## BLURB

*Some bonds aren't made to be broken...*

### **The Survivor**

When you're born as a sacrifice, freedom becomes an illusion.  
One I couldn't stop chasing.

I was meant to be my parents' one ticket back into their clan's  
good graces and nothing more than a pawn in their game.

My family wasn't opposed to playing dirty, breaking the rules,  
and getting blood on their precious hands.

Force-fed secrets and lies, I was willing to do whatever it took  
to finally have my freedom. I was willing to sacrifice  
everyone, play their games better than they could, and make a  
deal with the devil.

He was willing to pay the price of my freedom but I wasn't  
willing to leave without her.

*His weapon.*

### **The Weapon**

I was shaped into pure vengeance, happily ever after was  
nothing more than a fantasy. One I knew was too out of reach  
to even try for.

I was caught between being my father's daughter of  
destruction and my mother's victim after she died. I became  
what I knew best instead: chaos and violence.

Willing to go to dark places to make everyone pay for what I  
lost, to draw blood because my family bled, to stomp out the  
thought of finding happiness.

I shook hands with the devil, his weapon, causing his pain  
until I wasn't willing to see her suffer anymore.

The one person I had to protect.

*His survivor; my forever.*

**Note:** This is a prequel to **Six Feet Under**, Book 3 in the ***Sin and Sinuosity*** series. It ends on a cliffhanger and concludes in **Six Feet Under**.

*For the ones who hide in the darkness...*

# CHAPTER 1

THERE ARE TWO KINDS OF VILLAINS — THOSE THAT ARE BORN and those that are made.

As for me?

I could never quite decide what side of the spectrum I fall under. Or what side of the spectrum I *should* fall on.

I am not a good person, and I never claimed to be.

My moral compass was skewed long before I understood what those words mean, and I've long given up on making heads or tails of it. Or why I am the way I am.

The difference between myself and the man seated across from me is that I hide it better.

I have to. That's the world I live in.

It's a survival of the fittest. Eat or be eaten. Or, in my case, outsmart your opponent before you end up in a body bag.

That opponent just happens to be my fiancé.

Hyoga Yamamoto is... conventionally attractive, I suppose. Nineteen years my senior, he's tall with broad shoulders, a chiseled jaw, a strong nose, pillowy lips, and dark brown eyes. His jet-black hair is always salon-styled, with not a lick of hair out of place. For thirty-seven, he already has subtle highlights of grays peeking through. The kind that makes women swoon and fall all over themselves for a taste of him, even going so far as to drop their panties for him — on his command.

As I said, conventionally attractive.

Just not my cup of tea.

He doesn't give me butterflies or warm fuzzy feelings. I also never saw him as more than my sister's husband.

My *dead* sister's husband.

"Your father sent me," he says, holding open the door.

I don't answer him immediately, as his presence alone speaks volumes. I wave to his driver, who returns it with a warm, genuine smile, before resuming putting my bags into the limo trunk.

Tomorrow is my eighteenth birthday, so my father decided I was to spend it at home. Except, he was supposedly too busy to pick me up from boarding school like he always does.

"Your father told me about your little ritual," he says once my school is all but in the distance. "Since we have time today, I will honor it."

Leaning back in my seat, I nod in acknowledgment of his words. Let him see me as a moody teenager, I don't care. It's not like any of that will change his perspective of me. I am property to him, nothing more.

With my face pressed against the glass, I take in the sights and views as we drive to our next destination. It is bittersweet for me. To celebrate my birthday tomorrow, we are *supposedly* having a small, intimate lunch at home — my parents, myself, and my fiancé — which doubles as a conclusion to the marriage talks. Depending on the outcome of that conversation, I may or may not be allowed to graduate.

Regardless of that, this is the last time I will see any of this. So I'll soak it in for as long as I can.

Occasionally, my gaze strays to Hyouga's. To the untrained eye, his face looks calm, stoic, and collected. I don't miss the slight tick in his jaw, or the slight furrow in his brow. The last thing he wants is to accompany me to this, but his comfort is the least of my concerns at the moment.

Yes, I am *that* selfish and self-centered.

When I was four, I was informed that my only purpose was to make a good, obedient, dutiful wife someday. That part wasn't a surprise. I was born into the Yakuza — a now-ousted chapter, but that's beside the point. It's the only life I've known. It's the only path I was destined for, and every carefully crafted decision made for me has been leading up to this.

What has always baffled me is who they chose as my husband. It's not as if he is the last man on Earth. There had to have been far better prospects, decent ones. Noble ones. Yet, they chose him. It just shows how far my family has fallen out of the Yakuza's graces.

"We're here," the driver announces through the intercom.

"You have thirty minutes," Hyouga immediately says.

Turning to him, I grip the handle on the door. "Why?" The question stumbles out of me before I can backpedal.

There has never been a time limit on how much time I spend with my sister. This has to be another one of Hyouga's rules. A way for him to assert his position over me, to lord the fact that he now owns me, yet has kept himself restrained until I turned eighteen.

Hyouga's eyes remain glued to his phone. "I won't be indulging you in this any longer."

The audacity of him. The nerve.

She was my sister first, but she was also his wife.

Granted, she's been dead for twelve years, but still.

"You will deprive me of this?" Tears spring into my eyes, and my lower lip juts out with a slight tremble. Calculated, of course. One must infuse just enough emotion into the visceral reaction to get the point across. "You will have me, no, *force* me, to dishonor her memory?"

He runs his calloused fingers along his scruffy jawline. "It has been twelve years, Yong. For your own sake, let her go." Pleading mixed with condescension leaks into his tone. I am

impressed and mildly disgusted that he pulls off both simultaneously.

“Will that make me a good wife?” I ask, interjecting a breathy catch to my tone. “Sacrificing family for you?”

His icy-cold eyes meet mine. “I’ve let enough things slide when it comes to the Chun-jas, but not this.” He says my family’s name with such distaste, and it’s a wonder why he wants to bind himself to us and our shunned legacy. “Not only is discussing this with a child beneath me, I will not be reminded of her untimely demise. Family or not.”

*Untimely demise?* I want to laugh.

The only reason her demise was untimely is because *he* happened.

He put her down there. He cut her life short with his bare hands, and I’m expected to be okay with it. Not only that, but I’m also expected to fulfill the role that had been intended for her — spread my legs for him, and bear him his many children.

My lips part to protest, but then I think better of it and clamp them shut. This is exactly what he wants. If I play into his bullshit, I’ll waste the twenty-seven minutes I have left arguing with him. Then I won’t get to visit my sister’s grave — which is precisely what he wants.

He’s right that I am a child, *technically*, but that doesn’t mean I must act like one.

Still, I get out of the car and slam the door harder than is necessary. That is the only hint of defiance I plan on showing him today. It’s also an assurance, of sorts, that he won’t follow me. Because what I’m about to do will forever alter the course of our lives.

Gravel shifts beneath my shoes as I make my way to her tombstone. It takes me two minutes to get there, and as expected, a lone cell phone sits on her grave. Grabbing it, I kneel before her headstone for another three minutes and look around, ensuring he didn’t follow me.

My hands are deathly calm as I power on the phone and dial the lone number programmed into it. A chilly breeze blows through, further cementing just how ominous what I'm about to do is.

“Password,” a deep, throaty voice answers.

I take a deep breath, letting it out slowly. “Chaos runs in our blood.”

A beat passes, and then a hearty chuckle comes through. “Hello, Yong.”

## CHAPTER 2

I WAS NEVER THE SENTIMENTAL TYPE. NOR DID I PUT MUCH stock into attachments — familial or otherwise. People are unreliable. Emotions are wildly unpredictable. Put those two together, and it is the perfect recipe for heartache.

Still, as I take one last walk-through of the estate I have called home, the only one I've ever known, I am feeling... something. It's not sentiment, that much I am sure of. Sentiment is for fools, and that's not a word I would use to describe myself.

Cunning, calculating, and two-faced are all acceptable monikers I will gladly answer to.

But this feeling, is it relief, perhaps?

It is that serene feeling of artificial calmness that envelopes and lulls you into a false sense of security. I can't afford to let myself get sucked into it, not when I know a level four hurricane is heading our way, ready to rip through this compound and decimate everything in its path.

Today is the day of reckoning, and The Organizer will be here in less than twelve hours.

His name isn't really The Organizer. I call him that because it is easier to distance my thoughts from what I know is bound to happen. Calling him by that name, albeit in my head, also reduces the risk of me blurting out his name — accidentally or otherwise — since I know the name I know is a big no-no in this house.

As in, heads can and will roll should the name be whispered in this

But I digress.

The Organizer's real name is Lorenzo Sotelo, and, as it so happens, we have a common enemy.

Plural. Common enemies.

The only difference is he's taking this one pro bono.

Why?

Sentiment, that's why.

He made a promise to his little girl, one he intends to keep.

I know a little something about promises. I know a lot about what happens when those promises aren't kept. Thanks to my sister and her legacy that was cut all too short, I have an intimate understanding of what needs to be done and what has to happen.

Is it cliché of me to say all hell will break loose when he comes? Absolutely. I'm saying it anyway.

When you find yourself pressed between a rock and a hard place, you make a choice. In my case, it was the only logical choice to be made. The easiest one I've made in eighteen years.

I made a deal with the devil himself.

I don't regret it either, not for one second. Nor do I feel guilty about it. Had I been born into an ordinary family, or even had a different lineage, then I would feel regret or guilt. A tiny part of me recognizes that I should feel both things, with or without that context, but I don't. I really don't.

I owe them nothing.

Absolutely nothing whatsoever.

Not even the slightest twinge of gratitude that they brought me into this world because I know they could just as easily take me out of it and not bat an eyelash.

They did it to my sister, who's to say I won't meet the same fate she did? After all, they are marrying me off to the same man.

How many times have I wandered these hallways aimlessly, like I am right now, imagining what my life would have been if I wasn't born into this family, specifically as the second daughter to Geon and Hwang Chun-ja?

It doesn't take a genius to see that these two aren't parent material.

My sister's name was Yang.

Yang Chun-ja.

Original, right?

That's how little they cared about us. Swap one letter out and slap that name on the new kid. They should've been done having kids. Hell, they shouldn't have even had me in the first place. She'd just turned fifteen when I was born. I was an oopsie baby, so they handed me over to nannies to raise me while they groomed Yang for the next stage of her life.

After all, she was their golden goose and ticket back into the Yakuza's good graces. At least, that's what I was told.

Unfortunately, that part, they couldn't even get it right.

Yang was brutally murdered on her wedding night by her groom, for reasons unknown. With Hyouga, it could've been anything. Back then, he was infamous for his explosive anger and rage. Anything set him off. It is possible that she spoke out of turn, looked at him wrong, or sneezed at an inopportune time. Those aren't reasons to warrant death, but people have been killed for far less. Because she was eighteen then, he got off with a slap on the wrist. That part, I could never wrap my head around. As infuriating as it was, those were the times.

If only things had ended there.

The two families, the Chun-jas and the Yamamotos, had brokered some sort of a peace treaty deal thirty-five years ago, with the caveat that they were still entitled to a daughter —

any daughter — from the Chun-ja family, for their son Hyouga.

Why?

I have no fucking clue.

Seriously, I don't. I asked my mother once but was met with a pointed silence, so I never asked again. As far as I know, there's nothing special about my family.

What I do remember, is that I was four years old when they first informed me of this 'deal.' I remember this vividly because they told me this at my sister's grave. We were the last ones at the graveyard, and my mother took my hand and placed it in Hyouga's.

"Now, you finish what Yang started," my mother told me then.

I remember being so confused by her words, especially when Hyouga's hand tightened on mine. I remember feeling disgusted when his lips disappeared into his mouth and reappeared wet. I remember the dread that wrapped around my body as he nodded his acquiescence and how dark his eyes became with what I now know as lust as his gaze raked over my four-year-old body. I remember turning to my father for clarification, only for him to nod his approval at our conjoined hands.

That was my first lesson in 'parents are not to be trusted.'

They were such shitty parents to her, and not much changed after they got her back in a body bag. Instead, it was onto the next kid, and let's make this treaty deal happen since that's how much I was worth to them. They intend to follow through on this madness, which entails marrying their only living child to the man who killed the first one. A necessary evil, my mother loves to point out, all in the name of peace.

Fuck peace.

Seriously, fuck it. Ten ways to Sunday and then back.

For twelve years, I've visited her grave every chance I get. Not for sentimental reasons, but as a reminder to hold on

tightly to the plethora of emotions I felt that day. And also to never forget that Hyouga Yamamoto isn't the good guy he's managed to fool everyone he is. He is my sister's husband and her murderer.

They all think I do this as a physical reminder of what will happen to me if I step out of line because that's what I told them. As such, they indulged me in this. Until now, that is.

If only they knew.

To their credit, they spared no expense with my education. I've had the best tutors money could buy and attended the best schools worldwide. I am fluent in five languages, and a chess and musical prodigy. None of which are intended to elevate my status in life, but to make my parents look good in comparison. Not only am I to be the perfect trophy wife to Hyouga — like they intended for my sister — but I am also their ticket back into the Yakuza's good graces.

To say they are determined to get this part right would be the greatest understatement of the century.

They've done everything possible to ensure I never think about stepping out of line. And I haven't, at least to their knowledge.

In return, I am to smile, sit still, look pretty, and do as I am told. Oh, and to regal everyone with my superior intellect when the occasion calls for it. All of which I have done all my fucking life. But I've been nursing my own agenda in the meantime.

I had to.

The thing is, I don't need a fucking kingdom. I just need to get out of the castle. I don't care if I'm in one piece when it's all over or in a body bag myself, just as long as I take everyone else with me.

I harbor a lot of barely concealed anger and resentment, fueled by my love for a sister I barely remember, and her desire to break free of this life she never wanted in the first place. Except, for me to achieve that, I became everything she wasn't.

Where she rebelled at every turn, I am docile and compliant. I play my cards close to the vest and am not afraid to use them against this lot when it best suits me.

When you are loud and proud, everyone's eyes fall on you. So too, does their scrutiny. But when you are quiet, it's easier to hear the secrets people whisper — to themselves, to their confidants, even to their fucking plants.

Now, the devil knows their secrets. Most of them, anyway.

As I said, I owe these people nothing.

All that's left is to grab one last item from this cursed house, and I'm done. It should be simple enough, yet one more curveball is tossed into my path.

This time, it's my mother.

I round the corner to find her pressed against the wall, her lips intimately seared to someone who is not my father, their breathy moans filling the hallways. Her stamina impresses me; more importantly, she's shamelessly flaunting this. We both know she's directly in sight of a strategically placed security camera, and I have no doubt that my father will see this amorous exchange.

I planned on disabling it once I complete my rounds, but in light of recent events, I might leave this one alone as this is far too juicy to pass up. I wait a few minutes before clearing my throat. They spring apart, and then he scurries off like vermin.

Interesting.

She straightens out her crumbled-up clothing before turning to face me. "Yong. I didn't see you there."

*That's what we're going with?*

Urgh.

Two can play that game.

"Don't mind me. I'm just passing through."

Her nostrils flare, and her hands ball into fists at her sides. I move to sidestep around her, but she doesn't give me a chance. She reaches out to stop me. "Wait."

Humoring her, I stop and wait for her to make the next move.

“Happy birthday.” She graces me with one of her humorless, fake smiles.

“There’s nothing happy about it,” I say, just to see her dark brown eyes flash with rage.

Tricking her into letting that polished mask of hers slip is a superpower of mine.

“If you are planning on causing trouble tonight, don’t. Unless you plan on ending up like your sister.” Seriously, I’m surprised I don’t get frostbite. That’s how chilly her smile is.

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” It’s a challenge keeping the venom out of my tone. Keeping my features schooled, though, is a relatively easier sell.

Her features soften, and she swipes the back of her hand over her mouth. “Your father knows about this,” she offers, even though I did not ask. “He likes watching me with other men. It gets him all hot and bothered, and he’ll march down here ready to stake—”

“I didn’t ask,” I cry out, cupping both ears with my hands.

For fuck’s sake, I just turned eighteen. The last thing I want to do is discuss my parent’s sex life with my mother. Even if she thinks this will serve me well in the future. Even if she thinks this would be a surefire way to keep Hyouga’s interest. The fact that I don’t see him like *that* never made a difference to the woman, seeing as she’s been dropping not-so-subtle hints like these ever since I got my first period.

Maybe even longer than that.

The problem is, I can’t take her seriously. I know what kind of woman she is.

Hwang Chun-ja is the type of woman who can and will order her husband to kill another woman simply because she can. She has no qualms about forcing said woman’s daughter to watch either. On the contrary, she gets off on it.

“If it helps, he won’t live past tonight.” She angles her chin in the direction her paramour scurried off to.

*Neither will you*, I want to say, but I clamp down on it.

It is as she said. I plan on playing the part of the perfect, compliant, and honorable daughter tonight, and I intend on playing it to perfection.

Not even when my father rounds the corner and then stalks over to his wife, looking all hot and bothered, do I break out of character. I feign modesty and turn away. It’s the games they play, ones I wish they would keep me the fuck out of.

Shaking my head, I leave them in a lip-lock, much like the one I interrupted, and head straight for his office. It took a few tries and failed pin combos, but I eventually got the safe open and retrieved the items Lorenzo requested.

It’s not uncommon for me to hide out in Dad’s office. I can always claim something mundane led me here, like retrieving a book or something. But these things are anything but, so if I walk out of here with these items, they will be onto me in no time. To buy myself more time, I log onto Dad’s computer and pull up the camera’s live feeds. They’re still going at it, so I watch them some more, equally disgusted and mildly impressed with their stamina. I wait until they move out of the range of the cameras — probably taking the party to their bedroom — before disabling all the security cameras on the property.

They shouldn’t have underestimated me. That was their biggest mistake.

I don’t feel guilty about it either, not with parents like this.

Was I born a villain? Or was I made into one?

That, in and of itself, is the million-dollar question.

# CHAPTER 3

I FEEL LIKE I'M PUSHING MY WAY THROUGH A NEVER-ENDING sluggish dream as I make my way to the dining room a few hours later. I'm not surprised to find my parents seated at the table, engaged in a heated discussion, albeit in hushed tones.

Instead of the usual flurry of activity I've come to expect each time my mother hosts one of her lavish parties, there are... two people in the dining room putting things together.

Two servants. That's it.

Just two.

My last birthday was a lavish, extravagant three-day affair. They even flew most of my classmates — I don't have friends, by design — in for it, but only the ones from influential Japanese and Korean families. Day three culminated in the mother of all ragers, and they went all out for it. Drugs, alcohol, orgies, and whatever else they could think of — all vices I was never allowed to indulge in — were front and center that day.

Suffice it to say that not only was the entire weekend a nightmare for me, but I sat that one out because it just wasn't my scene.

But, to each their own.

Then again, the highlight of that weekend was stumbling upon my parents in bed with my chemistry lab partner, Ahnjong. She also didn't return to school this year, but I'm sure those two events are unrelated.

My classmates were still talking about that weekend all year long, ad nauseam. I'm convinced they all had fucking teenage blinders on, or they would've realized that party wasn't for me; it was for my parents. Hell, they partied harder than anyone else that weekend. My classmates were impressed, but I was not. I saw it for what it truly was: a pathetic attempt to reclaim some long-gone moment from their self-proclaimed wild youth.

Still, that was last year.

This year, though, pales in comparison.

Granted, this isn't a party per-se; it's a birthday lunch. And I'm not just anyone; I'm her daughter.

Yet this is the best she can do?

Was I gone that long? Or did we go broke overnight?

I don't think so, or Hyouga would've said something about it yesterday when he picked me up from campus. He certainly had a lot to say about last year's party, even though he was the one who oversaw the entertainment for the weekend. He supplied all the drugs and alcohol for day three's festivities.

Ah, did I say I sat out last year's rager?

I did, but he also forbade me from participating in any of it. Since I'm his betrothed and all. He even forced me to wear a chastity belt the entire weekend, just in case. Because that's all I am to him, his fucking property.

But I digress.

Back to the two servants working today.

These ones, though, are new. Yet, they seem to know what they are doing. It feels like I've been transported into some alternate universe because my mother has never had this good of luck with her servants. Because unlike the others — clumsy and uncoordinated — these two are like a well-oiled machine. Too coordinated. Too much in sync. If I didn't know any better, I'd say they were a mother-and-daughter duo.

The younger one — the daughter, I presume — notices me first, pausing mid-step, and her gaze travels up and down my

body. Her lips part, then she thinks better of it and her bottom lip disappears between her teeth. The older one — the mother, I presume — notices her companion is stalled mid-step and her gaze follows, landing on me.

Something flickers in her eyes as she takes in my outfit — recognition, I think? — but it is gone too quickly before I can decipher it. She gives the younger one a not-so-subtle shove, and they both resume their duties.

Truth be told, I don't know what to make of their reactions. But now, I feel bad for them and that they will be caught in the crosshairs of what will come. In another life, the younger one could pass for my sister. Or even my twin. Sure, I don't do attachment, but if I spent enough time around them I could see myself getting attached to them.

The problem?

I can't warn them to evacuate the premises without raising suspicion about what is to happen today.

Oh well.

It's probably for the best. At the very least, a lot fewer people will unnecessarily die today.

So this, I can work with. As Hyouga would patronizingly phrase it, I can wrap my 'teenage' brain around this and work with what I've got.

Besides, I'm doing everything by the book today.

Starting with the dress my mother laid out for me, the same one that gave the servants pause. It's a pink, ankle-length silk dress that clings to my petite frame like a second skin.

It's pretty, sure, but it's not my taste. At all. I feel more exposed in this dress than I've ever been. Eighteen or not, it's not what I would've chosen for myself. And I'm not stupid. Mom didn't choose this dress for my benefit; she picked it for Hyouga.

It's a preview of what he is supposedly getting this time around — me, in all my pure and untouched glory. I am his for the taking today if he so chooses. It's my birthday, yet she

feels the need to dress me up in wedding night lingerie and serve me on a silver platter. It's pathetic how desperate she is to see this wedding happen.

If only she knew.

Then again, it's my last day on Earth, so I might as well look my best. What more can I ask for?

Everything.

Or rather, anything but this.

As my eyes pan the room, the same question that has haunted my every thought since the day I found my sister's journals pops to the forefront of my mind again: Why me?

And once the question starts, more spill out in rapid succession.

Why does it have to be me?

Why couldn't I just have a normal life?

Why do I have to marry my sister's murderer? And what's so great about the Yakuza that my parents are willing to do anything to get back into their good graces? Shouldn't they know this by now, that that ship has long sailed?

Desperation is not a good look for my parents.

Just saying.

That, and they are too engrossed in conversation to notice me standing there, having a mini-existential crisis. I take one more step toward them, and the room falls silent. I turn to see Hyouga standing in the doorway.

He glances at my parents, then turns his icy-cold gaze to me. He tilts his head to the side as his gaze skates over me. I straighten both shoulders, internally fighting the urge to cower beneath him or shield myself from his leery gaze. Instead, I smooth both palms over the soft fabric of my dress, waiting for the inevitable underhanded compliment to drop from his lips.

It doesn't.

Which, again, is for the best.

He says something else instead.

“You look absolutely stunning,” he states in his matter-of-fact tone, then he turns to my mother and says something in Japanese. I’m only half-listening to him now, but it sounds like he approves of her choice.

As for me?

I fight the bile that rises up my throat.

*A few more hours, and they won't be my problem any longer,* I remind myself for the umpteenth time today as I make my way to my seat. As usual, it's the one next to Hyouga's. It doesn't occur to him that pulling out the chair for your companion is just basic decency.

Not that I care.

Because the daughter-servant beats him to it, then makes it a point to shove it in his face while she's at it. I thoroughly enjoy the lethal look she casts his way as she pulls out my seat, waits for me to settle in, and then pushes it in for me.

Like the gentleman he isn't.

Hyouga shifts beside me, his body humming with anger. “Who's she?”

The irritation and frustration in his question make me smile.

“She's new,” my mother quickly chimes in, waving her off. “Leave us.”

The defiance in her bow is evident to everyone, and then she pivots out of the room.

“New enough that she doesn't know her place?” Hyouga demands the moment she's out of earshot.

“The affairs of our household are not your concern,” my father snarls. “That extends to the servants.”

It is oddly comforting to know he still has some semblance of a spine left in him. Although, this is a recent development

and oddly out of character, even for him. Why he's defending the servants, the same ones he thinks are beneath him, beats me.

The rest of the so-called lunch is a sordid affair, and I spend most of it quietly picking at my food, a low-burning anger simmering at the back of my mind.

As usual, my father does most of the talking, regaling us with his exploits. Again, I'm not entirely oblivious about why he's doing this. It's his way of keeping me in line, of reminding me of what he's capable of, should I even think about stepping out of line.

Let's just say that for me, 'bring your daughter to work' day isn't what most people think it should be.

While my life has been relatively comfortable, I was never sheltered from the darker sides of it. My father used to be one of the Yakuza's most ruthless enforcers, and now he's been reduced to... this. A shadow of a man whose only solace is doing his wife's bidding.

And if you think he is bad, wait till you meet her.

Or my fiancé, for that matter.

The same thought occurs to me each time. I still don't understand — nor do I want to understand — why Mom thinks he and I will have such a great relationship.

Hyouga has, and always will be, cold and distant. His outward appearance is a giant billboard warning to all who dare to approach him. It's the icy cold eyes, the disdain in his glare, and the bored, pissed-off look he constantly has. I know that look is reserved only when he is around my family, especially me.

I remind him of his dead wife.

As I should.

I am a carbon copy of her, in more ways than one.

Not that my parents care about any of that. All I am, to them, is a golden goose. Their golden goose.

When Hyouga proposes a toast, the anger that's been burning low in the back of my mind flares up again.

"Happy birthday," my mother says again, and I hear the forced pride in her voice.

"Nothing happy about it," I mutter before lifting my flute in a bitter toast.

Next to me, Hyouga's body goes stiff. "What was that?"

Ignoring the fact that there are three pairs of eyes trained on me, I tilt the glass to my lips, relishing the burn of the amber liquid as it glides down my throat. "More, please," I say, setting my glass down.

As expected, the daughter-servant materializes and refills it.

"Yong," he says in a low voice, and I brace myself for whatever he's about to say. "If you have something to say, fucking spit it out."

My eyes narrow, and I clench my fist, digging my nails into my palm to keep from snapping. Turning to him, I give him the fakest smile I can muster. "I have nothing to say. Not about this, or anything else for that matter."

"Is that right?" he drawls, leaning back in his seat and crossing his arms over his chest. "The floor is yours, birthday girl."

I bite back a retort as my eyes pan the room. This is what I get for speaking out of turn.

Granted, I walked right into that one, and he's boxed me into the fucking corner. He knows it too. The grin on his face can only be described as menacing as his gaze roams my body, knowing full well that I have no way of backpedaling.

*Where the fuck is The Organizer?*

"Birthday girls get wishes, do they not?" I force out.

Hyouga smirks but nods. Everything else about him is... I don't know. I can't put a finger on it. Except for one thing, the biggest turn-off about him.

For me, it's the eyes. It's always been his eyes. They lack any semblance of warmth, much like his touch.

Is this what Yong had to put up with?

“If I wished for this marriage not to happen, would that wish come true?”

Across from the table, my father lets out an exasperated sigh, and the table falls silent.

Hell, the entire room falls silent. Deathly silent, you can hear a pin drop.

It's a good thing, too, because that's when it happens.

Time slows, but not before I hear the recognizable whistle of metal flying through the air. I watch in sick fascination as the blade nestles into my father's right eye. His startled yelp barely registers as blood pools from the socket.

Another soon follows, straight for his chest. He coughs up blood, then slumps over, falling face-first on the table.

“Okay, now that *that's* done...” The sound of chair legs scraping on the floor fills the room as my mother stands, then angles her chin in my direction as she addresses Hyouga, “You can finish her off, and let's—”

A canister drops to the middle of the table, cutting her off. Then comes the high-pitched squeal as the misty gas is expelled.

The daughter-servant materializes behind me, clamps her hand over my nose and mouth, and pulls me to the floor with her. She rolls us under the table as more footsteps enter the room.

“Try not to breathe it in, and it'll pass soon,” her voice rings clear in my ear.

Okay then.

“What the—” my mother's high-pitched squeal can be heard right before her voice cuts off, and she falls to the floor with a thud. A second thud soon follows, and then I find myself staring at Hyouga's ice-cold but lifeless eyes.

Good to fucking know the dead eyes thing is a permanent part of him.

Sleek black boots come to a stop next to the table, and its owner crouches and holds out two gas masks to us. I can't tell who it is, but the daughter-servant clearly does, as she grabs both and fastens hers over her face first, then helps me put mine on.

“You didn't breathe in much of it, so it'll pass soon,” she tells me as she secures the clasps on mine.

There's more movement and shuffling as Hyouga's and my mom's bodies are lifted off the ground and dragged off to who knows where.

“Bring out the birthday girl,” a deep, familiar voice says.

# CHAPTER 4

“HAPPY BIRTHDAY, YONG,” THE ORGANIZER SAYS AS WE come out from underneath the table. “Help her to her throne.”

My feet move as I’m ushered to the throne in question, which happens to be the seat at the head of the table. My father is still face-planted on the table, but they moved him to the adjacent seat to make way for me. My mother and Hyouga are still lying on the floor with their hands tied behind their backs.

My eyes pan the room as I settle in, but it’s like my eyes are seeing everything through a fine mist, like the world is just a little bit out of focus.

He’s a lot different in person, The Organizer. More imposing. He appears more relaxed as he glances around, cataloging the scene and ensuring all relevant players are in place. I know this because I’m doing the same thing, too, except I have no idea who most of them are.

I suppose that’s another thing he didn’t bother telling me: that he would bring an audience. At least he takes the time to introduce them, using single letters only, which I’m guessing are some variation of the first initials of their names.

There’s a total of six women present. Two of them I already know — the mother-daughter servant team — and he addresses them as M and A. According to my sister’s journals, Lorenzo has been doing this for a long time, so it makes sense that he would’ve put a team in place ahead of time.

It makes sense that they were able to infiltrate easily. They both fit right in. Plus, I suspect my mother was more enamored

by their competence that she didn't bother looking too closely. Or maybe she did, and they are just that good to escape detection.

My gaze settles in on my mother's unconscious body on the floor as her words from earlier sink in.

*You can finish her off.*

Those are the words she said to Hyouga right before the canister dropped and the room filled with gas. She thought this was something else. That Hyouga planned this. Could that be why she didn't look too closely at M and A? Because she thought they worked for Hyouga?

"She's not who you think she is," Lorenzo tells me in fluent Japanese, a deathly calm in his voice.

"It doesn't matter," I say in Japanese as well. "She still dies tonight."

"True, but don't you at least want to know who she really is?"

I blow out an exasperated breath. "Are you having second thoughts?"

He scoffs. "Do I look like the type of man to have second thoughts about anything?"

"No, you don't," I tell him, and there's a hint of trepidation in my voice.

My father stirs at that exact moment, then bolts to an upright position as he hacks up more blood.

Lorenzo's grin can only be described as menacing as he glances at my father. "That's one tenacious bastard." He lifts an arm and wiggles his fingers, then switches to English. "You're up, daughter."

*Daughter?*

At the puzzled look on my face, he adds, in Japanese, "I told you I made a promise to my little girl."

Right.

Sentiment.

Except, she's no little girl.

She looks to be my age, though.

And she is gorgeous. Breathtakingly gorgeous, I should add.

Tall, too. Her curly dark-brown hair is pulled back in a severe ponytail, highlighting the sharp angles of her cheekbones and olive skintone. She's dressed in black from head to toe — a black turtle neck conceals her slender neck, black jeans cling to her tall frame like a second skin, and sleek black boots complete the look.

Ah. It was she who handed us the gas masks earlier.

She certainly is a sight for sore eyes.

She steps forward, switchblade in hand, and my heart skips a beat, taking even me by surprise. Then she buries her fingers into his hair and pulls back his head to bare his throat, leveling his gaze with mine. It's almost poetic that my face is the last one my father sees as the blade cuts through his throat all the way around. She holds his head in place long enough for the gurgling noises to subside before releasing him, and his body falls to the floor.

The thing is, I feel... nothing. For the man, that is.

I feel absolutely nothing as I stare at his lifeless corpse.

As is to be expected. A part of me has always known that killing him won't bring my sister back. Still, it's not nearly as satisfying as I thought it would.

It was over too quickly. Granted, he had already been bleeding out, so all that happened was he got put out of his misery.

Perhaps her death will be better. Slower, preferably.

"My mother gave the order," I tell Lorenzo in Japanese, hoping he would catch my drift without my having to spell it out. "My father killed Sarah on her say-so."

"I know."

“She also knew who she was. She called her Sarah, not Tamera. Your wife’s name was Tamera, is it not?”

His jaw clenches. “It is.”

“Did you know that she knew *she* was there?” I angle my chin in his daughter’s direction. She’s playing with her toys — knives — so I doubt she is paying attention to us. It’s either that, or she doesn’t understand Japanese, which works out to my advantage. “That’s why he played with her for as long as he did. That’s why he kept her alive for as long as he did. It’s because my mother asked him to. She told him to make it good because she knew Sarah’s daughter was stuffed in the closet in that room. She filmed it too. I got the tapes from the safe earlier if you want them.”

He nods, then gestures to one of the other women, M, who then leaves the room, probably to retrieve it and everything else. When I called him yesterday, he had a specific list of items I was to recover from my father’s safe. That’s what I was doing earlier today, before this birthday lunch. Since both M and A are already familiar with the estate, they probably know where I kept them.

It was thoughtful planning on The Organizer’s part in case I backed out of all of this. It’s what I would’ve done if our roles were reversed.

Speaking of, he doesn’t say anything for some time, his jaw shifting as he absorbs this new information. “Your father wasn’t the love of her life as she claims.”

I shrug. “Theirs was a complicated relationship, bound by their shared love of violence.”

“So it would seem,” Lorenzo muses before continuing. “But it wasn’t that cut and dry. And it doesn’t change that he was a long con for her, nearly forty decades in the making. Given what you know about Korean culture, didn’t you think it strange that she took your father’s last name instead of keeping her own?”

“She always said she was an orphan. That he was... that we were all the family she needed.” She said it so many times

that there were moments when I had to wonder if she was saying that for our sake or for her own benefit. It did give off “the lady doth protest too much” vibes.

“She was an orphan, in a manner of speaking. Hwang isn’t even her name. Her real name is Hatsuko Yamamoto. Hyouga is her brother. Her younger brother.”

It’s my turn to go silent as I digest this new information.

It makes sense.

In fact, it might be the first thing that made sense about her in years.

Hwang Chun-ja is the type of woman who will happily look the other way while her husband crawls into his teenage daughter’s bed at night. And when that teenage daughter winds up pregnant, she raises the child in question as her own. When that daughter gets killed a few years later, she has her child take her place, essentially forcing her granddaughter to marry her mother’s murderer.

Once I found Yang’s diaries, the whole thing threw me into a tailspin. Besides telling me the name Yang intended to give me, not much else about this arrangement made sense before, but it does now. Sort of.

I wonder, where did this so-called marriage agreement come from? Was it ever legit? Did the Yakuza know about this the entire time?

Granted, our blood ties aren’t a matter of public record, but the murder is. So, too, is the fact that Hyouga is my betrothed.

“If that’s the case, that would make Yang his niece,” I say, more to myself. “And I’m his... how do you Americans say it? Grand niece?”

Lorenzo nods.

That would make Hyouga my granduncle since Yang *is* my biological mother.

“How was that supposed to work?” I ask. “This marriage between Hyouga and myself.”

“It wasn’t,” Lorenzo continues. “It was never meant to come to fruition. Hyouga’s mistake sixteen years ago was waiting until the wedding night to kill Yang. It’s been fourteen years since, so obviously, times have changed, and they’ve learned from their mistakes. They accelerated the timeline by a lot this time around. He planned on killing you at your engagement party a few months from now. A staged assassination, of course.”

“Seems fitting.” I’m not sure why that even surprises me.

“The Yakuza were never going to accept your father back into their ranks, especially after what he did to your sister. But Geon Chun-ja still has loyal supporters within the organization and several lucrative connections with South Korea by way of his pro-Japanese connections over there. From what I could find out, Hatsuko was initially tasked with assassinating your father nearly forty decades ago, but as she got close to your father, she ended up pregnant instead. She was betrothed to someone else then, so you can imagine the uproar it caused. She only survived because Hyouga, her younger brother and heir apparent to the Yamamotos, stuck his neck out for her at the time. But there was still the pregnancy to be dealt with.”

“She could’ve had an abortion,” I mutter bitterly.

“Not at the time, she couldn’t. This was the better alternative. A way for the Yakuza to rid themselves of the stain that is Geon Chun-ja. And because the pregnancy wasn’t sanctioned, all of this is the Yamamoto’s way of making up for Hatsuko’s initial fuck-up. As you know, she didn’t give much thought to your names either. Names hold a greater meaning in both Korean and Japanese culture, but she went with Yang and Yong. That’s because you two were always disposable.”

“So why wait nearly forty years?” I deadpan. “She’s had ample opportunity to get rid of us, and I find it hard to believe she’s just been twiddling her thumbs all this while.”

“She wasn’t, hence the long con. Back then, the Yakuza liked the money Geon brought in but refused to acknowledge where it actually came from. That’s why the Yamamotos were tasked with permanently severing those ties, however long it

took. If, for some reason, all of this falls through, you would be their backup because that money follows you.”

My brow furrows. “I don’t understand.”

“When Yang was pregnant, your parents hid her in the United States. That’s how she met Sarah, and subsequently me. And eventually, her,” he points to one of the ladies in the room. She’s older, like M, and her eyes have been glued to a portable laptop the entire time. “She handles money. I don’t know how Yang pulled it off, convincing your father to take your mother off his will, thus naming her his sole successor. Then she fixed it such that the money goes to you, all of it, instead of reverting back to Geon in the event of her death. It’s why Hatsuko and Hyouga were forced to carry on with this charade after her death. Geon was always meant to die today; his will would reveal that you got all his money. They kept you sheltered on purpose. Well, tried to, anyway. But since you’re eighteen now, getting you to sign over your inheritance to your fiancé would’ve been a piece of cake.”

So I really am just the golden goose, just not in the way I envision.

Money or not, this isn’t going to be my life, though.

Who needs an empire born of blood, consumed by greed, surrounded by death, and filled with constant heartache? If this is what it means to be a Chun-ja, then I want no part of it.

All I want is to get out of the fucking castle, just as Yang wanted for me. And, as it so happens, Lorenzo Sotelo is my ticket out of it.

While I hate having to deal with this, at the end of the day it’s the only way I’ll get a reprieve from all of them.

“She knows how *exactly* her mother died, correct?” I ask, angling my chin in his daughter’s direction, and he nods. “I got my hands on a copy of Yang’s *original* autopsy results a few years back, thanks to the tips you gave me. How about we give them both a taste of their own medicine.”

A shadow of a smile curls his lips. “I like the way you think.” He turns to the other two, the ones who are my age,

whom he calls A and P. “Wake her up,” he orders, switching back to English as he gestures toward my mother.

# CHAPTER 5

ONE OF THE OLDER WOMEN, WHOM LORENZO CALLS S, PULLS out the seat next to my mother as A and P drag her unconscious body off the floor and into the chair. A and Lorenzo's daughter — whom he calls C or daughter — do the same with Hyouga's unconscious body.

P walks over to where Lorenzo's daughter set up her toolbox. She pulls out a bottle and rag, then proceeds to soak up the rag in some putrid-smelling liquid before making her way back to my mother. I guess the smell doesn't bother her or anyone else because I'm the only one clutching my nose. She doesn't bat an eyelash or wince — no one does — as she grabs my mother by the hair and presses it over her nose, holding it in place long enough for full-body convulsions to run through her body and her eyelids to flutter open.

It's by design that my face is the first thing she sees.

"Hello, mother," I say in Japanese. "Or, should I say, Hatsuko Yamamoto."

She visibly freezes at that, and then her gaze darts to Hyouga. Now that I better understand the dynamics of their relationship, I bite back a smile at the gesture.

"Don't bother," Lorenzo chimes in in Japanese. "He won't be handling much of anything from where he's sitting."

I could tell the exact moment it dawned on Hatsuko that we weren't alone. Although, I have to wonder, did she really think I possessed the necessary physical strength to pull off all of this? She and I are alike in that I don't like getting my hands dirty unless it's absolutely necessary.

Unlike her, I'm not looking for a way out. I know my fate, and I'm ready to wholeheartedly embrace it. I'm cursed anyway, and if I have to drag them all to the pits of hell with me, I will.

My mother, on the other hand, is the type of woman who's always looking for a way out. Even when her chances of survival are slim to none, she'll find a way to weasel her way out. After all, if it means she can get back to her life as Hatsuko that much sooner, I don't doubt she would seize the chance.

But not this time, and I think she knows it, too. She knows there's no way out of this, so she does what she does best — spewing vitriol.

She glares at Lorenzo like she can't believe he's here, before turning her hate-filled gaze to me. “I should've smothered you when you were born.”

“You should've,” I toss back, not caring what words tumble out of my mouth. “A coat hanger probably would've done the trick. It would've been a crude but far better alternative to all this, *mother*. This didn't have to go on for as long as it did, especially since you know better. You had no way of controlling all the variables, and you taught me that the devil can create something worse than itself. A foreshadowing, perhaps?”

She chuckles dryly, but the sound dies out when Lorenzo's daughter, C, steps into her periphery.

“I bet you thought you'd seen the last of me,” she tells her in English as she runs the tip of her switchblade along my mother's jawline.

Hatsuko gulps. The fear seeping into her eyes excites me, and I can't help but feel giddy for this next part.

“Beg,” C orders when she doesn't say anything for some time.

“Why?” The fake bravado that seeps into her tone is almost laughable. “It's not like it'd make a diff—”

The words die out in my mother's throat as C drives her blade straight through her tongue and jaw, the tip peeking through her chin.

"I don't care if you beg," C tells her. "I just wanted you to open your filthy mouth."

She extracts another knife tucked inside her boot and drives the blade into my mother's left eye, eliciting another high-pitched scream from her.

"I know you can do better than that," C taunts her, a deathly calm to her tone. "Your lover and the rest of your brother's crew are in the other room. Scream louder for them, okay?"

Aside from the screaming, which eventually devolves into whimpers, I doubt my mother registers much of anything, as C delivers shallow cuts to every inch of exposed skin.

While some cuts are slightly deeper than others, it's obvious it's all meant to be superficial, like my mother bragged about doing to Sarah three years ago. I could recite the events of that night, step by step, even though I wasn't even there. That's how much she talked about it, ad nauseam.

Watching it happen in real time is as fascinating as it is disturbing, and I can't take my eyes off them.

Once done, C takes a step back to admire her handiwork. We all do, everyone present in the room, that is. Including M, who now returns with the things Lorenzo requested and sets those on the table before me.

"It's perfect," Lorenzo tells her, beaming with pride.

"It could be better," she shrugs, "but she's nearly bled out, and I'm bored."

*Bored?*

I don't think so.

There's something mesmerizingly addictive about how she moves, how effortlessly she glides, with the grace of a gazelle as she moves like she was born to do this. I'm not the only one watching her either; Lorenzo is. We can both tell she's

enjoying this, doling out a taste of Hatsuko's own medicine, not hesitating as she delivers each cut with a mere flick of her wrist, not bothering that Hatsuko's blood now coats her skin.

My mother now looks like someone ran her through a cheese grater, so even better.

C looks like a still from the movie *Carrie* as she moves to stand behind her, then proceeds to bury her crimson-soaked fingers into my mother's jet-black hair. She pulls back her head roughly, baring the shredded skin of her throat as she levels her out-of-focus gaze with mine, as she did with my father earlier. Then she leans over my mother's shoulder and presses her chin into the shredded skin as she whispers something directly into her ear.

Hatsuko's throat shifts, and I can't hold back my smirk this time.

C lifts her head, and our gazes lock. "Any last words?"

I shake my head. Everything that needed to be said has been said. And if it hasn't,

Her spine straightens. "Very well then."

I can't take my eyes off either of them as the blade slices through Hatsuko's throat all the way around. Like before, she holds her head in place long enough for the gurgling noises to subside, long enough for me to watch every last second of her miserable life drain away, taking her pathetic soul along with it.

"You should've thought twice before raising a monster," I mutter, switching to Japanese.

The thing is, those words aren't mine. They were my sister's. It was the last phrase Yang wrote in her diary on the eve of her wedding. I think she knew she would die, so she left that message for me even though she had no way of knowing I'd find it. Still, I was four years old at the time. Old enough for her to recognize the subtle hints of the darkness brewing inside me. Of the monster that has been festering inside me all my life, waiting to break free.

“And you should’ve said that while she was still alive,” Lorenzo chimes in, in Japanese, having heard them too.

Once C is sure that all that remains of Hatsuko is an empty vessel, she loosens her grip, and her body falls to the floor.

That thrill I was looking for earlier? It now hits me in full force.

But not necessarily because of the woman who raised me. It’s because of the woman who delivers her fate. So even as the coppery scent of blood hangs heavy in the air, clogging the back of my throat, I push all that out of my mind and turn my full attention to her.

“Is this how it felt,” I say, switching to English, “watching the life drain out of Sarah’s eyes?”

She pauses at that, and it’s the first sign of hesitation I’ve seen from her all day. With the switchblade still firmly clutched in her hand, she flicks her wrist several times, palm upwards, palm downwards, several times, as she mulls over the question I just posed.

That’s when I sensed it for the first time. I sense the darkness inside her, the kind we’re all born with. While it is true that everybody has darkness in them, hers... it matches my own. It vibrates a frequency that eerily matches my own.

That bond my mother had been trying to force between Hyouga and myself? I just found out who is the intended recipient and the one on the other end of that bond.

All my life, I always scoffed at the Japanese legend about fate and destiny.

Never again.

# CHAPTER 6

I WAS EIGHTEEN WHEN I FELL IN LOVE FOR THE FIRST TIME,  
and all it took was one simple question.

*Is this how it felt, watching the life drain out of Sarah's  
eyes?*

Okay, maybe not that simple, but neither is this.

Truth be told, I don't know if this is love at first sight,  
kismet, or fate. I do know that I looked at my parents' lifeless  
corpses, ruminating over the actions that brought them to their  
untimely demise, before deciding, there and then, that I would  
marry her.

It goes without saying that I want her. Or rather, my soul  
wants her.

The Collector is what I call her. Just as I call her father The  
Organizer, except her name suits her better.

She has a name, of course. But I call her C because that's  
what the others call her. So, too, do the others here with her,  
along with him, The Organizer. And a few others.

But it's she who has my full and undivided attention.

The term beautiful isn't enough to describe her.

She's divine.

Ravishing. Elegant.

A sight for sore eyes.

An angel of death.

There are other details about her, ones I commit to memory.

How majestic she looked while wielding the knife, the same one that slit their jugulars and had them bleeding out on the floor while I watched.

Karma is what I call it.

Their crimson blood looks mesmerizing against her olive skin tone as the arterial spray coats her in it.

Like her dark-brown curly hair tied in a ponytail, but it's the errand wisps framing her face that draw my attention. Her hair matches the rest of her outfit — as is to be expected of an assassin — but her eyes draw me in.

Stormy-gray eyes, ones that just seem so insightful, like she can see right through me. They also look haunted, which is not at all what I expected to see. But something about that has me entranced, and when she speaks to me for the first time, I am a goner.

“No one has ever asked me that before.”

How is that even possible? She was there the night that Sarah died.

I still don't understand why she'd been hiding in a closet, though, since she moves like she was born to do this. Scratch that; she moves like she has been doing this for far longer than the three years Sarah has been dead.

Surely someone has asked her that particular question, right?

“They wouldn't know to ask,” I tell her.

She purses her lips. “How did it feel for you?”

“Liberating,” the answer falls from my lips far too quickly.

“Same here,” she breathes, and something passes between us.

I know that my parents made sure her daughter's eyes were the last ones Sarah saw as she drew her last breath. They got off on those kinds of twisted mind games. I bet they expected

that daughter to turn out a cowering mess after that. They even took things a step further and often joked about what mental institutions Sarah's daughter must now be confined to, down to the color of her straight jacket.

What they did not count on, however, was for that daughter to bite back. Or that that daughter is my soulmate in more ways than one.

But I digress.

It's Hyouga's turn now.

The putrid-smelling rag reappears, but this time P jams the damn thing right up Hyouga's nostrils, holding it in place as he's forcefully jarred back to awareness.

Like his sister, he takes in the scene before him as the wheels click into place. I watch unease trickle through his features before eventually morphing into fear. When those eyes eventually land on me, he swallows harshly.

It's pathetic.

Of all the things I want to ask, only one pops out. "How did my sister die?" I ask him in Japanese.

His lips part in response, and I hold my hand to silence him. "Make no mistake, you will die tonight. Lie to me, and this will end much worse for you."

His throat shifts again. "The bitch didn't know her place."

Lorenzo reacts to that, much to everyone's surprise. One minute, he's casually leaning against the dining table; the next, he stands next to Hyouga with the latter's bloody earlobe between his fingers. A scream rips from Hyouga's throat as blood pools from the stump as he squeals like the pathetic pig he is.

I know how much force is needed to break through the skin, and he just made it look like child's play.

"You should teach me that," C tells her father.

He shrugs and drops the chunk of flesh to the floor before stomping on it. "I will," he tells his daughter, still beaming

with obvious pride, before turning to the others. A and P, specifically. “There’s an art to it that’s easy enough to master.”

They all nod, and it’s obvious that they all look up to him. I think I do too.

There was a time when I wished my parents would talk to me or, at the very least, even look at me the same way. Sadly, they took the notion that ‘children should be seen and not heard’ too seriously. I was a child then, desperate for their approval. Until I learned what they truly did for a living and their plans for me once I came of age.

In hindsight, I suppose there’s always been a part of me that knew they were only in this — this parenting thing — for appearances. Hatsuko, especially. They never took an actual interest in me as a person. I had a long string of nannies and bodyguards who cared for my sister and me — their version of it, anyway. When I turned nine, they shipped me off to boarding schools — more like training camps — where I was to be toughened up physically and intellectually, something they never bothered to do for my sister.

To make my death more believable, I suppose.

I was never delusional enough to think they saw me as anything more than my gender. What was truly appalling was the fact that I was headed for the same fate my older sister had, except she was brutally murdered on the night of her own wedding by none other than her groom, who then went on to live his life free of consequences.

So this is perfect.

They’ve gotten a taste of their own medicine. Hyouga will, too. I can barely conceal my smirk as the whimpering, pathetic, mewling fool negotiates his fate.

“You know, I have always been curious about something,” I tell Lorenzo in English. “Her original autopsy said he delivered the fatal blow by ripping my sister’s tongue right out of its socket. I’ve always been curious about how long it took for her to die. Also, an eye for an eye sounds pretty good now.”

All four sets of eyes remain glued to me. Make that five, as the mewling fool finally stopped.

“I like the way she thinks,” A eventually speaks up first. “Pliers or no pliers?”

“Pliers, definitely.” I reach for it, one of several objects M brought back with her, and hand it over to C. “Here you go.”

It’s the same one I’ve taken everywhere since I acquired it a few years back. Police departments are notoriously bad at constantly losing critical pieces of evidence.

Ten long but glorious minutes — that’s how long it takes for the mewling to stop, for the life to seep out of him, and then it’s done.

It’s finally *fucking* done.

Just one more, and this will all be over.

Closing my eyes, I breathe deeply, searching for a sliver of regret but there is none.

None whatsoever.

They’re all gone, and I’ll be all alone.

Not for long, though.

It’s my turn now.

# CHAPTER 7

IN HINDSIGHT, I SHOULD'VE SEEN THIS COMING.

It's not like Yang didn't write about this in her diary. She knew then that Lorenzo had a weakness for children like me. It's the leverage Sarah told Yang to use in order to enlist Lorenzo's help back then. I know now that it wasn't for her sake that she needed him; it was for mine. That's why I called him in the first place. That's how I knew it wouldn't have taken that much convincing to enlist his help.

What I did not expect, however, was for him to renege on the last part.

I asked for four deaths, not three.

But he seems to disagree, clearly.

And the first thing he did, right after he uttered the words "You're coming with us," was to do a re-introduction of all the ladies present. This time with their actual first names, not just the initials of their first names. After all, they will all be in my life, one way or another, for a very long time.

Let's do a run-down, shall we?

First, there's his daughter, C. Her real name is Courtney Bardales Sotelo. It's fitting that she uses both her parents' names, something I wouldn't have expected someone like Lorenzo to honor, but at the same time, I get it. The mother-daughter duo, M and A, whom he planted months ago, are Mattie and Abigail/Abby Sanders. Even though they look alike, Mattie is actually Abby's adopted granddaughter.

Apparently, there's a distinction in that. The other two older ladies, O and S, are Olive Hyun and Dr. Sonya Goodman.

Which brings me to the last one, P. She goes by Phoenix. Just Phoenix, no last name. There's something different about her, something I can't quite pinpoint. What I do know is that she's not like the others. She's different, as for the how that remains to be seen.

Her name, though. It literally translates to firebird, an imaginary bird that sets fire to itself every 500 years, only to be reborn and rise from its ashes.

"You two are more alike than you think," Lorenzo tells me, tells us, as he links our hands together.

Urgh.

That damn sentiment.

Meanwhile, I'm clutching my family crest in my other hand, one of the many items Lorenzo wanted, wondering how much strength would be required to bash my head in with the damn thing. The crest is made out of solid gold with circular but jagged edges. It's also heavy enough to inflict severe damage, and I wonder how long it would take me to bleed out and die.

Or if any of them would stop me.

I suspect they would if he ordered them to.

This is nice and all, but I never intended to forge these bonds.

"Lorenzo, this is embarrassing." Phoenix's cheeks pinken as she gently squeezes my hand before pulling hers away. "There's still much to do before I set the fire."

Now, why doesn't that part surprise me?

He gives her an imperceptible nod, and she walks away to do whatever she needs to do.

"Are you sure we should let her live?" Courtney addresses her father as he watches on with pride, the kind only a father can have for their child.

He shrugs, then turns to Abby. “What do you think?”

Abby purses her lips as she takes me in. She’s like me, physically. The sharp angles of her cheekbones are accentuated by her jet-black hair, currently pulled back into a severe ponytail. Her dark brown eyes are boring into mine as she studies me. They slide over my face thoroughly, cataloging every inch of my rather steely demeanor.

I want Courtney to look at me like that.

Or better yet, I want her to look *and* talk to me like that.

Courtney’s voice is warm and sensual and coats my skin like warm honey. As she talks, mostly plotting my demise, my cheeks warm even more, and other parts of me bloom to awareness.

Fuck.

I can’t believe I’m blushing.

“We could get her into the country using my passport,” Abby eventually says. “As long as no one looks too closely, we could pass for cousins.”

“Cousins,” Olive snickers, her eyes still glued to her laptop.

Abby and Courtney roll their eyes but don’t say anything. But Phoenix does.

“She seems alright,” Phoenix says as she drags my father’s corpse to the center of the room. “She seems a little too interested in her, though.” She angles her chin in the direction of my soulmate — yes, she is that I’m claiming it. “One would think she were a statute if not for her eyes constantly shifting as she watches her.”

“I noticed that too,” Sonya speaks up. “All the more reason to bring her with us. She’s useful.”

“That depends on your definition of useful.” Phoenix’s lips pull up at the sides as she steps over my father’s corpse and stalks in my direction.

It's the smile. It's like looking in a mirror and a little uncanny, if I am being honest. I suppose Lorenzo has a point. In another life, we could pass for fraternal twins, maybe. If our respective ethnicities weren't a factor, that is.

But never mind that.

I'd much rather watch Courtney instead.

"Hey." Phoenix snaps two fingers before me.

I drag my gaze off of her and turn to meet hers. It hits me then. It's her eyes. The light gleams, hitting the glossy sheen of her irises at an odd angle. It's a bit unnatural.

I've heard of this before but haven't known anyone who wore them.

Contacts?

"She's not listening." Phoenix snaps two more fingers before me. "Or maybe she doesn't understand us."

"That's a sexist thing to say," Abby interjects.

At the same time, I say, "I speak six languages."

"Ah. So she does speak. I wondered if the prospect of staying alive had rendered her mute." That's Mattie.

Not sure what possesses me to add, "Three of which you've probably never heard of."

"Really?" That brings Courtney's attention to me. "Which ones?"

On autopilot, I list them all off, and her eyes widen. "Quick, say something in French."

*"Je vais t'épouser,"* I blurt out.

*[I'm going to marry you.]*

She blinks. "Come again?"

So what if the first time was an accident? I repeat it a second time, slowly and in French, and she laughs, the sound light and infectious to my ears.

Abby snorts at that. “You just barely got out of one, yet you want to leap right into another?”

Lorenzo clears his throat, and I startle.

“She’s not for you,” is all he says.

Yeah, I don’t think so. “Says you. I’m an adult now. I turned eighteen a few hours ago.”

He knows how old I am, but I feel the need to reiterate this fact for some reason. It is more for her benefit than mine.

She turns to me, and something in her expression sends a chill down my spine. Then she shakes her head, almost imperceptibly, almost like she’s trying to warn me. But she doesn’t say a word. Instead, her jaw is set tight, and she’s gnawing on her lower lip. For some reason, that bothers me. Not so much that my existence is causing her distress, but that *The Organizer* is deviating from the original plan.

As inappropriate as it is, all I can think of is how badly I want to save her bottom lip from her teeth. I want to pull it from her teeth and soothe it with my tongue. I don’t even want to try to make sense of my thoughts. I want her in a way I can’t explain, in a way I’m not sure I even understand. All I know is that I want her.

“I still say we toss her in as a freebie,” Courtney eventually speaks up. “Leave no witnesses, you always say.”

Only for Lorenzo to do the unexpected.

He laughs, and it’s a deep, hearty laugh.

“Some people are worth more alive than dead,” he says once the laughter subsides.

A beat passes, then she asks, “Is she going into the Network? It’s her money you want, isn’t it?”

*Money?*

Why is that the first thought on her mind?

Why am I surprised that is the first thought on her mind? If the roles were reversed, I’d think the same thing too.

Except, that was never the issue for me. Money was never what motivated me, what drove me to the brink of madness. Revenge did. And also, the burning desire to not want to be a loose end in all of this — which is precisely what Lorenzo will be turning me into if I walk out of this cursed estate alive.

“I don’t care about the money.” I’m not sure why I feel the need to vehemently defend my stance, only that I do.

Keeping my eyes on her, I stand, then walk towards her, only stopping once I’m in her personal space. I hold out my hand to her, and my fingers go slack around the circular edges of the crest.

Only, she’s not looking at my hand. She’s looking at me.

I keep my eyes on hers as I shove the crest into her hand. Our skin touches briefly, and I feel it. The flutters, the invisible red thread of destiny that further binds our cursed fate together.

“To die by your hand would be an honor,” I whisper, meaning every word.

# CHAPTER 8

## THE WEAPON

LATER THAT NIGHT, WE ARE ALL LOADED UP IN THE PRIVATE jet, hours ahead of schedule. Once we board, everyone goes off to their respective corners, probably to catch up on their sleep, except for me. Sleep is the last thing on my mind, with today's events still weighing heavily on my mind.

I thought killing the Chun-jas would make Lorenzo happy. Hell, I thought watching the life drain out of their eyes — through her eyes — would make me happy, but it doesn't. Sure, it's a small victory, but I can't bring myself to enjoy it properly, not when the darkness in his eyes is still there and probably always will be. I know mine still is.

And, all we accomplished today is trade one vice for another.

Or rather, we traded one debt for another.

I'm tired. I didn't get much sleep on the trip here.

But this part, I must take care of.

I must purge this from my body, like I always do.

Except, this time, it's different. This time, I can't exactly purge her from my body — or my thoughts, for that matter — because we're bringing her back with us.

Why?

I have no idea.

Seriously, I don't.

What I do know, however, is that this is more than just a simple revenge; nothing about this is a 'simple' job like

Lorenzo led me to believe. If it were, he would've had Geon and Hwang killed three years ago when Yong first called him. I know he loved Mom in his own sick and twisted way, and I also know he still harbors a lot of guilt over her death. After all, the only reason the Chun-jas got to her — as I later learned — is because he sent her to that fucking meeting in his wife's stead.

Only, he couldn't have predicted Mom would bring me with her. Nor could he have predicted that she would order me to stand down.

Yet all of those things happened anyway. And here we are. It's why he carried darkness around with him all this time. It's why he still carries that darkness around with him. Hell, I carry mine around with me as well.

After three long, excruciating years, today should've marked the end of all that, but it doesn't feel like it's over. The Chun-jas are dead, and we're nowhere near done with this.

We should be heading back to the States, but Lorenzo wants to take the scenic route with an impromptu detour to South Korea. I'm not sure what he and the pilots are up to, but turning a three-hour flight into a nine-plus-hour one makes no logical sense.

But then, nothing about this day made much sense either. My father and I have much to discuss once we get home, however long that takes. Never mind that it's just one thing after another the last couple of weeks. I'll be glad of the reprieve when we put all of this to rest and get Yong settled in at her new placement, wherever that may be.

Jesus. I really shouldn't have gone into this one blind. I should've demanded Lorenzo tell me the whole fucking truth about this. The plan was to kill them all and torch the whole fucking place to the ground. At least, that's what he led me to believe. It's why he risked getting Phoenix out of the country for this job in the first place — it's been two years since she last set a fire and she was jonesing for her fix. And she got that, except Lorenzo deviated from the fucking plan and decided to keep Yong.

If I didn't know better, I'd say that *had* been the plan all along and that Sonya, Olive, and Mattie were in on it the entire time. Why else would he plant Mattie in their house as one of their servants for over a year, then send Abby over two months ago? Sure, it was easy for them to blend in. And sure, it is easier to sneak Yong out of the country using Abby's passport, but I refuse to believe that part was a bloody coincidence.

Because he asked me not to, I didn't tell Marc where I was going. Knowing Marc, he would have tried to talk me out of it. He has been trying to talk me out of it for three years, something about revenge only bringing even more vengeance. Then again, he's been preoccupied with school and his new boyfriend, so what he doesn't know wouldn't hurt.

A rasp on the door pierces through the silence.

"Go away," I groan as another dry heave makes its way up my gastrointestinal tract.

There's a brief pause, and then the door handle lowers.

"Courtney."

*Fuck.*

"I said I want to be left alone," I repeat. My eyes lift, and I'm staring into her hauntingly mesmerizing eyes. "It's you."

She swallows. "Yep, it's me."

Do I want her to see me like this? Hell no.

I don't want anyone to see me like this. I never do, and they all know the drill anyway. Except for her, that is.

To make matters worse, she is still in that fucking dress. Lorenzo gave her his coat earlier, but she's since ditched it.

The dress, though, is pink and it's girly and it makes me want to barf. At the same time, the fabric is so sheer and it clings to her petite frame like a second skin. It hugs her slender body and barely-there curves, leaving little to the imagination. The V-neckline isn't deep, but her small, perfectly palm-sized breasts still steal the show.

She looks so innocent, so pure.

She's the most perfect, pretty little thing I've ever seen.

But she's not *my* pretty little thing to play with.

Still, when she handed me that fucking crest earlier, our skin touched briefly and the strangest thing happened. A strange, unfamiliar, yet overwhelming sense of longing came over me. I was filled with an overwhelming urge to yank her into my arms, fuse our lips, and kiss her senselessly.

I don't, because... *what the fuck is wrong with me?*

As far as off-limits goes, she ranks top of the list.

I want her to be *my* pretty little thing to play with, though. I want to do all of the things I am imagining and then some.

But I don't, because that will just make me an asshole. Besides, it's a rather sensible decision, if I do say so myself. Not that I'm known for those. In fact, just because I speak this into existence, it does nothing to dampen the urge.

And now she's in here, and I'm not so sure I can contain myself.

"You're shaking, Courtney. Where are your clothes?" Her gaze flickers up and down my body, and then the unmistakable sound of a lock sliding into place fills the room. She kneels beside me, gathers my hair from over my face, and then rubs circles around my back. "Does this happen often?"

I chance a strained, dry laugh. The scenario is laughable, after all. Here I am, awkwardly draped over the toilet bowl, my lanky figure cramped for the space.

I don't want — or need her pity. There's nothing wrong with me.

Absolutely nothing.

I shrug and turn my face to the side. "I ate something funny."

"You barely ate anything."

Urgh.

Why is she so damn perceptive?

It would be easier if she weren't so... well, her.

Her fate is sealed. Lorenzo plans on keeping her close, as close as he can. It's why he has her riding in the jet with us instead of inconspicuously smuggling her out of the country. Granted, she's using Abby's passport — while the latter got smuggled on in the luggage — because she's claustrophobic. Or, at least, that's what Mattie told us about her. After all, she and Abby spent months infiltrating the Chun-jas compound and learning their habits and patterns to make this day as smooth and seamless as possible.

It's not that Lorenzo didn't trust Yong to hold up her end of the bargain; it's more like he isn't the sort to keep things to chance. He's a planner. His contingency plans often have their own set of contingency plans built in.

The problem is, I don't know what Lorenzo wants with her. I'm fearful, for her sake.

Because, whatever it is, it won't end well.

For her, that is.

Or for me.

Yong's gaze roams my body as she rubs circles into my back. "Does this happen often?" she asks a second time.

"Why do you care?" I snap at her.

"Because you're in pain," she calmly states. "I'm not sure I like that very much."

I can't help the scoff that bubbles up. "What part don't you like? Because from where I'm sitting, there's more than enough to fill a whole book."

"Just one, Courtney." She studies me for a beat, and her eyes soften briefly, drawing me in like a moth to a smoldering flame. "I don't like that you're in pain because of me."

My heart skips a beat, and the air in the space shifts. And just like that, it's as if the world ceases to exist and there's only us, cloaked in a cocoon of intimacy.

As I stare into her eyes, I can't help but see parts of myself staring back at me. It's intoxicating, seeing the same darkness that I have in me reflected back at me in her eyes. I realize it, then, what that darkness is.

Parts of it are feral, fueled by my insatiable bloodlust.

But, tonight, front and center in this moment, is something else.

Need. Carnal, primal, lust-fueled need.

But how?

And, most importantly, why now? Why her?

I swallow around the lump that forms. "That dress..." I begin, then trail off. "You didn't... where..."

"She picked this out," she tells me, and I can tell it's the truth. "My mother. She meant for me to seduce him in this."

The anger that felt like a constant hum inside me flares to life and vibrates strongly beneath my skin. I'd hurt anyone who hurt her. Which was an unsettling thought about a stranger.

A *dead* stranger.

Perhaps Lorenzo is right. I need to curb my bloodlust. And since she's not mine, I can't let her see that her words are unsettling to me.

Instead, I mask it as the corner of my mouth turns up. "I can see why."

"So you like it?"

"*Like it?*" I breathe, and my eyes dart to the door. "You should leave."

"Why?"

"I'm known to have a temper."

She chuckles, then studies me for a beat. "So?"

"An explosive temper, Yong. Which means the longer you're in here, the quicker your life expectancy drops."

“And?”

“Most people have some sense of self-preservation.”

A snicker slips past her delectable lips. “Then it’s a good thing I’m not *like* most people.”

I don’t know whether to be relieved, insulted, or amused. “Okay then. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“I won’t. I’m choosing not to heed your warning.”

# CHAPTER 9

## THE WEAPON

RISING TO MY FEET, I WALK A FEW FEET TO THE SINK, TURN the water on, and begin the arduous task of rinsing the blood spatter from my arms, as well as the vomit from my mouth.

The bathroom is more spacious than I imagined, all things considered. Having the things I need on hand is also convenient, like a toothbrush and toothpaste.

Or maybe it's her. Perhaps it's because she's in here, with me, that the space seems larger.

"What happened to your clothes?" she asks.

"They were soaked in your parents' blood, so I took them off," I deadpan as our eyes meet in the mirror. "Why? You have a problem with nudity?"

"No. I—" She looks away momentarily, then lets out a soft sigh. Her eyes return to me, and her gaze flickers up and down my body. "You look, you are..."

"...comfortable with my body?" I finish for her.

"Yes, that. I just..." she trails off at that again, her eyes staying on me.

I can't help doing the same to her. She's fucking gorgeous.

*But she's not your pretty little thing to play with,* the rational part of my brain warns.

"For someone who speaks six languages, you sure are having a hard time coming up with words," I say after a few minutes of silence.

“That’s not it. I’m having a hard time coming to terms with how I’m supposed to feel about this.” She waves a hand between us. “You *are* gorgeous, Courtney. Your body *is* a work of art. I have never met anyone like you before.”

Oh boy.

My hands grip the edge of the sink, and I lean forward to stare at myself in the mirror.

This is a distraction. *She* is a distraction.

All of this is a distraction.

A fucking test.

At least I know who I’m dealing with. She knows who she’s dealing with.

It doesn’t help that my self-control is barely skating by on thin ice. I hope one of us has enough common sense not to act on this. It won’t be me; that much is certain.

And if I didn’t think she’d love what I’m thinking about doing to her...

Fuck.

She’s not your pretty little thing to play with, the rational part of my brain warns again, louder this time.

She can’t hide that she’s attracted to me. She might have been a blank slate for a long time, something Abby said she had to do with her family, but now that they’re gone, and now that she’s trapped in this bathroom with me, every little dirty thought she’s having is written on her face.

She needs to learn how to do a proper poker face. And I should put an end to this right fucking now.

“You should leave, Yong,” I force out with gritted teeth, my knuckles turning white as my fingers grip the edges of the sink.

Only for her to do the unexpected. She closes the distance between us and places her hand over one of mine. “I’m not going anywhere, Courtney. I’m not afraid of you.”

“You should be.

“And I told you, I’m not like most people. I’m not afraid of death or of dying. That’s what happens when you live your entire life with the threat of death looming over you. Had I not called him back then, I would’ve met the same fate my sister did. I also wasn’t expecting to live past tonight either, and *The Organizer*—”

“*The Organizer?*” I ask with a chuckle.

“Lorenzo,” she clarifies. “Your dad. He stopped you earlier, but he’s not here to stop you now.”

Wow.

Nothing is more dangerous than a woman who has nothing to live for. Especially one with a non-existent sense of self-preservation.

“You really do have a death wish,” I hear myself say.

“I don’t. I’d rather do this whole dying business on my own terms. Or, in this case, at your hands. It would be an—”

I draw in a sharp breath. “Say honor one more time, and I will rip your vile tongue right out of your mouth.”

“Hmm.” She purses her lips. “If I’d known you feel that strongly about that word, I would’ve said something else. It’s just... it’s been ingrained in me.”

“Has it now?” I drawl sarcastically.

A part of me wants to dare her to say it, to see if I will follow through on my threats. Or if that’s all they will ever be — empty threats touted in the heat of the moment, intended to keep her in line.

Then, I’m immediately filled with a rush of guilt. Of Regret.

How is this different from how she’s been treated all her life?

Oh, how different our lives have been.

The last thing I want her to do is to toe the line. Freedom is an intoxicating thing. There's so much she can do with it now that she doesn't have those two assholes for parents telling her what to do, what to wear, when to eat, even when to fucking breathe.

"You should leave," I repeat, my voice unusually soft. I pull my hand out from underneath hers before turning my back on her. "Get some sleep; it'll help with the jet lag."

With that, I get down on all fours, then curl up on the floor in the fetal position.

My eyelids drift closed just as she says, "Do you have any idea how many germs there are on that floor?"

Guess I should've waited until she left before doing this. "I'll shower when I'm done, and the germs will wash right off."

A beat passes, and then I feel the heat of her body against my back. My body seizes up momentarily as she drapes an arm over my waist and pulls my body snugly to hers.

What happens next happens on pure instinct.

One moment, I'm enveloped in the heat of her body; the next, she's lying flat on her back and I'm straddling her body, the tip of my switchblade pressing into the soft skin of her neck.

"Are you insane?" I hiss-whisper, even as an all-too-familiar awareness between my thighs blooms.

"Certifiably so," she tosses back. "Then again, I'm not the one who's willingly taking a nap on a bathroom floor when there are several available beds on this jet."

It's none of her business where I choose to sleep. My lips part, intending to tell her this, but something else pops out in its place.

"You shouldn't hold me like that," I tell her, my voice barely above a whisper.

She shrugs one shoulder. "Like what?"

Our gazes lock, and in her eyes I see the same hunger reflected back at me. My fingers go slack, and the blade falls to the floor with a gentle thud. My fingers move on their own accord as I trace the lines of her lips with the edge of my fingertips, then my thumb, slowly dragging the digit across her bottom lip.

“Beautiful,” I breathe, the word barely more than a whisper, yet it resonates in the silence.

I wrap my hand around my throat, beneath her chin, to cut her off. She gasps as my thumb and forefinger press in, alongside her jawline, tilting her head backward. It takes everything in me to ignore the wetness at my entrance... but not hers.

I feel the subtle shifting of her hips, the pressure of her core against mine.

I mean to hurt her, and she knows this. Yet, the unspoken trust shimmers in her gaze as her eyes search mine.

“Is that what this is? You’ve been courting death all your life, so you seek out the devil’s weapon?”

“Is it that surprising?” she gasps, fear co-mingling with red-hot desire.

There must be something seriously wrong with her.

Or rather, her body, as it moves of its own accord, as she squirms underneath me, like a bitch in heat. Her gaze holds mine as the guarded walls around her eyes crumble. Her eyes search mine as this happens, as she weighs her options. The heat between us buzzes as the silence stretches, thick with anticipation.

Finally, she offers a small, tentative smile, and the faintest flicker of hope ignites within me.

Perhaps it’s not death she seeks tonight. It’s something else.

She solidifies this by whispering, “Kiss me.”

There must be something seriously wrong with me, too, because my body folds over, my lips fusing over hers like I so

desperately need to take my last breath.

# CHAPTER 10

“WHAT HAPPENS NOW?” I ASK LORENZO HOURS LATER AS I fiddle with the hem of my dress.

“Now, you disappear,” he says with a smile, like he knows something I don’t.

I’m not going to dwell on the awkwardness from thirty minutes ago when Lorenzo, Mattie, Olive, and Sonya pulled me out of the bathroom. *Ordered* me out of it, more like. They all seemed surprised to find that I was still alive. They couldn’t hide their shock as they all stared at Courtney and me huddled on the floor like their eyes couldn’t believe the sight they walked in on.

I couldn’t believe they’d barged in on us like that. I know I locked the bathroom door hours ago; that was intentional. So too, was everything else that followed afterward. Including the walk of shame from twenty minutes ago, all because Lorenzo wants to talk to me before we land.

As far as I know, Courtney is still fast asleep on the bathroom floor. Sonya said to leave her alone since that was a crucial part of her routine after each kill; and also that she’d wake up when she was ready to, and not a moment sooner.

As for me? I got summoned into his make-shift office on the jet. He looks larger than life in the cramped space, which I suspect is the intended effect. It certainly feels like I just got summoned to the principal’s office, even though he claims it’s to discuss business.

So what if I didn’t feel like talking about all that right now?

Too fucking bad for me, I guess.

“And what, exactly, does that entail?” It’s hard work to keep the bite out of my tone.

“The full gambit. Didn’t you say you were familiar with how the process worked?”

I shake my head. “Not really, no.”

As annoyed as I am to still be alive, I know I have to play my cards right. Sometimes that includes feigning ignorance, that way, I can tell when someone’s bullshitting or trying to pull a fast one on me.

Except he sees right through it. “We are not your enemy, Yong.”

“Could’ve fooled me. I just had my family killed, so why would you trust me enough to bring me back with you?”

“Who says I trust you?”

“Why am I here, then?”

“You’re useful, but I don’t trust you. Trust is earned, not given.”

“Right.”

“You will be assigned a temporary guardian, Dr. Sonya Goodman, for the first few weeks. She will oversee all the logistics that go into your assimilation.”

“Assimilation,” I deadpan.

He nods. “For this to work, you need a brand-new identity, and you have to make it look believable. There’s work to be done, but you’ll be in good hands with her. Although, it’ll be better if you have parents.”

My shoulders stiffen. “I don’t need those.”

“You don’t have to need them, but they are convenient. It’s the simplest way to explain your sudden appearance in the States. Goodman will find the right fit for you. Not someone to replace them, but a family to help you assimilate better.”

“You make me sound like some sort of spy.”

“Oh, believe me, you don’t have what it takes to be a spy, at least not in America. That’s not necessarily a bad thing.”

He pulls some papers from his briefcase and hands them to me.

“Ah, a contract. Smart. I should’ve had you sign one of these years ago so you wouldn’t renege on our deal like you did.”

“I doubt that would’ve made much of a difference,” he laughs. “Your sister wanted you to live, and her deal with me predates yours.”

My eyes narrow. “What deal?”

“The deal where all of her money follows you in the event of her death. My job is ensuring you stay alive long enough for that to come to fruition.”

“And after that?”

“This *is* after that. We’re currently fourteen years into the ‘*after that*’ part of the deal, and an end date was never stipulated. Now, this isn’t just any contract. With your parents and fiancé dead, all their wealth transfers to you. No one will dispute this on your father’s side, and I dealt with the Yamamotos already.”

“Dealt with?”

“Not only were Hatsuko’s and Hyouga’s actions not sanctioned, but they’d been killing off their relatives who dared voice their opposition. They’ve been doing other things, too, and eventually, that got back to the Yakuza. It got so bad that the Yamamotos were officially ousted. That was *three* years ago.”

It takes a moment for his meaning to finally click. “For killing Sarah.”

He nods. “Nobody wants to start an international incident. If anything, the Yakuza want all of this to go away. So you see, the Chun-jas and the Yamamotos were always mine to do with as I pleased. As far as anyone’s concerned, you are all dead, and your money is mine. Spoils of war, that sort of thing.

“However, I am a man of my word. I will do everything in my power to honor your sister’s wishes. And since you can’t start over with this hanging over your head, the money will pass through...”

I tune him out as I skim over the pages of the contract. All in all, it looks legit... except for one thing.

Or rather, one paragraph with three accounts and many zeros.

“What’s this?” I hold out the page to him and point at the part that stumps me.

“Ah. Trust funds.”

“I know what it says. I’m asking what it’s for.”

He studies me for a bit. “It says so, right there.”

I grit my teeth. “I can read, Lorenzo. I also know that I don’t have any family in South Korea. They all died in the war.”

