

THE FOX FAMILY CRIME SYNDICATE

LOVE IS FOR
PRINCESSES IN FAIRY
TALES, NOT THE
MAFIA

hate
MIE

SUMMER O'TOOLE

Hate Me

The Fox Family Crime Syndicate Book 2

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Epilogue

Dear reader,

Acknowledgments

Also by Summer O'Toole

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Author's note

This book is a dark romance. There are many scenes of graphic violence and sexual content. The hero of this book is not a good man. There are several scenes involving non/dub-con (for a complete list of content in please visit SummerOtoole.com/content).

This book will not be for everyone, and please for the love of God know me in real life, don't read. But if you do, remember this is a work of fiction.

Dark romance is an incredible, beautiful, gritty way of storytelling that people enjoy for many different reasons. Reading and writing something does not mean you condone it in real life. If that were the case, Stephen King should have been locked up long ago.

Please also note that this is not meant to accurately represent safe kink.

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Playlist

K eep an eye out for footnotes to pair specific scenes to the songs that inspired them. I'd recommend playing the suggested song or album until the end of the chapter or ornamental break. If reading on a Kindle, you can tap the numbered superscript and it will show you the footnotes without losing your page.

You can listen to the full playlist at [SummerOtoole.com/Playlists](https://www.summerotoole.com/playlists)

Speakers - Acoustic Mixtape—Sam Hunt

Fed Up—Ghostmane

Pull That Trigger—Tomme Profitt, Fleurie

Run My Mouth—Ella Mai

ALPHA—Layto

Bottom of the River—Delta Rae

Something to Someone—Dermot Kennedy

Houndin—Layto

Lost It All—Jill Andrews

you broke me first—Tate McRae

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Fine—Kyle Hume

Tears of Gold—Faouzia

Something in the Orange—Zach Bryan

Darkest Hour—Andrea Russett

Hurts So Good—Astrid S

Love Is a Bitch—Two Feet

Insane—Post Malone

Villain—Julia Wolf

Hurt Me—Låpsley

Pray for Me—The Weeknd, Kendrick Lamar

i feel everything—Amelia Moore

Next—Shaker

I Chose Violence—iamjakehill

Mount Everest—Labrinth

E-GIRLS ARE RUINING MY LIFE—CORPSE, Savage Gaf

Chills – Dark Version—Mickey Valen, Joey Myron

Dandelions – slowed + reverb—Ruth B., slater

you should see me in a crown—Billie Eilish

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Fine—Kyle Hume
Tears of Gold—Faouzia
Something in the Orange—Zach Bryan
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Prologue

Finn

T*en years ago*

My stomach flips seeing her dark brown hair whip around her the wind. I turn up the volume on the staticky radio playing old country to cover the sound of the open window. And my beating heart.

My fingers tap on the worn leather of the old steering wheel fight urge to reach out and touch hers. The cab of the truck is dark, the headlights lighting up the country road ahead of us. Ranch fence lines zoom past sideview, the occasional yellow sign warning of deer crossings.

Effie rolls down her window, and the fresh smell of pine rushes in.¹

It jumps like a skipping stone in my chest. Sharp, staccato hops that you anxious and waiting for the drop.

Effie and I had known each other for years. We're only a couple apart, and our fathers run in the same circles. Those circles being the r dirty criminal underworld. But it wasn't until we graduated high school years ago that we really started spending time together as more than crime bosses' kids. I had my brothers of course, but there was something freeing about spending time with another person who knew what it was

to wake up in the middle of the night to gunshots and eat breakfast
smell of bleach the next morning.

She understood that I didn't break the cashier's nose because I was
but because he disrespected me, and as a Fox, I can't let that happen
consequences. I glance down at my bruised knuckles wrapped around
wheel now and can almost feel the sting of the ice she held on them
she cursed our fathers and their damn egos.

As if reading my mind she turns to me from the passenger seat, 'your hand feeling?'

I flex my swollen fingers and take my eyes off the two lane road just
enough to meet hers. We're passing one of the few streetlights and the
face in glow makes her mahogany eyes shimmer like amber. My throat tightens
school
"Fine."

I may be imagining it, but I think I see her frown slightly at my
answer. It's not fine. My knuckles feel like they were run over by a
roller. But it's not like I'm gonna say that out loud.
ting the
adlights
it in the

I spot a sign for Bartlett Farms. "We're almost there."

Bartlett Farms is a small, family-run berry farm. They have fields
at leave strawberries and long hedges of blueberries and some other stuff
remember. The large, white farm house that we see as we pull into
e years drive has a wraparound porch faintly glowing with old-fashioned gas
ich and The couple who lives here now is in their seventies and the white
l a few chipping and curling off the wood siding, but the porch steps are
an two swept clean, and the flower baskets neatly pruned.

The Bartletts are proud and honest people, which is probably why
nothing father chose them. They don't know I'm coming tonight—no one does
was like

to the when the truck crawls past the house to the back, a light flicks on u
They must recognize my truck, and the light turns off within a few sec
nted to, “This looks more like a place you’d take a girl to murder her, n
withoutdate,” Effie muses as she looks up at the dilapidated barn we’ve pa
and the front of. I think she says something else, but I can’t hear over the
after a stumping in my ears.

A date? Fuck.

‘How’s I mean, I’m not complaining. I’ve had a thing for her since we wer
fucking years old. Back then of course, I just thought she was th
ist long beautiful girl I’d ever seen and wanted to hold her hand. But now,
ie rusty deny the number of times I’ve jacked off in the shower to the though
ightens. soft skin, graceful curves, and bone-warming smile.

I never considered she might think of me the same way.

y short And that thought makes anxiety roil in my stomach.

a steam Because I want it to be true. I want it more than anything I c
remember wanting in my life.

I lead us through the overgrown grass behind the barn to the
elds of There’s enough moonlight filtering through the leaves to guide our fee
I can’t Effie’s foot snags on a root and she flies forward. Instinctively, I re
the dirt and grab her around the waist before she breaks her fucking neck.

lamps. Her body is warm and soft, and I immediately notice how her che
paint is and falls with heavy breaths. Her pretty pink lips part and I am froze
always spot as she looks up at me through her lashes.

I could lean down and kiss her right now. I could. But I don’t. Ir
/hy my drop my arm and continue ahead, “Just a bit further.”

oes—so The rest of the way, Effie walks behind me instead of at my side so
follow in my exact steps. We arrive at the lake without any othe

upstairs. accidents. The trees part, and the foliage thins from rooty brush to thin
ponds. Weeds. The silvery water ripples faintly with the night air feathering abo
ot on a Effie eyes the wooden dock stretched out in front of us skeptically
rked in thing looks one gust of wind from falling down.”

and blood “It will be worth it.” I swallow down the rising lump of nerves in my
and hold out my hand. “Promise.” She sets her hand in mine and bur
erupt in my stomach. *Fuck.*

the seven We walk out to the end of the dock. It does creak ominously w
the most steps, and it would be my fucking luck if this old dock chooses to
I can’t crumble. “Look down,” I tell her.

to of her I don’t need to look. I already know what’s down there. Instead, I
her. Her brows rise and a sweet smile tugs on her lips. “That’s beautifi
says, eyes still taking in the web of water lilies floating on top of the w

Big white blooms dot the water, the moonlight making them look e
an ever especially with cricket songs humming in the air and the gentle breez
spins and catches me staring. I want to look away, pretend I
woods. memorizing every feature and line of her face. But she steps closer, s
at. Still, our chests almost touch.

reach out My hand trembles as I slowly reach out and tuck a strand of hair
her ear. She bites her lip when my fingers graze the shell of her ear. V
st rise thinking, I take my thumb and pull her lip out from under her teeth. Th
n to the thick and heavy. Our breaths are weighty as we stay locked in de
contact.

instead I I swallow hard as my thumb slides down to her chin and I tilt her h
My other hand cups her cheek, and she lightly places her hands on my
she can I’ve never been so nervous in my life.

or near- She rises on her tiptoes and our lips almost—

in, wiry A sharp ring pierces the air. My pocket buzzes with my vibrating phone. I love it, and the hypnotic moment shatters. She steps back at the same time as I, “Thataway and dig into my jeans. I realize it isn’t a phone call, but a slew of text messages coming in one after the other making the text alert tone come across my throatpinging like a call. Missed call notifications also come in.

butterflies They keep popping up again and again and I realize the time stands still for a moment back an hour. I usually don’t get service out here. My brother’s car is stuck in traffic with ourpops up on the screen, and I answer.

right to “Where the fuck are you, Finneas?” Cash growls as soon as I answer. “I’ve been trying to reach you for a fucking hour!” I can’t put my finger on why I watchthere’s something off about his tone. He’s an angry person, yelling at me. “I’ll be right there,” she says default, but there’s something anguished about the way he snarls.

later. “I just got service. What’s going on?” I ask and Effie looks up at me with her real, worried brows. She knows that an urgent call like this from family isn’t normal. “I need a request to buy milk on my way home.

wasn’t “Dad’s been arrested—”

so close “What for?” I holler back.