“According to your father, you mean. Geon’s father, your grandfather, had a twin sister. Geon had always known about them; he just chose not to tell you about them.”

“Why the hell not?”

“Because he was honoring his father’s wishes, however misguided those were. The twins were split in their alliances throughout the Korean independence movement, which trickled down to their offspring. I’m sure you don’t need a history lesson from me, but based on how each twin turned out, you can deduce whose loyalties lay where. The chaebols in South Korea, the Chun-jas, are your paternal relatives. Obviously, they know you exist. Your sister had me reach out to them fourteen years ago.”

“*And?*” I prompt when he prematurely pauses.

“They wanted nothing to do with her... or her baby.”

I scoff. “So what do they want with me now?”

“A lot can change in fourteen years. The former matriarch, your grandmother, set those up for your sister and yourself.”

“No one hands over this much money without a hidden agenda. And three trust funds at that. Wait, what do you mean by *former*?”

“Well, she’s dead, of course. So, too, is your grandfather. It was his death that prompted her change of heart. That, and I helped... open her eyes up to the truth. The three accounts were set up for you, your sister, and your father. They’re all yours now. But no, there is no hidden agenda behind those funds.”

His words say one thing, but his body language says something else. I’m nothing if not tenacious, and since he’s keeping me alive, the least he can do is be straight with me on this part.

“There’s always a hidden agenda, Lorenzo. Even though she’s dead, the money hasn’t stopped coming... or growing, and that’s for all three accounts. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say this was hush money. So tell me, who is still paying, and why? What’s the catch?”

He sighs, then looks away. “Her eldest daughter took over. Her siblings all agree that the money keeps coming to you and any children you have in the future. They all acknowledge your existence, but they want you gone. Hidden, to be exact. They want you to live a life befitting a Chun-ja, just as long as your biological ties to them remain hidden.”

*Because of who my father was and how I came to be.* Lorenzo doesn’t say any of that out loud, but I hear the unspoken implication in his tone.

Instead, I say, “How comforting. It’s nice to know that all I am to them is a bag of money.”

Lorenzo chuckles. “At least the money is clean, unlike Geon’s and the Yamamoto’s money. Based on how those trust funds were set up, you’ll get access to them once you turn twenty-one.”

“Or you could keep it,” I offer.

“That’s not how this works.”

He shrugs. “The money is yours. As you can see, it’s grown over the years and will follow you wherever you go. We just need to clean it up for you first.”

“Why bother? It’s blood money anyway.”

“Not the trust funds. Those are squeaky clean. It’s probably the cleanest money Olive has ever had to handle. Your parents’ money, on the other hand, is as filthy and bloody as they come. Unfortunately, both will follow you wherever you go. There’s nothing I can do about that. I have no interest in keeping it either, so don’t go getting any ideas in that regard.

“That said, because you are the sole beneficiary of your parents’ combined estates, I say keep it because you will need it. Building a new life isn’t cheap, and many other variables must be considered. If it makes you feel better, I’ll have Olive charge excessive fees to all your accounts just to maintain them. It’s a shit ton anyway, and it’ll probably take you at least three lifetimes to burn through it all.”

“If you say so.”

More words threaten to spill out, so I bite the inside of my mouth. Saying or doing anything rash won’t do me any good. If I play my cards right, then sooner or later, this will end for me. He’s laid out rather compelling arguments, but that doesn’t change the fact that I am a loose end.

Lorenzo leans forward in his seat with his fingers steepled together. “Did you have fun?”

The question catches me off-guard. “F-fun? What are you —” I trail off as understanding dawns on me.

Just in time for his well-timed scoff. “You did, didn’t you?” He grins as his gaze pins me into place.

I guess we’re done talking about trust funds and blood money. “I’m not answering that.”

Then again, I’m supposed to be dead. This is borrowed time, and I can sass him all I want if that will hasten things.

He looks impressed. “There’s no need to be a prude. You certainly weren’t worried about that a few hours ago, and everyone could hear you two going at it. Was that really your first time?”

“I’m not answering that either.” No way I’m not talking about this with her father. What happened between Courtney and me should be private.

“Have you gotten her out of your system?”

As though such a thing was possible? “No.”

His brow furrows. “Well, that’s too bad.”

I lean back in my seat and cross my arms over my chest. “Why’s that?”

“Simple. My daughter is not for you. The sooner you start seeing her as the forbidden, off-limits fruit she is, the better things will work out for you.”

“That’s not your call.” I infuse as much fake bravado as I can muster into my tone.

Only for him to see right through it and call me on my bluff. “Wanna test that theory?”

I try to speak, but I’m so choked up that it takes me a few attempts. “And if I do?”

“Aside from the overprotective and overbearing father, there’s someone else to contend with. Someone with a very singular focus on his precious little sister. You won’t even begin to comprehend the lengths he would go for her. What do you think he’d do to you once he finds out who you are, the daughter of the ones who killed his mother?”

If you know what’s good for you, you’ll forget her when we land. But since I’m nice, I’ll give you two enough time to say your goodbyes.”

# CHAPTER 11

WE LAND AT A PRIVATE AIRSTRIP IN SOUTH KOREA HOURS later. Lorenzo informs us we all have the option to deplane while the jet is being refueled, and he sorts things out with customs. Everyone gets off the plane, but not me, and not at first, because Lorenzo still wants to talk.

“Three of your uncles will be stopping by to see you,” he tells me.

It’s funny that he waited this long to drop that one on me. “Aren’t they the same ones who want nothing to do with me? Why now, and why here?”

He shrugs. “They’re curious, and we were stopping by anyway. They all know this is their last chance to see Yong Chun-ja before she permanently disappears.”

“Okay then, as long as that’s all there is to it.” I shift on my feet, ready to be done with this conversation. “How much time do I have?”

He glances at his watch. “An hour, two tops.”

Good. “So there’s still time. Can I go now? Unless you’re purposefully stalling so I don’t talk to her.”

He chuckles as he waves me off.

Courtney is standing at the foot of the stairs, deep in conversation with Phoenix.

She looks different in the daylight. More radiant, more ravishing, as the captivating aura she exudes hits me once again. The ponytail is gone, thank goodness. Her dark brown curls cascade down her shoulders in soft, tousled waves, a rich

shade that seems to catch the sunlight at just the right angle and hold it captive.

Something Phoenix says has Courtney's full lips curving into a half-smile, and the sight takes my breath away.

I wonder... I wonder what it would be like to kiss her one last time. To feel her lips on mine again, as some sort of assurance that the previous night wasn't a dream. An assurance that last night meant something to her as much as it did to me.

My feet move on autopilot, irrevocably drawn to her. I take the stairs two at a time. Phoenix falls silent as I approach them.

"I'll leave you two to talk," Phoenix mumbles under her breath, then walks away.

Courtney waits for her to leave before turning to me. "Why are you still wearing that?"

I look down at my body, soothing my hands over the silk of my dress. "I don't have anything else to wear."

"There's a whole closet filled with clothes on the jet." She shrugs her jacket over her arms and drapes it on my shoulders. "There, all covered up."

I'm not sure if it's the feeling of being cocooned in her warm scent, but I can already feel my nipples hardening.

It's her, I conclude.

She has this effect on my body.

"*À propos d'hier soir—*" I start to say, but she cuts me off.

[*About last night—*]

"You know I don't understand French, right? Or Japanese."

Oh. Right.

"Languages are Abby's thing, not mine," she adds.

"It wasn't Abby's face between my legs a few hours ago; that was you. Can we at least talk about that?"

“What’s the point?” She shifts on her feet. “You’ll be flying back to the States with Lorenzo and Mattie.”

It’s not so much what she’s saying; it’s what she *isn’t* saying.

“You’re not coming with us?” Panic seeps into my voice.

“No.” She reaches out and smooths the arms of her jacket over my shoulders. “We’ll be here for a few days, then fly back later with Abby, whose passport you’re currently using.”

Ah.

Right.

“I don’t regret any of it,” I tell her.

Her gaze roams my body again, her stormy gray eyes darkening with undisguised lust. A soft curse slips past her lips. “Last night shouldn’t have happened.”

Uh-huh. “Bullshit.”

I don’t care what she says; the fact remains that she can’t hide that she’s attracted to me. Now that I know what she’s like in the cocoon of our own little world, I see it clearly. I see her, and every little dirty thought that filters through her mind is written on her face.

Still, she says, “Lorenzo said as much, didn’t he? That you should stay away from me?”

I nod. “He did. Still, I can’t help how I feel.”

Another sigh. “You should take his advice. This won’t end in a happily ever after for either one of us.”

“You’re talking to the girl living on borrowed time.” I run a hand through my hair. “Courtney, what I feel for you can’t be rationalized, so I won’t even bother trying. I don’t even care what this is, only that it just *is*.”

“And I still can’t tell if you’re reckless or just unbearably naive.”

“Mock it all you want. Just know that no one will take this,” I press a hand over my heart, “away from me, not even

you.”

“Be careful what you wish for. I could—”

“Smother me? With what, the darkness inside you? Who says I’m afraid of it, or of you?”

She steps closer, closing the gap between us, our bodies not quite touching. “You should fear it. You should fear me, Yong. I’m not your knight in shining armor. I’m the nightmare that haunts your dreams. Yesterday was simply a preview. You haven’t seen the worst of my darkness, of the feral beast that leaves inside of me. I can barely control it myself, and you especially don’t want to be anywhere near me when I lose control—”

“Who says you have to control it, by the way? Instead of spending so much energy fighting yourself, why not embrace it for a change? I know I did. I’m a monster, Courtney. Same as you. Chaos runs in our blood; it’s who we are. Unlike you, I don’t see this darkness inside me as something to overcome. It’s a part of me. It always has been, and always will be, the same with death and the excruciating pain that comes with it.”

The corners of her lips lift into an asymmetric smile. “And you’re a philosopher now?”

“They spend a lot of money on my education, and it paid off... just not how they expected it to. In case last night didn’t make things clear, I’m not afraid of you. I don’t see you as evil, a monster, a feral beast, or anything else you wish to call yourself. And if this is goodbye, I don’t want to simply disappear from your sight. I wanted to say goodbye. Properly.” I hold out a hand to her.

She stares at it incredulously. “A handshake,” she deadpans. “Are you serious?”

My fist curls, and then my arm falls helplessly to my sides. “No. I want more, obviously. But—”

The air is swooshed out of my lungs as my body connects with hers. “You are a distraction, Yong. Nothing more.”

I snake my arms around her waist as heat engulfs my body. “If you say so.”

“I do say so.” She leans in, her lips hovering above mine.

“Still, I don’t want to leave without another taste,” I whisper.

Her breath hitches. “Then don’t.”

I tighten my hold on her as she cups my face in both hands and plants a soft kiss against my lips.

It’s a fleeting kiss that promises something I’ll never forget. It ends just as soon as it starts, stoking the flames of the fire that burns deep within me but offering no reprieve.

“Courtney…” I groan as her hands fall off my face.

“It needs to be this way,” is her straggled response.

Then she takes a step back from me, before she turns and walks away for the last time, taking my heart with her.

The End... *for now.*



Thank you for reading **Six Feet Dark**.

The first 11 chapters were released specifically for this romance anthology, **For The Love Of Villains**. The full novella will be released in Spring 2024.

If you are impatient and want to know how their story turns out, you can read the conclusion to their story in **Six Feet Under**, Book 3 in the *Sin and Sinuosity* series; set 16 years after this novella ends.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It takes a village. Truly.

But Six Feet Dark had an, admittedly, abbreviated village.

To my family — hereby dubbed Mr. Nange and Baby Nange.

Thank you for all your love and support as I delve into this exciting yet risky publishing journey.

To my inspirations. Since all three of you are still choosing to remain anonymous, I'm acknowledging you anyway.

*Anonymously.*

Last but not least – to you, lovely reader, who is reading this.

Thank you for coming on this wild journey with me. Hope you stick around. There's more where this came from.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elice Nange is a Contemporary and Dark Romance author. She writes from the heart, and her stories often address sensitive subjects like racism, sexual orientation, discrimination, etc.

Outside of writing, she enjoys spending time with her family and copious amounts of reading. She is also obsessed with Maya Angelou, ice cream, and the color purple ~ not necessarily in that order.

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SKIN

# SYBIL KNIGHT

*“Merrily I’ll dance and sing,  
For the next day will a stranger bring.  
Little does my lady dream  
Rumpelstiltskin is my name!”*



**Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm**  
*Grimms Fairy Tales*

## BLURB

*Obsession was a five-letter word. Ten years in the making.  
And her name was Emily.*

But the real question was who was I?

When my pretty little pet leaned forward, offered me a view of her cleavage, and tried to make a deal, I said why the hell not?

Five days. Thirty minutes. She could ask me anything to her heart's content. Anything but my name. She had to figure that one out on her own.

It should have been easy enough. I was the man she stole from, whose life she ruined, whose future she destroyed.

I was the man she left behind and she was... **mine**.

***SKIN** is a dark Rumpelstiltskin retelling and book one is The Renegades Series. Each title is a standalone in an interconnected world while each story is a retelling of a fairy tale, nursery rhyme, fable, etc. The focus is dark romance so please heed the trigger warnings at the beginning of every book.*

# PROLOGUE

IT WAS THE FEELING OF BEING WATCHED THAT FIRST HAD MY eyes moving rapidly under my lids, my lashes fluttering as I fought to pry them open. Then the damp, chilled air bristled my skin, causing my muscles to spasm involuntarily, before the antiseptic smell burned the inside of my nostrils. Finally, the buzzing of the harsh fluorescent lighting reached my eardrums, worsening the persistent throb in my temples.

A hospital? That had to be it. I was in a hospital. But why? What happened? Was I paralyzed? A bad accident?

*I can't feel my limbs...*

My internal panic was rising as I tried to take a mental inventory of the rest of my anatomy and quickly realized my fingers and toes were twitching. My respirations evened out and the pounding in my chest began to normalize until I heard his voice... the one that accompanied the eyes I could still feel boring past the layers of flesh, sinew, and bone, severing all nerve connections and rendering me immobile before seeing past my tangible form and into my soul.

“Welcome back, pet.” His tone was low, raspy. Like someone who'd spent far too many hours screaming at the top of their lungs and was now forcing air through a set of damaged vocal cords.

I didn't have much more time to think on it as I felt a pair of heavy palms slam down on each side of my head. My lids flung open, forcing me to stare into two black holes where eyes should be. I wasn't in a hospital. Doctors didn't hide behind black face masks. They didn't wear tactical pants or

have knives strapped to their hips either. And emergency room walls weren't made of concrete. No, I was below ground... in a basement?

Before I had a chance to work through my rapidly expanding train of thought, piece it all together, the figure was pushing back from the mattress and positioning himself across the dank room, drawing my attention to what I could only assume was the biggest threat to me getting out of here—wherever here was—*alive*.

Him.

# CHAPTER 1

“WHAT DO YOU WANT?”

“I already told you. And I’m not a fan of repeating myself.”

He tossed the small wooden chair across the room, watching it hit the concrete wall and splinter before turning his icy glare on me—I could feel the chill behind his eyes even if I couldn’t see them. Then he stalked forward, pinching my cheeks between his thumb and index finger to the point of pain.

“I want everything you took from me, my pretty little thief.” He sank his teeth into my earlobe, piercing flesh through the thin material of his mask, to the point of drawing blood.

There was an audible pop as he imprinted the likeness of his canines into the malleable cartilage. And I cried out even as I bit into my lip, trying to hold back the tears. I didn’t want to give him the satisfaction. “I’ve never stolen anything in my life...”

“A thief and a fucking liar, I see... Honestly, I’m disappointed in you, Emily.”

I watched him pull away and circle me, his steps measured, precise, nearly soundless until he forced his boots to squeak when he pivoted to look at me again. Sensation was finally returning to my upper limbs, but only enough so that I recognized the weight of the chains currently riveting me in place. There was no point in fighting against them. I knew it wouldn’t get me anywhere.

I needed to be smart. Not impulsive, no matter how hard my fight or flight instinct was urging me otherwise.

He knew me, my name, but how? Or did he...? Maybe he'd just found my driver's license... Or overheard my name somewhere... Honestly, his knowing who I was did little to tell me who *he* was... and I needed to know that, to also know what he wanted.

"Who are you?" It was the next obvious question, not that I thought it would be that easy.

"I already told you, pet. I'm the man you stole from." I could hear the grin curling his lips. But it wasn't something pleasant. No, it was the sort of grin that preceded a sudden bout of rage. Violence.

"How am I supposed to know what I took from you, if I don't even know who you are?" I tried again.

"Not my problem," he hissed in response.

"It is your problem if you want it back..."

*Keep him engaged, Em. Interested in continuing to play whatever game this is.*

My subconscious was urging me to maintain the façade. Be whatever, whoever it was he needed me to be. Part of me knew my inner voice was right, while another part was wondering how long it would take to chew through the meat of my wrist in order to free myself. The same part that realized I would bleed out long before I was able to make it to the door.

He was growing impatient—who was I kidding? He was impatient from the moment I first laid eyes on him, likely long before that too. It was evident in the tense posturing of his shoulders. In the way the biceps of his crossed arms flexed and loosened as though he were moments away from closing the distance between us and landing the full force of his knuckles into my face.

He hated me but why?

There was nothing about his voice that was recognizable, nothing about his build that was the slightest bit familiar. The

man was a stranger to me. I was sure of it, as sure as he was that I'd taken something from him...

He pushed off the wall and stalked towards me again. I closed my eyes and held my breath, waiting for the first blow. It never came. Peeking through fluttering lashes, I watched as he stomped to the only entry point instead. A metal door. Fireproof, I was certain. And not something I could break down.

“Wait!” I couldn't be left alone in here. Alone with my thoughts and rising panic... I just couldn't... “Let me help you —”

His laughter broke through my statement. The sound was humorless and bitter. “Help me? How the fuck do you expect to help me, pet? Do you even realize the gravity of the situation you're in right now?” It took seconds for him to appear at my side again, less than that for him to bring us nose to nose.

“That's not what I meant—”

“Then tell me what the fuck you meant, my sweet girl...” His tone was suddenly gentle, one you'd use to soothe a small child, and I didn't know what to make of all the mood swings. Clearly, something wasn't right with the man. But that went without saying... I was chained up in his basement after all.

“If you won't tell me who you are, or what it is you *think* I stole...” He raised a questioning eyebrow but I continued all the same. “...then at least give me an opportunity to figure it out... please?”

He threw his head back in genuine laughter this time. “*Please?*” He wheezed in a breath, obviously amused. “Yes, because proper manners will get you out of this one.” He dropped his jaw and glared at me with his neck cocked to one side, as if observing me for a moment. “Go on. What's your proposal? I'm just dying to hear it, pet.”

## CHAPTER 2

EMILY BRADSHAW WAS...

Well, for as long as I decided to keep her alive, she was mine. The object of my obsession for the past ten years. All the planning, the hours dedicated to this moment, and I was holding on by a thread. Less than that. I was dangling over the precipice of hysteria and insanity. My rage threatening to tip me over one way, then the other.

Neither would do.

I couldn't let her ruin this for me. This was more than a means to an end. This was about taking back everything the little bitch had stolen from me. This was about degradation, control, ruining her. And it was about savoring every second of her beautiful destruction.

Because that's what it would be. I'd paint these walls in her blood, mark her body with my cum, and shatter her will to live along the way. She would beg me to end it, end her, and I'd refuse... until her pleas no longer brought me joy. Until the taste of her tears no longer stirred my cock to life. Until her cunt was nothing more than a gaping hole, her tight muscles loosened beyond repair.

Then my pretty little pet would be free game for all the monsters far worse than I was...



She was staring at me now, waiting to see what I thought about her offer. As if she had any bargaining chips left in this little

game of ours. She didn't. There was only one way for this to end. But she still had hope, and I liked dangling it in front of her, just long enough to watch the devastation in her eyes when I ripped it away again.

"You want something from me? Fine." I grinned, chewing on the fabric of the breathable mouth covering. I could still taste her blood there. "But I want something from you first."

"I—what?"

I didn't answer her. Instead, I pulled the set of keys from my left pocket and approached the makeshift hospital bed, releasing one wrist, then the other. She watched my every movement, likely seeking a weak spot, leverage, an escape. There wasn't one. But she'd figure that out soon enough.

Once I'd freed her upper limbs, I stepped around the bottom rail and unburdened one of her ankles, yanking the chain on the second leg to allow her a longer leash. The metal clanked against the bedframe, scraping across the cement flooring, before the added length was left to coil into a small pile.

"Knees," I barked the order. The half-life of the paralytic agent meant that I knew she could stand on shaky limbs at this point. She was only pretending otherwise. Attempting to hold all her cards close to her chest. When she didn't immediately comply, I added, "And I want to hear the thud of bone hitting concrete, or I'll break them." I pivoted to face her. "Your kneecaps, I mean. Curious as to what that feels like?" Her eyes widened, so I continued. "It's a trick question really. It depends on if it's a clean break... or more of a shattering of the bone and cartilage. Do you have a preference, Emily?"

She shook her head.

"Then. Why. The. Fuck. Aren't. You moving?" I ground out the question between clenched teeth.

She scrambled off the bed like the good little cunt she was before dropping to her knees in front of me. I tilted my head and watched her, my fingers gripping the ends of my belt and loosening the straps. I yanked it free from my waist, dropped

to my haunches so that I was at eye level, slipped it around her pretty little neck, and tugged it tight. Her reactionary whimper wasn't just music to my ears. It was a symphony, well-practiced notes only I could hear as I tipped my head back and tapped the tips of my fingers to the melody.

She wasn't broken yet. She was far from it. She was playing along. Calling my bluff. I knew as much. But it was the first step towards her submission, and it wouldn't take long before her resolve was cracking and crumbling as easily as a fly between my fingertips. I'd pluck out her tiny little wings and watch her squirm. Then I'd toss her carcass aside and stomp it with the heel of my boot until what remained no longer resembled something tangible.

“Please...”

The singular word had my neck snapping back in place as I glared down at the pathetic creature pawing at my feet and scuffing my shoes. She had more fight in her than this. I knew it. I just needed to force her to show it.

I tugged on the end of the belt, the makeshift garrote further constricting her airway and causing her panicked eyes to shoot upwards. Then I raised to my full height, the fingers of my free hand nimbly dancing along the zipper of my black tactical pants, before I reached inside to release the full length of my pulsing cock. Her pupils dilated as tears began to form on her lash line.

*Are you scared, my pet? Or turned the fuck on? Maybe a mixture of both?* The two weren't mutually exclusive.

“Suck,” I hissed the singular command, and grinned when she attempted to shuffle back on all fours, only to be halted by the snap of my wrist and the taut leather of her leash. “And if you even think about biting down, I'll knock your teeth out and force you to swallow them.”

# CHAPTER 3

*SUCK.*

The singular word rang in my ears like a death knell. Worse. Because death was an end. And this was just the beginning of my downfall. My deterioration. The slow atrophy that would leave me rotting in my skin. Decomposing with each forced breath. This man, whoever he was, didn't want to simply kill me. That much I could accept. Make peace with. He wanted to destroy my humanity. He wanted me crawling on my hands and knees. And he wanted me begging.

I just couldn't figure out why. What had I done to deserve... *this*?

He didn't repeat the one-syllable command. He didn't have to. I didn't have much choice in the matter as he twisted the belt around his arm and yanked me forward. If I wanted to breathe, I had to open my mouth. I wasn't getting enough oxygen through my nose, and he wouldn't loosen the leather constricting my airway until I did as I was told.

I tried to be logical about it. Tell myself it was about survival. That the discomfort, the debasement, would be fleeting and I could figure a way out of here. But none of this kept my lower lip from trembling as I leaned forward, lowered my jaw, and took him into my mouth. He tugged me closer again without warning and his cock slipped past my tonsils, forcing me to sputter and gag.

My inner voice was screaming at me to do something. To snap my jaw shut and take the throbbing appendage with me. But I doubted my ability to tear into flesh, while the thought of

his blood pooling in my mouth had me struggling to keep the bile down. Far worse than the forced oral penetration. That and I had no doubt he would follow through with his threat. Something in his tone told me he wasn't bluffing.

So I did my best to block out the smell of his cologne, the taste of the soap on his skin—he'd showered at the very least—and the feel of him thrusting forward and pulling back out, only to repeat the rhythm with more force. I refused to acknowledge the way his fingertips pressed into my cheeks as he held my head steady and gave himself leverage. And I ignored the way my knees burned as they scraped across the concrete flooring, the first layer of skin rubbing away with the friction.

None of it was real. It wasn't happening. That's what I told myself. Even as my lips cracked and bled, and I struggled between trying to suck in air and attempting to keep the vomit from traveling up my esophagus.

He drove forward so that my nostrils were pressed against his pelvic bone, and I lost balance, my hands reaching out on instinct and clawing at his thighs to brace myself. He stilled, his chin resting against his collarbone and his head cocking to the side as he paused to observe me. I didn't know what he was looking for. I couldn't read his expression through the thin fabric of his cloth mask. But I could guess. Something I'd done had halted his movements. It wasn't my struggle. He obviously didn't care whether or not I could breathe. Whether I lived. Just that I suffered.

I didn't understand why I was trying to figure it out. His motives didn't matter. Why people were the way they were didn't matter. Some individuals were just evil. There was nothing more to it. No rationale behind their psychotic tendencies. And so I put him into that same category, as my right hand reached behind him to grip the splintered piece of wood that had skid across the floor when the chair had ricocheted against the wall. It was small enough to fit into my palm and sharp enough to dig into my skin as I tried to conceal it.

He cracked his neck from side to side, breaking the self-imposed trance, before he slipped free from my lips and tugged me to my feet, using the belt and his grip on my throat to lift me. When I was finally standing on shaky legs, he shuffled me back until the bones of my spine were digging into the far wall, and then he shoved his fingers into my mouth. I hissed with the impact, allowing him better access as he continued his ruthless assault, his tongue lapping up and tasting the blood along the seam of my split lips through the woven fabric of the mask.

I couldn't help the moan that escaped when his chest rubbed against my peaked nipples. And I hated myself for not hating it. *I did hate it.* I just couldn't stop my body's natural reaction to the chilled air and ongoing stimulation. Once again, the sound gave him pause and I used the momentary distraction to lift my arm and jam the jagged piece of wood into his right eye, only to jolt when the makeshift weapon veered to the side and cracked in my grip. It penetrated the mask, that much was obvious, as the stake seemed to suspend itself in the air and bounce with the movement of his head. It would be comical if my life didn't hang in the balance. Like something out of a vampire movie gone wrong.

My hands shot up to cover my gasp, while he threw his head back and laughed as I attempted to pull the piece of wood free and jab at him again.

# CHAPTER 4

SHE FUCKING STABBED ME. MORE LIKE STABBED *AT* ME. BUT the sentiment was all the same.

My lips curled beneath my face covering into my first real grin since entering this room, and my fingers reached out and closed around her delicate throat. Her eyes widened as she struggled to gasp in her next breath of air.

And there it was. That fight I needed in order to get off. The added adrenaline that rushed through my veins as she kicked, clawed, and attempted to shove at my chest.

With my free hand, I gripped the hem of the mask and peeled it back before yanking it over my head. “Talk about bad luck. Fifty-fifty shot and you still chose wrong. Should have aimed for the other goddamn eye, pet.”

My smirk widened the longer she stared into the prosthetic and gaping socket where my eye had been all those years ago. Long before I lost it. She swallowed down the gasp, the bile, the disgust and I felt the slow up-and-down movement beneath my palm.

I lowered my lips to her ear and licked the lobe as she trembled under the weight of my fingertips. “I agreed to your terms, your little game. But my... *kindness* comes with a price. Each day I allow you to breathe, I will take something of yours. Something you can't get back. I'll take your dignity, your sweat, your blood, and your tears. I'll take your self-respect and I'll decimate them so that there's nothing left of you. Nothing but a shell of someone you thought you were.

Till you are a living fucking corpse. Then I'll leave you to rot in your own misery.”

My hand was already lifting the thin fabric of the hospital gown I'd dressed her in shortly after her arrival, and I punctuated the statement with the upward thrust of my cock into her tight cunt.

She sucked in a sharp breath and whimpered. And fuck, if it didn't send an extra chill down my spine and to the base of my cock. My balls drew up with the impending orgasm. But I refused to give into my body's natural instinct to end this so soon. No, each forward drive of my hips, each tear that fell from her eyes, and each small break in her psyche was a slow, sweet indulgence. I pounded her tiny frame against the cold concrete, over and over again, and felt the way her body caved to me. How her legs trembled, her cunt salivated, her muscles tensed and sucked me deeper. It wanted me no matter how much her cognitive functioning refused to surrender to her carnal instincts.

I wouldn't allow her to come. Not now. Maybe not ever. I would leave her on that edge, teetering between hating me and needing me. Between begging me for relief and refusing to accept she wanted it. I'd leave that pretty cunt between her legs drenched and fluttering. To the point she would be tempted to touch herself even as I watched. And then I'd tie her arms above her head, her thighs spread wide on the cool sheets, and leave her to squirm like the greedy little bitch she was.

It was that thought, that image, that finally had my cum coating the walls of her womb and claiming her as mine. We both knew it. There was no coming back from this.

I lifted the material of her gown and kicked her legs apart, watching as the white, semi-translucent substance dropped from between her thighs, trailed down to her ankles, and landed with an audible plop on the uneven flooring. I could feel her eyes on me the entire time, boring into my flesh as if her hatred could somehow penetrate me as easily as I'd penetrated her. I glanced up from the soiled ground to meet her gaze, and she hacked back the pooling saliva in her mouth and

discharged it at my face. It clung to my cheek, the tacky liquid still warm to the touch as I swiped it with my thumb and sucked the digit clean.

If hatred had a tangible form it would be the flames I saw staring back at me in the reflection of her dilated pupils. And all I wanted to do was fuck her all over again.

# CHAPTER 5

I WRAPPED MY ARMS AROUND MY MIDSECTION AS I WATCHED him turn his back, open the metal door, and slam it shut behind him, before I screamed my frustrations to the empty room. The high-pitched sound seemed to echo off the barren walls and scream back at me. There was no satisfaction in it but I was able to breathe a little easier as I tugged at the chain on my ankle still tethering me to the hospital bed, which was bolted to the floor.

I couldn't give up now. Not yet. I'd barely seen what this man was capable of and I was certain far worse was to come. Especially now that he'd revealed himself to me—a face I had never seen before. I'd remember having met someone missing something as prominent as their entire right eye. And the scars...

Nearly half of his profile was mutilated, as if the skin had been peeled away and reattached at some point. It was evident he grew out his facial hair to soften the deformity. That wasn't to say he wasn't attractive in an oddly masculine way. His jawline defined and his singular eye a piercing blue. If he weren't so cruel, I might even dare to call him handsome. But his beastly personality made him the most hideous human being I'd ever met. Yet another reason I was confident our paths hadn't crossed until now. With this in mind, I wasn't sure if the fact that he was a stranger should be comforting or not. It sure as hell didn't help me determine what it was that he wanted from me.

I ground my teeth, hoping the sensation would somehow ground me too. Help me focus on the bigger picture and the

deal we'd arranged. One I was second-guessing the longer I sat in my solitude—though I'd been so certain it was the right move to make just a few hours ago...



*“Go on. What’s your proposal? I’m just dying to hear it, pet.”*

*I took a deep breath, reminding myself to treat this like any other negotiation. A regular day in the office. I could do this. He wanted something and so did I. It didn’t matter how much those two wants conflicted with each other. We just had to meet in the middle. I had to make him think we were meeting in the middle. When, in actuality, I had forced him several steps past his comfort zone.*

*Playing helpless didn’t work. He seemed smarter than that... unfortunately. I wasn’t above showing a little cleavage to brokerage better terms, but we were beyond that at this point. I was barely dressed as it was. And I had no doubt he’d use me like an old tube sock without so much as a second thought... should it come to that.*

*I shivered at the thought. I could only pray to whatever god was out there that there was at least one line he wouldn’t cross—despite all the threats.*

*“You claim that you know me...” I began.*

*“Oh, I more than know you.” His eyes were roaming up and down my body. “But I never claimed anything. I told you that you took something from me.”*

*I could feel it every time they seemed to flick across my skin as surely as if he reached out and touched me. I’d never met anyone who had this effect on me, especially when I didn’t even know what he looked like. It was a sickening sensation, the curiosity warring with the terror. Like being dropped in a maze at midnight on Halloween, only this time all the monsters were real—at least the one in front of me certainly was.*

*“Right...” I crossed my arms, trying to keep the chill from rousing my nipples. “So you’ve said. And it goes without*

*saying that you have the upper hand here. But humor me. I'm sure a lot of planning has gone into all of... this." I gestured to the room, the medical devices, the hospital bed.*

*"More than you know." He seemed to grin. He was proud of himself—cocky. Too sure of his failsafe. And it would be his weakness. He'd already determined how this would go. Which meant even the slightest deviation could be his ultimate downfall. "You're stalling now, pet. Get on with it before I lose my patience."*

*"Give me five days. Five days to figure out how you know me, who you are. Thirty minutes a day where I can ask you anything and you'll answer honestly."*

*He appeared to choke on his laughter, his sputtering ending with a deep vibration in his throat. "And why the fuck would I do that?"*

*"Because, if there is anything I've learned about you in the past few minutes, it's that you are the sort of man who likes to play with his food before he eats it..."*

# CHAPTER 6

I SLAMMED THE DOOR AND ENGAGED THE INDUSTRIAL-SIZE lock before punching the code into the keypad. Could never be too careful. Emily had gotten smarter over the years. But I was prepared for her games. I expected her to have something up her sleeve. What I hadn't seen coming was how easy it would be to agree to her whimsical terms. She didn't know what she was asking of me. You see, I had no issue with the truth. I was the most honest man I knew. *She* was the pretty little liar. The thieving cunt in our midst. And I was ten steps ahead before she'd even placed her pieces on the board.

Five days? Five days was fucking child's play. A joke. For me anyway. For her? It would be the worst one-hundred and twenty or so hours of her goddamn life.



“Morning, pet,” I sang a little too loudly as I shoved the metal door closed behind me, the gears clicking into place and ensuring only one of us was capable of getting out of the room again. “Trust you slept well?” I grinned as I eyed her from a distance.

She was curled up on the cold floor, behind the hospital bed, using its frame to shield herself from my view. She probably thought she was being watched. She was. The entire 20x20 space was wired with hidden cameras, which were monitored 24/7 from a surveillance room on the main floor. She was lucky it was also climate-controlled, or she could have frozen to death overnight. And that would have been a

shame, seeing as we'd only just begun to reacquaint ourselves. And my cock, the pathetic bastard that he was, had yet to have his fill.

I'd foregone the mask today. I didn't see the point. It had always been more for her benefit than mine. So that my... *distinct attributes* didn't immediately send her into a panic when she woke from her drug-induced coma for the first time. I was used to the figure I saw staring back at me in the mirror. Others? Not so much.

When she didn't immediately rouse from her spot on the floor, I placed the tray I was carrying on the desk and crossed the room. "Come on, Emily." I kicked at her arm with the tip of my boot. "Let's not add sloth to the list of all your other sins." Silence. "I can see the slight rise and fall of your chest, the fluttering of your eyelashes, even as you try to hold your breath." My eyes dropped to the face of my watch. "And now you're cutting into your thirty—correction, twenty-eight minutes." With that, she huffed, reached an arm out, and pulled herself to her feet. "Really? Playing dead?" I shook my head as I walked back over to the desk and plucked the apple I'd brought her from the tray. I sank my teeth into its juicy skin before adding, "I would have thought you more creative."

"Yes, well, I can only work with what I'm given..." She flicked her eyes from corner to corner. "Which isn't much."

"The accommodations not to your liking, princess?"

She narrowed her glare on me, causing my lips to tip up at one side. "The accommodations could be better but it's the company that's really lacking."

My jaw clenched as I slammed the half-eaten fruit on the desk top, bruising what remained of its flesh. "Pretty sure my company was requested, Emily. But if you are so set on spending the rest of your days—*hours?*—in solitude, I'm more than happy to oblige." I pushed away from the furniture, as if I were planning to leave.

I wasn't. But she didn't know that. My every action was conflicting, irrational, left her guessing. So that by the end of

this all, she would be begging for my attention. My companionship. My condemnation as much as my praise.

“No! Wait!” she called out and I paused.

Hook. Line. Sinker. Like taking candy from a spoiled little baby.

“What the fuck do you want now, Emily? Eat your goddamn breakfast and then we can try this again—when you aren’t so hellbent on being such a stuck-up cunt.” I tossed the tray on the floor, watching as the bowl of oatmeal toppled over and sprayed most of the contents across the room. “You’ll appreciate what I do for you. What I give you. Or you’ll fucking starve. Now, clean up this mess. I won’t step another foot through that door till you’ve lapped up every last drop.” I didn’t wait for a response before I pivoted on the heel of my boot, turning my back on her, her half-hearted pleas, and the remnants of her meal. And stalked out.

# CHAPTER 7

## DAY 1

The only thing worse than the bastard's presence was the sudden lack thereof. Being alone with my thoughts was the most torturous form of punishment.

My childhood had been spent in isolation. Not too far off from this, nearly as cruel. If the son of a bitch knew anything about me, he'd realize that this wouldn't be the first time I'd been given the ultimatum of licking my meal off the floor. I was a survivor. I did what it took to get where I was in life. Despite my upbringing. Not because of it. And I would do the same here.

He dished out insults like they meant anything to me. Like I hadn't heard the worst of it long before I even understood the meaning of the colorful vocabulary hurled my way. And he called me princess, as if his wounds were somehow more significant because they were visible. Fuck that. I'd take damaged flesh over a damaged psyche any day.

There was nothing he could do to my body that hadn't already been done to me before. Nothing I wouldn't endure as I plotted my way out of here.

He wanted a pet? I'd give him one. But if I learned anything over the last few days in his presence, it was that he didn't want that at all. No, he was pleased when I fought him, talked back, spit in his face. His eyes twinkled and his dick hardened. My submission was never the endgame, whether he himself realized it or not. What he wanted was a worthy

opponent, someone difficult to break, because when he did finally break me, *that* would be the ultimate satisfaction.

What that knowledge didn't do was help me determine my next move. How to play this. Play him.

My initial offer was only meant to buy me time. And it had done that... I guess. Every crime show I ever watched said the first forty-eight hours were the most important, and I'd requested more than double that. But then again, who really knew how long he planned on keeping me here...?



It took eight hours for the hunger pangs to set in and my will to finally break. Eight hours plus how ever long I'd spent in that hospital bed after being knocked out. Which didn't seem all that significant in the grand scheme of things. But my pride didn't outweigh my survival instincts. Being weak and half-starved only steeled your spine long enough for death to set in. And I refused to die in this basement. In captivity.

My dry tongue scraped across the concrete flooring, the granules of dirt, dust, and mummified insects overpowering the flavor of the bland oatmeal. I told myself it was protein. That I'd stomached far less appetizing meals in my lifetime. I'd grown plump and pampered over the years, more so than the bag of bones I'd been in my teens. And a little grime wouldn't kill me.

But I was starting to realize *he* just might...



**HIM**

I watched her lick the ground and imagined each stroke was lapped against my cock instead. That she was on her hands and knees in front of me, rather than alone in her room. It was

the most disturbingly erotic image. More satisfying than any fantasy I'd conjured up of her over the years.

I pushed to my feet, exited the small security room, descended the stairs two at a time, and stalked towards her door before disengaging the locks and barging inside. She peered up at me from the floor, her eyes alight with fury and disgust despite her attempts at schooling them.

And I realized how much I needed it. Fed off her indignation and disdain. My boots echoed with each step into the cavernous room, the sound robotic and methodical, as I marched towards my target, tugged her to her feet, and bent her over the foot of the hospital bed. She twisted her hips, bucking beneath me, and I stood back a moment to watch the action. The vision before me like a worm on a hook, tempting me to take a bite.

Emily wasn't just a fixation; she was my ruin. In so many more ways than one. And she didn't even know the power she held over me.

*Apparently, neither did I or I never would have kept this farce of a deal going...*

I reached out a hand and bunched up the fabric of her hospital gown, my fingers lingering between the apex of her thighs just long enough to test the waters. She was drenched for me. Part of her, deep down, enjoyed the degradation. Got off on it as much as I did. She just didn't want to admit it yet. But she would. Eventually.

The more she fought me, the more we each were turned the fuck on. Keeping her wrists pinned above her with one hand, my elbow digging into her spine, I freed my cock with the other. Then I grabbed her ass cheeks, even as she continued to buck beneath me, and thrust home. Her tight cunt gripped me in place, as I attempted to drive deeper, before pulling back and pistoning forward again. With each forceful jerk of my hips, her body gave way to the penetration till it accepted me as readily as my pet would come to accept her fate.

Her whimpered pleas spurred me onward, the perfect accompaniment to my audible grunts. My trimmed nails embedded themselves in the supple skin of her waist to the point of drawing blood, and the image of red tainting the white of the bedsheets sent that familiar tingle to the base of my spine as I came inside her. Coating her walls with my cum as perfectly as I would coat her flawless skin with her blood.

And that's when I realized my fatal mistake. I was goddamn addicted.

# CHAPTER 8

THE FUNNY THING ABOUT BEING RAPED—IF YOU COULD CALL it *funny* at all—was that everyone’s reaction was different. Friends, family, shrinks liked to tell you otherwise. Narrow it down to the most basic instincts a human had and look to toss you into one of those boxes. But it was so much more complicated than that. With so many shades and variations, it could give good ol’ Christian Gray a run for his money.

There was anger, sure. At your attacker, yourself, society as a whole. And with that came the shame. Feeling like something was wrong with you, just as much as there was something wrong with him... the man (*or* woman) who did this to you.

*It.*

The word no one liked to say because it felt nearly as dirty as the act. But more than those basic and obvious emotions, there was detachment. The part of you that floated away and could pretend like it didn’t happen. Screw diamonds, detachment was a girl’s best friend. It meant survival. The ability to compartmentalize, to pretend you enjoyed it to the point maybe part of you did. And there was absolutely nothing wrong with that.

There was nothing wrong with protecting yourself in whatever way you could. *That* was what I told myself when he bent me over the hospital bed and violated me in the worst way possible. When I felt my body give way to his penetration and accept what was happening to me. When I heard the sounds he made when he was finally done and part of me didn’t hate the audible grunts as they rang in my ears.

It was rape. There was no nice way to put it. No more fitting definition. And I hated him for it. Hated the way my body vibrated, because whether I wanted it—him—or not, he'd found a way to stimulate my every nerve ending. To turn me against myself. So I shut down. Switched my brain off like a simple reboot could somehow make it all go away. Help me forget where I was and who put me here. And focused on finding a way out. No matter the cost to my mental state.



## HIM

She hated me. I could taste it in the air as readily as the piece of chewing gum I popped and gnawed on while lost to my thoughts. A smoke was what I really wanted but my eyes were glued to the screen, watching her watching me from a distance. If there was an antidote for what this woman did to me, I'd take it. But short of castrating myself—which wasn't an option—there wasn't much I could do. Outside of killing her. And I wasn't ready for that yet either.

It was like burning a bunch of ants with a magnifying glass. Once they were all gone, so was the fun. Thus, Emily and I found ourselves at a stalemate. Neither of us could surrender, without the opponent claiming the win. And I didn't fucking lose. Not since that night. Not again, and certainly not to her.

*Fool me once and all that bullshit...*

I had to kill her. The decision had been made for me. I think I knew it deep down all along. That this was never meant to be a long-term arrangement. And getting rid of her meant that I finally got to move on. Stop obsessing. Accept my life for what it was and forget about everything it could have been if it weren't for her.

And what she stole from me...

But my cock had a mind of its own. And addiction replaced the obsession. Until I became near animalistic with need. Like a cokehead constantly chasing that high. The truth

was, if I didn't kill her, I had no doubt she'd kill me. In some fashion or another. And as much as I didn't fear death, I wouldn't let her take my life from me either. Fuck no, if I was forced to live in this perpetual hell, she sure as fuck would feel the same burn.

That's what really got me going. Her pain, her tears, the sound of her voice when it broke on a sob...

My cock twitched at the thought. And I knew it was too late to do anything but jump on this crazy train and follow its crash course to my demise.

I shot up from my chair. I didn't give a fuck that she was sleeping—or pretending to sleep. Who really knew with this bitch? After all, she was great at pretending. Pushed out of the surveillance room and made a beeline for her door. She startled awake the moment it creaked open and slammed shut again.

# CHAPTER 9

**DAY 2**

He was positioned in that same fucking spot on a wooden chair in the corner of the room. Sinking his teeth into another goddamn apple and watching me. Always watching. Eyeing me like a subject under a microscope or a creature in the zoo. With curiosity and something more. Sometimes rage. Others lust. All while giving me little to nothing when it came to who the fuck he was.

He reminded me of that Ryuk character from *Death Note*. It was all I could picture every time he bit into an apple. He liked the red ones, appeared to tolerate green, never chose yellow. It was a fitting comparison, this man and the Shinigami, considering he held my life in his hands.

Some sick part of me couldn't help but wonder when my name would be added to that little black book of his...

It was only the second day and I already knew my situation was hopeless. But maybe I could figure out something that could get me out of here. Whether it be by his hands or mine. I wasn't ready to die yet. The will to live still flickered in my chest, forcing my heart to beat and my lungs to expand with each breath I took. It wasn't over. I refused to accept that.

I had thirty minutes to ask him as many questions as I could come up with. But it was like a dance, and he would skirt around the truth in whatever way he could. Not that it mattered. The truth, that is. Just his reaction to it and to me. He wanted something and it was more than seeing me dead.

*Now to determine what that something was...*

“How long have you known me?”

He grinned, a minute curl of his lips on the right side. The scar tissue never moved, no matter the expression he made. It was eerie, really. “It feels like it’s been forever.” He shrugged, and I huffed.

“That’s not a good answer.”

“Then ask better questions, pet.” The chair scraped across the cement flooring as he scooted back and leaned against the wall, with his arms above his head and his eyes glued to the ceiling like he was soaking up his fill of UV rays on some tropical beach. Instead of sitting in this dank basement beneath the handful of flickering fluorescent bulbs.

“What’s the point of agreeing if you weren’t planning on participating?”

Another shrug of his shoulders. “Who am I to begrudge someone their need for a ticking clock?”

“A man who rapes women, apparently,” I hissed in reply.

“Not women. Woman. One woman in particular.” He rocked forward on his seat and planted his feet back on the ground, and his gaze landed on me like a pair of laser beams that could somehow sear their way through to my soul.

“One woman or twenty. Rape is rape, you son of a bitch.”

“You can throw that word around as much as you want, darlin’. All you’re doing is making my dick harder.” He tilted his head as he observed me for a minute, adjusting his cock in his pants before adding, “Look at me.” He gestured to his face, along his left arm, down to his scarred hands. “Do you really think I care what kind of monster you see me as? I know who and what I am. Can you say the same? Or do you lie to yourself as much as you lie to me, Emily?”



**HIM**

She seemed to consider my question for a moment, chew on it as if it were a complex math equation with a veritable answer. That was the problem with people like Emily Bradshaw. They always thought they were smarter than everyone else. Give them enough time and they could unravel you, sniff out your weakness and use it against you.

*But I see you for who you really are, pet. A monster just like me. Perhaps worse. Because you hide it better.*

“You sure like to hurl insults, don’t you?” She was running out of clever retorts. That much was clear.

“Was that one of your questions, pet? Or more of a rhetorical thing?” I raised my good eyebrow at her growing irritation.

“Fuck you,” she seethed, and I grinned and took another bite of my apple.

*Maybe I will. After I’m done with my lunch.* But I kept that thought to myself. I was much better company after all. Because I always laughed at my own jokes.

# CHAPTER 10

**DAY 3**

“Why apples?” It was a waste of a question. But one that honestly piqued my interest. Was it some weird obsession? Some kind of dietary need? Was I being stored under a goddamn apple orchard somewhere in the middle of nowhere?

Inquiring minds wanted to know.

He lowered the fruit from his mouth for a moment, flicking his gaze down to look at his snack before lifting his eyes back to me again. “Because they are a lot like people. We choose ’em based on what we see on the outside, but it’s not until we peel back the skin that we’re forced to bear witness to how truly rotten they are. Take you for example.”

His lips twisted into a grin that would be charming if it weren’t so sadistic at the same time. Then he canted his head to the side as if examining me, and my arms shot up and crossed over my chest without me realizing it. His scrutiny left me feeling far more vulnerable than the flimsy nightgown.

“You’re pretty enough. Decent packaging. Fuckable, of course.” His brow twitched as if he found himself amusing. “But slap that ass on an aluminum table, hand me a scalpel? And, oh, the stories that body would tell. Every bruise, injection mark, failing organ—everything you try so desperately to hide under the business casual pantsuit and sensible shoes—would be mine for the viewing. I mean, really, Em, pantsuits? When did you become so basic?” He bit into the apple again, making a show of spraying the juices down

his chin and licking it off. He was trying to goad me. He was also trying to distract me from what he was really telling me.

“You’re a doctor,” I gasped at the realization.

“No, I’m not.” His tone was dry, too dry, and it lacked the usual humor and cockiness he wore like a coat of armor.

“But you *were*, weren’t you.” It wasn’t a question and I didn’t need his verbal confirmation. I could feel it in my gut. I was right.



## HIM

I waited for it. That glimmer of recognition that told me she understood. That she realized what she’d done to me. It never came. Instead, she seemed proud of herself. Pleased that I had handed her, her prize on a goddamn silver platter. And curtsied on the way out.

The bitch was something else all right. And I gave her more credit than she was due.

I chucked the apple against the far wall, listened to it splatter, and watched it slide down the concrete while imagining it was her brain matter that now brightened the dark-gray paint job. I’d love to say that I was too pissed off to fuck her. But my cock had other plans. So I tossed the chair aside, oblivious to whether or not I’d cracked the wood in the process.

At this rate, I was gonna need a warehouse full of goddamn replacement furniture.

*I wonder if IKEA still offers in-home delivery?*

*Never mind. Scratch that. Because regardless of whatever game she was playing, Emily’s days were numbered.*

I stalked forward, closing the distance between us, as she observed me from where she’d holed herself up in the corner of the room. For all that backtalk, she was no better than an injured bird.

*I guess not much has changed after all...*

The fire in her eyes was a total contradiction to how she folded into herself upon my approach. And I couldn't help but wonder how much of it was actual fear and how much of it was Emily trying to play games with my head.

Did she honestly think that feigning submission would earn her any favor? Empathy? Nah, she knew better than that. She also knew I liked the fight. So maybe this was her way of trying to dial it down. To play coy like that would stop me. No matter what she was trying to do, I saw the truth in the way she looked at me. How her pupils dilated. She wasn't afraid. She was fucking pissed.

My steps were slow, measured, as I closed the distance before dropping to my haunches and tipping her chin up so she was forced to meet my gaze. And my lips curled into a grin, whether I wanted them to or not. I lowered my face to her ear, watching her hold her breath in my peripheral as I whispered the singular word.

“Run.”

She sucked in a lungful of air and exhaled on a gasp, her eyes flicking to the door. She hadn't even realized I'd left it open. Barely an inch.

Emily scrambled to her feet, the panic heightening the rush of adrenaline presently coursing through her veins as she shoved the hospital bed in my path and bolted for the door. The moment she yanked it open and slipped into the hallway, I rolled up my sleeves, cracked my neck from side to side, and sprinted after her. I gave her a good running start, which meant that she'd already tugged on the first few doors, found them locked, and was forced to round the corner and barrel head-first into the unknown. She wouldn't get far—a fact she'd figure out soon enough.

“Come out, come out wherever you are,” I sang down the hallway, my words bouncing off the walls and encasing her along with the darkness. I could hear her panted breaths, the pattering of her bare feet on the concrete, and her muttered expletives each time she was met by yet another locked door.

This was what I needed. The hunt. Not the frightened little girl ready to melt into a pool of obedience under the heat of my gaze. Maybe there was a time when I was attracted to that side of her. A part that wanted to care for Emily and tend to her every need. But that part, that man, was buried along with the rest of my face.

Two more long strides and I reached the end of the hall and the last room. She'd just turned the knob, slipped inside, and slammed it shut upon my approach. My little pet was desperate. I could taste it in the air.

But what my poor, sweet Emily had failed to realize was that this was my domain. And she'd just walked into my trap like a rodent reaching for that tempting block of cheese, only to be cut off at the tail.

# CHAPTER 11

I SLAMMED MY PALMS AGAINST THE ICE-COLD WALLS, searching for something. A door. A way out. A goddamn window. Anything. And all I found was more concrete. I spun on my heels, pressing my back to the closest surface, and faced the pitch-blackness of the room.

It was sheer stupidity. To think anything the man did was a mistake or an error in judgment. But that was the fucked-up thing about hope. It dampened your intellect. Let you believe in childish notions like chance, luck, fate, and love. And there was no room for any of those fanciful ideals in the real world.

It took a moment for my eyes to adjust to the sudden lack of light. But I could finally make out different shapes. Four walls, a low ceiling, and a cot. Nothing else. If I thought the last spot was a prison, this was a veritable jail cell—a steel door where the bars should be. There wasn't even a light bulb dangling from the ceiling.

I'd run from the comforts of a dungeon straight into my grave. My heavy breaths thickened the air as I awaited whatever would greet me on the other side of that door. I knew it was only a matter of time.

When your senses were hindered by a lack of light and an eerie soundlessness, it was hard to tell how much time had passed. But the creaking of the heavy door was both fear-inducing and a welcomed reprieve from the quietude. I could smell him before I could see him. Not to say it was a bad odor. Just one I'd grown accustomed to over the last few days. Something akin to cedar-scented soap, mint from chewing gum, and a hint of cigarette smoke.

I remained glued to the wall, even as his boots squeaked across the floor with each approaching step. It's not like there was anywhere to go anyway. I could try to run past him. But that would only lead me back to where I started. I'd already tried all the other doors without success.

"Did you enjoy your little bit of freedom, pet?" He grinned. I couldn't see it but I could hear it in his voice as it bounced around the small room before sending a shiver down my spine.

His fingertips brushed against my cheek and before I knew what I was doing, I was ducking under his outstretched arm and sprinting for the door. He gripped my wrist and slammed me into the far wall. My head snapped back with the impact and I felt a sharp chill and a slight dampness that likely meant I was bleeding. The adrenaline kept the pain at bay as I struggled beneath his grip.

This had all been part of his game. Foreplay for a man who got off on breaking me. If my brief time in captivity hadn't told me as much, the way his dick pressed into my stomach certainly did. He restricted my breathing with the webbing between his thumb and forefinger while his free hand shredded my hospital gown down the middle in his urgency to take what he wanted.

The moment he had unrestricted access, he spit into his hand, slapped the saliva between my thighs, and penetrated me. I hadn't even heard him loosen his zipper before the bare skin of his pubic bone was grinding into me like some beast during mating season. The force of his thrusts had my spine scraping against concrete, while layers of flesh peeled away with each back-and-forth motion.

I had no choice but to lean into him, clawing at his shirt with both hands, to relieve some of the pressure from my raw skin. His animalistic grunts warmed my ear, and before I knew what I was doing, I was slamming my mouth on his and shoving my tongue down his throat to muffle the sound. He tried to pull away and I sank my teeth into his bottom lip deep enough to taste copper.

“Emily,” he hissed in warning. And I couldn’t decipher which act he was chastising me for. Whatever it was, he seemed to change his mind, or lose his conviction as he dropped me onto the cot, spreading my thighs as far as they could go as he pressed between them and continued to drive forward.

This was the point where consent and the lack thereof blurred. I didn’t want this or him, to be caged against my will or be treated like an animal. What I wanted was to be human. Feel human. Escape the pain for a moment and make the best of a terrible situation. Which I understood didn’t make much sense. But neither did being imprisoned by a stranger who swore he knew me better than myself. If he did, this would be a good time for him to explain a thing or two about why I was so broken.

My back was on fire, but the stiff canvas material was far more forgiving than the wall, and if it weren’t for the friction burns and his lack of humanity, the experience would almost be pleasant. His rhythm decreased from frenzied to impassioned, which eased the strain on my tired muscles. I closed my eyes and imagined I was somewhere else. With someone else. But this man had imprinted himself on my brain. And his beautifully grotesque features were the only thing I could conjure up. So I decided to work with what I was given and deal with the consequences on my self-respect later.

If there was a later...

I skimmed a hand down his face, over the thick scars that marred his skin, and pressed my mouth to his again, offering myself like a sacrificial lamb to this monster, who at his core was just a man. At least that’s what I wanted to believe in the moment.

He hummed my name, breathing in the scent of my hair as he finally came undone. And put an end to his brutal assault on my body.

I should have felt dirty. Used. Disgusted with myself. But all I felt was relief that it was over and I was still breathing.

# CHAPTER 12

**DAY 4**

He'd fallen asleep on top of me. And for a brief moment, I saw him in a different light despite the lack of illumination. I guess we all had our demons to fight—some were just more ruthless than others. Not that it excused his barbaric behavior or disgusting treatment of me. Just helped explain his motives.

*Was this what Stockholm Syndrome felt like?*

I was aware enough to realize there wasn't much of a chance of me getting out of here. If nothing else, the man was intelligent. Calculated. And I was no match for that. I could be tender or I could be cruel. I had a harder time switching between the two, rather than committing to one.

Meanwhile, my friend here was Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Sometimes both at once. It must have been exhausting. Or so I could only assume. He didn't seem the type to self-analyze on his own.

Part of me wanted to reach up a hand and stroke his cheek. I was curious about the underlying damage, about what really caused him to become the monster on the outside that matched the one he embodied on the inside. It was obviously a result of trauma. Some sort of accident. And deep down, I knew it had to do with a woman. It would explain all that deep-seated rage he directed at me.

Maybe I reminded him of her? Whoever she was...

A subtle knock had my heart thrumming in my chest. There was someone else here. Which could either be my damnation or saving grace. At this point, what did I have to lose?

“Help...” I hissed the word, while simultaneously hoping that whoever was on the other side of that door could hear me and the man whose full-body weight was presently holding me down couldn’t.

There were a few beeps of a keypad before the door swung open with a loud screeching sound and the clanking of metal, revealing a blurry silhouette standing at the threshold. Their features obscured by the shadows in the hallway.

“Yo, Frankie,” the baritone voice shouted with every intention of rousing the sleeping dragon, and I knew this man wasn’t my savior any more than the one holding me captive.



## HIM

I woke with a start. *Fuck*. I’d passed out. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d slept for more than a few hours at once. The lingering pain was a son of a bitch, nearly as agonizing as the nightmares that always ended with my face burning off and melting into a puddle in my hands. PTSD was one sick fuck. It turned your mind against you. And there was no escaping it.

“Frank, you fucking listening?” Donny’s incessant prattling was grating on my nerves. “Or was the cunt just that good?”

I pushed to my feet, tugging my pants up my waist while shoving my cock into my briefs. My back was to Emily. I really didn’t feel like dealing with her moods this early. And I knew she would be less than pleased with me after the game I’d played with her last night. But obviously, it was exactly what I needed. Other than a little bit of muscle tightness, I felt like a million bucks.

“Cunt was just fine. Now what the fuck do you want?” I ground out between my clenched teeth. The bastard knew better than to trespass on my territory. I liked my privacy. We all had our vices. And this compound was mine.

“Boss wants to see ya. Wanna of the guys got fucked up real bad. Needs ya to stitch 'em up.”

“And where the fuck’s The Surgeon?” This wasn’t my problem. I stopped all that after my hands got fucked. Can’t really suture right when your dominant fingers can barely move.

Donny shrugged. The dumb fuck wasn’t good for much more than disposing of a body and even that was questionable.

“I’ll be there in fifteen. Now get the fuck out.” I slammed the door in his face and waited until my watch alerted me to his departure before grabbing Emily’s wrist and dragging her back to her room.

She kicked and screamed and spit along the way but it was all in vain. We both knew there was nothing she could do but surrender to her fate.

I keyed in the code, the door disengaged the lock, and I shoved Emily inside her cage. “Wait! Frank!” she called out as if she’d just uncovered some deep, dark secret.

I turned on my heel and grinned at her. What was left of her hospital gown hung off a shoulder, her pussy was bare, and the one breast bounced with her heaved breaths. Her hair was a rat’s nest while her cheeks and lips were flushed with the afterglow of being properly fucked. I grabbed at my cock and readjusted it in my pants, wondering if fifteen minutes was enough time for another round. Then quickly dismissed the idea. I didn’t need the rest of those fuckers coming down here looking for me.

“Your name,” she tried again. “It’s Frank. *Frankie*. I don’t know a Frankie.” She sounded so sure of herself. So proud that someone else had unraveled the equation she was supposed to put in the work for.

“Wrong answer, pet.”

Her eyebrows drew together, her jaw bobbing as she tried to solve what was left of the puzzle. Only to realize she was missing most of the pieces.

“Don’t look so confused, sweetheart. It’s a nickname, short for Frankenstein. On account of my face. Idiots think they’re clever—’cept they’re too stupid to realize that was the name of the doctor, not the monster.”

“And you’re the monster...” she whispered, the words barely audible as her posture deflated.

“You bet your sweet ass I am.” I grinned, my palm slowly pressing the door shut as I watched Emily disappear behind a thick layer of steel, gears, and internal locking mechanisms.

# CHAPTER 13

**DAY 5**

I'd never been much into nature shows. They were always too gruesome for me, too much blood and violence. But I remembered this one time when my mother's boyfriend—I can't for the life of me remember his name... Which suggests he was neither all that kind nor all that abusive to be memorable. Anyway, I must have been six or seven because my feet didn't reach the floor yet so I kicked them back and forth as I ate my breakfast. He had the Discovery Channel playing on the TV, focused on a scene where this pack of wolves cornered and tore a helpless bunny to shreds. I was traumatized for weeks.

Whenever I closed my eyes, I could hear that rabbit's screams. My mother told me it was natural. The way things were in the world. "*You are either a predator or their prey.*" Mind you, she said all this while smoking a pack of Marlboros and using my bowl of stale cereal and spoiled milk as her ashtray. Truth be told, I was just happy she was talking to me. The woman rarely acknowledged my existence. So every word she did say was ingrained in my brain with that sudden surge of serotonin.

The point was, that stuck with me. The fact that some of us were predators while others were prey. Especially now, as this man stared at me like I was his next meal. And for the first time, I felt like that rabbit. He may have only been a lone wolf but that didn't make him any less vicious.

I knew he was going to kill me. He'd made up his mind. There was no doubt anymore. And I couldn't help but wonder what that bunny was thinking in her last moments. Had she accepted her fate, made peace with it, or was there some part of her that held out hope? Thought if she fought hard enough, if she could be quick enough, there'd be a way out. A chance...



## HIM

It was day five. The fifth and final day of our little agreement, which I still wasn't certain why I indulged her in the first place. When I positioned myself in the corner of the room, crossed an ankle over a knee and watched her.

She had yet to remember me, though I wasn't sure why I was surprised. Emily was self-absorbed, a leech on society, only out for herself. And I was nothing to her but another obstacle in her way.

It was that cunt of hers that kept me from slitting her throat up until now. *That* and the fact I was a man of my word even when she wasn't a woman of hers. But goddamn was she a good fuck. I wasn't too proud to admit I'd miss it.

I adjusted my cock in my pants as she sipped on cold chicken broth. Her glare boring through me, conveying her hatred, while she sat tight-lipped.

*The feeling's mutual, pet.*

"So?" I prompted. Not because I couldn't stand the silence but because I was irked with the mundane. With the same thing every day. "Have you figured it out?"

The clanking of her spoon in her bowl told me she hadn't. She was buying herself time, trying to at least. Something in that twisted little brain of hers had her lips curling into a grin. I should have known better than to assume my little fighter would admit defeat so easily. It was time for the Hail Mary, whatever power play came before acceptance.

“Your name? No, I’m certain I don’t know you,” she replied while eyeing her nail beds like it was just another day in the salon. “That’s what bothers you, isn’t it? That I mean enough to you to warrant all of this.” She gestured to each corner of the room to emphasize her point, before landing her glare on me again. “And you mean *nothing* to me. It’s all about your wounded ego.”

“Is that your final answer?” I hissed between clenched teeth. I shouldn’t let her bait me, but the woman knew how to sink her teeth into my skin, gnaw past flesh and get to the real meat beneath the surface. Like some sort of parasitic creature.

Emily fed off me, and I bled for her.

“You want more?” she fired back. “Fine. Beneath all that toxic masculinity is a little boy with a lot of mommy issues. Did she hurt you? Is that why you are the way you are? Is she the one who did that to your face? So now you have to take it out—”

Before the toxic words were fully formed in her mouth, I’d crossed the room, shoved her against the mattress, drew the knife from my waistband, and pressed the serrated blade across her throat. A straight-edge would have been more effective but I enjoyed the sensation of sawing across flesh. The push and pull and the sound of snapping tendons. It was like cutting into a taut rubber band.

“Enough about my mother, pet.” I grinned, my voice eerily calm as I hummed my command against her cheek.

“I’ve struck a chord, huh?” Her throat bobbed with the question, causing the blade to bite into her skin and bright-red liquid to drip down her throat and onto my hand.

“My mother was a saint, Emily. How was yours? Did she pass down those same nurturing instincts to you? Or are you just too goddamn selfish to ever have children of your own?”

Her eyes widened before narrowing in my direction. “FUCK YOU,” she hissed, pulling saliva between her cheeks and launching it at my face.

Obviously, she hadn't learned after the first time. A little spilled bodily fluid was nothing to me.

“As much as I've enjoyed that cunt of yours, right now, I'd rather not. But if I'm careful enough, you'll sure make for one pretty corpse.” I repositioned my knee, digging it into the pressure point on her thigh, drew my knife back for a second time, aimed for her cold dead heart, and...

“Cohen! Wait!”

My arm stilled midair as if tethered back by some invisible force while she stared up at me with those goddamn doe eyes of hers. As if I were the villain in all this. She was sobbing but she wasn't afraid—that much I could discern as I watched her.

“I lost the baby...”

# CHAPTER 14

## TEN YEARS PRIOR

I glared at the two little pink lines staring back at me from where the plastic stick was perched on my bathroom counter. Eyeing them as if I could somehow will them to disappear.

This was it. My life was over. I'd carry on the legacy of becoming an unfit single mother to a child I never wanted. My hand drifted to my abdomen with the thought. I didn't mean it the way it sounded, I told myself and the unborn baby who was nothing more than a blip beneath my fingers. It wasn't about me not wanting them. It was about them being better off without me. I didn't know how to do this. I was never shown how, and I was almost certain that the genetic trait of being a shitty parent was passed down from generation to generation in my family.

But it wasn't just about me. He needed to know. He *deserved* to know. It was the right thing to do. Then Cohen could decide for himself if I—*we* were worth sticking around for.

My hands trembled over his name in my contacts. We barely knew each other, our relationship consisting of a *few dates more* than a one-night stand. And he was almost finished his surgical residency—he was at the top of his class. With a life and a future ahead of him.

I typed out a message, deleted it, and typed again while chewing on my nail beds till they bled. The copper tang grounded me enough to hit *send*.

**Me: Hey, can you come over?**

My eyes flicked to the analog clock on the wall. Fuck, that sounded like a late-night booty call more than an invitation to have a serious conversation.

**Me: If not, that's fine. I just have something to tell you.**

*Send.* Yup, that one sounded worse. Like I was about to inform him that a series of antibiotics was in his near future. Lucky for us, a baby was only slightly less permanent than Herpes. You could walk away from the former, not the latter. My mother taught me that much.

I watched those familiar bubbles pop up on my screen and disappear. Then pop up and disappear again twice more.

**Cohen: I can't tonight. I really want to. Promise. But I'm assisting in the OR tomorrow morning. Have to be bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, babe.**

**Me: Okay, I understand.**

I dropped my phone onto the counter with an audible clank and a sigh, my eyes glued to the chipped paint on the ceiling until the device pinged with another incoming text.

**Cohen: What are you wearing?**

*Are you fucking kidding me?* I glared at the screen as if it had personally offended me rather than the man behind the message.

The thing about Leos was that we acted on emotion and impulse. A living, breathing example of “fuck around and find out,” which got me into trouble on more than one occasion.

**Me: A t-shirt, a black lacy thong, and this...**

I proceeded to snap a photo of the pregnancy test and send it on through.

*Like I said, impulsive and emotional.*

# CHAPTER 15

**TEN YEARS PRIOR**

Call me the Grinch but my dick deflated while my heart grew ten sizes that day. I was going to be a father...

I considered typing out a reply. But I couldn't find the words to describe how I was feeling in this moment. Emily was it for me. I knew it even if she didn't. The baby only gave me more of a reason to rush things. I needed to see her. Ask her to marry me before I missed my chance. It was the perfect opening without sounding completely off my rocker.

So I jumped out of bed, slid on a pair of gray sweats, a white beater, and my leather jacket, grabbed my helmet and rushed out to my bike. Then I flung a leg over the seat and hopped on, barely checking that the road was clear before I was pulling onto the street and merging with traffic. I should have called her first. Told her I was on my way. But I was afraid that whatever I said wouldn't come out right and I'd scare her off. Emily was easily startled, like a bird with an injured wing, only with a much stronger bite.

I'd only been to her place once before and she'd never been to mine. But I knew the way there like it was imprinted on my mind. I guess everything about this woman was. I wasn't ashamed to admit I was a little obsessed.

Thirty minutes into the hour commute, I was pulling up to a stop light. Propping my bike up with one leg on the ground and the other supported by my footpeg. I reached into my pocket and quickly withdrew my phone to check the time.

Ten past midnight. I had to be scrubbed up and in the OR in less than five hours but that didn't matter right now...

Or ever really. Seeing as the next thing I knew, my helmet was flying off my head, my bike was propelled forward, and my face was scraping against hot asphalt. Apparently the asshole behind me hadn't seen my bike or, if he had, was just too drunk to care.

Lucky for me, adrenaline kicked in quick and I was able to roll across the highway, out of harm's way, curl up into a ball, and hold my face on until paramedics arrived. The pain was indescribable, unbearable, and yet the only thing running through my mind was the fear I would never get to meet my kid.

I lost more than my left eye that night. I lost my career, my chance for a family, the man I could have been, and not long after all that, I lost my ability to trust. And it was all because of *her*.

That was the night Emily Bradshaw stole *everything* from me.

# EPILOGUE

EMILY

## Ten Years Prior

ME: IT WAS A JOKE, COHEN. I'M NOT REALLY PREGNANT. YOU didn't have to ghost me. That's really immature by the way. But I guess I know what kind of man you are now. So thanks for that. You can lose my number because I'll be deleting yours.

—

I did it.

Mandy: You finally told him about the miscarriage???

No, I chickened out, said it was a joke.

Mandy: Oh, Em, is that really a good idea? He should be there supporting you.

Fuck him. I don't want his support. I don't ever want to see him again. He's already pretending our baby never existed. I'm just helping him perpetuate the lie he tells himself in the mirror every day. He didn't take the chance to get to know me, us, or our unborn child. And now he'll never have that opportunity again.

Mandy: I'm sorry, hun.

There's nothing to be sorry about. Now we're both dead to him. One of us just happens to still be breathing...

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sybil is a career-driven Philadelphian native. A crime show enthusiast by day, and club hopper by night. When she isn't working or writing, she is talking about working and writing. She is a single mom to her beta fish (Fish) and way too many dead houseplants.

Her stories range from gray to black, with darker themes throughout. She prefers heroines with a kick-ass mentality and the heroes who know how to rein them in. The mental and medical aspects of her books are well-researched, though they are given a humanistic approach and diagnoses aren't the focal points. She believes her characters don't need to wear labels in order to get her messages across.

Her books are mostly standalones, though her characters may interact and intersect worlds.



# THE SONS & DAUGHTERS OF SIN- PART ONE: GREED

R.E. JOHNSON

# CHAPTER 1

## KURZAN- LOWER PRINCE OF GREED

I CLOSED THE DOOR BEHIND ME; HEARING THE MAN'S SCREAMS wouldn't do anything to stir my sympathy. I don't know why he bothered. It had been a relatively informative session, though. Apparently, another demon clan had stolen a shipment of our drugs. It was selling them off without giving the Coskaras their cut.

I despised dealing with interrogations; they were boring, but Father knew how to get me to do anything. After all, the only thing I liked less than dealing with thieving scum was dealing with them in Hell, and revoking my earthside access was definitely something the old bastard would do just to piss me off.

"Your father is looking for you." One of my escorts approached cautiously as he spoke, holding out a cell toward me.

I grabbed the thing and put it to my ear, "Speak of the fucking devil. What?"

"Watch your tone, boy. I'll demote you, yet." Andrei Coskaras, Prince of Greed and head of the family, droned on in my ear.

"And lose your best pusher? Right. What is it?"

"Your interrogation is about to end early. I have a job for you. Retrieval and containment."

I sighed, "Would you please just say kidnapping? We've enchanted the line. No one's listening."

Walking toward my parked ride, I started the car, which connected my phone to the Bluetooth.

“The interrogation is done. It’s the Kalvaskas men. They roughed up a dealer and took his product. Who’s the mark?” I cracked my window, lighting up a smoke for the drive.

“How timely. Kalvaskas progeny is your target. One Senka Kalvaskas. She should be easy for you.”

“And why exactly am I snagging some chick from his family?” I took a drag.

“That ‘chick’ is his firstborn, Princess of the Carnal Realm, and heiress to his dominion. I want it. You know that. Just do it.”

“Fine,” I flicked the cigarette out the window, landing it at my escort’s feet, “I’m going.”

I hung up the call and shouted out the window, “Get the house ready for company. I’m bringing home a guest.”

“Yes, sir. Right away. Will you be needing the tool set up?” Rafe asked.

“Let’s hope not. I have better things to be doing than working over some Princess of Hell. At least, more appealing people to be doing it with.”

I thought about the typical style most demons who resided in Hell sported and cringed. Spending my evening “retrieving” a horned, oozing, and charred demoness wasn’t my idea of fun, even if she was the daughter of the Prince of the Carnal Realm.

I mean, you never knew with demons. They could present more human like I did, even in full demon form, or they could literally be a walking pile of organs or bones. Fuck, I’d even had to deal with a particularly nasty bug demon before. Carnal Princess or not, the chances of her being “attractive” in the usual sense were slim to none.

As I took off for my penthouse to use one of the few access gates that existed between Hell and the Mortal Realm, I considered the timing of my father’s phone call a bit more. It

was odd that the guy had managed to call right after I'd interrogated one of Kalvaskas' thugs. If Kalvaskas had indeed sent the fucker to simply disrupt our drug flow, why'd he send a higher-level demon? Why not send an imp or, Hell, someone under his thrall to do it? Why had he sent one of his commanders?

Kalvaskas had to know that my father would demand swift and harsh retribution for fucking with his money. It was the only thing he truly cared about. I didn't like it. It smelled fishy as fuck, and I was suspicious of everything to begin with.

Pulling into the apartment garage, I took the private elevator up after parking my Bugatti La Voiture Noire haphazardly. I owned the building, so I didn't give a fuck about how many spaces I took up. The gate was in my bedroom, protected by every mundane and magical lock around. When I was about to go through, I took a second look at my clothes in my bathroom mirror. Objectively, they were fine, but if I was going for stealth, a change was in order.

I slipped into something more black and quiet and stepped through the gate. My father's fucked up palace came into view on the other side, and I B-lined straight for my balcony exit in hopes of avoiding the man altogether until the task was done.

The golden expanse of my father's home was bright and ostentatious, the structure built with floors and floors of endless rooms, each more blinged out than the last. Everything glowed with an eerie red light, making the shiny gold surfaces look hot or covered in blood. Knowing my asshole dad, both were equally likely to be true.

The Carnal Realm wasn't far from the Realm of Greed, the concentric circles of Hell crossing over each other at specific points in their maze-like layout. In Hell's permanent darkness, I'd blend in well, with only the occasional fire and brimstone to avoid so that I wouldn't be seen. Yeah, fucking brimstone, even the thought made me roll my eyes, but the King of Hell and Prince of Pride wasn't a subtle creature.

Covering the distance would still take time, and unfortunately, dropping my human form would make travel

quicker. I hated slipping into full demon mode, but when the Prince of Greed wants something, it's best that you deliver quickly.

Releasing my hold on my true form, I let my tail slice out of my spine. Horns tipped in gold quickly followed, and I grunted as the pain raked through me. Warm blood dripped down my legs and forehead as they appeared, and I was all the more grateful that I'd chosen a shitty black outfit for my trek into Hell. My black scales blended in with the fabric, and without another thought, I flew off into the dark toward the kingdom of the Prince of Lust.

## CHAPTER 2

## AZGOS- LOWER PRINCE OF WRATH

AH! IT WAS FUCKING BULLSHIT, AND EVEN MY WHORE OF A mother knew it. I hadn't done anything to piss off his fucking lowness of Greed, and they could both get fucked anyway.

“Ahhh!”

I punched clean through the drywall next to me, and the small studio apartment reverberated around me as my curses shook the space like an earthquake. Sure, this “abode” was nicer than Hell, but not by fucking much, and my mother had fucking stuck me here because she was a fucking bitch that didn't want to deal with her own fucking kid.

Yeah, she could get double fucked.

“Azgos, get a hold of yourself, for fuck's sake! I just got off the phone with the useless sludge of a man, and he's claimed that you had one of our demons smuggle out some of his drugs. Honestly, I know you enjoy angering me to no end, but stealing from Andredi Coskaras is just stupid.”

Her grating voice tore through the magicked line and made my phone buzz. Thank Hell I'd put her on speaker, or I'd probably have crushed the phone in my grip. It'd be the third one this week.

“I did shit! Why the fuck would I want someone's fucking drugs?! It's not like I sell them! I have one fucking job in this pisshole of a universe, and it's torturing, not sales!”

The Princess of Wrath, Regina Wracordas, grumbled over the line, “It's apparently not your *only* job! You excel at ruining everything! Just figure it out, Azgos! Do some

digging, or whatever you fucking children are calling it these days, and don't come crawling back to Hell without an answer!" I heard my mother swallow. "You have three days. Then, I'll deal with it myself. And you."

The line went dead, and shortly after, another fist made its way through the wall. I had quite the collection of holes at this point. One of my fucking demons was in for another night of patch jobs.