“They’re saying he shot Governor Albright.”

behind “*What?*” My blood chills. Albright has been a longtime ally.

Without “Get your ass home. Now.” My bruised hand aches with how tight the grip is on my phone. “And Finn?”

keep eye “Yeah?”

“Get home safe. There’s a war coming.”

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CHAPTER 1

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CHAPTER 1

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Arrivals

Effie

Present

I didn't think my father would say yes to the *Les Arnaqueuse* because they're an all-women crew. Even if they've pulled off some biggest heists in modern history—a Monet from the Louvre, a collection of Faberge eggs from a Russian oligarch, an entire *wall* from a building in Bristol with a Banksy original—I could go on.

But then again, he loves any reason to fuck with the Foxes. So when the infamous crew reached out to him about the Fox cache and wanting me as a backer, he didn't hesitate. And if the rumors of the worth of the Fox cache were true...well, I suppose he figured the potential payout was worth the risk.

What did surprise me, however, was the fact he wanted *me* to be the liaison. My brothers were deep in dealings with the New York families and expected him to have Bruno, his bruiser of a Capo, take lead. But of course his misogynistic ass didn't think a man could work with women without fucking them, so that left me.

"This job is too important to risk because a whore can't keep her mouth closed."

I'm sure he is just as unhappy about it as I am.

I understand I have a role to fill, a duty to family, but I always figured I would be marrying whoever my father decided was most beneficial to the family. He's kept me out of almost all operation details, and I'm fine with that. Not that I am fine with him pawning me off like a dowry of course. I'm resigned to know my place, my worth.

I hear the jet before I see it. Jonathon hands me a pair of neon yellow earmuffs. He almost comically fulfills his role as my security by dressing himself identically to the Secret Service. Black suit and tie, starch white shirt, black sunglasses and an earpiece. The jet breaks through the clouds and its nose lines up with the runway's yellow lines. I slide on the earmuffs and I laugh to myself when Jonathon just clenches his jaw and makes his bare hands instead of putting on a pair himself. *Men.*

The small jet is the only plane in sight in the whole private airport. My father no doubt used his considerable resources to make sure no one would be here when the crew arrived. I wonder what would happen if the Foxes were a local *Les Arnaqueuses* were in town. Would they know they were coming? My mind involuntarily recalls a warm summer night and the petals of water lilies under the moonlight.

I swallow the knot in my throat and remind myself that was a long time ago. As the plane rolls to a stop and lowers the steps, I try to replay memories from when my heart sang, with memories from when my heart screamed. My favorite cousin unrecognizable from the beating heart. Watching from a window as another soldier was curb stomped, hearing that horrible crushing sound three stories up.

That is who the Foxes are. Brutal. Ruthless. Heartless.

And Finneas Fox is the worst of them.

The bloodshed only stopped when a delicate and brittle ceasefire had been agreed upon before the two families eradicated each other. Mutually for the destruction or survival.

I hate what they did, but I hate what we did too. Framing Finn's wife, but Aiden Fox, for the murder of the governor, driving him to kill him in prison. All of it sickens me.

I wasn't cut out for this life. I'm cold but not ruthless. I'm cold because I was never shown the warmth of love, except for that one summer night—*forget about that, that Finn no longer exists.*

A woman steps out, her blonde hair slicked back in a tight bun, her face visible between a tight, cropped tank and cargo pants cinched at the waist. With one scan of her athletic build, I'm sure she knows twenty different ways to kill me with her bare hands.

My father meets her at the bottom of the steps, shaking her hand and taking the designer duffel bags from her hands and putting them in the trunk of the limo waiting on the tarmac.

The rest of the women follow and once everyone has deplaned, I walk over to the group. "My daughter, Euphemia," my father says, handing out as I step up to the circle of people. "She will be your point of contact and has already arranged your living arrangements."

"You can call me Effie." My father grinds his jaw, hating my nickname but quickly turns his sleazy grin back on—always putting on a show.

The women introduce themselves. The one that looks like a mercenary is named Linnie and has only a slight French accent. A short-statured woman with tanned skin introduces herself as Hadis, her dark brows with flecks of gold flit over the surroundings, constantly sur

ire was reminding me of a hawk. The last woman, with short buzzed, dark hair and assured fair skin is Marguerite.

The drive to our home is passed with my father jabbering and the mother, politely laughing at his sexist jokes. Though I watch Linnie's knees whiten around her champagne glass, and I half expect it to explode.

I'm going to like her.

My mother greets us and presents the dining table full of home-made—No, Italian food as if she made it herself. I doubt she even got out of bed minutes before we arrived.

“You all must be starving after that flight, how long was it now?” mother asks as she flits around the table to her seat at the opposing head. My father.

“Just shy of nine hours,” Linnie responds, tucking in her chair and folding her napkin onto her lap.

Once we are seated and begin eating, I notice my mother surreptitiously observing Marguerite's shaved head and can practically hear her in my ear. “What would possess a beautiful woman to do that to herself? Must she be looking for a husband, that's for damn sure.” And a healthy dose of Greek.

My mother and father's marriage was political, of course. The merger, the Luciano and Papadimitriou families. Though, I do think they've learned to love each other in their own way. Like how a spoiled child loves his favorite toy simply because it's his and no one else gets to have it. I guess I know my worth was my hand in marriage.

Marriage for love is for princesses in the fairytales, not princesses in the Mafia.

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I check my watch again. They should be arriving any minute. I strap my respirator and cross my ankle over my knee. The room is empty and

I am sitting in the only chair in the room. The only light is coming from three monitors mounted above the door streaming three of the many colors covering every inch of this old hotel.

It was decommissioned years ago because the whole thing is riddled with asbestos and when renovations were needed there was nothing to do but abandon it.

Now, it's my playground. ¹

A black, windowless van drives through an opening in the concrete fence that surrounds the dilapidated property. One of my men in a suit drags the fence closed behind the van.

A subtle sort of adrenaline leaks into my bloodstream. It's not deadening but heightening. The blue light emanating from the screens is crisper, behind the respirator fresher, and the need to hunt growing stronger.

I used to be consumed with my thirst for violence. After my first suicide, I wanted nothing more than to feel the slick, warmth of fresh blood spilled on my hands. The desire—*need*—is still there, but it's quiet and patient and calculating.

It seethes through my veins as I watch a man being pushed out of the van, a black pillowcase over his head and his hands zip tied in front of him. He stumbles, crouched and shoulders curled, as he tries to brace himself in his new surroundings.

Calvin, my second, jumps out of the back of the van and rips the cap off Martin's head. His usually neatly styled Ivy League cut is mussed, and he's annoyed but amused when his first instinct is to raise his bound hands to straighten his hair. *The pretentious fuck.*

Pretentious *and* stupid. We hired him as a fence for a parcel of diamonds from the vault and he swapped half of the stones with fakes, pocketing the real ones.

And sure, we could have roughed him—broken a few bones, retrieved the stones—and threatened him if he ever pulled another stunt like that representing the Fox name. But I needed *more*.

I use my phone to remotely unlock a door that used to be a back entrance. Calvin opens it and ushers Martin in, my eyes track the movement on the screens. All the doors and elevators in the hotel were set up with electronic locks for key cards. I've reprogrammed them so that I can do but which doors open from the palm of my hand.

I see Calvin's lips move as he explains the game to him and the ceiling, my mouth curls watching fear sink into his eyes. Now, the fun can begin.

The rules to the game are simple: *Run*.

He jumps back when Calvin pulls a switchblade, but he only cuts his father's blood ties. I see but can't hear Calvin say one more thing and then Martin sprints down the hall. The monitors above me change as the motion on the cameras follow his path.

His white dress shirt is stuck to him, sweat making a dark spot down

he backmiddle of his back. He paces and pounds the elevator buttons, running front of over his face waiting for an elevator that is never going to come himself another few seconds of waiting, he ditches the elevator and decides stairs.

case off I watch him scamper up the steps, trying each door at every landing and I'm keep them locked. On the seventh floor, he kicks the door and s to fix pounding his fists.

This is always my favorite part. When they start to crack, to break and regress to a child throwing a tantrum when it finally sinks in that they leaving these halls alive. Any composure goes out the window with ved the of their hope.

it while The next time he slams his shoulder into the door, I unlock it tumbles to the floor, the door finally opening. He regains his footing service looks around frantically, trying to decide which way to run down the elements of rooms. He doesn't know that he's merely a mouse in my maze. It up with matter which way he chooses because every route is a dead end until I control it's not.

It's the control as much as—if not more—than the violence that I corner of Total and complete control over his destiny, helps settle the anxiety I really always trying to eat away at me.

He arrives on my floor, red-faced and out of breath, and my blood with his approach. He starts down the hall straight toward me. The the zip the old suite I am in has been switched with a stairwell door.

it is off, When I can hear his footsteps outside, I switch off the monitors and sensors *Time's up*. My pulse races under my skin. I love watching them scurry love the anticipation of waiting blind. My breath quickening with own the footstep that draws closer.

a hand I roll my head, cracking my neck, and slide gloves over my fingers. After letters tattooed across my knuckles disappear under the black leather, they spell out two short words: CAN'T HIDE.

You can run but...The door cracks open...you can't hide.

g, but I “Hello, Martin.” His backlit frame freezes in the doorway. “I’m sorry, you could make it.”

My phone vibrates in my hand, and I look down at the picture I’ve taken. They all night to receive. There’s a torrent of feelings, making my head hurt. I wasn’t wanted to draw this out, but now seeing my confirmation proved correct. The last face staring back at me from my screen—my already-thin patience

The dark room lights up for one blinding second. The next second, he hits the ground, a bullet hole between his eyes.

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1. Fed Up—Ghostmane |

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I roll my head, cracking my neck, and slide gloves over my fingers. The letters tattooed across my knuckles disappear under the black leather. They spell out two short words: CAN'T HIDE.

You can run but...The door cracks open...you can't hide.

“Hello, Martin.” His backlit frame freezes in the doorway. “I’m so glad you could make it.”

My phone vibrates in my hand, and I look down at the picture I’ve waited all night to receive. There’s a torrent of feelings, making my head hurt. *Fuck*, I wanted to draw this out, but now seeing my confirmation proved correct—her face staring back at me from my screen—my already-thin patience snaps.

The dark room lights up for one blinding second. The next second, Martin hits the ground, a bullet hole between his eyes.



CHAPTER 2

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CHAPTER 2

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Chance

Effie

Hadis spreads out the latest surveillance photos on the table in our shared apartment, and I have to steel myself to look him eye in the face. Again.

We've rented an apartment under a fake name in the building across from the *Fox's Den*. We know Cash lives in the penthouse apartment above the restaurant. In fact, they own the whole building. I was honestly surprised they didn't own this one we're now staying in too.

It may be Cash's apartment but in the three days we've been staying here documenting everyone coming and going and establishing lines of sight through the windows, we haven't seen the eldest brother once.

Instead it's him. Finn.

I'm beginning to wonder if my father gave me this job just to torture me. If he did, it's working.

I've spent the last ten years trying my damndest to avoid all things Finneas Fox. When the Fox family shows up in the newspaper, I turn the page. When I'm obligated to attend an event he might be at, I suddenly

down with the flu. And on the rare occasion I go out with friends, I en never choose one of the many clubs and bars owned by them.

“We need to get inside. What we’re looking for is inside. I’m sure Linnie stands and palms the table, shuffling the photos around.

“They only ever have two guards at the front door...,” Hadis muses.

Marguerite leans back in her chair, rocking onto the back legs, “W you thinking?”

“But the entrance from the roof terrace has no security.” Linni approvingly at her implication.

in our
to eye.
“But how would you even get up there? The only way to get t through the apartment which we’ve already determined is always guar say, and they all look at each other with hints of a smile.

ss from
ve their
ed they
Linnie sits down and laughs, “Finding a way into places we shoul able to, is quite literally our job description.” *Right.*

My phone buzzes in my pocket and I pull it out.

Please be at Il Giardino in 30. Your father wants an update. -Bruno

ed out,
of sight
It’s an unknown number, but it’s not uncommon for him to get burner every few weeks.

I don’t typically jump to orders from my father’s lap dog, but I’m ; for an excuse to get out of this conversation. Despite the amount that’s passed and all the bloody events that have transpired betwe families, this plot still feels like betrayal, and it doesn’t sit well with m

things
urn the
y come
It’s a direct, premeditated, and unprovoked attack. If we get caught be a blatant breach of our truce and I shudder to think about what will in retribution.

The Foxes aren’t known for second chances.

sure we

of it.”



What are opened before the urbanization of June Harbor, *Il Giardino* is one of the oldest restaurants in the city; it actually has a quarter acre garden in the woods. To this day, they still use produce harvested from it and their outside seating is dispersed throughout the garden. So you can eat your Linguine here. There is Puttanesca next to the plant that grew the very same tomatoes on your garden. In my rush to get out of the apartment, by the time I step out of the door I am ten minutes early. From the sidewalk, I can almost imagine the place didn't beglory eighty years ago. Candles dot every red tablecloth-covered table, making the place glow without being too bright. The low, wooden rafters are exposed with a rustic charm and black and white vintage photos of Italy are on the walls.

a clean Maria waves to me from the hostess stand as I walk in. “Table for two tonight, Ef?” Despite the several other couples waiting for a table, a waitress gratefully reaches for a menu to seat me right away. I can't deny there are some moments of time of being a Luciano—I don't think I've waited for a table once in my entire life.

e. “Two, my father is coming.”

; it will “Inside or outside?” she asks while weaving between tables, me following her. I happen behind her.

“Outside, please.” It's a gorgeous evening, the temperature is cool and pleasant, but not so cold I need more than a light, long sleeve.

As she leads me under an arching trellis of green beans to an empty table, my feet stutter to a halt, my heart leaping into my throat. I have to force myself to flatten myself on the brick pavers and hide behind the raised bed. Because through the climbing poles wrapped in green vines, I see

Finn is sitting at a table by himself, eyes on a book in one hand while the other takes a drag from a cigarette. Despite being bombarded with pictures of him daily, I am not prepared for the pure feeling of suffocation when I get seeing him in person.

Do I leave? Do I tell him to leave? My father is going to be here soon. I don't want to leave. I don't want to lose him. I don't want to be alone.

"Everything okay?" Maria's voice shakes me from my trance.

"Hmm? Oh yeah, this is great." I don't bother to give her a fake smile. I sit at the table, polite, plopping myself down at the table trying to catch my breath. The waiter doesn't have any plates on his table, only an espresso cup and saucer. I hope he is done eating and will leave before my father gets here.

hoping.

Maria leaves me and it's a good thing I know the menu by heart because she can't read a damn word. I pick at the corner of the menu trying to find something to occupy my shaking hands.

The garden is surrounded by a brick wall and our tables are placed in front of it, at the end of the rows of raised beds. There are no other tables in our row and goosebumps run down my arms, being as alone with Finn as I have been in a decade.

I can feel his dark presence, like a cloud floating in front of me, creating an instant chill. *Can he feel me like I feel him?*

The smell of cigarette smoke wafts over to me and instantly transports me back to the night we climbed out on the roof and shared a cigarette.

y table, taught him the constellations. I've smelled cigarettes a thousand times right the but for some reason that is the one memory the scent is intrinsically tied to. The garden makes something sharp in my chest pang.

him. I try to shrink myself in my chair, but I can't look away. I'm entranced while he the way his long neck bobs as he takes a sip and how the setting sun glows on his cheekbones look chiseled and cutting. He flips a page, and his eyes flicker up briefly and my heart nearly stops. Luckily he doesn't notice me. I check the time anxiously wondering when the hell my father is getting home after. If it wasn't a busy Friday night, I'd ask to move inside, but I already have a line of waiting guests.

A server comes out with a bottle of wine I didn't order. "Compliments to your family," he says and pours me a glass while I wait. I quickly eat. Finn before pouring myself another. I jump when my phone pings with a text message.

Here's Change of plans. He won't be coming.

Thank god. I finish the wine that's left in my glass before throwing a napkin in my seat and standing up to leave, thanking Mary, Joseph, and just to that I can leave before—

"Effie?" His voice is deeper than I remember but instantly recognizable. I bite my cheek and consider running, but that would be suspicious. I can't pretend that a small part of me wants nothing more than to sit down at his table and pretend like the last ten years never happened.

I turn slowly and hope the mock surprise I have pasted on my face is believable. "Oh my god, hi. I didn't see you there." *God, what a terrible*

"Are you leaving?" he asks, ducking his head to get a clear line of sight through the web of beans.

while I "I was waiting for someone, but they canceled," I say quickly and

s since, around hoping he'll leave it at that.

ed to. It “And you're really gonna let that *brunello di montalcino* go to because some asshole stood you up?” He nods to the half-drunk bottle iced by table.

l makes “Oh, no, I was waiting for—it wasn't a date.” My cheeks burn.

es flick “Good.” He leans back and crosses his legs at the ankles and takes ;, and I drag of this cigarette and my skin lights on fire as he blatantly trails l ig here. down, then back up my body.

skipped “Good?”

“Join me.” The corner of his mouth tilts up, and he nods to the empty seats to his table.

empty it “I don't think that's a good idea. I should be going.” I try to leave another keyword being try. I can't tell you why I don't ignore him and leave ought to.

“It's been a decade, Effie. Our families have been at peace for long my right?” I stare at him, not knowing what to say. Technically we are a kid Jesus for all he knows. Denying the truce would be suspicious, but joining would be a risk too. Finn can read between the lines better than anyone I've ever met. He notices the tiniest details, and I am terrified I'll give someone as hell away.

n to sit “Please...” he looks down and swallows deeply. When he looks back again, his eyes have a raw vulnerability to them that tugs on my heart. It makes me wonder if maybe he missed me as much as I missed him. “*Just line. drink.*”

of sight “Okay,” I manage to squeak out. I wipe my sweaty palms on my jeans and grab the bottle of wine from my table.

nd spin The first thing he says when I sit down is, “God, I've missed you.”