"Fix this shit!" I screamed at one of them as I walked down the hall, the lava beneath my skin brimming to the surface and casting an orange glow on the walls. Deal with it, she said. Like it was that fucking simple to ask the Prince of Greed some questions, let alone get actual answers. Demons are habitual liars, myself included.

Perhaps a face-to-face would avail me of some real info. Looks like I was paying that fucker Kurzan a visit. I hadn't seen the asshole since he'd managed to trick me into getting wasted with him, and we'd fucked at the bacchanal.

*Asshole.*

Rage burned brighter, and I vaguely noted the smell of melting vinyl as I passed. My bathroom was down at the opposite end of the hall from my bedroom. As I reached the grime-encrusted tile monstrosity, I met my eyes in the reflection. My eyes glowed like flames, a faint smoke drifting off me.

It wasn't like I gave a shit about anyone saying dick about who or how I fucked, but the fact that Kurzan had fucking told Er'gokan sucked ass. That asshat couldn't let go of a juicy piece of gossip to save his life. Bringing that shit up at every chance was his favorite way to piss me off. Proudful bastard always had to have the most information out of everyone and about everything.

I could see Er's smug face when he saw me later, whispering in my ear like a fucking child because he had a dirty secret. I'd gone to punch the bastard but thank his fucking lucky stars, he dodged quicker than he shut his fucking mouth.

And Kurzan just expected me to buy that he'd never said anything, and Er had to have been spying. *Yeah fucking right. I'm not that fucking thick, you gold dick.*

I mean, come on. It's not like Er would have come up with the phrase raging lava cock on his own. That screamed of Kurzan. After all, he'd been the one to swallow it like a fucking champ. *And you were the one who let him shove his tail up your ass while you gagged on his.*

I shook the thought from my head. It wouldn't fucking help me right now. Unless, of course, I could plow his ass into oblivion to get those deetz my stupid fucking mother wanted.

“Well, Kurzan, if this *was* your fucking doing, you're fucking toast, you piece of shit,” I growled at the gateway my mother had hidden in a secret compartment behind the shower, of all places.

As I stepped through, I dropped the pretense of my human form and rolled my shoulders as burning red rock scales rippled across my skin. Flying would have come in useful at a time like this, but that's just another thing to be angry about—wrath demons don't get wings, only pride demons.

I did have a big fucking pair of horns, though, and imagining ramming them into Kurzan's stupid chest brought out a smile.

“Ding dong fuck face, Az's coming for a fucking visit!”

# CHAPTER 3

## SENKA- LOWER PRINCESS OF LUST

SITTING IN THIS PENTHOUSE WAS GROWING INCREASINGLY annoying. I was incredibly bored, but my parents were off fucking somewhere and demanded I didn't leave the estate. It wasn't like I had anywhere better to go, but they could have at least provided some entertainment.

“Speaking of,” I whispered to myself.

Picking up my cell and dialing Mal, my trustworthy demonic booty call, I hopped onto my chaise lounge and began playing with a dagger.

“Senka. How can I serve you?” he answered.

“You know exactly how you can serve me. Get your cock over here.” I ordered.

“Any special requests?”

Mal knew that I liked to try a variety of things when we fucked, and he was usually quite good at rolling with the punches, both figuratively and literally.

“No. I'm just bored. Hurry up.”

I hung up and waited for him to materialize at my balcony window. Sure enough, he was there in a few seconds and knocked on the glass with a smile. Unfortunately for him, and unlike myself, he was fully clothed, however.

“Strip.”

I smirked, still lying on the chaise and content to watch for now, even if I did toy with a nipple absentmindedly.

“Out here?” He raised his eyebrows at me.

“What? Like you care? Don’t pretend your exhibitionism knows any bounds.”

Mal began to undress slowly, and I made my way across the room toward him, exaggerating the sway of my hips and willing the red lights to dim.

When he was good and naked, he held his arms out, gesturing for approval. I just nodded. After all, he hadn’t earned any praise yet.

“Put your cock on the glass,” I said as I sank to my knees.

Doing as told, Mal pressed his erection to the cool surface. I took in the veins and curves that ringed his dick in useful ribs. Precum dripped from his tip, and the red of his skin and scales shone brighter as his desire heightened.

I made direct eye contact with Mal as I dragged my tongue up the glass right on the other side of his cock, which twitched as it begged for attention.

“Senka, are you letting me in or not?” Mal groaned.

“And why should I?”

Raising my eyebrows at him, I stood back up and returned to the chaise, presenting my ass and slit for him, driving him to the edge. If he busted through my door, I’d peg Mal so hard he’d see stars as he shot cum all over the broken pieces, which he’d clean up with his tongue.

“Please, Senka. Let me worship you, pleasure that cunt with my ribs as I tail fuck your ass.”

I smiled. I did enjoy Mal’s tail. It was dextrous and long. Sliding the door open just enough with a wave, I leaned deeper into the lounge and dipped a finger into my pussy.

“Well, come on then.”

Mal was inside and on me in moments, driving his thick cock up to the hilt in my cunt and rubbing his spit into my asshole with his thumb. I laughed as he fucked me hard and fast, quickly adding his tail to the fun as he grunted and panted like a wild dog.

He hit all the right spots as he frenzied. I was wet, and the filthy slapping noises we made echoed around the room. In only a partial shift, my tail was tucked away. Still, I knew how much Mal enjoyed my unique blend of torture, so I slipped it free and reached around behind him to shove it between his cheeks, teasing his hole.

“Senka! Fuck yeah, baby. I want to fill that cunt.”

Mal had never been excellent with words, but his dick made up for it. He fucked me harder as I thrust my tail into his ass. He moaned, squeezing my hips tightly and eliciting a delicious sting of pain.

That’s when I heard something on the balcony.

Barely noticeable against the black sky, a demon stood outside my room, watching. I could just make out the points of golden horns cresting above his glowing yellow stare. I could feel the lust sweeping off him in waves. It was unlike anything I’d felt before, powerful and potent and all for me.

I smiled as the mystery demon continued to watch and imagined him fucking me in place of Mal, which somehow made the experience better than it ever was. Whoever was out there exuded something I couldn’t put my claw on, and despite my more rational mind’s objection, I wanted to perform for him, make him wanton, and impress him with my skills.

*Impress him?* I stilled slightly as the thought crawled up from the depths of my mind. It went against the persona I’d worked so hard to develop, brimming with a latent submission that had haunted my thoughts in the late hours.

Mal fucked harder, screaming that he was “so close. So close, baby.”

I looked over my shoulder, sneaking a glimpse at the tall, muscular demon who I was sure had no idea I’d noticed him. Forcing my tail deeper into Mal so that he might get the message and do the same, I reached down to stroke my clit as I admired the man outside.

That’s when I noticed his thick erection gripped tightly in his fist. It was one of the most impressive I’d ever seen,

massive and barbed at the base where it swelled into a delicious knot. *A greed demon. Oh, hell yes.*

They were known for their fantastic cocks that demanded as much of you as possible. Imagining his hard dick inside me was what finally pushed me over the edge and allowed me a rare climax, watching as my mystery demon did the same, painting the glass with his tasty golden cum. I wanted it all over me, inside me, and the thoughts were so surprisingly arousing that my orgasm stretched on and on until Mal was begging to be freed.

I tore my tail from him, flicking him away and back to his unimpressive home with a wave of my hand. I'd had my fun, and now it was time to interrogate.

# CHAPTER 4

## KURZAN- LOWER PRINCE OF GREED

I'D ARRIVED AT THE TARGET'S HOME JUST IN TIME TO SEE another lust demon strip on her balcony. *Fucking christ*. The assholes were always rutting like drunk fools, so I shouldn't have been surprised. Internally groaning so as not to reveal my position, I waited until the sliding glass door had opened up just enough to let the man through and then stalked over to the opening, peering inside for a glimpse of the unlucky Lower Princess of Lust.

That's when I laid eyes on her.

The red of her skin was a creamy invitation to carnal pleasures, and the black horns on her forehead that extended from under her long black hair looked intriguing and dangerous. She was bent over a small chaise, presenting her dripping cunt to the fucker that wanted inside so badly.

A growl rumbled up from my chest. *No. No. She's mine. Mine, mine, mine*. Potent greed stronger than anything I'd ever felt swam up from the depths of my soul, and it was utter insanity. I was out of my damned mind, wanting, *needing*, that demon under me.

I couldn't stop staring, watching her delicious cunt take that cock as her asshole stretched around the demon's tail. My erection ached, throbbing so hard I thought I might die. Reaching down to squeeze my shaft until my knuckles ached, I stroked in time with their thrusts, imagining burying myself deep inside the gorgeous lust demon. *My lust demon*.

Her efforts picked up, and I could sense the impending climax in us both, the air becoming a hazy wave of energy

around her.

Shouts from her partner echoed through her room, and I growled low. I would see his head on a pike for touching what belonged to me. Pressure built in my shaft, my barbs grazing my knuckles as I stroked.

And that's when I noticed it.

This filthy, delicious lust demon was watching. Her eyes were trained on my cock, following it as I thrust into my fist. It was enough to push me over the edge, knowing she was focused on me despite that useless demon's efforts. I came, spraying gold across the glass of her door, and she arched back as I did, crying out as her own release claimed her. It was because of me. It belonged to me. And it certainly wouldn't be the last orgasm I pulled from her body.

She tore her tail from the other demon with little ceremony and sent him packing. I chuckled to myself as I tucked my dick back in my pants and then stopped in my tracks.

Never. I never acted like this. I never jerked off, let alone this damn display. What had happened?

I stepped back, giving myself space from the mess I'd left, and straightened my clothes.

The lust demon stood, retrieved a robe from a nearby hook, and wrapped it around herself. As the sight of her naked form disappeared, I felt more of my brain clear. *This fucking bitch*. I should have known better. Lust demons were notorious for eliciting unwanted responses from everyone around them, and I walked right into it like an idiot.

She walked to the door, and I tensed, preparing for her charms this time.

"Well, won't you come in?" Her voice was like wine, dark and rich and potent.

Hesitating and then quietly grumbling to myself, I entered her room. I avoided moving much farther than the door frame and conjured my blade to my hand.

“And here I thought I was the kinky one. Should we at least come up with a safe word first, or do you just want me to hurt you?”

Her eyes sparkled, more of that lust pouring from her, and I stifled a groan. Glaring at her from beneath my brows, I noticed something else flicker across her stare- fear. That I could work with, and I wanted her begging me for mercy until she confessed her crimes against the Coskaras family.

“Don’t try your shit again, demon. You’ll find I’m much less patient with your games this time around.”

I stepped forward, holding the blade out, and the claws at her fingertips lengthened.

“You must be out of your mind, greed demon. Attacking the Lower Princess of Lust in her own bedroom. If you wanted to die, there were much more fun ways to do it.”

She threw her title at me like it might protect her, and all I could do was laugh.

“I know exactly who you are, Senka, and you’re coming with me.”

My grab was lightning fast, and then I had her wrist in my grip. I slashed the knife through the skin of her bicep, sending droplets of black-red blood to the ground. Willing the pool of liquid into a message for the High Prince of Lust, I teleported us out of her room and back to the palace of greed. Soon, her servants would find my note, and I smiled at the thought of them reading it.

*She’s ours now. The Coskaras Clan sends its regards.*



Arriving home, or at least the place where I stayed when I was on this side of the veil, I tossed Senka to the chaise that sat in the corner of my golden room.

Shifting out of full demon mode, I assumed my more human appearance. I willed the locks on my only door and a

set of handcuffs into my hand. Senka glared at me from the chaise as she righted herself, but I clicked the cuffs in place before she could get up.

“Seriously? What the fuck is wrong with you?”

The hiss and rage in her voice rattled through the air, scorching it. But she was still pumping power into her fucking lust, and it had to stop- now.

“Shut it down, Senka. Shift.”

I walked toward her, lowering to a knee to put the tip of my blade under her chin.

“No. I don’t take orders from you.” Her glare was liquid molten through my veins.

“You will. Now,” I pressed the blade into Senka’s skin, a droplet of blood welling up to the surface, “shift.”

We hung in that space of tension and threat for what seemed like years, but then Senka broke eye contact and huffed out a breath. Her human form slid over her skin quickly, and the potency of her powers died down, if only slightly.

Lust demons were all tempting curves, a heightened version of the best in sexual appeal. Still, when they were in human mode, they could be as expected and unappealing as anyone. Apparently, luck wasn’t on my side this time, however.

Senka—demon form and more human—was fucking breathtaking. Her red skin changed to a deep mocha color while her hair remained midnight black. Her eyes didn’t glow the same red, but the teal color they sported now was equally as mesmerizing. Hell, even her fantastic tits were just as intoxicating as they remained large for her thin waist.

Maybe it was something about being a pure demon or one step down from the original lust demon himself, but Senka was jaw-droppingly gorgeous, beyond fuckable, and it was still a huge problem.

“Better?”

I stayed silent, not trusting my voice, and considered how I'd manage to stand while keeping my erection hidden.

“What do you want, greed demon? Who are you?”

That seemed to help. Senka playing dumb just made my greedy need to appease my father burn hotter.

“Don't try to fake innocence, Senka. You know very well why the Coskaras want you.”

I shoved her back, as good a plan as any to stand up without poking her in the eye, and turned away from her. Tucking my dick behind my waistband, I faced her again, only to find a pretty real-looking confusion on her face.

“I mean, I know why anyone wants me, but somehow, I don't think that's what you mean. Why don't you enlighten me so I can get to the part where you're wrong?”

I towered over her as she sat cuffed to the chaise and hovered the knife above her heart in the air.

“A stolen shipment. Two sources for the Family say that the Kalvaskas clan did it. And the High Prince of fucking Greed himself says it was you that orchestrated it.”

I put a booted foot between Senka's legs, leaning down onto my knee as I stared at her.

“Now, my dad's a fucker, to be sure, but he's also not stupid. He knows where to look for good information. So why don't you tell me why my old man would be wrong about you?”

Senka scoffed at me with a smirk. “So you're Kurzan. Heard a lot about you. And I don't know why your dad had bad intel, but he does. I didn't steal shit. I don't need to.”

With the knife still pressed against her skin, another well of blood prickling up between her breasts, I reached down for Senka's hair at the back of her neck and squeezed.

“And why's that, princess?”

Her eyes rolled back as she pushed herself forward, the knife cutting deeper. Then Senka flicked her gaze to mine,

sliding her hand over mine in her hair, forcing my grip tighter.

“Because I make all the stuff for Kalvaskas. I’m their cook.”

The raging lust that coursed through my veins like heroin made it hard to focus on her words, but then they sank in. Losing a shipment is nothing compared to losing your chemist.

“Well, I’ll be damned again. I think we have a problem, princess.”

# CHAPTER 5

## SENKA- LOWER PRINCESS OF LUST

IF THIS WAS WHAT INTERROGATIONS WERE SUPPOSED TO BE like, I would have tried one much sooner. Still, as Kurzan's knife dug into my sternum, I didn't think I'd want anyone else at the other end of the blade. *At least none that I can think of.*

Unfortunately, I could tell there was something more going on as soon as the mix-up occurred, and the situation didn't bode well for either of us.

"You may be right, Kurzan."

How exactly his father had found information that I'd stolen from his family was concerning. Of course, I didn't need to, but furthermore, I didn't *want* to. That was a dumb idea on any day. No demon is above killing, and I very much like being alive.

Why would someone plant that rumor anyway? And who? Obviously, the lust demons don't want me dead, and the Coskaras would just attack without cause. Retribution from my parents would be swift and bloody.

Could the other demon clans be conspiring against the Carnal Realm?

I needed more information, and there was one way to get it standing right in front of me.

"I'd be more than happy to exchange details, Kurzan. A little quid pro quo?"

Raising a brow at him, I scooted closer to Kurzan's boot, allowing the toe to nudge between my legs. A barely audible hiss licked through the air, and he squeezed my hair again.

“This knife is going nowhere. You hear me? I still don’t trust you.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way, baby.”

I smirked up at him, the pain in my scalp stinging and going straight to my core. The way I wanted this demon’s fury was all animal, but there was some danger afoot, so I reeled it back.

“And as I was saying, I cook the Kalvaskas’ drugs, and I’m no slouch in the brains department either. I know how easy it is to lose a position, even if I am Princess. So, I haven’t shared my secret sauce recipe with anyone.”

Kurzan stepped back, considering, and then spoke to the distance.

“You haven’t shared it at all?”

I crossed my legs to lay back on the chaise. *I might as well get comfortable if he’s going to keep me cuffed to this chair.*

“No. Like I said. I enjoy job security.”

When he finally stopped pacing, Kurzan moved to the chaise once more, moving his dagger to make connection with my neck.

“What does your stuff do? I have a feeling your batches have a similar modus operandi as ours.”

“Likely. It’s a lust demon-based version, of course, so you know. The fucking, the debauchery. It actually works on other demons, too, which I’m especially proud of.”

As Kurzan stared me down, I felt that coil of something different burning in my core. I’d been turned on before, duh, but the electricity he brought forward in my blood was entirely new.

I couldn’t help myself as he stood over the chaise, and almost on its own, my hand dragged up his leg.

The pull to him was undeniable, and as Kurzan tensed under my claws, I couldn’t tell if it was from frustration, annoyance, or desire.

“Do you think anyone would be able to reverse engineer the drugs from your supply?”

Kurzan spoke through gritted teeth.

“Hmm. Fair question. Maybe. But it would be damn hard to come up with the exact mixture and ratios. I use dummy ingredients, and I can’t say many of my kind are especially detail-oriented. Outside of the bedroom anyway.”

The grip Kurzan had on the dagger squeezed, his knuckles going white, and I pressed closer to the blade, reaching up to inch closer to his cock.

Pain bloomed through my skin as the knife pierced my skin, a small trickle of blood dripping down the shaft of the blade. *Hell, I want this demon to destroy me.*

The thought was from that alien place of service that I’d never allowed myself to explore, and a nervous fear set up shop in my gut.

The blaze in Kurzan’s eyes intensified, and he leaned closer, his lips a breath away from mine. I’d doubted if he truly had simply been affected by being around me, but this I wasn’t doing.

“So, if I killed you, the Kalvaskas would be going without their product?”

“Among other things.”

I flicked my stare to his lips, craving them on every inch of my skin.

“Hmm. Daddy Coskaras could very well want that. He could want that a lot. Ending your life would put me in his good graces, and fuck if it ain’t hard to get there.”

He yanked on my hair, causing the blade to slice sideways across my neck. It wasn’t much, but the threat was clear.

I couldn’t deny what was happening, however.

“Tell me something, Kurzan.” I pulled my chin back, if only slightly, and dragged my tongue down the shiny surface, licking up the blood. “I know you greed demons have a

reputation, but is pleasing His Highness really what you want?  
Or is there something else eating up that dark little heart of  
yours?"

# CHAPTER 6

## KURZAN- LOWER PRINCE OF GREED

HELLS AND BEYOND, SHE WAS DOING IT AGAIN. THAT delectable fucking demon was using her lust magic and striping me of my judgment.

A big part of me wanted to move back, to let the blade hover there and put some space between us, but the rest of me wanted to stay right up near her, pushing the limits and seeing how much more I could get without going bust.

Yeah, I was fucking greedy, and I wanted more like a fucking junkie on the edge of dying.

I closed my eyes for a brief moment, smelling her blood and flesh so near me, before I looked back up at her and smirked.

“I do want more than just pleasing my father. In fact, I love pissing him off. But I need answers to do that and save my ass. So, yeah, here’s a bit of what I know in exchange for more from you.”

Senka eyed me, the red irises glowing. My eyes flicked to her breasts, admiring the way her nipples showed through the thin fabric of her robe, and she adjusted on the chaise again, letting the two halves of the garment split open around her thigh.

“Knock it off,” I growled.

“I assure you I’m not doing anything. Magically, anyway.”

I rolled my eyes and met her gaze with a glare.

“I interrogated the thief we found snooping around our Earth-side base. Probably one of many. They gave me your

clan name. Said it was the Kalvaskas who wanted the drugs so bad. He had few good reasons to lie and several bad ones to keep him honest. Why would he lie?”

Tilting her head to the side, Senka narrowed her gaze. “I don’t think he did.”

“Explain.” I gripped her hair harder again, reminding Senka of her situation.

“He probably did believe he was sent by my clan. It’s easier to look like you’re telling the truth when you are to the best of your knowledge.”

“So you think someone posing as a Kalvaskas or associate set you up?”

“It’s very likely, especially considering your father said the chain went up to me, and I have no idea what all this is about.”

I scoffed. “So you say.”

“It’s the truth. I have little reason to take your drugs. I can make my own, but snatching me from the Kalvaskas would be detrimental to their supply. At least for a long while. What’s more, that’s quite the jump up the totem pole, don’t you think?”

Senka dipped her head to stare up at me from behind her lashes, rubbing slightly against the toe of my boot on the chaise. My cock pulsed, and I was practically salivating. It was like being starved for days, with just the necessities keeping you alive.

Yanking her head again and moving the tip up the blade under her chin, I growled, the human form I preferred flickering as my greed and anger swelled.

“What did I say, demon? Knock. It. Off.”

A shaky breath escaped her lips, and Senka’s eyelids fluttered.

“I’m not doing anything.” Her words were a deep growl. “But I’ll admit the grip you have on my hair is not helping, which is new.”

“The fuck do you mean?” I snarled at her, squeezing tighter.

“Uhh,” she moaned, “Ever since I noticed you on my balcony, a host of new thoughts, ones I kept locked away, have bubbled forward. And I’m starting to think it’s your greed that’s rubbing off on me. How do I know you’re not using your magic to make me want things I’ve never ever allowed myself to consider? That sounds like greed to me.”

“Shut your fucking mouth, Senka. I’m not the one who’s been pulling shit this entire time. Fucking that useless piece of shit just so I’d have to watch you come all over his fucking dick, throwing your demonic lust all over me like it might save you.”

Her claws flew to my arm, digging in as she fought to break the other hand free. Gold blood seeped to the surface of my skin, and I gripped the dagger tighter. Senka pushed my arm back, moving up onto her knees as I stepped back from the chaise and planted my feet on the floor.

The blade still pressed to her throat, and dark crimson blood pooled at the notch of her throat. I towered over Senka as she kneeled inches away from my hips. The black pupils of her human eyes were consumed by the red of her lust demon form. Fangs and horns started to push free from her mouth and hair.

“I told you! I’m not doing anything! It’s not like coming actually does anything for my power. Lust doesn’t mean satisfied.”

I leaned down, my face inches from hers. “You expect me to buy that? I love money, and I love owning everything, but that shit I ain’t paying for.”

“I’m a purebred lust demon, daughter of the High Prince of Lust who created my mother from his own blood. We’re demons, Kurzan. We’re all fucking damned. Do you actually think orgasms would be allowed for something like us?”

My mind spun. What was she getting at?

“I don’t—”

“Forget it! I shouldn’t have said anything. Just fuck off or kill me and get on with it!”

I spun my grip off the blade, letting it hang in the air, and wrenched Senka’s arm behind her back as I pulled her against my chest. Her cuffed wrist pulled, the metal digging into her skin. I moved the blade closer, hovering it just above her heart.

“Spill it. I’m getting really impatient.”

Senka’s breath left her in ragged puffs, hissing against the pain in her arms.

“You piece of shit.”

She growled, and I put more pressure on her arm.

“Ah! Lower demons, the fuckers crawling around in the muck, are made from human souls.” she struggled against my grip. “They retain some of that humanity. I’m not so lucky. I’ve never experienced life like that. I’ve never...”

More pressure. “Never what?”

“Fine, what do I care? I’m just going to die anyway. I’ve never orgasmed, all right. Seeing you, knowing you were watching, that was the first time. So, unless I can buy your greedy ass off with some cash, just get it the fuck over with.”

My brain went nuclear. She’d never come, not once, until... me.

*It was mine. She was mine. That orgasm was mine. Mine, mine, mine.*

“Who said greed had anything to do with money? Right now,” I spun Senka around and pulled her against me, dropping the dagger and knowing full well that my cock pressed into her, “I’m greedy for that cunt. So, do as you’re told, princess.”

# CHAPTER 7

## SENKA- LOWER PRINCESS OF LUST

RAW, PRIMAL LUST ROARED SO HARD THROUGH MY BODY THAT I thought I might pass out, and I was familiar with the stuff. But this was different. This was better than the usual magic, better than my drugs, better than anything.

Kurzan continued to squeeze my arm against my back, and the other hand was still cuffed to the chaise. The thick feel of his erection pressed against my hips, and I couldn't stop the moan from escaping as his words hit me.

His lips crashed into mine. The kiss was biting and rough caresses as he reached up and took a handful of my hair at my nape. Hells, the taste of him was pure sin and delicious- hot red lust, sickly sweet greed, and a zinging connection that zipped through me like electricity.

I would never get enough of it.

My body roared to life in a way it never had. It was like I could feel every molecule of my demonic form buzzing, and each one was desperate for more of Kurzan. *All* of Kurzan.

“You're going to give me everything, Senka. Your mouth, your cunt, your ass, your very fucking soul. It's all mine. *You* are mine.”

I could feel his claim through the weave of Hellish magic that animated every part of our damned domain. I was his, he was mine, and there was nothing in Heaven or Hell that would change that.

Kurzan pulled me down to my knees with my hair, and the strain on my wrist cut deep. The pain only served to ramp up

my desire, and wetness pooled between my legs. Using my hair like a handle, Kurzan directed my mouth right in front of his erection. I could see it straining through his pants, and I was practically drooling for a taste.

“Open up, Princess.”

I started to roll my eyes at the nickname, but Kurzan’s grip on my hair squeezed as he yanked my head. It was a quick, mean snap to the side, and then I heard him free that gold-veined cock I wanted so badly.

“Keep up that attitude, my little slut, and you’ll discover the hard way if demons really do need to breathe.”

His words only just registered as I was mesmerized by the throbbing beauty in front of me and my pussy clamped down around air. I wanted that thick shaft buried inside me, deeper and rougher than I believed I could take.

Kurzan’s fingers found my jaw and squeezed, forcing my mouth open, and he dove his dick between my lips.

There was no preamble. He thrust hard and fast, fucking my mouth like a piston on overdrive. The feeling of him testing my throat was pain and lust and greed swelling together to demand the most deliciously dirty pleasure. It was everything I wanted but never vocalized, and we were just getting started.

With each of Kurzan’s thrusts, his knot pressed into my face, stealing more of my air. I wasn’t sure if I *did* need it, but I was happy to suffocate wrapped around his dick.

“Such a good little slut, eating up my cock like a greedy whore.”

No one dared speak to me like that. I’d gut them where they stood, but hearing Kurzan’s words just fueled the lust pounding through my body in time with his hips. His grip on my head kept me prisoner to his pace, and tears streamed down my face.

“Show me those pretty horns, princess.”

I met his stare through the tears and freed myself from the human form I was struggling to maintain. Red bloomed across my vision as my skin changed to the same crimson, and my horns and tail snaked into reality.

Kurzan gripped each base near my forehead and pulled me toward him. I took his shaft as deep as I could, choking slightly as he slid back out.

Saliva hung from my chin, and Kurzan wiped it across my face. I playfully bit at his fingers, and he came back at me with a slap. As I righted, I sucked my bottom lip between my teeth, and Kurzan smirked.

“Turn around.”

With a shove to my head, Kurzan spun me in the other direction, lying across the chaise. My wrist pulled at the cuff, and though I knew I had the strength to rip free of it if I really tried, I didn't want to be free. I wanted to be under Kurzan's thumb, subjected to his delicious form of torment.

As I turned my head back to look at him, Kurzan tore the robe from me, destroying the fabric and flinging it to the floor. I just smiled, and then his shirt was over his head, revealing a plethora of demon clan tattoos and kill marks. He was covered in art, the thick ink decorating the ribbed edges of his muscular arms and chest. A blasphemous image of demons fucking a nun stretched over his side, and the Coskaras Family Motto was scrawled across his chest- “Take & Take, For Ye Will Never Fill.”

I wanted to drag my forked tongue across the intricate tattoos, or perhaps my claws, watching as blood welled up behind them.

But then Kurzan shifted, and I all but came right there. Magic shimmered to reveal his inky black skin and tail. Horns tipped in gold pierced through his forehead, and that gold-veined cock swelled as the skin turned to night, its knot thickening as the angry barbs lengthened.

Suddenly, Kurzan's knife reappeared at my breast, dancing around my nipple as the sharp tip scraped my skin. My pussy

wept with need.

“Show me how much you can take, Princess.”

Yet again, Kurzan’s entrance was anything but gentle. He thrust his hard cock up to the knot in my cunt, and I couldn’t stop the scream that erupted from me. His dick was somehow even better than a lust demon’s, and as he fucked me, his clawed hand snaked through my hair, wrapping it around his fist and pulling hard as his other grabbed my horn.

Craning my neck made it difficult to breathe, and Kurzan reached for my mouth, stuffing his fingers between my lips and pulling. Pain soared through my jaw, and my pussy surged around him. It was rougher than anyone had ever been with me, and I still wanted more.

I wrapped my tail around Kurzan’s knot and squeezed. His hand came down across my ass in a hard slap, and then his tail shoved into my tighter hole. Then his barbs brushed against my clit, and a swelling heat seeped into me as they touched my skin. I was completely filled up with just Kurzan’s shaft and tail probing my asshole. His knot hadn’t even pushed in.

I orgasmed- hard.

Cum ran down my legs as the exquisite feel of him actually pushed me over the edge. My vision tunneled, and stars prickled across my vision as Kurzan fucked my cunt and ass relentlessly.

“That’s my good, little whore. Fucking take it. You’re mine. You’re fucking *mine*.”

The knife at my nipple dug hard, piercing the skin, and blood trickled down my breast. The orgasm swelled harder as the pain magnified my pleasure. And then I watched as Kurzan dragged the blade down my breast, crimson spreading over the gleaming silver.

It was magnificent. The primal brutality of his claim over all of me, inside and out. The blade pulled back, hovering in the air. His grip found my hair, and he pulled my face around to look at him. As the blade floated in front of Kurzan’s

gleaming fangs, he licked the blood clean from his dagger, red coating his tongue.

Then, in a flash, my face was shoved down into the chaise, and Kurzan's relentless assault of my holes picked up to full power. I cried out, his barbs scraping my clit, and I was seconds from coming again.

Claws dug into my scalp once more, and more found the flesh of my ass cheek, digging into the skin and drawing blood.

"Don't you dare come until I say so. Every ounce of your pleasure belongs to me. You hear me, you delicious fucking whore?"

His demonic form hummed with power, Kurzan's voice deep as the blackest void. I shook around him, my pussy begging for release. The heat that swelled from his knot grew to boiling, burning his arousal into me.

"Kurzan!"

I rarely spoke during sex, but this wasn't that. This claim, this devouring, was so much more, and I screamed out until my lungs ached. Somehow, my body listened to his command, keeping me at the edge of an orgasm but never tipping over the edge. Roaring pain seared through my veins, and all I wanted in the entire fucking universe was to fall apart around Kurzan's incredible cock.

"That's it, Princess. Scream for me. Beg me to let you come. Beg me to give you release."

"Please!" He speared himself deeper and deeper, his knot almost slipping in. "Fucking please!"

"Who does that ass belong to, princess? Who does your dripping fucking cunt belong to!?"

Tears, tainted red with lustful blood, poured down my face as Kurzan twirled his tail inside my ass as his cock stretched me, and I squeezed the black velvet of his chaise with all my might.

"It's yours! I belong to you!"

His evil chuckle scorched the air behind me. “Damn fucking straight you do. Grip that fabric tight, Princess. You’re going to take every last inch.”

Everything disappeared as Kurzan pistoned his hips, driving his knot further into me with each thrust. The stretch was blissful agony, and then he was fully seated inside me. I felt the molten barbs hook into my flesh, and with one more hard thrust, Kurzan growled behind me, coming as he took us both to the edge of oblivion.

Tremendous heat flooded me as ropes and ropes of his cum filled my cunt, till overflowing. It dripped down my legs, and I could just see the gold trails sliding down my skin from my position.

Kurzan reached over my body, his cock pulsing in my pussy as it slowly relaxed. He grabbed the cuffs, tearing them from the chaise, and pulled me up to stand against him, still lodged deep in my cunt, thanks to his knot.

He angled my head back to look at him, gripping my throat.

“Mine. All fucking mine.”

I looked into his demonic eyes. They were solid black with only a circle of gold denoting his irises. That world-shaking connection still powered through me, and likely him, too. I thought it might disappear after the sex, but it clung to me with irrevocable chains that locked around my heart and soul.

“Yours. And it looks like you’ve got yourself a partner in your little investigation.”

I smiled at him, and Kurzan grinned back, his fangs gleaming. Without warning, he quickly pulled my head to the side and sunk his teeth into my neck, sucking deep. I moaned as the mark surged, drawing another orgasm that had me squeezing down around Kurzan’s knot.

He pulled back, roaring into the expanse of his ornate room. As the howl receded, Kurzan pressed his lips to mine, and I licked the blood from his fangs and tongue. We were bonded now, and there was certainly no going back.

“Well, now that whatever the fuck *that* was is over, I hate to inform you, but you’re both gonna die.”

I snapped my gaze to a dark corner of Kurzan’s room, and another demon, this one covered in the burning rock of a wrath aficionado, stepped forward.

“And I am going to enjoy it so fucking much.”

# CHAPTER 8

## AZGOS- LOWER PRINCE OF WRATH

*THAT'S RIGHT, YOU STUPID PIECE OF SHIT. LEAN INTO THAT rage.*

After all, I had to keep myself focused on anger if I was going to make it through *this* fucking interaction. Kurzan was one thing, one fucking thing that shouldn't affect me like it did, but a singular distraction to power through.

Seeing him knot deep in the most spectacular lust demon I'd ever laid eyes on was another fucking thing altogether.

I'd snuck in through the shadows an hour ago by riding the festering rage in one of the Coskaras Family's own stooges, but I'll be the first to admit I didn't expect him to teleport in and start his own fucking "interrogation."

With the Lower Princess of Lust of all people. Fucking bad damn luck yet again.

Though as I'd watched them, feeling the strange magic they pulled, I found it increasingly difficult to keep thinking of this encounter as *bad*.

Which was a fucking problem.

I knew, I fucking *knew*, that the only reason I'd let Kurzan get away with entertaining me that night was because I was wasted. The pull, the connection to him, had been entirely the result of too many drugs and too much booze at the one and only demon free-for-all Hell had once a century.

That was it. It wasn't like I was actually into the guy, great cock or not.

Absolutely not. I hate everyone. It's part of the package. Wrath demons don't do feelings. We fuck, hate fuck at that, and even I had standards. Greed demons were well below them.

Which is why it had to be something the lust demon was doing. That was the only reason I hadn't already gutted them and the *only* reason I was hard as a fucking rock.

Unfortunately, regardless of my commitment to the fact, it was still distracting enough to allow Kurzan the chance to shift into human form long enough to pull free from the Princess and shift back as he dove for my throat. He knocked me back, and I landed with him squarely on top of me, his dagger at my neck.

“What the fuck are *you* doing here?”

Kurzan's eyes bore into me, and I had to struggle to find that rage again. It could never be too far away, though, and as the burn etched through my sternum, I tossed Kurzan back and sprung to my feet.

“Oh, don't get your panties in a bunch, fucker. It's all business, I assure you.”

“Nothing in Hell is just business, wrath demon. So spill. I'd love to see those lips of yours wrapped around the truth.”

The Princess eyed me with what was obviously lust, but her gaze lingered longer than I expected. What was even fucking weirder was how Kurzan growled from across the room at her like a possessive cat. But as his eyes turned back to me, that odd pull tore at my gut. *No, I'm fucking done with this fucking magic bullshit.*

“Piss right the fuck off the both of you. I'm the one who's getting some fucking answers.”

Coals swirled under my skin as the anger I always held peaked. I allowed myself to shift into my demon form, embracing the agony as rage made my insides feel like they were boiling. Wrath was never without pain. Not for one fucking second.

As the molten spread through my veins and surged beneath my black stone skin, my horns tore through my forehead, dipping lava blood down my face.

“Why the fuck does your asshole father think I stole drugs!?”

The deep boom of my voice echoed, and as it faded, the room went silent. Kurzan and the Princess exchanged glances.

“Someone speak the fuck up before I lose my cool!”

The heat I gave off scorched the materials around me, leaving black streaks of char across his stupid fucking shit. He had way too much stuff in here. What even was that?

I considered the large *poof* that sat on the floor near me.

“Calm down, you fuck. There’s something else going on.”

“Kurzan, insulting him isn’t going to help.”

“Senka,” he eyed her, “you don’t know him. I do.”

So that was her name. The heat ticked up, and I couldn’t assign it entirely to anger, no matter how hard I wanted to.

Senka responded by rolling her eyes and turning back to me. “Wrath demon—”

“His name is Azgos,” Kurzan spit out.

I met Kurzan’s stare and growled. “Pleasure.”

“Azgos,” Senka drew my attention back to her and that incredible pair of tits she was sporting, “what exactly did you hear about the theft?”

“My mother, you know, High Princess of Wrath, spoke to your dick-head father, and he told her that *my* wrath demons stole drugs from the Coskaras.”

My mother’s threat rolled around in my head like a ticking time bomb, but the two of them exchanged those fucking glances again. It was getting on my last nerve.

“Enough fucking looks! Speak. The. Fuck. Up!”

The lust demon, Senka, padded over to me, still fully in her demon form after shifting during the sex and still

incredibly naked. Her claws gripped my chin as she demanded my stare.

“Az, darling. We’re being played.” Senka shoved my face to the side as she walked back to the chaise to sit. “Coskaras told Kurzan that I was responsible for the missing drugs, and I’m the cook for Kalvaskas, so I’ve no need for them. What’s more, my parents insisted I stay in my room this evening, which is precisely where Kurzan appeared ready to kidnap me.”

The heat surrounding me cooled- slightly.

“Some kidnapping.” I raised a brow at Kurzan.

“Watch it.” The greed demon glared at me, the gold of his irises glowing against the surrounding black.

“Watch yourself,” I snarled back, but then Senka snapped her fingers in the air and forced my attention back to her. “Your point, Princess?”

She smiled, eyeing Kurzan as I used her infamous nickname. Yeah, I’d watched the whole damn thing, and I knew exactly how much she enjoyed it. I focused on the small fangs decorating her grin. They were like a kitten’s compared to my own, and I imagined sinking my teeth into her neck like Kurzan had.

“My point, sweet Azgos, is that there appears to be something going on between the Houses. Sins have never worked together before, but communication, at the very least, was required to get us all where they wanted. I imagine the other Houses, Slodencio, Guiviletoni, Encarraska, and Hubrion, are also involved.”

I considered Senka’s words for a moment, which was asking a fucking lot. But I couldn’t ignore what she was saying. It matched up too damn well with some of what I’d already seen. The molten beneath my skin cooled, becoming a steady river of heat.

“Well, that would make my mother speaking to Andredi at all make a little more sense. She hates him as much as I hate you.”

I eyed Kurzan, glaring at him as he walked up to me. He stopped inches from my face, and we stood nose to nose.

“Your mother is as much of a spoiled brat as you are, so quit throwing your fucking tantrum just because you’ve got some regrets.”

Scorching heat picked right back up, as Kurzan even vaguely mentioned that night. I swung for his smug face, but he pulled back, so I settled for grabbing his neck. His dagger flew to his fist, and he shoved it into my throat, a small trickle of blood hissing as it slid down the metal. I wanted to squeeze until he begged me to stop. I wanted to make him eat his words and then maybe my cock until he fucking gagged.

I wanted it so fucking bad.

And that’s when I remembered who I was dealing with, a Prince of Greed, and his relentless hunger was infecting me like the damn plague. At least I knew the rage he was feeling was a delightful side effect of being around me.

“I really do boil your blood, don’t I, Kurzan?”

But then something different slithered between us, and we held each other’s stares. I couldn’t pinpoint it, but whatever it was, the magic of it wouldn’t allow me to let go of him. And Kurzan looked like he was fighting with his own gifts to keep the dagger pressed to my throat.

Then Senka was between us, sliding her hands up either of our chests and pushing.

“Boys, we have something more important than your spat at the moment.”

However, feeling her between me and Kurzan did nothing to ease whatever I was experiencing. If anything, it just made me want to lift her up and make a spit roast out of her mouth and ass.

I gazed down at her and growled. How could she dare think to interrupt me? I’d make that pretty cunt of hers pay. Kurzan’s rumbling roar reflected my own, and I flicked my gaze up to meet his. *Fuck, why does he have to be so fucking hot?*

“Ugh!” Kurzan pulled himself back, grabbing Senka’s wrist and dragging her with him. “She’s fucking right. What do you know?”

The energy waned, and I rolled my eyes, huffing out a breath. “Mother has been taking calls from Andredi for some time. But I know for a fact that she’s also been speaking with Tranio Slodencchio as well. Bitch doesn’t think I know.”

“Fuck. Our parents never meet with each other. There’s that one fucking party every century, and that’s it. Sins don’t work together.” Kurzan started fiddling with the dagger.

“And,” I paused because this part not even I’ve really thought about, “she seemed pretty fucking convincing when she said that she’d ‘deal with me.’ It’s not a big deal for wrath demons to want their own kids to fuck off, but you said your parents wanted you to stay in the room tonight?”

Senka’s stare drifted to the floor as she chewed on her lip. Her face turned sour for the first time since he’d been watching her with Kurzan, and she looked genuinely upset.

“They wanted me to get kidnapped. How could they?”

I could sense the rage building in her from here. Senka reached down for the chaise and flipped it over, flinging it a few feet away. It was pretty impressive, considering how small she was and way too fucking hot.

“Hey, I like that.” Kurzan walked to the chaise, righting it and folding his arms across his chest. “Could we keep destroying my stuff to a minimum? Thanks.”

I rolled my eyes. “We need more information.”

Senka was pacing the room, her red skin glowing, and Kurzan had to stop her to get her attention. He nodded toward me, this time without cracking a joke.

“Senka. We were just talking about this. We need to figure out what’s going on. I don’t like being played, especially by my asshole of a father.”

I walked up to them, clapping a hand down on their shoulders. Kurzan’s hard enough to make him grunt.

“Three heads are better than one. Shall we do some digging?”

Kurzan shrugged my hand off but bit back the words bubbling up.

“Well,” Senka smirked, “it looks like you’ve got two partners now. And we have work to do. Also,”

She stepped back, spinning in a circle and gesturing down her body with her hands.

“I need clothes.”

“If you insist.” Kurzan and I spoke at the same time, and we each glared at the other.

Senka raised her brows. “Oh, this is going to be very fun.”

# CHAPTER 9

## KURZAN- LOWER PRINCE OF GREED

HOW THE FUCK HAD I ENDED UP IN THIS SITUATION? FUCKING a lust demon, bonding with her in some way, and now working with fucking Azgos? Really!

But here we were. It was obvious something was going on, and Az had a point. Three heads were better than one. But did it really have to be him? The guy had it out for me, clearly, and he was still too fucking stubborn to realize the truth.

I said fuckall to anyone about what we did. That's not my style. But it's right up Er'gokan's alley. He loved snooping and spreading gossip like a fucking teenage girl. Arrogant son of bitch.

It was to be expected, though, right? After all, the fucker was the son of the head honcho himself. King of Pride, First of the Fallen, and Creator of Demons. Yeah, no one missed that fucking point because Seraphaerio Hubrion wouldn't let anyone forget it.

He wasn't just a sin, a demon. Oh no, he was the first. All of Hell was under his domain, the first fallen angel to question God's plan. The Devil, Lucifer, those were his bullshit earthly names. He was a seraph, after all, and all those millennia ago, it was his selfish pride, his belief that he knew better than God, that birth the original sin.

The Root of All Sin, Pride, and the apple didn't fall far from the fucking tree.

But none of that mattered to Az. Absolutely not. He still wouldn't believe me that it was Er who'd found out on his own. Some bullshit about "lava cock" and it being something I

would say. *Fucker, anyone would make that reference if they saw what you were swinging.*

As he studied the guy's face, now shifted back into his human form, Az appeared to be slightly more willing to listen to logic, at least for now. The hot-headed asshole could blow at any moment.

And he looked the fucking part of a dude with anger management issues, even in human form. I couldn't help but take him in. He was still attractive, even if I hated to admit it.

His hair was longer than it had been, the dirty blond locks dusting his shoulders in unruly waves. He'd also grown out his beard. It was like I was looking at a straight-woman dream Viking boyfriend. Muscles and all.

They were something all right. I was muscular, but in a lean way. Az looked like a mountain compared to me, and he was covered in intricate geometric and demonic tattoos from head to foot, a large skull stretching from the bottom of his ribs to his hips. Oh, and of course, going full demon had set his clothes up in flames, so I had the joy of trying to keep my eyes off his fucking dick.

Lava indeed. Even human mode couldn't hide the thick molten veins that ran over its length, and like all demons, he had a knot at the base. His was an angry swell that glowed like a flame. The real wrath demon exclusive was the piercing-like beads that went from base to tip on the underside. I'd experienced them for myself, and I knew just how hard the circular ridges were and just how good they felt.

If it weren't for the subtle glow they gave off, you'd think they were another one of Az's piercings, considering he was covered in them. Ears, nose, nipples, he had it all.

"Could you please go find some pants?" I kept my stare pinned to his face.

"Feeling inadequate, Kurzan? Don't worry, I'm sure Senka likes you for your personality."

I threw my dagger past his face, landing it in the door behind him, and Senka just snorted as she tried to hide her

laugh. She'd reverted to human form as well, and the tan of her skin flushed ever so slightly.

Scoffing, I summoned the dagger back to my hand. "Oh, fuck you both."

Senka stood up from the chaise that I'd put back on its feet and sauntered over. When she swayed her hips like that at me, it was hard to think. She was like a delicious caramel-skinned treat when she looked human.

That was the thing about demons. We didn't look like any one race or ethnicity, just the one that matched that particular demon. Senka looked like she could be Indian or Middle Eastern. Again, demons weren't perfect amalgams.

I looked vaguely Italian with a bit lighter skin because I hung out in the shadows. Az looked like a fucking beefcake American jock. There was no other way to put it.

"I'd be up for it if you are."

Greed boiled in my veins as I imagined Az and Senka intertwined. She was *mine*. But then my mind faltered, holding onto that image and adding myself into the mix, reigning over both of them. *Both of them*.

*Why is that so appealing? Fucking Hell. Not right now.*

"We have shit to do. And clothing is required if we're going topside."

Az furrowed his brow at me. "Topside?"

"I think I have some demons I can question up there. I've been dealing with investigating these thefts, so there are men up there scouting. At least, supposedly."

"Oh, I am so in. If I don't get to pound your stupid face, I'll need to take it out on someone." Az grinned, his irises glowing like coals.

"All right, settle down, asshole. We need to be discreet if we're going to sneak you both in there. Wrath and lust demons are our usual guests."

Senka ran a hand down my chest. “Fair enough. You got any clothes in all this stuff?”

“He does have too much stuff!” Az yelled.

“Okay, that’s good. One more quip out of you, love,” I took Senka’s hair in my grip and pulled, “and this trip is going to have another detour.”

“Promises. Promises.”

Az cleared his throat. “I’m standing right here.”

Senka looked over her shoulder at him. “You don’t have to be.”

I growled. “And we’re done. Let’s go.”

Everything about that idea was way too tempting, and I couldn’t tell if that was just because Senka was so powerful and I had a history with Az. Either way, it was time to go. We needed information, and as soon as our folks figured out that we hadn’t killed each other, they’d get suspicious. Time was of the essence.



Dressed and earth-side, I reformed with Senka and Az right behind. Like literally. When I solidified through the gate back to the warehouse, Az pulled up in a second, and I wound up with him practically on top of me.

“Dude, get out of my ass.”

“Fucking step forward, asshole.”

I turned, glaring at him, and we were trapped in another nose-to-nose standoff. Senka quickly materialized through the gate, however, and shoved through us.

“Unless you’ve changed your mind about the detour, let’s go, you two.”

My resolve was already hanging by a thread, and watching Senka slide past us, her hips swaying, was *not* helping. Putting on clothes was supposed to make her less distracting, but she

was just as mesmerizing in the tight leather pants and black tank top.

I sighed, closing my eyes to gather my thoughts. “Hold up, Senka. We need to spot a demon who could lead us to something useful. Down here is where we usually hang out. Let’s see if we can do some recon from there.”

“Hang out? And do what?” Az pushed in front of me, heading in the direction I’d indicated.

“Wait for orders, gamble, drink. Probably the same as you.”

Az scoffed. “We don’t sit around and wait. But we do hold fights. I’ve made a killing, literally.”

“Ugh. Good for you. Let’s go.”

The two of them followed me down the hall, but Az just wouldn’t shut up.

“What? You’re not jealous, are you?”

“I don’t get jealous.” I stepped up to him, and Az backed up against the wall, trying to put space between us. “I *get* what I want. No need for jealousy.”

That tension between us simmered, and I thought intently about testing how far I could push Az before he snapped or preferably broke.

“Well, how about we *get* those answers you say are here.”

It was another draw, but this back-and-forth wasn’t going to end pretty. We were just building up for the smackdown. And the winner of that particular battle was hard to guess.

I turned away from him, showing Az I didn’t care about his threats. I could still end him even if he snuck up behind me. Starting for the backroom, I grabbed Senka’s arm and yanked her forward with me.

“Kurzan,” she tore her arm free, “Get the bug out of your ass. I’m not the one you have unresolved issues with.”

Rage bellowed from my gut. “What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“You forget, dearest. I’m a lust demon. I can recognize it when I see it.”

“If I’m lusting after anything, it’s you. Not that fucking wrath demon.”

“Sure. Whatever you say.”

Like lightning, I snatched Senka’s hair and pulled her face beneath my chin.

“Don’t. And if your lust magic thinks this would be fun, tell it back off.”

She smirked up at me, dragging her claws along my arms. “Is not me, Kurzan. Yet again, there’s something else at play here.”

I frowned. I didn’t want to admit that was true, and hearing her point it out only made the rage I was feeling from Az burn brighter.

Releasing her, I went back to where I knew there would be a game going on, speaking to the two of them as they tagged along.

“Try to keep your mouths shut. We’re greed demons, not wrath or lust. That shit will give you away, and the glamors only work on your signatures, not your mouths.”

For once, they didn’t come back at me with something, and we reached the tables.

The back games were flowing hard, and chatter echoed through the large open space. This was well past the broken-down warehouse front, and the decor suited the style of Andredi Coskaras to a fucking tee.

Gold littered the space like we had a fucking stock in it, which of course we did. Drugs, diamonds, and gold. If it killed someone to make, use, or sell, if the humans would die for a taste, the Coskaras backed it. Jimmy and the Trio were playing poker in the corner. A fat pile of coke and a prostitute put up for a bid.

“Don’t go over there. We’re not interested in them. They get orders directly from me, and I’ve enchanted their phones to

see who they're messaging."

"Couldn't they just use a different phone?" Az growled at me.

"Normally, yes. But I set it up so that if it's any phone they're using, I see it."

"Neat trick, darling."

Senka winked, and I smacked her ass hard.

"What did I say about the lust, Princess?"

"Oops." She smirked.

"Oh, you're getting it later."

Az groaned. "Keep it in your pants, fuckface."

Az shoved through us and posted up against a pillar that looked over the game. He tracked the cards easily enough, and I was glad the glamor disguising his wrath signature was working.

We waited for about 20 minutes when another demon came through the doors. He went to the large metal cabinet off to the side where we kept the equipment. Reaching inside for a few standard pieces and cash, the guy packed them in a duffle and then made to leave again.

His glamor wasn't working as well.

The three of us sat up straighter, tracking his movements. It was another wrath demon, but he looked the part of a greed demon. I thought I may have seen him before, but the truth was these lackeys are a dime a fucking dozen. He wore the same high-quality black suit the crew usually used and flaunted a handful of expensive accessories, which was typical.

What was *not* a part of the average greed demon's makeup was the sizable piece he already had plugged into his pants at his back or the lack of chatter with the other demons.

No. We didn't operate like that.

"Kurzan." Senka's voice was a whisper to my left.

“I see him. We should trail him. See where he’s going.”

Az pushed off the pillar. “Agreed.”

It was weird enough that Az agreed with me at all, let alone voice it out loud, but as I glanced over, I could see that he’d assumed tracking mode. All demons were good scent dogs, capable of finding our targets vast distances, but wrath demons were particularly noted for their deadly pursuits.

Wrath demons never gave up on a target, holding the ultimate grudge until they died or the unlucky fucker who pissed them off did.

Right now, coals burned in Az’s eyes, and I could see a wave of heat surrounding him. I stepped to his side, between him and the crew at the table, and risked putting a hand on his shoulder.

“Az, try to hold it til we get outside. I don’t want them sensing you and you’re pushing the limits of the glamor.”

He snapped his stare to me, gripping my forearm. It singed my skin where my sleeve was rolled up, pumping fiery rage into the muscles and blood.

“I know him,” he bit out.

Pulling his hand off me, I narrowed my gaze at him. “What do you mean?”

Az’s jaw clenched hard, and I saw him struggling to maintain some semblance of composure.

“He’s from my ranks. He’s one of mine, in my crew.”

Senka slithered up behind him, sliding a hand up to his shoulder and pulling him to face her.

“He’s also getting away. Just get out of the building, love. Then, you can help us get some info out of him.”

I stepped toward the door, looking through my brows at Az with an evil grin. “Come on, big guy. Let’s see if he likes to wear his insides on the outside.”

Fire surged in Az’s eyes, and a fanged grin stretched from ear to ear on his face. He started toward me, barreling for the

exit like a man on a fucking mission, and dammit if it weren't fucking hot as hell. I could just imagine him coming at me like that, ready to fight his way into a fuck. *Mmm, violence can be so appealing, can't it?*

The three of us followed the rogue wrath demon out of the Coskaras headquarters and down the block. We were in the shittiest part of town, so it was a surprise when the guy rounded a corner and headed for a sleek black Ferrari. The chirp of the keys echoed as he unlocked it and went to the trunk to deposit his stash.

Thankfully, the alley was empty, so when I shifted momentarily to slide through the shadows, there weren't any humans around to notice. From the new vantage point, I could pick out a large cache of weapons and drugs in the trunk. There were both Coskaras family bricks, marked with our seal, and Kalvaskas family deposits as well.

Az and Senka appeared next to me in the shadows. "Look what we have here."

"He's taking it somewhere, but he won't be alone when he gets there. This is our chance. Can you both make it into the car?" Senka kept her voice low, and the intense calculation behind her eyes spoke to exactly what this little hellion was capable of.

"It's dark in there, so I can. Az?"

"He's too fucking calm. I can't piggyback on the rage. Just open the door for me while Senka distracts him."

"And how am I supposed to do that?" She raised a brow at him.

"I think those tits might work."

I shot my gaze to Az, willing a piece of broken glass up to his eye. "Watch it."

"Do you have a better idea?"

I clenched my jaw. "Unfortunately, no. Will a wrath demon even be susceptible to lust?"

“Maybe not usually, but I am the Princess.” Senka ripped the front of her tank to expose her cleavage. “Be ready to move.”

She was walking over before I could stop her, and I cursed quietly as Az and I waited for an opening.

“Hey, there.” Senka’s voice was up to an eleven on the flirt scale, and I rolled my eyes.

The wrath demon spun around, going for the piece at his back. I started to stand, but then Az grabbed my shoulder and pulled me back down.

“Just wait.”

“Hang on there, cutie. I’m on your side. Coming from Coskaras, right?”

The guy narrowed his eyes as she approached. He didn’t pull the gun out, but his hand remained at the small of his back.

“What’s it to you?”

“What do you think? I’ve got a drop-off for you.” Senka reached behind her back, materializing a brick of drugs.

“You’re supposed to add this to the collection.” She held it out toward him.

The wrath demon cocked his head. “Why they sending more? Isn’t this more than enough?”

Senka expertly rolled her eyes as she put a hand on her hip. “What do I know? I’m just taking orders. All they said was to bring this. ‘He can drop it off at one of the stops.’”

Suspicion still marred the demon’s face, and just as I was going to lose my patience and go for her, Senka stuck a long pinky nail into the drugs, pulling out a small bump and taking a hit.

“Ooh, this is some good shit. You wanna try?” She pulled down the strap of her tank top, revealing the edge of her nipple, and I was about ready to snap.

*Mine.*

But then, old wrath boy's mood changed, and he sauntered over toward her, obvious lust pooling behind his eyes and in his pants. Swearing to taste the asshole's blood on my dagger, I moved through the shadows into the car and opened the door for Az to follow.

I met Senka's eyes through the windshield, and she smiled harder.

"Come here, baby."

Using her numerous charms, she led the guy over to the driver's seat, practically dragging him along with her nail under his chin. He fumbled with the door, opening it up, and Senka shoved him down into the chair. As soon as his ass hit the leather, I pulled him across the center console, his torso dangling over the back seat.

Az punched the guy hard in the jaw, and I put my knife to his chin.

"Hi there. We've got a few questions." I smiled down at him.

The demon's eyes scanned back and forth between us and then went to Senka. "You stupid bitch! You're going to pay—"

I slashed my blade through his cheek. The cut went deep, and he hollered out against the burst of pain.

"Threaten her again, and I'll gut you slowly so I can get a taste as your entrails bleed out."

His skin heated beneath my grip, and I could sense him trying to change.

"Oh, we'll have none of that." I dragged my knife down his neck. "Stay good and human, fucker. I don't care if you haven't talked. I will kill you."

Senka sat down in the driver's seat, closing the door behind her and giving our little interrogation some privacy. As I smirked down at the wrath demon, Az punched across his chin again, making sure he was in too much pain to shift. It left his mandible hanging at an odd angle until Az took the

liberty of shoving the thing back into place. The demon screamed. It was fucking music to my ears.

“Now that we have your attention. Spill.”

“Spill what?” He glared at me.

I nodded to Az, and he dolled out another punch, this one to the guy’s ribs. I had to admit he was helpful to have in an interrogation. I was as strong as any greed demon, supernaturally blessed to hit harder than we looked, but few could match the raw physical power of a wrath demon. And we were short on a Son of Pride at the moment.

“Don’t play dumb, even if it does perfectly fit you. Spill.”

Senka leaned over from the front seat, dragging a claw across the guy’s stomach and slitting open his shirt. He had similar tattoos to Az, but not as well done.

“Did you know that it can actually be quite painful to go unsatisfied for a lust demon?” She dug her claw through the skin below his belly button, blood welling up behind it. “Like your insides are twisting in on themselves.”

I smiled as Senka spun her nail around inside the demon’s flesh. Fresh screams filled the car, and Az lowered his face to his former demon’s.

“You broke my trust, Vigo.” The guy’s eyes blew wide. “Oh, yeah, fuckface. I know exactly who you are. And I don’t take betrayal lightly.”

“I’m not scared of you, Azgos!” Vigo screamed as Senka pulled her claw free and chose another spot. “You’re nothing compared to your fucking mother!”

Az’s arm rippled as he let it shift into molten rock. He gripped Vigo’s face, the heat doing little to affect a fellow wrath demon but enough to get the car smelling like burning hair.

“Is that so? Look, I know smarts aren’t really your thing, so I’ll forgive that. But I don’t forgive traitors.” He took my dagger, holding the tip right above Vigo’s eye. “So, let’s try

this again since you seem too fucking dumb to understand self-preservation.”

He stabbed down, slicing the blade through Vigo’s eye, steaming blood popping up and coating his hand and arm. Vigo screamed his loudest yet, and Senka smirked, choosing just then to pick another spot for her claw to dig deep into his abs. Working with the two of them was pretty fucking fun, I had to admit.

“What the fuck is my mother doing!?”

“Ahhh!! I’ve been... I’ve been told to take the shit to the Slodencio headquarters!” Blood oozed out of the guy’s eye, and Az pulled my dagger back, plucking Vigo’s eye from the socket in the process.

More screams shook the car, and when they quieted, I pulled Vigo’s face to look at me.

“She gave you the order personally?”

Vigo breathed in ragged gasps, struggling to maintain consciousness, so Senka grabbed his dick through his pants and yanked. Az and I flinched despite ourselves.

“Yes! Her and your fucking piece of shit father!”

Pulling my dagger back into my hand, I hovered it over Vigo’s other eye. “My father was working *with* her?”

“Yes! They seemed real buddy-buddy when they weren’t cursing at each other.”

I looked over to Az, and we communicated without words. Our parents fucking hated each other more than they hated any of the others, except maybe Hubrion, but everyone hated him the most. This whole situation was way fucking off.

But then, good old Vigo got brave and snatched the dagger from my hand, turning it around and shoving it toward my throat. I pulled back, but the fucker was fast, and the blade was heading straight toward my carotid.

Then red hot stone skin was in my face, Az’s forearm taking the attack.

The dagger lodged in Az's flesh, but he just pulled it free, grunting slightly as he threw the knife to the floor. I still had a grip on Vigo's arm, so I let it shift as well, lengthening my claws so they tore up through Vigo's bicep.

Senka hopped on top of his hips, fully shifting into demon form. "Bad dog."

Her black claws ripped through the flesh of Vigo's throat, and she was covered in the arterial spray as the asshole bled out.

I looked between the two of them, my mouth hanging open slightly. They'd worked together to take out the threat to my life. I'd never had anyone risk themselves or anything else for that matter to save me. Hell, no one has done shit at all for me. I hang out with greed demons, for fuck's sake.

Blood leaked onto my legs, and Vigo twitched as the last of his pathetic life slipped away. Senka leaned forward across Vigo's lifeless body and licked across my chin and mouth, lapping up the crimson decorating my skin.

"Az," I shoved the body toward him, "take care of this."

Without his magic to protect him, Vigo's body went up in flames, instantly turning to ash as Az funneled the full extent of his boiling fury into him. I clapped the dust from my hands, wiping it across the seat as I stared at Senka.

"Get over here."

She crawled over the console, straddling my hips. I crashed my lips to hers, the blood dripping from our skin mixing and spreading across our faces. Tearing Senka's shirt the rest of the way in half, I smoothed my hands across her breasts, smearing ash and blood over her red skin.

Breaking the kiss briefly, I glared at Az as Senka ran her tongue across my neck, biting and dragging her teeth across my flesh. I was about to tell him to fuck off and busy himself for a moment when that fucking *something* rippled through the air again.

It was the same fucking thing when I'd fucked Senka. I felt that connection, and as much as I wanted to deny it, I

remember the hazy feeling of it when we'd fucked all those centuries ago.

“Either piss off or put that cock of yours to work.”

The words slipped out before I could think better of it. Az's eyebrows shot to his forehead, and the glow of his irises tripled. *Well, what's it going to be, lava boy?*

# CHAPTER 10

## AZGOS- LOWER PRINCE OF WRATH

*DID HE REALLY JUST FUCKING SAY THAT? IS THIS SOME FUCKING joke?!*

But as I glared at Kurzan, he held my stare. Senka dragged her beautifully long tongue across his neck, her breasts on full display thanks to the last-minute alterations a la Kurzan. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't hard as a fucking rock right now and dying to get a piece of her incredible ass. I wanted her since I fucking saw her, and denying that hadn't worked.

But it was fucking Kurzan. He was possessive on a good day, and he'd been growling at me every time Senka so much as joked about the three of us banging this out. Still, he stared at me like he was expecting something and not for me to leave.

The air bubbled, thickened, or some shit. It was that same fucking feeling I'd been getting all fucking day, and it was so much worse. Better? Christ, this was too fucking much, but just when I went to leave, Senka looked up at me from Kurzan's lap and smirked.

"Az, darling," she peeled the bloody, destroyed shirt from her body, arching her breasts up against Kurzan's chest as she did, "show me what you're working with."

Something cracked loudly in the car, and I looked down to see I'd torn the handle off the door. I was officially trapped from this side now, and if that weren't a fucking sign, I don't know what was.

"Kurzan," I dragged my eyes away from Senka, Vigo's blood still clinging to her skin, and nodded at his dick, "why don't you teach this slut who she's talking to?"

Heat and greed and lust and angry fucking tension roared through the cab like a volcano. Kurzan pulled Senka onto the back seat, shoving her face down into the cushions. He gestured with his head at the passenger side.

“Make us some room.”

I looked at the chair and smirked. Allowing my rage to boil through my hand, I dusted the expensive leather chair, opening up the cab to provide me with a place to kneel. I shuffled past Senka, sliding up behind her and smacking her across the ass as hard as I could. She yelped, but it melted into a moan, and I noticed Kurzan freeing his cock through the zipper.

The gold wonder was just as appetizing as I remembered, and in seconds, Kurzan had Senka’s face pulled down to his lap, swallowing his dick. The sounds of her gagging around his shaft filled the car as he pumped into her, and my erection throbbed.

He was just as coated in Vigo’s death as Senka. The sight sent my rage swirling together with my growing arousal, and I stroked my dick through my pants.

Reaching down to the leather that hid Senka from me, I pulled the stretchy material up at the seam between her cheeks and tore them down the middle. She wasn’t wearing any panties, thank Hell, and she was decorated.

I don’t think Kurzan had the chance to appreciate it, but Senka’s tasty clit was pierced. *Oh, this is going to be fun.*

I lifted her hips to my face, diving my tongue into her hot cunt.

She tasted like a fucking drug, and I’d done plenty. As I swirled my tongue in a circle around her clit and the tiny beads surrounding it, her moans rumbled low as she took Kurzan’s cock like a goddamn pro, which I guess she was. But she was our pro now.

As the thought washed through my brain, I was struck by how okay I was with it. She was *ours*, Kurzan and me, and where it would normally piss me the fuck off to share, I

somehow knew that the connection went all the way around the circle. We belonged to each other.

But I wasn't fucking ready to look at that closer. That was *way* too much, and I'd be sticking with the fucking, thank you very much.

I pushed my tongue deeper, and Senka did her best to ride my face, bouncing up and down. Switching my grip to a single hand, I fingered Senka's hot cunt with my free hand, stretching my tongue long to reach her clit.

She squeezed around me, clenching her thighs around my head. Just as she was about to orgasm, I pulled back, eyeing her work on Kurzan's cock. Ugh, it was a fucking dream watching her take all those inches up to his knot. And I wanted to see just how much this lust demon could take.

Running my fingers through her slit up to her asshole, I pressed inside, and Senka popped Kurzan's dick out of her just long enough to speak.

“Oh, fuck, Az. Yes.”

My knot throbbed as she growled the words, and as I pumped my fingers harder, I couldn't stop the journey of my eyes as they found Kurzan.

We just stared, and then Senka's mouth was wrapped around his dick again. She bobbed her head up and down in an impressive rhythm. Kurzan didn't break eye contact with me, and if anything, his eyes glowed all the harder.

“Get her ready for us.”

His voice was as dark as ever, that commanding, menacing growl I heard him use with Senka. He was bossing me around, and instead of hating it, I was all too happy to obey.

Fuck, even thinking the word threatened to make my skin crawl, but something about it coming from Kurzan only made my arousal pump harder. It was enough to take me out of my head, and my eyes snapped back to Senka's luscious curves.

Scissoring my fingers, I stretched her tight hole and then pulled free to slap her ass. Rational thought was out the

fucking window, and as I dragged my tongue through her slit, I found her ass and played.

She positively whimpered against me, and I used my other hand to fuck her cunt, squeezing in several fingers to loosen her up. It made my cock roar for attention.

Pulling back, I watched Kurzan's head fall back as Senka swallowed him down, her nose pressing into his growing knot. *Holy. Fuck.* Dropping her knees to the floor of the cab, I reached across her smaller form and pushed her head down as she tried to pull back and take a breath.

Senka grunted, crying out around his thick shaft, and Kurzan's eyes flew open. His stare met mine, and then a slow smirk spread across his face.

"It looks like Az thinks you aren't giving me your all. Ugh." He ground down on his molars as Senka let me thrust her head up and down. "Fuuuuck. That's it. Let us use you like the fucking whore you are."

My knot pulsed, heat flaring off me like a damn bomb. I let her up enough to speak, grabbing her around the throat as saliva stretched from her chin to Kurzan's shaft.

"I think," I flicked my eyes to Kurzan, "You need two cocks filling you up. Do you want that, Princess? Do you want to feel us claiming both your holes?"

Kurzan lowered his head to lick across her nipples, then slapped them hard.

"Fuck! Yes, please. Please stuff your cocks inside me."

Kurzan and I smiled, and I pulled Senka back toward me, giving Kurzan room to kneel in front of her. Working in tandem, Kurzan lifted her legs up over his arms as I held Senka up by her ribs.

"She's got a surprise for you, Kurzan."

He cocked a brow at me and then looked down, finally noticing the piercing.

"Oh, Senka, you delicious fucking slut. Look at how you've decorated that pretty cunt."

Kurzan's hand came down across her pussy in a hard slap, and she cried out, her head falling back onto my shoulder.

Reaching down, I freed my dick, letting just that part of me shift into demon form. I felt the base swell as I elongated, the beads across the underside pulsing with angry heat. I glanced over at Kurzan, nodding at his crotch.

“Give her the real thing.”

He licked his lips, pulling an arm free and spitting in his hand.

“Like seeing it, do you?”

I clenched my jaw. He was testing this. But fuck it. I didn't care right now.

“I want to see those golden veins pulsing in Senka's cunt.”

She groaned in agreement.

Kurzan growled low, and I could see the shift from my height over Senka. My cock twitched with need, and I mimicked Kurzan's gesture, sliding a spit-covered hand between Senka's legs. She moaned as I massaged it into her asshole.

With little warm-up, the two of us shoved deep inside Senka, and she screamed out in pleasure. Her ass squeezed around my erection, stretching to accommodate my size, no doubt reaching new heights as my beads rubbed against her.

“Fuck yes, little whore. Ride our cocks. I want you begging for release.” Kurzan's words tunneled right for my dick, and I started thrusting hard.

It bounced her small frame up and down Kurzan's shaft, and I could *feel* it rub against my own inside her. Hell below, the sensations destroyed me. Senka's tight ass, together with Kurzan's greed demon asset, it was the best fucking thing I'd ever experienced.

Our hips found a rhythm as we assaulted Senka with our pummeling thrusts. The thick base of Kurzan's knot rubbed against mine. I could sense the greedy desire swelling through

it, and he gripped her breast as we took turns pushing deep into Senka.

“Fuck! Please! I need to come!” Senka dug her claws into Kurzan’s shoulders, blood trickling down his skin and mixing with the smeared crimson already coating him.

He looked at me, slowing his thrusts, and I did the same, reaching around Senka’s side to pinch her nipples. Even this steady rock of our hips ground our knots against each other as we slid up into Senka’s holes.

“Take her throat,” Kurzan growled, then dipped his head to lick up the blood dripping down his arm.

I wrapped my hand around Senka’s neck, gripping hard and cutting off her air. She clenched around us.

Kurzan finished lapping up the blood. “Open her mouth.”

Squeezing my fingers between Senka’s teeth, I forced her mouth open. Kurzan leaned his mouth over hers and let the blood drip down his tongue into her mouth. I grabbed her throat again, turning Senka’s face toward mine.

Her eyes were glazed over with lust, and she started rocking her hips against our cocks.

“So desperate for release, little whore?”

Kurzan’s tongue dragged up Senka’s neck and face. “Beg me. Beg me to let you come.”

“Please. Please, Kurzan.” She spoke in a desperate plea that sounded all the better on her because she was so fiery otherwise.

“No. You’re going to take our fucking knots first. We’re going to destroy your fucking holes, and then you can come.”

Senka whimpered, and my dick pulsed inside her tight asshole.

“And you,” I looked up to Kurzan, “Don’t you fucking come until her asshole squeezes down around your knot.”

My blood boiled; I was so close already, and his words made my shaft scream for release.

Kurzan's pace picked up, fucking Senka with everything he had, and I followed right behind him, sinking in up to the knot and working to stretch her ass around me.

"Please!"

"Keep screaming, love. Keep begging."

The pleas flew from Senka's lips with each pound of our hips, and I was right there with her. My knot ached. I needed to come like I needed my own fucking blood.

More of her body began to yield, her head falling back against me once more, and then she screamed Kurzan's name.

"That's right. Fucking take it like the good little whore you are. Ugh. Fuck, yes."

He pressed hard in one long stroke, his knot disappearing inside Senka's cunt. I felt it throb against my shaft, and I couldn't take another second. I reached down, spreading Senka's ass wide as I shoved my knot in.

"Fuck! Az! Oh, Hell. Oh, yes. Oh, fuck. Please!"

We were locked tight inside her, and Kurzan pistoned his hips like a jackhammer. I was blinding frenzy as I fucked her asshole. Our knots rubbed against each other as they stretched Senka, completely filling her up.

"Please!"

Kurzan growled low, and I could feel heat nearly a match for my own radiating from his knot.

"Come for us, Senka."

His teeth found her neck, biting down through her skin. She hollered into the cab, exploding as she tipped over the edge. It racked through her whole body, and her ass squeezed around my knot. I was going to come.

"Oh, fuck," I mumbled.

Kurzan's tail was suddenly around my throat, and he squeezed. My eyes flew open, and I met his stare over Senka's shoulder. Blood ran down his chin.

“Say it, Az.”

I fucked harder, dragging out Senka’s orgasm along with her screams. Kurzan’s squeezed tighter, pain blooming through my throat and lungs.

“Say it. Good boys get treats, after all.”

*Fuck. I’m going to burst. Fuck!*

I blinked my eyes closed, the pain in my knot magnified by a thousand, begging me to come.

“Please, Kurzan. Please, can I come?”

The words were quiet, but they were there.

“Good boy.” He resumed his assault on Senka’s cunt, and she flew into another orgasm. “Yes, and why don’t you take a bite.”

My heart fucking soared, and I lost all control, fucking into Senka with everything I had. She came again and again, her asshole clamping down around my knot.

Kurzan’s efforts propelled us harder, and I could feel his knot pulse.

Just as I was about to come, I shoved her hair out of the way and sunk my teeth into the other side of her neck.

Intoxicating blood flowed into my mouth, and then I met eyes with Kurzan.

I orgasmed hard, pumping my cum into her ass like I was emptying a 50-cal rifle. Thick ropes flooded her until they dripped down my legs, and my mind reeled, the world melting away into nothing.

The mark I’d forged in Senka’s skin blazed with my claim, and I felt Kurzan’s spiraling together with it. It was enough to pull another orgasm from me, a quick pulse of energy rolling down the beads on the back of my cock and sending another burst of cum deep inside Senka.

I could imagine her taking my knot in her cunt, filling up with cum as I bred her.

“Ugh,” Kurzan grunted, his cock kicking deep inside Senka as he came, her cunt milking his shaft.

It strengthened that burst of energy, making me shoot out more hot spend.

Releasing Senka’s neck on a roar, I looked up at Kurzan. His irises glowed as they flicked between the two of us.

“Mine.”

# CHAPTER 11

## SENKA- LOWER PRINCESS OF LUST

EVERYTHING ACHED- MY NECK, MY PUSSY, MY ASS, MY LEGS. It was bliss.

My demons helped me off them as they finished, their knots coming down, and I was dripping with their cum. I never wanted to wash it off. I felt so totally claimed and bound. I'd never expected myself to ever want that type of submission, to allow someone to have that kind of control over me.

And now I'd given it to not one but two incredible fucking demons that weren't even a part of my House.

I could barely hold my eyes open, though. Exhaustion racked through my body nearly as hard as the orgasm, and as the adrenaline backed off, I got colder.

"You've both destroyed my clothes. I can't walk around like this. Not that I think I can walk at all right now."

Az's deep chuckle rumbled through his chest. I loved the way it sounded. He was such a surprise in Kurzan's, and then everything moved so fast. I hardly got the chance to enjoy that blistering sexual tension I'd got with Kurzan.

But being rewarded for diving in head first with an incredible cock up my ass more than made up for it.

"We need the stuff from the trunk, too. Think you can call up a trustworthy demon to pick us up?"

Az smoothed a hand down my arm as he spoke, and I cracked a lid to look up at him. I was apparently lying against his chest, sort of seated on his lap as he knelt.

I looked at Kurzan, exhaustion be damned, and he smiled. Bending low, he leaned down, lifting my legs up so he could drag his tongue up from my ass to my cunt. Az's hungry growl vibrated through him, and he licked across my neck where he'd bit me.

“Mmm. Delicious. We taste good on you.”

My aching pussy fluttered. I hadn't missed a beat back there. I could sense the lust swelling between these two since the moment Az revealed himself, and I adored it. I was determined to get them fucking the next time. After all, I could also sense that it was the three of us. We'd all connected with that same odd magic. We belonged to each other.

But even I had my limits.

“Fucking Hell. I at least need food if we're going to fuck again.”

Kurzan chuckled. “I don't think a ride will be too much trouble. Let's get back to the palace. We can regroup with our new information.”

Az lifted me onto the seat behind Kurzan, shifting that lava cock back into human form and stuffing it away. He cocked a brow at Kurzan, crossing his arms.

“I'm coming along then?”

Kurzan rolled his eyes. “Yes, you're coming along. Now be a good boy and hush so I can use the phone.”

Heat flared off Az, and he clenched his jaw, growling at Kurzan. But I knew very well there was way more lust behind that growl than anger.



When we returned to the Coskaras “palace,” Kurzan's word, I took a long shower in his bathroom, completely allowing myself to enjoy the ridiculous amenities my greed demon kept around.

We'd also agreed to use the opportunity to do a bit more snooping on Kurzan's dad, and then we'd travel back to my home to see if my useless fucking parents left any clues for us as well.

"Ugh, thank you, lover. That shower was just what I needed."

I'd slipped on some of the clothes Kurzan stole from a female greed demon, and I had to admit the material was quite nice.

"You don't think this top is a little much, do you, love?" I raised a brow at him, directing Kurzan's gaze to the skin-tight black shirt I'd picked from options.

It was long-sleeved, but each sleeve had strategically placed slashes with two cut-outs right on my shoulders. There was also a window in the fabric that revealed my cleavage, and it left my midriff exposed.

Kurzan rolled his eyes at me, smirking. "I think you managed to find the one shirt in there that's more holes than fabric."

Az slid up behind me, wrapping his arms around my side and taking my breasts in his hands. "I like it."

"I never said I didn't like it."

Kurzan sauntered over, eating me up with his hungry stare. As I leaned back into Az, Kurzan pushed my hair off my shoulder and brought his lips to the bite scar. Goosebumps rippled across my skin as he dragged his tongue across it, and then Az's hand was gripping my ass through the new leather pants.