And I wonder how the hell I'm going to get through this night.

o waste

e on my



a slow

his eyes

“I think we are the last people here.” I look around the garden, now empty of all other diners and servers. It's been three hours since I sat down, and my chaircheeks hurt from smiling so much.

“I don't want to say goodbye.” Finn's dark green eyes look at me again, earnestly, like he's begging this night to never end.

It's like I But it has to.

It's a cruel irony that we reconnect at the same time I'm planning a goodbye in a few years, and I'm about to rob him of his family's finest possessions.

My mouth hangs open, still trying to formulate my response while the string lights lining the brick walls turn off. I look at him guiltily. “That's our cue.”

“Fair enough,” he sighs, standing and coming around to my side of the table, holding out his hand.

I shouldn't take it. I should walk away right now. Tuck this night away in my heart and memory to hold onto but nothing more. But it's so dark in the garden now and maybe they forgot we are here, and maybe if I just reach out and take his hand right now in the night, it will be like it never happened in the first place. I must take too long to decide because he tucks his hand into his pocket and gives me a weak smile. I stand and we start walking back through the garden in the morning.

I must take too long to decide because he tucks his hand into his pocket and gives me a weak smile. I stand and we start walking back through the garden in the morning.

rows of vegetables, passing orange squash blossoms and a bush of rosemary.

It feels so natural to slip my hand in the crook of his elbow and grasp his bicep. I feel him tense slightly, but then he leans into me and to stop time. This night has been a gift I never expected, and I know as we walk out of this restaurant, the illusion will shatter.

I don't even realize I've stopped walking until he pauses and faces empty of gently peels my hand off his arm and holds it in front of him, picking and my other. My breathing slows as he looks down at me. "I meant what I don't want to say goodbye to you. Not again."

at me His thumb slowly rubs circles on the back of my hand. The motion is small but jarring. It's too comforting, too soothing, and I can't happen. We may have a truce right now but for how much longer? heist to "It's really late, I have to go." I bite my tongue to hold back all the want to say and tug my hands away.

hen the I brush past him, but his fingers wrap around my wrist, and he says "I think back. He catches me with a hand on my hip. The breath is snatched from my lungs when his fingers that were around my wrist raise to trace the curve of my chin with a featherlight touch.

His fingers trail up my jaw and into my hair, "Come home with me." I say as a "I can't—"

en right "I'm parked out back, no one will see us leave together."

out and "But—"

d in the "I've waited ten years. I'm not waiting another minute." His grip on my hair tightens and he pulls me to him, crashing his lips down on me. I'm pocketfrozen for a moment, and then I'm melting into him, fisting the collar of his shirt and breathing him in like he's the only pure oxygen in the air.

fragrant My mind empties of all thoughts but the feel of his mouth on my
tastes like the sweetest forbidden fruit, and I feel more drunk on him than
lightly wine. I involuntarily whimper when he pulls away, immediately missing
I want to touch like a drug. His voice is thick and raspy. “Yeah. You’re coming
as soon as possible with me.”

He bends down and then makes me scream as he wraps his arms around
me. He hugs my thighs and throws me over his shoulder. “*Finneas!*”

He laughs. “I like that, already screaming my name.”

I gasp, my cheeks burn, and I clamp my mouth shut.

We leave through a back gate instead of going through the restaurant
Finn opens the door of his coupe with one hand, the other still wrapped
let that around my thighs. He gently deposits me in the passenger seat, and
when he leans across me to buckle me in, the smell of his rich cologne
words I wafting past me.

Finn drives like a bat out of hell, his hand never leaving my thigh.
I’m grateful that he uses the private underground garage. The last thing I
from my all this is for one of *Les Arnaqueuses* to see me and have word get back to
edge of father.

Before I even have time to unbuckle, he’s already opening the passenger
” door, sweeping out his palm. “After you, princess.” *Princess*. That one
makes my stomach flutter more than anything else he’s said to me.
convinced him to drive me to get ice cream once by saying, “I’m the I
Princess,” and he replied, “Well, who am I to deny a princess.”

” in my “I can’t believe you remember that.”

” m only “I remember every second I’ve spent with you.”

r of his My stomach twists into knots at his words. The knot only grows
bigger and tighter ball as we take the elevator to the top floor. It loose

ine. Hewhen he pushes me against the door to kiss me ravenously before le
han theinto Cash's apartment—the same one we've been surveilling for c
sing hisdrops into the pit of my stomach as we step into the apartment, and I l
g homethe click of the lock. Standing here now, I realize the gravity of the
up-ness of this whole situation.

around But then he's wrapping his arms around my waist from behind and
my neck, and I can't bring myself to resist. *Just one night*, I tell myself

I roll my head to the side, giving him more access and as he su
sensitive skin between his lips, a moan slips out of mine. "Fuck," his
unt, andtickles my neck, "you don't know how long I've waited to hear tha
rappedsound." He groans and bites down on my earlobe and my knees
I blushbuckle.

cologne His hands inch down my stomach and pinch the hem of my shirt,
his knuckles graze the skin of my stomach. "Please let me see you, I
gh. I'mtugs the hem higher, and my eyes latch onto the big window to ou
need inThrough it I can see the window of our stakeout place and panic grips
k to my I spin around. "Let's go to your room." Luckily the blinds are dow

but who knows the next time one of them is going to look out the wind
ssenger He smiles giddily, and it's such a beautiful, light expression on his
ie worddarkened features. Sweeping up my hand he leads me down the hall a
right. Ia room. It's a small room with a four-post bed and minimal other fu
Lucianoand decor—what you'd expect of a guest bedroom, but I don't let o
know this isn't his place.

Like he can't wait a second longer, he rips my shirt over my head
hands hungrily roam the bare expanse of my curves. He pauses almo
; into ahe's awestruck, and I find myself wanting to cover myself, not deser
ns a bithis adoration. If only he knew what we were planning.

ting us I move to cross my arms over my chest, but he pulls them away a
lays. Itthem at my side. “Don’t ever cover yourself in front of me. Not wh
isten to look like Aphrodite herself.”

fucked- With my arms still pinned, he bends down to kiss my throat, my ch
across the tops of my breasts. I suck in a breath with each brush of h
kissingHe straightens and dusts a kiss on my mouth, before kneeling. He co
E. to travel the length of my body with swipes of his lips and tongue.

cks the His grip on my hands doesn’t waiver, but the urge to hide lesser
; breatheach roll, curve, and freckle he kisses. His eyes lock on mine as he tea
t sweetdelicate skin above my waistband with his tongue making me shiver.
nearlypart of you is going to belong to me by the end of the night,” he whisp
my flesh and begins to undo my jeans with his teeth.

letting *Fuck if I’ve ever seen anything hotter than this man on his knees for*
Ef.” He Releasing my arms, he pulls my jeans over my hips and down my
ir right.until I’m left in nothing but a black, lace bralette and matching panties
me. He stands, fisting my hair and tipping my head back. Forcing my ga
m now,notice two eye hooks screwed into the canopy rail above the base of t
low. Finn’s lips graze my ear as he whispers, “Ever been tied up, princess?”
usually “No,” I breathe, my skin lighting on fire and a pulse beating betw
nd intolegs. I’ve had boyfriends in the past, but no matter how much I initiate
urnitureof them were even a modicum as rough as I wanted. They were prob
n that Itoo scared of my father to leave bruises. Funny, since my father
problem leaving them.

and his It’s not lost on me that this might be my one chance to exp
ost as ifsomething I’ve craved, to be at the mercy of a man not under my
ving ofthumb, and who can give me what I truly want. And if this one night
will get with Finn...then how could I say no?

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ost as ifsomething I’ve craved, to be at the mercy of a man not under my
ving ofthumb, and who can give me what I truly want. And if this one night
will get with Finn...then how could I say no?

nd pins Finn traces his bottom lip with his tongue, a wicked gleam in his eyes. “Good. Now stay right here.” I stand unflinchingly still—save the rattle of my chest as my heart hammers under it— as he goes to a dresser, and pulls out two coils of silken cord and something else small and white. I can’t get a good look at it.

continues He walks back to me, stopping to rake his gaze down my exposed body. “Hands out.” His voice is colder, more commanding, but still burning with lust and something else I can’t quite put my finger on. Whatever it is makes my insides feel like molten heat.