We allowed ourselves the brief detour, but we all knew there was work to be done. As he straightened, Kurzan looked over my shoulder at Az.

"Think you can find a jacket in there that'll stretch over those arms of yours? I do have a few oversized ones."

"Ha! Yeah, we'll see."

Az disappeared into Kurzan's closet and then returned sporting a suit coat over his ribbed, white tank. He'd pulled his long, wavy hair into a knot at the back of his head, only a few of his golden locks tumbling out. Az had also found a very nice watch and a thick white gold chain, which dangled across his chest. All in all, he certainly looked the part of a greed demon, if a particularly buff one.

Kurzan smirked with approval. "You clean up well, Azgos. Might I add one more thing?"

He crossed the room to Az, a similar gleaming chain in his hand. Az stared at him curiously as Kurzan clipped one end to the wallet in Az's back pocket, completely unshy about sliding his hand in there to get it. Az's stare never left Kurzan's face, who seemed completely oblivious to the daggers Az was staring through his head.

For his last step, Kurzan clipped the other end of the chain to the belt loop of Az's black slacks. Kurzan chose the loop right near the zipper, and his knuckles brushed across Az's crotch. If I didn't know any better, I'd have thought Kurzan was a lust demon. *Smooth, my love.*

I registered the thought. *Love? Do I really?*

But as I watched Kurzan seductively walk back over to me, with Az growling as he followed behind, it didn't seem like a question. That's what the connection had been. I'd heard of mate bonds existing between demons like they did angels but had never seen it.

*Hmm. Mates. I like it.*

"All right. Let's get going then. My father's study is one floor up at the end of the left hall. There will be guards patrolling, so keep your heads down and just pretend you're working for me."

Az pushed past Kurzan and went for the door, holding it open with mock subjugation. "I can't wait to get you back to my House, so you can be the one acting like a fucking lackey."

Kurzan just laughed, and I looped my arm through his as we walked by Az. "Oh, dear sweet, Azgos. I promise that no

matter where we go, I'll always be the one on top."

A deep guttural growl emanated from Az, and I stuck my finger through the chained belt loop, pulling him along after me.

Leaning back to whisper at him, I eyed Az. "Would you prefer it if I were the one who topped you?"

He grabbed my arm, pulling me from Kurzan and walking me up against the wall.

"Watch it, Princess. I was nice last time."

Az towered over me as he pressed me up against the frilly gold and white marble surface. Heat bubbled off him, just sitting on the edge of pain. It was incredible. I loved the way he manhandled me. The way they both did.

"If I ask nicely, do you promise to be mean next time?" Az inched closer, pressing his knee between my legs. "I'd do anything to see you truly let loose. With *both* of us."

I knew he caught my meaning, and his eyes glowed until they became pure embers. Lowering his mouth to my ear, Az let out a ragged breath, and it tickled across my skin.

"Anything, huh? Oh, I'd love to see that myself. Maybe if you're a good girl—"

Grinding myself on Az's leg, I let my eyes close. "You'll be a good boy?"

His hand found my throat.

"I'm more than happy at the bottom of this pecking order. I just want to see you take your rightful place in the middle. And I think you would, too."

Az squeezed, and then Kurzan was speaking from behind him.

"As much as I adore watching this, we don't have time. Guards. Just down the hall."

The moment thoroughly interrupted, the three of us nearly sprinted down the hall toward a large set of stairs that sat in the middle of the large Coskaras estate. It went both up, into

infinity it seemed, and down to the lower floors, the front door as it were visible from where we stood.

Kurzan led us up a floor and then to the left toward the aforementioned study. We had to duck patrolling greed demons several more times but eventually made it to the room, which was, of course, locked.

“Now what?” I cocked a brow as Kurzan.

“I see something I want.” He focused on the handle, holding it just on the precipice of turning. “I take it.”

A ripple of energy flowed from him into the door as the handle stopped resisting and granted him entry.

“Well, fuck. That would be handy.” Az stepped inside.

“How were you able to get past your father’s seal?” I moved closer to Kurzan just in front of the door.

“I’ve been working on that trick for a while. Something about my blood calling to his blood magic. I imagine if he finds out, he’ll be fucking pissed.”

Kurzan pulled me inside the office and closed the door behind us. Focusing again, I could sense him putting the seal back in place.

“I’m not sure if that will have alerted him. He may have enchanted the room to know when someone enters regardless. I wouldn’t put it past him. So, let’s hurry.”

We tore through the contents of Andredi’s desk and shelves, looking for anything we could get our hands on. That’s when Az spoke up from the desk, sitting in the old man’s chair.

“Hey. Look at this.”

I rushed over, Kurzan right behind me, and noticed that Az had literally pulled the bottom drawer off its hinges and onto the floor.

“Well, I guess that’s one way to do it. I’ll try to remember that subtly is not your strong suit, darling.”

Az grinned at me as he rolled his eyes. “Fuck off.”

Kurzan snatched the papers from Az's grip, scanning them quickly.

"Would a 'please' kill you?"

Kurzan just ignored him, but I couldn't help laughing.

"They're texts and emails. Enchanted hard copies of conversations between Andredi and House Kalvaskas. It fucking says they're getting shipments from Slodencchio and Encarraska this week. The fuck are they doing working with sloth and envy demons. Ugh, we fucking hate envy demons."

"Envious of them?" Az snorted at his own joke, and Kurzan met him with a dead stare. "Oh, lighten up."

Shuffling through the papers, Kurzan sighed. "For your information, it's because of the close territory. There's a fine line between greed and envy, so we fight over souls constantly."

"What else does it say, love?"

I drew Kurzan's attention back to the papers.

"They're planting stuff left and goddamn right. There's mention of the case I was on, including a direct mention of how Andredi knew that demon would give me the name Kalvaskas." Kurzan flipped to the next page. "Your mother is in on it."

Flinging the page toward Az, Kurzan moved on.

"That fucking cunt. I knew she was trying to get rid of me."

"It appears they're trying to get rid of all of us."

Kurzan flashed the most recent page of messages so Az and I could see it for ourselves.

At the bottom, from a text sent by my own mother, it read:

*When this is all over, our dreaded children will be dead and gone.*

Rage seethed beneath my veins. I'd never been particularly fond of my parents, but it was always a relationship of mutual

disdain for everyone else and a love of the carnal arts. And now I knew without a shadow of a doubt that my fucking mother, and more than likely my father since he did nothing without her, wanted me dead.

Then Az pounded the desk with his fist, driving a hole straight through to the floor.

“How many of them? Just our three houses or all of them?”

The heat billowing off Az was scorching, and I stepped back, pacing off some of my furious energy.

“I can’t quite tell. At the very least, they have sub-demons working for them from all of Hell. These texts don’t show messages from the other four Princes and Princesses, however. That could mean they don’t know, or—”

I sighed. “They’re on a different chain. Hell, Slodencio probably isn’t on any of them. That fucker never returns a missive, text, call, or whatever. My mother complains about it all the time whenever a gathering is coming.”

*Thump.*

A massive hit rang out from the door. We all snapped our attention to it, and Kurzan cursed under his breath.

“Thank you, Az, for destroying the desk. If they weren’t coming because of an alarm, that ensured they would.”

He shifted into full demon form, his golden tan skin replaced by black stone crisscrossed with rivers of magma.

“Get fucked, Kurzan. Let’s just get out of here.”

I dropped the human form as well, looking over to Kurzan, who rolled his eyes as he threw up his hands.

“Fucking Hell! I hate going full demon mode.”

Stepping between Az and Kurzan, I put a hand on my greed demon’s chest. “Oh, love. Black suits you. Besides, horns have proven to be very useful.”

He smirked, and we all faced off at the door just as it split in two, a throng of Coskaras’s men waiting just on the other

side.

# CHAPTER 12

## KURZAN- LOWER PRINCE OF GREED

FUCKING HELL.

It was a toss-up as to what caused the guards to come running to the study, but I wanted to blame it on Az. Even if it was only because I wanted an excuse to fuck him raw.

Yeah, I'd given up fighting that one. The cab had been too good for me to deny. And when I see something I want...

*They're both mine, and Az is going accept, so I can fuck that brimstone ass of his into the fucking ground.*

"Hands up, asshole!" Benny shouted from the door, more men flanking him, and I sighed.

"Fuck me. You're who he sent? As if it weren't bad enough."

Benny had it out for me from the beginning. My very existence as Andredi's son pissed him off, and he'd spent centuries doing whatever he could to make me look bad in front of the old man.

"That's right, you little pissant fuck. He's finally let go of his restrictions. Old man's gonna let me fuck you up."

"Oh, I'd love to see you try. Need I remind you, Benny, you lost a fight to a fucking baby hellhound."

"Shut the fuck up!"

He launched himself at me, but I quickly sidestepped, pulling my dagger to my hand. It was easy enough to slide up behind him and stab down through his neck.

Blood squirted over my hand, and I turned back to the crew waiting.

“You still want to do this?”

Gurgling noises echoed through the room as Benny bled out on the floor, and the other greed demons considered the situation. A handful stepped forward, another of my dad’s favorite lackeys shouting through the room.

“Oh, I want to. Benny was a fucking chump.” He gestured to the others surrounding him. “We’re not.”

They barreled forward in a wave, working at a unit instead of an easily dispatched single person. Az stepped forward at my left and grinned.

“I think they do, Kurzan. Do you think I should hold back? Make it last?”

I chuckled darkly. “Unfortunately, we don’t have time for that. But by all means, please enjoy yourself, Az.”

Heat roared off his body, the magma veins snaking through his body pulsing. “I’ve been waiting for a chance to let a little steam, and you fucks? You’re going to make a great appetizer.”

Az met the group of demons running toward us head-on. Controlling his body like a wrecking ball, he smashed into them, knocking several to the ground while the others had to split away. The stragglers came right for Senka and me, but we each took care of them easily enough.

My blade sang through the neck of the tallest one, and I landed a hard punch to the shorter one who’d broken ranks. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Senka wrap her tail around the wrist of the one pointing a gun at her, twisting hard so he dropped it right in her waiting palm.

Emptying the clip into his head and the head of the guy behind him, Senka had expert marksman skills, and I was thoroughly impressed.

Snapping my gaze to the demons on the floor with Az, I just saw him tear the head off Dad’s supposed golden boy and

jam his fist through the chest of another. Golden-flecked blood splattered across his hands and face, and despite everything, my cock throbbed with need.

*Smash.*

A body landed full force against me, knocking me to the ground. I recognized this one, too.

“Hi, Tony.” I held him back from my face with my hands, “Can I help you with something?”

“Andredi’s orders. Nothing personal.”

He clawed for my face and then drove his fist into my side as I protected my head. Pain welled through my ribs as he battered them with hits, and I grunted low.

“Nothing personal? Sure feels personal.”

I’d lost my dagger in the fall, so I called it back to me, and it slid across the floor in a scratchy *whoosh*.

“You should really start thinking for yourself. Might live longer.”

“I’m not here to think.” Tony leaned forward, punching my guard arms.

It was just the position I needed.

“Well, don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

I bucked my hips up, flinging Tony over my head as I jabbed upward with the dagger. He landed hard on his back, and I followed quickly on top of him. The tip of my blade stuck into a small space between his ribs, but I hadn’t finished him.

“Still want to obey orders?”

Tony grunted as he fought to keep me from plunging the dagger the rest of the way home.

“You’ll never win. No one is a match for the Big Seven.”

Jerking hard, I shoved down in two jagged stabs. The dagger pushed in, finally hitting vitals, and Tony was quickly giving up the ghost.

“Watch me.”

A wave of heat blasted off Az as he funneled more of his powers into the air around us, knocking back the second wave of demons ready to join the fray. We were doing well, but even I knew we couldn't take them all without something going wrong or one of us slipping up.

“Let's get the fuck out of here!”

Az and Senka took care of the assailants dogging them and ran toward my position near the door. I clocked the guy starting to get back up in the threshold, and we all lept over him, running down the long hall.

“Where are we going, love?” Senka yelled.

“My room. To the portal. We'll hit the headquarters earthside and then head to my safe house.”

“Six o'clock!” Az paused at the hall to our six, sending a bout of flame from his hands down toward another mass of greed demons.

They fell back, but I could see exhaustion creeping through Az's brow.

I ran to his side, pulling him up to his feet. “You good?”

“Don't have much of that left. It's draining.”

“You got any fancy tricks, Senka?” I shouted up to her, and she spun around, seeing the crowd of demons on Az and my tail.

“One. Get behind me.”

We hurried toward her, and I pulled Az to her back for cover.

Senka waited until the group was close, way closer than I would have liked, and then a strange aura licked through the air, traveling from her hands and eyes.

“Hi there, gentlemen. How about you give a little lady a head start?”

Her voice was enchanted with lust, a subtle red glow wafting around her body. Each of the demon's eyes glassed over with a red tint, and they fell to their knees. They all sported an erection or a pained face as the arousal gripped them hard. A chorus of moans built around them as the demons tried to find any way they could to alleviate the lust.

"We won't have much time. Let's go." Senka scooped under Az's other arm, and we sprinted for my room.

Once inside, we bolted the door, and I flung as much furniture as I could in front of it. The portal was in the back near my closet, and Senka dashed for it, willing it to open, which, thank fuck, it still did. Knowing my dad, it wouldn't for long.

"Get me by the door," Az growled low as I tried to drag his half-useless body to the entrance.

It took all of my strength, but I got the guy propped up. He reached for the handle, and another bout of heat swelled from his hand, melting the lock and knob. That was, unfortunately, all the strength the guy had, and Az passed out as soon as it was done.

Hauling his ass across the floor, I got us to the portal right when the banging started up on the other side of my room. Even melted, it wouldn't take a gang of demons too long to break down my door.

"It good?" I shouted to Senka, and she nodded.

"Yup. Just need you two."

She ran over, helping me with Az, and we leapt through the portal, landing hard on the headquarters' floor in a private back room.

"Okay. Now what?"

Senka eyed the space around us. We were back earthside with that crew of greed demons. We couldn't just walk out of here. Andredi would be sending up the alarm any second.

"This."

I dropped Az to Senka's lap and walked to the back wall. Running my fingers across the bricks, I searched for the telltale lip that gave the passage away.

“What are you doing?”

It didn't take long to find it, and once I got my claws into the thinner patch of mortar, I yanked the hidden door open.

“Had it built just in case I needed to make a hot exit.”

Senka smiled. “Clever, love. Now help me with this two-ton brick of a demon.”

Carrying Az as best we could, I guided Senka through the back lot of the headquarters and to the hidden car I'd stashed back there years ago. I occasionally checked the engine to make sure it would still run, but this time, it needed a bit of power to get the motor going.

We pulled out into a little monitored back alley, and then the three of us were headed to my private safe house I'd told no one about.



“I still can't believe my fucking parents want me dead.” Senka paced the room. She'd yet to still once we arrived, and it didn't look like that was changing any time soon.

“Join the club, Princess.”

I sighed, stretching out on the couch as Az snoozed across from me on the floor.

“Haha. You're used to your dad hating you, and vice versa. I'm not.”

I walked up to her, stopping Senka as she turned to start another lap. “I know. But I can think of one thing that might make you feel better.”

“Oh, yeah, and what's that? I'm not sure a shag can calm me this time.”

She smirked at me.

“We kill them first.”

Senka’s eyes positively glowed, and she wrapped her arms around me. “Now, you’re talking.”

Lowering my head, Senka raised up on her toes to meet my kiss, and I scooped her up onto my hips, gripping her ass.

Her head fell back as she rocked against my already hardening cock, and I trailed my lips and fangs across my mark.

“I want their heads on a fucking pike. Thinking they can just get rid of us because they don’t like the new guard. Well, fuck them.”

“Got a plan for how to do that?”

Az groaned as he sat up, sucking in a deep breath.

“Morning, Goldilocks. Have a nice nap?” I set Senka down, walking over to lend Az my hand.

“No. Your loud asses woke me up.”

He stood with only a slight wobble, and Senka was quickly at his side, probing the large bruises on his side and arm.

“You certainly took a beating.”

Az swatted her hands away. ” Yeah, remind me not to do that.”

I sauntered up next to him, clapping a hand down on his shoulder and enjoying the way he hissed.

“So, how come you don’t have a handle on that power of yours?”

Az glared at me, shrugging off my hand. ” I don’t use it much. Hasn’t been a need. Where’s your special gift that’ll save the day?”

“Fair enough. But I don’t think inciting greed would have worked amongst a throng of greed demons.”

Az plopped down on the sofa, his large chest rising and falling as his body worked to restore his reserves. It was odd the way my chest pinched at the thought of him dying. Before

all this, I would have been able to dismiss any lingering feelings if I'd heard about his death, but now...

*Fuck. Do I actually care about the asshole?*

Banging him was one thing, but caring about him was totally different. I studied him from head to toe as Senka sat next to him, stroking a claw down his bicep.

“Would you quit it? That tickles.” Behind the growl of his words, I could see Az fighting back a smile.

“No. I do what I want. If you have a problem with that, punish me.”

Lust swirled through the air between them, between all of us, but the stranger thing was the comfort that sat behind it. We all felt at ease with each other, and that was hard to come by for anyone, let alone a demon.

*Mine.*

The thought rattled around in my mind, encompassing both of them. *Hmm. Well, what do you know? I guess it's a double-stuffed kind of cookie.*

“So,” I sat down on Az's other side, draping my legs across him so my feet rested in Senka's lap. “What next? We clearly want to take down the three Houses, but I personally want to see how far up the ladder this goes.”

Glaring at me and rolling his eyes, Az begrudgingly accepted his position and released a heavy sigh.

“The three of them working together hardly speaks to a limited conspiracy. I'm sure there are more people involved.”

I hummed as I drummed my fingers on the arm of the couch. “One of the demons back there said, Big Seven. That implies it's all of them.”

Senka sat up straighter, staring off into the middle distance. “I want more info about my parents. I want to know what they think they're getting out of my death.”

I knew she'd want to, but it was a fucking risk to go there. I was sure Andredi would spread the word to Senka's mother,

Luperccia.

Az took Senka's chin, forcing her to meet his eyes. "Senka, you know that's an ask, right? I'm sure she'll expect us to come. Any ideas for how we survive that?"

"Actually, I have one. It involves using a bit of your blood. So, if you have a way to heal up faster, that'd be great."

"My blood."

"His blood."

The words left Az's and my mouths simultaneously.

"I want to alter the drugs. Part of the key to the potency is using my own blood, another reason why not just everyone can make it. If I infuse your blood into a batch, I think it'll do the trick. Forcing rage instead of a raging hard-on."

I chuckled despite the circumstances, and Az glared at me.

"How much blood do you need?"

"Only a few pints, darling. You'll be fine."

Az went to stand up, but my legs stopped him. He furrowed his brow as he stared, gesturing for me to move with his head.

"What?"

Raising his eyebrows at me, Az eyed me hard. I was sure he was inches from punching me. I looked down, like I had no idea I was keeping him from anything, and then swung my feet to the floor. He grumbled to himself as he stood and took up Senka's position, pacing back and forth.

"What's the issue, Goldilocks?"

"I need to heal up. I won't be able to spare that much if I don't recharge."

"And how do you do that, darling?" Senka slid up behind him, wrapping her arms around Az's thick waist.

"I eat. Or drink, rather. More than a single demon can handle. Wanna volunteer?"

He glared down at her like Az expected Senka to back off like a wounded pup. I knew she wouldn't be swayed so easily.

“Does it have to be from just one demon?” She smirked up at him, and then Senka's eyes slid to me.

“No. It doesn't, but something tells me Kurzan would be less than thrilled to offer up his vein, and finding someone else might draw attention to us.”

My stare flicked between the two of them. My blood was necessary to fuel up Az enough to power Senka's drugs. Logically, that wasn't a big deal. We needed to get in and out of there safely, and this concoction of hers would help to ensure that.

Logic aside, this was a big fucking deal. I didn't let anyone bite me. Allowing Senka to do it in the heat of passion wouldn't come without punishment, and now I was supposed to offer up my neck to Az like it was nothing.

“Kurzan, love. You want a way in. This is it.” Senka held my stare.

I did want in, so I was just going to have to lean into that greed.

“Fine. Take what you can from her first.”

“Mmm, please do, darling.”

Senka leaned back, exposing her neck to Az, and he swiftly scooped her up into his arms and brought her flesh to his lips right over his own mark.

Az whispered into Senka's ear, but thanks to the superior hearing, I heard it all plain as day.

“Be a good girl and scream, won't you? I'll be that much stronger if you come from my bite.”

His fangs sank into her neck like a viper strike, and Senka cried out as instructed. Lust rolled off her as Az sucked, her blood trickling down her skin. She shifted, her crimson flesh matching that bright red as her blood darkened. With his other hand, Az reached between Senka's legs, sliding his hand under Senka's pants to her cunt and pumping his fingers inside her.

“Fuck, yes, Az. Oh, yesssss....”

Senka became a puddle in his arms as Az pulled her blood into himself and fucked her with his fingers. She arched up, her cries getting louder and longer, and then she was coming undone, her cum leaking through her pants.

I couldn't stop myself from stroking my aching erection. The sight was too magnificent, and it was all I could do to keep myself planted on the sofa. Az took his fill from her, stopping when her eyes lulled shut and laying her gently on the floor.

His eyes snapped to mine, and I was just able to pull my hand away from my cock before that glare of his had me wanting to take it again. Az stalked toward me, blood coating his lips and fire dancing through his irises as he shifted into his full demon form.

I stilled, waiting for him to attack my neck like the predator he was. But instead, Az lowered himself on top of me, straddling my hips.

“Neck.”

Az growled low as I turned my head. I was painfully hard watching his monster side take over, and my own shift overtook me. My skin turned inky black, and Az lowered his mouth to my carotid.

Without warning, he struck. His fangs drove into my neck like two hot poker full of venom. I writhed as the pain zinged through each of my nerves, and my cock twitched. Az's ass was right over my erection, and it pushed into him as he sat back, holding my neck to his mouth as he sucked hard. I remember how hard he sucked, images of my cock stuffed down his throat swirling behind my closed eyes.

A soft moan escaped him as he drank, his ass grinding against my head as he jerked me closer and sank his fangs deeper. It was euphoria, bliss, and blinding pain. Az's long teeth tore into my flesh, and in his ravenous state, he couldn't possibly tell he was rocking his hips as my cock pressed into him.

Hell, I wanted that. I wanted to sink my cock deep in his ass as he drank from me like this. Claiming and being claimed.

Another hard pull and it was too much. I came in a great wave, painting the insides of my pants with torrents of hot cum.

That's when I felt it.

Az's dick twitched against my stomach as he held my neck against his mouth, the rhythmic pulses of orgasm taking over as he shot ropes of thick spend into the fabric separating us.

He pulled back, my gold blood mixing with the deep crimson of Senka's already painting his lips. My shaft twitched, another quick spurt of cum spraying into my pants.

We held each other's stare for a moment, and then both of us quickly looked away. *Unholy fucking Hell.*



Thankfully, Senka dozed through Az and my cleanup. I darted straight for the bathroom after Az dismounted, washing up and snagging a new pair of pants from my closet. Hopefully, she wouldn't notice that I'd changed them since I was sporting a nearly identical black pair.

Of course, Az wasn't as lucky. He didn't have a backup set of trousers, and something about him being forced to sit in it after his hasty cleanup made my evil heart sore. *That's right, you delicious fuck. Where that cum like a good little slut.*

Eventually, Senka stirred, and as she sat up, she looked between the two of us, her eyes flicking to Az's crotch. She could smell the sex all over him. Meeting my stare, Senka cocked a brow, and I rolled my eyes at her, shaking my head.

Apparently, my scandalous lust demon wanted Az and me to get it over with as much as I did. But he was still holding out on me, the bastard.

"How you feeling?" Az got up off the couch and helped Senka to stand.

“Like I got fucking bitten and orgasmed hard enough to see stars. You?”

Az chuckled, shaking his head, and wrapped his arms around her waist. “Great. Thanks for the hit. It was one hell of a power-up.”

I snuck up behind Senka, threading my arms around her and through Az’s forearms. Smirking at him, I dragged my tongue across my fangs.

“I feel so left out. She wasn’t the only one who got that body back up and running in record time. Tell me, Az, how did it taste? A bit of lust and greed swirling around behind those lips?”

I was pushing it again, but I just couldn’t help myself around Az. It was like this the very first time we fucked. I had stalked him through the entire party, bent and determined to fucking wreck his ass or die trying. Now, I understood why I was so compelling. That something that bubbled between the three of us was there even back then. I’d just been too young and stupid to think about it.

“Great.” Az rolled his eyes. “Can we please make this drug or whatever now.”

It wasn’t a question. Az walked off, reaching into my fridge and pulling out a beer. I hadn’t even noticed that he’d downed another one at some point during my impromptu shower.

Senka just giggled, content to watch Az and my seemingly endless back-and-forth. She turned around to face me, and I stole a kiss before she pulled back, putting a finger to my lips.

“Where’s the stove?”

I nodded toward the kitchen where Az stood.

“Got any mixing bowls?”

“I don’t think so. I’m not big on cooking.”

“Well, then I guess we’ll just have to conjure up a few more supplies.”

Senka padded over to the kitchen, tiptoeing in her bare feet. I followed, hanging out on the opposite side of the counter as she held her hands over the laminate surface.

“Alrighty, then.”

She clapped her hands together and then began to pull them apart like she was tugging on two bars to pry them open. Between her hands and hovering in the air appeared a lightless black hole. The light from my safe house couldn't penetrate it, and it was opaque as far as I could tell, obscuring Senka's chest from my vantage point.

“The fuck is that?” Az peered around it, darting his head from the front to the back like he was trying to see how thick it was.

“That is an extradimensional space. Very handy for storing things.” Senka winked at him.

I cocked a brow at Senka. “Where'd you learn magic? That's usually a demon thing.”

“My mother. She's a particularly big fan of tormenting lustful witches.”

Senka reached her arm inside the hole, rooting around like she was digging in a purse.

“Witches don't usually go to Hell. How'd she nab them?”

“I assume she cheated. It's not like she tells me her plans. Clearly.”

I nodded with a frown. I could hardly say the greed demons were innocent. We cheated our way into souls all the time. Only a single word of acquiescence, and we could snatch them up even if they were on their way upstairs.

Snapping my attention back to Senka, I moved around the counter to the side to see the items she retrieved from her little pocket dimension. There were several of the typical cooking supplies, heating wells, and even a distillation adapter. Rarer were the demon-specific tools for enchanted blood drawing and essence extraction.

“Okay, let's get started. Az, darling, arm, please.”

He groaned, offering up his elbow vein for Senka's work. The archaic-looking tool Senka used pierced into Az's prominent vein, and she pulled the plunger back, drawing out not only his blood but the power contained in it.

The small receptacle didn't look big enough to take more than a teaspoon, but being enchanted, it pulled more and more crimson wonder until Senka finally stopped. Az looked a bit woozy, having just lost a fair portion of his blood, and I wondered if he might need another pick-me-up. My dick twitched at the prospect.

"Fucking Hell, Senka. It's a good thing I fucking fed first. You damn near killed me."

"I did warn you, darling. I usually collect my blood over the course of a few days, but we didn't have that kind of time."

"You owe me."

Az smacked her ass hard, and Senka squeaked, looking back over her shoulder at him. Her arousal was *very* evident, and I was straining to stay composed. We had shit to do, after all.



After what I had to assume was two or so hours, Senka finally finished. The red powder she created sat as the final product of her strenuous work, and she had to use magic several times to speed up the process. *This must take fucking forever normally.*

"Well, that was a bit of a rush job, but I think I got it done. We should probably give it a test run to see if it works the way I want."

"Test?" Az and I spoke simultaneously.

"I am a scientist. I want proof that it works."

"You make drugs, Senka." I narrowed my gaze on her.

"And it's quite the process, as you can see. The magic did its job, but results can't be guaranteed until they're studied."

“Christ on his damned cross, just fucking do it, Kurzan. We don’t have time to pussy foot the fuck around.”

Az’s rage pulsed under his skin, his veins glowing with molten rock as his demonic form flickered across him.

“Why the fuck do I have to do?”

“It’s not going to work on me. You really want Senka to beat your ass? At least I’ll be able to stop you.”

“Fucking— Ugh!” I snatch up a tiny bit of the red dust on my dagger and walk to the far wall. “So if it does fucking work, how long am I going to want to kill Az?”

“I mean, don’t you always want to do that?” Az smirked at me.

I glowered at him. “How long am I going to be unable to stop myself?”

Senka squinted at me, considering. “Well, you only have a little bit there. So, hopefully, you process it quickly. How long would you stay high on a bump of coke that big?”

I looked at the nearly insignificant amount on my blade. “Maybe ten minutes. Probably less.”

“There ya go. That’s my best guess. This is new. I tried to make it especially concentrated, but that’ll just affect how severe the symptoms are. So head’s up.”

“Goody,” Az grumbled.

“I guess restrain me or something? If it gets bad.”

I didn’t wait for their response. We were already running short on time, and I wanted this over with. Anger was too reckless an emotion, and I preferred to get what I wanted through calculation. *This is going to suck.*

Snorting the red powder hard and fast, I waited for the effects with my eyes closed. At first, I thought it didn’t work, but then a wave of wrath like nothing I’d ever felt washed over me, bathing me in a rage that made my guts ache like they were being roasted over a pit.

Opening my eyes, they went straight to Az.

“You fucking stupid piece of shit. I’m going to take a pound of flesh out of your ass until your blood coats my cock, and I can eat your heart.”

# CHAPTER 13

## AZGOS- LOWER PRINCE OF WRATH

OH, SHIT. KURZAN BARRELED TOWARD ME AT FULL SPEED, knocking me back to the floor. Senka quickly darted out of the way but then got the bright idea to try and pull Kurzan off. He growled at her, and she backed up, hands in the air.

“Get in the other room. I’ll deal with him.” I fought to get the words out as Kurzan tried to ram his fists into my skull.

“But—”

“Just fucking do it, Senka!” I shoved Kurzan off, throwing him against the wall to buy time. “I know you can handle yourself. This isn’t about that. Let me deal with him. We have some shit to work out.”

She eyed me, offering an understanding nod as she beat-feet for the bathroom. I heard the lock click over just as Kurzan leaped on me again. I caught him around the neck, squeezing to cut off his air. He just shifted, his skin going black as he grew horns that stabbed into my side. *Okay, that was uncool.*

“Fighting a little dirty, aren’t you, Kurzan. Well,” I pulled his head back, slamming it into the wall, “I’ll admit I’ve been wanting to do this for a while.”

The truth was I easily outweighed and out-muscled Kurzan, but he was fast and relentless. He quickly shook off the blow to the head and turned to face me, spitting golden blood on the floor. Kurzan wiped his lips with the back of his hand and discarded his shredded shirt, and fuck if it weren’t hot as Hell.

“You and me both, you fucking whiny ass bitch. Couldn’t stand for anyone to know that you liked getting fucked by a greed demon.”

We circled around each other, Kurzan slashing out his claws.

“You know, Kurzan, you can get fucked. I didn’t give a fucking shit, but you had to fucking blab about it to Er of all people!”

That set him off, and he launched at me. I prepared for a high swing, but at the last minute, Kurzan ducked low, knocking out my feet from under me. He jumped on top, raining his fists across my ribs. Kurzan’s dagger flew across the room to his hand, and he pressed the sharp tip to my chin, drawing blood. *This is a problem.*

“For the fucking last time, you dumb fucking slut, I didn’t tell him shit! It’s not actually that hard to come up with the term raging lava cock, you unbelievable moron! Er spotted us on his own, and when he was done jerking off to us, he decided to torment you with the info!”

I froze. Wrath like this didn’t make for good liars. Kurzan’s eyes blazed an unnatural red, fiery rage overtaking the normal gold of his irises.

He really didn’t tell him.

Kurzan took the opportunity to clock me across the jaw, and I bucked my hips, launching him off. That’s when I noticed his thick erection as his hips flew past my face. When he landed, I flung myself up into a crouch and spun to face him.

“Don’t tell me this version of you actually gets off on the violence. How unoriginal.”

Kurzan threw the dagger at me, and I just barely ducked out of the way, the blade slicing through the side of my bicep. The knife landed in the far wall behind me with a solid thump, and then it was back in Kurzan’s hand.

“First of all, Azgos, I’ve always enjoyed a little violence, and second, I stopped hiding how I feel about you back in that

dead demon's car.”

I eyed him, the flame behind his eyes died off, and Kurzan slipped back into human form. He licked the blood off his dagger and then sheathed it in his boot.

He called back over his shoulder. “Senka! We’re good. Come on out!”

I couldn’t respond, everything I thought was true just did a total fucking one-eighty on me, and I clenched my jaw, unable to keep my eyes from roaming over Kurzan’s chest.

“You said I was envious. But let’s get one thing straight.” He walked up to me, stopping with his lips inches from mine. “Greed is not envy. I see something I want, I take it, and I want everything, everything you have, and more. But I’m not envious of the attention you’re getting from Senka or anyone else for that matter because I know very well who you *both* belong to.”



When Senka had returned from the bathroom, she came out with an idea of how to get into the lust demons’ earth headquarters, and we quickly took off.

I hadn’t said a word to Kurzan since our little tussle, and he thankfully didn’t make a thing about it when Senka asked for details about the experience.

He rode in the back of his car, letting Senka drive and me take shotgun.

“I’m surprised you didn’t want to drive, love.” Senka glanced at him through the rearview mirror.

“Oh, I’m all about sharing, Princess. Besides, it’s like having my very own chauffeurs. And most drivers I’ve had weren’t nearly as cute.”

I rolled my eyes, but that same menacing doubt from before seeped through my veins. *Nope, I do not have time for this shit.*

“So we’re going in through the backdoor. How exactly is that going to make a difference?”

Senka flicked her eyes to me as I asked, grinning.

“Because, darling, that entrance is known by few. It’s cloaked, so only someone with an affinity for magic can open it. Mother does like to brag. If I’m right, that entrance will lead straight to the vault and lab where I usually cook up the drugs and then stash them.”

“Less going through security. I like that bit. How do we distribute the drugs?”

Kurzan leaned forward between the seats as he spoke, and I struggled to keep my eyes straight ahead.

“It’ll dissolve in water. So my plan is to have Az pry open the water tank outside and pump it through the sprinklers. Just need a bit of that flame of yours.”

Senka winked at me, and while I should have been thinking about something else, anticipation for our next round in the sack built up in my spine.

Nodding, I checked the piece I’d snagged from Kurzan’s safe house. We each took a pistol, and the Glock23 I’d grabbed was loaded with the safety on and ready to go.

“And how do we stay out of the spray?” Kurzan probed.

“There’s no sprinklers in the lab.” She popped a bubble with the gum she’d found at the safe house. “I’d set it off way too much with the heat I use. And we’ve disconnected the auto-call to the fire department. Just water, love.”

“Alright, then. Last, of course, is getting some info while we’re there. Where would your parents keep it?”

“They have a back office down the hall from the lab. Spelled lock, of course, but I should be able to break it, especially with a bit of the old man’s blood.”

My gaze shot over to Senka. “You have your father’s blood?”

“He’s a heavy sleeper, and if I need a little bit of oomph for the drugs, I’ve got his.”

“I appreciate how much you’ve planned ahead, Senka. Az, do you think you’ll be able to help me hold off the raged lust demons until they kill themselves off?”

Until that point, I’d been able to avoid speaking directly to Kurzan. I hesitated before answering. It was a simple enough question, but everything felt so bare and raw with him now.

“Yeah.”

“Good. Just promise not to enjoy yourself too much. We’d hate to resort to knocking you out.”

The bite to his words was obvious, and I nearly flinched as he came for like that. I needed out of this fucking car right the fuck now.

“How much farther, Senka.”

“Actually,” she rounded a corner blowing another fucking bubble, “we’re here.”



Busting through the magical seal took way too fucking long, but we got through, and I darted for the large water tank a few yards away from the building.

Turning the rusted wheel to open the top was certainly a job for a wrath demon, and I had to force a partial shift to get it turning. Once it was open, I dropped the power inside and gave it a stir with a stick I found leaning up against the tank.

Hurrying back to the group, I found Senka at the back door with Kurzan.

“Why aren’t you inside?”

“We can hear someone in the lab. He won’t get hit by the drugs, so we need the others good and distracted before we break in.” Kurzan gestured with his head at the roof.

I glared at him. “How the fuck do I set off the sprinklers from out here?”

Senka walked up to me, putting a hand on my face. “You don’t.”

“Fucking hell.”

Without another word, I circled around for the front of the building. All I needed to do was get in far enough to get a blaze going under a sprinkler head. That shit would come gushing out in no time, and the drugs worked fast. I could hear voices just past the set of iron doors.

“Ding dong. Az is coming for a visit.”

# CHAPTER 14

## SENKA- LOWER PRINCESS OF LUST

AZ JOGGED FOR THE FRONT DOORS, AND ALL THERE WAS LEFT to do was wait. Silence hung in the air like a wet blanket, and tension made my skin itch.

“Can you peek inside? See if the guy in there runs out?”

Kurzan clenched his jaw, moving to the door and gingerly cracking it open. The metal groaned ever so slightly, and we both froze.

“He didn’t notice,” Kurzan whispered, looking inside through the open sliver he created.

A shuddering breath ghosted through my lips, and I stepped up behind Kurzan.

“Anything?”

“Not yet.”

I stood there, unable to see fuck all, until there was a massive boom that rocked the building, sending Kurzan and I wobbling back.

Kurzan pushed off the gravel, risking the door, and stuck his head inside.

“Flames down the hall. Az must have done it. The guy’s gone, let’s go.”

He tore open the door the rest of the way, shoving it against the dirt as the crooked thing dragged on the ground. I slipped past him, heading for my workbench, and he followed behind, letting the door slam shut.

My notes and papers were scattered across the desk and not in the usual chaos I left them. I snatched them all up, conjuring the hole at the edge of the table and sweeping everything inside.

“What are you doing?”

“My notes. They’re coded, but better safe than sorry, right?”

“Fine. Let’s check on Az.”

My heart fluttered at his obvious concern, and I hoped his little one-on-one with our wrath demon was productive.

We sprinted down the hall toward the front, eager to find where Az stood in the center of all the panic. Lust demons crawled across the floor, tearing into each other as their limbs burned while still more were beating the ever-loving shit out of each other.

“We never did have great constitutions.”

I smirked with a shrug at the assholes bleeding out at my feet, leaving footprints in the growing pools of blood.

Suddenly, I was flung up against the wall, smashing into the concrete surface with devastating force. Stars bloomed behind my eyes as I shook off the blow and looked up at who’d gotten the bright idea to attack me.

Mal stared me back in the face, eyes crazed with rage and covered in deep red blood. He’d shifted, his crimson skin matching the color of my distinctive red powder.

“Hello, lover. Long time no see.”

“Fuck you, Senka! You fucking whore! You bitch! You never let me please you! Holding out like there’s someone better to fuck that sloppy pussy!”

His fist came for my face, but I ducked out of the way, and it landed squarely into the concrete, cracking it.

“I’m going to make you pay!”

Another blow aimed for my head, but then the silver glint of a blade burst through his eye. Mal’s body quickly went

limp, and his body fell to the floor.

Kurzan stood before me, blood spray covering him from head to toe. His shirt was torn to bits and hung open, revealing his chest tattoos. A deep, rumbling growl rumbled through him.

“No one touches what’s mine.”

I grinned at him, slinking up to his side and running my tongue through the delicious blood coating his cheek. In a flash, I flicked out my claws and slashed them behind me. As Kurzan and I turned, another lust demon, Monica, slumped to the ground, her face a mangled mess thanks to my talons.

“Or what’s mine.”

Kurzan pulled me to his chest, his thick cock straining through his pants and crashed his lips into mine.

“Hell, you’re fucking perfect. My unhinged little killer.”

I pulled my gun from my waistband. Discretion was far less important at this point. “Let’s go, love. We have another violent dream on legs to find.”

Kurzan’s eyes flared a bright gold, and I shifted out my tail to smack his ass.

We took off further down, searching for any sign of Az. Only a few yards from the entrance, we saw a massive collection of doped lust demons crowding around what appeared to be a single target. There were several more dead on the floor around the mob, and then a roar echoed through the hall as Az shoved the group back, fully shifted and glorious.

Kurzan smirked. “Found him.”

With wild punches, Az forced the demons off him, then gripped the head of the closest and tore it in half. It made a crunching squelch noise, and the demon’s brain flopped to the floor as Az flung the two halves of his skull to the ground.

He was coated in blood, dripping some of his own molten essence as well. I leveled my gun at one approaching him from

the right and squeezed the trigger. Az barely blinked, turning to another attacker and tearing the arms off this one.

I spotted Az's gun, the clip empty, just as Kurzan slid across the blood floor and popped up behind another member of the Kalvaskas House. He drove his dagger through her neck, pushing it through and tearing her throat open. It was nearly enough to fully decapitate her, and he finished the job by gripping her hair and kicking her body away.

We all stood on edge, waiting for the next attack, but as we eyed the area, the few remaining lust demons were too busy murdering each other to pay us much mind. Kurzan pulled Az along back toward the hall where I stood, and we took off for my parent's office.

"You do look so good covered in blood, darling." My stare roamed across Az as he sprinted alongside me. "This kitty might have to give you a tasty little bath later."

The flame behind Az's eyes flared, and he looked back to Kurzan, equally covered in viscera.

"You just can't seem to keep your shirts in one piece, can you?"

Kurzan pulled off the stained fabric and threw it to the ground. "Admiring the view."

As much as he tried to hide it, I could see Az's gaze positively eat up Kurzan's bloody, tattooed skin.

"I guess red really is your color." My wrath demon's eyes shifted behind me and Kurzan, and my pussy fucking wept with lust.

Skidding to a stop in front of my parent's office. I slashed an offensive burst of energy through the seal around the door, and Az swiftly kicked the door in. Mother clearly wasn't expecting someone proficient with enchantments to come a knocking.

We tore through the space in a frenzy. We only had moments before an alarm would sound in Hell, and I wanted to be long gone by the time that happened.

Kurzan and Az dug through drawers and file folders stuffed into the desk, but they came up blank. I studied the room. Where would mother and father keep their assets?

There were shelves of fucked up sex tools, trinkets from other universes, and several hearts in jars decorating the black lacquered wood.

“Hearts?” Az gestured with his head toward the jars.

“Keepsakes of their favorite souls they’ve had the joy of tormenting.”

His lips turned down as he nodded, and that’s when I noticed the picture of the Marquis de Sade on the wall behind him. *Curious.*

Pushing past Az, I pulled the thing off the wall.

“Bingo.”

A safe was framed into the wall. I took in the combination lock holding it shut and spun the numbers until I heard a satisfying click, and it swung open.

“How the fuck did you know the combo?”

Az’s face was painted with an adorable mask of confusion, and Kurzan walked up behind him, throwing his arm over his shoulder.

“Lust demon trick?”

“Hardly. I just know my parents. 69, 4, 8. Their favorite sexual positions.”

“Okay, I get the first one, but...” Az furrowed his brow.

“Well, yeah. Sixty-nine, a four. The closet thing to a capital A, which looks like an Eiffel Tower, and an eight. Infinity. As in sex forever.”

“I never would have fucking guessed that.” Kurzan shook his head.

“Well, I have a leg up. It’s a running gag in the family, honestly.”

As I emptied the safe of its contents into the hole, I noticed one particular paper that was another enchanted hard copy of texts. This one had a message from just last night.

“Look. ‘Move them. Slodencchio. Get that side started now. We need to act quickly. They already know too much. Get the shit planted...’”

I met Kurzan and Az’s wide stares. “Hellside.”

“I guess we’re going to the Realm of Sloth, hot stuff.” Kurzan playfully elbowed Az in the side.



Getting to Slodencchio territory was going to take some doing. None of us had portals there, and it was a particularly nasty journey across the levels of Hell.

After gathering up the rest of the papers and a plentiful supply of drugs from the vault, we ditched the last headquarters, Az tossing another fireball into the remaining chemicals and lighting the place up real fucking pretty.

We knew we needed to lie low for a while, so Kurzan drove us back to the safe house, double and triple back on himself to ensure we weren’t being followed.

Once inside, Kurzan pulled me into him, his blood-soaked skin pressing against me as he tossed our duffle bags of crap to the floor.

“God fucking damn, Senka. I won’t wait a second longer. You look too fucking good, dripping in blood.”

His tongue pressed between my lips as his claws tore through my clothing, exposing me to him. Az was suddenly at my back, his scorching palms dragging down my body as he rubbed his erection against my ass.

“You’re fucking covered. I can smell their fear in it, their pain. But that’s nothing compared to the delectable scent coming from your wet fucking cunt.”

His fingers snaked between my legs as I arched my ass up against his cock. Az's free hand gripped my hair, pulling my head back until it choked me. Kurzan's tongue circled around my nipple. Then his fingers crawled down my stomach, finding my clit before joining Az's.

I could *feel* them tangle and swirl together inside me, stretching and warming me up for their knots.

“Oh, fuck, yes, please. I want to taste you both.”

Az shifted back into demon form, and Kurzan actually did so without prompting. Their clothes were quickly a heap in the corner, and I forced Az to his knees in front of me as Kurzan stroked his dick at my back. My wrath demon cocked a brow, and I lifted my foot onto his shoulder, presenting up my pussy.

“Snack?”

With an evil grin, Az pulled my cunt to his mouth, devouring my clit in rough, hungry sucks and licks. My head fell back against Kurzan's chest, and he kissed me hard, biting on my lip enough to draw blood. The coppery taste flooded my mouth, and wetness pooled all the harder between my legs.

I reached for Kurzan's cock, replacing his hand and gripping hard. I stroked up and down his glistening, gold-veined shaft, precum building at the tip. I swiped my thumb across Kurzan's opening and brought the salty goodness to my mouth, sucking it off my skin.

“Such a good little slut.”

My loud moan echoed through the room as Az dove his fingers deep inside me and fucked me with them. His tongue flicked across my clit, and his “come here” motion deep in my core sent me spiraling into a blinding orgasm that rained my cum across his hand and face.

As the quivering dulled to a subtle pulse, I released Kurzan to slide down to my back on the floor in front of Az. His glowing erection nearly burned my hand, and I moved my head between his knees so I could take him in my mouth.

Threading my legs through Kurzan's, I swallowed down Az's shaft. Kurzan stepped closer, his erection level with Az's

mouth.

“What an interesting position she’s put you in, Az.” He leaned closer, and I watched as Az picked up steam, fucking my throat. “Perhaps a nice chaser for that intoxicating flavor of Senka’s?”

Az growled as I rolled my tongue across his head, probing the small hole as I massaged his balls.

For a moment, he hesitated. I could just make out his stare, likely going to Kurzan, if I tipped my head to the side.

I paused, halting my work, and Az dropped his stare to me. Raising my brows at him, I hoped he got the message. It was time.

“Stop being such a brat, Az. Open up for your master.”

Tension hung, and then Az looked away from me and back at Kurzan.

His heavy sigh sent a shudder through his entire body, and I felt his cock twitch in my grip.

“Can... *May* I please...” Az’s words were a pained fight as he battled against himself. “Taste you?”

Kurzan’s grip went to Az’s shaggy, dirty-blond hair.

“Who do you belong to?”

I felt the swell of connection rise around us, serpentine motions flowing through our veins and pitch-black souls.

Az’s voice sounded desperate as he answered. “You.”

With a tight grip around Az’s throat, Kurzan crashed his lips into our wrath demon, again drawing blood.

“The fucking taste of you together. Ugh. Now swallow down your master’s cock, like a good boy.”

With the same lightning speed as with me, Kurzan forced his shaft between Az’s lips, and I returned to worshiping his lava dick.

The slapping sounds of Kurzan fucking Az’s throat with abandon made me drip with need, and I struggled to match the

hard thrusts of Az's hips. He was burning hot, the dripping arousal that coated his tip was like drinking fire- pain and heat and frenzy.

It was incredible.

“Oh, fucking Hell. I forgot how good at this you are.” Kurzan's voice was strained as he pummeled Az until he choked.

As he caught his breath, Az looked down to me, his shaft pressed in up to his knot, and smiled. Pulling back, he took himself in a fiery grip, smacking his erection against my face. His other hand came to my throat, and he squeezed, driving his fingers inside me and ripping an orgasm free as he moved with unmatched power and speed.

I screamed out, and Kurzan's dick shoved down my throat. The silky change to his inky skin from Az's rough, molten rock sent my mind spinning.

Then, Az freed my neck to grip my hips, lifting me into his lap. I came again as my wrath demon forcefully shoved his cock into my ass before Kurzan's tail wrapped around my throat, choking me as he fucked my mouth.

It was the best fucking kind of spit roast, double stuffed from both ends and still covered in the blood of our enemies.

The burn of Az's knot against my ass and pussy swelled, and I was already powering up for another release. Without warning, Kurzan pulled back, and I whimpered at the loss. But then I tracked his movements as I bounced up and down on Az's dick. He slipped behind the wrath demon, driving his erection into him.

“Fuck!”

Az's loud roar tore through the room, and he hardened further inside me, his lava veins pulsing. Kurzan's tail snaked between Az's legs, wrapping around his knot and clamping down.

“Oh, Christ in Hell.”

The iron grip Az had on my hips deepened as he fucked me, and I unleashed my own tail, slipping it past Kurzan's to grip the greed demon's knot. We were a deliciously depraved puzzle of limbs.

Az's speed picked up.

"Don't you dare come, Azgos. Not until I say so."

I looked past Az to Kurzan, relishing the way he bossed both of us around. For as reluctant as I had been, I was thoroughly enjoying this submissive part of myself.

"You bastard." Az gritted out through his fangs.

Kurzan encircled Az's throat with a talented grip.

"Would you like me to stop?"

Our greed demon was quite the sadist.

"No." Az's eyes rolled back as Kurzan thrust hard, pounding him deeper into me. "Fuuuuck."

"Make Senka come. Destroy that ass as you finger fuck her cunt."

Az growled low, all too happy to oblige as he smirked down at me.

Everything became a blur of sensation as Az plowed into my ass as he fingered me. I squeezed my tail around Kurzan's knot instinctively, and his thrusts pushed Az further and further in. Rough hands grabbed my hair, pulling my head up, and then Az gripped my horns, stroking.

The sensitive skin at the base prickled, and I reached for his. My palms flared with pain as I held onto his bull-like horns, holding on for dear life as he fucked the ever-loving shit out of me, his knot forced in.

I came hard, squirting my arousal across Az when he found my g-spot.

"Good boy. Now fill up that ass. Come for your master."

I looked down to Az's shaft buried deep in my ass. Kurzan's tail spiraled around his base and disappeared with his

knot inside me. I felt him squeeze down on Az, and I mimicked the gesture, constricting my tail around Kurzan's knot until it slipped inside Az.

With a final thrust, our wrath demon orgasmed in a flurry of flame, the boiling heat scorching our skin as he emptied his molten cum inside me. Kurzan quickly followed, his knot throbbing as he flooded Az with gold spend. Another smaller yet equally delicious release flowed over me as I felt Kurzan claim Az through our bond.

Slowly, everything began to still. Eventually, we were able to disconnect from each other, and the boys took care to help me through our joint shower.

The hot water felt incredible, and I giggled as we turned it red, blood rushing down the drain. Afterward, none of us bothered dressing, and I admired my men's sexy as Hell tattoos covering their entire bodies. I didn't have any, and for the first time actually kind of wanted one.

“You're both so decorated. I feel like the odd one out.”

Kurzan glanced at his chest before looking over at Az's, and then he smirked in a way that told me I was in for something devious.

“Go lay down.”

Az was already seated on the couch, a round of beers in his hands for each of us, so I joined him, propping up my legs over his lap. Kurzan pulled his dagger to his hand, rolling me a bit onto my side up against Az's stomach.

“Grip her hips. Hard.”

Doing as told, Az locked me down with his hands. Kurzan looked over at me, a positively fiendish grin on his face.

“You might want to bite down on something.”

I grabbed the pillow by my head, biting the corner between my teeth. My pussy wept, knowing Kurzan was going to inflict pain in his own pleasurable way.

In a few quick slashes, my greed demon carved the initials KC into my hip. My blood dripped down my ass, and I

moaned. Handing the blade to Az, Kurzan lifted my head and sat down on the couch, giving me his lap as a new pillow.

“Your turn.”

Kurzan held my hips still as Az added his initials to the carving, AW. When he was finished, Az licked up my blood, scorching my wounds closed with his heated tongue.

“There you are. Your first body mod. And now everyone will know who you belong to.” Kurzan smirked, kissing Az’s blood-coated lips.

I smiled, the burn in my hip a pleasant sting as I rolled onto my back. Az retrieved our drinks from the floor and passed them out.

“All I know is that it’s a good thing demons only get pregnant when they want to. Otherwise, I’d have a full-blown army of hellspawn setting up shop in there after all the fun we’ve been having.”

Kurzan stroked my hair as my head lay in his lap, Az running his hands up and down my legs.

“Maybe when we’ve figured out this fucking nonsense with our parents, we can properly breed you, Princess. What do you think, Az? Do you like the idea of filling Senka’s cunt and breeding her?”

Az growled low, lowering his face to kiss my thighs.

“Very much. But I agree that we should wait until the grandparents are dead.”

“Soon enough, darling.” I smoothed my hand down Az’s face. “Before you know it, we’ll cross into the Realm of Sloth and get some real answers.”

“Cheers to that.”

Kurzan clinked his beer against Az’s and then mine. We all drank deep. The future was interesting indeed.

*To be continued...*

THIS HAUNTING OBSESSION

MORGANA DARKINS

# CHAPTER 1

THE REAL ANSWER LURKS AT THE BACK OF MY MIND, AND YET, I always refuse to let it be heard whenever someone asks me what made me become a true-crime author? Fear bubbles up inside me and strangles me when I try to answer. The answer is there, but it's never allowed to surface.

It's moments like this, when I find myself alone, surrounded by a sea of crime scene photos, newsletters clippings, and notes scribbled in a haste when the memory of that night surfaces with a clarity that time can never erase. For minutes that never seem to end, I become a child again, too young to fully understand the horrors of reality. I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to focus on the notes in front of me. I rub my eyes until the memory is a blur of sirens, flashing lights, and police tape. I have tried to convince myself that I wasn't guilty of it, but deep down, I know the truth. The darkness lingered, seeping into every corner of my life. My childhood was never the same. The nights were filled with nightmares, and the days were clouded by fear.

I have never spoken about that night to anyone except my dad. The secret remains locked away, a truth that has been carefully hidden in the shadows, a silent weight that I have carried all these years. And now, as I find myself drawn deeper into Mortimer's twisted mind, I can't help but wonder if there's a connection—a thread that binds us beyond the surface. It's a chilling case, and his name alone is enough to send shivers down my spine. The newspapers have named him The Macabre Puppeteer. I've never been a fan of naming serial killers, but this one fits. He orchestrated life and death like a puppet master, driven by a twisted sense of artistry. The media

stated that his crimes are a form of dark, theatrical expression, but it's more to it than that. Detectives didn't yet decipher the symbolism and clues left behind, and sometimes I wonder if it isn't all just chaos and nothing more.

The Macabre Puppeteer's reign of terror has turned the city into a stage for his chilling performances, but it has finally come to an end. I skim through the latest article that has been written about him.

*The Macabre Puppeteer is not merely a name; it's a legend steeped in shadows and whispered in hushed tones. A figure who dances on the fringes of society, his presence is like a dark symphony that sends shivers down spines and captivates the imagination of those who dare to ponder the depths of human depravity.*

*His calling card is a morbid and macabre display—an intricate arrangement of their victims' remains that speaks to a twisted artistry beyond comprehension. The scenes he left behind are gruesome...*

I have been staring at these photos for so long that all I dream about is dark, eerie puppet shows, bodies posed in unnatural positions, like marionettes on strings. My heart races as I immerse myself in the details of his crimes for the ten thousand time. He snuffed out the lives of his victims in ways that left no room for mistakes. I've been trying to piece together this puzzle of darkness, to understand the mind that could conceive such macabre scenes. His mind draws me in. I'm determined to unravel it. To face the horror inside it. The way in which I find myself drawn to his madness is unsettling.

As I return my gaze to the files before me, I can't shake the feeling that there's a truth waiting to be unearthed in the darkness that surrounds him. I take a deep breath, my fingers tracing the outline of a newspaper clipping. As I close my eyes, the memory of that night resurfaces, the echo of sirens and the distant cries of the carnival crowd playing in my mind. The truth hovers just out of reach, and I can't help but wonder if confronting it will finally allow me to break free from the shadows that have clung to me all these years. Will I stop trying to understand the depths of the darkness if I confront it?

Will I finally be free? I have built a life unraveling the secrets of others, yet the biggest secret I've kept is the one that gnaws at me from within.

My phone buzzes on the desk, interrupting my thoughts. I pick it up to see a text from Rachel, not only my best friend, but also the detective that's been on Mortimer's case since the beginning.

How about you pour yourself a glass of wine and relax? Stop staring at those photos.

I read her words, a smile plastered on my lips. Rachel's message is like a lifeline, pulling me out of the abyss of my thoughts. She has seen the worst of humanity, and she knows the depths to which Mortimer is capable of sinking. But this isn't just about the thrill of the chase or the rush of uncovering secrets. It's something deeper, something that tugs at the edges of my consciousness. I need to understand him, to delve into his psyche and expose the twisted motivations that drive him. Her voice of reason often brings a touch of reality to my obsession, reminding me that there's more to life than the haunting mysteries I can't let go of.

As the rain continues to tap against my window, I follow my friend's advice. I pour myself a glass of wine, allowing its warmth to ease the chill that Mortimer's presence brings, even if he's absent. With the soft glow of a single desk lamp casting a warm light across the office, I delicately retrieve one of Mortimer's letters from the pile. The paper is smooth behind my fingertips, a tangible connection to the enigmatic mind that has captivated my thoughts. As I hold it, I can almost imagine the ink still wet, his hand hovering above it. Every envelope on my desk holds a secret world, a glimmer in his dark and twisted mind. His handwriting is elegant, each stroke of the pen a deliberate dance that draws me in. His choice of language is calculated, the cadence of his sentences carefully

orchestrated. I know all his letters by heart by now, but I still can't decipher the mix of emotions they stir up inside me.

*My beloved Flower,*

*I trust this letter finds you in a state of curiosity, a sensation we both share in our own unique ways. The ink that dances upon this page is not just a sequence of sentences—it is a connection, a bridge between two minds that delve into the shadows with a hunger for understanding.*

*Oh, how I've marveled at your words, at the meticulous way you unravel the mysteries that haunt the human soul. Your eyes pierce through the veneer of the mundane, seeking the truth that lies beneath. And yet, isn't it fascinating, my beloved Flower, that truth itself can be a puppet master, guiding us along unseen strings?*

*I've read every word you've written, every article that reveals the machinations of minds like mine. As I sit within these cold walls, I imagine you in your house, surrounded by your research. The dim glow of a solitary lamp casts elongated shadows, much like the truth we both seek. The weight of your curiosity*

*must be both exhilarating and daunting, a feeling I am intimately familiar with.*

*The darkness we explore in our words, and the depths we delve into are our symphony. Our worlds are separated by a mere wall, a boundary that holds within it the potential for an unparalleled connection. I see you, my beloved Flower. I see you, Dakota, as a kindred spirit—one who possesses the ability to see beyond the surface and into the heart of the abyss.*

As I read, I can almost hear his voice, a silky whisper in the depths of my mind. His words wrap around my thoughts, tugging at the edges of my consciousness. He draws me into his darkness with promises of understanding, of glimpses into the abyss that both terrify and captivate me. I have interviewed serial killers before, but I never felt like this. I have never corresponded with any of them, to begin with. None stirred anything else inside me apart from hatred and disgust.

*There's a certain allure to the darkness, a whisper that calls to those who dare to listen. Your words are a testament to that whisper, a testament to the magnetic pull that the unknown exerts upon us. When the night falls and the world is draped in shadows, know that I am not far from your thoughts, just*

*as you reside in mine. Our dance through the labyrinth of the mind is a dance of understanding, of shared secrets that only we can fathom.*

He speaks of shadows and the dance of fate, weaving a narrative that blurs the lines between reality and his twisted perspective, and I find myself drawn to it, more and more with each passing day. And as much as I am aware of his manipulations, I can't keep myself away from him. I can't help myself but feel every word, like he's writing it on my skin.

*In the silence of my cell, I find myself captivated by the image of you—the true-crime author whose passion matches my own in its intensity. The image of you leaned over your research, your eyes alight with the flames of fascination, is a canvas upon which my thoughts often wander.*

*You may find it intriguing, Dakota, that in this desolate place, your presence is more vivid than you might ever imagine. The mind is a powerful instrument, capable of weaving dreams that transcend the confines of reality. And so, I find myself imagining the touch of your fingertips on the pages of your notes, the soft rustle of paper as you turn each page.*

*I've allowed my thoughts to wander,  
envisioning your delicate fingers as they trace  
the lines of my letters—the very letters that  
bear witness to the shadows that dance  
within my mind. It's as if your touch ignites a  
fire within me, a fire that yearns for you.*

It's as if he's reaching out across the distance, his thoughts intertwining with mine in a way that is both unnerving and irresistible.

*I extend you an invitation, my beloved  
Flower. An invitation to step beyond the pages  
of our correspondence and into the realms of  
the tangible. There is a curiosity that binds  
us, a curiosity that begs to be explored face-  
to-face. I propose a meeting, a meeting  
withing these cold, stone walls—a meeting that  
will blur the lines between our worlds.*

*Can you imagine it, Dakota? The scent of  
the prison, the echoes of footsteps in the  
corridor, the weight of the bars that separate  
us? Can you fathom the intensity of our  
conversations as we delve into the depths of  
the darkness that consume us both?*

As I almost reach the end of the letter, a chill courses down my spine. It's not just his words that affect me—it's the way he's managed to insinuate himself into my thoughts. With every letter, every carefully crafted sentence, he tightens the invisible strings that connect us. The manipulation is palpable.

*I admit that I am curious about you on a personal level. I find myself wondering about the color of your eyes, the texture of your hair, the fragrance that clings to your skin. It's a curiosity that goes beyond the mere intellectual, a curiosity that seeks to unravel the enigma that is you. You are a tapestry of contradictions. A woman who has made the shadows her domain, yet remains bathed in an ethereal light. I envision the moment our gazes meet, the unspoken understanding that passes between us. And I can't help but wonder if it's fate that has drawn us together, two souls destined to dance in the shadows.*

*Yours in the Dance of Shadows,*

*K.M.*

I fold the letter gently, my heart pounding in a rhythm that matches the dance of his words. It's both thrilling and

dangerous, a rush of emotions I can't fully comprehend. Mortimer's letters are more than just words on paper; they are a manifestation of his power over me, a reminder that his darkness has seeped into my world and taken root. I place the letter back in its envelope, sealing it with care.

Maybe one day I'll stand face-to-face with the man behind these words, a man who has refused to talk to anyone so far, the puppet master of his own twisted narrative.

And as I step into his darkness, I can't help but wonder if I'm dancing to his tune or writing a story of my own.

## CHAPTER 2

## THE MACABRE PUPPETEER

MY BELOVED FLOWER—THE UNWITTING PLAYER IN MY twisted game—is playing hard to get, but this has never stopped me before and it won't stop me now.

The dim light of my prison cell casts elongated shadows on the cold, stone walls. I'm a master of solitude and confinement. I have turned this world into my canvas for the dance of obsession I've been doing for a while now.

Dakota's reply to my invitation echoes in my mind, the words a testament to her hesitation, her fear. She declined, but I wasn't expecting anything less from her. It's in her nature to fight. She chose to stay in the safety of her world, but I'm coming for her and nothing can protect her from me. Her decision only deepens the threads that bind us. The letters I've sent her are like tendrils of darkness, slowly wrapping around her thoughts and pulling her toward me. I can feel her curiosity, her uncertainty, and it thrills me to know that I've captured her attention. I never doubted my plan, not even for a second, but she's an unpredictable woman.

As I look around my cell, I see the evidence of my obsession—newspaper clippings, photographs, and notes that create a collage that brings the only light into my world of chaos. I shouldn't have done it. I should have never exposed my Flower like that, turn her into a vulnerability, but I couldn't resist. I have to see her face everywhere I look, and sometimes the image in my memory is not enough to quiet the demons. I welcome this dance of resistance. It will make it all the sweeter when she will finally succumb to me. I can almost taste her yearning to delve deeper into the labyrinth of my

mind. It's a curiosity that will ultimately lead her back to me, whether she realizes it or now.

Obsession and desire. Her intellect, her curiosity, her very essence—it's intoxicating. Our connection has become an addiction I can't escape to the point where I let myself be captured by the authorities to slip into her mind through our letters.

As I recline on the narrow cot in my cell, I allow myself a dark chuckle. I don't care how the world outside sees me. They don't understand the complexity of my motives—the layers of manipulation, the web of fascination, the obsession that drives me to orchestrate this macabre symphony. Dakota might have denied me her presence, but our dance through the shadows is far from over. We share the same darkness. She will drink from mine and I will drink from hers until we will become one.

I don't need to pull out her letters to read them. I recall her last one vividly. She always starts her letters directly, skipping any form to address me, as if she's still unsure what I am to her. I will soon be everything for her. She will breathe and bleed only for me.

*I hope this letter finds you well,  
considering the circumstances that bind us.  
Your words have lingered in my thoughts. I  
find myself both drawn to the prospect of  
delving deeper into your mind and wary of the  
unknown paths that such a meeting might  
lead us down to.*

I lower the waistband of my pants, wrapping my fist around my hardened cock.

*Your invitation is a tantalizing proposition, a chance to bridge the gap between the pages of our letters and the reality that surrounds us. It's a chance to understand the darkness that courses through your thoughts. And yet, it's also a venture into uncharted territory.*

I picture her on her knees in front of me, dark brown eyes looking up at me through tears. My hand wrapped in her curly red hair, pulling her head back. She puts up a fight, refusing to open her mouth and beg for my cock, but resistance only makes me harder.

*Your letters have painted a vivid picture of your thoughts.*

Not even close. I had to hold back in my letters, not wanting to scare her off. I picture gripping her chin, forcing my thumb between her lips. She's breathing harder, shaking her head as she tries to convince herself that the right thing to do is fight this. Fight me, fight us. I pause, my hand still moving up and down, as a shiver runs down my spine. The images that flood my mind are a stark contrast to her letters, a testament to the duality of my desires. I can hear her sweet voice taunting me about how I am consumed by my fantasies that twist and warp the boundaries of consent and morality, but I shake my head until it's filled again with images of her soft flesh into my

hands as I spin her around, burying my cock inside her. Lately, it's been a desire that has overpowered my killer instinct. Raw and unexpected.

*You must understand, Mortimer, that my reasons for declining your invitation are not born out of a lack of interest. I'm driven by a desire to uncover the truth, to understand the motives that propel minds like yours into the realm of the macabre.*

I picture her velvety tongue circling the crown of my dick, running up and down the length of it, sucking like it's the last thing she'll get to do on this earth. I imagine my beloved Flower sucking my cock like it's her only reason for existing.

*I fear that the line between truth-seeker and willing participant is one that I may struggle to discern. As I write these words, I can't help but feel a twinge of regret, a curiosity left unsated. But know that my resolve remains steadfast. The shadows you inhabit are not mine to embrace with caution. Your invitation, while tempting, is a dance that I must decline.*

Her resolve will break. When I will have her legs wrapped around my head, feasting on her pussy, fucking her until she can't deny any longer to whom she belongs, it will break. It will be bitter and bloody. It will be the most beautiful, macabre picture I will ever see and I can't wait for it.

*I hope you can respect my decision, as it is not made lightly. The threads that bind us may be complex and tangled, but they are threads that I must navigate with care. The darkness we both seek to unravel is a labyrinth that holds both answers and dangers, and I tread cautiously as I explore its twists and turns.*

### *Dakota*

The walls of my cell seem to close in on me as I finish myself off, their cold embrace a constant reminder of the confines that hold me captive. I'll own her. Every single piece of her soul, sooner than she thinks. Taking my T-shirt off, I wipe myself clean and discard it on the floor, thinking back on every word we have ever exchanged. Beneath the surface, there was always a current of tension, an unspoken challenge that simmered in every sentence. I've sown the seeds with care, making sure they took roots in her thoughts as she fights to understand minds like mine. Her moments of vulnerability were the most tantalizing, the times when Dakota confessed her own struggles with the darkness she seeks to uncover. Those were the moments I seized upon, the moments I used to tighten the invisible strings that connect us.

I imagine her in my cell, her presence a juxtaposition to the stark surroundings. Dark brown eyes piercing through the shadows, a mane of curly red hair that begs to be tangled in my fingers. The lines between manipulation and desire blur in my mind as I picture her at my mercy. I wish there was a window in my cell. Even a barred one would be better than nothing, something to offer me a glimpse of the outside world. The thought of moonlight filtering through it's a fantasy in its own right. Time seems to warp and stretch. Days blur into nights and I have a one track mind. I have to unravel the layers that make her who she is and understand why.

The world beyond these walls might believe that I am shackled—both body and mind—an exhibit of the Puppeteer's fall from grace. But they remain blissfully unaware that it is all a part of my grand design. I allowed myself to be ensnared, allowed myself to be the spectacle of my own undoing, all to reach her, to have her within my grasp.

In their eyes, I am the puppet, the marionette dancing to the tune of captivity. But they fail to perceive that I am still the conductor of my symphony; I am not a prisoner of its haunting melody. I am here because it's the only way to get to her. My power, my control—they have merely taken on a new form. A form that will lead me to my ultimate goal. This dance with my beloved Flower is but a prelude to the grand performance that awaits. I am here for a purpose, and the world will learn soon enough that my captivity is a mere illusion.

*I'm coming for you, Dakota.*

# CHAPTER 3

## DAKOTA

I'M SITTING AT THE EDGE OF MY BED, CRADLING A STEAMING mug of coffee in my hands, the aroma mingling with the tension that had woven itself into my thoughts. It's strange how I wonder when was the last time Mortimer had the chance of enjoying a steaming cup of coffee, or wonder if he even likes coffee at all. Maybe he prefers tea. It's strange how I think about him, at the little things he could be doing now or the things he used to enjoy while he wasn't locked up—apart from killing. Does he enjoy the rays of sunshine? Is he the type of person who skips breakfast in the morning? Does he thrive in chaos or is he obsessed by order?

I keep going back to the conversation I had with Rachel the other night as she told me not to dig any deeper. As if on cue, my phone buzzes on the nightstand. I pick it up to see a text from her:

I know you're determined to uncover the truth, but be cautious. Mortimer is not someone to be trifled with. Going to prison could put you in danger. Please reconsider.

She finds it as strange as I do that I am the only person Mortimer agreed to have any form of communication with. The message hangs in the air like a warning sign, but I am past the point of turning back. The allure of understanding the mind of The Macabre Puppeteer is a siren song that I can't resist. I type a brief reply, assuring her I will be careful, then pocket

my phone, place the cup on the nightstand and get ready to leave the apartment.

A couple of hours later, I am sitting in front of the towering monolith of steel and stone, an imposing fortress that seems to absorb the very light around it. I check in at the reception, my heart pounding in my chest as I wait for the clearance to visit the man that has been haunting my thoughts. It doesn't take long, as I am being expected. A guard leads me through a maze of sterile corridors until we reach the visitor's area—a place of stark tables and uncomfortable chairs, but we don't stop. We walk for another couple of minutes until he stops. As I stand before a heavy prison door, the guard's stern gaze assesses me with a mix of caution and curiosity. I take a deep breath, suppressing the nerves that threaten to surface, and meet his eyes with a determined expression.

“Ms. McAllister,” he begins. “You're about to enter a room with a man who has a reputation that precedes him.”

I nod, acknowledging his warning without even flinching. “I understand that.”

He continues, his voice low. “The director has made an exception for this private conversation. You'll have no cameras in the room, and he'll be restrained by his hands and feet. If at any point you feel uncomfortable or unsafe, there's a discreet button beneath the table. Press it, and we'll intervene immediately.”

His words remind me that even in this controlled prison, there is an inherent danger in engaging with someone as complex as Mortimer. I appreciate the precautions, understanding that the director's arrangements were made with my safety in mind, while still complying with Mortimer's demands list.

“The director believes that your perspective might shed some light on the motives that drove him,” the guard continues, his tone softening slightly. “Just remember to be cautious.”

“I will,” I assure him, my voice unwavering.

With a last nod, the guard opens the door, revealing the stark room beyond. As I step into the room, the door closes behind me, leaving me alone with The Macabre Puppeteer. The room is small, its walls are bare. My pulse quickens as I see him seated across from me, shackled by his hands and feet. Despite the restraints, his presence is a commanding force. I can physically feel the weight of his gaze, a palpable pressure that presses down on me, drawing me deeper. There's an air of quiet power that emanates from him, an unspoken authority that holds me captive, and I realize just how unprepared I am. He's unlike all the others before him.

His eyes, deep pools of darkness, hold a mesmerizing quality that seems to draw me closer with an irresistible force. Before I realize what I'm doing, my feet are moving towards him. There's a haunting depth in his eyes that makes the hair at the back of my head stand. Eyes that have seen death caused by his own hands and enjoyed it. Eyes that are now scanning me from head to toe, making me feel exposed.

It's his demeanor that strikes me the most. Though restrained, he exudes confidence. His lips are curved into a half-smile. There's an undeniable aura of darkness surrounding him—a darkness that cloaked his every word in our letters. It's a darkness that has shaped the lives of his victims, a darkness that has woven its tendrils into the fabric of his being. His age is difficult to pinpoint precisely. His dark hair is tousled, a bit unruly. Some strands frame his face, casting shadows that play across his features.

We're waiting to see which one of us is going to break the silence first, a battle of wills. I try to focus on my breathing as I take the seat across from him at a safe distance.

“My beloved Flower,” his voice cuts through the silence, a low murmur that seems to wrap around me like a velvet ribbon. “I knew you couldn't resist a private conversation.”

I don't bother correcting him on the name. It's what he wants. The air seems to crackle with tension, and I suddenly wish I would have spoken first because even though he broke the silence, he somehow got the upper hand. My heart thuds in my chest. The chair feels inadequate against the emotions that

swirl inside me, and I don't understand why I'm feeling like this in his presence. He's not my first serial killer. But I have never been so confused before.

"Mr. Mortimer," I reply, my voice betraying none of my emotions. "Would you be open to allowing me to record this conversation? It would serve as a valuable resource for my understanding."

The silence between us stretches, a delicate thread of anticipation shimmering in the air. His smile lingers, a silent acknowledgement of the power he holds. I try to remind myself of the purpose that brought me here, but I'm not so sure I know what that is anymore. After I have declined his invitation, his letters kept coming, more often, more intrusive. He manipulated me into coming here and knowing it doesn't make things any different.

I take a deep breath. He regards me with a thoughtful expression, a glimmer of intrigue in his eyes. "A permanent record of our discourse?"

I nod, my gaze locked with his. "Yes. It would ensure that the nuances of our interaction are preserved accurately, free from the limitations of memory."

A hint of a smile plays at the corners of his lips. "How fitting—an archive of our dance through the shadows. Very well. If it serves your pursuit of understanding, then by all means."

I reach into my almost empty bag and retrieve a small digital recorder. Carefully, I place the recorder on the table between us. As I press the button to record, a soft indicator light blinks to life.

"I came here seeking answers, Mr. Mortimer. Answers that lie beyond the words we've exchanged in our letters."

His gaze remains fixed on me.

"Answers, Dakota, are elusive creatures. They flit and flutter, always out of reach."

I resist the urge to fidget under his scrutiny, refusing to show any sign of vulnerability.

“Yet, it’s the human nature to seek understanding, even in the darkest corners of our minds.”

“The depths of the human psyche,” he muses, his tone dipping into a quiet introspection. “A labyrinth of desires and fears, motivations, and impulses. It’s a tapestry that I’ve dedicated my life to unraveling, one dark thread at a time.”

Unease coils within me. I can’t shift my focus from his hands, the same ones he used to end lives. Hands coated in blood, pain, and suffering. His presence awakens something inside me, something dark, wrong, and twisted. I realize I shouldn’t have come when I feel the urge to press my thigh together to ease the ache between my legs. What the hell is happening?

“Your motivations have intrigued me, Mr. Mortimer,” I force myself to go on. “Do you view your ability to manipulate minds as a form of control or a manifestation of your own desires?”

He chuckles, a dark sound that finds its way into my soul. “Control—that’s a fascinating concept. It’s the illusion of power that captivates, the ability to shape the destinies of others. As for desires, they are the undercurrents that drive us, the primal urges that fuel the dance of our existence.”

I remind myself that every word he utters could be another layer of manipulation, another layer of his façade.

“You’ve left a trail of chaos in your wake,” I continue, keeping my voice steady. “Do you ever wonder about the lives you’ve altered, the pain you’ve inflicted?”

He leans back, a contemplative expression crossing his features. “Consequences—the echoes of our choices. Every action sets ripples in motions, my beloved Flower. The beauty of life lies in its unpredictability, in the myriad ways our paths intertwine.”

His response offers no emotion, no remorse.

“Yet,” he adds, his gaze unwavering, “for all the darkness that surrounds me, there is an undercurrent of truth in my actions.”

His words are tantalizing, a glimpse into the depths of his mind that simultaneously repels and compels me. There's a challenge in his gaze, a silent dare to uncover the layers he's carefully crafted.

"You've chosen to unveil your mind to me. To share your thoughts, your motives. Why?"

"There's a certain liberation in letting the darkness see the light."

There's more to it than that, and we both know it. He could have chosen anyone else to talk to, but didn't.

"Your letters, intricate and haunting, reveal an obsession with my thoughts. Why?"

"Obsession is a force that defies reason. It's a whisper in the shadows, a tug at the corners of one's consciousness. I've navigated the depths of human minds, but I'm yet to unravel yours."

His words are a confession that raises more questions than it answers. Was my role in his twisted games preordained, a role that I have unwittingly stepped into?

"I couldn't kill my last victim," his voice holds a hint of something I can't quite place. Regret, perhaps? I doubt it.

This is a revelation. No one knew there was supposed to be a last victim, as no incidents have been reported that have been tied to this case.

"Why defy your own nature, the very darkness that has shaped your actions by stepping back?"

He leans forward, the distance between us shrinking as he regards me with a gaze that's both unnerving and strangely intimate. "That is the question that has plagued me since that moment. There's a fascination that eclipses even the thrill of power—an attraction to the unknown depths of your mind, the very depths that mirror my own."

"I never killed anyone."

"Didn't you? In order to understand a killer, you have to become one. You're not repelled by the darkness within me."

Instead, you seek to understand it, to explore my motives. And in that exploration, there's a connection that defies the boundaries of our roles."

The weight of the recorder's presence is palpable. Our words will be preserved, our thoughts will be immortalized. It's a calculated risk. He has always been a master at manipulating the boundaries between investigator and subject, blurring them until I can no longer distinguish between us. He investigated me through his letters so many times I have lost count, and I let him. At this point, he knows more about me than I do about him.

"You broke the pattern you've established by not killing her. Why?"

Mortimer leans back. "I had her at my mercy, the power to snuff out her existence as I had with others. But something within me rebelled against that inevitability."

I wish I could take notes, but I wasn't allowed to bring any writing instruments with me. The prison thinks pens can be a deadly weapon in the hands of someone like Mortimer. His admission strikes a chord within me. I have been trying to understand the complexity of his actions, but I only see what he wants me to see. Mortimer is not a one-dimensional villain.

"Why her?" I ask. "Why spare her when the others were subjected to your meticulous designs?"

"Why did I spare her? Why did I deviate from my own script? That, Dakota, is the crux of the matter."

The darkness that binds us is not defined by the crimes he's committed—it's also defined by the questions that have brought us to this room.

"Is your fascination of understanding me born from a desire to comprehend the complexities of your own psyche?"

His lips curve into a smirk. "A mirror within a mirror. A dance of reflections that spirals into infinity. The mind is a labyrinth, and perhaps it's the chaos within that propels us to explore the depths."

The conversation goes on. All of his answers are carefully measured. With every word, every revelation, the enigma of Mortimer deepens, his motives as intricate as the patterns he's woven through the lives of the victims. He's not providing me any real information about why he did it, why he chose those particular victims. There's a certain elegance to his responses, a careful avoidance of direct revelations that keeps me both intrigued and frustrated. I'm acutely aware of the gaps in his responses—the voids where answers should be, but I can't stop myself. I can't fight the strength to get up, leave, and never look back. My mind wanders in directions I hadn't anticipated. His presence has disrupted the walls I've built in our letters. His hands, resting in cuffs on the table between us, possess a certain elegance I can't deny. I can't help but wonder about the actions they have carried out—the lives they've taken. Are they only built for pain or pleasure, too? I trace the lines of his hands with my gaze. It's a morbid curiosity. The way he looks at me makes me think that he knows everything that's going on inside my head.

“Tell me, Dakota. What compels you to seek out the darkness? What drives you to navigate the minds of those like me?”

His question catches me off guard, pulling me from my own thoughts. It touches the truth I've buried and rarely acknowledged. As I search for an answer, I'm aware of the irony—the investigator being investigated, the inquirer being questioned.

“I suppose it's the desire to understand the human experience in its entirety—the light and the darkness, the motivations, and the contradictions. Perhaps I'm also navigating the labyrinth of my own curiosities in the minds of those like you. What led you down this path?” I ask, trying to change the subject.

“What compels one to embrace the shadows, to orchestrate chaos? Is it a quest for power, a dance with darkness, or something more intricate? You know, we're both captives of our own obsessions—the obsessions that have shaped us, that have led us into this room.”

The barriers that separate us seem to crumble and I can't help but feel attracted to him. It was never safe for me to come here. The barriers that separated us in our letters now appear fragile, as if they were constructed from illusions rather than concrete reality. The safety I once took for granted is slowly dissolving. The rational part of my mind recognizes the peril, the risk of allowing myself to be drawn to him. And yet, as I sit across from him, our gazes locked in a silent exchange, I can't help myself. Seeking to understand his mind has brought me face to face with the complexity of my own emotions. By coming here, I've entered a world where attraction and danger and intertwined—a world where understanding the mind of a villain means confronting my own desires, fears, and darkness. He knew this was likely to happen if I came here. Perhaps this is why he insisted on it so much.

It was never truly safe for me to come here, and I played right into his games.

# CHAPTER 4

## DAKOTA

THE ROOM FEELS BOTH FAMILIAR AND CHARGED WITH TENSION as I step inside; the door shutting behind me with a finality that echoes through the space. This is the eight time I've entered this prison, the eight time I've sat across from Mortimer, and he's still evasive about his motives. I should stop coming.

“Seeing you is the highlight of my week, Dakota.”

A shift occurred in the dynamic. A familiarity developed between us over these visits.

“Mr. Mortimer,” I address him, “your actions, your motives—they've become a central focus of my research.”

His gaze meets mine, his dark eyes glinting with satisfaction. “My beloved Flower, I'm delighted to be the subject of your attention.”

There's a threat of amusement in his voice. And yet, beneath the surface, there's something more—an intensity that's become impossible to ignore. It's as if his obsession with me has escalated, matching the escalating obsession that makes me to come back even when I know I won't get anything useful from him.

Today, as I take in his appearance, something looks off. A faint bruise mars the skin beneath his left eye, a shadow of violence that contrasts with the calculated control he typically manifests.

“You've been delving into my past, into my actions, but you wrestle with your own darkness, Dakota,” he observes.

“The line between fascination and repulsion blurs, doesn’t it? The very traits that drive us to understand minds like mine also draw us into the depths of our own desires.”

His words linger in the air, an uncomfortable truth that’s impossible to ignore. He’s right. This is a treacherous path for me. Our connection, our obsession, has escalated beyond the boundaries I once believed I could maintain. I find myself spending my days immersed in our recorded sessions, poring over the details, dissecting his words and actions. It’s a puzzle I’m determined to solve. In the quiet darkness, as sleep eludes me, he invades my dreams. I am not one of his victims anymore, a fact that sets me apart from those who have suffered at his hands. And yet, in this tangled dance we have been doing, I’m aware that I have become something else—a willing participant in his macabre performances, a collaborator in the unraveling of his secrets.

In the shadows of my dreams, I turn into his accomplice. I turn from the seeker of truth to the partner in his dark narrative. It’s a transformation that defies logic, that challenges the very essence of who I am.

He’s peeling back my armor, exposing the vulnerabilities that lie beneath.

“You’ve sought the truth in the darkest corners of the human mind,” he muses. “But have you also dared to seek the truth within yourself? Have you looked into the abyss and found what lies there?”

“I thought I knew,” I reply, my voice tinged with uncertainty. “I thought I had a grasp of the complexities of the human mind. But this, what we share, it’s a dance between fascination and danger, and it’s both intoxicating and terrifying.”

It wasn’t an accident that I didn’t press the record button today. I am tired of always running in circles in our conversations. The push and pull, the veiled revelations—it’s a game that has become exhausting. A grin curves his lips. “It’s a dance of shadows and secrets, a dance that draws us in even as it threatens to consume us, but there’s an undeniable allure

to the darkness, isn't there? The darkness that defines us, that binds us, that blurs the lines."

"What happened to you?" The question tumbles from my lips, my voice curious and concerned. I can't help but glance at the faint bruise that mars his skin.

He raises an eyebrow, like he didn't expect me to actually ask the question. He leans back in his chair, the metal chains clinking softly as he shifts. He knows I'm not talking about what happened to him to get him where he is now. I'm not inquiring about his childhood or if his mother loved him, or if his father was cruel. He already denied answering those questions. I am asking about the present.

"The guards in this place don't like me very much," he replies with a grin, as if the situation amuses him more than it troubles him.

I narrow my eyes.

"Is that a result of your interactions with them, or do you intentionally provoke them?" I press, wanting to know.

Mortimer chuckles softly, the sound resonating through the room.

"Perhaps a bit of both," he concedes, a glint of mischief in his eyes. "The dance between predator and prey, even in these confined spaces, can be quite enthralling."

I take a deep breath, trying to understand why it pains me to see him hurt. It shouldn't matter to me whether or not he's hurt. He's a villain, a man whose actions have caused untold suffering. And yet, I do.

"Why do you intentionally provoke them?"

His gaze remains fixed on mine. "Isn't it intriguing to push the boundaries, to test the limits of power and control? The dance between predator and prey thrives on the tension, the unpredictability."

I struggle to reconcile the attraction I feel with the reality of who he is. I don't know how to escape this. I exhale slowly.

“Why does it matter to you, Dakota?” He asks me, his voice soft.

His question reverberates through me.

“It doesn’t,” I respond, my voice carrying a note of defiance that I’m not sure I truly feel.

The words are meant to shield me from the truth, to protect me from the unsettling emotions within me.

“Why do you lie to me?” His inquiry is delivered with calm, as if he sees through the façade.

I swallow hard. Why do I bother lying to him?

“Maybe I’m not lying,” I retort. “Maybe I’ve convinced myself that it doesn’t matter.”

“Self-deception. It’s something we all engage in, isn’t it? Convinced that we can neatly compartmentalize our emotions, setting boundaries and pretending they’ll hold.”

“What about you?”

His fingers are drumming rhythmically on the table. “More times than you could imagine,” he replies.

“So, do you see through everyone’s deceptions?”

“I only care about yours.”

“Why me?”

“You’re the object of my fascination.”

“Do you see me as a puppet?” I frown, the question escaping my lips before I can fully consider the implications.

Does he see me as the centerpiece in one of his macabre displays? He gives me a knowing smile. “Not a puppet, Dakota, no. I see you as a partner. A participant who willingly steps onto the stage.”

“I am not your partner.”

“Yet here you are,” he counters. “Sitting across from me, engaged in this narrative that draws us closer with each passing moment.”

My heart pounds in my chest, my palms beginning to sweat.

“I’m here to uncover the truth,” I declare.

“And what if the truth you seek is more elusive than you can imagine? What if, in the pursuit of your answers, you find yourself entangled in a reality that defies any explanation?”

I’m breathing through parted lips, trying to slow down my racing heart. In moments when I allowed my guard to slip, I caught myself wondering about Mortimer beyond his persona as the Macabre Puppeteer. I wondered what his touch would feel like, how his lips might taste. In the quiet moments when I am alone with my thoughts, I find myself drawn back to him, wondering about the man beneath the monster.

“You’ve been thinking about me,” he goes on before I get a chance to reply. “I’ve been thinking about you too, Dakota. The way your skin would feel under my fingertips, the way your body would yield to my touch, how your lips would feel wrapped around my cock.”

My breath catches in my throat as his words wash over me. His voice, low and seductive, stirs something deep within me. I struggle to maintain my composure. It’s a moment of unfiltered honesty, and I wonder if it was brought upon because our conversation is not being recorded. Did he know I would not press that record button at some point, even before I did? Just as he knew I wasn’t going to hit the panic button a few meetings ago no matter how far he pushed me? Was he expecting for this to tell me what is really crossing through his mind?

“Imagine my hands tracing the curves of your body,” he goes on. “Slowly exploring each inch. My fingertips would glide along the contours of your skin, while my mouth is entrapped by your nipple.” I feel my body responding to his words. Anticipation surges through me as I surrender against my will. I can almost feel his touch, his hands exploring my body, and I am willing to die in this moment if it would mean that I will find out what it feels like. “Every caress, every stroke would ignite a fire within you, building a tension that

only I will be able to release. And you'll beg me for it, Dakota. And when our lips finally meet, the world around us will fade into insignificance."

My mind swirls with longing and aching need. He leans closer, his voice a velvety whisper. "Picture yourself in my arms, Dakota. Our bodies pressed together, skin against skin, as passion consumes us. The scent of desire fills the air, mingling with the sound of our ragged breaths." His voice grows huskier. "I want to taste you," he murmurs, his voice dripping with need. "Every inch of your body. Can you taste the anticipation lingering between us?" I nod dumbly, my gaze caught in his. I can almost feel his breath against my skin, his touch setting me ablaze with a hunger I can't deny.

"Don't," I utter, my voice betraying my emotions. It's a feeble attempt to put an end to the conversation, to the magnetic pull that seems to bind us despite my best efforts.

My mind teeters on the edge of surrender as his words wash over me.

"I know you can feel it too," he goes on. "The ache, the longing, the hunger that consumes us, demanding to be satiated."

My heart pounds as I blink slowly, unable to look away. I stand here, my breath caught in my throat, my heart racing like a trapped bird in a cage. It's as if he peered into the depths of my thoughts, exposing the desires that I've fought to keep hidden. He can't possibly know that this is what I've been craving deep down. That I've started to wonder and I would give anything to know, to feel, to breathe him in. I don't know what he's done with me. He got under my skin, in my blood, in my veins, and I can't get him out. I had to deal with manipulators, narcissists, and psychopaths before, but I never got myself into this situation. None could manipulate me like clay before.

"I don't," I breathe out the lie, my voice trembling. "And we are done, Mr. Mortimer," I declare, my voice stronger now, though still tinged with vulnerability. "This has been our last encounter."

For a moment, there's a flicker of something in his eyes, a shadow of something that looks a lot like disappointment, if he were able to feel something even close to it. But it's quickly replaced by a smug, knowing smile—a smile that reveals that he's not shaken by my declaration, that he remains confident in the power he holds over me. He knows I can try to run, but I won't be able to escape him. He holds the strings.

As I turn to leave, the echoes of his words refuse to fade. I can't escape the feeling that even if he's confined and I'm free to run, I will never truly be free of him.

# CHAPTER 5

## DAKOTA

MY PHONE BUZZES ON THE NIGHTSTAND, JOLTING ME AWAKE from a restless slumber. Groaning, I fumble for it in the darkness, my fingers finding the screen just as the insistent ringing subsides. “Hello?” I croak, my voice thick with sleep.

“Dakota, turn on the TV,” Rachel’s urgent voice comes through the line.

“What? Rachel, it’s the middle of the night,” I protest, my heart racing at the anxiety in her tone.

“Just do it,” she insists.

With a sigh, I reach for the remote control and switch on the TV. The screen flickers to life, revealing a news anchor’s stern expression. My drowsiness dissipates as I focus on the words he delivers.

“Kairo Mortimer, also known as the Macabre Puppeteer, has escaped from prison yesterday. Authorities are urging residents to remain vigilant and report any suspicious activity. Mortimer is considered extremely dangerous and should not be approached...”

My heart lurches in my chest, a wave of fear crashing over me. I sit up in bed, the news report echoing in my mind like a haunting refrain. He has escaped. He is out there, free. I have heard the words, but they make no sense to me.

“Dakota, are you watching?” Rachel’s voice breaks through the haze of my thoughts.

“Yeah, I’m watching,” I reply, my voice shaky. “This...this can’t be real.”

“I wish it wasn’t, but it is. You need to be careful. Lock your doors and don’t answer the door for any reason. I’ll send an officer to your house.”

“Why? You don’t really think he’s coming after me, do you?”

There is a pause at the other end of the line.

“I don’t know,” she finally replies. “But we can’t ignore the possibility. I’m just taking precautions.”

The world seems different when I end the call. In the stillness of my room, the darkness outside my window feels suffocating. The news report continues to play on the TV. My fingers clutch the phone, wishing there was a way I could scroll through all our past conversations—each sentence, each exchange. I could read the letters or listen to the recordings, but fear paralyzes me for long minutes. Mortimer peered into the depths of my soul during our meetings, dissecting my fears and desires with a surgeon’s precision. And I let him. I never pictured it would come to this—a reality in which we are both free.

I think back to all our encounters, trying to discern any hidden clues, any sign that he might have been hinting at his escape, his plans. Was there a subtle shift in his tone, a veiled reference that I missed in the mist of my insane attraction for him? Maybe I’m just overthinking, letting the fear cloud my judgment.

The room feels stifling, my thoughts spiraling in a never-ending loop. I can’t shake the feeling of being watched, of being drawn into a world of shadows and secrets I can’t escape. The memory of his piercing eyes, the way his lips curled into that enigmatic half-smile, the intensity that radiated from every word he spoke—it all floods back. But now, his image is tainted by the news of his escape. The lines between fascination and fear are blurred again, and I can’t help but picture him as a shadowy figure lurking in the periphery.

The question that haunts me is how he escaped. Did he orchestrate his getaway with the same calculated precision that he employed his crimes? Did he manipulate those around him,

using his charisma to bend others to his will? Or was it a stroke of luck, a crack in the system that he seized upon to free himself? I imagine him moving through the darkness, navigating the confines of the prison with a familiarity that chills me to the bone. His mind must have calculated every move, every step that would lead him to freedom. And as much as I'm consumed by fear, I can't help but wonder what would happen if we ever met outside the prison walls?

Does he know where I live? Is he coming for me? The shadows seem deeper around my room. I hate feeling this vulnerable. I try to force myself to move, but I find myself unable to do more than curl in the middle of the bed. I consider calling Rachel, but even she can't calm me down now. I lied to her. I held back the truths that seemed insignificant at the moment, like Mortimer's obsession with me. I didn't show Rachel all the letters, didn't reveal the extent to which his words had woven themselves into my thoughts.

I wonder if he's watching, if he knows the impact his escape has had on me. Is this all part of his twisted game? He reached out to me once after our last encounter, and I left his letter unanswered. I wrap my arms around myself, trying to ward off the cold grip of fear that has settled in my chest. The truth is, I'm alone in this. What would I tell him outside the room I have got used to seeing him confined in? What would I do if he weren't bound by his hands and feet, if the barriers that had separated us were no longer there to protect me? What would he say to me if given the chance? What secrets would unveil, what truth would he lay bare? Would I be able to resist the pull, the inexplicable connection between us?

The room seems to close in, the walls pressing closer and closer. With a deep breath, I reach for my phone, my fingers trembling as I dial Rachel's number. It's time to confront the reality of the situation, to share the truth I have been hiding. Each second feels like an eternity as I wait for Rachel to answer. I try to find the way I'll explain the reality of the situation, to share the truth I have been hiding, but there's no rational explanation for the things Mortimer makes me feel. My dreams keep shifting—from victim, to partner, to lover. I can picture how the conversation with Rachel will go. She will

remind me he's a criminal, a manipulative serial killer. I will tell her that I know it sounds insane, but I can't stop thinking about him. It's like he unlocked something inside me, something I didn't even know was there. I change my mind in the last second and hung up the phone. I can't speak the words out loud. I haven't decided what all of this even means yet.

Talking about it won't help.

Nothing can help me at this point.

I have tried to put as much distance between us as possible, trying to forget about his existence, and it's all proving to be pointless now.

*The ache, the longing, the hunger that consumes us, demanding to be satiated.*

He saw right through me, through the lies.

I finally manage to pull myself out of bed and get in the shower. I let the water cascade over me, washing away the lingering remnants of our conversations. Afterwards, I stand before the mirror, water droplets trickling down my skin. My hand trembles as I reach for the towel, wrapping it around me as if it could shield me from the chaos within me. I change into some shorts and a top and head towards the kitchen next, but my appetite is non-existent, a knot of anxiety tightening in my stomach. I make some coffee and force myself to take a sip, but it's an effort to swallow. Sitting at the kitchen table, I stare out of the window, wondering where that police officer is. A reflection in the glass captures my attention—a glimpse of movement, a figure that shouldn't be there.

My heart lurches, a cold wave of terror crashing over me. In the window's reflection, I see him—a dark silhouette that shouldn't be here. Before I can react, before my instincts can kick in, his presence is suddenly tangible, his figure looming behind me. The air in the room seems to stand still, time itself suspended as our worlds collide.

“Hello, Dakota,” his voice is a low murmur, a haunting melody I have been dreaming about.

My breath catches in my throat, a strangled gasp as I finally turn my head to meet his gaze. Those magnetic eyes are the same as I remember. Beautifully dark. I scramble to my feet, my heart hammering against my ribs, the chair scraping back against the floor. He never seemed so imposing before.

“How—”

“Shhh,” he silences me with a finger pressed to my lips. “It’s been a long time coming, hasn’t it?” Nothing can protect me now. “Did you really think you could resist the pull, Dakota?” he steps closer, his eyes never leaving me, as if he can see every thought, every fear that races through my mind.

I want to step back, to put distance between us, but my legs feel like they’ve turned to jelly. “What do you want?”

He offers me that smile I got to know so well.

My voice trembles as I speak, the words a whisper that barely escapes my lips. “You’re a monster.”

“And you’re fascinated,” he counters.

As he steps closer, I wonder how easy it would be for him to overpower me. His fingers are trailing a path along the edge of the table, a slow, deliberate motion. I’m trapped, and he’s not even touching me.

“You’re not afraid of me,” he murmurs, his voice seductive. My pulse quickens. I’m terrified of him. “Maybe fear and desire aren’t so different after all,” he leans in, his breath a warm caress against my ear.

“They’re looking for you. Your face is everywhere on the news. Why risk coming here?” I find my voice.

“The thrill of chase, perhaps. Or the fascination of seeing how far one can push the boundaries.”

I take a step back, needing to put some distance between us. My mind is a battlefield. He watches me with those piercing eyes. “I know you’ve been wondering, Dakota. Wondering if I would come for you.”

He can read me like an open book.

“Am I in danger?” The question escapes my lips, a raw admission of my fear.

“Is it danger you feel, or something else?”

“I’ll call the police.”

He tilts his head, studying me with a knowing look. “You won’t do that. You don’t want more than a dead officer in your house.”

I bite my tongue, understanding his confession. Rachel didn’t abandon me and she sent someone to watch over me. It just wasn’t enough to protect me from the danger that is Mortimer.

“Why did you come here?”

“You and I have unfinished business.”

“What do you want?”

“Answers, Dakota. I want to understand the secrets you’ve been keeping. I have to unravel the web of emotions that binds us together.”

His presence in my home, despite the danger he poses, sends a pulse of adrenaline through me.

“You’re playing a dangerous game,” I warn him.

“Dangerous games often lead to the most thrilling outcomes, don’t you think?”

As his fingers brush against mine, a jolt of electricity shoots through me. He can feel the battle between reason and instinct.

“Am I in danger?” I ask again.

He leans in. “Perhaps danger and desire are intertwined, two sides of the same coin. But are you truly afraid of me, Dakota?”

He steps back, giving me space to breathe, to think. But his presence remains a stain on the fabric of my reality. I wish he would stop talking in riddles. He’s always been doing this,

never giving me a straight answer, like our conversations are part of some poems hidden in a long forgotten book.

“I can’t keep running from this,” I say, more to myself than to him.

“Then perhaps it’s time to stop running.”

I turn on my heel and make a run for the door. Fear propels me forward, but my steps are too slow, my heart pounding in my chest like a relentless drum. Before I can even reach the door, a strong hand wraps around my wrist, halting me in my tracks. The force of the grip sends a jolt of pain shooting up my arm. I turn to face him. His eyes betray the storm raging inside his mind. He steps forward as I step back until I’m cornered between his body and the wall.

“Running won’t change anything. The pull between us it’s inescapable.”

My chest heaves with every breath, fear and desire warring within me.

“Let me go,” I plead.

“You’re not truly asking me to let you go, are you? You’ve been drawn to the darkness, my Flower. The question is, can you handle what lies within it?”

As he reaches out, his fingers graze my cheek in a touch that’s both tender and possessive. I’m unsure whether to step back or jump straight in, whether to fight him or cave.

“Stay,” he asks me. “Let my darkness consume you.”

I push myself away from his touch, my instincts screaming at me to break free from under his spell. I try to hit him, but he’s quicker, his reflexes toned by a lifetime of calculated violence. His fingers curl around my throat with a strength that leaves me powerless. I struggle, my body twisting and writhing in a desperate attempt to break free. Each movement is met with his unyielding grip, his fingers digging into my skin. His eyes blaze with an intensity that sends shivers down my spine, a predator cornering its prey.

“Stop fighting,” he commands, his voice low and dangerous. “You can’t escape me, Dakota.”

Part of me wants to surrender, while another part of me screams for freedom. His grip tightens, his fingers pressing into my flesh. Although I am terrified, my body welcomes his touch.

“You’re mine, whether or not you admit it.”

His voice fills the room, cutting through the air like a knife. There’s still a flicker of resistance left that keeps burning inside me, but I’m not sure for how long I can keep it alive.

“I am not one of your puppets.”

“Ah, but you are,” he murmurs, his lips brushing against my jaw. The sensation sends a shiver down my spine, a mix of terror and something else I’m afraid to name. “A puppet in the grand theater of desire.”

His words wrap around me like a cocoon, tightening their hold on my thoughts, clouding my judgment. I press my lips together, defiant. My breath comes in ragged gasps as I fight to regain control over my body.

“Let go,” he murmurs again. “Surrender, Dakota.”

I’ve been dancing with the darkness all along, losing myself in it. It pulls me closer as I fight to resist it, and I’m not even sure that’s an option. It’s pointless to think back now. The letters, our interactions, none of it matters. Even if I would be able to pinpoint the exact second I started to feel something for the monster in front of me, it won’t make any difference. I’m not just here to understand him anymore. There’s a part of me that wants him, everything he has to give.

He leans in, his mouth capturing mine in a kiss that’s both tender and possessive. There’s an underlying hunger—a delicate balance between his desire to possess and my need to break free. His touch is a paradox, as his fingers are still clasped around my neck, while his mouth devours mine. He grazes my fingers with his other hand, his touch surprisingly gentle, but I know what those hands are capable of, how easy

it would be for him to snuff the life out of me. His lips are warm against mine, his intoxicating scent surrounding us. Chemistry crackles between us. I'm breathless and disoriented. As the kiss deepens, I find myself unable to hold back any longer. The fire that's been smoldering beneath the surface was waiting for a spark to ignite it, and this is it. His lips, his rhythm, are both familiar and new, a dance that's as much about control as it is about surrender.

My fingers tremble against his chest, torn between pushing him away and pulling him closer. The line between right and wrong blurs into a haze of raw desire. I lose track of time, reason, of everything except the monster in front of me, and the intoxicating taste of his lips.

In the aftermath of the kiss, as it ends just as quickly as it began, the reality of our situation crashes over me like a tidal wave. Mortimer is no longer a distant figure confined to prison walls. He's here, in my world, in my space. He's real. And he came after me.

He bangs my head against the door with a force that makes me see stars, my vision going cloudy as he wraps his hands around my neck and stars squeezing.

And my last thought before everything goes dark is that this is not his usual way of ending a life.

# CHAPTER 6

## THE MACABRE PUPPETEER

LOVE IS A FOREIGN CONCEPT TO ME. LOVE, AS OTHER PEOPLE understand it, is something I have never felt in my life. But this obsession, this relentless pull toward Dakota, is something different—a puzzle that defies rationality, a craving that goes beyond my understanding.

I have come back here, not out of some twisted sense of nostalgia, but because I had unfinished business to attend to—a dance that needs its final steps, a masterpiece that requires its last brushstrokes. And my beloved Flower is at the center of it all.

I have always been a master of emotions, although I never felt many of my own. I learned to recognize them in other people and manipulate them to my will. And the mix of emotions playing across her face right now is a mix I savor. Fear, desire, confusion—all intertwined. I have a war of my own to fight. In my mind, chaos, and logic wage a silent battle. She sits before me, bound by the wrists, her eyes wide with terror and longing. As I move closer, my fingers securing the bindings around her wrists, I watch her closely. The way her chest rises and falls with each quickened breath, the way her eyes flicker between resistance and surrender—it's intoxicating. She wants me. I could always tell by the flush that tinged her cheeks, the only color in my black and white world, and the rapid pulse at her throat that always made me want to jump across that iron table and tear her apart.

“Where are we?” Dakota shakes her head, looking confused around her.

She has seen through my darkness, had delved into my mind with a fearless curiosity that both fascinated and confused me. She's too familiar to me now, a liability I promised I will never have. I forced the prey to become entangled with the predator. I have given her no choice but to write back to me, to come see me. I forced the feelings out of her. My fingers trace the line of her jaw, the oddly gentle touch taking me by surprise. My hands have a mind of their own around her, a touch I have never offered to another human being, and they surprise me. I thought all they are capable of are to inflict pain and create my masterpieces. I lean in closer, my lips brushing against her ear as I whisper, "You knew it was going to come to this, Dakota. You wanted to understand me, to be a part of my darkness."

I can see the desperate need to resist me, overpowered now and again by fear. I will win this battle, not through force, but through her own emotions that she can't control any longer.

There are no rules, no boundaries with her.

"What are you going to do to me, Kairo? Is this how it's going to end?"

A smile crosses on my lips. She's using my first name in an attempt to stir something in me, but it fails miserably.

My plan has been meticulously crafted, every detail tattooed into my mind. I have returned to her with the intention of making her my final masterpiece, my magnum opus in the gallery of darkness I had created so far. This is the perfect masterpiece. I can picture it. Once I'm done, she will be the main attraction on the stage, bathed in dim, eerie light. The curtains, heavy and blood-red, will hang over the wooden stage, concealing the puppets that will soon be revealed. The theater is already filled with an audience of lifeless, porcelain dolls, their blank eyes fixed on the stage with a haunting stillness.

"The dolls," she mumbles as she looks around. I watch her swallowing, her eyes wide, her lips trembling.

I invested time in choosing the perfect dolls in the audience. Each one wears a mask of frozen terror, their painted

lips forever silenced in a grotesque parody of humanity. But she's not talking about the dolls in the audience. She is watching terrified the marionettes that dangle all around us on the scene, an assembly of limbs and torsos, stitched together from various people, each one a grotesque image of human and doll. I take a step back to show her my masterpiece. It only takes a few strings pulled for the marionettes to move. Their limbs jerk and twitch as I make them dance in a ghastly ballet of pain and suffering. I laugh.

"You're sick!" She yells with more emotion than I've ever seen from her. She struggles to break free, but I'm not concerned. "What the hell have you done?"

This performance will transcend all others. The audience of dolls remains unmoved, the eerie silence a contrast to the spectacle on stage. I remain unmoved as Dakota bends over and tries to calm her breath. I never pictured it would be so satisfying to have an audience while I manipulate the strings of my victims' lives until they dance to the tune I choose. My laughter echoes through the theater, reverberating. This is my world.

I have brought with me all the instruments I need. I stare at them displayed on the table. As I hold up a knife, the blade gleaming in the dim light, something inside me resisted to act. I see Dakota watching me with curiosity, her eyes never leaving mine. I have been the puppeteer for so long, the master of my own destiny, and yet here, in this moment, I feel like the marionette.

"What now, Kairo?" She asks me when I stop in front of her, pressing the blade against her neck.

Instead of the familiar rush of exhilaration, I feel a strange emptiness, a void where my demons usually thrive. The chaos in my mind intensifies.

I came back to finish what I started before. I have to go through, to make my beloved Flower my final victim, but every fiber of me pushes against the thought. The blade trembles in my hand, my fingers losing their grip. It's as if an

invisible barrier has always been protecting her, shielding her from the fate that had befallen so many others.

She is my equal, my reflection in the abyss, and I can't destroy what I see in her. I knew it that night, and I can't deny it any longer.

"You can't kill me, can you?" She finally speaks, after being quiet for so long.

"I couldn't kill you back then," I confess, "and I don't think I can kill you now. That doesn't mean I'm not going to try." I try to get a grip on my thoughts. "You were supposed to be my final masterpiece, my ultimate act. But I saw something in you that night, something I couldn't destroy."

Dakota's eyes bore into mine. She looks like a wild animal.

"What are you talking about?" She finally manages to utter, her voice quivering.

"It was before I decided to go to prison. That night, when you were meant to be my victim, I couldn't do it. It was like looking into a mirror and seeing my own darkness reflected back at me. Something stopped me."

"Before you decided to go to prison?"

"I looked into you after, and I went to prison to get to know you. The letters were my way of trying to understand why I couldn't kill you."

"The letters," Dakota blinks, her confusion deepening. "You... This makes no sense. You went to prison just to get to write to me? To get to know me? Did you really think that it was going to make you understand why you couldn't kill me?"

I nod. "Yes, I did."

Dakota shakes her head in disbelief. "Well, did you?"

She awaits for a response that might never come. As the seconds stretch into an eternity, I finally break the silence. "I thought I would," I admit. "But now, I'm not so sure. There's something about you, Dakota. It's like you're the missing piece of a puzzle I've been trying to solve my entire life."

“What now, Kairo? What do you want from me?”

“I want you to tell me what you’ve been hiding from everyone else. I want you to pour your darkness into me, and make me understand why.”

She hesitates. I know her mind is racing with conflicting emotions she can’t entirely comprehend. I have seen it happening more and more often the last few times she came to see me. She’s losing this war. Dakota has always been the one uncovering the secrets of others, delving into the minds of killers and monsters. But now the tables have turned. I want to understand her. She takes a shaky breath.

“You told me once that I’ve always sought the truth in the darkest corners of the human mind. You asked me if I dared to seek the truth within myself, if I have looked into the abyss and if I found what lies there. It’s something I’ve been avoiding, Kairo, because I’m afraid of what I might find. You want to know my demons?”

“I do.” I drop the blade from my hand and crouch in front of her, placing my hands on her knees. “Your demons will play well with mine.”

“You want to know my demons,” she repeats, her voice trembling. “Well, here’s the scariest of them all. When I was a child, at a carnival, I... I killed someone. It was an accident, but I am a killer.” The words spill out, each syllable heavy with the pain of guilt and secrecy.

My grip on her knees tightens slightly, encouraging her to go on.

“My father, he covered for me. He made it look like an accident, and no one suspected a thing. I was never convicted, never held accountable for what I did. And it’s eaten me alive ever since.”

She looks at me, seeking absolution in my eyes. This is the part she has kept hidden from the world, the darkness within her that had festered for years. I understand the weight of her confession. Her darkness is different, unique in its own way. While I have committed acts driven by a compulsion I can

scarcely control, Dakota's actions have been born of a tragic accident and a web of deception spun by her father. She had been haunted by guilt and remorse, emotions I am only familiar with in name only.

“How did it happen?”

Dakota looks over my shoulder as if she needs a second to remember. As if the dark memory is buried deep within her and it needs a few minutes to reach it.

“It was my thirteen birthday,” she starts, her eyes distant. “My best friend and I were inseparable. We decided to spend my birthday at the carnival that had come to town. It was supposed to be fun, and I don't remember being as happy as I was when my parents agreed to take us. We were having a great time, riding the Ferris wheel, eating cotton candy, and playing stupid games. But then, we stumbled upon a fortune teller's tent. My best friend, Clara, begged me to go with her.”

I nod, listening to every word she says.

“So, we entered the tent, and there was this old woman. She looked at us as if she could see right through us. Clara was so excited. She believed in all that supernatural stuff, you know?” She pauses, taking a deep breath before going on. “She offered a tarot card reading for Clara. She said she saw something... something about her destiny being intertwined with water.”

“They always see something ominous.”

Dakota nods. I need to know more, but I keep my curiosity in check. “As the women started laying out the cards, Clara became more and more agitated. She began demanding to know what the cards meant, what the water symbolized. But the women kept saying it was unclear, that the cards were murky.”

She takes another breath, her eyes glistening with tears. “Clara lost her temper. She grabbed the table, shouting at the woman. I jumped and accidentally knocked over a lantern, and the tent went up in flames.”

Her voice breaks. I wipe away her tears with my thumb, licking them off, savoring their taste. “I tried to get them out, but the flames were spreading so fast... They didn’t make it. They both died in there, Kairo.”

This shouldn’t haunt her like it does. It was an accident and nothing more.

“My father convinced the authorities it was a tragic accident, and the carnival left soon after. But the guilt...”

I have listened to countless stories of darkness and despair as last confessions of my victims. For some reason, people tend to confess all their dark sins when they are facing death. I have always enjoyed playing the priest, but Dakota’s tale is different.

I place my hand on top of hers.

“Dakota,” I begin softly, unsure of what I’m going to say next. “It wasn’t a deliberate act, and your guilt, while real, doesn’t make you a monster. Although your darkness calls to mine, it’s not the same.”

“No, it’s not the same,” she shakes her head. “My darkness is the product of a single event. Yours is something that has always been a part of you, lurking beneath the surface. You kill because you are compelled to, because it’s a part of your nature that you can’t deny. But I’m not like you.”

My hands are gliding up her thighs and she flinches, her pupils blowing wide. I have to tread carefully, but I can’t pull away. I feel the warmth of her skin beneath my fingertips. Dakota’s breath catches in her throat. As my hands move higher, inching closer to her pussy, I can sense her surrender. Her body betrays her desire, arching slightly.

“When did you try to kill me?” She demands to know.

“Almost a year ago,” I confess. “I watched you for a while, and I waited, and waited. I broke into your house while you were sleeping.” Her face pales.

“You... you broke into my house while I was sleeping?”

“Yes, I did. I stood there, watching you sleep, just like I had with my other victims. But with you... I was fascinated by every breath you took. I attended your book signings, read every word you wrote. You never gave a clear answer to why you decided to do what you do. And I couldn't let that question go unanswered.”

“So, you've been stalking me all this time?”

“Not stalking, my beloved Flower. Studying. Trying to understand what makes you tick, what drives you. I've been drawn to your darkness, just as you've been drawn to mine. Now I know that you chose to study killers in order to convince yourself that you're not one of us. Your past haunts you because you carry it as a burden. You've never embraced it, never allowed it to become a part of you.”

“Two people are dead because of me.”

“Yes, they are.”

It would be easy to coerce her into killing someone. I could put a blade in her hand and force her to take a life, but it will destroy her. She has worked too hard and for far too long to understand other people's darkness and try to differentiate herself from my kind.

“I have spent my entire life trying to distance myself from the darkness that touched me as a child. Now I'm face to face with the very embodiment of darkness, and I'm...”

Her voice breaks. And she's drawn to it. I feel it in the way her body responds to my touch as my hands keep exploring the contours of her body, tracing every curve.

I grip her chin between my fingers, forcing her to look at me.

“I'm not like you. I could never...”

I lean in, my lips an inch apart from hers.

“You're here with me now,” I whisper, my breath mingling with hers.

And it's time for her to face the truth she's been trying to run away from for far too long, before I will lose my patience.

# CHAPTER 7

## DAKOTA

THE CONFESSION TUMBLED OUT OF ME, A SECRET I HAD CLUNG to for so long, finally laid bare. Memories elude me like fragments of a dream. How did I get into this theater? Why did I confess? I've played right into his hands, like a moth drawn to a lethal flame, although he didn't force the confession out of me.

For a brief, terrifying moment, I consider ending it all. The knife he left within my reach if I could get one hand free, gleams with deadly temptation. I consider manipulating him into freeing me, and then it would be so easy to grab it, to turn the tables and make him the victim. But I'm held back by the same thing holding him back from killing me. Whatever this connection between us is, is unbreakable. Killing him might sever the twisted bond that binds us, but it would also mean losing the only person with whom I've shared the darkest corners of my soul. The only person who now knows the truth and doesn't see me in a different light. The truth and everything else about me.

As I sit here, oscillating between this love-hate dance between life and death, Kairo's presence looms over me like a shadow. I'm so fascinated by him, I even forget about the macabre scene he created all around us, about the floating bodies and the recent lives he ended.

"I know what you're thinking about," he whispers, grabbing the knife from the floor. I flinch when he cuts through the restraints holding me still. "Take it," he taunts, flipping the knife around. "Do it, Dakota. Make me bleed and end it all."

I glance at the knife within my reach. My fingers twitch. Do I want to rid myself of him and the connection we share? I reach for the knife, my hand shaking. He lets go of the blade without putting up a fight. I stare at him, shaking my head.

“Do it,” he repeats.

I purse my lips, tears pouring down my face. Killing him won't erase the darkness within me. It won't change what I've done or the secrets I've kept buried. If anything, it would only bind me further to this macabre dance we've been doing for so long now.

“You're not worth it,” I mutter under my breath.

His lips curl into a sinister smile, as if he's won another round of our deadly game. Swift and unpredictable, he snatches the blade from my hand. He turns me around, his strength overpowering me, and I find myself bent over the chair, my heart pounding in my chest. The sharp edge of the knife presses firmly against the delicate skin of my neck. His breath brushes against my ear.

“You see, Dakota, you could have ended it all right here,” he laughs.

The fine line between my life and my death is held in Kairo's hands. Now I understand his obsession. I was supposed to be one of his victims, and he couldn't kill me that night. He came back to finish what he started, and even if he won't be able to go through with it, it doesn't mean he's not going to at least try as he said he will. My heart races, pounding in my chest like a desperate prisoner trying to escape. As Kairo's knife cuts my skin, my world narrows to the searing pain. It's a warning, a demonstration of his power over life and death. Every nerve in my body ignites in protest, and I can feel the warmth of blood tickling down my neck.

I've never felt more alive than in this horrifying moment. Kairo grips my waist with his free hand. I can feel his erection as he glues his chest to my back until there's no space left between us. He leans closer, twisting me slowly towards him as he buries his face in my neck, sucking the blood from the wound he inflicted.

“The edge between life and death it’s a place most people never truly understand, and yet here we are.”

I grit my teeth through the pain, trying to muster some semblance of defiance.

“You’re not going to kill me, are you? You’ve already admitted you can’t.”

His laughter is cold, his teeth stained with blood. There’s darkness in his eyes, an evil that pierces through my soul. I stop breathing when he crushes his lips against mine, making me taste my own blood. My body freezes. The kiss is not like the one before. Is a sickening reminder of how vulnerable I am in front of him and his sadistic pleasure in inflicting pain. I push against him, breaking the kiss. Gasping for air, I look into his eyes, my entire body trembling. Blood keeps dripping from the shallow cut on my neck. I’m still dizzy from the hit I took to my head, and I have no idea for how long I have been out. I can’t tell if he decorated this place before bringing me here or while I was unconscious.

“Kill you, Dakota? I think we’re both past that. I’m going to bury my cock so deep inside you, I’ll make you see God. I’ll bathe you in cum and you’ll drink it like it’s the holy water that can wash away your sins. I’m going to hurt you, choke you. And you’ll love every second of it.”

I swallow as he uses the knife to cut through my top and for a second all I can feel is relief that it’s not my skin. Cold air brushes against my hardened nipples and I don’t even make an attempt to cover myself as he drags my shorts down on my thighs, forcing me out of them one leg at a time. I’m left standing only in my panties, breathing hard as Kairo licks the blood that off my neck, his hands cupping my breasts. He sinks his teeth into the side of my neck as one of his hands finds his way between my legs. He teases my clit through the thin material. A soft moan escapes my lips.

“Admit it that you want me, Dakota.”

I shake my head, trying to hold on to the last bit of rationality I have left. I’m lost as he pushes my panties on a side, shoving two fingers inside my pussy. I bite my tongue to

hold back a scream, or a moan. I can't be sure. I'm panting as he starts finger fucking me while he licks the tears that don't stop running down my face. It's too much, too unexpected, and my knees buckle. I'm trembling. Kairo licks the blood mixed with my tears from his lips, giving me a satisfied smile.

"Your tight pussy drips for me," he states.

Weirdly enough, his words bring no shame. I am hyperaware of the situation I find myself in. He's a convicted serial killer who escaped from prison, and I'm starting to think he was driven by his insane obsession to hunt me, not to find new victims. He transformed the theater into a macabre scene, with bodies floating all around us, but it's all for show. The police are looking for him. After what he pulled off, if he gets caught, he will most likely face the death penalty.

And I'm falling for him.

He pulls back for a second, enough to get rid of my panties, and turns me around with a hand in my hair, bending me over the chair. I refuse to close my eyes to the horrors in front of me. I am now a part of his reality and I have to face it. Kairo works his fingers back into me, and I moan, breathing hard through parted lips. My body wants to surrender, but my mind won't break. Not yet. I'm not in my right mind tonight, and I doubt I will ever be as long as Kairo Mortimer is near me. His hands are bruising my body, digging into my skin. His teeth pierce the flesh of my shoulder as he unzips his jeans. I can't stop crying, but I'm not afraid. Maybe I lost my grip on reality, entangled too much in his web.

"Look at me."

I looked at him. A thousand times, in my dreams. Sometimes I struggled to focus on anything else. Sitting across from him in that prison room, sometimes all I could think of was this. I force myself to do it once again.

I should at least try to stop him. I doubt that anything I could say would make him back down, but I could at least try to put an end to this. Except I can't. I don't want to.

"Kairo..." His name comes out like a prayer.

“You are mine,” he smiles before. “Bend over and spread your legs for me,” he says before going down on his knees.

I obey, as I know no other way. My clit throbs when he grips my thighs. He starts licking me slowly, pushing a finger inside me, then another. My pussy clenches around his fingers, my body pushing back against his mouth as he never stops licking and sucking like he’s starving. And maybe he is. I know I am. I realize I want him more than I have ever wanted anything in my entire life. I grip the chair, trying to find some balance as he presses deeper inside me. My eyes are screwed shut, my entire body tense.

He is right about something. I am his. Regardless of the warning signs in my mind, I am his. He had me even before I stepped foot in that prison room to meet him face-to-face. He had me with every word, with every letter, with every glimpse he allowed me inside his twisted mind. Kairo cups one of my breasts, flicking my nipple between his fingers as his tongue dances over my clit. His fingers slide inside me with ease, a little deeper each time. I’m a stranger to the intense sensation building inside me, almost too much to bear, and I can feel myself getting closer to the edge. He bends his fingers, and it’s all it takes to make me come undone. My body shakes and trembles as the orgasm rips through me. My vision goes hazy when I turn my head all of a sudden to look at him. He stands up behind me, licking his upper lip. His pupils are dilated, his hair a mess, and I don’t think I’ve ever seen someone more beautiful.

He kisses me, his hands roaming over my body, exploring every inch exactly how they are not supposed to. He lines the crown of his dick between my legs and fills me in one go as he grips my neck. I fall forward, gripping the edge of the chair until my knuckles turn white. Kairo grips my hips and fucks me like a madman with no patience.

“Let me see how beautiful you look when you come on my cock, Flower.”

My moans get louder and I tighten around him, riding through my second orgasm as he plays with my clit. I feel his body going tense as he comes inside me minutes later, but I

can't worry about that now. A distant wail of sirens breaks the silence. Time is running out. I turn to Kairo, trying to force the words out of my mouth.

"You have to go," I beg him.

He studies me for a moment, his eyes searching mine as if trying to understand what I'm saying. He steps back and I sigh as he does, feeling empty. I watch him pulling his jeans up as his cum drips between my thighs. I grab my discarded top from the floor and wipe myself.

"You have to go now. Bind me on the chair, make it look real. Run, Kairo."

I don't think I have ever seen him hesitate, but he does it now. The sirens draw closer.

"Come with me."

The darkness in his eyes dances with a spark of hope, and for a moment, I'm torn. I shake my head before I say something stupid. I don't even know when I decided that I can't see him back in prison and that I'll do everything I can to help him escape.

"I can't. You know I can't."

His face hardens like stone, his emotions concealed behind a well-practiced mask.

"I will come back for you. This is not the end for you and me."

His movements become calculated. He retrieves the rope from the floor as I put on my shorts. I wish he wouldn't have cut through my top. He doesn't have to ask me to take a seat or fight me on this. I watch his fingers weaving intricate knots around my hands and wrists, both terrified and fascinated by his efficiency. As he secures the last knot, our eyes meet. Dread washes over me as he steps away from me. I worry he will get caught. For a fleeting moment, I forget about the ropes that bind me to the chair, the approaching sirens, and the danger that looms as he leans down, his lips meeting mine.

Then, without another word, he turns and disappears into the shadows, leaving me alone in the theater, my heart racing, my lips tingling, and my thoughts all over the place.

# CHAPTER 8

I SIT IN THE STERILE HOSPITAL ROOM, MY THOUGHTS A CHAOS. I'm afraid Rachel will see straight through my lies. Her gaze is too intense. She knows something is off, and it might be only a matter of time before she pieces it all together.

She sighs and takes a seat next to my hospital bed, her eyes never leaving mine.

“Here’s the thing. There’s something about your involvement that doesn’t add up. Mortimer never did this before. He never took someone and let them go.”

I swallow hard. My palms grow clammy. I can’t tell Rachel the actual truth, not when my feelings for Kairo have grown so complicated. I thought about it at some point, but she wouldn’t understand it. I don’t understand it.

“Rach, it’s not what you think.”

She furrows her brows, her detective instinct alert. She is my best friend, but she is also the detective assigned to Kairo’s case, and I think being my best friend comes second right now.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean,” I hesitate, choosing my words carefully, “Mortimer just ran out of time. He heard the sirens. He would’ve killed me.”

Her eyes narrow.

“That man has killed dozens of people without batting an eye. It would have taken him less than a minute to do so.”

I look away, unable to meet her gaze.

“Maybe his escape seemed more important than killing me. Doing it in a rush didn’t fit with the picture inside his head.”

Rachel crosses her arms, clearly not convinced. “Dakota, you’re not telling me everything. I know there’s more to the story, and I can’t help you if you’re not honest with me.”

I take a deep breath. The weight of my secrets threatens to suffocate me, but I can’t go through this again.

“Rachel, I get it. It sounds crazy, but that’s what happened. Mortimer had a chance to kill me, and he didn’t. I don’t know why, and honestly, I’m just glad to be alive. I just want this nightmare to be over.”

Rachel’s gaze softens. “I’m just worried about you. You’ve been through a lot.”

I nod. “I know, Rach. But I need some time to process all of this. And maybe think about a career change,” I try to joke.

“I didn’t do enough. I never really thought that he would come after you. I would have sent more police officers to your house, I could’ve...”

“Stop,” I interrupt her. “None of this is your fault. Mortimer’s mind is a labyrinth. I’ve spent hours talking to him, and it’s as if he’s constantly dancing on the edge of sanity. He’s obsessed with understanding the darkness within himself and others, with having power over life and death.”

“And what did he tell you about his victims? Did he ever show remorse?”

I shake my head, recalling our conversations. But recalling isn’t easy, as I can feel his breath on my skin again, his hands on my body, his intoxicating smell as he fucked me.

“No, not exactly. He believes that he’s uncovering some hidden truths. But I’ve always felt there was something more to it, something he wasn’t revealing.”

“And what about you? Do you think he ever truly cared for any of his victims, or were they merely pawns in his twisted game?”

I hesitate, because I read between the lines. She wants to know if he truly cares about me and if this is the reason he couldn't kill me.

"I... I'm not sure. There were moments when he seemed almost human, but at the same time, he's a psychopath, and there's darkness inside him neither me nor you will ever be able to understand." Rachel nods. "Do you have any leads on where he might be?"

"We're doing everything we can to track him down. There's a nationwide manhunt, and we've alerted law enforcement agencies in other countries as well. But he's crafty; he's eluded capture for so long. It's like he knows how to disappear into thin air."

God, I pray he does know how to. I don't tell her that he let himself get caught to begin with.

"Some think that he might come after you again. You've been his target tonight, but we'll do everything to keep you safe."

Except I don't want them to keep me safe. There's only one person out there who can keep me safe, and that person is Kairo.

"There's something else I don't get," Rachel adds after a few moments of silence. "He never raped his victims before. Again, why you?"

I feel a knot in my stomach as Rachel's words hit me.

"I wish I had an answer," I reply, my voice shaky. "Trying to understand his mind is like navigating a labyrinth with no end. And I really don't want to talk about any of this anymore."

She reaches out to touch my hand. I hope she doesn't ask me again how I'm feeling. I can't lie again. "Of course, you're right. We don't have to talk about it anymore. Just know that I am here for you, no matter what."

I offer her a weak smile. "Thank, Rachel. I'm just... tired of it all. How did he escape to begin with?"

“He had people working with him on the outside, people who are loyal to him for reasons I can’t understand,” she replies. “The prison believed he had some kind of mysterious illness that requires immediate treatment. So, during the transfer to the hospital, he got away.”

I nod, even though I know the truth behind Kairo’s escape. I can’t afford to reveal anything I know, not now. Our conversation slowly drifts away from the topic, and I’m grateful.

“Alright, you rest up. I have to go.”

With that, Rachel leaves the room, and I’m finally alone with my thoughts. They wanted to keep me under observation tonight, although I insisted it was no need. I refused to speak much about what happened, claiming that he attacked me in my house and I woke up in the theater shortly before the police arrived. I could have come up with something better, but I didn’t want to claim that I was awake while he fucked me. I couldn’t admit that nothing felt more right in my entire life, so I had to call it rape. Kairo’s already the villain in everyone’s story, so it doesn’t make any difference.

I sink into my thoughts, torn between the lies I have told and the truth I have hidden. The memories of the night continue to replay in my mind.

I have become his partner, and whatever boundaries we had left have crumbled tonight. I’m aware of the danger he poses, but I worry about him. It’s a paradox I can’t escape: I fear him, yet I’m drawn to him.

My life is now forever entwined with his.

# CHAPTER 9

*BREAKING NEWS: THE NOTORIOUS KILLER KNOWN AS THE Macabre Puppeteer Found Dead*

*In a stunning turn of events, authorities have confirmed that the elusive serial killer known as the Macabre Puppeteer, who has escaped from prison over a year ago, has been found dead in a remote location. The circumstances surrounding his death are still under investigation, but it appears that he met a gruesome end.*

*The Macabre Puppeteer, whose real name was Kairo Mortimer, terrorized the nation with a string of meticulously staged and grotesque murders. His reign of terror came to an end when he was captured and imprisoned. However, he managed to escape under mysterious circumstances, leaving authorities baffled.*

*His body was discovered in a secluded cabin deep in the wilderness, and initial reports suggest that he might have taken his own life. A thorough autopsy will be conducted to determine the exact cause of death. Investigators are also looking into how Mortimer managed to evade capture for so long.*

*Dakota McAllister, a writer who had been closely linked to Mortimer's case, has remained largely out of the public eye since the killer's escape. McAllister's best-selling true crime novels explored the minds of serial killers, and her connection to Mortimer raised questions during the investigation. She later moved...*

I turn off the TV, not wanting to hear another word. I sit by the window, a mug of tea in my hands, gazing out at the serene forest beyond. They say Kairo Mortimer, the Macabre Puppeteer, is dead. Found lifeless in a remote cabin, much like this one, deep in the woods. It would be an ironic twist of fate, or perhaps, a fitting end for a man who thrived on the macabre, but something doesn't sit right with me.

I can't bring myself to believe it. Kairo Mortimer was not the type to take his own life, to bow out with a whimper. He was a master of control, a puppeteer of the darkest desires.

For months, I have tried to forget, to distance myself from everything. But the memories remained. I abandoned the city and my writing career. In the quiet of this cabin, I have found some kind of peace—a chance to breathe. Surrounded by the soothing rustle of leaves and the distant call of wildlife, I have tried to make sense of the tangled web that connected me to Kairo.

I gave up on my writing career, but I have not stopped writing. I have filled journals with my thoughts, seeking answers and never finding any. The connection between us still clings to me. Even if I were to believe the news of his death, his presence will always linger. I have confronted the shadows of my past, but the scars remain. I can't escape the truth that I have become a part of the stories I once told, forever bound to the darkness within him.

Rachel, my once-best friend, kept fighting. She lost herself in Mortimer's case, her determination to bring him to justice, ruining her life. We have exchanged messages from time to time, but our connection has faded, much like the chapters of the book I have started to write about Kairo, but never finished. I don't think she ever believed me. She is way too smart for that. After endless hours of questioning once I left the hospital, she let me go. I moved here shortly after.

I think about him in the quiet moments when the world around me fades away. I carry the weight of something deeper than love in my heart. It's a haunting obsession. His absence is a void that can't be filled, a desire that can't be silenced. I often trace my fingers along the contours of his memory,

clinging to fragments of him. I've read his letters a million times. I kept thinking about him as a story that continues to unfold, but they just announced his death on the news. The walls seem to close in around me as I try to deal with the loss that washes over me.

The finality of it all.

# CHAPTER 10

I STAND AT THE EDGE OF THE FOREST, HIDDEN IN THE shadows, my eyes fixated on the cabin that has haunted my dreams for far too long. The sight of her, just a silhouette in the window, sends electricity coursing through my veins, a feeling so foreign yet tantalizingly familiar. It's been a year, and now I'm here, just as I promised her.

She's more beautiful than I remember, bathed in the soft glow of the cabin's warm light. Her presence pulls me closer like an irresistible force. I could never forget the way she moves, the way she speaks. She's the missing piece of my dark and twisted puzzle and I have to have her. I have watched her from the distance all this time. I step out of the shadows, crossing the distance to the cabin. My beloved Flower doesn't know I'm here, doesn't know I have been watching, waiting, and longing for this moment. She might think I am dead by now, just like everyone else.

I sneak inside through the back door, as I have done countless times while she was asleep. The second I step into the living room, the mug slips from her fingers, shattering against the floor. Hot liquid splatters, mingling with the shards. A sharp gasp escapes her lips and, as if she can feel me, she slowly turns around.

"Kairo," she whispers my name, stepping closer and closer until she stops in front of me.

Our fingers touch and I pull her into my arms. Her eyes are wild and red, like she's been crying.

“I told you,” I say against her hair, my lips grazing her ear.  
“This is not the end for us.”

“Did you miss me?” She asks, and I laugh, as it’s a weird thing to hear from her.

“More than you’ll ever know.” I dip my head, crushing my lips against hers. It’s a promise and a declaration at the same time.

I will not leave her again. I rest my forehead against hers.  
“I watched you, you know. You’ve haunted my thoughts every moment we were apart.”

“You were never far from my mind either,” she confesses, her fingers threading through my hair.

I knew that night when she decided to stay behind and delay the police that she has made up her mind. She chose me. I will reward her for that every single day for the rest of my life, starting now. I lift her in my arms, smiling as she wraps her legs around me.

“I’m going to fuck you, Dakota, and no sirens will save you this time.”

“Maybe I don’t want to be saved.”

No, she doesn’t. I have her right where I want her.

The last time I was in a hurry and she was terrified, but nothing is going to stop me this time. A few minutes later, as Dakota lies on the bed in her bedroom, on her back and with the head hanging off the edge, my cock a few inches from her lips, I realize what a good girl she can be for me.

“Open your mouth.”

Her naked body is on display for me, ready to be touched, marked. She licks her lips and does as I ask, and I push in, slipping past her lips. She moans as I hit the back of her throat. Fuck, she’s going to be the death of me. My eyes are glued to her. I don’t plan on ever letting her go from my sight ever again.

“Touch yourself,” I command.

I watch as she slowly slides her hands down her chest, playing with her nipples for a second before she moves her legs and starts rubbing her fingers over her clit. Her cheeks are on fire, but she's not shy when she starts finger fucking her slowly next. My cock twitches in her mouth and I lose focus. I want her entirely concentrated on her body, so I take a step back, slipping out of her mouth. Dakota closes her eyes, whimpering.

"Kairo." My name sounds desperate on her lips.

"Show me how beautifully you come, Dakota."

She rubs her clit faster, as my encouragement was all she was missing, and when she comes, her body shudders and it's the most beautiful scene I have ever seen. I give her a few seconds to come down from her high, then I wrap my hand in her hair and push her up in the middle of the bed as I move behind her. Her back is against my chest and I let one of my hands roam over her tits. I want to bite her, lick her, fuck her.

"Please," she whimpers as I bend her forward, shoving her face into the pillow, ass up.

"Spread your legs."

Her pussy is glistening as I let go of her hair and press my thumb on her clit. I bend down behind her, licking and finger fucking her until she's drenched in sweat, never allowing her to come. I work her up until she's on edge and then back off, going back to exploring her body, making sure I don't leave an inch untouched. The next time she's going to come, it's going to be on my cock, but it's fascinating to watch her giving up all her control. Surrendering to me. I have an entire life ahead to make her come and I will never get bored of it. But I have been keeping my distance for far too long and I have to be inside her soon. She turns her head to look at me, heavy-lidded. Her hair is stuck to her face.

"Do I get to be fucked by you now?"

I raise an eyebrow and smile.

"Do you want to?"

She nods, a tired and excited smile on her lips.

“Say it then.”

“Please, Kairo. I need you to fuck me.”

“Since you’re asking so nicely,” I align behind, slamming my cock inside her.

We both grunt at the same time. I want to see her riding on top of me, but for now we just have to find some release from all that pent-up frustration that built up over the last year. I place one hand on her ass, wrapping my other arm around her to bring her closer to me. I slam into her pussy hard and fast. I move my hand between her legs and draw circles on her clit when I feel her body clamp down while she explodes around my dick. I growl, unable to hold back any longer. I am going to fill her up, and then I am going to spend the next week making my cum drip between her thighs until we will both be too exhausted to even walk or think straight.

Every moment I spent in her presence in that prison room was a battle between the urges that had defined me for so long and inexplicable, maddening attraction to her. I have always been detached and unfeeling, but she is driving me fucking insane. Maybe she was never meant to be just a pawn in my deadly game.

Even when I thought about killing her, I still wanted to protect her.

My vision goes blurry as I come inside her and I have never been so anchored in reality as I am at this moment. I hold my arms wrapped around her, unwilling to let go.

“So, what are we going to do, Kairo?” She pants.

I smile.

“Now we’re going to spend the rest of our lives together.”

Dakota’s laughter echoes through the room. Her eyes meet mine as she turns her head and I see something that was missing there before—embracing. She kisses me, sealing our fates together.



Thank you for reading *This Haunting Obsession!*

Want more dark romance? Try [Carved in Bones](#)

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Morgana isn't your average fairytale fan. She likes her stories with a twist, where the anti-hero takes the lead and the girl falls head over heels for him. She's not afraid to explore the dark and twisted side of love and obsession. Her heroes are always alpha to the extreme—they'd set the world on fire for their other halves, and her heroines are strong, independent, and not afraid to take a walk on the wild and dark side.

But don't be fooled by her dark themes—Morgana is a fun-loving cat lover who enjoys nothing more than curling up with a good book. When she's not writing or reading, she can usually be found binge-watching the latest Netflix series, sipping on a cup of coffee, or reading. Her heart belongs to the dark and dangerous worlds she creates in her books.



# THROUGH THE WRINGER

WELI SANE

# CHAPTER 1

SITTING IN THE CORRIDOR, I WATCH MY MOTHER'S BLOOD slide down my fingers and stain the white tiles of this gloomy hospital. And to think that tonight we were supposed to celebrate one of my proudest accomplishments. If only I'd refused to replace Bill in cleaning the gym, we wouldn't be in this mess.

Five minutes.

Five minutes, the difference between life and death. Five minutes would have been enough for me to stop her attacker from inflicting so much damage. I take a quick glance at Mom's room. Her bruised skin is visible even through the gown she is wearing. Her attacker grabbed whatever was within reach to use as a weapon. And there's only one thing Jabowski holds at all times: a bottle of liquor. His wife looks as if she's been through a terrible storm, with her hair disheveled and her clothes wrinkled. Tubes push in and out of her bloated face.

"Mr. Jabowski... Mr. Jabowski..."

My jaws twitch. It's an involuntary movement, but over time it's become a part of me, because the name gives me the creeps. I raise my head after the nurse insists for the third time. Mouth half-open, she scrutinizes me in silence. Given that my eyes look like my mother's, it's a common reaction. Some say they're so beautiful, they're like a gateway to a new world. My translucent blue pupils observe her reaction.

"Your eyes are gorgeous," she comments in a voice that's almost inaudible, as if she can't believe it herself.

I stare at her, waiting for her to give more details about why she wanted to see me. She didn't come to me to tell me something I am already aware of.

“Yes, of course,” she mumbles.

Disturbed by my eloquent silence, the nurse lowers her gaze to the file she holds and taps her pen on it.

“Your mother is now in stable condition. The CPR you've practiced before the paramedics arrived has helped to restart her heart. But it's not over yet. The doctor will tell you more the moment he's free. We've been dealing with another emergency patient,” she adds, frowning. “You have the same surname as him,” she wonders in a low voice. “A Mr. Peter Magalov Jabowski.”

The shock fills her face. Her slightly trembling eyelids droop in a half-moon as she watches me with pity. An emotion she shares alone. If my father is in this state, it's because I put him there myself.

I accepted he would kill Mom one day when he started beating her. But I never could have imagined it would happen so soon, or that he would seize today out of all days to do it.

When I returned from the gym, red trails led me from the entrance to the kitchen, where Mom lay in her own blood. A weariness washed over me as I watched her struggle to breathe. As she was choking on her blood, I realized that one more beating might be fatal for her. After performing CPR, I called 911. But before they arrived, I detoured into my parents' bedroom. Dad was sitting on the mattress with a bottle of gin in his hand, staring blankly at the floor. For once, he seemed distraught by the situation.

“You can see your mother after talking to the doctor.”

The nurse's conciliatory voice rouses me from the waking nightmare I'd experienced a few hours earlier. I simply nod. The nurse zooms in on my hands, points them with her pen and suggests cleaning them before meeting Mom. That is a good idea. I'd better do it before the police think of taking samples from my fingers.

As I stand up, the nurse steps back, her eyes rounding. She's noticed my imposing height and build. I pass her and head for the men's room. After sitting on the toilet, I take three deep breaths. When you grow up, you understand that you're going to lose your parents. It's the natural order of things. But you can never fathom that one of our parents will cause the death of the other. It's not just scary to imagine, it also changes the way you think about everything.

I'm about to lose my mother and go to jail if the police ever find out what have done to my dad. Enraged, I strike the bathroom partition in stainless steel. My fingers tremble with anger and pain. I immediately calm down at the sound of muffled footsteps pounding the tiles in a slow, measured cadence. The person whistles and turns on the sink tap.

I plunge my hands into the toilet bowl and rub my fingers vigorously over it. The panoply of microbes in this bowl may make it difficult for the police to get conclusive results from my fingernail samples. I emerge from my cubicle, the whistle fading. As I approach the sink, I feel myself being watched, stared at. I ignore the man and approach one sink to wash my hands a second time - this time with soap. If he works in law enforcement, he will have called me out by now. Out of the corner of my eye, I examine the man in the suit leaning against the sink. As soon as I finish, he turns to the mirror in front of him and runs his fingers over his eyebrows. He's not the typical man you meet in this city. He's clearly not from around here. His three-piece suit reeks of money. And his perfume, which differs from the smell of sweat in the boxing club I frequent, confirms my suspicions.

“Killing is easy. Getting away with it is another story.”

## CHAPTER 2

I KEEP A STRAIGHT FACE EVEN THOUGH MY BACK STIFFENS. The gentleman turns fully towards me and watches my reaction with a satisfying smile hanging on his lips. He's what? 25 years at most. What's his weight? 190 pounds, and I'm being generous with my estimate. In a boxing ring, my fists would make mincemeat out of him. His eyes shine with a menacing glint, and his face takes on a more serious look when his gaze falls on my clenched fists. The atmosphere suddenly becomes electric.

“But nobody's dead yet! So, I guess it's not all over...for now,” he adds, staring straight into my eyes.

He knows what I've done. But how? Though I'll never ask him that question. That would mean confessing my crime. And this is out of the question. I can't lose my mother, my freedom and my innocence all the same day.

“Whoever you've lost, I hope you find comfort,” I tell him indifferently.

The corner of his mouth quirks up into a half-smile. Though he can read my intentions, he ignores them altogether. With his eyes drawn back to the mirror, he scrutinizes his reflection. I grasp the cold doorknob and push open the door.

“Speaking of comfort, you'll need it,” he announces.

My fingers slip from the doorknob as I turn to confront him. The gentleman adjusts his tie. My eyebrow arched in surprise as I approached him, taken aback by his inappropriate comment. We hardly know each other, so where does he get the idea, the audacity, to know about my needs? The guy with

auburn hair doesn't flinch as I approach him suddenly; he just brushes off his suit. Although my sneakers barely make a sound, the clattering of my steps on the tiles reveals my intense frustration. My height and build might intimidate some, but the three-piece suit is unfazed. He smiles as we challenge each other's gaze through the mirror. He looks at me with a hint of amusement as I stand just inches away from him.

"A consultation with a psychologist would help you control the tremors in your fingers," he advises, his voice amused.

Abruptly, he turns towards my fingers, fixing me with a pointed stare that sends shivers down my spine. His gaze moves up to my face.

"It's these little tics that give us away," he warns, his focus back on the mirror.

That's why I like to keep my fists clenched.

"The hospital has a talented doctor on the sixth floor. Recommended by several of his peers," he adds, brow furrowed.

His icy tone makes me wary. As I squint and look at him in the mirror, I strain to discern his emotions from his inscrutable body language. I have a hunch that something suspicious is going on with that psychologist. I am not sure what his motive is for insisting that I visit this doctor.

"We don't work for the police. I represent a firm that hires geniuses like you and trains them to become even better. Falling out of bed and entering a coma is not a common occurrence, and it's rare for us not to know how the whole shebang happened."

When you know where to hit and what to hit with... the rest is child's play. As I lift my chin in pride towards the man, I suppress the smile that threatens to form on my lips. The three-piece slips a business card onto the counter.

"You have my direct line on the card. Once your initial appointment with Dr. Roberts Young is complete, please give

me a call.”

My hiring is contingent on attending the doc’s appointment without fail. With a slow, deliberate movement, the man turns towards me and lingers expectantly. I take a step back to give way to him. As the door creaks open, the nurse turns towards the sound. Her eyes widen as she recognizes me. She’s probably been waiting for me, and my stomach churned at the thought of what she might say. Just as I step outside, the gentleman catches my eye and quickly disappears into the corridor.

“Doctor Jerome is waiting for you in his office,” she whispers apologetically, her cheeks flushed with embarrassment for waiting outside the men’s room.

I nod and follow her. We reach the doctor’s room. A small alcove in the emergency department containing two armchairs, a sofa and a closed door.

He asks me if I’d like to call someone to assist me. The news he’s about to tell me must be terrible. I fixate on him, prompting him to launch into an explanation for the delay in our meeting.

“Unfortunately, your father passed away a few minutes ago. We tried everything we could. My condolences.”

Looking down at my clasped hands, I nod delicately. Death was far too sweet for this bastard. I clench my fists to control the anger shaking my fingers. The urge to punch something, anything, burns inside me.

“Regarding your mother,” he hesitates to continue.

My eyes fly to the doctor’s face. I don’t know if I’m ready to live without her.

“Do you have any health insurance plans, Mr. Jabowski?”

Insurance? In the shithole where Mom and I lived? With a drunken father and a housekeeper? Don’t dream of it! We were the poorest of the poor. Every penny we had went either to pay for our rent or our food... but most of it, the amount Dad stole, or Mom gave him to avoid getting beaten up, went to feed Peter Jabowski’s addiction.

“No,” I swallow.

The doctor and nurse exchange worried glances

“Listen, your mother is in a terrible state. She suffered several blows to the head. This caused blood to enter her brain. She’ll need surgery if we want her to get back healthy. She also has four broken ribs. According to her medical records, if she were to receive another blow to the spine, she would end up paralyzed.”

Fuck me! I didn’t know that. Mom always insisted on talking to the doctors alone. She demanded that I leave the room, and unfortunately, I couldn’t do otherwise.

I nod, realizing the doctor’s underlying message. Either she’ll end up in a completely vegetative state, or she’ll end up paralyzed. I’d have to choose which demon she’d have to fight against or accept for the rest of her life.

“Since you don’t have insurance...”

The doctor doesn’t dare finish the sentence.

“How long can you keep her?”

“The best solution would be to end her sufferings now. Hospital costs are staggering. And?”

“For how long?” I insist, my voice firmer than before.

“One month maximum. But you’ll have to pay an enormous bill, either or the administration of the hospital decide to unplug your mother.”

After returning to the apartment, I put on my black suit and sit on the mattress. Ideas to get us out of this mess are lacking. I could always ask Moreno for an advance on my boxing contract. But that would never amount to a third of the hospital bill. The other option would be to say goodbye to Pearl Jabowski now, then move on with my life. But could I ever accept that Dad finally got his way with her?

The vibrations from my phone jolt me out of my reverie. The restaurant is calling me to confirm my reservation for two tonight.

Two?

A bitter laugh escapes my throat. I'd booked the nicest restaurant in town to celebrate the signing of my boxing contract. I bought Mom a dress to wear for the outing.

Dad beat her up when he saw her dressed up. Mom had been through so much in this marriage that, for once, just once, I wanted to please her. We weren't just celebrating my contract; we were celebrating Mom's freedom. I had finally reached adulthood. The age where nobody can accuse her of child kidnapping. For there was a time when Mom managed to escape. But not for long, as Dad tracked us down with the police's help. Mom endured this marriage to stay with me.

I worked hard at the welding shop to give her this dress, this outing, this moment. But I didn't know the dress will sign her death warrant. What a bitch of a life!

A combination of bus, metro and walk leaves me in front of the *Aux Belles Lumières* restaurant. The staff at the entrance are busy calming down an irate couple. Their reception check-in has apparently gone astray in the system.

"Sir, you've booked for two," the waitress reminds me.

She leans to the side and tries to see if the person supposed to accompany me is standing behind me. I clear my throat.

"I'm alone," I announce, with a heavy heart.

"In that case, would you mind being seated with someone else?" suggests the man who appears to be the restaurant manager.

I shrug. Alone or accompanied, what do I care? But my imposing body could pose a problem to the person I'll be sitting with. Maybe he'd better...

"We've already told the young lady that a stranger could join her table, if need be," replies the manager, to my unspoken concerns.

Looking down at the computer screen, he continues to type furiously on his keyboard.

“Please follow my colleague. She’ll lead you to your table. It’s a seven-course meal, lasting about two hours.”

My eyebrows twitch. My fingers inside my pants pocket clutch at my wallet as I worried if I’ll have enough funds to pay for the bill. I’d only gone out with enough to pay for an appetizer for me and a main course for Mom. After her miserable life with Dad and me, I wanted to give her a memorable experience with my first boxing contract check. As a housekeeper for wealthy men for many years, she had always dreamed of dining in this place.

“Don’t worry, your order will be taken care of. We apologize for the inconvenience,” adds the manager, raising his face to me.

I nod. How did he figure out I don’t frequent this type of establishment? I quickly scan my rented suit and follow the waitress who has already entered the room. I avoid darting my eyes all over the place.

We made our way to a table, and I could feel the curious gazes of some customers following us. I pay them no attention. Like them, I deserve to be here. I secured my spot months ago and I’ve respected the restaurant’s dress code. So, nobody’s going to spoil my evening. Mom’s condition has already made my day shitty. No need to add another layer. A young lady with medium-length curly hair catches my eye. The scooped back of her black dress accentuates her flawless skin, which shone like the sun. As we approach her table, I become more certain about her height. She must be at least five feet six inches tall. The realization brings a smile to my face.

“You were supposed to be here, Victor! You promised!”

Her conversation continues to be animated. Her left hand sweeps the air in annoyance. I glance at the waitress, but she avoids my gaze. She stands a few steps away from the young lady. Waiting for her to finish her call. Pff! So much unnecessary decorum! I’m not waiting like she is. It’s her job to kiss ass, not mine! I pull out the chair and sit my butt down,

exhausted by my day. The lady finishes her call and turns to us. First, she notices the waitress, then me.

*Fuck me!*

I should have waited, standing up like a gentleman. This girl is gorgeous! I leap onto my legs, which hit the edge of the table. Glasses clink. The sound of glasses clinking filled the room, accompanied by the laughter of the customers.

“Fuck!” I murmur, my eyes fixed on the damage I’ve caused.

It’s the first time I’ve ever lost my temper. And it had to be in such a ridiculous way. Even when I saw Mom’s bleeding body, I didn’t panic; same when I decided to finish off my father. I try to put the glasses back in their place, but I make more mess... and more noises. My trembling fingers drop the crystal glasses instead of grasping them properly.

A yelp forces me to raise my head. Her laugh joyful, rich, almost childlike calm down the tremors in my hand. A laugh beautiful laugh. A laugh that seems to bind us, never to part. Unlike the others, her laugh is not mean-spirited, cold or demeaning.

When she comes to her senses, we stare into each other’s eyes for a long time. There’s something there in her pupils briefly. Something that looks like lust. Because it’s her, I don’t mind being checked out. I feel flattered. Though If it was somebody else, my skin would crawl out of despise and annoyance. She lets go of my gaze and spills her glass on the table, a thud louder than my blunder echoing through the room.

“You see? It can happen to anyone! And I have every reason to break glasses, too,” she adds.

She walks around the table and approaches me, holding out her hand. For the first time since this morning, I regret rubbing my hands in the toilet. What had possessed me to do such a thing?

“Salomé LeBlanc.”

I stare at her palm. If she ever found out that I washed my hands in the toilet before meeting her, would she hold a grudge against me? A flicker of disappointment passes through her eyes as I look up at her.

No, she'll never know. Another secret I should bury with me.

"Alex Jabowski," I introduce myself, grabbing her hand. "You can call me Jabs or Alex."

A beautiful smile returns to her face.

"Alex it is, then," she concludes, tightening her grip.

How did she know I'd prefer Alex in every way to Jabs? Jabs reminds me too much of my old man.

"We can start dinner now," she says in a cheerful voice.

The other noises in the room recede to the background, leaving only a faint hum. I walk around the table to her side and courteously pull out her chair for her.

"Oh!" she murmurs, surprised.

Her breath catches in her throat as she takes a step back, but she quickly composes herself and sits down. Waiting for me to bring her chair back to the table, she gives me a few glances. Our proximity allows me to see her swarthy skin pecked with goosebump. A small, satisfied smile settles at the corner of my lips.

It's been a poor start to the day, but perhaps this day will close with a happy ending. I wish, as I take my seat in front of her.

# CHAPTER 3

THE WAITERS CONTINUE TO WALK BACK AND FORTH, PEERING IN my direction. I can sense the annoyance emanating from some of them as they impatiently wait for me to place my order. At *Aux Belles Lumières*, the table service is timed to the second, adding to the posh ambiance of the local restaurant. My presence, which has been dragging on for several hours now, puts a damper on their planning. However, as Victor and I are regulars here, the staff won't dare to kick me out.

I sip on my glass of Château Lafite Rothschild wine and glance quickly at my watch. Victor's lateness becomes alarming, and anxiety knots my stomach. Although we regularly dined together, Victor always paid the bill. As accountant to the wealthiest family in town, the Donaldsons, he has ample money and charisma to visit the upper echelons of this city. Me, I'm just a simple au pair looking after a five-year-old girl. My salary is enough to provide me with the minimum. If Victor stands me up, how will I get out of this mess? I ordered one of the most expensive wines on the menu. I monitor the restaurant's draped entrance like a hawk, praying that he'll show up soon. We have an event to celebrate tonight.