“Every time I see a man I haven’t spoken to in ten years tie me up, practically naked, despite those ten years and all the boyfriends in between, I never, not even for a moment, felt a closeness with any of them like I feel with Finn. I could be holding a memory, to a teenage love that ended before it could ever begin. Or Finneas Fox could really be the one man I’ve ever felt safe with.

ze up, I ¹ He methodically ties each wrist with some fancy knot that is tight but comfortable. I get a pang of something bitter realizing, the ease with which he’s using the rope means he’s done this before...many times before. He gently spins me by the hips to face the bed and then ties the end of the rope to one of the hooks above us. My heart beats erratically, sensing I’m not behind me but lacking his touch, wondering what he will do next and how eager my inner thighs feel slick.

erience “You’re so beautiful like this,” I shudder at the finger he trails down my father’s spine as he speaks, “You’re gonna look even more gorgeous with your cheeks all turned bright red—” *Smack!*

I cry out in shock, but it’s instantly followed by a soft whimper for relief.

is eyes. “You liked that, hmm?” His voice is so low I barely hear it, like a v
ise and from a ghost. I hear footsteps and turn my head as much as I can to s
ser and pull something else out of the dresser.

e that I He catches me looking and shakes his head. I fix my eyes straight
again, a slight thrill shooting through me at the idea of doing somethi
figure. I feel him behind me again and then the cool, flat touch of something
ng with thigh.

it is, it I look down and see him drag a black, leather paddle up my leg. M
thuds in anticipation. Tantalizingly slow, he brings to my hip ar
Letting caresses the round of my ass.

d? But “I have one question before we begin—”

ot once, “What’s my safe word?” I guess.

ng onto “No.” His voice is shockingly cold, detached and starkly differen
i begin. tone he’s used all night and dread sinks into me. “What the fuck are y
those French bitches planning?”

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“You liked that, hmm?” His voice is so low I barely hear it, like a whisper from a ghost. I hear footsteps and turn my head as much as I can to see him pull something else out of the dresser.

He catches me looking and shakes his head. I fix my eyes straight ahead again, a slight thrill shooting through me at the idea of doing something *bad*. I feel him behind me again and then the cool, flat touch of something on my thigh.

I look down and see him drag a black, leather paddle up my leg. My heart thuds in anticipation. Tantalizingly slow, he brings to my hip and then caresses the round of my ass.

“I have one question before we begin—”

“What’s my safe word?” I guess.

“No.” His voice is shockingly cold, detached and starkly different to the tone he’s used all night and dread sinks into me. “What the fuck are you and those French bitches planning?”



CHAPTER 3

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CHAPTER 3

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All is Fair

Effie

“Do you really think I don’t keep track of every single person who moves within a mile radius of us? Let alone right across the street? Come on, Eff, I know you’re smarter than that.”¹ His voice is dripping down my spine and moments from the night trickle through my mind.

The fact that he was dining at an Italian restaurant known to be a favorite of our family.

He was parked discreetly out back and there were no guards when he arrived at the apartment.

The texts from an unknown number, conveniently placed me at the table alone next to him.

Please be at Il Giardino in 30. Your father wants an update.

I don’t think Bruno has ever said please in his life. And he always refers to my father as *he*. We all know which *he* he is talking about.

“The texts. That was you?” *How could I be so fucking easy?*

“Now, you’re catching on,” he mocks, and I yank on the ropes, they twist around, they remain taut, and steam rises in my chest.

Anger boils in me. *Played. I've been fucking played.*

“You said it yourself, Finn, I am a goddamn Mafia princess. If my father finds out you have broken the peace and have me fucking chained up, rain hell down on you.” I seethe over my shoulder, irritated I can’t see his face face to face.

“What peace, *princess?*” He tilts my chin further back with the tip of the paddle. “Any false pretense of peace was broken the moment you brought *Les Arnaqueuses* into my fucking territory.”

He drops the paddle and tugs my head back by my hair. My eyes close from the pressure on my scalp. “Now tell me, what are you planning to do on the street? Like ice cream through my favorite?”

“*Nothing,*” I growl back, grinding my teeth together anticipating a stinging blow.

When it indeed comes, I huff out through my nose but keep my lips pressed tight together. I’m far too used to taking punishment without giving bastards the pleasure of my screams.

Finn grunts dissatisfied at my silence and spanks me again harder, trying to make me madder...and *wetter*. And I think I hate him the most for that.

Another spank resounds in the room, and I squeeze my eyes shut, fighting on the rage turning red behind my eyelids. I feel his breath against my neck and then he drawls roughly, “If you won’t tell me what you’re planning, at least be a good girl and *count*.”

Another blow and I squeeze my thighs together, the impact making my head throb. He bends down again, and I feel his tongue lick my beading sweat path up the back of my neck and says into my ear, “Four.”

“No.” I bite out.

Smack.

“Five.” I recognize a devilish glee in his voice now, and I realize that my fatherly, vulnerable Finn from earlier was never real. He isn’t soft or kind, he willsweat.

look at *He’s a fucking sadist.*

“If you think you can beat the answer out of me, we’re both going to be here for a long night.” Physical pain can be tuned out. And I’m so good at that.

He chuckles darkly and then I hear a buzzing sound. “Oh, princess sting isn’t about pain...” He dips under my arm and stands in front of me. “Right?” He breathing becomes choppy as he trails a vibrator between my breasts and down my stomach. “...It’s about pleasure.”

He runs the buzzing toy across the most sensitive part of my stomach, right above my waist band. My abs constrict and I try to curl away from him, praying he doesn’t go any further. “You’ve made your giving point, Finn.”

“Think about how good I’ll make it for you...” he trails off as if he can’t even hear me, even though there’s no other sound than our breathing and that distant foghorn, and that goddamn incessant buzzing. Dragging the toy up to my inner thigh, he teases it up and down the sensitive skin but never reaches my neck, all the way up. “So good, you’ll hate yourself for how much you enjoy this, then.” “The only one I hate right now is you.” I take the opportunity while he’s looking down to use my limited mobility and headbutt him in the face. “My clit.” “*Fucking hell,*” he snarls, checking for blood with the back of his hand. Unfortunately, his nose isn’t bleeding. “I was going to be nice—”

“I hope it’s fucking broken, you piece of shit,” I spit, ignoring the throbbing in my head from the blow.

“You wanna play dirty? Then let’s *play.*” His eyes are da

that the unreachable as they bore into me, shoving the buzzing toy into my pants. I try to pull away, but he holds me tight. “No, *no*. Finn, please, don’t.”

I attempt to knee him in the groin, but he catches my leg instantly and laughs unimpressed. I try to wriggle my calf out of his grip but it’s useless. He pulls my knee out to the side and looks down at my bare thigh. “You want to be in just like this?” He leans in and exactly wants to take a bite out of it. For a second, I think he might.

He crowds me, hooking my leg around his hip so I’m forced to press against him. I huff, trying to lean farther away but he holds me tight. His lips brush against my neck. “You know how to make it stop.”

And then he’s cupping between my legs, pressing the vibrator tight against my sex and the pleasure is instant and blinding.

I want to cry out in tortured rapture, my body responding so fiercely to the toy, the ropes—fucking hell, to *him*. But I don’t want to give him that fucking look like this. So I bite my tongue and squeeze my eyes shut, trying to block out the feelings and not make a sound.

I don’t realize I’m crying until he wipes a tear from my cheek with his thumb and then he brushes it across my gasping lips.

I hate him. I hate him. I hate him. I want him. I need him.

He gives me a wicked smirk before returning to my backside and hitting my burning cheeks again with the paddle, the toy still vibrating against my clit while he’s split in my panties.

“*Oh, Go—*” I bite back a moan, my cries getting harder and harder as he continues to hit my cheeks. Another hit of the paddle and the mixture of pleasure and pain sends me riding fast and hard to my climax. I hate the sounds I’m giving off, but I can’t help it. I’m giving in freely, yet against my will. I bite my lip in an attempt to not give in anymore.

He hits me once more, the fiery sting melting through my core, and

ties. encircles my waist and palms my stomach, inching his fingers lower until he's applying pressure again on the toy. I shatter partially and "That's it. Come hard for me, princess. Tell me how good it hurts." He pants, "Fuck you, Finn," I pant, trying to catch my breath as my orgasm subsides. I feel like I've barely, the vibrator still pulsing against my swollen clit.

"You can make it stop anytime," he taunts.

He continues a rhythm of spanks then pressing the vibrator harder against my skin, over and over again until I'm struggling for air as another orgasm hits. I'm still so sensitive, never getting a reprieve from the last one, and I'm shaking involuntarily.

"Look at you, such a desperate little plaything." He caresses the side of my neck to my hip, and I realize I've been rolling my pelvis forward, searching out the source of his pain. Not that I hate to *need*. Then before I know what's happening, he's ripping the vibrator away and clutching my throat in his hand. I feel a whiplash of sorrow as the pain sensation is gone, wanting it back but also happy relief that it's over.

"What. Are. You. Planning?" He tightens his grip on my neck, pinning the sides of my throat with each word, the restricted blood flow instantly making my head swim.

"Go to hell," I croak out.

He huffs indignantly and releases my neck, the black dots swarming in my vision dissipate. "I *will* break you."

And then the torture—because that's what this is—begins again. He alternates impact and toy play until every muscle in my body is straining. It hurts, every inch of skin is blazing, and every thought in my mind is consumed with rage-fueled desire.

"Are you close, princess? I know you are." He slips the toy back into my hand, and my whole body convulses on contact. He drags the paddle down the

ver and my thighs and my knees. “Your legs are shaking. In fact, your whole
infinitely trembling.” He’s right of course, my knees wobble and I’d collapse
wasn’t for the ropes keeping me up.

subsides I suck in a heavy breath when he tugs my hips back, pulling me onto
tiptoes and slinks a hand down the back of my panties. I hiss as his
slide down the curve of my ass and between my legs. I try to thrust
againstout of his reach, but he only holds me tighter.

builds. “Don’t fucking touch me there, Finn. If you do this, I will have
I moan forever.”