After fetching my phone from my purse, I dial his number once more. But the call goes again to his voicemail. My fingers dig into my old cell keypad. The restaurant manager strides over to my table. My heart pounds in my chest. Maybe they'll ask me to vacate the premises. He leans slightly towards my ear so that only I can listen to what he's saying.

"Your reservation time is over."

I feel ashamed as my eyes land on the bottle of wine. I can already imagine my mother's voice taunting me when I'll call her to help me pay the bill. 'Don't leave your bag where you can't reach it. Didn't I teach you that?'

My mortification is obvious to Gerard, who follows my gaze to see what I am staring at.

"We were able to contact Mr. Donaldson to inform him of... this situation," he hastens to add. "He has made it clear that if you wish to stay, he will take care of the bill. However, if you'd like to stay, we'd appreciate it if you'd allow another customer to join you at your table. Given that your time is up."

I'm too shocked by Victor's lack of response to my calls or messages to pay attention to Gerard's veiled threat.

"He answered your call..." I murmur in total disbelief.

Despite me flooding his cell phone with messages and calls since morning, he never replied. Words escape me to describe or explain my confusion. I pause for a few seconds, and the restaurant manager realizes that I need some space to process the situation.

After returning to the reception desk, he probably provided Victor with an update. My phone starts to ring a few minutes following his leave.

"Hello!"

Victor sighs in exasperation.

"Listen, Salomé, I couldn't get away, okay?" He yells.

Oh, no, you don't! You can't be at fault and act like I'm the problem. I jump on my feet, furious.

"We have planned this date for months. Today is an important day. It's my..."

"Yeah, but...while others squander money around, some work hard," he sneers.

"What do you mean by that? Let me remind you I work too, just as much as you! I put my priorities in the right

place... unlike you. Once again, I see that I'm just an option in your life."

And that's true! We only see each other based on his schedule solely. And sometimes I fight with him to remind him I exist. He's at the center of my world only when he feels like it.

"Stop acting like a child, will you! I can't be there, okay! Your screams won't change anything. I'll take care of your bill. You should be happy about that at least and enjoy yourself!"

He trivializes my words as usual, making me look like a leech.

"You were supposed to be here, Victor! You promised!"

My voice quivers. My lungs explode with dismay and incomprehension.

"But I can't. What's so hard to understand? Holy shit!"

"Victor, don't yell at me!"

Carried away by anger, I wave my hands in the air and give him a piece of my mind. But I know it will be short-lived as he hangs up on me as usual. Although I feel watched, I'm far from being embarrassed, because Victor and I have been arguing regularly lately. Especially since he asked for our relationship to be exclusive and official. Have my aspirations perhaps risen too high?

I should have stayed home. This day had already started badly with Mom's call reminding me I'm the disappointment of the family. Now that Victor isn't coming, it has gotten worse. I had planned for us to spend a lovely evening together. Despite being an au pair, I still freed myself. What's stopping him? Especially since he's related to the Donaldsons? He could have used their blood relationship to take the day off.

Given that today is my birthday, I was sure that Victor would free himself, but he didn't.

The more I think about it, the more my heart pounds widely inside my chest.

The more I think about it, the more my blood pressure rises.

I fume with rage. Victor will pay dearly. I always get even and add taxes on top of it. Always. What did he say? Some people work while others squander. I'll make him regret those words.

Ready to order the restaurant's most expensive meals and rarest wines, I turn to sit down, invigorated by my decision. My feet falter when I notice the waitress. Did Victor tell them he'd changed his mind about the bill?

Embarrassed, she spies on the giant sitting at my table. A giant with translucent blue eyes of extraordinary and breathtaking beauty. Cheeks flushed, he stands up quickly, hitting the edge of his table, creating a mess. His fingers slip on the glasses. Though he was trying to put them in the wrong place. I burst out laughing at his sheepish, bewildered expression, which underlines his humanity. No human being is perfect, and his awkwardness and embarrassment confirm this.

He looks up at me. Our gazes lock. My lungs suddenly lack air, and my hilarity fades away. His eyes aren't just beautiful, they're divine. They seem to come from another world, as if they were a mirror to another reality. They're sublime. The way he lets me dwell on them without saying a word implies that he's used to seeing people drown in them.

I want to enjoy this evening, even though it started off badly. So, the urge to break the ice overtakes me. I lean over the table and spill my glass of Château Lafite wine. I don't give a damn! Victor's paying for it, anyway!

"You see? It can happen to anyone! And I have every reason to break glasses, too," I confess in a casual tone to reassure him that his blunder could happen to anyone.

I approach him and extend my hand in greeting.

"Salomé LeBlanc."

His eyebrows twitch with concern. Maybe he's someone who's not fond of physical contact. This face-to-face dinner will be the most interesting. As I lower my palm, he catches

my hand, an apologetic look sitting on his face. His raspy hand embeds itself in my flesh, sending shivers down my spine.

“Alex Jabowski,” he says. “You can call me Jabs or Alex.”

But I noticed the inflection in his voice when he said: Jabs or Jabowski. Almost the same as the one I make when I mention my first name.

“Alex it is, then,” I conclude.

His eyes crinkle as he watches me curiously.

“We can start dinner,” I suggest, returning to my side of the table.

But Alex is faster than me. In three long strides, he positions himself behind my chair, which he pulls out to allow me to sit down.

“Oh!” I catch myself muttering.

Alex waits patiently for me. He doesn't rush me or yell at me. He gazes at me and lingers for me as if he is matching my speed, and he doesn't care at all. Something none of my exes had done for me until now. With feverish legs, I join him. I lower myself down gently. I ogle his muscular body over my shoulder as he adjusts my chair towards the table. His agility is surprising, considering his bulk size. Despite his powerful physique, he moves with a grace that puts those around him at ease... as if he doesn't want to be feared. It leads me to suspect being gallant is in his blood. Though Victor may sometimes appear to be a gentleman, his tendency to insult me later makes me wary of his behavior.

Before the waitress leaves, I ask her to bring us the most expensive champagne on the menu. I still haven't forgotten my mission.

“So, Salomé, we're celebrating something special today?”

The bubbles of the fizzy drink dance on my tongue as I pause my movement, enjoying the moment.

“You could say that.” I reply vaguely, Victor's absence still weighing on my chest. Maybe we weren't ready for an official, exclusive relationship after all.

“My apologies if my question is very personal. We’re going to have dinner together, so it might as well be a pleasant moment for both of us. But we could also dine in silence like two complete strangers, hoping never to cross paths again.”

His words run through my head. He’s right. By choosing to introduce myself, I’ve given this dinner a more personal touch. Besides, there’s no reason we shouldn’t converse with each other. I have nothing to lose by chatting with him, a stranger. Alex’s gaze weighs on my lips. I moisten them. His pupils flare with desire briefly.

“Today is my birthday. A most memorable one, since I can now buy and drink alcohol in this country.”

Alex, who was unfolding his napkin, freezes. Awkwardly, he places the napkin on his legs and avoids my gaze.

“Do you usually drink a lot? No, forget what I just said.”

Afraid to ask, he blurts out the question.

“I’ve been drinking since I was fifteen with my parents. We’ve lived all over the world. France most of the time. So yes, I drink, but not to the point of getting drunk, either.”

He smiles, obviously relieved by my answer. Alcohol has undoubtedly taken its toll on his family. Not on him, because his choice of drink is orange juice.

“Now I understand why you order that dish!” he comments with a smile on his lips, pointing at my plate of scallops Rossini with his knife.

I burst out laughing.

“No, you don’t!” I reply vehemently. “It’s delicious. You should try it.”

“No, I prefer sticking to what I know.”

And that’s what you do naturally when your means are limited or non-existent, I add in my head, glancing down at his plate of steak and fries. The first thing you do when your resources are scarce is to avoid squandering them on dishes you doubt will satisfy your palates. It’s the same logic I’ve been following since my parents cut me off. This may not be

the case with Alex, but there are several signs that he doesn't frequent this kind of milieu: the way he holds his cutlery, the subtle way he observes and copies what's going on around him.

“LeBlanc, I assume that's a French name?”

I frown. Alex guesses my suspicion as he immediately adds.

“You mentioned earlier that you're glad you can now drink and buy alcohol in this country. Which implies that you're probably not American. And earlier you were talking about France...”

He's really interested in everything that comes out of my mouth. Impressive!

“Salomé Kodjo Leblanc. French father, Togolese mother. Hence the name Salomé, unfortunately.”

“Why unfortunately? I think this name suits you perfectly. What's more, it's beautiful.”

The temperature rises, and my tongue grows heavy in my mouth. Words fail me. His head lowered to his dish, he dreamily repeats my first name over and over as if memorizing it. Feeling watched, he looks up at me.

“Yeah! Definitely a beautiful name.”

He places the cutlery on the table, wipes his lips, and leans back in his chair. His penetrating gaze catches my face as he gives me his full attention.

“Why don't you like it? My opinion counts for little. Your feelings are more valuable than mine. I can't help but be curious about your reasons.”

I drop the fork onto my plate. He really wants to know what I'm thinking, to listen to me. I can't remember the last time someone took my wishes, my desires, my opinion into consideration.

“I'm sorry if my question offended you,” he apologizes with a pained expression, staring at my trembling fingers. “We should talk about something else...”

After taking a deep breath, I intertwine my fingers under the table.

“The truth is this is the first time anyone has actually cared about my feelings. When I announced to my parents, I wouldn’t pursue a career in politics or administration or even medicine, they resented me. Hugely. As soon as they knew what I wanted to do with my life.”

I take a deep breath.

“Let’s just say they cut me off, and I found myself here alone, having to work to save money for my studies. The case of many students, no doubt. I just wasn’t prepared for this eventuality. Especially when my parents paid for my brothers’ and sister’s education down to the last penny. They wanted nothing to do with my aspirations...”

The words of the argument flash through my mind. My eyes begin to get wet. Embarrassed, I turn my head towards the bay window. What’s the matter with me, telling such stories to a stranger? Maybe the possibility that we’ll never see each other again. So, I can afford to be vulnerable today. Tomorrow, tomorrow I could be Salomé the stubborn or the unyielding.

I feel as if I’ve traded one demon for another. My weakness has led me to seek solace in Victor’s embrace, even though he can be disdainful at times.

“Some parents think they’re doing the right thing, when in fact they’re only making matter worse.”

I nod, struck by the veracity of his words. If only my parents had been willing to look at my portfolio or believe in me, I’d already be finishing my second year at the uni.

“Why don’t you tell me about your hobbies?”

As Alex changes the topic, we spend quality time the rest of the evening. As we talk, I become so lost in the conversation that the passage of time slips my mind, and my plan to ruin Victor fades into the background. We’re the last people to leave the restaurant. Naturally, Alex pulls out my chair and helps me into my jacket. He opens the door for me,

and we stroll out into the streets. His gaze is never far away from my body. Sometimes I catch his heavy glance on my back or my chest, making my heart race. His protective arm pulls me to him from time to time to avoid passers-by. We wander.

Neither he nor I know where either lives.

Neither he nor I want this evening to end.

Neither he nor I have the courage to ask more of the other.

It's just an evening between two strangers who'd like to have more, but don't dare. We enjoy the fresh air and the pleasant moment. It's late spring, so a fresh breeze lifts the sparse garbage littering the boulevard. Alex stops in front of a subway station. My heart sinks in my chest. I can't believe it's already over. That we'll never see each other again.

There's an ease to confiding in a stranger. A stranger you're sure you'll never see again. So why does this prospect sadden me?

Looking down at my feet, I think about the best way to say goodbye.

“Salomé.”

The touching way he pronounces my name forces me to lift my head to him.

“Yes...,” I say, captivated by the desire and sadness dancing in his blue pupils. He removes a tree leaf from my hair with his left hand.

Ah... that's why he was calling me.

“There comes a day in life when antipodes meet and evolve together. That day hasn't arrived yet, but there's no reason to believe it won't.”

How did he figure out I'm from a different social rank compared to his? Stepping back, he fumbles in his trouser pocket, searching for something. He pulls out his key case, revealing a collection of keys, each one worn from years of use. He removes the figurine, a tiny metal owl, from his key ring and hands it to me.

“While we strolled, my mind wandered to the ideal gift for your birthday. My gift is a little selfish,” he admits with a small smile, staring straight into my eyes. “But the gift I’m giving you will only fulfill my own selfish needs. I want you to remember me every time you look at or touch this figurine. I want you to remember that moment when you let me into your life, even if it was only for a brief moment. I want you to remember Alex Jabowski. It was such a lousy day for me, but thanks to you, it ended happily and was even more beautiful than I expected it to be. Please accept this modest gift from me. And remember me, this moment.”

I grab the figurine and squeeze it hard in my hand, then against my chest. This day had started so badly for me too, but it’s ending in the best possible way. I couldn’t have imagined it more perfect than it is now after Victor bailed on our date. This impromptu present will remind me of his eyes.

A goofy smile settles on my lips. My first gift of the day, and probably the only one I’ll receive. In fifteen minutes, we’ll be past midnight. Alex slips his arm around my shoulders and pulls me into his embrace. His warmth and stocky body envelop me. He entwines me, and we stay that way for a few minutes. We don’t want this moment to end. But it must end. We must return to our respective lives. Alex seems to think the same as me. He takes a step back, and we watch each other. An apologetic look passes over his face. Puzzled, I watch his reactions, his lips for the next words they’ll utter, his fingers for the bit of skin he’ll caress. He bends towards me and places a kiss on my forehead. Despite the heels I’m wearing, I rise on my tiptoes and grab the lapel of his suit. I want more, a goodbye kiss, here. If it’s a farewell, it might as well be memorable for him and for me. But as soon as my mouth grazes his, he tilts his head back.

“Don’t make me regret meeting you,” he begs, his hot breath caressing my lips. “If I kiss you right now,” he grumbles, his hand snaking into my hair, “it will be impossible for me to let you go. I’ll search for you, haunt you in hope to make you mine and never let you go.”

His fingers grasp my hair. Alex puts the right amount of pressure to curve and maintain my neck backwards. How does he know I like to be gripped like this? Desire prickles my skin and my crotch throbs with excitement. He scrutinizes every part of my face as if trying to memorize it for the last time. The courage escapes me to ask him more: his number, his address, his marital status. I'm not crazy. All evening we've been dancing around the subject of being single or married. And it was deliberate. Neither of us wanted to break the wonderful auspiciousness in which we were bathing.

“Happy birthday Salomé,” he whispers in my ear, pronouncing my name in that warm way that thrills me.

He lets go of me and moves backwards. His imposing stature forces passers-by to move aside around him. We stare into each other's eyes until a group of students exiting the subway drowns Alex out.

TO DIMITRI WITH HATRED

JOCELYNE SOTO

## CONTENT WARNINGS

Please be advised that *To Dimitri With Hatred* does have on page violence that involve weapons and blood, as well descriptors of death. This may not be for all readers. Please do not continue if this is something that you are not comfortable with.



# PROLOGUE

WHEN IT COMES TO LIFE, EVERYONE ALWAYS HAS AN ULTERIOR motive.

There is always something that someone wants, and they will do anything and everything to get it. It doesn't matter if it's money, property, or a life, if it's something that they are desperately after, they will stop at nothing to get it. They will pay good money to get it, kill, or lie through their teeth. Some people do all three.

I'm one of those people.

There are a lot of things in this world, in this life, that I want. Things that I would lie for. Things that I would kill for, and I mean that in the literal sense. Everything that I do has a motive behind it, and I will stop at nothing until that object, or person is in my hands.

And in this case, it's both.

Someone has something that I want. Something that will be deadly in the hands of the wrong person. I'm the wrong person.

But they don't know that.

They don't know that I'm after not only their most precious gift but also all the power that said gift comes with. Power that would make men like me envious.

They don't know that I'm the villain of their story. They don't know who I really am, and if I have it my way, they never will.

Something else that they will never know?

I'm their worst nightmare come true.

# CHAPTER 1

BLOOD TRICKLES DOWN MY HAND, AND ONTO MY FOREARM staining my brand-new dress shirt.

I just bought this shirt and now its stained with blood from the bastard that is currently screaming in pain at my feet.

This should have been something I expected, but since I had a plan, I didn't think twice going wrong. The bastard that is currently pleading for his mommy and daddy, should have been an easy kill. A stab wound straight to the heart and another to the carotid for good measure, but he moved. He moved and his death is taking a lot fucking longer than it should and now I have blood staining my new shirt.

I should have shot him between the eyes. At least then the splatter would have been on the floor and not on me.

Either way, I'm pissed, and I feel like taking it out on the man child at my feet.

I bring my leg back and land a kick against the bastard's stomach, causing him to wither in pain even more.

"Not only do you owe me money, but now you also owe me a new shirt," I spit at him, crouching down so that his biddy eyes can only concentrate on me and me alone.

My face needs to be the last thing he sees before going to the other side. I have to haunt the fucker in some way, even in death.

"I'm-m sor-sorry," the bloodied man says. I know his name. It's one that has been staring back at me from a post-it notes on my computer for weeks. But I don't give a shit what

his mommy and daddy named him. In two minutes, he won't matter. At least not to me.

Not giving a shit anymore, I pull out my gun from my waistband and place it against his sweaty forehead. The smell of urine fills the room and that's all I need to pull the trigger.

Blood splatters everywhere, officially putting an end to my new shirt.

I watch as the life drains from his eyes. Remorse should be something that I should feel as the man before me falls limp to the concrete floor onto a pool of his own blood. I should feel bad that his family will never see him again or that his friends will never be able to grab a drink with him again, but I don't. I don't give the slightest of shits that there is a dead body in front of me, or that he had a family and friends. Not caring, not feeling any remorse, has been something that I never have to worry about. I didn't care when I made my first kill and I'm not going to care about it now.

Not feeling remorse about taking a life, or even going home with blood on my hands is something that comes from the way that I was brought up.

When you're the eldest son to one of the heads of a Russian crime family, you are brought up to be cold hearted and blood thirsty so that one day you are prepared to take over the seat the head of the table. I know men that would do everything in their power to not land in that role.

I'm not one of those men.

Yes, there were a few years where I wanted nothing to do with the head seat. There were times where all I wanted was to do things outside of my father's and uncles' holds and not have rule my life every step of the, but eventually I grew to learn that the seat at the top was what I wanted the most. I wanted to answer to no one, I wanted the power, and the only way to get that was to become the person that my lineage wanted me to be.

Something I realized years later was something that I was more than happy to do.

I kick the body in front of me one more time for good measure and stand up to full height.

My shoulder is screaming at me for throwing countless blows to my human punching bag, but I just ignore the pain and grab the can of gasoline that I keep here for times like this.

Currently, me and the corpse are inside one of the few warehouses I own around New York City, one where nobody will come looking for him.

Ninety percent of the warehouses I own, are used for legitimate business, mostly to keep the DEA and the FBI away from looking too deep into what I do. But this one, this one is special.

This warehouse was the first one that I bought with my own money. It's where I held my first meeting as boss when my old man landed in the hospital almost ten years ago and needed someone to call the shots while he recovered. It's where I burned my first body to a crisp. It's the place where I became the feared man that I became today. A small little warehouse just outside of city limits, surrounded by other warehouses that serve as actual businesses, is the perfect place to make someone scream out in agony before they meet the light.

I dose the body in the gasoline and don't hesitate in pulling out a disposable lighter and lighting up the fucker.

This should serve as a sign to every single person that what's to cross me. Do so and fucking die.

It's not a strong enough sign though because before the week is even over, I will be back here with another sad fucker that owes me money and they will meet the same demise that this poor bastard did. It's like clockwork.

I watch as the flames engulf the body for a few minutes. Enjoying the smell of burnt flesh a little too much, before remembering that I have to head up to the Manhattan to meet up with my father.

According to his message from this morning, there's an important meeting with someone special that he wants me to

be present for.

Special is code name for someone that might be influential in society. This special person could be a senator, a governor, a celebrity, hell even the president of the United States. It could be absolutely anyone.

I truly doubt that who this meeting is with is actually “special” but I’m still going to humor the man and show up.

For all I know, special means it’s another body that needs burning. Something that I will gladly take.

I give the current body burning in front of me one last look and start walking out of the room. The fire won’t get big enough, so I can leave it. One of my men will come by later and make sure that everything is clean and disposed of properly.

I’m halfway out the main door to the warehouse when my phone starts ringing. Ninety percent of the time when I’m leaving the warehouse after a kill, I tend to ignore my phone. Usually when I walk out of the doors, I have this sense of peace that I would like to bask in as long as possible. Peace that is ruined the second I look at my phone because there is always something that I have to take care of because my men can be idiots sometimes.

Today, though, I’m reaching for my phone in my pant pocket, all because of the stupid ring tone currently sounding from it.

The lovely work of my brother. When he got a sense of humor is beyond me.

“Brother. Look at you finally remembering that you had family outside of your hockey team,” I chime, heading over to where I parked my car.

“We talked two weeks ago, besides, I’ve been a little busy or did you forget that my team is currently in the playoffs?”

I snort.

Of course, I didn’t forget. Who the fuck would forget that their little brother, the professional hockey player, is on his

way to getting one of the highest accolades in sports history? I may have a cold heart when it comes to ending an individual's life but when it comes to my brother, that cold heart is nonexistent.

There have been a handful of times where my brother has been my saving grace, the only person to bring me out of the dark holes I put myself in. We both grew up in this dark life, but whereas I took hold and embraced everything that has to do with being Bratva, my brother has not. He's still a part of the family business when we need him but the majority of the time, he is concentrating on his hockey career and being one of the best wingers in the Dark Knights of Chicago have ever seen.

He thinks that because he chose hockey over the family business that we see him as a disgrace, as not worthy of much other than skating in ice and passing a puck. He might be on the money with that though process with our father, but never with me. I'm glad that he got out. I'm glad that he doesn't have to kill people like I do or better yet, I'm glad that he is not in harm's way. Losing him would be something that I would never be able to get over.

"I didn't forget. I'm still waiting for you to send over tickets for the Cup Finals," I say, getting into my car. The leather of the brand-new Audi hitting my nose like a Christmas delight.

"Let us get there first and then we can talk about getting tickets," my brother, Sasha tells me, and I could be wrong, but I hear a smile on his voice. Something that I don't get to hear or see often.

Sasha and I both were born in Saint Petersburg and spent the first few years of our childhood in Russia. We didn't come to the states until I was thirteen and Sasha was eight when our parents decided to it was best to move the family business to the beautiful state of New York.

What the move really meant was that the Russian government was starting to look into the side business that my father conducted, and he decided to take his family and run.

As if running to the States was any better, but the old man saw an opportunity and he took it.

Growing up wasn't anything cheerful. Before Sasha chose to pursue hockey professionally, a sport he has loved since we lived in Russia, he was right next to me seeing the ins and outs of the family business. We both saw things that no child should have to see. It wasn't only the things that we saw, but also the things that we experienced.

We weren't bad kids, but there were times where we definitely didn't act or to do things that were up to my father's standards. His hand and belt were definitely something that we feared.

That fear affected my brother and I in different ways. While I challenged the fear and did everything in my power to stand against it. Sasha, on the other hand, lost himself in that fear. He hid away and let it affect him in was that even I couldn't pull him out. For years, he kept quiet and wouldn't do or say anything that would trigger our father. For me my rebellion was my escape but for him his only escape was hockey.

Something that I'm grateful he found. I'm also grateful that he's on a team that is able to bring him out a bit.

Thankfully the fear went away the second our father landed in the hospital. I was twenty-three and Sasha was eighteen. That day was the day I became the new boss. The day that the seat at the head of the table became mine. All because we didn't know if the man was going to live and couldn't leave the city in shambles.

“You'll get there. You just have to win two more games, right? Then the Knights will make it to the finals?”

“Yeah, two more games. If I call you piss drunk on Saturday, we either made it and I' celebrating or we didn't, and I'll be drinking my sorrows away.”

I laugh. The fact that I burnt a body a few minutes ago completely gone from my mind. “It wouldn't be a Sasha call otherwise.”

I start the car and start making my way back to the city. If I'm late for this meeting, with this special someone, my father will have my head. Even if I call the shots now.

"Don't call me that," He growls out.

My eyes can't help but to roll. We go through the same shit every time I use his birth name.

"For the millionth time, I'll call you Logan in public but in private Sasha is the only name I will call you."

At eighteen Sasha legally changed his name for Sasha to Logan. He said he wanted to step away from the family as much as he could, since he was entering the draft. He couldn't have NHL teams looking into who his father was or what he did for work.

He still kept the last name Volkov, though.

"Whatever. I didn't call to talk about hockey or my name," Logan says, his voice sounding rough through the car speakers as the phone connects to the Bluetooth.

Great now I'm thinking of him as Logan and not Sasha. Whatever.

"What is it?" I ask, going on high alert. If he needs help disposing of a body, I will forget this meeting with my father and drive straight to Chicago.

"Is there a reason why I was called to New York this afternoon?"

Not what I expected him to come out of his mouth.

My brother isn't very involved in the family business, only comes into the city when me and my father request for him to be there. Since I didn't call for him, that leaves one other person.

"Fucking hell," I mutter, trying to fugue out what my father is trying to play at. This has to be about his meeting. I have so many other questions as why he would want his second son there. "No clue, but I'll find out. Are you in the city?"

“No, still in Chicago. Thought I would call you first before calling a plane.”

“Let me find out what the fuck he’s up to,” I say, both of us knowing who I’m referring to. “And I’ll let you know if you have to jump on a plane before your next game or not.”

“Keep it so that I don’t have to,” he grumbles.

“I’ll try my best, brother.” I say, getting out the expressway and heading into the cit. “I’ll call you when I can.”

He just grunts and within seconds the call ends.

The whole way through the city, I’m trying to figure out what my father might be up to, but not a single scenario that I come up with is making sense.

Who is so important that Lev Volkov is calling both his sons in?

That hasn’t happened since right before he landed in the hospital, and he wanted to teach us a lesson on how to properly respect him.

Whatever it is, it has to be big, or Lev wanted to get both of us in the same room to off us both, something that I wouldn’t put past the man.

I arrive at the hotel, the one that was “gifted” to my father by a wealthy businessman a few years ago and give the valet attendant my keys. I spend enough time here for the hotel employees to know who I am, so I give them the same respect that they give me and tip and greet them whenever I can. I don’t need them catching on to some of the things that I do in this building and them ratting me out the feds.

A few nods are thrown my way as I walk over to the elevator banks. According to my father, this meeting is being conducted in the presidential suit. A suite that is only used by high profiled guest.

This hotel is one of the most luxurious places to stay in the city. Anyone who is anyone stays here and bring big money into our pockets. Something that happens thanks to me and the man that I share blood with.

Since I'm at the head of the table, I check to see who is staying here every morning. I don't need some slime bag senator catching me by surprise with his or her mistress every time I walk in here. I like to walk into to place already three or four steps ahead.

Currently, I'm not three or four steps ahead, because as far as I know not a single person is staying in the presidential suite for another week. That knowledge alone has me placing my hand on my gun as I ride the empty and wanting to pull it out when I get to the top floor and find it swarming with security.

No fucking way my old man has the actual President or any President for that matter in this hotel. That would have been national news.

The security assholes apparently were expecting me because as soon as I step off the elevator, they nod for me to proceed. They don't even fucking check me.

What the actual hell is going on here?

I don't ask them. I just continue to walk down the long hallway and when I reach the doors to the room, I give the metal decreative door three knocks.

The signal to my father that I'm here.

Within seconds, the door opens, and I'm being waved in by yet another security guard.

If I didn't know any better, I would say that I was walking into an ambush with all the armed guards surrounding me.

Maybe the old man really brought me here to take me out.

I walk deeper into the room and find my father waiting for me at entrance of the small living area, blocking my view from whoever is behind him.

It looks to me a man, but my father stepped in my line of sight before I was able to catch a glimpse of anything else.

Maybe it's the hitman. A laugh wants to bubble up inside of me. Of course, Lev would hire someone to take me out. He wouldn't get his hands dirty; he hasn't lifted a finger since he moved to the states.

“Dimitri. I’m glad that you can make it,” Lev says, giving me a grin that my mother says looks very much like my own. I don’t see it.

“Father. What’s with all the security?” I ask, nodding to the suit wearing men behind me.

There’s one to my right that hasn’t taken his eyes off me, but that could be because I haven’t taken my hand off my gun. Don’t want something to go off and me be unprepared.

“That would be our guest. Your brother can’t make it, I assume?” he asks, his Russian accent still prominent even after so many years stateside.

My face goes stoic. “Missed his flight. Do you want to tell me what this is all about?” I haven’t moved since I made eye contact with my father, and I don’t plan to until he does.

“Impatient as always.” He shakes his head as if I’m a little kid asking how much longer until we get to Six Flags. “Very well.” My father claps calling all the attention in the room. “Dimitri, I would like to introduce you to a friend.”

My father moves out of my line of sight, and I’m met with a face that I’ve been studying since I was a teenager. A face that has the power to give me every single thing that I’ve been wanting for years.

No fucking way.

How did my father pull this off?

“Son, meet His Majesty King Nicholas, he has a proposal for us.”

## CHAPTER 2

AT THE AGE OF EIGHTEEN, I FELL IN LOVE, BUT IT WASN'T with a woman like my mother continues to hope for to this very day.

I fell in love with power.

Eighteen was the age I figured out just how deep and influential my father's last name went. That was the age where I figured out that that there were people out in the world that wanted to kill me but that they couldn't and wouldn't touch me because of who my father was and who I later became. That was also the age that I realized that I could be so much more than just Lev Volkov's eldest son, so much more than someone that would potentially take over the family business when the time came. When I realized that, I started thinking of ways to pull myself away from my father and his influence to build my own but still using his name to get it.

At that time, my father wasn't going to step down, unless life and the devil himself took him down. So, I needed to put in the necessary work to be able to either overtake him or build up my own branch of the family business. Some of that work included looking into a lot of the powerful people that the world had and look at every single thing that they could possibly offer me.

When it comes to power, nobody has a moral compass. Every single person, no matter if they are a government official, a celebrity or fucking royalty, they will stop at nothing to get their hands on something that they want.

I'm very much like them.

During my search, look at every single head of state to see if they had anything to hide that I may be able to use it against them.

Almost every single of them had something, not a single person was as squeaky clean as they portrayed to be to the public.

But there was one individual that caught had caught my eye from day one.

The King of Beldoria.

His Majesty, Nicholas the Fourth.

Who would have thought that the standing king for the small country wedge between France and Spain, would have a lot to hide and had bigger scandals to his name than his counter parts in the United Kingdom and the United States.

But he did, and I was intrigued.

From the outside the king looked like an almighty figure that couldn't be brought down, but from the inside, I knew that all it would take was a little strike of a match and his majesty would come crumbling down.

He reminded me of my father, and within seconds of learning about his past I despised him.

For years, I've been thinking up ways to bring down the so-called king. I know everything about the man, his family, and his kingdom. I've been wanting to bring him down, but I've never gotten a clear shot. I haven't been able to get in the same room as him or been able to get deep enough into the lives of those closest to him to able to make my move. Over twelve years I've been waiting for the moment that I came face to face with His Majesty to use his past to my advantage and take the one thing that he holds dear to his heart and make it mine.

His power.

I haven't had the chance.

That is until now.

Why he's standing in the same room and my father is beyond me, because not once have I told him that I was after everything that the King stood for. Never have I mentioned that I there was another kingdom that I wanted to rule besides the one that I already have, a kingdom that would make more powerful than anything my father ever built. I never even mentioned it to my brother.

There is no way in hell that he is standing a few feet away from me because my father knows my plans. He's here for another reason.

"I didn't know the two of you were friends," I state, finally taking my hand off my gun and adjusting my suit jacket, the very one that I thought to throw on before walking into the building. I didn't need my father throwing question in my directions about what I do in my free time.

"I wouldn't call your father a friend," His Majesty answers, looking over at my father with some disgust on his face.

"What would you call him then?" The question rolls off my tongue, raising eyebrow at the man.

Nicholas looks from me to my father, as if he is silently asking him if he should tell me what their connection is or not.

If he does it again, I won't miss the chance to tell the king that the one that calls the shots in this room is me and not the man that supposedly raised me.

The king may live be from another country, but it's well known that there are five individuals that run the city of New York and none of the four are Lev. Something that he absolutely hates and tries to change every single damn day.

It's not going to happen as long as I'm fucking alive.

My father gives our special guest a nod and the fucker looks back at me.

"Someone that offered to get me out of some trouble," Nicholas says, finally answering my question.

*Some trouble.* I want to scoff at the words. The King is in more than just some trouble.

But of course, I don't say that. I can't have anyone in this room knowing that I've been lining tabs on his Majesty. I have to act indifferent and if this information is new news to me.

"What kind of trouble?" I ask, making my way over to the wet bar over in the corner of the room and start pouring myself a glass of vodka.

What's a meeting without a little of alcohol?

"I already told your father," Nicholas answers, letting out a huff.

Now I do let out a scoff, before turning to the man that is doing everything in his power to piss me off.

"Yeah, well, my father isn't in charge here. I am, so how about you tell me what type of fucking trouble you are in? Then maybe, I can decide if we can help you or not."

Nicholas face turns red, telling me that he is not used to people talking to him the way I just did. Tough shit.

"You're only in charge because of technicality," the King throws out, standing froths seat and walking over to the wet bar.

If he thinks I'm going to pour him a drink, he has another thing coming.

"Funny. I could say the same thing about you," I throw out before taking a sip from my tumbler.

Everyone knows that the now King has been waiting for the day that the crown landed on his head. From the whispers in his inner circle, I know that he has been waiting for this day since his own father took the throne when he was fifteen. For almost forty years, Nicholas was waiting for something to happen to his one blood so that he can take over.

Thank fuck, I didn't have to wait that long. Without a doubt I would have found a way to kill my father to take his spot as boss. Maybe that's what Nicholas did because he was tired of waiting.

If that's true or not, Nicholas is King of Beldoria now, something that he's only been for about two years, and he doesn't know how to handle it.

Why else would he come to my father for help?

I take another sip of my drink and look at the King straight in the eye. He didn't like my comment, I can tell by the way his eyes are coated in fury. I don't give a fuck if I pissed of his Majesty.

"So, is someone going to tell me what kind of trouble? Or am I going to have to torture someone for it?" I don't give a shit if touching the man in front of me gets me killed. I'll torture him not matter what.

Both older gentlemen look at each other and after a second, a sigh finally escape the king's mouth and turns to look at me head on.

"About twenty-five years ago, I had an affair. One that resulted. In a child being born," Nicholas lets out, shame covering his face.

I feel a smirk trying to form on my lips. The King of Beldoria having a kid with someone that isn't his wife, isn't news to me. I learned about this secret love child years ago after a night with one of the Queen's ladies in waiting. The Beldoria Royal family should really look into who they let walk within their palace walls. A little promise of sexual adventure and all the secrets start to come out.

"And let me guess. You got word that your love child is going to be revealed to the public and you want us to get rid of your bastard child?" I throw out, not even caring that my words make the man cringe.

"Not necessarily get rid of them," he answers getting a little red.

"Kill them then?" I throw out, finishing up my two fingers of vodka.

The king lets out a sigh. "No. There might have been a time in my life where I would have been that cruel, but I'm not that person anymore." Not according to the people living in his

palace. “I just need them to feel threatened enough not to come forward. I can’t have the fact that I have another child, a son at that, come out. It would ruin everything. This would ruin what the family stands but most importantly, it will take my daughter’s place as heir to the throne. She will go from being the heir to the spare and I can’t have that. There’s a reason I paid off the mother years ago and now this fuckery is coming up. I can’t have that happen.”

“You mean you can’t have your image tarnished,” I say, putting my tumbler down and walking over to Nicholas, cowering his personal space so that the tips of my shoes are touching his. “You promised your country its first Queen, you can’t go back on your word now, can you?”

There are a lot of reason, why Nicholas wants his oldest daughter to be Queen one day, but the reason I just stated is not one of them. Not by a long shot.

But Nicholas will never at admit that.

Not even to himself.

I can see it in his eyes the battle he is having within himself about agreeing to my assumption. He doesn’t want to. He wants to tell me the real reason, but he loses the battle within himself and gives me a nod.

“Of course, I can’t. My kingdom deserves a Queen to rule it, not some illegitimate son that only wants what comes with being the King’s eldest child. He isn’t worthy of ruling even if he does have my blood running through his veins.”

Nicholas isn’t worthy of ruling either, but who am I to get on the King’s bad side when he holds something that I want.

“If me and my men do this for you, what do I get out of this?” I say, giving the man a smirk.

Nicholas squares his shoulders back. “I already made an *agreement* with your father.”

A growl sounds deep in my chest. When will pussy ass men learn that the one in charge here is me and not my father?

I look over at my father and raise an eyebrow in his direction, wanting answers.

My father gives me a look like he is down with me and wants to move on from this meeting.

“What’s the agreement?” I ask, relaxing my jaw so that the question doesn’t come from between my teeth.

My father lets out a sigh and goes to sit on the couch a few feet from me and the king. He unbuttons his suit jacket and brings his ankle to rest on his knee, as if we’re all buddies about to have a guy’s night.

“An arranged marriage,” My father says, looking bored. “One between Nicholas eldest daughter, Anastasia, and your brother, Sasha. Since he’s not here it looks like the agreement will have to wait.”

That’s why Logan was called to the city. To make this arrangement happen.

An arranged marriage. Jesus. Out of all the things that my father could have offered, an arranged marriage was defiantly not a thing that I thought would be on the list.

That is something that Logan will ever do, even if it is to please out father. At least not, willingly. If it were me making the deal, he might have considered it, but even then, there would be a chance that he wouldn’t agree.

If this was ten years ago, and I was still under my father’s thumb, I would have gone along with it. I would have done everything that I could to convince Logan that this marriage would be a good idea. That he needed to walk down the aisle because it would be for the family’s best interest.

I give it to my father, though, this marriage is a good idea, in hindsight, since it would give out family a lot more power and make us some of the highest members of Bratva, but it isn’t a good idea to involve Logan.

Me on the other hand...

If I were to stand in his place, I would be able to achieve something that I’ve been wanting since I was eighteen. If I do

this, I will be one step closer to gaining all the power that I want and need. Marring the King's daughter will give me that opportunity and when his majesty meets his death bed, I will be the one taking over right next to his daughter.

It will take years, fucking decades to get what I want. Am I willing to risk it all to finally get everything I've been wanting, thirty to forty years from now?

There isn't even a thought.

Yes, yes, I am. Even if I have to marry someone that will probably hate me as long as she is a live.

I will be fucking in it for the damn long game.

"You don't need Sasha for this agreement," I say, my mind made up on what I'm going to do. I never wanted to marry but fuck it. It gets me what I want.

"Of course, we do, there is no other man that would be suitable for my daughter."

I finge hurt. "You wound me, Your Majesty. What makes you think that I don't have someone that I have someone that is very much suitable for your daughter?"

He huffs. "Do you?"

My smirk at him. "I do."

"Who?"

"Me."

Nicholas face turns red instantly at my single word.

He hates it.

I can see the hate and anger swimming in his eyes.

A small laugh escapes my lips as circle the king as if I were a predator ready to pounce in his prey, and in a way. I am. Nicholas is standing in front of what I want and all I need to do is eat him alive and I will be able to get all the I have ever wanted and more.

"You want to marry my daughter?" He asks, moving his body to follow mine. The anger clear in his voice.

Instantly, my mind fills with thoughts of his daughter.

Anastasia, The Princess of Beldoria.

Like her father, I know almost every single detail about the woman without actually meeting her in person.

If it was going to possibly infiltrate the family one day and take everything from them, I had to get to know every single family member.

At first, I steered clear of the heir to the throne. She was just a child when I started my fascination with the king and looking into his wrong doings. My plan had to do with the King, and his own demise, not his two daughters, so I left them alone. Any information that I came across that had to do with them, I burned to never think about again.

And it stayed that way until his eldest daughter, Anastasia, the heir to the fucking throne, turned nineteen. The princess had taken a gap year between her secondary schooling and going off to college, so I made the choice to let her be until she was out of her father's grip.

As soon as she started school at Columbia, I started looking into her. Everything she did, everyone she talked to, I knew it all. I still do.

Everywhere she goes, one of my men is always following close behind, hidden in plain sight, and alternating every hour so that she doesn't catch on. Every so often I leave my men and follow wherever she goes. There is no reason for me to do it, my men have a handle on it, but I still feel inclined to.

At first, I thought it was just to so that I could get close to her. I thought that she would see me and get intrigued by me and possibly stick up a conversation. A conversation that would have led to more and more, until I made my way into her heart, and she would get the bug to introduce me to daddy dearest. I had the plan all worked out, I just had to execute it, but somewhere down the line I pulled away from the plan.

I think it was because the princess enjoying life and a part of me didn't want to take that away from me. I don't know why I gave a shit about that, but I let her be and continued to

watch from the shadows as she fucked whatever measly boy that she wanted and acted like a normal college student and not actual royalty.

From what I could tell, she was doing everything in her power to go against everything that the crown stood for, what she would stand for when the time came. I like that.

But a door is opening for me, and I honestly don't give a shit if the princess doesn't want to be queen one day and wants to party her last year of college away. I'm going to take what I've been wanting for years.

"The way I see it, I'm your only option. It doesn't matter if I want to marry her or not," I say taking out the knife that I have sitting next to my gun and twirling it around.

From the corner of my eye, I see a few of Nicholas' men twitch waiting to see if I'm going to stab their king.

I'm not, but they don't know that.

"I want what's best for my daughter," he says, a shake to his voice.

"If that were true, you wouldn't have arranged her marriage with a known criminal to cover your ass. You would have let her live her own life and fall for whoever she wanted. You wouldn't be using her life to better yours." I slide the blade of the knife along my hand, letting blood come to the surface.

Nicholas looks down at it and swallows down whatever lump is forming in his throat audibly.

"You have a proposition in front of you, Your Majesty. I marry your daughter and in return, I'll take care of your bastard child. Do we have a deal?" I hold out my knife for him to take.

There is nothing better than a contract sealed by blood.

He takes the knife cautiously, staring at the blade as if he is trying to figure out if its real or not.

"My family doesn't believe in divorce, are you okay with living as my daughter's husband until your last breath?"

He is trying to scare me, but nothing he can say or do will do such a thing.

“More than okay,” I say, trying to contain my grin. “Now.” I hold out my hand for him to shake. “Do we have a deal?”

Once again, he looks down at my hand, but this time he looks like he wants to give up.

With a sigh, he nods and takes the knife and slides it against his palm.

The blood that seeps from the cut smells like sweet fucking victory.

I can't contain the smirk as the king of Beldoria slides his hand along mine.

“My daughter is not to never know about what brought on this arrangement. She is to not know who she is marrying until the day of the wedding. Am I clear?” He tightens his grip on my hand, putting enfaces in every single one of his words.

“Crystal,” I say, as I jerk his hand. “Do we have a deal?”

“We have a deal.”

One handshake, and I just got one step closer from having all the fucking power in the world.

# CHAPTER 3

MY PHONE VIBRATES IN MY HAND WITH A NOTIFICATION AND when I look down to see who or what it is, I can't help but to let out a sigh.

The message staring back at me is from my father, or his chief of communications I should say because God forbid a king learns how to text, telling me that he's in the city and I'm to meet him at his hotel for brunch.

You would think that since my father is one of the top governmental figures in the world, him coming to New York City would be news. If not on the actual news, then at the very least, I would be told that my father would be arriving before his plane landed at JFK. But that wasn't the case. Hell, it has never been the case.

I have to announce that I'm leaving the city and before I even stop foot in Beldoria, but my father has never given me the same courtesy. It's interesting really. He wants to know where I am at all times, and where I'm going to go, even has my security detail telling him what I'm doing every hour of the day, but I can't even know when he's even in the same city as me, outside of Beldoria.

Being the heir to the Beldorian throne comes with a lot of perks, but having my father's respect isn't one of them.

I probably being dramatic with that, but it's true. King Nicholas respects me as his daughter, but when it comes to me being the future queen, I haven't earned it. All the partying that I do could be part of it, but you would think that everything that I do outside of that would help, but it does not.

My father still sees the immature teenager living her best life in Paris and not the respectable woman that I'm trying to be.

Hopefully, by the time that I get my degree and leave college life behind, that will change because I really do want to do some great things for my country, I just have to be allowed too.

For now, since I'm not allowed to do conduct any real princess duties, I'm trying to get the most out of being a young adult and my college experience, which is officially ending in a few months.

My sister would say that I'm trying to live up to the party princess nickname she so happily gave me, but what she doesn't know is that I'm starting to hate partying. Sure, it was fun when I first move to New York, because nobody knew who I was and I was having fun making all these new friends, but when you do it almost every single weekend for three years, it gets stale and tiring. If it were up to me, I would quit going to clubs and drinking all together and go to a secluded island somewhere and drink my body weight in alcohol.

But of course, that idea is boring to my friends. So instead of flying somewhere tropical or staying home and watching a moving while I eat something from the bodega around the corner from my apartment, I get dressed and go out with them.

It doesn't happen every single night of the week, but it definitely happens enough that by Sunday morning, I'm dreading the start of the new week.

Tomorrow Morning is Sunday, and I'm already regretting my decision to go out. More so now that I have to have brunch with my father. No way am I going to be able to meet up with him while I'm hung over. Which means, I'm going to have to limit myself to two drinks.

"Great." I grumble to myself in the back of the SUV I'm currently occupying.

"Everything okay, princess?" James, my head security guard ask from the driver seat.

Ninety percent of the time, I have a team of guards with me every way I go. Got to protect the heir to the crown and all that. On nights like tonight, to give me some normalcy, I drive to my destination with one guard, while a small group follow close behind in another car.

I don't mind the security. I'm legit royalty, the security guards come with the freaking bloodline. So, since they are here to protect me from psychos and stalkers ex-boyfriends, I'm more than okay with it.

Besides, having a security detail does have its perks. Perks that make a woman like me very happy.

I shake my head a bit to get my brain away from where it wanted to head and answer James' question.

"Yes, I'm fine. I just got notified that I have an early morning tomorrow. His Majesty is in town," I say, looking at James through the rearview mirror.

His face goes stoic, the easy smile that shined through his eyes a few moments ago is now completely gone. Which tells me that he knows that my father was in town, and he didn't think it to mention it.

I guess, no matter how much time I spend with them, my security team is loyal to one person and one person only. The King.

*He does sign their checks after all.*

Whatever.

"I'm guessing by the way your eyebrows shot up that this little bit of news wasn't new information for you."

James lets out a sigh. "I'm sorry, princess. We were under stricter orders to not notify you."

The way he looks at me through the mirror tells me that he wanted to tell me but because he probably got orders from the king himself, he didn't.

"And do you know the reason behind those strict orders?" I ask, crossing my arms along my chest.

I get a head shake as we make our way up Midtown.

“I don’t. All we know is his majesty is in the city for no more than thirty-six hours. The president wasn’t even notified.”

Interesting.

Usually whenever my father makes his way stateside, he makes sure to make it the biggest deal known to man. I can’t help but wonder, why he isn’t doing it this time.

James takes my silence as me being angry instead of me pondering what the hell is going on and why my father is being so damn secretive about why he is here.

“I’m sorry, princess. If I could have told you I would,” he says, with sincerity in his eyes. “I’ll make it up to you, I promise.”

All thoughts of my father and why he is in the city, go out the window the second that I hear James last few words. Instantly my ears perk up.”

I square my shoulders a bit and push them back enough to push up my chest. Something that James can very much see through the small mirror. His eyes go from holding sincerity to being filled with lust. “And how will you make it up to me?”

I don’t have to see his face fully to know that a smirk is currently forming on his lips.

“Maybe you should get up here to the passenger seat and find out.” His voice is seductive, and it warms me in all the right places.

Like I said, having a security detail has its perks, and James is very much one of the.

I don’t make it a habit to hook up with men that are part of my security detail, but I have made the exception for James. He’s about five years older than me and has been there through a lot of my ups and down while I’ve been here in New York City. He’s been the one constant in a world of people of coming and going. He’s also hot and looks sexy in a suit. Us hooking up came after we were locked in my apartment during

a blizzard at the beginning of last year and we tend to hook up again when I feel about forgetting things that are going on in my current day to day.

It's not serious by any means and I should probably end it before my father finds out, but I want to enjoy my fun a little bit longer.

Which is why I take my seat belt off and climb over the center console of the SUV, very unprincess like I may add, and situate myself in the passenger seat.

Thank God its late and the windows of the SUV are blacked out because I don't need pictures of me blowing my security guard to land on my father's desk. I've already worked too hard to keep this from him, I don't need to blow it now.

James concentrates on my exposed legs for a second or two before turning back to face the rode.

He tightens his grip on the steering wheel and even though he isn't looking straight at me, I can see the hunger for me in his expression.

I guess I made the good choice in the dress I picked out for tonight. It's short, and perfect for whatever he wants to do to me.

"Do you like my dress?" I ask, sliding one of my fingernails along my exposed thigh.

"Very much. Why don't you bring it up a little so that I can see that pretty pussy?" He says in almost a growl as his right-hand lands on my leg.

"Why? Are you going to play with it?" I ask, doing as he says and pushing my dress up until everything below the waist is exposed. I applaud myself for choosing to wear a small g-string tonight.

James' hand makes its way from where it rests on my leg to my apex, his fingers ghosting along the fabric. "I am. I'm going to make you wish you had my fingers in you while you dance around with your friends."

His fingers caress me through the small amount of fabric, and I can't help but to let out a moan in anticipation of what's to come.

"I like the sound of that. Now make me come and try not to kill us.



James kept his promise.

Well, partly.

He did in fact play with my pussy and made me explode all over his hand, which I very much enjoyed, but he didn't leave me wanting for more. He didn't leave me aching for his touch again and wishing that his fingers, or better yet his cock, were sliding in and out of my pussy as I dance around the club.

Usually, he does and tonight he didn't.

I should take that as a sign to end things between James and me. As much as I like him, I don't want to complicate our work relationship even more, especially since he is here to protect me, not make me come with his finger and cock whenever I want.

Ending things between us has been something that I've been thinking about a while, not because he doesn't satisfy me anymore, he does, but because it can't go anywhere else besides where it currently is. He has a duty to do and so do I.

Tonight.

I'll end things between us tonight.

After we leave this club, I will get in the car with him and tell him that us hooking up has to stop. It's for the best.

He'll understand, there is no doubt about that.

"Why aren't you dancing?" Celia, my old roommate and best friend asks as she moves around me.

I didn't even notice that I stopped dancing.

“Sorry. I was just thinking about something,” I yell in her direction, hoping that she can hear me through the music.

“About that guy over there?” She gives me a smirk while she nods somewhere behind me.

I’m guessing she is nodding towards James, who no doubt is standing a few feet away, hiding in the shadows of the club keeping a close eye on me with the rest of my security detail. Out of all of my friends, Celia is the only one that knows who I am and why I have security following me around. She is also the only one that I’ve told about my secret hook ups with the hot guard.

Before I can answer her, Celia places her hands in my hips and sways against my body like we have done countless time before.

I let out a laugh as my friend grinds her frame against mine and for a few minutes we get lost in the music and in the fun we are having while dancing.

Eventually the music changes and we decided to go get some water to cool down. As our other friends continue to dance their ass off, we go to take a seat at the table that we were able to nab when we first got here and chug down the cold water waiting for us.

Icy, cold water never felt so good until you are in a room full of sweaty people, and you need to cool down.

I’m tempted to order my second drink of the night, but for right now, water will do.

“Why do you think that guy can’t stop staring at you?” Celia asks, after finishing up her second glass of water.

“James? He has to stare at me. It’s his literal job,” I answer, definitely feeling eyes on me but I’m not turning. I’m ending things with my security guard, there’s no need to continue adding fuel to the fire that’s in his pants. No matter how good the sex is, I mean was.

“Who said anything about James?” Celia exclaims, like I offended her. I might have by the way her face twists. “I was talking about the guy up in the balcony.”

“What guy?” I say, putting my glass down and looking over at the balcony overlooking most of the club and the dance floor.

“The one in the all-black suit, no tie and dirty blonde hair. The man has been staring at you since the second we started dancing.” Celia nods, toward the other side of the room and my eyes dance over to where her head is pointing.

It takes me a second, but I finally see the man that she is talking about, standing at the edge of the balcony, with one hand on the half wall and the other on a glass tumbler currently making its way up to his lips.

I’m half expecting for him to be looking down at the dance floor or even looking at someone as they are talking to him, but he isn’t. Instead, his eyes set in the direction of where me and Celia are sitting.

There’s no way that he is looking at me. There’s a handful of girls all around us, there is no way that he is looking at me. Hell, Celia has been at my side all night, he might be looking at her and the only reason she thinks it’s me is because of my title. My best friend is sexy as hell, nobody will pass her up to stare at me.

“He’s not staring at me,” I say, pouring myself another glass of water.

“Honey, who the fuck are you trying to fool? That man is looking at you like he either wants to eat you alive or fuck you until both of you burst into flames.”

Water travels up my nose at her comment.

“Jesus” I cough up the water and grab the nearest napkin that I can find to clean up myself.

It takes me a full minutes before I’m able to compose myself and when I do, I turn back to face Celia.

“He’s not looking at me like that. He’s probably looking at you,” I throw out because again my friend is hot as fuck.

“Please. Other men’s eyes may be on me tonight, because c’mon, look at me,” she slides a hand down her body “but not

that man's. You should go introduce yourself to him.”

She bumps my shoulder and gives me a smirk in the process.

“And say what? ‘Hi, your hot and I know you are staring at me, want to dance? But before we dance you should know that I had my security guard’s fingers in my pussy not two others ago, so there’s no way I’m sleeping with you tonight?’”

Now it’s Celia spitting up her water. “Fuck,” she frantically grabs the napkins from my hand and starts cleaning herself up. “I mean, you can say the first part but if I were you, I would keep that last part to yourself. And what’s so wrong with sleeping with him tonight?”

“Did you not just hear me say that I had another man’s fingers in me a few hours ago? It would be whorish of me to sleep with another man after that. On top of that, the man is a stranger. I have never seen him in my life. I’m not sleeping with a stranger.” I shake my head just thinking about it.

I can’t help but to think what my Nona would say if she found out that I was with two different men in one night.

She would call me a whore, that’s what she would say.

“It would not be whorish. Taboo, sure, but not whorish, but why does it matter? You’re twenty-three, you’re allowed to live your life. Nobody should judge you about how many people you sleep with in a day. And don’t give me that James crap. You two aren’t together. You can sleep with whoever you want and that includes a stranger,” Celia, says, sounding proud with every single word that is coming out of her mouth.

“I technically can’t.”

“Why not? You’re fucking James.”

“Yeah, in secret and I’m ending it tonight.” I whisper yell. I look around making sure that nobody is within hearing distance before I say anything else. “I’m a princess, remember? I have to be with someone from high society.”

“So? Fuck your way through strangers before you have to settle with someone from high society. If you want my

opinion, end things with James like you have planned and fuck the sexy as sin stranger that is following your every move.”

“You make it sound so easy,” I say, letting my eyes move up to the balcony and catching a set of eyes on me.

The stranger's eyes.

It's too dark and he's too far away for me to see anything specifically, but I can tell that every single aspect of this man is intense.

“It is easy. You may be royalty, but you deserve to act your age once in a while and not worry about your title or image. Live a little, Stass. This is your time before the crown lands on your head. Take advantage of it.”

I take a second to think about what my friend is saying.

She's right. I can definitely live a little before my official duties start.

There's nothing wrong with me sounding time with people. It's not like I'm going to marry this stranger look at me. I can definitely have fun with him in some capacity and when I'm officially in my duties as The Princess of Beldoria, I will worry about being with someone of high society.

Do I hate that I might be hurting James in some way? Sure, but he'll understand, besides, I know for a fact that he has seen other women outside of me. Why should it be any different if I do it?

I'm going to listen to Celia's words and go for it.

And by the way I'm standing up from my seat that means that I'm doing it now.

“Where are you going?” Celia asks as if she just didn't encourage me to go fuck a stranger.

“To go introduce myself to the guy. He's already stared at me all night according to you. Why not repay him with a little conversation?” I tell her, adjusting my dress in the process. And by adjusting, I mean hiking it up.

“Get it girl!”

As I walk away from the table, I can't help but to wonder if I should have grab that second drink to give me some confidence.

Too late now.

Now I just have to be the confident princess that I am and hope that I don't embarrass myself with what I'm about to do.

# CHAPTER 4

I STAND AT THE EDGE OF THE BALCONY AND WATCH HER AS SHE gets up from her seat and starts walking away from her friend.

My eyes stay on her as she walks across the dance floor by herself and heads toward the stairs that lead up to the VIP area of the club. If I didn't know any better, I would say that she is coming up to balcony because of me.

I actually do know better and have no doubt in my mind that she is coming up here because of me. Why wouldn't she? I've been watching her all damn night, either her or one of her friends was going to notice at some point. She was either going to come up to me and call me out for it or she was going to do the exact opposite. By the way her body is moving as she moves through the crowds of people, I know for a fact that it was the latter. More so since she hasn't gone up to one of the ten security guards that she has watching her every move from the shadows.

Just as I have been since I left the meeting with her father earlier in the day. The only difference between them and me is that they have her best interest at heart. I do not. Well, I should say nine out of her ten security guards have her best interest at heart. The fucker that is currently staring at her ass as she makes her way up the stairs to the VIP area does not.

He could be just watching her as she moves through the club, I try to rationalize with myself, but I know that man just as well as I know the princess and I know for a fact that he is not keeping an eye out just in case she disappears.

“Is there a reason you look like you are about to murder someone in my club?” A voice says from behind me and instantly a smirk forms on my face.

I turn to look at the man that may be just as derange and blood thirsty as me, if not more. Dante Rosetti. The head of the Rosetti Mafia that has the nickname The Devil for a fucking reason.

Dante is to Chicago what I am to New York City. One of its rulers. Rumor has it, Chicago is run by two individuals, the king, and the devil. The King, who actually helps the city where it needs it, and the devil who oversees the majority of the darkness that the city sees.

The difference between Chicago and New York, that instead of two individuals over seeing what goes on within city limits, New York has five. Five major crime families control New York City and the five boroughs that it's composed of. My family has control over Manhattan, and I don't dare step foot in one of the four sections of the city unless I absolutely have to. Something that my father didn't give two shits about and drove the other four bosses fucking insane. Running a city with other individuals is all about respect and Lev has none of it.

I've heard a few stories here and there about men trying to overthrow Dante but not a single one has succeeded.

I take a sip from my tumbler before I respond. “Not murder. Just admiring the view.”

My eyes stay on the princess as she is making her way over to where I am.

Dante follows my line of vision and shakes his head at me. He knows who she is. Of course, he does. The Princess and her friends have made coming to Cattivvo, Dante's second club that he opened here in New York City earlier this year, their stomping grounds. They come here and dance the night away a few times a month. Some that both me and Dante are very much aware of.

It doesn't matter if the young woman uses a different last name than that given to her at birth, the people that know the ins and outs of the city and how it works, will know your every move.

"That view looks a little too much of a high risk to interact with." Dante lets out, turning back to look at me.

"I could say the same thing about you getting together with your children's nanny," I say to him, giving him a smirk.

my relationship with Dante is not a close one. There will never be a time where you will find either of us reaching out to the other without there being a reason behind it. No grabbing a drink, no phone calls, nothing. Not unless it is warranted. But given that we do and who we are, we have a bond that not a whole lot of people would understand. Which is why I am able to throw jabs at him about being with his nanny in a romantic capacity.

Given the look in his face, his relationship is definitely more than just a fling like I thought it was.

"First, I would keep any mention of my romantic life away from your mouth. You don't want to see what happens when you say the wrong things in regard to her. Secondly, there are certain individuals in this world who you shouldn't be messing with, and that girl is one of them. Especially given the family that she comes from."

I can't help but smirk.

Dante is right. The princess and her family are definitely people I should stay away from, and if I was younger, I would have listened to him and thought twice about stepping into this agreement, but I'm not a young kid anymore and I know what the fuck I want. And I want to watch the King of Beldoria burn to the fucking ground as I take everything his family has worked so hard to achieve. The fact that the man is willing to basically sell off his daughter to get rid of his own discrepancies just adds fuel to my fire.

"You may be right, but there is one thing that you aren't taking into account."

“Yeah, and what is that?”

“I’m not the one seeking her out. In this case, it’s the other way around and she is coming to me.” I would have sought her out eventually, I am marrying her after all, but the little vixen beat me to it.

Dante is about to say something, but he’s interrupted from even opening his mouth when my future wife comes to stand right next to him.

We both look over at her as if we weren’t expecting her to arrive any second.

I take in the woman in front of me and I can’t help but admire the beauty that she is.

My plan may be to burn her father and his kingdom to the ground, but that doesn’t mean that I’m not able to see the sexy beauty that my future bride is. If I wasn’t after her father’s power, I would have tried everything I could think of to make this woman mine in any way that I could. That was the plan anyway before this little arrangement landed on my lap.

“Hello,” I say, giving the woman a smile that she returns.

“Hello,” she answers, her smile growing a bit lustful. “I saw you from across the way and I thought that I would come and introduce myself.”

“Did you, now?” I let my eyes travel down the length of her body, playing at the role of a complete stranger and not someone that knows every single thing about her.

“Yes,” she gives me a nod and the way she starts to bite on her bottom lip has my cock thinking up a few other scenarios that involve her mouth. My eyes make their way back to hers and I give the woman that is going to be mine soon a smile at the same she does. “Hello, Mr. Rossetti.”

She knows who Dante is, interesting. It makes me wonder for a second if she knows who I am, but I quickly squash that thought because if she did, she wouldn’t have come up here.

Dante composes his facial features and give the princess a smile.

“Hello, Anastasia. Are you enjoying your night?” He asks, slightly looking over at me from the corner of his eye.

Anastasia gives me a look before turning to look at Dante again and giving him a smile. “I am. My friends and I are glad that you decided to open up a club here in Manhattan. We’ve heard great things about your Chicago one but unfortunately we have not been able to make our way over there without schooling.”

“Well, if there is a time you make it to Chicago, feel free to contact me and I will get you into Perversa.” Dante offers and instantly, I feel hands go into fist.

Perversa is the strip club that Dante owns in Chicago and it’s definitely not a place for a woman like Anastasia. And I don’t mean because she’s prime and proper and shit but because I don’t need fucking assholes to be ogling my future wife. This arrangement may be a contract between me and her father and I may have an ulterior motive in it, but that doesn’t negate the fact that she will be mine and mine alone. I’m going to stake my claim. Even if she doesn’t like it when she finds about our impending marriage.

“I will.” Anastasia answers him before giving me a quick look and turning back to Dante.

She wants him to go away.

It’s a good thing that I want that to.

Thank fuck that Rossetti gets the fucking hint.

Dante clears his throat. “I have to check on a few things. Still a few kinks that we have to straight out. Excuse me.” He man turns to leave but not before he gives me a knowing look. One that tells me that I should stay away from the princess.

Like hell I would.

She is the fucking key and I’m going to grip onto to it for as long as I can.

“Before you tell me how you know Dante, how about you tell me your name?” I ask, turning back to look at the princess

acting as if tonight is the first time I have ever seen here. If only she knew.

She smiles up me as if I'm about to make her night. "Anastasia," she says holding out her hand for me to shake.

I place my vodka on the small table closest to me and take her hand in mine and bring it up to my lips.

"It's nice to meet you, Anastasia." I place a kiss against her knuckles. "I'm Dimitri."

My eyes look up at hers to see if my name brings any recognition to them but all I see is the same fire that I saw earlier when I met her gaze.

"It's nice to meet you, Dimitri," she says while a small blush covers her cheeks.

That's what I want.

I want her to be affected by me. I want her to be comfortable around me, because how else would I be able to get what I want. I need her help; I need her to see me as something other than the monster that I am because if she doesn't all of this will go to shit, and I won't be able to get everything that I want. All the power that the Beldorian royal family has is going to mine, and I need this woman at my side to help me achieve it.

I could care two shits if she hates me later down the line. Right now, I need her to fall to her fucking knees for me and the only way to do that is to show her a version of me that I am not.

"That blush makes you look even more beautiful," I say to her, dropping her hand but not letting her go.

From the corner of my eye, I can see one of her security guards walking up the stairs to the VIP area in search of her. The princess may not know who I am, but I have a feeling that her guards might and if they see us together, they might ruin everything I'm working towards.

"Well, if you continue to look at me the way that you've been doing all night, followed by your sweet words, the blush

is going to be a constant while I'm around you," she says, her eyes shying away a bit from me.

"And that is a bad thing?" I ask, putting all my concentration on her and trying to ignore her guard that just stepped in my line of sight.

Anastasia shakes her head. "No, it's not," she answers and gives me a dazzling smile before she takes a look around. She must notice that one of her guards is a few feet away, looking for her because when she turns back to me the smile, she just gave me turns to one that is filled with nerves. "I'm not usually this forward, but would you like to go somewhere more private. I need a little break from all the people."

I want to smirk at her lie, but instead I give her a nod.

"Of course. I know somewhere we can go. Let me take you there."

# CHAPTER 5

THE SECOND THAT I SAW JAMES WALKING THROUGH THE VIP area of the club, looking for me, I panicked a little. I shouldn't have, since I know he was trying to make sure that I was safe but that didn't matter. I was trying to flirt with this hot stranger, and I didn't want him to ruin it by doing his job, so I did the first thing that I thought of. And that was asking Dimitri if he wanted to go somewhere private.

Surprisingly, he agreed, and now we are walking into a private room that looks like a room that a celebrity would rent out to keep away from the crowds. A room that I should be renting whenever I come here when I don't.

As Dmitri closes the door behind us, I pull out my phone really quick and shoot a text to Celia to distract James so he would stop looking for me, at least for a little bit. I'll keep my phone ready to dial his number, though, just in case Dimitri turns out to be a creep.

Is it bold to come to a private room with a strange man and not let my security know where I am? Yes, it is, but I'm doing what I've been wanting to do for a very long time and that is live. Celia was right when she said I should be acting my age, the crown isn't on my head just yet.

It wouldn't hurt to have a little fun.

But is the way to go? This man could be a predator for all that I know.

"You look nervous." Dimitri says, taking me out of my thought process.

I turn to look over to the man that has spent the majority of the night looking at me and I take him in since I this room is a lot more lit than out in the club.

He has dirty blonde hair that is a little too long for the current hair cut he is sporting, but it suits him. Pieces of hair are out of place, and they add to the mystery of him. My fingers are itching at the thought how it would feel to touch the strands that look silky smooth. The room is also illuminated enough for me to see his eyes, like really see them.

In the darkness out in the club, even up close when I first approached him, I wasn't able to see the icy gray ice that are currently surveying me. I wasn't able to see the brightness that shines through them.

There is also something else that shines through them, something that tells me that I should fear this man, that I should run out of this room and never look back. Something that actually sends a shiver down my body, but even with the heeding warning that my brain is giving me and my body, I don't even try to walk out of the room. No, I stay where I am and continue to look at the man in front of me as if he were a masterpiece come to life.

He asked a question. I was so damn captivated by him, I completely forgot what he had just asked me.

I give him a small smile. "I'm sorry, what did you ask?"

"I didn't," he says, giving me s dazzling smile in return, one that a like a little too much. That smile suits him.

"Oh, but you did say something," I say, my voice sounding shy even for me. I'm not shy, not even in the slightest, hell, I approached this man, not the other way other, so it's blowing my mind that I'm acting shy now.

What is this man letting out in his pheromones that it's affecting me like this? Whatever it might be, I can feel that effect deep in my blood stream.

"I did. I said that you looked nervous." Dimitri closes the distance between us slightly, coming to stand close enough to

me to be able to grab a strand of my hair and caress it with his fingertips. “Do I make you nervous, Anastasia?”

The way he says my name is feels like a sexual activity. Nobody should ever say my name like that again, expect for him.

“I wasn’t before we came into this room, but now I can’t help but to feel a small bit of nerves,” I answer him honestly.

“That didn’t answer my question,” he says pinning his icy grays right at me. “Do I make you nervous?” He asks again, his voice becoming all that softer.

I give him the truth once again. “No. You don’t make me nervous, but the situation does.” Instantly, he takes a step back, the strand of hair dropping from his hand.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable,” he says, sounding sincere.

“You didn’t,” I say, moving closer to him. “I’m just not used to being in a room in a public place that isn’t...” I stop.

Before I’m even able to think of something to say with my abrupt silence, Dimitri speaks.

“Isn’t swarming with security guards?” He adds on, finishing my sentence.

My eyes go wide right away, and my mouth goes dry.

If he knows about my security team, does he know who I am? It’s possible since I’m not some secret princess that the public doesn’t know about. I attend events where I’m conducting official events all the time, but the things that I do in Beldoria doesn’t usually make its way to the States. And because of that, a lot of American’s don’t even know that Beldoria has a royal family, let alone that a member of said royal family is living in New York trying to get her college degree.

“How do you know about that?” I ask, now my voice truly shying away.

“Don’t get scared, Anastasia,” he says again, this time with sincerity in his eyes as well in his voice and my body relaxes a

bit even though I know it shouldn't. "I'm an observant person, something that helps me do my job better, and I notice things that the normal person wouldn't. A bunch of men hiding in the shadows, not interacting with other club goers or even drinking is a sure-fire way to get noticed."

"And how did you conclude that they were here with me?" I ask, crossing my arms across my chest and finding a bit of my confidence. It doesn't go unnoticed how Dimitri's eyes travel to my chest the second that arms are crossed.

I'm not going to lie, I wore this dress because it was short and it hugged my body in all the right places, not because I wanted men to ogle me, but having Dimitri's eyes on me, almost in a caress, it feels good. Really good even if my nerves were running high a little bit ago.

"A few of them don't know how to be discrete. There were looking over at you and your friends every two to three minutes. At first. I thought that they were for sure they're for one of your friends but then I notice something that you did." Dimitri gives me a smile, and I don't know if I like this one better or the other one he gave me earlier. This one is sweet and looks like it's filled with kindness, the other one was as if his sexiness was just trying to ooze out.

I might need to see both one more time to be able to make my decision.

"What did I do?" I ask. I try to think but I can't think of a moment where I did something that would tell someone else in the club that I had a security team following my every move.

"You nodded to one of them."

"Nodded?" I honestly don't remember doing that.

"It was a small movement, one that you probably aren't even aware that you did, but you did it and I noticed and I'm not going to lie, it intrigued me." He finishes up the sentence with a smirk, and just like his smiles and his eyes, the smirk does something to me.

I really need to get a hold of myself when I'm close to this man that I just met.

“And why did a simple nod intrigue you?” I ask, popping my hip a bit in the process.

“Because it made me wonder why a beautiful girl like you needs that much security. That’s what I’ve been trying to figure out all night. Who was this woman that had ten men looking after her and why the fuck was my cock twitching at the sight of her hips moving to the music?”

My whole body burns at the last part of his statement.

I’ve been the recipient of some dirty talk before. I’ve had men tell me all the things that they wish they wanted to do to my body, but my body has never reacted to the words of those men in the same way that it’s reacting to Dimitri’s.

Why is this man different? Why is he making my body sing, without even touching me, in a way that nobody else has before. What makes this stranger different?

Is it the eyes?

The deepness of his voice?

The way he stands there, exuding all the confidence in the world?

It’s possibly a combination of all three and I would be lying to myself if I say that I didn’t want to feel more of everything he is giving me.

“You don’t mean that,” I say, my own confidence dropping a bit, but I still try to hold my ground somewhat.

“What?” He asks, coming closer to me, his body a whisper of a touch against my arms that are still across my chest. Again, a beautiful smirk on his lips. The sudden urge to kiss this man is a strong one and I want to go through with it so bad.

“That your...” I can’t even say the word. I just feel my face go red. This is what happens when you’ve been prim and proper all your life, you can’t do things like cock out loud.

“My cock was twitching at the sight of your sexy as hell body moving to the music?” He finishes, his smirk getting deeper.

I swallow. “Yes, that.”

Dimitri stays silent for about a minute, the whole time his eyes are on mine as if he were contemplating something. He is probably thinking why is wasting his time with me, if I can't even say the word cock out loud, who's to say I will even do anything in the bedroom.

Eventually he breaks the silence, his eyes still holding mine hostage. His body still close to mine and when he shifts to side his hands into the pockets of his slacks and his covered forearm grazes me, I let out a shiver.

“Why did you approach me, Anastasia?”

Out of all the questions I expected this man to ask me, that one is not one that I expected. It takes me a second to come up with an answer, and when I do it's not a good one.

“Because my friend said that I should,” I answer him, wanting to kick myself in the ass for giving a stupid response.

“Because your friend said that you should.” He repeats, his eyes telling me that my reasoning isn't convincing him.

I nod. “Yes.”

A hum sounds out of his mouth. “I don't believe you,” he says, reaching out and grabbing another strand of my hair between his fingers.

What would it feel like have his fingers deep in my strands and have them pull as hard as they possibly can?

“She did tell me to go and talk to you.” I argue, trying my best to convince him for no real reason. Why do I care if he believes me or not.

“I don't doubt that. What I don't believe is the fact that that is the only reason why you approached me.” He moves his fingers up until his hand is almost at the edge of my face, close to cupping my cheek. His hand isn't the only thing that has come closer to me, his body has too, ever so slightly.

The burning sensation is back and this time, I want to grasp it and never release it.

“Tell me the truth, Anastasia. Why did you approach me?” His words are barely a whisper as he leans his head ever so slightly so that his mouth is inches away from mine. His breath is a light whisper and his cologne is like a cloud and it all just causes my body to burn even more.

Once again, I decide to be truthful with him.

Giving lies only causes more issues that won't be able to be fixed later down the line.

“Because I was also intrigued by you and even though you were across the room and I couldn't fully see you, it was I could feel your gaze on every single inch of my body. Everything about you was intense, so when my friend told me that I should act my age and have a little fun, I wanted to listen. I wanted to listen with you. I wanted to see if you were just as intense up close and personal as you were standing on that balcony as if you owned every single inch of it.”

He stays quiet, but this time not for as long as before. This time his hand makes it past my ear, until he is gripping me just above my neck.

“And what do you think? Am I as intense as you thought I was?”

I don't hesitate to answer. “I would say so, but I don't have a clear picture just yet.”

“Then let's give it to you.”

# CHAPTER 6

“WHEN YOU SAID YOU WERE GOING TO GIVE ME A CLEAR picture if you were intense, I wasn’t expecting you to try to do that with ice cream,” Anastasia says right before bringing up the little spoon filled with ice cream up to her mouth.

Yeah, I wasn’t expecting it either.

When I guided Anastasia to the private room, I had somewhat a plan in mind as to how our first bout of privacy away from her security team was going to go.

I was going to be charming. I was going to fake being sweet and show her I was trustworthy. My plan went far beyond what I thought was going to happen in that room. If I’m going to be bringing down King Nicholas for everything that he is, I need his daughter on my side however way I was going to get. Lying my way through it seemed like the perfect method.

But the second that we were in the room alone, away from the loud music of the club and from prying eyes, it was as if something within Anastasia shifted or morphed into a completely different person. She was no longer the princess that could hold her own. No longer the vixen that was dancing provocatively with her friends. No longer the confident woman that found me staring at her and made her way over to me.

No, that woman was gone the second I closed the door. She tried to repair as we were talking and when I used my words to my advantage, but nonetheless, the woman that was

standing in front of me was different than the one that walked in with me.

I shouldn't have cared that she became a different woman when she stepped into the room. It shouldn't have bothered me that she wasn't holding her shoulders up high or that she was nervous and uncomfortable around me. I shouldn't have cared, and I shouldn't have been bothered, but I was.

So instead of faking my way through my interaction with her, I tried to be that person. I tried to be charming and come off as trustworthy. Someone and something that I'm not.

Apparently, I succeeded, though, because as soon as I suggested that we leave the club and go somewhere else, she didn't even hesitate to agree.

I didn't even have a plan as to where we were going to go, but she still agreed, so we left.

To avoid her security, I grab Anastasia's hand and pulled her along as I walked us over to the back entrance of the club. The entrance that Dante keeps locked at all times, but because my mind works in the same speed as his, I was able to open.

I knew that we had a few minutes before her team of goons that are supposed to be keeping an eye on her came looking for her, I hailed a cab and got us out of there as soon as possible.

Anastasia thought it was adorable and laughed, but what she doesn't know is that absolutely everything has an ulterior motive and dragging her out of there was more for my benefit than for her to see me in a certain type of light.

For some reason, I told the cab driver to take us to central park. I saw it as a good place to be able to dodge her security if they were to come looking for us, especially since my place is close by. Anastasia on the other hand saw it as me being romantic and trying to show her the charming guy that I'm definitely not. Because I am trying to get this woman to see me for everything that I am not, I went along with it.

And when we passed a small little ice cream truck that sets up in the park at all hours of the night, and she said she hasn't

had an ice cream cone in so long, I decided to buy her a damn ice cream to go with the whole charming thing that I'm trying to pull off.

Releasing that I haven't responded to her comment, I hike up the charm a bit more and give her a smirk.

"Don't you know that buying a woman ice cream is the most intense activity that a man can do?" I say, scooting my body slightly closer to her.

"Is that so? And why is that?" She asks, taking another spoonful of the chocolate cream in her mouth.

My eyes follow every single one of my moments and I have to keep myself in check because if I don't, I will grab that ice cream she has in her hand and throw it on the ground before I grab her and place her on my lap.

Inserting myself in this arranged marriage and in her life like this may be a ploy, but I cannot deny that I find my future bride attractive. Like I said before if circumstance were different, I would have made her mine a long time ago. Eventually, she will be mine, and possibly for a short time before she finds out about the marriage, she will be but the second that she finds out, she will hate me beyond measure. There is no doubt in my mind when it comes to that.

"Because watching her lick or suck on something that brings her enjoyment, paints a certain picture in the man's mind," I answer her question honestly. Might as well make this whole charade as truthful as possible.

A sweet blush coats her cheeks, and it gets even deeper, when I reach over and wipe a small spec of ice cream that didn't quite make it in her mouth.

I fucking love seeing her blush like this. It tells me that I have an effect on her, and that effect is either in line with how she affects me or possibly more.

The spec of ice cream coats my thumb and I bring it to my mouth to wipe it clean, here eye on my hand the whole time.

I let out a hum as the small bit of sweetness hits my tongue. I didn't get any ice cream, this was to make Anastasia

happy and so that she could find me trustworthy, but I'm deftly liking the flavor. It might be because I wiped it off her skin and not the actual ice cream.

Anastasia clears her throat and slimly turns her body towards mine, closing the distance between us ever so slimly.

My eyes can't help but to notice that the small piece of material that she calls a dress get hiked up in the process and I can't help but to wonder if she is a lace or satin type of woman.

"And does me licking off ice cream off a spoon, paint a certain type of picture in your head?" She asks, her voice having a slight breathless feel to it.

I move my eyes away from her legs and look up before giving her a smirk. All the while my hands lands on one her thighs and I give the skin soft caress with my thumb.

"It does," I answer, not moving my thumb any higher. I need her to trust me, not think that I'm only in this to fuck her and leave. I'm in this for the fucking long game and I need to learn to take my time with thins beauty. Slow and fucking steady and all that.

"What kind of picture?" She asks, her eyes looking down at my mouth.

"The kind of picture that would be inappropriate for me to share on the first night that we've met."

She lets out a small gasp and finally moves her eyes away from my lips and up to my eyes.

"You're not how I was expecting you to be," she voices, slowly reaching up and swiping a few strands of hair off my forehead.

"What were you expecting?" I ask, moving my body even closer to hers. If someone were to pass by right about now, they would see the two of us and probably see a couple enjoying their night and enthralled with each other. They would never guess that we just met tonight for the first time and that the woman that I'm with doesn't know a single eating

about it. They would see a woman enjoying her night, not the princess basically being sold off by her father.

Anastasia's hand stays on my face and slowly makes her down the muscles, her fingers almost feeling like a feather like movement.

"Can I be honest with you?" She says, her voice low and definitely filled with a lot more confidence than it was back in at the club.

"Absolutely." I should feel like an asshole for wanting her to trust me all the while I'm lying to her. I should but I don't.

"I know that Cattivvo has mafia ties, that was something that I was informed of when I first brought up the idea of going there to my team. So, when I saw you up there in the balcony, dressed in all black, with that intensity in your eyes and stance, combined the good looks, I half expected you to be part of those mafia ties." She lets out a little giggle at the end, and all I do is look at her as if I'm in fascination of her.

And that's not even a lie that I have to pretend to convey. I am fascinated by her. This woman saw me from across a busy club and figured out that I had ties to the mafia.

She's smarter than I thought and that can be both a good and bad thing in this situation.

"And did those expectations go away?" I say, not moving away from her or even taking my hand off her leg.

The princess bites down in her lower lip and the temptation to take her mouth with mine continues to get harder by the damn second.

After a few seconds of staring at me, she finally shakes her head. "No, they have not."

"Shame." I say, gently digging my fingers into her leg.

She doesn't say anything for about a minute, neither of us do, but eventually she breaks the silicon with a question. "I'm right, aren't I?" She whispers her question. The words are like a soft caress against my face. "That's why you put off this

intensity that is unmatched by anyone else. Because my line of thinking is true.”

I smirk at her, not giving the answer that is looking for. At least, not yet.

“I will answer that question, when you answer one of mine.” I say, figuring that I should show her that I want to get to know her when in reality, I already know everything about her.

“Anything,” she says, telling me that she is trusting me more the longer we spend time together.

You shouldn’t princess. You shouldn’t trust me one bit. I will destroy you.

“Why do you have a security team?” I ask, making her think that I’m still hung up on what I observed back at the club.

My question causes her to back up from me. Not a whole lot but still enough for there to be more space between our bodies and for her hand to fall from my face.

Anastasia looks at me for a long minute, contemplating if she should tell me who she really is or if she should lie.

This may be my first face to face interaction with her, but I already know that she isn’t a liar. She always gives the truth, or at least a version of it.

Eventually she lets out a sigh and gives me a small smile. A defeated smile.

“Have you heard of the country Beldoria?” She starts, giving me a look that says that she hopes I tell her no.

I play along. “I have, but I don’t know much about it besides that it’s between Spain and France.”

Most people would be worried about the composure of their face when they are telling a lie, I’m not. I’ve trained myself since I was a child to keep every emotion in check, to keep things neutral, to not let anything show on my face when I told a lie or when any other emotion came powering through. It’s something that helps keeps some individuals at arm’s length and others as close as possible.

The woman next to me lets out another sigh. “I’m from there. I’m actually a very important person there.”

“Really? How so?”

She gives me another look one that tells me that she is trying to figure out if I am being truthful in the aspect of not knowing who she is. She can continue to look at in that way, she will never get the answer.

“Well, I’m a member of its royal family. Well, not just a member,” she pauses for a few seconds before she finally speaks again. She’s probably taking the time to convince herself if telling me who is a wise idea. “I’m next in line to the Beldorian throne. My father is the King, and I am The Princess of Beldoria, future queen. That’s why I have so many men watching my every move. They are protecting the future of the crown.”

She sounds defeated. Like she doesn’t love being in this position but that she is doing it out of obligation. Whether if that obligation is to her father or to her country, I don’t know. But I’m sure that she doesn’t even see that she is not looking forward to ruling a country one day.

And here I thought that the princess was going to be a spoiled brat and become a fiery annoying pain in my ass.

“A princess?” I ask, continuing the charade of not knowing her.

She gives me a nod. “Very much so. I’m surprised that you didn’t know.”

Oh, I knew Princess. I knew.

“I stopped caring about anything that was going on in Europe it even Eastern Europe when I moved to the states a teenager. I visit, sure, but I’m not well versed in which country has a royal family or doesn’t.”

God, I fucking love when the lies just roll my tongue so damn beautifully.

“Well, if you need a lesson on the royal families of the world, feel free to use me. I know them all.”

“When the time comes where I want to learn more, I will let you know.” Now that right there was not a lie. Her knowing members of the other royal families may actually become beneficial to me to get what I want.

She gives me a smile, a beautiful smile at that but then it quickly disappears, and she rolls her lips into her mouth. “So, I answered your question. Are you going to answer mine?”

I could give her the truth. I could sit here and tell that I am in fact who she thinks that I am. That not only am I in the mafia, but that I’m the head of a whole damn family. I can tell her the truth from the very start, but if I tell her, it would just bring up a whole bunch of questions that she is not ready to hear the answers to.

So, yet another lie leaves my lips.

I give her a small smile. “As much as I appreciate you thinking that I part of the mafia, I am not. I’m a businessman. I owe a few hotels around Manhattan. Do I hang out in place that have Mafia ties? Sure, but being from a Russian background, I thought it would be best to not become part of that world. It would just cause more problems than I’m willing to deal with. Both my brother and I actually decided to stay out of that life.”

I didn’t have to mention Logan, but I want her to get the sense that I am a family man.

“So, if I ask you to kiss me,” she says moving closer to me once more. “I won’t be kissing a mafia man?”

I smirk at her. “No, you will not. But before you ask me to kiss you, I have one more question for you.”

“Oh? And what is this question?”

“Do you have a clearer picture yet?”

The smile she gives me is one that she should be giving to another man but fuck all other men. From this moment forward that smile is for me and me alone.

“I do,” she answers, her eyes closing just a bit so that she can look at me from under her long lashes.

“And what’s the verdict? Am I as intense as I thought I was?”

“Yes.”

“And is it a good or bad thing?” I ask, leaning forward, my mouth ghosting over hers ever so slightly and my hand digging into the skin of her exposed thigh.

“I’m seeing it as a good thing,” she says, her voice filling with lust at the anticipation of what’s about to happen.

“Good,” I say, before leaning forward and taking her mouth with mine.

She is sweet from the ice cream that she was just eating, but her sweetness goes deeper than what’s at the surface.

With just one kiss, I want to mark her. I want to fucking mark her so that everyone will know that she will be more, maybe not soon but eventually. I want to mark her so that nobody else would touch her.

That want, no, the fucking need, intensifies when I swipe at her tongue, and she lets out the sweetest moan that I have ever heard.

My hand travels up her thigh, and I’m almost to her hot apex when a sound rings out somewhere around us and pulls us out of the cloud that we are in.

Anastasia pulls away from almost in a frantic motion. “I’m sorry, I thought I had turned off my phone.”

She pulls her body away from mine and reaches into the small purse that she has with her and checks who is calling her. Given by the look on her face I’m going to take a wild guess and say that it’s her security team and I will give all the money I make this week and say it’s the asshole guard that was staring at her ass for half the night.

As I look up slightly over Anastasia’s head and can’t help but smirk. The asshole in question is about three hundred feet away, with his phone to his ear and not doubt an angry look on his face.

“Is that one of them?” I ask Anastasia, who quickly looks up and turns in the direction I’m nodding. Her shoulders instantly deflate.

“How did they find me? I turned off the location on my phone,” she says.

I don’t tell her that she might have her location off, but she has at least two other trackers on her person that she isn’t aware of. I only know this because if she were mine, she would. After the wedding I will switch out those trackers so that I have access to them.

“I guess our time together has been cut short,” she says, sounding sad about the thought.

I guess this woman very affected by me. I like that.

“It doesn’t have to,” I start, trying to figure out where I’m going with this but can’t figure it out myself.

“What do you mean?” She asks, her perfectly sculpted eyebrows bunching up a bit.

“Have you every ran away from your security team before?” I ask, a sadistic smile forming on my face. “Or have you always been the good little princess?”

Anastasia blushes, but this is blush is more out of embarrassment rather than from her being turned on. With that I know my answer. The princess has never stepped out of line.

She shakes her head. “No, I’ve never ran away from them.”

It’s time to change that.

I stand up from the bench and hold out my had to her. “Do you trust me?”

Say no, princess. Tell me that you don’t.

“Yes,” she says, a little too quickly she even surprises herself.

“Then let’s run.”

With no hesitation whatsoever, the princess puts her hand in mind, and we start to run.

Straight to my apartment.

This night has definitely taken a turn into the unexpected.

# CHAPTER 7

I DON'T KNOW WHAT CAME OVER ME, BUT THE SECOND THAT Dimitri asked me if I trusted him, I gave him a resounding yes. Because in that moment, and I completely trust him as he drags me along behind him as we run toward a high rise that is about a block from Central Park.

Running away from my security team is not something that I do. My sister? Sure, but never me. Dimitri called me the good little princess and he couldn't have been more right with the nickname. That's exactly who I am. I follow every single rule and order that is thrown my way. Sometimes I do question why I have to do certain things or why I have to act a certain way when my sister doesn't, but no matter how much I question it, I still do it.

Because that's what's expected of the heir to the throne. You have to follow rules, you have to be poised, and respectful, you have to me in line.

Sometimes I do wonder the kind of person that I would be if I wasn't the heir, if I wasn't the first born, but it's never good to wonder about things that you can't change.

Apparently, I'm into my mind thinking about being the good princess that I don't notice the curb that is coming, because I accidentally trip.

For a second, I'm falling but then I'm not. It takes me a bit to realize why I didn't fall to the concrete and it's because Dimitri pulled me up before I could.

When I'm standing up right on my feet, I give him a smile, but it quickly fades away, when I see the way that he is

looking at me.

Celia is right.

This man looks at me like he either wants to eat me or fuck me until both our bodies burn to the ground. And at the very moment, I'm willing to take both.

“Are you okay?” He asks, his voice deep and sultry and definitely making its way to my core.

I give him a nod. “Yes,” I say, unsure if I can find my voice to say anything else. Eventually, I clear my throat and smile up at him again. “When I got dressed earlier, I didn't think I would be running. If I had some idea, I wouldn't have worn heels.”

He lets out a chuckle and everything in me wants to hear him let out a full blown laugh. “The heels are hot as fuck on you, but let's take them off. I don't want you breaking a bone. I don't want to be responsible for hurting the princess of Beldoria.”

I let out a giggle, one that turns into a nervous laugh when Dimitri drops to his knees in front of me and starts taking off my shoes for me.

Where has this man been all of my life?

His finger gently slides down the length of my calf up to my thigh when he is done unbuckling the little clasp.

A shiver runs down my whole body at his movement and then the shiver turns into a gasp when he leans forward and slides his nose along the exposed skin of my legs. It's as if he is smelling me and trying to engrave my scent into his mind.

Once he has one heel off, he goes and takes off the other and does the same thing.

This man is barely touching me, his fingers are sweeping my legs in the softest feather like motions and his nose is barely gliding up my skin, but it doesn't matter, I'm turning into a puddle in front of this, because of this man, and all I want to do is for him to take me right here and satisfy this ache I'm feeling.

When Dimitri has both shoes off my feet, he looks up at me, still down on his knees and gives me a smirk.

“Do you like seeing me on my knees for you, princess?” He asks, gliding one of his knuckles abasing my leg once more.

I give him a nod, not sure if am able to speak and he lets out a chuckle.

“You should be used to having people at your knees. You are going to be queen after all,” he says touching my leg one more time before standing up to full height, with my shoes still in his hand, and taking my hand in his before we continue our walk away from my guards.

“People don’t see me in that light; besides, it will be a long time before people will bow down to me.”

“That’s a shame. I would bow down to you any day,” he says looking back and throwing me a wink. “I feel like been in my knees some more. How would you feel about that?”

I feel a blush creep up my face, and I know I don’t have to say a single word because Dimitri already has his answer, but I speak anyway.

“I would like that very much,” I say, my voice soft and low.

Dimitri stops in front of a building, and turns to face me, looking me straight in the eye with determination.

“I’m going to tell you this once. Never and I mean fucking never, be fucking shy with what you want. You want me on my fucking knees, yell it out. You want me to fuck you so hard with my cock that you won’t be able to walk tomorrow, scream it. You want me to spit in your mouth, fucking announce it. Don’t be fucking shy. Get what you want like the fucking queen that you are and are going to be. Do I make myself clear?”

No man has ever said something like that to me.

I may be royalty but when it comes to next, I always do what my partner wants. Sure, it brings me pleasure, but I’ve

never been very vocal about the things that I yearn for.

I give the man in front of me. Already feeling all my confidence come to the surface so that I can do what he is asking of me.

“Take me upstairs, so you can get on your knees for me.” I say, with all the conviction that I have.

“With fucking pleasure.” He grabs my hand and drags me through entrance of his building.

This man is absolutely full of surprises. Looking at him, I would say that he cares about money, but doesn't give two shits about flaunting it. This building he lives in definitely flaunts it.

The lobby itself is filled with opulence and everything is so grand, it makes me feel as if we were at the palace back home. The doorman is even dressed as such.

I don't even live in an apartment building this nice.

All of that is forgotten though the second that we are in the elevator and Dimitri pushes me against the wall, caging me in with his body. His hard and fucking delicious body.

“Tell me, princess. What else do you want me to do? Because I'm ready to rip this dress apart and have you right here in the elevator.” He presses his body even more into mine as his nose glide the side of my face. I let out hum at his good he feels against me.

“I just want to feel good” I say, arching my back a little bit so that he gets the idea, and he does, he lets out a chuckle and places a kiss against my neck.

All too soon though, he pulls away from me, but not too much because he raises his hand and caress my cheek with the back of his knuckle. His eyes are so icy, I can see the lust for me seeping through them.

He continued to run his knuckle against my face before he slowly moves it to my neck. I think that he is going to continue the caresses but instead he extends his hand and wraps it around the muscles. The move takes me by surprise

but the second he tightens his hand around my throat, a moan escapes my lips, showing him how much I like what he is doing.

The grip he has on my neck tighten a bit more and I feel my eyes close a bit at how good it feels.

“You like that, don’t you?” he muses, tightening his hand just a bit before opening it again. “You like a little pain. You like experiencing that high you get when someone else is in control of your body, don’t you princess?” He asks but he doesn’t let me answer with words, so when his hand tightens again, I let out a hum. “Don’t worry, I’ll make you feel so damn good that you’re going to want more but know now thing about tonight.”

He’s going to say that this only happens once. He’s going to say that after tonight, I will never see him again, I just know he is. Because men like him don’t spend more than one night with a woman like me.

“Tonight, I’m marking you as mine,” he states with so much conviction that not a single part of me doubts him. “No other fucker is going to touch you after tonight, I hope you are aware of that.”

I pat his hand so that I can speak and, he doesn’t even think about releasing the grip he has on my throat. “And here I thought that you were going to say that what we are about to do is only going to last for one night and not go any further.”

His eyes shift, like he is angry that I even thought about saying that we were not going to see each other after the night ends. Isn’t that what strangers do? Have one night of fun and then move on with their lives?

His hand tightens again. “Princess, only a few hours with you and I developed and addiction. No way in fucking hell am I going to let that addiction go and have some anther undeserving bastard get the high that is supposed to be mine.”

My body feels like it’s not only melting also about to burst into flame with all the lust that this man in currently making

me feel. The intensity is tried and true and I'm loving everything about it.

Dimitri leans forwards and take my mouth with his and from then until the elevator dings, we kiss like we were both starving for each other. And in way, that's truly how I feel. I feel absolutely starved for this man and everything that is about to come, I don't know if I'm able to contain myself.

We pull apart at the sound of the elevator doors opening and there is no hesitation getting out of the steel car and down the long hallway. When we reach the door that must lead to his apartment, Dimitri quickly puts in his passcode and scan his thumb and the door is open within seconds.

The lights turn on instantly, but I don't have any time to see the apartment, that I'm sure is gorgeous, because before I can even get my earrings right, my back lands against the main door and Dimitri lands back on his knees in front of me.

"What are you doing?" I ask, as he throws my shoes somewhere behind him and places his hands on the outsides of my exposed thigh.

"The princess wanted me on my knees, so it's time that I follow orders."

"Are you always a willing participant when it comes to following the orders that are given to you?" I say, almost in a pant because he is pushing my dress up and his fingers are digging into my skin. His mouth isn't even on me and I'm ready to explode for him.

"Only when those orders are given to me by you. Everyone one else can go fuck themselves. Now let me eat this pretty pussy that I've been dying to taste all fucking night," he says he grabs onto my small panties and rips the off my body.

I don't even get a chance to respond before his mouth lands on me and I'm seeing stars.

All the air leaves my body when his tongue slides from one end to me to the other and the way that he is gripping my thighs as me wanting to scream out at him to pull me even closer to him.

“Holy fuck,” I let out, my head throwing itself back and my eyes closing in the process, not being able to handle what this man’s mouth is doing to my body.

“The only thing that’s holy is this pussy,” Dimitri says against me, the words coating all of me in a warm breath that has me shivering. “So bare, so smooth and pink. Looks almost untouched. Are you untouched, princess?”

I shake my head even though he can’t see. “No.”

“Hmmm. I feel bad for all the fuckers that came before me, because they will never have you ever again.” His mouth lands back on my pussy but this time with a lot more force, a lot more need and want. Then he had his fingers and the stars that I was seeing earlier have turned into full on fireworks.

“Dimitri,” I start but then words fail me. What he is doing to me is becoming too much, I don’t know how much longer I could hold on.

“Tell me what you want, your royal highness. Tell me. Scream it. We made a deal, remember?” He takes my clit between his teeth, and it just takes me closer to the edge. “Fucking tell me.”

“I need to come. Fuck, make me come.”

“Gladly. Hold on to something, Anastasia, because you are about to crumble.” One of his hands lands against my pussy in a hard slap and all I’m able to do is let out a moan and hold on to something just like he told me to. That something? His hair.

I grip his silky strands as he his tongue, mouth and fingers attack my most sensitive area. I try to breathe through it, but the sensation of everything he is doing is becoming too much.

“Right. Oh my god, I’m right there.” I moan out, bringing his face closer to me and grinding against him.

“Come for me, Anastasia. Come for me so I can slide my cock into this pretty pussy again and make you come again and again.”

His words do it.

His words bring me over the edge, and I fall and continue to fall until I'm living in every single inch of greatness that his mouth brought to me.

I couldn't be more grateful at the fact that he took my shoes off earlier because he hadn't, I would be on the floor next to him with how my legs are shaking.

"Hmm," I start, letting go of my grip that I have on his hair. "That was." I say, but he quickly cuts me off.

"Just the start." He lifts me up and cradles me in his arms as he starts walking us through his apartment. I don't bother looking around, I just turn his face toward mine and press his lips against mine.

My tongue slides against his and I'm able to taste myself on him. That isn't something that I've done before, tasting myself. I didn't feel a certain type of way about it before tonight, it just has never happened. But now that I'm getting my taste off Dimitri's tongue, I wouldn't mind tasting it again. Especially if he is the one I'm getting the taste from.

I feel Dimitri shift a bit as he opens a door, meaning that we're possibly entering his room, and a few seconds later, we pull apart and I'm being deposited onto the bed.

My eyes, go straight to him and watch every single one of his movements.

We don't say anything, I just lay back on the bed where he deposited me, and he undress himself. I'm mesmerized by every single one of his movements and for a second, I can't believe that this is my life.

At this moment, I can give two shits about being a princess or the fact that I might have been with another man. No, in this moment all that I care about is Dimitri and all the dirty things that he is going to be doing to me in just a few seconds. All I can think about is Dimitri and his glorious body and the fact that he wants me, and he is about to mark me as his.

We literally just met, and this stranger is about to mark me as if I was his property, and that I'm complexity okay with that. I shouldn't. I should be running away, like I told myself

that I should have been doing earlier, but I want this. I want him to mark me. I want him to make me his.

I don't know how long this thing between us is going to go, but I'm going to hold on to it for as long as I can.

My mouth starts to water when Dimitri slides his dress shirt off and then it waters even more when he starts taking off his slacks. When he is just in black boxer briefs, my pussy starts to tingle once again with anticipation.

“Like what you see, Princess?” He asks, lowering his brief and showing me the most pro minute part of him.

Big, veiny, and hard just for me.

I bit down on my lip and give him a nod.

“Good, now strip. My need to fuck you is becoming uncontrollable.”

I do as he tells me and get on my knees to take every inch of material still on my body. I do it as slowly and as sensual as possible to torture him, and by the look he is giving me he is very much appreciating it.

Once the last scrap of material is off my body, he looks at me as if he is taking every single inch of me in and engraving it in his mind.

“Such a pretty girl. Are you ready to be defiled by a man like me?”

I can't nod fast enough because my words are failing me at the moment.

“Good. Now turn around and get on your knees. I need your ass in my hands as I mark you as mine.”

And mark me as his he does.



I don't want to go. I don't want to leave this small cocoon that me and Dimitri and possibly loose the electricity that flowed between us right before we fell asleep. I want to bask in every

single feeling he made me feel until the end of time. Unfortunately, life doesn't work in that way. But if I didn't have to go and meet my father for brunch, I would be staying and repeating everything that we did only a few short hours ago, all day and possibly all week.

Without any care, I climb out of the bed, away from a sleeping Dimitri and start getting dress.

It takes me all of five minutes to get situated and as much as I don't want to leave, I shoot out a text to James, ignoring every text and call that he has sent, and tell him to pick me up and my location.

That's definitely going to be a fun conversation.

I contemplate waking up Dimitri and telling him that I have to go, but I think twice on it and don't. Instead, I find a piece a paper and write him a note and leaving him my number.

There is a high chance that he won't call or that I will never see him again, but that is a chance that I'm willing to make.

With one last look at the sleeping body, I walk out the apartment with a smile on my face and feeling content. No man has never made me feel this way, and I hope I will get to feel this again.

Because for one night, I wasn't just a princess, I was also Anastasia.

# CHAPTER 8

DIMITRI

MY BODY LETS OUT A GROAN AS LIGHT STARTS TO INFILTRATE the cloud of sleep that I am. It's too early for it to be so fucking bright. I could probably shoot the person that left the blinds open last night, in the head, but since there is a ninety nine percent chance that it was me, that threat is comical.

I turn over in the bed and reach over for the warm body that should be right next to me, but my reach come back empty.

That's causes for my eyes to fully open, the brightness of this Sunday morning be damned.

The bed is only occupied by me. The sensual vixen of the princess is long gone, the note on the pillow she used last night telling me as such.

I really need to get my brain fucking checked. I fucked my future bride. I'm using her to get what I want, there is no reason for me to be fucking disappointed that she wasn't here when I woke up. Yet my mind is turning in that direction, more so when I read the letter she left behind.

*To Dimitri,*

*Thank you for last night. Believe me when I say that my body will remember every single second of it. I would have stayed until you*

*woke up, but I have to go meet up with my father for a late breakfast. Please don't let this be the last time that I see you. Here is my number, I really hope you use it.*

*Anastasia <3*

*Please don't let this be the last time that I see you.*

I can't help but to smirk at that small sentence. If only she knew that last night will definitely not be the last time that we see each other, not by a damn long shot.

And if she is meeting her father today, she might find out that small bit of news a lot sooner than later.

I wonder how much she will hate me when she finds out that we are getting married. Or when she sees that I'm not the loving and caring man that I was last night.

I can see her anger in her amber eyes already, and just picturing her mad has me going hard as rock.

Fuck, now that I've thought about her eyes, I can't help but to think about that mouth of hers too and how it wrapped so damn perfectly around my cock, it was as if her mouth was made for me.

It may not happen soon, but damn, I want her mouth back on me and I want mine back on her.

There is no doubt in my mind that the princess is going to be the death of me, either because she will hate me so much that she will actually kill me or because one we get married, I'm going to have blue balls every single time I'm around her and the only way to get rid of them will be to chop off my dick.

Thinking about Anastasia, it could be an all-day event, and as much as I want to jerk off to thoughts of my bride taking me in her mouth or sliding my cock in her pussy, I have shit to

do. So, I throw the light blue sheet off my body and grab my phone. The first thing that I should do is answer the message from my right-hand man telling me that he has a lead on the drug dealer that owes us money but instead I decide to enter my future's wife number in my contacts.

As soon as that is done, I decide that it's best to send her a quick message. I'm an asshole through and through, but she doesn't know that yet. And until she does, I have to keep up this persona of being charming and trustworthy.

I'm going to betray that trust sooner than later, but in the meantime, I'm going to along with the game. When I finally get what I want, not a single person from the royal family, is going to know what hit them.

The second that the message says delivered, I throw my phone on the bed and start getting ready for my day.

Pretty soon, I will be concentrating on creating a high society persona. In the meantime, though, I'm going to concentrate on being who I currently am. The Bratva boss that needs to take care of the drug dealers that are trying to ruin my portion of the city.

My princess will hate me, and when that time comes, I will be one step closer to gaining all the fucking power I can get my hands on.

In the meantime, there is a body that needs to be burned.

# CHAPTER 9

I WALK INTO THE HOTEL THAT MY FATHER SAID TO MEET HIM at, the one where all the celebrities and who's who in the world stay at when they are in the city. One that I've step foot in countless of times, and still feel in awe of whenever I see it. I may be walking thought a hotel but it's without a doubt an architectural dream. Everything about it is absolutely perfect.

If I wasn't in the city for school and already had and apartment that I absolutely loved, I would stay here. It's one of my favorite buildings that the city has to offer.

Walking through the lobby and heading to the elevators, I'm slightly aware of the eyes turning in my direction as I walk. The majority of the time when I'm going somewhere, people aren't looking at me, they are looking at the group of men that are either walking behind me or at my side.

A lot of people seem to have a thing for men in business casual clothing, more so if they have a translucent wire hanging down from their air, so they stare occasionally, but today the stares feel different. Like the eyes are staring right through me or something.

Once I get into the elevator, James following behind me just before the doors close, I can't help but to check my body to see if there is anything wrong with my clothes or if I have toilet paper attached to my heel, but I don't see anything.

"What are you doing?" James asks, his tone filled with unspoken questions as I survey every inch of my body.

"Do I have something on me?" I ask, looking up at him and finding one of his eyebrows raised up.

“No,” he answers, looking down at my body relative quickly before looking back up to my face. “Should you?”

I shake my head. “No, it just felt like everyone was staring at me while we walked through the lobby.”

“Maybe they were looking at you and wondering how they can look as sexy as you do,” he says in almost a whisper as he looks over at the numbers of the elevator going up as if he will miss out stop at the top floor.

Before last night, I would be blushing right about now at James’ words. Not only would I be blushing, but I would also be giggling like a schoolgirl. We may have only been hooking up and not in a relationship but there was definitely a handful of times where I was affected by the words that came out of his mouth. This morning, though, absolutely nothing.

I didn’t think that one singular night with Dimitri would affect me like this, especially is quickly but from the look of things it has.

Interesting.

Even if I don’t have butterflies flying in my stomach from James’ words, I still respond to his comment. “Nobody was looking at me in that way. There are sexy women int this world, and I’m certainly do not one of them. If anything, I would want to look like them.

James lets out a scoff as he continues to look at the numbers climb higher and higher. A scoff that tells me that he doesn’t agree with my statement.

Instead of arguing his sentiment, I decide to ignore his reaction to my comment and turn the conversation to something else. Last night and how I basically ran from my security team. Might as well make use of what seems to be a never-ending elevator ride. Surely this building doesn’t have this many floors.

“Look, about last night.” I start off before quickly pausing to figure out what to say. “I want to apologize for what I did. I shouldn’t have left the club, much less dodge your call and text message. You and everyone else on the team are there to

protect me and to make sure that nothing happens to me, and last night I went against every single one of the rules that the team has set for me, and I'm sorry. I will be sure to take all the blame when my father is informed about my," I can't say sexual indiscretions with a stranger, "not approved activities."

My apology sounds so damn formal.

I shouldn't be apologizing for having a little fun, but I did put my safety at risk. I might have felt safe with Dimitri, but my security detail didn't know that. For all they knew, I was kidnapped or something and I was right at death's door. Leaving with Dimitri last night might have also cost a few jobs if my father finds out the extent of it, and as much as I don't want to forget about my night, I will if it means someone is going to lose their income and way to feed their family.

James's doesn't say anything, he just continues to watch the number but even if he's not looking at me straight on, I can tell from his profile that his face has shifted to one of anger.

"Did he at least fuck you good?" He asks, the second that the door opens. Of course, this is when the elevator ride decided to end.

The second his words register, I get angry.

I don't give a shit if he's been my security guard for years. I don't care that for the last year and a half he has landed in my bed. He has no fucking right to ask me that.

"I know that you are probably pissed at me about last night," I say through my teeth as I start making my way out of the elevator, "But that question is out of fucking line. You have no right to ask me something like that."

"I would say that I do," he says under his breath as he follows me off the metal cart.

"Why? Because up until last night you were the only man that I seek out when I needed pleasure? We aren't and have never been together exclusively. If I remember correctly, I walked in on you while you had some woman on her knees during a charity event. An event where you were supposed to be working, I might add. So don't come at me saying that you

have right, because you never gave me that courtesy and I am not giving it to you.” I didn’t realize that I had stopped walking and that I started to shove my finger into his chest out of anger. I take a second to compose myself. “And for the record, anything that has happened between us, is done. I’ll seek out pleaser elsewhere.”

I start walking again and like the good security guard that James is, he quickly follows, but not quietly.

“Where? With the asshole that had you breaking protocol last night?” He whisper-yells at me.

I don’t look back at him, I just continue walking over to the rooftop restaurant where I know my father is waiting for me for brunch. “So, what if I do? I don’t answer to you.”

“No, but you do answer to your father,” he states right before we walk into the restaurant.

If he wants to call anyone an asshole, he should look in the mirror. Was he always such a prick and I’m just noticing or is this a new development because he didn’t like seeing me with someone else.

I slowly turn to face my disgruntled security guard.

“My father has nothing to do with this. I’m not a working royal, I’m not representative of the family yet, so he doesn’t get a say in who I sleep with or don’t. That decision is mine and mine alone. If he had a say, you and I wouldn’t have happened. The only reason we kept our indiscretions quiet was because of our damn work relationship. So, get off your high horse and fuck off.”

I don’t even wait for him to say anything, I just yank the restaurant door open and walk in as if I wasn’t fuming and could feel smoke coming out of ears. There are very few people in the restaurant, mostly my father’s guards and a few other patrons. They don’t see the fury running through me, they only see the princess that is happy to meet up with her father.

James stays by the door as I’m guided through the tables by the hostess to where my father already is.

There is no surprise whatsoever when he guides me to one of the private rooms that the rooftop restaurant has to offer. The man doesn't like being watched why he eats and well, he is a king after all, he deserves privacy. Even if he isn't in his home country.

"Father," I say when I enter the room and give him a curtsy, before going over to where he sits and place a kiss on his cheek. "To what do I owe this pleasure?" I ask, giving him a smile.

"I was in the city doing some business and I thought that I would treat my eldest daughter to a meal," he tells me, standing up from his seat and giving me a kiss on the cheek.

"Well, it's a surprise that is much appreciated. Thank you."

We both take our seats and start filling our plates with the food that has already been laid out for us.

"How is school? Are you ready to graduate in a few months?" My father asks a few minutes after.

I give him a nod. "School is going great and yes; I am ready to graduate. There is something thing actually in that regard that I wanted to speak to you about."

"Oh, and what is that?" He asks, curiously, not looking up from the piece of fruit that he is cutting.

"I know that we had agreed that I would return to Beldoria, at least return to the same continent, after graduation, but I was wondering if it was possible for me to push that back. At the very least for a year. I'm not allowed to do anything official until a year before my twenty-fourth birthday. I can stay in the States until then and build up my charity work."

This is something that I've been wanting to ask my father for a while now, I've even made plans as to what I would do with that time. I just had to get the permission to do it.

It doesn't go unnoticed that my father looks up at me immediately. He takes a whole two minutes to study me, as if he is trying to figure out why I'm asking what I am.

After much awkwardness, my father puts his cutlery down and wipes his mouth and looks me straight on. “Unfortunately, you staying here in New York City after graduation is not a decision for me to make.”

Confusion quickly floods my mind. If it’s not his decision, that who’s is it? My father has always made these types of decisions. He has always been the person I would have to ask to do something, no matter how archaic it sounds, that’s what happens when you are a part of a royal family.

“Whose decision would it be?” I ask, curiously, half wondering if he going to say that it’s mine decision and my decision alone. If he does, it would be something new. Being the heir to the throne comes with a lot of rules, rules that my father has put in place to make sure I stay in line and act like that future queen that I will be. If he’s about to give me this liberty, it would be a big step for my father in more ways than I can count.

For a second, I’m giddy at the possibility but then that giddiness disappears when he finally answers my questions.

“Your husband’s.”

Hearing him say those two words causes all the blood in my b body to drain.

I open my mouth to speak but no words come out. At the same time, I feel tears pricing at the back of my eyes, threatening to come out.

Finally, after what feels like an eternity, I’m able to speak.

“W-What do you mean by my husband?” I ask, my words sound like a jumbled-up mess.

I have a theory what he means, but every fiber in my body doesn’t want it to be true.

“It means that I’ve arranged a marriage for you. One that will come together three months after your graduation. Once you are married, you can go to your husband and decide if you will be staying in New York City for the following two years.”

*Arranged a marriage.*

Out of all the things that my father is capable of doing, this is not something that I thought that he would ever do. An arranged marriage hasn't even been part of our family for more than half a century, and yet he arranged one for me.

All the oxygen leaves my body, all the blood that I hold is at my feet.

With this marriage, the crown officially owns me and there is no backing away.

In a few months, I will marry a stranger and my life will be over as I know it.

**To be continued...**

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jocelyne Soto is an independent author living in California. She loves reading romance and discovering new authors. She comes from a big Mexican family, and with it comes a love for all things family and food.

Jocelyne has a love for her mom's coffee and writing. In her free time, you can find her reading a romance novel on her kindle while writing heartwarming and chaotic romance stories in between.

Check out her website for ways to connect with Jocelyne!

[www.jocelynesoto.com](http://www.jocelynesoto.com)



# TRICKSTER

SIMRAN

## BLURB

Nothing is as it seems in the town of Hallow Creek. Everyone is hiding behind a mask.

Everyone has secrets.

Everyone has a sinister endgame.

Mine is the one no one saw coming.

Not even my monster *hellbent* on chasing me.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

THIS IS DARK ENEMIES TO LOVERS ROMANCE WITH MATURE situations and themes. The hero is over the top possessive and obsessive. The situations are included but not limited to stalking, knife play, dub-con/non-con and breath play. If any of these is a trigger for you, please skip the story.

# CHAPTER 1

I RAISE MY PALM TOWARD THE SKY TO WARD OFF THE sunlight.

Internet lied when it said the sun rarely shines in this hilly town.

A trickle of sweat glides down the length of my spine underneath my cami as I haul my second suitcase inside. The gravel path in my driveway causes the wheels of my suitcase to make an annoying and screeching noise. Irritating and loud enough to wake up the dead, let alone all my neighbours on the quiet street.

*If* only there were a lot of neighbours.

Apparently, my uncle and aunt's paranoia has reached a level that they would rather live in a buck town of nowhere. A two-story house on a deserted street, surrounded by tall trees and thick woods as though we're competing with those stupid families in a horror flick. The ones foolish enough to take residence in a home filled with ghosts.

God knows how many are hiding in ours.

Sighing, I take a pause and gaze around. Trying to search for a single living soul. To prove life exists in the godforsaken town called Hallow Springs. As I peer up ahead, a large gothic mansion sits looming behind an iron gateway. Even under the bright sunlight, it appears hauntingly and beautifully creepy.

An urge to drive up there rises within my chest but is shut down by the voice of my aunt calling for me from behind.

I twist and face her as she stretches up on her toes while her hands grip the railing of the porch. I'm not that far so I'm able to make out her squinty eyes and a scowl stretched across her lips as her stare drills into me.

"Move your ass, lazy bird, and help unpack the bags," she yells.

With a huff, I stand and march my way toward my new home. Aunt Mila rounds on her not-so-lazy ass and goes inside. Aunt Mila—my late mom's younger sister—and her husband, Tej, are quirky and slightly off beat. They're the exact opposite of my dead parents, who were sophisticated and prim all the time.

My past life—it feels like a faraway dream now. A bad one.

The childhood of a soul that no longer exists.

The memories too nightmarish and disturbing.

So, being around Aunt Mila and Uncle Tej is a refreshing breath of air. Despite their always on-the-move lifestyle and odd charms, they were determined and eager to welcome me into their arms.

My parents' untimely death is a topic we never breach. Too content in keeping it buried like most people do skeletons in their closet. But that's not all we've entombed.

Some secrets, after all, can never be kept hidden.

For their energy is too powerful, too contorted and too *vindictive* to stay suppressed.

Still, I'm forever grateful to them for stepping up when no one else would. Plus they're fun to be around.

"What the hell do you mean you forgot?" Aunt Mila screeches. "How am I supposed to cook dinner now?"

I look between the two with a confused expression while wiping the sweat off my brow.

"I asked you to put it in the truck." Uncle Tej replies.

"And I told you it was too heavy!"

“Then why the hell didn’t you ask one of the movers to put it in?” Uncle Tej retorts.

She crosses her arms while tapping her foot. “I asked you.”

“No, you didn’t,” he replies, mimicking her pose minus the foot tapping.

“Yes, I did.”

“You did not. I would’ve remembered it.”

“Like you remembered to put it in the truck.”

I chortle, making their heads snap toward me.

My aunt wags her finger at me and mutters, “Wipe that smile, lazy bird. Where were you when we were moving stuff?”

“Flirting with the young man,” answers Uncle Tej mischievously. “Instead of letting him do his job.”

My aunt arches her perfect eyebrow. Shrugging innocently, I reply, “I was just making small talk.”

“Oh, I bet you were.”

So, maybe I was flirting, but it was harmless. He was too irresistible to ignore, and I needed a distraction from saying goodbye to my home for the past one and a half years. Burying my parents has made me averse to any goodbyes.

“Clearly, I’m the only responsible adult in this house,” says aunt Mila with a mock glare toward us both, to which uncle Tej smiles adoringly. The man is smitten with her antics.

“We can order dinner from the nearby town,” he suggests.

“They don’t deliver here,” I reveal in annoyance. When they stare expectantly, I explain, “I found out when I was craving a smoothie.”

“Well, damn.”

“See, I told you moving to new town was a bad idea,” I huff.

Their expressions soften at my complaint. They’re aware of my reluctance to move and just how hard this transition has

been for me. I believe it stems from being passed around from one place to another my whole childhood. I might be the only eighteen-year-old teenager alive, who changed boarding schools every year.

Though I did find stability after moving in with these two.

Aunt Mila tucks a wayward curl behind my ear. Tilting my chin with her soft fingers, she says, “Change isn’t always so bad, my love. If you lock yourself in one place, you will never find the joys another might bring. The wonders and gifts it might be hiding. And I promise, you will never have to navigate the path without us. We’re not like your parents.”

“I don’t want to be a burden to you both,” I whisper my inner fear. “I don’t want to be a dark cloud that brings yet another storm to your doors.”

Uncle pulls me into his arms. I circle his waist and let his steady heartbeat calm me down. “You’re not *her*, Dovey.”

Another pair of arms wrap around me and squeeze, holding us in a tight circle. The familiar and comforting scent of Aunt Mila surrounds me as she assures me yet again. “And you never will be.”

*I hope so.*

The three of us remain locked in an embrace for some time before pulling apart. Their small smiles and the loving twinkle in their eyes soothe the uneasiness in my heart that never settles completely.

“So,” starts Aunt Mila, “do you want to drive and bring us dinner, lazy bird?”

The possibility of facing the sweltering heat outside makes me wince, and I hum.

“Or you can help me unpack.”

*Hell no.* “Keys please!”

## CHAPTER 2

THE TOWN ISN'T ANY BETTER WHEN I PARK THE CAR OUTSIDE the first family restaurant I see. It's lifeless, quiet and desolate. However, there's a small crowd roaming up and down the street.

Shutting the driver's side door as I step out of the cool confines of my uncle's car, I cross the deserted road. The pinging of my phone in my back pocket has me reaching for it. It's a text from Aunt Mila.

Aunt Mila: Did you reach safely?

I swear, the woman is always worrying about me. And it's not entirely unnecessary. Secretly, it brings warmth to my chest because my parents never cared enough about my whereabouts.

No, I'm having a date with my kidna—

I collide into a brick wall and the phone slips from my hand to the ground. Except what I smashed into isn't a wall, it's a person. Strong hands grip my shoulders, steadying me as my eyes travel up a thick muscular chest to a shadowed face.

Piercing brown eyes observe me with part amusement and part apology.

“Okay there, freckles?” he asks in a gravelly voice that sends a shiver down my spine.

“Really? Freckles, pretty boy?” I retort, arching one eyebrow.

“Pretty boy? Really?”

“Hey, you started it.”

He laughs and bends to pick my phone before sliding it back into my hand and teases, “Did no one teach you not to cross the road while texting?”

“They did,” I say, “but I wouldn’t be a worthy teenager if I didn’t ignore it and did my own thing.”

The smile he responds with has a tremble going down my spine.

I admire the way every move he makes has his muscles shifting enticingly. The dark material of the shirt fits like a glue to his firm chest and biceps. My hands itch to feel him twitching beneath my fingers.

*Is he like made of stone?* I wonder while trying not to drool. Even though his features are sharp and edgy with shiny jet-black hair, chiselled and smooth jawline, he has a friendly quality about him.

Fuck, he’s so damn attractive.

A tiny hope sparks that maybe there’s something worth staying for in this town. Aunt Mila’s earlier words play in my head. She might have been on to something.

As though he can read my dirty track of thoughts, his gaze heats. It causes my breath to hitch which doesn’t escape his notice. Our connection—*lust*—is instant.

“Well, thanks for almost bulldozing me.” I wave my hand holding my cell. “Along with my phone.”

I move to slide past him but his words halt me. “Let me show you around town.”

“Quite presumptuous of you, pretty boy,” I tease, twisting toward him once again. “What makes you think I don’t already know it?”

“The fact you’re new and only moved here today.”

“What gives away?”

“I know *everything* that happens in my town, freckles.”

Narrowing my gaze at the sly arrogance in his tone, I retort, “Is that right?”

“Yeah, but mostly the fact you don’t already know me,” he replies, then adds before lowering his silky voice slightly, “Or that I’m your new neighbour.”

The gothic mansion. It’s his.

“So, can I take you on a date?” he asks gently.

“Depends.”

“On?”

“For starters, I usually know the guy’s name before he asks me out.”

There’s that same twinkle in his expression that I’m slowly liking more and more. It shines even brighter as he introduces himself, “Brayden.”

“Well, Brayden, it was nice to meet you,” I say before sidestepping and saying over my shoulder, “But a girl’s gotta eat. Maybe I’ll see you around.”

“You haven’t told me your name.”

I turn and walk backward. “Since you seem a know-it-all, why don’t you find my name yourself?”

“If I do, you’re going on a date with me.”

The dominance in his voice tightens my core, and I give him a wink. “You have a day. If you don’t find out by then, you know my answer.”

His smirk says we both know the outcome.

He will learn my name.

And it's a date.

# CHAPTER 3

THE EVENING GOES BY UNEVENTFUL ONCE I RETURN WITH Chinese food and the three of us finish unpacking the remaining boxes. Tired from all the moving, my aunt and uncle call it an early night and settle in the downstairs bedroom. However, sleep eludes me.

Long forgotten memories make me toss and turn until it's a little past midnight. I tell myself it's only the jitters from being in a new town, new bed and everything. I stalk to my window to gaze at the moon.

Something about it always soothes me.

Despite the darkness, it still glows like a beacon of light. Fighting the dark that's trying to swallow it. I'm well familiar with the depths of blackness. The hollowness that sucks you in deeper.

Some days, I still feel I'm there.

The same little girl that saw the devastating news on television in her hostel that her parents have been bludgeoned to death in the safety of their homes. The media painted the incident as a burglary gone wrong. They were actually murdered in cold blood.

The details of which I'm still not privy to. Except my aunt and uncle.

Finding about their death in such a heartless and cruel way shattered the last of my innocence.

I'm still staring at the moon when I catch a movement below. A shadow traipsing into the woods behind our house.

My pulse skyrockets with nerves as I lean my head out, trying to catch a glimpse. It felt almost as though they were watching me.

Or maybe it's a figment of my imagination.

Always seems to happen whenever I'm reminiscing about the past.

The woods are intriguing to the explorer in me.

Like there's a world beyond I might find. The way characters do in fantasy movies.

During my boarding school, I would often sneak out of my bedroom alone and spend hours around the campus. It had a forest around it too.

Nostalgia hits and my feet carry me of my own accord to the stairs leading to the front gate of my home. I tiptoe carefully as I unlock the door and step out.

Cool air instantly hits my face.

Moonlight guides me as I cross the street. I peek at the mansion sitting at the end of the street, and my mind swirls with memories of Brayden.

The sexy name alone gives me butterflies.

"Brayden." His name rolls off my tongue easily, and I blush like a lunatic, even though he isn't here. There are still hours left before his time is up to my dare.

A light breeze caresses my arms while my hair spill into my eyes. I brush it to the side and walk deeper into the tall trees. They arch in a curve above my head, making the moonlight and stars play peek-a-boo.

Deeper under the thickness of the woods, the air becomes chilly but not in an uncomfortable way. It feels more like a home than my new bedroom. One would think, I'd be accustomed to moving and settling in a city but each time it only becomes harder. The only perk is I don't have to do it alone.

Fingers crossed; this one becomes perman—

I freeze when I hear the unmistakable sound of boots crunching on the fallen dry leaves. It's close and coming from my right. Suddenly, I recall the earlier incident. I wasn't imagining when I thought somebody entered the woods.

*Are they following me?* I gasp in horror at the possibility.

Breathing slowly, I avoid making any noise as much as I can considering it is dark and I can hardly see ahead of me due to the rising panic.

"Fuck," I hiss when a branch hits my right cheek.

The footsteps pause, and I still in my spot. My breath whooshes out of my lungs. Once. Twice. Thrice. I dare not move until they resume walking again. Skirting to my left, in the opposite direction, I stride faster.

A short distance away, a small clearing greets me, and I walk in that direction. Hoping it'll help me to get a clue which was the direction I wandered till here.

Jesus. Why the fuck couldn't I have stayed in my room?

I'm so consumed by my inner rant I neither see the fallen branch nor the hulking shadow appearing from the front. I trip and squeal as I land hard on my knees on the rough ground. The tiny stones and rough texture dig into my palms, scratching the skin.

"Fucking hel—" My curse trails into the mist when I raise my gaze and collide with... *Brayden*. "Oh, thank God... It's you."

The instant relief I feel is unsurmountable. But then, my eyes travel lower and I notice him holding what looks like a carcass of a small animal. The blood dripping to the earth. Fear skitters across my limbs because that's not all. His other hand has a butcher knife clutched tightly.

*Did he k-kill that animal?*

"Brayden," I murmur, slowly rising to my feet.

He doesn't say a word. His head tilts slightly, and I can sense his sharp, hunter-like eyes narrowing into slits. Broad chest rises with every steady inhale and exhale. None of the

earlier flirtiness and warmth wafts from him. It's as though I'm gazing into a different guy.

I take a step back.

He takes one closer.

When I retreat again, he swirls the knife in the air before catching it smoothly. My breath hitches, his senses sharpen as he caresses me head to toe from his deep and unnerving stare.

Just my luck I crossed paths with a psychopath. One would imagine I'd be a hound to determine them after everything. Yet here I am.

Except this time, I don't stay like a deer caught in headlights.

I run.

# CHAPTER 4

HE CHASES ME.

His hulking footsteps closes the distance every time I get a lead. I feel like a small and helpless prey being chased by a monster. Very much like the dead pet in his hands.

Little Red Riding Hood being hunted by the Big Bad Wolf.

A wolf that hid in sheep's clothing.

Probably would've hid longer had I not caught him red-handed tonight.

Branches slap and cut across my face every now and then. My knees pump from the adrenaline coursing through my veins. I don't know where I'm running, whether to the safety of the streets or not. All I know is I need to seek a safe haven and hide until morning light brightens the forest.

I skid to a halt when a sudden eerie silence descends.

*Did I lose him?*

I'm panting harshly while bending over when his shadow appears.

"Noo—Ahh," I scream when his arm circles my waist from behind, swiftly picking me up in the air. I might as well be a fly to him against his brute strength.

His hot breath teases my earlobe, right before he whispers, "Caught you, *little dove*."

"Let. Me. Go!!!" I yell, digging my nails into his steel arms and kicking my legs to no avail. "I swear to God, Brayden, if you hurt me..."

“You can’t do a damn thing.”

That damn arrogance is unmistakable even though he’s still whispering in a raspy voice. Ignoring the warning in my head I shouldn’t poke him, I taunt, “You don’t know me.”

“You’re right.” He hums with sly amusement. “I should rectify that.”

The next second, I’m twisted and pushed against a tree. My back to his front. His sinew chest like a band against my skin. I struggle harder, but he easily manhandles me, manoeuvring and locking my arms so tight I can’t move.

“The more you fight, the harder my cock gets.”

His unashamed threat sends a trickle of terror down my spine.

My measly struggle dies down.

Yet the unthinkable happens as though my mind and body are two entities. While the former recognises the danger, the latter pulses in wicked desire. His dirty words—underlying threat—couldn’t arouse me. Right?

It’s like he has unlocked my depraved fantasies.

Dominance thrills me, yes. The one women secretly dream of when they’re lying alone in their bed at night and seeking pleasure with their own fingers. But not this kind. It must be some syndrome I’m suffering from.

“Heed my warning, Brayden,” I growl, putting force in my tone. “Let me fucking go. You touch a hair on my body, I’m going to put you behind bars.”

Fisting my hair, he yanks my head. “Oh, I plan to touch more than your hair, little dove.”

“So, you did find out my name.”

“Did you doubt me?” I feel his smirk against my cheek. “I told you this is my town. If only you had said yes to my date, I wouldn’t have to resort to chasing you. Or is this what you were secretly wishing for?”

“Fuck you.”

“Like I said. I plan to, little dove.”

“What happened to *freckles*?”

He smiles while his lips trail to my ear. “Little dove has a pretty ring to it. Delicate. Soft. Breakable.”

“You’ll never break me.” *You can’t break what’s already broken.*

At my challenge, one of his hands holds my wrists captive while the other inches and wraps around my throat, curling on the sides with a strength and lethality of a snake. His fingers are wet, and my eyes widen because I know it’s that animal’s blood.

*What an unhinged psychopath.*

“Did you kill that animal?”

“Yes.”

“Are you going to kill... me?”

“I might,” he murmurs. “Unless you beg me for mercy like a good girl.”

“All because I didn’t eagerly fall at your feet to be your date?”

For such a cold man, his body is giving immense heat while his masculine scent envelopes my senses like a powerful drug. I’m waiting for his reply with bated breath when his hand drops from my throat. I almost jump out of my skin when something cold and pointy presses against my inner thigh just where my shirt ends.

His butcher knife.

“No,” he whispers, trailing it upward. “All because you made the mistake of following me into the woods. Don’t you know all kinds of monsters hide in them? I happen to be the worst of them all.”

“You won’t get away with this, Brayden.”

“Oh, but I already have.” He chuckles.

“You’re a fucking psycho.” I insult, being stupidly brave instead of keeping my mouth shut. Something about him is just riling me up, when I usually have better control over my emotions.

I can’t wrap my head around the fact that I read him all wrong. And why the hell do I attract only psychos and bullies?

It’s unfathomable.

My train of thought is cut short when he presses the blunt edge of the knife against my pussy. Right between my folds. Boldly. Wickedly. Savagely. I gasp, and it makes his cock twitch against my ass. Huge. Hard. Pulsing.

Again, that same twisted sensation crawls over my body.

I must be worse than him if I’m remotely aroused by his threatening aura.

“Stop.”

“Shh...” he whispers while tearing sound of my cotton shorts fills the night like an ominous siren. When I whimper, he tsks cruelly, “I’m a psycho, remember? Your fear and cries only feed the beast inside me.”

My shorts fall in a heap to my feet, and I whisper, “Why are you doing this?”

“Because I can.”

“HELP!” I scream as a last attempt. Praying against hope there’s someone passing by who can hear my pleading. “HELP! HE—”

Brayden laughs. A full-belly laugh. Maniac.

“No, no, please continue,” he teases jokingly. “Let it all out. There are only two houses on our street. Yours is too far, and well, mine... No is coming to save you, little dove.”

Catching him off guard, I push against him with renewed strength and dislodge his grip. The second I’m free, I pull his hand holding the weapon, twist and insert in into his thigh. Then for good measure, I knee him in the balls until he grunts.

*Bet his ass didn’t see that coming.*

While he's distracted and wincing from the pain, I run. I don't care which direction I'm going as long as it's far away from the monster. The air caresses my bare legs. My lungs cave from lack of oxygen but I don't dare slow down.

A few distance away, I see the clearing that leads to my house. I'm almost there when I go barrelling down as a heavy weight lands on my back.

I'm roughly twisted onto my back. A hand circles my throat and squeezes. Dark eyes glare down at me. Pissed. Cruel. Burning with satisfaction.

"Never run from a monster, my sacrificial dove," he murmurs, bending close to my parted lips. "They always give chase."

I try to remove his hand, but he pins both my wrists down above my head. His fingers cut off my oxygen, making it harder to breath. It's when my eyes almost roll back in my head that he allows me mercy.

I choke and sputter, gulping air into my lungs.

All the while, his lengthening cock throbs right against my core. I become painfully aware of my half naked state. My shirt has inched up to under my breasts, baring my lower half to his lascivious gaze.

Vulnerable.

Tempting.

Indecent.

Yet my deceiving heart finds his features sinful. Broody. Hypnotic. It's only a smokescreen to the hideous monster lurking below. Despite it all, it doesn't diminish my morbid attraction to him.

It feels even more darker. Deeper. Uncontainable.

But then, reality washes over me. Frightening thoughts convulse in my head. I'm no match against his bulky and hard physique. Physically, I can't fight him if he wishes to rape or kill me. My only strength is mentally or... through begging.

“Brayden... Pl-please let me go.”

“No. Not until I’ve had a taste.”

My gaze widens when he lets my throat go, reaches behind him before hovering the earlier knife inches above my face. Ever so slowly, he lowers it to my right cheek, trailing it over the slope of my neck until it presses against my pounding pulse.

“Life is so fragile, isn’t it?” he whispers. “Just one perfect slice and I could watch it slip away right from your pretty, innocent eyes.”

I shut my eyelids when he nicks my neck. The sting intensified by my fright. I feel him gather the dripping blood from the wound onto the knife. Then like a sick fuck, he paints it on my lips.

“Taste yourself.”

I don’t.

“Do it and I won’t kill you.”

I ache to fight. But when my family’s faces flash in my mind, I lick my lips and taste it.

“Good little dove,” he rasps.

A tear leaks from the corner of my eyes.

“Don’t tell me I’ve already broken you,” he cruelly taunts. “I haven’t even begun yet.”

Those words push me over the edge of common sense, and my gaze snaps open. I growl through gritted teeth, “I’ll make you pay for this, Brayden. It’s a promise.”

“*If* you manage to live long enough.”

His tone makes me pause and another feeling flickers in my brain. I search his face shrouded in darkness and I’m hit with the force of my gut feeling.

He doesn’t want to kill me.

Not really.

And that's enough for me. I can survive with a few more scars.

"You're stalling, Brayden," I taunt his knife's trajectory stills. "Those are not the signs of someone who wants to kill. My fear and cries excite you. A dead body doesn't give that. So, get over with what you've really planned and let. Me. Go."

*Snap.*

My flimsy panty is torn. Shred to pieces.

He rips it off like a savage. My shocked scream echoes in the wilderness.

I'm exposed from below.

As if that's not enough humiliation, he unbuttons my shirt until my breasts are caressed by cool air. I'm even more ashamed when my nipples peak at the rough dominance. My traitorous body sings under his barbarity, dancing to his tunes.

However, his intentions are still boggling me.

No one is that cruel to hurt someone without a significant reason. A purpose. I must be missing something.

Embarrassment has me squeezing my eyes shut and biting my lip, still lingering with the essence of my blood.

"I will not kill you, little dove. Not tonight," he murmurs softly, like I'm a mesmerising creature. I suck in a sharp breath when he rubs the wooden handle of the knife over my pussy folds. So leisurely and with gentleness of a lover. "But I will hear your cries as I make you come."

Situating himself between my legs, he spreads me wide open with his thighs until he can stare at every inch of my pussy. Every untouched corner. His height lets him keep me captive while he lowers his head and blows on my clit.

I buck, back bowing at the tingling sensation while he continues stroking the knife up and down my wet slit. Fucking hell, I'm drenched and leaking cream the more tortuously slow he does. For god's sake, he's pleasuring me with a knife. A knife!

It's unsettling.

Wrong.

Disturbing.

“Look at your soaked cunt, displayed wide open and begging for a monster's touch,” he taunts shamelessly, his strokes becoming rougher and picking up speed. “Tell me... are you a virgin, little dove? Has another man been inside this pussy?”

“F-fuck you, you prick,” I curse but it comes out breathless.

He chuckles. “Never mind. I'll find out for myself.”

He presses the handle against my entrance and thrusts inside. My helpless body resists even though I'm embarrassingly wet, but I'm too tight. The bastard's satisfaction washes over my skin because it proves my innocence.

That I'm a virgin.

“Your virginity is going to be mine, Dove,” he vows. An animalistic claiming to his words. “It's only fair I do the same to you since you made me bleed.”

His cruelty knows no bounds.

A familiar ache builds deep in my core. He notices it too because he doubles the pressure and relentlessly thrusts the wooden handle in my pussy. Again and again.

“Oh God,” I whimper. It feels nothing like my fingers when I play with my pussy or my vibrator. This sensation is entirely of another realm.

“Look at me.”

“No.”

“Look.” *Thrust.* “At.” *Thrust.* “Me.” *Thrust.*

His threatening tone has my will submitting, and I whip my gaze to his. They're hooded and breathing fire. Our eyes locked, he slows his fucking and gentles the strokes. And then,

there's only wicked pleasure. Dark desires. Tormenting tingles.

I wish his face wasn't obscure so I could memorize that monsters hide beneath the most sinful and rugged face. That they're magnetic and hypnotic enough to render you helpless to resist their power.

"You're going to come just like this. Laid beneath me like a sacrifice, trapped and powerless to do anything but take whatever I give you. This time, it's my knife. Next, it will be my tongue, my fingers and then... my cock."

Dirty, wet squelchy noises my pussy makes every time he thrusts fills the air. His penetration is shallow and short.

No. he wants to break it with his cock.

Make me bleed like a deranged psychopath.

His hungry eyes lower to my nipples, and when he runs his tongue over his bottom lip, I involuntarily squeeze around the object.

"Brayd—"

His name from my mouth finishes on his tongue because his lips smash against mine before I can blink. The shock renders me speechless. His kiss is reverent and seductive. Soft and tender. A paradox to his assault on my pussy.

At first, I fight and don't kiss him back.

Because he's a devilish monster, he coaxes it out of me by sucking, licking and biting my lips. His tongue is greedy as it tastes every corner of my mouth. Swallowing my whimpers and moans.

"Don't fight it. Don't fight me," he rasps, tugging my lower lip between his teeth. "Give me your cum, my little dove. Drench my knife so it smells like you."

A deeper thrust and he holds it deep while thumbing my clit in rough circles. His expert fingers wreak havoc on my senses, my mind. Forcing and demanding. Relentless in its pursuit for my submission.

Yet I keep resisting. Fighting.

His lips curve against my cheek and trail to my ear before whispering, “Trying to be a good girl? Good girls don’t ride a foreign object like a pretty whore.”

I glare at his taunt, which only amuses him.

Kissing down my throat, his tongue leaves a wet trail before circling my hard nipples. I’m lost in the soft feeling, and suddenly, there’s pain.

“Ahhh....”

He bit my nipple. Instead of letting it pop, he sucks harder. Bruising me. Marking me as his prey.

“Come before I wreck your virgin cunt with my cock.”

I lose the battle on a silent scream as my orgasm barrels down. Goosebumps spread over my skin while my hips rise to seek the forbidden and raw ecstasy. Wave after wave of intense pleasure swallow my senses.

The woods. The aggression. The howls. All of it prolong my climax.

Especially him.

*My monster.*

His body heat disappears while aftershocks rock my vulnerable and used body. Through blurry eyes, I see him looming over me. His hands clench on his sides.

He reaches over his shoulders and yanks his black t-shirt off him. Panic swells that he’s changed his mind and is about to fuck—no, rape—me, but he doesn’t take rest of his clothes.

Instead, he bends, pulls me upright, and puts his shirt on me.

The gentlemanly act dichotomy to everything that transpired tonight.

“You were wrong. I’m not a psycho, little dove,” he grunts harshly. Gripping my chin, he tilts my head back and bares his villainous soul. “I’m your worst nightmare.”

“Bray—”

“Run away before I truly break you.”

# CHAPTER 5

“DOVE, THERE’S SOMEONE HERE FOR YOU.”

I wake with a start when Aunt Mila shouts from below. I have no idea when I dozed off after returning home last night. Somehow, I had found my way back. The morning light was rising on the horizon when I hid under the covers of my bed.

Too beaten, tired and raw to take off Brayden’s shirt. I should’ve ripped his shirt off and burned it. Instead, I slept surrounded in his scent.

I swear I’m suffering from a foreign syndrome.

If I close my eyes, I can almost relive it again. The utter terror of him chasing me, throwing me down ruthlessly. My clothes being torn. His hands. Touching, caressing and coaxing wicked pleasure.

And I came. Hard. Intoxicating. Unbound.

Like my pussy was his to command. Like my body had a mind of its own.

My berating is cut short when there’s sound of stomping footsteps from below.

“Dovey,” she yells again.

“Coming,” I answer, but my voice comes out hoarse. So, I yell louder, “Coming.”

Who could be visiting me? Only one person comes to mind. Brayden. He wouldn’t have the nerve to show up, would he? Fuck, who am I kidding? He absolutely would, being the arrogant monster he is.

If he believes I'll not scream bloody murder and expose him, he's got another thing coming. I yank the blanket off me and march downstairs. I'm certain I look like a mess. Who fucking cares?

When I reach the landing, I hear Aunt Mila humming in the kitchen. While she's distracted, I stalk toward the front door. Better to get rid of him before she sees him and gets the wrong idea.

Swinging open the door, I look straight into the eyes of my monster. I'm prepared to rip into him until I see his expression. Instead of the darkness, a flirty and vivacious warmth greets me.

Brown eyes.

Chiseled features.

Strong build.

But it feels wrong. For a second, I wonder if it was a bad dream, but the scent still lingering reminds me I am not. Is he pretending as if he didn't just call me a whore, fucked me with his knife until I came over his hand?

Then kissed me.

"Dove," he calls.

I can only stare. I'm disoriented. Boggled. Maybe he's suffering from a mental illness. He wouldn't be looking at me the way he is if he wasn't.

Like he's delighted to see me. As if he's won a prize. However, when I don't answer, it switches to slight concern. He steps closer, and I flinch.

He freezes and asks in a tone used with a wounded animal, "Are you okay, freckles? It's me, Brayden."

"Ho-how can you not remember?"

"What?"

When I take a shaky breath, his eyes drop to my—*his shirt*—and his brows furrow. My hackles rise even more when his features harden, and he demands, "Is that shirt yours?"

“No. I-It’s yours, Brayden,” I stutter. “Y-you gave it to me last night.”

The horror that flashes across his face renders me stunned, and he staggers back a step. Frantic eyes connect with mine, and in a flash, he pulls me against his body.

“What did I do to you?”

“You’re scaring me,” I mumble. “Do you really not remember?”

“Tell me... Did I hurt you?”

The genuine regret and anxiety on his rugged face has me comforting him. “Nothing I couldn’t handle. But will you please explain how you don’t have the memory?”

“Because it wasn’t me.”

It’s my turn to freeze. He pushes me away and paces back and forth on my porch. He curses under his breath while stabbing his fingers through his already messy hair.

“What do you mean?” I gasp, pulling myself out of the stupor.

“I didn’t hurt you nor did I give you this shirt.”

“Are you calling me a liar, then? A lunatic?”

“No.”

“Then stop talking in fucking riddles.” I throw up my hands in frustration. Yes, it was dark but I vividly remember seeing him as he stood across from me. He even acknowledged me. Knew my name. Mentioned our date.

“It was Bastian.”

The fuck. “Who?”

“My twin.”

My jaw drops, my heart stills, and I blink as I process the words. Brayden has a twin brother. An evil twin, apparently. Like a puzzle, everything slides into place.

Bastian didn’t just fuck with my body.

He fucked with my head.

I relive the night all over again with a new clarity. A twisted tale I couldn't have predicted. He wanted me to believe it was Brayden assaulting and tormenting me. The little things I didn't notice last night are now flashing like neon red flags.

Him whispering so I didn't recognize the difference in their voices.

The blank ignorance whenever I called him Brayden.

*Kissing* me so I didn't repeat his name while in the throes of passion.

I was a prey for him to toy with for his amusement. But the lengths he reached and the lines he crossed tell me there was more. He had to have a reason for wanting me to hate his own brother.

Brayden's shadow falls over me when he inches closer and tilts my face. An apology etches across his soft brown eyes. His thumb traces my bottom lip and the same spark flickers between us that I felt with him the other day.

"I'm sorry he hurt you, freckles," he murmurs. "I promise it will be the last time."

"He's your brother."

"I love him, but he took it too far. I told him about you," he confesses raggedly. "And he broke my trust by sabotaging something good that could've happened between us."

"I don't understand his intentions. Does he hate you?"

"Bastian is wired differently, freckles." He sighs. "He does whatever he wants, uncaring of the consequences."

"I can't believe I didn't recognize it wasn't you."

"It's not your fault. He's good at pretending."

"Has he done it to other girls in the past?"

While talking, both of us have plastered against each other. His arm circles my waist while my palms rest on his chest.

“No, just you.”

“How magnanimous of him,” I snap sarcastically, making Brayden smile awkwardly. I realise he genuinely likes me. I still do, too, despite the unfortunate incident.

“You have to believe me I will never hurt you, Dove,” he says seriously. “And I understand if you don’t ever wish to see me again. If it’s hard to look at me.”

“No.” Hope sparks in his eyes and he waits for me to speak. “I want our date, Brayden. You may have the same face as Bastian but the way you make me feel is entirely different. I feel safe with you. I feel your warmth and want to see where this leads us.”

“You’re still attracted to me?”

“Yes, I am, pretty boy.”

The tension dissipates from his shoulders. When his head dips, I let him kiss me. Because no matter what, I’m not letting that monster—*Bastian*—win.

Expect, my traitorous body doesn’t hum the way it did for him.

And I hate myself for it.

# CHAPTER 6

## BASTIAN

I LEAN MY SHOULDER AGAINST THE TREE TRUNK ACROSS Dove's house while she and Brayden stand face-to-face. My lips curve on one side the moment horror flashes across my little dove's pretty face. When reality sinks in that there's two of us.

A part of me is disappointed and angry that she didn't react the way I wanted her to. That I was robbed of more opportunities to toy with my prey. The other half of me loves the challenge. It pleases the predator inside me that she knows who I am.

My dove is smart. A good judge of character.

It doesn't help my brother has no malice in his bones, unlike me. We might share the same DNA, a mirrored image of each other, but that's where our similarities end.

We're as different as day and night.

I focus on the couple a second before Brayden bends and presses his lips against hers. My hand tightens around the knife until the sharp edge slices into my palm. The cut barely registers or calms the rage inside me.

Bringing the knife to my nose, I breathe in her scent.

Still strong and delicious.

It still doesn't soothe the simmering lava inside my chest as Brayden's hands and lips touch what's mine. What I claimed with my teeth, tongue, and lips last night. I can still taste her blood as I sucked on her neck where I nicked the soft skin.

The only thing holding me back from hauling him off her is the fact she's still wearing my shirt. It means she slept in it, covered in my scent.

Dreaming of me.

Though she might call them nightmares.

Even from the distance, I can tell he's treating her delicately like a porcelain doll.

If only my brother knew it's not what my innocent dove craves. She doesn't want soft caresses; she wants greedy hands. Not teasing flicks, but rough bites. No seduction, but primal domination.

She wants to be broken, then put back together by wicked pleasure.

*Oh, how she fought in the woods.* The memory brings a smile to my lips. It had taken all my willpower not to pierce her cunt with my cock the second her eyes bared the truth.

Untouched.

Pure.

Sweet innocence waiting to be tarnished.

One might say my obsession and possessiveness for my dove is baseless. Brother's rivalry. Mere jealousy. But I saw her first.

Nobody sets foot in this town without my family knowing it. My great-great grandparents found this town with their two best friends. So, when I say I own this town, it's a fact.

It's built on lies. Secrets. Destruction.

To protect our legacy, my father ensures the new towners are vetted. Our enemies lie in every corner. I was surprised when he gave me the task to learn everything there was to know about the Draven couple and their niece.

*Initiation.*

That's what this responsibility is.

My father has been training me and my brother to take over our legacy now that we've graduated. While I'm meant to lead the ugly and corrupted side, Brayden shines in the light as the dutiful and moral son.

I knew the day the Dravens were arriving. I waited in the shadows until Dove and her family reached. My attention was stolen by Mila Draven and her husband, Tej Draven before I saw Dove. They seemed normal like an everyday couple but when I found Mila is sister to the late Sloane Winthorpe, my suspicions arose.

I was about to call Dad when my eyes landed on a slim pair of legs, stepping out of the car. Their pampered niece. The infamous daughter of the Winthorpes. The one they kept sequestered away from the toxicity of the media. How her uncle and aunt have kept her out of the limelight is impressive.

If the media got wind of her existence here, they will swarm this place like flies. Bring heat to our town that we can't afford.

I was plotting my next steps when Dove Winthorpe came into the view. The glaring sun made her blonde hair glimmer like jewels. I was close enough while staying hidden to make out her effervescent features.

Her hair framed her oval face with an aristocratic nose, sharp eyes under perfect eyebrows with full pink lips made to be wrapped around a cock. Her eyes—I couldn't guess the colour—were slanted enough without being cat-like. She was a stunning creature. I would hide—no, lock—her away in a tower too.

I was drawn to her.

Mesmerised by her beauty.

She had her mother's grace while her ruthless father's intelligence. A deadly combination.

Though, the way she held herself and the slight apprehension in her eyes captured my interest. While her aunt was busy pulling out bags and arguing with her husband, Dove

was scouting the area with such intensity, it shook me. As though she was waiting to be pounced on.

Waiting for some monster to snap and maim her.

My intention for her is purely selfish. She made me intrigued in merely a lingering breath.

A task no one has ever accomplished.

Yet this blip of a girl did. I had to have her.

It's been a while since I seduced and pretended to be a gentleman to win a girl. Because, something told me she wouldn't have given in easily. Letting her see the real me would've scared her away.

She thinks her uncle and aunt's gypsy souls is the reason they moved to this godforsaken and barren town. Something tells me it wasn't a coincidence they chose this house. This street.

My dove is clueless.

Like I said, pure and angelic innocence.

No one willingly moves to my town. Unless they have an end goal. Something isn't sitting right. I could've killed two birds with one stone. But then my brother told me he had asked her out. Naturally, I was pissed.

My first instinct was to kill him.

However, I loved him too much to go through with it. He is the other half of my soul. My blood. A bond only twins can share. I had to find another way to ruin what little they had. Because what I feel for her pales in comparison to what he does.

Last night, opportunity presented itself, and I took it.

She assumed I killed that stray puppy. Except, I was only going to bury him because someone had hit him on the road. I was watching Dove in her bedroom when I saw the dog seconds before he was hit and freed him of his pain.

I thought it'd be enough to keep Dove away from Brayden, if she believed it was him. Except, I didn't count on my little

dove not being a scared victim. She was ballsy instead. A forgiver. The fact she didn't cower until the moment she knew it wasn't Brayden heightens my sick attraction to her. Or maybe it's obsession. Possession.

Whatever the fuck you want to call it.

I'm willing to cross lines for her that Brayden never will.

He's incapable of doing a bad deed. It has become my responsibility to protect him from the depravity of our family.

Brayden thrives in the light, while I do in the dark.

If I were a good man, I would probably step back and let him have Dove. But after tasting her submission last night, it's impossible.

# CHAPTER 7

THE SUMMER PASSES BY IN A BLUR. I'VE SETTLED FAR BETTER to my new town than I had predicted. It has surprised my aunt and uncle as well. And I can tell, it has pleased them immensely and eased some of their tension.

I'm also officially dating Brayden. The caring, sweet, and flirty man who makes butterflies dance in my stomach.

We may have had a rocky start but we stood strong against the wave.

Everything is sublimely perfect. Well, as perfect as it can be with one tall, broody and mysterious being following me like a dark cloud. Or shall I say—a dark shadow.

*Bastian.*

He's everywhere around me.

Never in front of my sight but close enough I can sense his presence, his sharp and cunning gaze watching me. I'm yet to meet him in broad daylight. Look at him when he's not terrorizing girls in the woods. To gaze into those dark eyes when they're not plotting my death.

For some stupid reason, it's grating on my nerves. I'm torn and suspended in this constant agony of wanting to look him in the eye and staying the hell away.

Even out of sight, he's toying with my head.

Stalking and imprinting on my psyche.

It's the reason I'm always making excuses and avoiding going to Brayden's place. Instead, we hang at my house or the

nearby town all the time. His gothic mansion terrifies me. Creeps me with its huge iron gates, the surrounding forest, and gray architecture.

Mostly, it's the twin monster residing in those walls.

Almost waiting for me to arrive so he can torment and trap me yet again.

Brayden notices my deflection but understandably stays silent and doesn't force. He never *forces*. Unlike his brother.

Brayden gives me space. He doesn't purposely scare me. Listens to every word I say with breathtaking sincerity. He's the perfect next-door boyfriend every girl dreams of.

But when I'm lying alone in my bed late at night, it's not him who plagues my thoughts. My nightmares. It's not his hands I dream about wrecking me.

It's not his mouth I dream of kissing my lips.

Not his deep and rough voice commanding me to be his little dove.

When I wake up the next day with my nipples hard and panties drenched, I feel like an awful girlfriend. A bitch. A cheater.

This tortuous cycle needs to end.

And it will today. I'm going to be brave and do what I should've done the next day two months ago. Which is to face my monster. In his territory. Instead of hiding like a coward.

Hence this morning, I texted Brayden right after I woke up that I want to hang out at his place.

Pretty boy: You sure, freckles? As long as I'm with you, it doesn't matter where we are.

That's exactly why I want to. I'm not letting him come between us.

I feel like the biggest hypocrite. A liar as I reply to him. The way Bastian is constantly hovering in the back of my head is not small or insignificant. I'm hoping once I confront him, I will be reminded of the terror he put me through. When he forced his will on me. The orgasm was a slap in the face.

Pretty boy: Bastian might be home today.

Don't care.

Pretty boy: I won't let him near you.

I know. I can't wait to see you.

Pretty boy: I'll pick you up in an hour, freckles.

Putting aside my phone after reading our earlier chat, I stare up at the ceiling. He'll be here in an hour. Meanwhile, my mind runs rampant with nerves and something else swirling in my core.

Bastian fascinates me.

His mind intrigues mine.

It's a dangerous combination. To be enthralled by your bully. Though bully is too tame a word. Bullies are girls who push you down, steal your clothes or lock you in lockers. Not

sinful monsters who hunt you down in the woods and fuck you with a knife.

Who kill helpless animals and paint you in its blood.

However, the memory that haunts or fucks with my head the most is the aftermath. The gentle way he picked me up and dressed me in his shirt. The shirt I haven't been able to throw away or burn into ashes, as I promised to myself.

When I look back, I realise I wasn't as scared as I should've been. Despite kicking him and fighting back, I let him make me submit.

Probably because I've survived a harsher and cunning monster than him.

My heart knows evil.

Bastian wasn't even close.

# CHAPTER 8

BRAYDEN ARRIVES RIGHT ON TIME. LIKE A DUTIFUL boyfriend.

I don't understand why the guilt is sitting heavily on my chest today.

Is it because I'm secretly excited to catch a glimpse of his twin?

Am I that fucked up to crave the violent and unpredictable man, when I already have a perfectly man by my side. Before I can dwell further, I'm distracted by voices.

Brayden's boisterous laugh spills down the hallway as I reach the ending of the staircase. The man has charmed my uncle and aunt and has them wrapped around his fingers. My aunt couldn't stop gushing about him after I introduced him. She didn't let him leave without having dinner with us.

It's one of my favourite memories, filled with love and smiles.

Rounding the corner of the hallway, I see the three sitting around the island in the open kitchen. My aunt has a cup of tea in her hand while the men drink their coffee. Brayden senses my presence first and turns in his stool.

His eyes soften as soon as they land on mine. They melt into liquid heat as they unabashedly roam down the length of my halter summer dress. I shiver and give him a small smile.