“Mmm...” he moans, and I can hear my own wetness as he rubs one
of my pussy. “You’d be much more convincing if you weren’t so fucking soaked.”
He lifts my hips even higher and presses two fingers at my entrance
the toy “Finn...” My throat is dry and raspy, and even I can’t deny it sounds
that the plea, not warning.

“Quiet now, Eff.” He thrusts the fingers deep inside my hot, wanting
inching “And fucking take it.” He drives them in and out of me, my body teetering
almost another godforsaken orgasm builds, the vibrator making my clit throbb
I’m teetering on the edge.

“Oh god, oh god—*Fuck, Finn*—” He curls against my G-spot, an
ing myself off, refusing to say his name with any ounce of pleasure. He uses
other hand to hold my throat. I can sense his fingers itching to squeeze
in. He blacks out. A cry gets tangled up in my throat, bliss begins to bloom in
rungs of right places—but then he slows his movements, draws his fingers
mind is painfully slow, in and out.

I whimper, delirious with this incandescent need. “Don’t—Stop—I
in, and Stop.”

back of He chuckles dryly behind me, “Are you telling me: Don’t. Stop. O

body is needy, playing begging me not to stop.”

se if it “Goddamn you, Finn,” I sob. “*Please*. Please don’t fucking stop. I
myself break like a crack in an icy lake. Brittle. Cold. Irreversible.

nto my He begins to pump his fingers faster and firmer again. “Then tell me
fingers want to know.”

myself “No—”

“I am not bluffing, Effie. I will tease you until you are nothing
ate you dripping mess, then I will leave you. Bound. Alone. Wanting.”

I can hardly focus on his words when my body shakes with the n
ver my release and he plays my body like a well-rehearsed instrument.

iked.” “I know how desperately you need to come. I can feel your cunt str
atrance. my fingers. And I can give it to you. I *will* give it to you, if you just
s like a what you’re up to.” My toes that are barely touching the floor curl an

pangs start to spark in my core. “What will it be, Effie? Are you goin
ig cunt. left wet and needy, or are you going to drench my fingers as I ma
nses as come?”

ob until My breath pounds in and out of my lungs, my grip on reality slippi
mind clouding. I can’t even find the words to respond.

d I cut “What—” *Smack*. “Will—” he strikes again with the paddle. “It—
ises his *it burns so good*. “Be?” The next hit sends a jolt of pleasure radiating
e until I clit; I cry out.

all the “*We’re going after your cache!*” And then I’m toppling over th
gers sospiraling in aching euphoria.

My entire body shakes, the ropes swaying as my climax rips throu
Don’t—the summation of so many competing sensations.

“That wasn’t so hard, was it?” Finn spits as he swiftly flicks a switc
r is my and cuts the ropes keeping me upright. I groan as my body gives ou

tumble to the floor.

” I feel He crouches down in front of me, and I’m suddenly struck by the contrast of him being fully clothed while I’m lying in a near-naked heap. “I promised you earlier that I would break you. That every part of you would be mine by the end of the night. Well, the end is here, and I fucking over. Continue on with whatever you’re scheming, but you report back to me about *everything*. Got it?” He snarls, his lip curled and his eyes too fucking bright to wonder who the hell this beast in front of me is.

Before I even have a chance to agree or disagree, he’s up and slamming the door in his wake. And with it any potential for a sliver of happiness the beginning of the night let me foolishly believe was possible.

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He crouches down in front of me, and I'm suddenly struck by the contrast of him being fully clothed while I'm lying in a near-naked heap. "I promised you earlier that I would break you. That every part of you would belong to me by the end of the night. Well, the end is here, and I fucking *own* you. Continue on with whatever you're scheming, but you report back to me. *Everything*. Got it?" He snarls, his lip curled and his eyes too fucking cold, I wonder who the hell this beast in front of me is.

Before I even have a chance to agree or disagree, he's up and gone, slamming the door in his wake. And with it any potential for a future happiness the beginning of the night let me foolishly believe was possible.

1. Continue playing Pull That Trigger

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CHAPTER 4

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CHAPTER 4

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In Love and War

Finn

“Hot coffee. Leave room for milk.” I pass a ten-dollar bill over the barista and walk to the other side of the counter, waving when she asks about my change. A teenager looking down on his bumps into me, and I have to weave to avoid him spilling his caramel latte-shit on me. God, I fucking hate people. *Why didn't I just make a cash at Cash's apartment?* I'm only one week into my stay, and shit's already the fan. He wanted me to be here to keep an eye on things while Harlow are away for a month long fuck-a-thon on some tropical island

Thankfully, it doesn't take long to pour a cup of coffee, and I'm there quickly. I cross the street to the *Fox's Den*, using my key to let in since it doesn't open for another few hours. Perks of owning a pub is having a shortage of access to alcohol, even if it is before eight a.m.

I didn't sleep last night after I had Calvin walk Effie home. From the window, I watched them cross the street from our building to hers, trying to make myself feel an ounce of glee for the walk of shame she deserves, but instead I only felt shame toward myself.

I'm telling myself I didn't sleep because I didn't finish. Fuck, just think about how her tight, *dripping* pussy felt on my fingers has my dick swollen. I walk straight to the bar and find the whiskey, adding a healthy pour of coffee. Like that will somehow stop every inch of my body feeling like it's being mauled by fire ants.

She loved the pain, got so fucking wet every time I—

Fuck it.

I storm to the back office and login to our secure server on the computer. A few clicks and I'm looking at Effie tied up, crying, and so damn needy. *a perfect little plaything.*

I press play on the video recorded by a hidden camera in the room's corner. She's molding, tugging the waistband of my joggers down and fisting my dick. I can't help but suck in a breath, licking my bottom lip when I fast forward right before I add the vibrator into the mix.

I watch her try to knee me in the balls, remembering the zip of fire hitting up my spine at the fight in her. *And how badly I wanted to fuck it out of her.*

But I couldn't. Last night wasn't about getting off. It was about possessing her. About control.

And showing Effie that I possess both in spades.

No matter how much time has passed, no matter what silly, little crush we may have once shared, I will not hesitate to make it hurt.

I stroke my cock, having no trouble getting hard watching her try to get away from me, but I never let her get more than an inch away from my groin, remembering the feel of her hot breath across my face as she seethes.

Christ, she was a goddamn vixen, getting so angry with herself while enjoying it. Just like I knew she would.

I don't think many people know Effie. I don't think she lets many

hinking know her, not the real her. She has a good, kind heart—something I m
velling. once sympathized with, not anymore—but it's been crowded out by
r to my ugliness around her. She makes herself small to avoid the attention a
e it gotire from her father and men like him. Like *me*.

But that's a survival mechanism, not who she truly is. Who she tru
a fighter. She wants to fight back, be broken down, and then have so
care enough to pick up the pieces.

outer. A Maybe one day, I can be the kind of person who picks up another p
y. *What* pieces.

But not until I find out exactly what *Les Arnaqueuses* are planni
s crownmake them regret they ever whispered the name Fox.

dick. I I shake my head and bring my attention back to the screen, focusing
ward to graceful muscles of her neck as I pull her hair back and *goddamn*, d
neck look good with my hand around it.

that lit She tells me to go to hell, and I stroke faster, harder, conjuring the
f her. her pulse thumping beneath my fingers. Beautiful, delicate, but *weak*.

ver and I rub my thumb over the tip of my cock, my balls drawing tigh
longer I watch her take it until her legs are trembling. She was trying
not to come, trying so hard not to give in, trying so hard to make me th
ush we hated what I was doing to her. But then...

I watch myself slide my hand down the back of her panties and su
to rearbreath, my dick throbbing. She fucking *loved* it.

7 face. I I throw my head back in the desk chair and squeeze my eyes shut,
ethed. up the volume on the video. I pump my hand up and down my cock as
self for to her beg me not to stop.

Don't stop. Don't stop. Don't stop.

people I grind my teeth as tension builds in my groin, my balls heavy for re

ay have “*Goddamn you, Finn. Please. Please don’t fucking stop.*”

all the Her pleas are the strongest aphrodisiac. I grunt like an animal as
nd thus into my fist and come hard to the sound of her breaking.

I grab a tissue off the desk to clean myself up, and like an addict,
ly is, is craving my next fix before I’ve even come down from the last, I pull
omeone burner and text her.

erson’s

ng and



on the

oes her I’m sitting at one of our bistro tables outside the Den, my finger taps
the table while I stare up at Effie’s apartment. The angle isn’t great
feel of only see if someone steps right up to the window. But I don’t give two
I can see them. I want them to see *me*.

ter the I light a cigarette and balance it between my lips while I send another
so hard *I’m waiting, princess.*

ink she And then immediately another one:

ick in a *see.*
I bet you’re sore. Did I leave any marks? Step up to the window and

I snicker to myself imagining how riled up she’ll be reading my message
turning Just like I hoped, that last text gets her to respond.