The only time I'm not haunted by Bastian is when I'm with Brayden.

He demands all my attention. I'm hoping the Bastian Syndrome—*yes, I named it after the evil twin*—I'm suffering from, will be cured if I spend enough hours with my boyfriend.

The turbulent fascination I have with my monster needs to end.

*What if he doesn't allow it?*

"I should invite Brayden more often, if it'll get you to rise early," teases Aunt Mila with a smirk.

"Ha. Ha. Very funny."

When I'm close enough, Brayden reaches out and tugs me into his arms. Aunt Mila and Uncle Tej busy themselves to cleaning the counter give us semi-privacy. Brayden's lips press a soft peck on mine before whispering, "Missed you, freckles."

Fingering the ends of his hair, I whisper, "You wouldn't have to if you had just stayed the night."

Before he can reply, Aunt Mila clears her throat, and I roll my eyes. The woman is like a hound, I swear. Brayden chuckles and says, "I think you got your answer."

"You're just afraid of her."

"I need them on my side if you ever got mad and I had to grovel."

My heart skips a beat and those damn butterflies swarm again. This, right here, is what makes me happy, what I've always desired. The easy-going teasing and uncomplicated bliss. The same qualities I see and yearned for every time I saw my aunt and uncle.

Now that I have it, I'm not letting anyone ruin it.

It's really a mystery how two men, who look alike, can make me feel in two opposite ways. One is my safe place while the other is my tormentor. Pushing these confusing thoughts aside, I focus on my boyfriend.

Turning in Brayden's arms, I stand between his spread legs while facing my aunt and uncle. Aunt smiles adoringly when Brayden perches his head on my shoulder while squeezing me tight.

"So, where are you two love birds hanging out today?" questions Uncle Tej.

"I'm finally taking her to my place," answers Brayden. "Or the scary gothic mansion, as she loves to call it."

"I wouldn't be surprised if I found a dungeon or two in there."

"Scared I would lock you away all to myself?"

*Your brother might.* "Your poor kidnapping skills will prevent that."

"And how would you know that, freckles?"

"For one, you shouldn't reveal your devious intentions in front of the captive's family."

His response is to chuckle before saying, "Sounds like you're a pro kidnapper. I don't know if it's hot or scary."

We're so lost in our own banter it takes a couple of seconds to notice my aunt and uncle's pale faces.

Did something in our conversation trigger them?

Brayden senses the sudden tension as well and straightens behind me.

"Aunty Mila?" I whisper. "Uncle Tej."

It gets them out of their trance. Uncle recovers, flashing fast, while Aunt gives a shaky smile after a few seconds.

"What just happened there?" I ask sharply.

"Was it something we said?" says Brayden but in a calming tone.

"Oh shush, it was nothing, you two," she says, waving her hand. "Ignore it. Guess we're not as used to the dark humour as we thought."

She is a terrible liar. Still, I let it pass because whatever it is, she will not discuss around Brayden. I file it away for later.

“You kids go have fun,” Uncle encourages. “You be back before dinner, Dovey.”

Nodding even though I’m shook by the weird encounter, I leave the house holding Brayden’s hand. He squeezes it comfortingly, sensing my tension and slight concern.

It has been only two months since we began dating, but he reads me like no other. He has this innate quality of recognizing my moods. There are so many things we still don’t know about each other. We’ve been content in keeping it casual.

Every day, we learn something new about each other that brings us closer.

I know Brayden’s ancestors are the ones who found this town. His parents are wealthy with investments in various business and are always traveling. He is twenty-two and has graduated recently from overseas. Soon, he will join his father’s real estate business.

And quiet shockingly, is close to his twin, Bastian.

“Hey,” Brayden murmurs, yanking me from my musings.

I tilt my head to gaze at him. “Hi.”

“We really don’t have to go to my house if you don’t want, Dove.”

Sighing, I grab his face and kiss him. “Take to me your home, Brayden. I wanna know more about you.”

Stopping me from leaning back, he picks me up and pushes my back against the wall beside the entrance. Resting his forehead on mine until our breaths mingle, he confesses, “I really like you, freckles, from the moment I saw you and right before you crashed into me. Actually, I might have let you run into me on purpose just to have you pressed against my skin.”

“I really like you too,” I murmur. “So, trust me, I was more than happy you let me collide into you. Even though, I’m kinda hurt that it turned out to be a fake cute meet-up.”

“We can pretend it was.”

“Okay, pretty boy.”

Dropping me after kissing me once more, he announces, “Let’s get you to my bedroom. So I can finally make out with you the way I’m jacking off to every night.”

“You could’ve just snuck into my bedroom through the window.” Winking, I confess in a seductive voice, “I keep my window open.”

“You little tease.”

# CHAPTER 9

MY LITTLE DOVE IS HERE.

In my territory.

It's not some silly connection that made me sense she's close. I have someone keeping an eye on her when I can't. The second they reported she's on the way here with Brayden, I drove straight home.

The opportunity to toy with her was just too tempting.

If she thinks being with Brayden will protect her from me, then she's highly mistaken. I've been biding my time for this very moment. Torturing myself while watching as she spent every waking hour with Brayden. Laughing, flirting, kissing. They've been inseparable and glued like two peas in a pod.

Even the bastard can't keep his hands to himself.

The sole reason he's still alive is because he's too important.

But my generosity has limitations. I'm hanging on by a thin thread. An instinct tells me it will snap today. Having my prey so close enough to touch, I won't be able to control my urges. Won't be able to resist from punishing her for every touch and kiss she granted Brayden.

I'm a little pissed too that she so easily created a wedge between me and him. When he returned after confronting her the day in the woods and met me, he didn't utter a word. All I saw was his fist flying toward my face. Even though I could've easily dodged it, I didn't.

I had intentionally tried to sabotage his little crush on the new girl in town.

“Stay away from her, Bas,” he’d warned through gritted teeth. “She’s mine.”

So, instead of claiming her, I stepped back. Temporarily.

Meanwhile, I spent the summer learning all there is to know about her family, her past and how a multibillionaire heiress like her came to live in this small town. The Winthorpes’ untimely death.

Or how she is so content playing house with her relatives when she could be anywhere in the world. The mystery is eating away at me. Witnessing the power hungry, obnoxious, rich and toxic people in my world all my life, I know when something is amiss.

There’s something deeply volcanic that the Dravens are hiding.

I’m determined to discover before it erupts.

Focusing on the screen of my laptop in my bedroom, I pay attention to the cute couple lounging on the bed. I’m riveted by the sight of constant flush on her cheeks, that sneaky smile on her lips as she gazes adoringly up at Brayden.

Jealous is a faraway emotion.

Because the adoration holds no light to the way I make her feel.

They arrived half an hour ago and went straight to his bedroom. While my room is two doors down from where I’m surveying them. It’s a breach of his privacy.

But what’s even privacy between brothers?

He didn’t even give her the tour of the house as though afraid they’ll run into me. He’s kept her distant from me because of the incident. However, I wonder just how much she told him about what happened in the woods.

She didn’t give him the full truth because otherwise, he wouldn’t have stopped with one punch. I sit up straight when I

hear Brayden speak through the microphone. I secretly installed them while he was away.

“Were you close with your parents?”

“I wished I was, but no, I wasn’t. All I remember is moving from one boarding school to another. It’s saddening how little memories I have of them.”

“So, in a way, we’re similar,” murmurs Brayden. “My parents are hardly ever home too. Their business takes all their time.”

“Is that why you’re joining the family business? To be close to them?” my dove asks.

“It is.”

“It also explains why you’re close to your evil twin.”

My lips lift in a smirk as she mentions me. An adorable glare darkens her eyes. Still, there’s no missing how her nipples harden beneath her thin dress, even through the camera.

*Evil twin.* You haven’t seen anything yet, my feisty dove.

“Are you ever going to tell me what he did to you?” my brother asks after a beat.

I wait and lean forward so I don’t miss what she says. Or the emotions with which she says it. But she disappoints me when she utters, “Why? So you can punch him again? Not that it isn’t tempting.”

*Fucking brat.*

“I just want to make sure he never does it again.”

Pushing him down until she’s straddling his waist, she replies, “I’m not coming between two brothers, Brayden. Besides, he hasn’t attempted to come close to me again. Your punch might have just worked.”

*You spoke too soon, little dove.*

Her tone suggests she’s become comfortable that I won’t touch her again. That one silly punch is enough to make me

stay away. It's time I refresh her memory.

Monsters never stop chasing.

They bide their time.

# CHAPTER 10

## BASTIAN

ONE SNIP AND THE ELECTRICITY GOES OUT IN MY HOME.

Darkness descends in the basement, and a heady rush of thrill courses in my veins. I don't need torch as I walk toward the flight of stairs to take me to my wing of the house. I pause and wait outside my bedroom.

A second later, Brayden steps out of his.

He goes down the opposite end of the hallway to fix the broken electricity.

While unaware that I'm back home early or he wouldn't have left his precious and temporary girlfriend all alone.

Not wasting another second, I cross the distance and push his bedroom open. It doesn't make a noise as I enter and shut it behind. My nostrils flare when her intoxicating scent reaches me while her soft breath teases my ears.

She's facing the other way while lying on her stomach and surfing on her mobile. Only a hint of the setting sunlight filters in through the open window. Bright enough I can make out every inch, shape and curve of her delicate body. The skirt of her dress teases me with the flash of her ass.

So innocent. So tempting. So blissfully unaware of the danger lurking right behind.

It's when I click the lock into place that my innocent prey notices my presence.

That her predator has arrived.

“Brayden?” she murmurs, sitting up. “Everything okay? Do we need to cal—”

The words die on her tongue when she realises it’s not Brayden. The flash of fear in her soft eyes make my dick throb. I’m a sick fuck, but Jesus, I want to terrorize the fuck out of her. I want to drive my cock inside her while she screams for help, for a god that will never come.

“You!” she gasps accusingly.

“You know my name now, little dove.”

She bristles and crosses her arms, pushing her enticing tits high. “Monster suits you better.”

“Or maybe you’re scared my name will sound better on your lips than your boyfriend’s.”

“More like it’ll give you more power for the demon that you are,” she sasses. “I’d rather you be he-who-shall-not-be-named.”

Years of exercised control lets me keep my face straight while my lips twitch to smile. But afraid and nervous is how I like her. I steel my expression, step forward and tilt my head as I speak, “Aren’t you a feisty little thing today, little dove?”

“You’re still a dick though.”

“Speaking of dick, you owe me an orgasm.” I take another step. She notices but stays near the bed. “It’s time I cashed it in.”

“Hell will freeze over before I put my mouth anywhere near your dick.”

The sound of her saying the word dick with that hauntingly stunning face has me wanting to shove it down her throat. Making her choke and sputter on it. My already thin patience teeters on the edge.

“On your knees, little dove.”

She does the opposite and tries to crawl to the other side of the bed. In a flash, I’m on her before she can scream. I

swallow it by covering her lips with my hand and trapping her wrists between the mattress and her stomach.

Her hips shift, trying to shake me off her but it only makes her grind her ample ass against my painfully hard cock. The tempting girl is blessed with a glass doll figure that women pay thousands of dollars to get. Full tits, tight waist, and a thick ass made to be slapped and fucked.

It's her strong spirit that has me enamoured, though.

“Don't scream,” I whisper in her ear menacingly. “Or I'll fuck you in the ass with the knife this time. I don't have blood to lube you up either.”

She curses in garbled words underneath my palm. I tighten my grip and circle her throat with my other hand while my weight keeps her attempts to escape useless. When she continues to struggle, I squeeze until she's breathless.

Finally, she relents and submits.

“Good girl.” I uncurl my fingers slowly, returning her precious oxygen, one harsh gulp at a time. “Now you're going to behave and do as I say.”

Turning her onto her back, I shove her arms above her head and hold them captive. Golden silken hair fan out while few curls tease the curve of her cheekbone. The sudden urge to memorize her every feature strikes me out of nowhere.

*When did I ever feel such a foreign feeling?* Never.

Brayden will return any second once he realizes I cut the cords on purpose.

Yet I don't rush.

She stares at me quietly as I bring my finger and trace it down her forehead. Pushing the wayward curl behind her ear, I continue my path down her cut cheekbones while those long lashes flutter in a slow motion. I thought her eyes were black, but they're a rich shade of dark blue.

My blonde, blue-eyed little dove.

We're entranced and raptured by one another when I stop my journey on her full lips. Cupping her jaw, I tease the bottom one with my thumb. Gazing into her eyes, I lean my head down inch by inch until my mouth is hovering above hers.

Why the fuck do I want to kiss her all the time? What will she think if I told her she's my first kiss. The only girl who made me crave it.

To her, I'm a monster who steals.

"No," she whispers, reading my intention.

"There are no safe words here, little dove."

With that, I mash my lips against hers until she gasps and lets my tongue in. My hand drops lower to circle her delicate neck, feel her pounding pulse as I deepen the harsh kiss. There's no gentleness, no finesse this time. Only an impulse driving me to consume her whole. To eat her alive.

The torment I felt watching her with Brayden the whole summer bleeds out.

And she's the bearer of it all.

She whimpers when I bite down and draw blood. Eager to feel her blows and her fight, I free her wrists while not stopping the assault on her mouth. She hits me, trying to push me off and failing while I let my hand have free reign to explore her curves. Her fingers pull my hair, nails scratching the back of my neck, and it only eggs me on.

"You fucking monster."

She growls between rough sucks and bites. She's so distracted that she takes a second to notice I've grabbed her thighs. Her fingers still in my hair when I spread her legs wider and inch my fingers upward.

"Don't you fucking dare," she threatens.

But the breathlessness in her voice gives away her thrill of being under my control.

“Dare what?” I taunt, pushing her skirt higher and revealing soft skin pebbled with goosebumps. “Dare to touch your cunt?” My fingers touch her panties, and it takes every ounce of control not to rip them off when I find them soaking wet. “You’re dripping, little dove. Does your pussy gush for every man that’s not your boyfriend?”

“F-fuck you.”

“Such a dirty fucking whore.”

A soft moan escapes her swollen lips when I slip one finger underneath her panty and trace her slit. Up. Down. Up. Down. Her wetness drips down her thighs as I continue teasing. When I dip my finger between her folds and circle her entrance, her eyes flutter close.

“Does my brother know you have a crush on me?”

Her eyes flash open and narrow. “I don’t have a crush on you.”

“Then why do you sleep in my shirt every night?”

“I burned it.”

“Liar.” Teasing her opening and pushing the digit in, I arch one eyebrow at her and murmur, “I’ve seen you search for me when you know I’m close.” I thrust until I’m in to the knuckle and my little liar clenches around it. “My brother is nothing but a diversion. It’s me you truly desire.”

I plunge even deeper until I’m pressed against the thin wall. I could ease the inevitable pain by breaking her hymen but I’m desperate for the scream when I’ll tear it with my cock. I meant when I said I want to make her bleed.

“If you believe that, then you’re delusional,” she retorts.

Pulling out my finger, I shove it past her lips until she tastes her juices. Tastes her arousal for me. When she tries to grasp my wrist, I slap it away and push my finger deeper until a tear dribbles down her cheek.

“I’ll prove just who is the delusional one in this room, little dove,” I threaten before turning her on her stomach. Flipping the skirt up, I bare the soft flesh of her ass and spank hard. Her

hand flies back to cover her bottom from the blows, but I hold her arms captive.

“Tell me you were aching for this moment,” I growl. “Waiting to taste my domination.”

“No.” *Spank.*

“If you truly wanted me to stay away, you would’ve told Brayden the truth. But you haven’t, my little dove. Because you. Want. Me.”

“N-no.” *Spank.*

“And yet you’re drenching the sheets, you fucking whore,” I grunt and squeeze the reddened cheek, making her moan. “Brayden will take one look and he’ll know your dirty little secret.”

“No. No.” *Spank.* “Ahh... Stop.”

I do but only to yank her on all fours. She’s too far gone to stop or fight. Bending, I take one long lick from her asshole to her clit. Dammit, even her pussy tastes like heaven. Like delicious fucking sin.

Using my thumb and forefinger, I spread her folds so I can lap greedily as her cream drips on my tongue. I want to strip her bare and take my time to eat her cunt but Brayden will be here any minute. Because I’m a selfish monster, I don’t want to share the sounds she makes when she’s surrendering to me.

This shameful, whimpering, and wanton side of hers is all for me.

*Mine.*

Inserting two fingers inside pussy, I flick and graze her clit with my teeth. I suck hard until she’s choking around my digits as I keep my thrusts shallow. When she begins to grind like she can’t help herself, I replace my fingers with my tongue.

“Oh God!”

“Ride my mouth.” I slap her ass when she disobeys. “Do it or I’ll fuck you with my knife in front of Brayden so he sees

what a dirty whore you are.”

It has the desired effect.

The humiliating masochist that she is, my little dove loses herself in the pleasure. I finger her clit mercilessly while fucking her pussy in rough strokes. When she pants and her grins become jerky, I pinch her swollen nub.

She shatters on a silent scream.

The powerful orgasm rocks her whole body.

She’s still in the throes when there’s a knock on the door, followed by the sound of knob turning.

“Freckles?” Brayden’s voice filters in.

Dove freezes while I slowly stand to my full height without taking my hands off her. Her freshly spanked ass and dripping cunt is on display, tempting me to continue our little play, audience be damned.

But I’m enjoying our secret encounters too much to ruin them.

“Dove? Are you okay?”

It puts her into action, and she shoves away from me to stand on the other side of the bed. Her panicked gaze flits toward the door before ping-ponging toward me. I make no move to leave while waiting to see what she does next.

“Dove?” Brayden shouts.

My feisty dove looks frazzled, and I take pity on her. Rounding the bed, I yank her to me and right her clothes, her hair, as best as I can. While she watches me with a strange expression. As though I’m a mystery to uncover. A complicated puzzle she can’t solve.

It’s a good thing the lights are still out because there’s nothing I can do about the flush on her cheeks and swollen lip from my rough kisses.

Tilting her chin, I whisper, “Tell Brayden you locked the door because you thought you heard someone in the hall and got scared.”

“Or I could tell it was you.”

I smirk and shake my head. “You could.”

Backing away, I stalk to the window to escape but turn at the last moment to taunt her, “But we both know you won’t.”

# CHAPTER 11

ANOTHER WEEK FLIES BY WITH YET ANOTHER TWISTED SECRET in my closet.

Bastian's last taunt still mocks me. *We both know you won't.*

He was right. I didn't. Instead, I lied yet again with the one Bastian recited before he jumped out the window and disappeared.

Brayden was too worried about my well-being to notice the slight hoarseness in my tone from the moans that his twin had coerced from my lips. My body deliciously danced to his tunes yet again.

And I let him.

I craved it.

*I enjoyed it.*

The guilt is so suffocating that I haven't been able to look Brayden in the eyes and have been ignoring him since then.

I told him I'm busy applying and preparing for my college interviews.

Because he's perfect, he's given me space while continuously texting and calling me. He wants to have a long-distance relationship if I chose to study out of state. I'm desperately trying to hold on to the spark I felt for him the first time we met but with every encounter with his brother, it's dimming.

And I loathe it.

Why does everything have to be so complicated in my life? I like Brayden a lot and want to make us work. But the second Bastian touches me, commands and ruthlessly dominates my senses, I turn into his wanton whore.

He's every dark fantasy I've had personified.

Maybe that's why I feel this dangerous pull toward him.

Ugh... I need help.

Throwing my empty dinner plate in the dishwasher, I wash my hands before turning off the lights in the kitchen. Climbing the stairs, I stride toward my bedroom door. After they went to their room, I stayed to watch a movie but my thoughts kept me distracted.

I push open my door and don't bother switching on the lights since the bed lamp is on. Standing in front of the full-length mirror, I yank all my clothes off before throwing on the simple black t-shirt. The one I should've torn or burned but still haven't.

"I thought you burned it."

I scream, terrified of the cocky voice. Only the sound doesn't make it out because a large hand swallows it. My body recognises Bastian's heat, his scent and his brick-like body immediately.

He's built like his brother. Except, he's slightly lean.

A harsher, meaner and lethal version of him.

I elbow him hard until he lowers his hand and lets me breathe. The man is fucking obsessed with controlling my air. The very essence of my life. His muscular and veiny forearms circle my waist as I study our reflection in the mirror.

My head barely reached the top of his broad chest. Unlike Brayden, his hair is short, curly and dark brown. They complement his eyes which are a combination of light brown and green, his roman nose and lips with the bottom fuller than the top.

They deliver the sweetest kisses while whispering the darkest taunts.

Both brothers are ruggedly handsome but Bastian exudes chaotic energy and intimidating intensity. One wears smile while the other wears thin lines as if he's perpetually disappointed or bored with those around him.

He lifts one eyebrow, cutting my perusal of him short. Reality hits like thunderbolt that I have my tormentor in my fucking bedroom. And like a dumb bimbo, I've been checking him out instead of screaming for my uncle.

"Don't." He warns.

I wisely listen because he's unpredictable. Volatile and carries a bloody knife. No way I'm letting him near my family.

"How did you get in?" I demand angrily.

"I'm not interested in twenty questions," he retorts. "Last time, we got sidetracked. I've come to collect my orgasms now."

"Plural?"

"Do you not know how to count?" he jokes before his eyes heat. "I've made you come twice, little dove. You're greedy but so am I."

I annoy him with silence. Especially since I know he gets off on my cries and moans. The corner of his lips lift in a taunting smirk.

"Keep those lips sealed," he murmurs, eyes dropping to them heatedly. "I'm going to force them open soon enough. They'll look pretty wrapped around my cock, choking as I shove it down your throat."

"You're vile!"

"Sick. Depraved. Monster. I'm all of it and worse."

"Why can't you leave me alone?" I cry out in frustration. Twisting in his arms, I hit his chest. He doesn't flinch or react. "What did I ever do to you?"

All the powerlessness, anger—more at myself than him—I feel every time I'm with him bleeds out. Breathing quietly and watching me with rapt calmness, he lets me take it out on him.

It pisses me off harder.

I slap him. Hard enough for his head to snap to the right. A trickle of fear seizes my bones, when he turns to face me. Instead of being met with fury, his eyes hold molten heat and mania.

“Tell me what the hell did I ever do to you?” I raise my hand to slap again, and he catches it in his rough palm and twists it behind my back.

“You. Chose. Him.”

His rough and low voice raise goosebumps on my skin, and I gasp, “What?”

Before I can make sense, I’m pushed down on my knees. Fisting my hair, he wrenches my head back. “Dare to slap me again, only if you want one in return. Understand?”

“It can’t be worse than what you’ve already done to me.”

“And what is that?” he quips. “Bringing you pleasure? Fingering your cunt until you drench my hand? Kissing you senseless? Doing what my pussy-ass brother can’t?”

Every taunt is a slap in my face, as was his intention. “How would you know he isn’t already doing all those things to me?”

“The fact you’re asking me instead of telling.”

“You’re a terrible brother.”

“And you’re a terrible girlfriend.” He sneers. “Because you’re about to worship my cock.”

“No.” I fight against his grip, and he lightly taps my cheek.

Stunned, I watch as he unbuckles his belt, and I swallow when the large bulge tenting his pants swells even bigger. My monster has a monster cock to match.

“I hope you don’t have a gag reflex,” he murmurs, “because otherwise, you’re in for a sore throat, little dove.”

“I-I’ll bite you.”

“Good. I like my pleasure mixed with pain.”

With that, he wraps his leather belt around my neck. He uses it as a leash to bring my lips closer to the pre-cum leaking from the crown of his cock, peeking from his boxers. I despise the way my core clenches and mouth waters to lick his taste.

I feel small and helpless as he hulks over my kneeling body, staring down like a wicked god.

“Take out my dick.”

“No, I wo—” My protest is cut off by his hand tightening the belt around my neck.

“I’m not giving you a choice,” he barks. “Now pull out my dick and suck like the whore you are for me.”

The lust darkening his features paired with the scent of my arousal that my traitorous body drips, I lift my hands. With trembling fingers, I lower his boxers and barely miss getting slapped by his massive shaft.

I almost shrink from the veiny girth, the angry purple head shining with his precum. The first cock I’ve ever seen this close and I’m almost traumatised.

Does he intend me to take it all?

“I-I haven’t done this before.”

“Wrap your fist around the base,” he encourages.

I follow his lead, and my fingers barely wrap around his shaft. He’s soft, slippery and so hard.

“Both hands, my little dove.” Once I do, he says, “Now stroke to the tip.” I grip him and slowly move my fist upward. “Harder. I told you I like pain.”

The second I tighten my hold; he exhales roughly, and I chance a glance at him. His head is thrown back as though he’s struggling for control. A rush of power boosts my bloodstream and I stroke him harder and rougher and longer.

“Fuck,” he groans.

His harsh panting and my wet smacking hand make a symphony.

Maybe if I make him climax like this, my mouth will have mercy. But as I'm falling into a rhythm, he tugs my hand away and wraps his own. He rubs the head over my parted lips. Repeatedly. Until he's all I can taste.

“Open that fuck-me mouth.”

I'm shown no mercy, given no warning, as he thrusts to the hilt in the back of my throat. He's brutal. Beastly as he ruthlessly takes his pleasure from my mouth. My jaw begins to ache before he even finishes the third thrust.

I'm just a warm hole to him.

A toy.

A fuckdoll.

Drool slips from the corner of my mouth while I'm held on my knees by his belt as my only anchor. He's punishing me for making him wait to do this. For making him want me. Stalk me.

He's my tormentor.

But I'm his too.

All this time, I thought I was powerless. The truth is I'm his equal.

“Play with your cunt,” he growls while I choke on his length and cry ugly tears. “I know you want to. Do it or I'm fucking your throat all night long.”

Stilling himself in my mouth with his balls pressed against my chin, he tightens the belt until my vision turns hazy. The sadistic monster waits until I slide my fingers between my thighs and press against my pussy.

I shudder violently at my arousal.

The caress euphoric.

“You're dripping on the floor, aren't you, you dirty little whore?” he taunts before resuming to abuse my throat again. “Brayden will never make you feel like this. He doesn't have the balls to skull-fuck you, choke you and turn you into a needy whore.”

I hate when his illicit words ignite the familiar tightening in my lower belly. I'm so messy and burning with lust that all I can do is flick my clit repeatedly in tandem to his thrusts.

His hips become jerky the longer he stares at me playing with my pussy. While his length swells even further at my submission.

“Come with me.”

He issues his demand by tightening my throat. Using his other hand to pinch my nose, he steals the last of my air supply. My body fights his brutality and yet neither he stops his deep plunges nor do I stop rubbing my clit.

When I'm almost driven to the edge and about to pass out, he removes his hand from my nose and loosens the belt.

“Now, Dove.”

Stars dance behind my eyes, and I shatter. My body doesn't feel like my own as I feel floaty and high on intense ecstasy. Riding my own fingers while warm, salty liquid floods my mouth.

Bastian's cum.

“Fuck. Fuck. Fuck,” he chants while stroking his dick to splash the last of his creamy seed on my tongue. “Don't swallow.”

My cheeks flush a deep red when he throws his belt away and yanks me up. Picking me around the waist until I wrap my legs around his hips, he tugs my head down and slams his lips against mine.

With his tongue, he pushes his cum down my throat.

It is nasty, erotic, and so fucking debauched.

I'm spent and on the verge of passing out when he pulls back. All I see is the yearning intensity on his face before I give in to the darkness.

Right in the arms of my monster.

My nightmare.

# CHAPTER 12

BASTIAN IS WAITING FOR ME THE NEXT DAY WHEN I ENTER MY bedroom.

He lounges on my bed, like he's right at home, and I take a second to notice he's casually scrolling on my phone.

How the fuck did he crack the passcode? And why do all psychopaths have to be genius?

I flick my gaze toward the open window and narrow my gaze at him. I distinctly remember locking it. So, how he broke it without creating any noise is boggling my mind. And impressive.

*He's a dick.*

Until yesterday, he was content in watching me from afar. Now, he's glued to my side like a parasite.

A sexy, broody, and callous parasite.

The black button-down shirt stretches over his thick biceps, broad chest and tapered waist while the denim molds to his muscular thighs. My eyes automatically drift to his bulge, which makes my mind travel to activities of last night.

Me on my knees.

His cock tearing into my throat.

The struggle to breath.

And then exquisite pleasure.

"I'm not giving you a blow job tonight," I announce, mustering my strength. Honestly, my jaw and throat are still

sore.

He doesn't even lift his eyes to acknowledge me. Annoyed with his lack of boundaries, I storm to his side. Before I can pluck my phone, he swiftly puts it out of reach.

"Hey! Give it back."

"Say the magic word."

"Dickhead."

"No. The other one." He shakes his head. "It rhymes with tease."

I try snatching it back again. Only to be lifted in the air and rolled underneath his body on the bed. He pins my hands on either side of my head before smashing his lips against mine in a searing and toe-curling kiss.

"Hi, my little dove."

I shiver in delight and sigh. "Is this how you court a girl?"

"Why do I need to court? You're already mine."

Arrogant, unhinged psycho. "No. I am Brayden's."

"Temporarily." Letting my left wrist go, he circles my neck and drags his thumb on my bottom lip. "Until he eventually gets bored of you."

"And then what? You're going to swoop in?"

"I'm not a patient man, little dove." A cocky smile splits across his mouth. "I will claim every inch of you long before then."

"I will never be yours."

Shaking his head like I'm being delusional and me being his is a foregone conclusion, he rises and slips off my bed. Then casually goes back to scrolling on my phone again and demands, "Why don't you have any photos?"

"None of your fucking business." I reach for his hand, but he swats my wrist away and gives one scolding glare to behave.

"Don't you talk to your friends from boarding school?"

“What’s with the twenty questions?” I grumble. “I thought you hated them.”

“Not when I’m the one asking.”

“Well, I’m not answering them.”

We lock in a staring battle. The urge to squirm is palpable but I hold firm. The corner of his mouth twitches before he relents and offers, “I’ll answer one of yours for every question you answer of mine.”

The word ‘no’ is on the tip of my tongue, but I pause. Who knows when I’ll get this opportunity again! The tiny curious part of me wins. “Okay.”

Throwing my phone on the bed, he joins back and sits against the headboard. It causes his shirt to deliciously stretch and tighten around his abs. It’s so unfair that I haven’t seen him naked once, yet he’s stared and felt mine twice.

“Come here.” He taps his thigh.

“No thanks, I’d rather si—” His arm reaches forward lightning fast and drags my flailing body to him. I’m forced to straddle his waist with his palms resting on my upper thighs in a silent command to stay still.

“Why do you ask if you’re only going to do as you please?” I ask, annoyed.

“Stop whining. You love it when I do it.”

“I do n—”

“I dare you to lie. Because then I’ll make you sit naked while we talk.”

“Fine.”

“Good girl.” He smiles, not a full-blown but a small movement that lifts the corner of his lips until his features soften a touch. “Now, tell me why you don’t have any friends?”

“The girls hated me. I never stayed at one place long enough to form a lasting friendship. I have a resting bitch face.” I tick off one by one and shrug. “Take your pick.”

“You don’t have a resting bitch face.”

His softly spoken reply renders me stunned.

“You’re ethereal like an angel,” he continues while tracing his knuckle back and forth on my thighs, making my skin tingle. “Why else do you think I keep dirtying you up every chance I get?”

“Because you’re one controlling and jealous monster.”

“That I am. Only when it comes to you though.”

“Lucky me,” I reply sarcastically.

He pinches my skin in punishment. “Why haven’t you applied to colleges?”

“I have.”

“You’re lying. I searched your laptop.”

“Stop hacking into my stuff.” I hit his chest.

Trapping my wrist, he massages it and probes, “Why has your family really moved here? Why is everything about your past hidden while you’re barely planning your future?”

“Why do you care?”

“Because a girl like you with the world at her feet and a straight A student her whole life wouldn’t just move to a backward-ass town without a reason. Or put her future on hold.” He scoffs in an icy tone. “If my father catches wind of all these holes in your life, he will stop at nothing to uncover them and destroy you in the process. You don’t want to be on my family’s radar, little dove.”

“Something tells me it’s worse being on yours.” He doesn’t deny it, and chills run down my spine.

He has no clue the evil he is digging apart.

“My turn to ask questions now,” I say before he can open his mouth. When he nods, I continue, “Why are you trying to break Brayden and me apart?”

“There should be a relationship for me to break up,” he states boldly. “You don’t even like him.”

“I-I like him.”

“No. You’re *pretending* to like him. You don’t look at him the way you do me.”

“Like what?”

“Like you hate me yet still want me to eat you alive.” I look away, unable to handle the intensity in his uniquely colored eyes. He brings my face back to his. “It’s okay to want the bad guy, little dove. The monster that never leaves you alone.”

“I want to be loved, not eaten alive.”

“Who says I can’t give you both?”

I gulp nervously. “Your love will kill me. Besides, you already ruined your chance after you assaulted me in the woods.”

My accusation has no effect or guilt on his stoic face except the hardening of his jaw. A lock of curly hair falls on his forehead, enhancing his broodiness. I crave to push it away with my fingers. I dig them in my palm instead.

“And despite all your threats, you still haven’t gone to the police.”

“I know enough about your family name to know you have them in your pockets.”

“Or maybe you have another end goal in mind.”

Somehow, the manipulative asshole has turned the interrogation against me again.

“I’m tired,” I lie, pushing off him. “You should go.”

I hide my surprise when he lets me off his lap and jump to the floor. But makes no move to shift himself. Instead, heat darkens his gaze, and he licks his bottom lip.

“Strip.”

“What?”

“Lose the shirt. Get naked. Show me your tits and cunt.” He smirks and tilts his head. “Take your pick.”

“Hell no.”

“Is that invitation for me to take control, little dove?”

My pussy pulses at the sexy rasp in his voice with a hint of threat. Words don't form on tongue as I lick my lips, drawing his attention to it. He exhales, and I know it's a sign he's fighting for control. His monster's on the edge of being let loose.

I instinctively back a step.

Bastian stands and crooks his finger. “Clothes. Off.”

Twisting, I run. I don't get far before my world tilts when he throws me over his shoulder and walks to my dresser. Dropping me on my feet, he fists the back of my plain t-shirt and rips it in half.

My bare breasts spring free, and he cups them in his big palm, squeezing roughly. The other hand travels to my cotton panties and he tears it until I'm naked. I'm shamefully wet when his finger connects with my slit.

“Watch.” He commands.

I obey, afraid of his unhinged side.

My pale flesh contrasts against his tanned arms. Everything about us is a striking contrast yet we fit like gloves. A gorgeous monster and his prey. A hunter and his lamb.

One hand plays with my nipple. Tugging. Pinching. Flicking.

The other collects my juices dripping down my inner thigh and spreading it on my folds. His teasing caresses bring another wave of desire until his fingers make wet noises.

“You're such a shameless whore, little dove,” he murmurs in my ear. Our eyes locked on his hand between my thighs. He spreads my pussy lips, making a V with his fingers. “Being mine makes you this wet, huh? I could easily slip my dick in. It will still be tight though. I bet you'll like me forcing every inch of my cock in. Hmm?”

“N-no.” *Yes.*

“I’ll tie you up.”

“Oh God!” I whimper when he removes his hand from my breast, takes my wrist, and places our joined hands right above my clit.

“While you’re bound and helpless, I’ll steal your air until you’re choking on my shaft.”

I shudder when we tease my entrance while he paints the fantasy in my head. Succumbs us into the depths of our depraved minds.

“I’ll write my name with the knife right above this pretty cunt.”

“Come. I’m going to come,” I rasp, and he slows down. “No. Don’t stop.”

“Say the magic word.”

I bite my lip defiantly and circle my clit with my own finger. His monster lets loose and he smacks my pussy.

“Beg.” *Spank.* “Me.” *Spank.* “Whore.” *Spank.*

“Please. Please. Please.”

Covering my mouth and nose, he slips one thick finger in my hole and thrusts. I ride his hand so his palm hits my clit every time. The friction’s so fucking good. The lack of oxygen makes me dizzy.

The orgasm barrels down.

I let the pleasure drag me under.

When I eventually come to my senses, his hard cock is the first thing I feel digging in my lower back. Yet he makes no move to shove me down on my knees. My pride prevents me from begging to suck him. Even though I desperately want to.

I notice my pussy is swollen while my nipples are pink.

It makes me blush.

Slowly, I raise my eyes to meet his in the reflection. And he’s already watching me. Jaw hard, darkened gaze while his

cheekbones look sharp enough to cut. Eternity passes before he breaks eye contact, bends and cradles me in his arms.

As much as his scary, possessive side thrills me, the one where he puts me together excites me equally. Setting me down on the bed, he goes into my closet and returns with a t-shirt I haven't seen before.

My eyes widen when I realise it's... *his*.

"You brought me your shirt?"

"You will only sleep in my clothes from now on."

"That's such a boyfriend thing to say."

He doesn't find it funny. "I'll be gone for the next two days."

I ignore the disappointment that pangs my heart. But it vanishes as soon as he says, "I want you to end it with Brayden before I return."

"It's not up to you."

Putting his fists on either side of my hips, he bends lower until our lips touch. "That's why I'm giving you one chance. Because if it came up to me, you won't like it."

# CHAPTER 13

THE MORNING COMES WAY TOO SOON.

Bastian's ultimatum sits heavily on my mind. I hardly got any sleep because of it. I also know I can't keep ignoring Brayden any longer. Because a text from him is waiting for me when I check my phone.

Pretty boy: I'm coming to see you, freckles.

Discarding Bastian's shirt, I bring it to my nose and inhale our mixed scent. My belly flips with the memory of him from last night.

He makes me so confused with his actions.

As though, he constantly wants my mind fucked.

He's playing my body against me. Just because he's bringing me immense pleasure, making my buried dark fantasies a reality, doesn't mean what he's doing is right. Bastian gets off on being the villain, but he's turning me into one too.

With every kiss, touch, orgasm, I'm betraying Brayden.

*You're pretending to like him.* Bastian's taunting accusation repeats in my head.

I genuinely like Brayden, but it's getting overshadowed by his evil twin's overwhelming presence. The first two incidences

weren't my fault, but these past two nights, I'm just as much to blame.

It's unforgiveable what I've done.

I am going confess it all to Brayden today. And if he's still willing to give me a chance, I will cut my ties off with Bastian. Because as much as he excites me, he's ultimately bad for me.

Dressing in jean shorts and a tank top, I go downstairs. I find my aunt humming in the kitchen as she cooks breakfast. Tip-toeing behind her, I wrap my arms around her waist and yell, "Boo!"

"Ahh!"

I laugh when she screams and twists.

"You naughty, lazy bird!" she scolds while resting her palm on her chest. Shaking her head, she playfully hits my arm. "Don't scare your poor aunt like that again."

"Oh, come on, you're a tough cookie."

She rolls her eyes before turning serious. "Did you and Brayden break up?"

"No." I straighten in my seat at the island. "Why would you think that?"

"Because for the past week, I haven't seen him around. All summer, you two were practically glued together."

"We're still together, Aunt Mila." *Well, until I tell him the truth.* "In fact, he's on his way over here."

"Well, that's good," she says before turning to flip the toast she's buttering. "Because I would feel better if you have someone to stay with."

"What do you mean?"

"Didn't I tell you? Your uncle has a job interview in the neighbouring city and we'll be staying there for the weekend."

"No. You didn't tell me."

She turns and quirks on eyebrow. "You should be happy."

“Of course, I am,” I softly whisper. “But why can’t I come with you?”

“It’s just one night, lazy bird.”

I sigh when she serves me breakfast with toast and coffee. She knows I don’t like being alone.

I’m about to answer when there’s a knock on our door.

“It must be Brayden.”

“Bring him. I’ll set him a plate too.”

Shoving down my anxiety, I brave a smile as I open the door. My messy feelings minus the guilt and the shame disappear as soon as I lock eyes with him. The stark happiness in them takes my breath away.

“Bray—”

His lips descend on mine before I even complete his name. I’m tugged against his hard body while he fists my hair and kisses me so deeply that I moan. I can only let him plunder mine and take his fill.

My sweet, caring boyfriend kisses—no, fucks—my mouth like he’s starving and I’m his last meal. When he finally rips his lips away after what feels like ages, I’m dizzy.

“Wow.”

He keeps me pressed against him and whisper, “Hi.”

“If that’s how you kiss after staying away, I should do it more often.”

Shaking his head at my teasing, he growls, “No. This is the last time you’ll push me away. I know you were ignoring me and I’m pretty sure it had something to do with Bastian. But not anymore.”

“Look, I need to tel—”

“No. I don’t want to talk about him.”

“But—”

He shushes me with his thumb. “Just tell me this. Do you really want to be with me?”

My mind goes to Bastian's ultimatum and my own twisted feeling about it. I think about the summer I spent with Brayden and the way he made me feel like a carefree girl who could trust him. Instead of the chaotic and dark lust his brother consumes me with.

And the answer comes easily. "Yes. I want to be with you."

"You mean it?" In this moment, he exudes energy like his twin.

"I do."

Kissing me, he whispers, "Good."

"Lazy bird? Don't hog Brayden all to yourself," Aunt yells from inside, and I wince in embarrassment.

"She has missed you too."

He chuckles and takes my hand as we walk inside. Aunt Mila wraps him in a hug when we enter the kitchen. She doesn't wait before blurting out.

"Brayden, can Dove stay with you tomorrow night?"

"Auntie!"

"Are you traveling?" asks Brayden, ignoring me.

"Yes, and I would feel so much better if she isn't staying alone."

Brayden turns and winks at me before nodding to her with his best innocent boy expression. "Of course. I probably would've kidnapped her anyways."

I slap his chest playfully, remembering the dread on my aunt's face last time we joked about kidnapping.

"I can't wait to have you all to myself, freckles," Brayden says in a low voice once we're alone. "No Bastian either. Just us."

"There better be electricity though."

He laughs before pulling me into his arms. "Come one. Let's pack your bags."



“How did your interviews go?”

I peer at Brayden as he drives us to his place the next day. Yesterday, we passed time in my bedroom, talking and binge-watching. It was pleasant and got my mind off troubling memories.

I contemplate about telling him the truth but decide against it. “They were uh... good. When does your training at your father’s firm starts?”

“Soon.”

“Are you excited?”

“Honestly, yeah. I’ve always wanted to get out of this town. I probably would’ve left early if I hadn’t met you.”

“You don’t like your home?”

“It’s an empty house, Dove. No soul. Only old secrets and bad deeds.” He gives me a small smile before focusing on the road again. “It’s been in our family for generations. So, my father will never sell it. Instead, he would rather exile his sons there.”

“I’m sorry,” I console and squeeze his thigh. “You finally have your chance.”

He intertwines our fingers and brings it to his mouth to kiss. “Maybe we can be in the same city, huh?”

“Maybe.”

We ride around the circular driveway of his mansion. As soon as he parks the car, we get out, and he grabs my overnight bag. I’m a bundle of anticipation and nerves as we climb up the same staircase and round the familiar hallway leading to his room.

The air sizzles with tension.

Could it be because we’re alone? No fear of monster pouncing from the shadows. I didn’t realize just how much

Bastian was affecting my relationship. He was like an invisible hurdle we kept bumping against.

When Brayden turns after putting my bag in the corner, his gaze mirrors mine. The dark lust staring back has me biting my lip and looking away. Why is he suddenly affecting me so much?

It's nine in the evening but neither of us are ready to call it a night.

We're both skirting around the fact that something is bound to happen tonight. It's almost written on his handsome face. Perhaps, I want it too.

“Do you want a tour of the house, freckles?”

I look up at him in surprise and nod. “Yes, please.”

# CHAPTER 14

BRAYDEN'S MANSION IS A REPLICA OF AN OLD CENTURY HOUSE in the 70s with hand-drawn paintings, vintage art and high ceiling. Lamps light the path along with fashionable infrastructure. Every corner is decorated with a blend of vintage and modern.

The place is magnificent.

There's even a scary-looking dungeon.

"You need to lock that dungeon forever," I declare once we're back in his bedroom.

"Don't tell me it scared you."

"Of course, it did. I bet your ancestors tortured people in there."

Brayden laughs, amusement twinkling in his brown eyes as he sits against the headboard with his arms crossed behind his head, while I'm lying on my stomach beside him.

"No torturing happened." He smirks. "I promise."

"You must feel like a king every time you look at your portrait?" I tease. "When was it painted? You looked young."

There was even a family portrait. It was the first time I saw his parents and they made a stunning pair. I had ignored the way my heart skipped when I recognized Bastian. Even young, he was broody and cold. I bet he hated every second while the artist sketched his portrait.

The Rutherfords are old-money-rich. What surprises me pleasantly is how Brayden never shows it off.

“I was sixteen when it was done,” he says. “Enough about me now. Wanna watch a movie?”

“Sure.”

“Why don’t you change while I set it up?”

“Okay.”

I crawl to get off the bed, but Brayden yanks me to him for another kiss. I grind on his lap when he palms my ass roughly and gives a thrust. Lacing my fingers in his hair, I deepen the kiss until our tongues duel.

His kisses alone will ruin me.

“Fuck, I can’t get enough of your lips,” he rasps against my mouth.

I nip his bottom lip and murmur, “You’ve been holding back on me.”

“You want rough, I’ll give you rough.” Spanking my ass, he helps me down the bed and orders gruffly, “Change. Now.”

At his commanding tone, my panties become soaked. I stare at my reflection in the mirror of his bathroom. My skin is flushed, lips swollen and eyes filled with lust. I don’t understand why Brayden hid this side all this time.

Maybe I’ll finally get over the sick infatuation I have with Bastian.

Quickly changing into my cotton sleep shorts and camisole, I skip my bra and brush my teeth. When I enter his room, it’s encased in darkness with the light from the television screen creating a halo.

His predatory eyes lock on mine immediately.

For a second, I feel I’m staring into Bastian’s eyes.

*Stop being silly, Dove.* I cross the distance and climb onto the bed. I’m pulled flush against his side, causing heat to rise to my cheeks. He’s hot and hard everywhere while I’m a nervous wreck.

Brayden rests a hand on my hip while he plays some random movie.

We're aware it's just mindless foreplay, a distraction, and yet, we play along. As the actors continue to act, his fingers begin to toy with the hem of my short, which has risen up my thigh. Then, slowly, they trace up and down my skin in a teasing caress. With each pass, they inch closer and closer to my pussy.

Until I'm a squirming mess.

Brayden has no visible reaction except the bulge in his sweatpants. Otherwise, he's steadily breathing and paying rapt attention to the TV.

"Bray..." I moan.

"Shh..."

His fingers cup my pussy and he grinds his palm right against my clit. I dig my nails in his leg while moaning against his neck as he circles it roughly. My back arches when he thrusts one finger inside.

He languidly thrusts in and out, pushing deeper and deeper. Until he hits the barrier of my virginity. Through it all, he's calm, and it skyrockets my desire.

Just when I'm reaching for ecstasy, he stops.

"No..." I almost shout.

I reach my own hand to relive the ache when he slaps it away. In a flash, I'm pushed down on my back with him stretching above me. Pushing my hands above my head, he yanks my shorts down, tears my panties, and inserts his finger inside me again.

He gives shallow thrusts that keep me on the edge, not letting me fall.

"Let me come," I beg. "Ahh..."

His teeth bite on my hard nipple, poking against my thin cami. Sucking the tip into his mouth, he flicks it repeatedly with his tongue. I writhe and whimper in pleasure to no avail.

Paying the same attention to my neglected nipple, he pulls back until my top is soaked from his saliva.

“I want to come.”

“You will come around my cock.” *Thrust.* “When I allow it.”

“Then give me your cock.”

“Are you that desperate?” he taunts amusedly, and that same awareness creeps in. But then, Brayden smiles softly, and I shove the thought away.

Even from another city, Bastian is mind-fucking me.

Fuck him. Fuck his demands. Fuck his mind games. When he returns, I won't be his and neither will be my virginity that he arrogantly claims is his.

“I want you to be my first, Brayden,” I tell, and he stills. “Make me yours.”

He searches my eyes, and I dare not look away. Once he sees I mean it, he pulls his fingers out of me to tug his shirt over his head. His upper body is a work of art. Chiseled to perfection and made of steel. Every ab is sharp enough to cut, making me want to lick between the valley.

One messy lock falls on his forehead as he intensely gazes at my half naked body.

“Lose the shirt.”

I lean up and pull it off until I'm naked. His pupils darken as he unabashedly admires my bare skin, my pebbled nipples and my wet pussy. I boldly spread my legs, making him run his tongue over his bottom lip.

The longer he stares, the wetter I become.

“Lose the sweats,” I seductively purr.

He twists my nipple and tsks, “In bed, I make the rules. The demands. And command your body. Understood?”

“Yes,” I gasp when he pinches my sore nipple again.

Freeing my wrists, he runs his hand down my throat, between my breasts, while his other hand massages and plays with my tight bud. Bending down, his mouth trails a wet path down my stomach, circling my belly button and stopping inches from my pussy.

I raise my hips to seek his tongue against my core and he shoves me down before pinching my inner thigh. Kissing and nipping my red skin, he admonishes, "Don't be greedy."

"Don't tease."

"I want to feast on your cunt before I claim my prize."

My retort dies on my tongue when he fucking finally licks my center and sucks my clit into his mouth. His hands mold to my breasts while his tongue laps at my pussy. The pleasure and sensations are so wicked that I push his head down harder.

His satisfied groan sends delicious vibrations.

But again, he stops.

He rises above me, his mouth glistening from my juices, and I reach for his waistband. He's as big as Bastian. My hands are slapped away with a low warning.

"Don't make me tie your hands." Spanking my pussy, he plunges two fingers to the knuckles. "You'll get my cock when I'm ready. Now fuck yourself on my fingers or it's going to hurt when I force my shaft in."

His dirty demand, spoken in the gravelly voice, makes me blush red. Fisting the sheets, I ride his fingers while he stares between my thighs. He makes me do all the work as I grind and push myself down. My clit feels neglected, but I don't disobey him.

I whine when he takes away his hand but any protest dies when I see him lower his sweats. He does it enough for his cock to spring free. The purple crown is shining with pre-cum and more drips when he roughly strokes himself.

"Condom," I murmur, remembering I'm not on any pill.

"No."

“Bray—”

“I want nothing between us.”

“But...”

“I’ll pull out.”

With his other hand, he grabs the back of my knee and pushes it down on my chest. I’m obscenely spread open for him when he rubs the cockhead between my drenched folds. When I try reaching for him again, he shakes his head.

“Why won’t you let me touch you?” I ask breathlessly and needy.

“Because I’m hanging on by a fucking thread.” His voice comes out strained. “You touch me and I’ll lose control. I also like having you under my mercy.”

“I need you inside me.”

His jaw clenches before he circles my entrance and my eyes close when he pushes inside. My muscles resist the wide crown of his thick cock. He’s too big.

“Eyes.”

I jerk them open at his command, not realizing I had closed them. And he looks feral. Psychotic. Famished. I stare in awe at his clenched abs, forearms flexed as he holds the base of his shaft and pushes the head past my resistance.

It fucking hurts.

And he isn’t even inside me yet.

His slow pace is torturing and burning me up. I suck in a breath when he relentlessly applies pressure until my body succumbs to his raw power.

“Relax,” he grunts low and pained.

“I-I’m trying.” When he gives another sharp thrust and slides one thick inch in, I lose my senses. Forgetting his no-touching rule, I grasp his arm and dig my nails in. He hisses and stretches my walls around his girth in shallow strokes. “Oh God. It burns.”

“Fuck,” he curses, wrapping his hand around my throat.

The familiar possessive move unclouds the haze of lust slightly as my hand drifts to his right upper thigh. His hairy skin teases my fingertips. He must have removed his pants while I was begging for his tongue.

I’m scolding myself for letting doubts creep in when I *feel* it.

The slight ridge in his skin.

And I freeze.

No. No. No. It can’t be. It can’t be him.

*Bastian.*

“Bastian!” I gasp, smacking his chest, but he doesn’t budge. “Stop.”

The scar I gave him when I stabbed him mocks me while his cock is shoved halfway inside me.

“Took you long enough, little dove,” he taunts, twisting my wrists above my head and trapping it against the mattress. “I was getting tired of the act, to be honest. Being Brayden is boring. Even if it was fun fucking with you.”

When I stare into his eyes this time, I see the depths of his true predatory nature. The remorseless psychopath who has no limits.

“Get. Off. Me.”

He laughs. I try wriggling, but he’s like a mountain I can’t lift. He watches me struggle with amusement. My futile attempt only makes his cock harder.

All pretense of softness vanishes from his beastly face.

His true self rises to the front.

“Not until I’ve broken you,” he growls, penetrating with another inch. “Not until I’ve filled your cunt with my cum.” *Another thrust.* “Not until I’ve made you mine irrevocably.”

With that scary promise, he shoves the rest of his cock in.

Tearing through my virginity.

Like the monster he is.

# CHAPTER 15

MY LITTLE DOVE SINGS FOR ME WHEN I PIERCE HER WITH MY  
cock.

My ears ring as pleasure and tightness choke me, making  
my balls tighten. Her cunt circles me in a death grip. Tight,  
heavenly, and wet as hell.

She lies beneath me like a sacrifice.

Eyes shut, tits shaking with every breath while I hold her  
immobile. I lower my gaze to where we're joined. Her hole is  
stretched so wide around the base of my shaft, clit swollen and  
fluttering for attention.

I pull out an inch, which is hard because her walls try to  
suck me in. My shaft is shining with her blood and the proof  
of her innocence. It makes me want to shout in pride.

*Mine.*

The possession bleeds from the depths of my soul.

She whimpers, drawing my attention to her beautiful face  
etched in pain. I will make her feel good after I've had my fill.  
I've been aching for the feel of her this whole summer.

But first, she needs to be punished.

She blatantly disobeyed me. That just won't do.

Squeezing her throat, I thrust into her again. Hard enough  
to slam the headboard against the wall. Rough enough to jerk  
her body up the sheets. I curl my arm under her knee and  
spread her wider for my punishing rhythm.

“I told you I’ll make your virgin cunt bleed, little dove.” I grunt before pulling out and thrusting hard again. She cries harder and her pain is melody to my ears.

Savagely, I fuck her pussy raw.

I want her to hurt.

I want her to plead.

I want her to know I own this fucking cunt.

“How fucking dare you give it to Brayden?” I harshly bark.

“Because I fucking hate you,” she yells and scratches her nails down my back. Not pushing away, but pulling me deeper. Her glossy eyes flash open to glare at me. “Because I despise the way you ruthlessly bulldozed your way into my life. Because you never leave me alone. I loathe when you force pleasure from my body. B-because despite it all, you make me ache for you.”

Her walls clench around my girth while I’m close to combusting from her raw confession. The frustration in her hoarse voice for wanting me despite hating me.

She chased after the good boy.

But fell harder for the villain.

“I hate you too, little dove,” I whisper, licking the column of her throat and biting down on her unmarked flesh. Meeting her gaze, I confess my own depravity. “I hate how you turned my world upside down with your mere existence. I hate that you made me crazed enough to break my own rules. I fucking hate that you’ve sunk yourself underneath my skin, my psyche. You, my precious dove, have made me into a monster.”

*You’ve made me betray my own blood.*

*My twin.*

I don’t say it out loud. Instead, I dive into her mouth, push my tongue deep and kiss all my poison into her. She returns

my passion with a fire of her own. Biting and sucking on my tongue.

I rip my mouth away when she whimpers.

“Does my big cock hurt?”

“So much.”

“Do you want me to stop?”

“God, no,” she says, yanking my face for another kiss.

I slam into her faster, deeper. My balls smack against her ass with every vicious plunge. Shoving myself to the hilt, I grind the base of my cock against her clit. She responds by clenching around my shaft.

“Look at you, my filthy little whore,” I taunt. “Letting her boyfriend’s brother fuck her nasty. Is this what you wanted? My cock in your slutty pussy?”

“Yes. Yes. I wanted it.”

“What if it had been Brayden?” I growl, anger flaming my veins at the possibility he could’ve had her first. “You would’ve let him claim what’s mine. What I told you was mine.”

She moans, not answering.

I lightly tap her cheek. The dirty fucking girl drips even more. So, I slap a little harder, and fuck... how she squeezes me.

“Answer me,” I demand in a harder tone. “You had two chances to tell him it was over, Dove. But you didn’t. Did you mean when you said you wanted to be his?”

“I-I don’t know.”

“Why are you trying so hard to be his?” She looks away, and I slow my pace. Throwing her arms over her head, I nip and pull her bottom lip between my teeth. “You’re a bad liar, Dove. Monsters like me don’t let up once they catch a whiff.”

“Stop calling me a liar.” She lifts her hips to fasten my thrust and whines, “Bastian.”

“Tell me.”

“There’s nothing to tell.”

“I’ll find out either way, little dove.” I’ve observed her for too long to know when she’s being real or acting. “I’m giving you a chance now. Because you won’t like the consequences if I find out myself.”

“You’re being paranoid.”

“Stop being evasive.”

“I’m no—”

Before she can deny and insult my intelligence, I shove her torn panties between her lips, gagging her. Pulling out, I flip her onto her stomach and force her until she’s on her hands and knees. Spanking her hard, I thrust inside her swollen pussy.

“Keep those panties in your mouth,” I growl, slapping her again. “You’re going to take my cock like the whore you are and let me bruise your cunt as I please.”

“Mhmm.”

I groan at the exquisite feel of her. The immense ecstasy she’s consuming me with. The lust she makes me feel for her lithe curves. Wet sounds fill the air as I fuck her senseless in my brother’s bed.

The taboo aspect makes my balls throb and tighten.

Desperate to feel her come around me, I seek her clit and rub it in firm circles. My thrusts are savage and merciless. My hunger and lust unleashed. But it’s not enough.

Fisting her hair, I yank her flush to my chest and circle her throat. Her tits bounce while her nipples make my mouth water. My teeth ache to pull at them. I want to caress her everywhere at once.

But the need to choke and steal her oxygen is stronger. Enticing.

“Come for me, my little whore.”

The dirty word and a pinch to her clit sends her into a climax. She spasms and convulses as I slowly pull out her wet panties from her mouth. She sucks in sharp gulps and jerks on my cock.

Looking utterly breathtaking.

My dove is a kinky little thing.

Made for me.

Tossing her ruined panties aside, I bring my wet fingers to her lips and push inside. “Suck.”

She licks her juices. Tugging them out, I spank her tits before pushing her down again. Bending over her, I press her front into the sheets by gripping her hair. Biting down on her collarbone, I keep her pinned and fuck her like I hate her.

“Shit. Fuck. Too full.”

“Tell me you want my cum.”

“I-I’m not on the pill, Bastian.”

“Good.” She stills, and I smirk. “Maybe I should breed you with my baby and tie you to me irrevocably, hmm? Ruin any chance you have of being with Brayden.”

“No!”

“Yeah. It’d be so easy.” *Thrust.* “All I need to do is fuck you all night long.” *Thrust.* “Fill you to the brim with my seed. Over and over.” *Thrust.*

“Don’t you dare.”

I laugh. “It’s not like you can stop me.”

“Bastian.”

She tries to fight, but my weight doesn’t allow her. Her struggle, the stark fear, has my balls pulling taut. “Say the magic word. And I might listen.”

“You basta—”

“Careful, little dove.” I fuck her harder. My thrust becoming jerky and she feels how close I am to coming. “Two seconds. Or I spill inside you.”

“Please.”

I spank her ass. “Louder.”

“Please, Bastian.”

Her pleading does me in, and I thrust twice more before pulling out. Twisting her around, I straddle her chest and slap my cockhead on her lips. “Open, whore.”

Plunging my cock to the back of her throat, I hold her nose against my groin and spill thick spurts of cum. Cupping the side of her head, I thrust slow and deep as my orgasm continues for long moments.

The heat of her mouth divine.

The sight of her stuffed cheeks erotic.

“Your cunt. Your mouth. Your ass,” I growl. “Every hole and piece of you is mine, little dove. You’re fucking mine.”

Chest heaving, I let my cock slip from her lips and collapse with her in my arms. Our slick bodies tangle together, and my heart tightens when she doesn’t pull away. Instead, she seeks my contact and throws her leg over mine.

“You’re my monster, Bastian,” she murmurs and passes out.

She has no idea just how right she is.

# CHAPTER 16

WHEN MY EYELIDS OPEN THE NEXT MORNING, EVERYTHING IS blurry.

My memory. My sight. My surrounding.

Seconds pass as I slowly come to awareness, and with a startled jerk, I sit up in the bed. Morning light pours in through the half open window. Last night's activities filter in one by one. With it the panic, guilt and... shameful lust.

I passed out in Brayden's bed.

Right after I gave my virginity to Bastian. No, not gave. Tricked.

The evil twin tricked me for two days, pretending to be my boyfriend and stealing my innocence. Just like he promised.

And I... I let him.

Even after I recognized it was him, I let him descend me into hell with him. The gut feeling I was ignoring all day long proved to be correct.

*Wait.* This isn't Brayden's bedroom.

It's dark. Edgy. Too masculine.

Bastian must have brought me here after I passed out in his arms. His name alone raises goosebumps on my arms and my pussy damp. Wrapping his sheet around my naked body, I tiptoe out of the bed and wince when I stand.

I'm terribly sore.

Yet last night, all I felt was intense pleasure. He would be smug if he saw me right now, which is why I need to escape. Fast. But where the hell are my clothes? My overnight bag? Phone? He better not have hidden them.

Different thoughts and emotions run rampant in my head while I search his closet, underneath his bed for my things—my clothes, my overnight bag, my phone.

I need to come clean to Brayden.

Yesterday, all my actions were to piss off Bastian. To prove he had no sway over me, and because of it, I was selfishly hurting Brayden. But no more. He deserves someone who will be loyal to him. Not fucked up in the head like me.

*Thump.*

I'm bent near his bed when I hear footsteps in the hallway outside. I jump out of my skin when the door flings open and bangs against the wall. Iciness freezes my bones when I gaze into a furious-looking Brayden.

*Oh God.*

He takes one look at my appearance and draws the conclusion. The brown of his eyes darkens into slits. His lips purse in disgust, but underneath, I see betrayal and heartbreak as vivid as my regret.

“Brayden.”

He gives a self-depreciating laugh. The sound is so hollow and sad. “You chose him.”

*No. But I'm also not choosing you.* “Let me explain.”

“What's left to explain? You're in his room. Naked. Looking fucked to within an inch of your life.”

“He tricked me, Brayden.”

He rubs his hand on his face in exasperation before meeting my eyes. “Lame excuse, freckles. Seriously lame. You really couldn't tell the difference?”

“I thought he was you!”

“Did you make it all up?” he questions. I frown at the total switch.

“What?”

“The attack in the woods.” I jolt in horror. He continues, “Did he even hurt you or did you seduce him? Was being my girlfriend all a ploy to get close to him after he rejected you?”

Each accusation is like a stab in the heart.

“How could you ask me that, Brayden?”

“Bastian was right about you all along.”

I stare after him in shock as he turns around with that terrifying remark. I forget all about my naked state as I chase after him.

“Hey!” I yell as he rounds the corner. I follow after him while he ignores me. “Brayden! Please.”

Disregarding my pleading, he takes the flight of stairs to the basement. Even though fear locks my heart, I push through. It’s pitch-black downstairs until suddenly bright orange flames dance in the fireplace in the corner.

The basement lamps and candles lit up on the walls. The interior matches the gothic vibes of the outside. There’s also a pungent smell I can’t recognize but feels familiar. However, my focus is on the man across from me.

“Brayden!”

“Get out of my house, Dove.”

“Not until you listen to me.” He whirls around, fuming and looking exactly like his twin. The Brayden I knew always had a smile on his face. “What did Bastian say to you?”

“That you seduced him in the woods. Hell, I found you wearing his shirt. He warned me, yet I didn’t listen to him. Instead, I hit him because I believed you.”

My blood runs cold when he confesses.

Bastian is toying with us both.

He’s painted me as the villain.

“He’s lying to you, Brayden,” I say but I feel like I’m talking to a wall. “He made me believe it was you so I would stay away from you. Then he kept stalking me and for the past two days, he pretended to be you before claiming my virginity for himself.”

“Did you fuck him still?”

I flinch.

“Did you push him away?” He steps forward. “Or did you beg for more?”

I walk backward.

“Did. You. Come?”

Brayden chuckles. Even if I hadn’t broke up and confessed my sins, Bastian had made sure of it. Or ruined any chance of us ever being together.

Bastian wasn’t after my body.

He was after my mind.

My soul.

*My secrets.*

“Brayden I-I am so—”

A large ball of fire blasting into the air cuts my words off. It comes straight from the fireplace and horror eclipses my eyes as I stare at Brayden’s large body knocked off to the ground. It is so strong he doesn’t lift his head and passes out.

I run toward him as another blasting wave crashes around us, almost taking me down. Fear seizes my bones and all I have as protection is a thin sheet. Flames turn into smoke.

That’s when it hits me.

The scent.

It was gas.

“Brayden,” I whisper, coughing when I inhale the smoke.

The fire has now caught onto to the lit candles in the room. There is no way for the mist to flow out. Fuck. We’re trapped.

“B-Brayden.”

Using my elbow to cover my nose, I scramble on my knees and whimper when my hand touches his still body. Visionless, I feel for his chest and sigh in relief when it rises and falls. But his pulse feels faint.

I must get him out of here.

My vision blurs as I search a way out. With each passing second, my hope dies. Another ball of fire bursts, and this time, they lick my arms and face. It burns, and I hiss in pain.

*Thump.*

*Thump.*

The faint sound rings in my ear. It's of someone banging against something hard. Maybe the gate at the top of stairs.

“Dove? Brayden?” Bastian's strong voice filters in.

“Bas... Bastian...”

“Dove!”

“He... here.”

I'm clutching the sheets to my chest in a death grip when steady hands touch my face. They pull me closer and push my hair behind my ears before sitting me up slightly.

“Dove.” Bastian's trembling voice makes me cry in relief.

But it's short-lived. Because I remember Brayden is lying unconscious beside me. I curl my fingers around Bastian's wrist and cough before murmuring, “Bray...”

“Shh... Don't talk.”

“He's h-hurt.”

“For once, listen to me, Dove. I'm getting you of here.”

I'm lifted in the air in his arms. My eyes sting, and it's a struggle to breathe. “No. Sa-save Brayden.”

He runs up the stairs. We've almost reached when there's a loud crash behind us. Both of us jolt and look back. A cry of

pain rips from Bastian's chest because a low hanging part of the ceiling falls a few feet from his brother.

The whole basement is consumed in fire. The walls, the crumbling ceiling... everything.

When I gaze above, another patch of ceiling is coming undone.

Right above Brayden.

“Sa-save him, Bastian,” I whisper, summoning what little strength I have left. He can only carry one person and leave the other behind. I know what my request means for my fate but I never wanted the brothers apart.

Not like this.

I gaze at Bastian, my monster, as torment locks his beautiful features. I raise my hand and bring it to my face and murmur, “Go to him.”

But his decision was made when he chose me.

Over his own blood.

Hefting me higher when I cough and my hand drops, he runs up the rest of the stairs. Flinging the revolving door open with his shoulder, he carries me away from the fire.

Away from my death.

Like an avenging angel.

The door behind gets lost in the mist the farther we run.

I try to stay awake, but it's not long before I succumb to darkness.

# CHAPTER 17

THE PARAMEDICS, FIREFIGHTERS, AND POLICE OFFICERS surround the Rutherford mansion. They flitter, hum and chatter in a sea of blurs, trying to control and make sense of the macabre scene.

The mysterious fire has consumed the whole left wing of the house.

Numbness sinks into my skin.

Because the inevitable truth slammed into me the second we stormed out that Brayden couldn't make it.

He's gone.

Because of me.

Because Bastian chose me.

When I came to, I was lying on a bed in the paramedic's van while they looked me over. There was an oxygen mask placed over my mouth. Apparently, I had breathed in a lot of smoke.

I had panicked and almost taken it off. Being around strangers made my anxiety rise higher.

Bastian was nowhere to be seen.

When I asked a nurse, she said he was fine and had gone to answer the authorities. It brought another wave of alarm. My experience hasn't been actually been kind with them.

I needed to escape before they recognized me.

"How long?" I ask for the umpteenth time.

“We need to call your guardians, ma’am.”

“I live alone,” I lied. “I feel fine. Just let me go.”

“Sorry. The police would like to question before you’re allowed to leave.”

No way I’m getting involved in another investigation. I just can’t. When she squints at my visible shudder, I relax my expression and nod. “Can you please get me Bastian?” She hesitates, so I soften my expression. “Please.”

“Okay. Wait.”

“Thank you.”

The second she disappears into the crowd, I rip the IV and the mask off before escaping. They’ve dressed me in a sweatshirt and pants so no one recognizes me when I put on the hood.

On the streets, multiple vans hang in the corner. They’re broadcasting this incident on their live feed.

“It appears tragedies never stop haunting this small town.” The lady says into the camera before pointing behind her. “This happens to be the most horrific of them all. Because the heir, Brayden Rutherford, to the Rutherford’s legacy was a victim of the fire. His remains yet to be recovered.”

I run as tears fall like river down my cheeks.

I’m thirsty and panting when I shove the door open to my home. Locking it behind, I slump to the ground. It’s my fault. All my fucking fault. This isn’t how it was supposed to go down. Wiping my tears, I stand on shaky legs and make my way to my bedroom.

There’s no Bastian waiting.

I almost wish he was here.

I can’t believe I killed someone.

In a split second, everything is changed irreversibly. Switching on the light, I round my bed and plump down on it. I gaze out the open window but the moon doesn’t hold the same peace.

Sinister sensation crawl over my spine, and I shiver.

Even wearing the clean hoodie, I can smell the faintness of the smoke. I look at my hands and they're black and dirty. It even clings beneath my nails. Closing my eyes takes me back to the basement.

I curse, itching to take off my clothes.

Running to the bathroom, I tear them off one by one. Standing naked underneath the shower, I twist the knob until water hits my skin. Leaning with my palms against the tiles, I let it pour down on me.

It could be hours or minutes when I wrap the towel around and return to the room.

My feet come to a halt.

The light is off, which I remember leaving on, and my heart thuds behind my ribs. Fear crawls up my spine as I feel the evil's presence.

The all-too-familiar and suffocating presence.

A full body shiver courses through my limbs as I glance left and right, searching. The terror I'm feeling isn't anything like the one Bastian inflicted. Silence is so sharp it could cut the air rushing through the window.

My instinct is to run, but I keep my pace slow and alert, as I walk toward my dresser for the hidden gun. I fix my hair while looking in the mirror. If I pretend evil isn't here, it won't hurt me.

It's been my motto my whole life.

Yet it has failed me every time too.

Pretending is foolish. But it's also my only hope of surviving.

I study the reflection in the mirror staring back at me. Blue eyes, sharp and rosy cheekbones, perfect nose and pink lips, framed by long and wavy blonde hair. Every day, I stare into this face that everyone believes innocent and angelic and kind. I believe it is.

But the one I've locked eyes with... isn't mine.

"Hello, Dahlia," I whisper.

My twin smiles. "Dove, you did good."

It takes everything inside me not to flinch when she comes closer and lays her hand on my shoulder. I keep up the nonchalant act of brushing my hair so as not to spook her or reveal all the trauma she's bringing up of our shared childhood.

The twin—me—who was always seen against the one condemned to the shadows.

It's why she won't rest until she's destroyed me.

"One down. Three to go," Dahlia says with a cold glint in her eyes.

"Did you set the fire?"

"Yes."

"It wasn't the plan, Dahlia."

Her nails dig painfully in my shoulders. In a scolding tone, she sneers, "Neither was softening toward the boys."

Vehemence drips from her body and it's somewhat valid. The Rutherfords killed our parents. Had they known of Dahlia's existence, they would've murdered her too. While I spent my childhood traipsing and hidden around the world, my sister's was opposite.

Dahlia had always been different.

Vindictive.

Cold.

Emotionless.

She was diagnosed with antisocial personality disorder, which is why our parents kept her close and under supervision. Though hardly affectionate, she loved them in her own twisted way. So, when she witnessed their death, she vowed to make everyone involved pay.

To the world, the Winthropes had only one daughter.

“I am not. And you could’ve warned me Brayden had a twin. It just complicates things for us. They’re investigating into the fire. What if it trails back to us?”

“That won’t happen.”

Her hands drop, and she moves along my pictures I hanged on the wall. None have her or our parents. I turn to face her and swallow before asking, “How?”

“Did it hurt?”

I frown at the strange question. “Hurt what?”

“When Bastian took your virginity?” she casually asks before lifting one frame off the wall. It has aunt Mila, Uncle Tej, and I at a beach from our trip last year. It’s the first time I felt I was part of a family. Another kind of dread fills me.

“Where are Aunt and Uncle, Dahlia?” I demand, trying not to let my fear show. Not that she can’t hear it. They’re my only weakness and she knows. It’s the reason I’m descending to her level of cruelty.

“First, answer my question.”

“No. Tell me.”

Rolling her eyes at me, she answers, “They’re safe. Now answer mine.”

“Yes. It hurt.”

“But did you enjoy?”

“No.”

“Oh yeah? Because that hickey on your neck screams something else.” Smirking, she crosses the distance and sits on the bed. “I think you had much too fun with the boys. While it doesn’t matter to me as long as you fulfil your end of the bargain, don’t forget our purpose. It will only devastate you, sis.”

“Killing them for their father’s sin is wrong.”

“Blood for blood. Death for death.” She drops the amused mask she’s perfected to blend with the rest of humans. “Those

are the words we live by. Those are the ones we'll die for."

"You put me in danger too," I accuse, realizing I'm only a mere pawn to her. "What if I had died?"

"But you didn't. I have to give it to you," she praises, tilting her head. "You had both brothers wrapped around your fingers. Neither of them would've let you die."

"Bastian is on to me, Dahlia." She doesn't react, only watches calmly. "Even if you somehow make the investigation go away, he won't rest."

Just thinking of Bastian and the agony he must be feeling at the loss of his beloved brother threatens to kill me. While I had fooled Brayden of our toxic connection, I hadn't conned Bastian.

He saw the real me.

He didn't trust me.

And yet... he saved me over his twin.

If he uncovers my part in his twin's death, I will unleash the monster that lies in him. The one to rival my sister's evilness.

Everyone believes a man to be the villain.

But in our tale, I was the villain.

"Bastian wasn't like Brayden," I whisper.

A sinister smile stretches on her lips. "The night isn't over, Dove. We haven't played our checkmate move yet."

# EPILOGUE

*A WEEK LATER*

Brayden is dead.

Burned into ashes.

There wasn't a piece of him left to be properly buried. An empty casket in his name was lowered to the ground. Even as pain tried to drown me, I couldn't show it. Because to the world, the Rutherfords are untouchable. Unflinching. Immortal.

My brother's death is my own fault. I left him to die in the basement. In the fire that I know was perpetuated.

*If only I hadn't left him there...*

If only I hadn't chosen her.

My little dove, whom I haven't seen since that night. Because she knows I'm after her. She knows I believe her to be the cause of the fire. Because my little devious liar gave the statement to the police that put me in cuffs.

Some elaborate story of how I was jealous of Brayden and her relationship. How I lost it after seeing them together. That I had been waiting for my opportunity.

*Well played, little dove. Well played.*

We have the authorities in our pockets, but they can't blatantly ignore an accusation such as this. For the public, we had to play the part. Hence, this farce of a court hearing.

My not-so-innocent dove sits on my right along with her family and lawyer. She hasn't looked at me once. It makes my fingers itch to go to up to her, yank her head back until I uncover all the pretty, terrible secrets she's hiding.

She won't get rid of me.

Not in this lifetime.

Not in death.

"Present the witness," the judge calls.

Dove rises, and as she walks across from me, I roam my gaze down her demure skirt, a fitted black shirt with a blazer. Her curls are straightened and flowing down her back. Even dressed like a nun, she makes my cock hard. While my heart despises her.

When she sits in the witness stand, her face is a blank mask.

*Look at me, little liar.*

I can feel her fear like a live wire. Any doubt I had evaporates. Her arriving in this town, befriending Brayden, was a con from the beginning. Instead of breaking her like I had vowed, I let my lust for her distract me.

It cost me my brother.

She will pay for this.

She takes the oath before her lawyer begins his questioning. "Miss Winthorpe, did you see Mr. Rutherford on the night of the fire?"

"Yes."

"Was your boyfriend, Mr. Brayden Rutherford, with you when you ran into Mr. Bastian?"

"Yes. We had just arrived when Bastian saw us and was furious. H-he had been stalking me for months, warning me to break up with Brayden, and when I didn't, he threatened he will never let us be together. I-I didn't actually—"tears that feel real fall down her cheeks—"try to kill us. Kill me."

Her answers are all rehearsed. A big fat lie. But she delivers with the perfect emotion, innocent expression and pain for her dead boyfriend. And why wouldn't she? She had been playing us this whole summer.

Her lawyer asks a bunch of more questions until it's my turn.

But as I gaze at the judge and the jury, I see my fate written on their faces. They find me guilty.

Meanwhile, she counters my lawyer's questions perfectly in that soft, depressed voice.

I'm fighting a losing battle.

The judge goes to his cabin before announcing the result. Two hours later, he returns with a stoic expression.

My attention zeroes in on Dove.

Her chest heaves, hands twisting in her skirt upon feeling my glare on her.

"After hearing both the sides and looking over the evidence, I find the accused, Mr. Bastian Rutherford, guilty of arson and third-degree charge of murder. He is hereby sentenced to ten years in prison." With that, the judge pounds the gavel.

The guard handcuffs my wrists again and pushes me forward. My father is already on the phone, talking in a pissed tone while my mother looks close to tears.

Something cracks inside me seeing her.

*Dove Winthorpe.*

She's the only one to blame. As I'm about to pass her, I grab her arm and yank her against my chest. Those stormy, treacherous eyes meet mine.

"I'm your nightmare, little dove. Your monster. And I will chase you to the ends of the earth. Till the end of time."

"Bastian..."

“You thought my obsession was scary?” Bending, I whisper in her ear, “It’s my hate you should’ve been afraid of.”

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Simran is an Indian dark and taboo romance author, making you fall in love with the villains. Her books are packed with over the top possessive alphaholes, sassy and kind heroines, and packed with suspense and spice. When she's not writing, you can find her binge watching or reading.

If you loved trickster and want to read more from Simran. Then check out my books below. They're all available to read in kindle unlimited.

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