I listen *Effie: Why the hell would I do that?*

Me: Why the hell not? I thought we had fun last night.

Effie: I’m not your fucking puppet, Finn. And I sure as hell am not
lease. *“plaything.”*

Me: You sure about that? Because it certainly looks that way.

I thrust Then I send her freeze frames from last night. Us kissing against the wall, her hands tangled in my hair, hungry for everything I'm giving her. I'm already kneeling in front of her, stripping her pants off. Then to really make my point, to really make out my that I own her, I send an audio clip I snipped earlier: *Please. Please fucking stop.*

I don't expect a response. Instead I look up at the window. When she finally face peek through the blinds, I wave with a charming smile just to get her off.

Five minutes later, she's crossing the street with a murderous look on her face. Her dark brown hair is hanging like curtains on either side of her head under a baseball cap. As she approaches, I pull out a chair for her, but she just keeps going on brushes past me to the pub door. "Inside. Now."

But I can't. She may be stupid enough to move in across the street from me, but she doesn't shit if isn't stupid enough to sit outside in broad daylight with me. Nonetheless, I take my time putting out my cigarette and strolling over to the door, even though I know how she looks around flustered the longer I draw out the short walk.

"You're gonna get me killed, asshole," she whisper-yells when I finally get us in.

I let me She badgers me with questions as I walk to the back bar. *What do you want? Do you know how much I hate you? You think you can blackmail me? Luciano?* I ignore them all, only speaking once she sits down at a bar next to me.

"You look tired. Something keep you up last night?"

"Fuck you." She spits and I get a swooping in my stomach when I notice a slight wobble in her voice. *She brought this on herself. She did this to herself.* I remind myself and shove any shred of sympathy deep down.

“Drink?” I stand up and circle the bar and pour myself a whiskey. The door, “What do you want, Finn?” *You. Tied up. In my bed. Bent over. Megoddamn bar. Any which way, as long as my cock is deep inside you.* It clear “What do you know about the cache?” *I don’t* “Isn’t it a little early to be drinking?”

I set the glass on the counter with a thump and rest my elbows on the bar. I see a “Answer another one of my questions with a question and—” She kiss her “*And what, Finn?*” She stands up, kicking away the stool. “And what?” “You’ll chain me up? Beat me? You already fucking tried that.” Red light on her up her chest and into her cheeks. Her face My lip curls. “It worked, didn’t it? You’re here, aren’t you?” She hugs me she just crosses her arms, looking defiant and oh so fuckable.

“You’re here because you know just how *interesting* your father is, but she find those photos. So, sit the fuck down before I make you.” She scoots back on the stool, Iobeyes. I step back and lean against the back bar, letting her enjoy me uncomfortably in the silence until she answers my question.

“Not much. We know the rumors that everyone knows: that your father really has a stash somewhere of all the stolen art, jewelry, gold, artifacts, et cetera that you’ve acquired over the years. Your ‘hidden treasure.’” She rolls her eyes, *do you* eyes, but that is exactly what it is. It’s a trove of hundreds of millions of dollars’ worth of stolen and legally obtained goods.

It’s our family’s safety net, four generations in the making. Bank accounts can be seized or frozen. Hustles come and go and require exact timing and constant hustle to be profitable. One day, whether it be in a year or a half a century, if we ever want to leave the game, we can.

“So that’s it? You’re starting a war—*another* war—over some rumors?”

“It wasn’t my idea.” She looks down and I can’t help myself. I clasp her chin between us and tip her chin back up with two fingers.

There’s a desperation in her deep, amber eyes, almost like an apology. Her eyes shift down to her mouth and my jaw clenches with the urge to push my thumb inside her full, pink lips.

the bar. “What would you do if I kissed you right now?” The question is out of my mouth before I can think to stop it.

“What?” She swats my hand away from her. “I’d bite your fucking lip off.”

I laugh, getting hard at the idea of her being rough back. “How do you plan on finding out more than just rumors?”

“Break into your brother’s apartment.” Her lips tip up into a smirk. “You’re going to break into your security headquarters after all.” I keep my expression exactly the same, not wanting to show I would see her statement for what it is: she’s fishing. She just doesn’t know how to be straightforward. Inside Cash’s apartment is a double reinforced steel room called the Vault. It has every piece of data, security footage, and intel gathered over the years.

“Well, if breaking into the most secure place in this city is your business, then I’m not too concerned.” Her eyes flare as if she’s offended that I’m so unimpressed with the big reveal.

“We know how we’re going to do it.” She straightens on the stool and tips her chin out.

“Oh, really? Care to share, princess?” She bites her lip when I call her out, and the small movement is like a live wire straight to my dick.

“Hmm.” She makes an exaggerated face like she’s pondering the question.

“No, actually I won’t be sharing. Have a good day, Finneas.” She pushes off the stool.

“If that’s your decision, then tell your father I’ll be in touch.” I show

ose theher, my eyes glued to her ass and her soft, long hair swaying above it.

She flips me off over her shoulder in response, and I let out a dark
gy. *MyShe's calling my bluff...*

ush my Well, this is about to get much more fun.

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She's calling my bluff...

Well, this is about to get much more fun.

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CHAPTER 5

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CHAPTER 5

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Run Your Mouth

Effie

“**A**re you sure you want to wear your hair down?” My mother aggressively twirls a lock of my hair, and I grip the leather of the limousine.

“Yes, I’m sure.” I try to hide the irritation in my voice, but appear well enough.

“Okay, no need for the attitude.” She scoffs and tips back her champagne flute, finishing it off. “I was just saying, because I know how your hair gets limp after a few hours.”

Maybe I’ll shave my head like Marguerite. “Thanks, Mom. I’ll keep you in mind for the next charity event for blind wombats. Or is it endangered snails?”

“Don’t be smart, this gala is a fundraiser for the Harbor Island Resort Golf club’s new equestrian center.” Incapable of ending a sentence with some backhanded compliment she adds, “You have such a lovely tan, but that shade of brown makes you look jaundiced.”

I actually quite like my dress and look damn good too. The corset bodice hugs my waist and lifts my tits without restricting my breathing.

the soft, draping sleeves hang off my shoulders. The skirt hangs p around my hips and ass and opens in a dramatic slit, revealing just en my thigh to tease but not enough that my mom starts calling me a slut different languages.

And the light-mocha satin does *not* make me look jaundiced.

“Hudson will be there tonight,” my father chimes in. I know he’s sp to me even though he sips his scotch while looking out the window.

“Who is Hudson?” I ask, and his head swivels to level me with a lc he’s trying to tell if I’m joking. I’m not, but apparently my mother something’s funny as she titters into her glass.

passive

seat of

“Hudson Campbell. Governor Campbell’s son and—”

rtly not

mpagne

ir tends

“And your future fiancé,” my mother spills, and my father cuts her I, on the other hand, feel like a bucket of ice water was just dumped head.

My father straightens his bow tie and turns to me. “For the family.” all the explanation I get. I guess I always knew this day was coming or later.

o that in

d giant

ort and

without

but that

et-style

, while

I feel my mask slipping into place, my dutiful daughter mask, n pawn mask, my “it’s easier to comply” mask. Like Tetris, I compartm away my identity, personality and only leave what’s acceptable f world.

“Is he proposing tonight?” I didn’t plan on getting engaged today can’t help the petty voice in my mind that whispers how much my would hate photos of me in my jaundice-inducing dress and lin splashed all over the society pages.

“No, but this will be a good time to start teasing your relationship public.”

perfectly “What relationship,” I scoff under my breath. Turning back to my father, “Does he know about this, or will he be just as blindsided as me?”
in three “He’s been involved in the negotiations.” *Of course, because who else is a business deal.* Always has been, just never knew who would be the one to close it.

speaking “Did you even consider having me join these *negotiations*? It’s not my life being bartered off.”

look like “Euphemia, calm down. It’s not like you didn’t know this was coming.” You’re almost *thirty* for heaven’s sake.”

The rest of the ride is quiet, the air in the limo is thin, like the life is being sucked out of it the closer we get to the museum hosting the event. Our limo pulls into the queue of cars and my hand starts sweating around my phone as I watch the flash of cameras a few cars ahead.

We crawl to the front of the line and my mother pokes a finger through the window. “Oh look, there he is. Isn’t he handsome?”

sooner I recognize the governor immediately. Governor Campbell is a prototype for rich, white politicians. Average height, decently fit for someone in his early sixties and graying sophisticatedly. Looks like the kind of person who would spend three hundred dollars on lunch and then tip the server with a twenty for this bill.

It’s easy to tell who his sons are. They look like younger, sturdier versions of him. My eyes bounce between the two of them and wonder at my mother’s surprising detachment which one is going to be my future husband and which one is the father of my kids.

The car door opens. My father steps out first, then helps me and my mother out. I smile sweetly, keeping my focus blurry so I’m not blinded

father, I flashing lights and end up squinting in every photo. I know the drill.
' *stand tall and—*

I marry I look up, startled by a tug on my hand. One of the governor's sons
the onemy hand and places it on his arm and leads me forward up the museum.
"I'm Hudson," he subtly dips to whisper.

like it's I speak out of the corner of my mouth, keeping my smile s
photographers, "Effie. But you must already know that."
coming.

s being
r driver
r clutch



at the Turns out that enduring a dinner of dry chicken and overcooked
followed by speeches on the intersection of golf and dressage, is a
ototypemuch easier in Hudson's company. He has a dry sense of humor
in theirlightness to him that is refreshing. He has that sweet all-American cha
spendsisn't intimidating and has been nothing but respectful all night.
y-dollarmaking me forget that all of this is a pre-arranged destiny.

I sour at the thought. Will I ever have something good and true?
ronger, everything always be constructed and form-fit into what best ser
ler with family?

and the As if Hudson can sense my shift in mood, he sweeps his auburn hair
with a hand and rests his arm over the back of my chair. "Listen, I know
motherfamilies are who they are, but that doesn't mean we have to run
by the anything." He lowers his hand onto mine resting on the table.

. *Smile*, “I want to take things slow, get to know each other.” He laughs
know, actually date the person I’m going to marry.”

is takes My chest squeezes, realizing how real this is quickly becoming.
n steps. blow off the serious tone. “Oh, so we’re not meeting at the chapel tom
morning?”

soft for “If only I’d be so lucky. You’re drop dead gorgeous, Effie.” His wa
eyes melt into mine, and I feel he’s being truly genuine. Maybe he r
just a good guy in a bad world.

“How about we start with a dance? Then we can talk about whetl
prefer a spring or autumn wedding.” He nods to the speaker podium t
been replaced by a DJ booth, and the people starting to trickle on to th
floor.

I take his proffered hand, catching our fathers give one another ap
carrots, looks. He sweeps me close to his body, and I’m surprised how comfor
actually feels. We’re still an appropriate distance, but I can feel his body h
r but a smell is masculine aftershave.

rm that He twirls me around and I giggle, feeling light and...*happy*. “How
Almost we just elope on some tropical island?” I tease when he catches me aga

He laughs and dips me low. “You know our families would kill us
Or will they didn’t get to choreograph our wedding for the most political gain.
ves the The smart aleck reply on the tip of my tongue is shut down wher
eyes with someone across the room. Dark, dangerous and green e
tir back recognize anywhere.

ow our Finn’s leaning against a back wall, dressed handsomely in a classic
sh into dark hair is combed smartly out of his face, showing off the sharp ar
his cheeks and jaw. I can make out his knuckle tattoos while he take
from a whiskey glass. *Can’t hide*.

is. “You It certainly feels that way. Especially as his gaze locks with mine, t every movement I make. He smirks, eyes dark, and spite flares insid I try todrape an arm around Hudson’s neck and pull him closer, watching Fi narrowhis shoulder. Hudson reacts warmly of course, placing a hand on m and swaying to the music.

rm blue Finn’s jaw clenches and his lips press into a firm line as I whi eally isHudson’s ear, keeping my eyes fixed on his. I’m only saying I like th but with the sultry look I’m sporting, I hope Finn thinks it’s somethin her youmore scandalous.

that has He tips back his drink and finishes it, slamming the cup down on e dancebeside him. It’s a thrill, goading him. And I don’t plan on stopping.

I feel Hudson’s hand slink to the small of my back, and I rotate us provingcan catch the movement. His hand dips lower over the top of my as rtable itlicks my spine, and I know it’s Finn’s gaze burning into my back. I eat andburn.

“I’m going to get a drink. Would you like anything?” he pulls aw v aboutasks.

ain. “No, I’m good, thank you.” We step off the dance floor, and he both iftoward the bar. I look around but don’t see Finn. I try not to insp ” closely at the wave of disappointment I feel at his absence.

1 I lock Hudson shoots me a small wave from the bar while he waits. He yes I’dand I scan his face looking for a hint of...something, I’m not sure w has a strong jawline and a sweet dimple on one side. He’s clean cut ar tux, hislooking but not playboy handsome. Many women would be delighted igles ofa husband like him.

as a sip “Princess,” I hear roughly behind me and spin, coming face to fa Finn. The second I do, I realize what I was looking for in Hudson: da

racking hunger, ruthlessness. And I see them all staring back at me now.

me. I “The fuck do you want?” I hiss as I see Hudson leaving the bar, di
nn overhand. He only looks at me smugly and tongues his cheek. *I hate him.*

y waist He ignores me and holds out his hand to Hudson who’s just walk

“Hi, I’m Finn—”

per in “Finneas Fox. Yes, I know who you are.”

ie song, “Oh? And you are?” My jaw drops at his flippant reply knowing h
g much well knows the answer.

“Hudson Campbell.” His previous friendly tone is gone. “So, how
a table know my fiancée?” I swallow deeply, stunned. So much for taking
slow. If I didn’t know him so well, I’d think Finn was totally unfazed
so Finn bomb just dropped, but there’s a split second when his eyes flared,
s. Heat widened and then like shutters on a window, he closes every single e
Let him down.

“Old family friends.” His gaze flicks to me and the corner of his
yay and tugs up subtly. “Though we recently *reconnected.*” My face burns ho
am suddenly regretting not getting another drink.

e heads Despite the death glare I shoot him, he continues, “She did some p
ect too for me. She’s a very talented photographer, have you seen her photo
stomach roils, and I try to read any suspicion on Hudson’s face, but he
smiles, not to notice anything off.

hat. He Though I get the message loud and clear.

id good “No, you’ll have to show me some time,” Hudson says to me and p
to have to his side with a protective hand around my waist. Finn’s jaw ticks
display.

ce with “Well, I’ll see you around, Ef, perhaps for another photo session?
irkness, was nice meeting you, Henry.” Finn waves and walks away, my sl

crawling from the interaction.

inks in I consider leaving it be, but then I think about how pleased Finn n
catching me off guard and calling me out so blatantly. I don't want th
ked up. bastard thinking he can get away with shit like that.

"I need to use the restroom. I'll be right back." I stalk after Finn
him dip into the men's room. Without hesitation, I follow after him.
e damn Finn's leaning against the sink counter, chewing on a toothpick, a
was waiting for me. Like I said, *smug bastard*. I turn the lock shut
do youclick.

; things "You lost, princess?"

l by the

nostrils

emotion



mouth

t, and I

Finn

portraits

s?" My

e seems

¹It takes an ungodly amount of control to remain relaxed again
counter when she storms into the bathroom, cheeks flushed and angry,
rising and falling dramatically pushed up in her corset dress. The sound
door locking makes my cock jump.

ulls me

s at the

And it

in still

"You lost, princess?"

"You can't do this."

"Do what?" The irritation in her gaze is like a shot of the strongest s

"You can't—" I kick off the counter and clamp my hand around h
effectively cutting her off.

“Let’s get one thing straight,” Her pupils blow wide, but she bites must be, defiantly. “I *can* and will do whatever I damn well please. And i e smugespecially not the Luciano *whore* is going to tell me what I can and can

I push her back against the door, sliding my hand lower on her neck and see can feel her pulse thumping. I snatch up her left wrist and look at her hand. “No ring, hmm?”

as if he “It’s getting resized.” I can tell she’s lying through her teeth. She yanks with a hand away. “And don’t call me a whore.”

“Do you prefer plaything—”

My head snaps to the side, my cheek burning but my cock throbbing slapped me.

She fucking slapped me.

I trace my lip with my tongue, licking up the blood from a small laugh darkly. “I know you like it rough, baby, but you only had to ask.

“I don’t want *anything* from you, Finn.” Her eyes are wild, like she’s decide if she’s scared or turned on. I hope she’s both.

“Really?” I tighten my grip on her throat and lower my other hand against the bare thigh through the slit in her dress. “So, I won’t find your panties from me watching you all night?” I slide my hand higher, feeling the breasts from her cunt and her body tense the closer I get.

d of the She sucks in a sharp breath as I brush the edge of her panties. Her ball into fists at her sides, and I wonder why she isn’t pushing back. I trail the tip of my tongue up her cheek to whisper in her ear. “I know it work out too well for you last time, but you’re not even gonna try to catch. back this time?”

her jaw, “Go ahead...” She shimmies out of her thong, stepping out of stuffing the soaked material into my jacket pocket. “...Feel how wet I

her lip my *fiancé*.”

no one, I resist the urge to turn her around and fuck that lie right out of
it do.” decide to play her game.

fuck so I I’ll let her run her mouth.

er bare Right up until I make her scream my name.

“That so, huh?” I graze my fingertips up and down her slit and—C
nks her *she wet*. “So what did Harvard do to get you dripping like this?” She b
lip as I part her folds and swirl her wetness over her clit.

“Finger fucked me under the table,” she breathes as I apply more p
ng. She to her swollen bud.

“At dinner with all those people? You dirty girl.” I swipe my finger
and press against her entrance. She bites her lip and nods, but that isn
split. Enough for me. “What did he do, princess? Tell me.”

” “He slid his hand up my thigh, pulled my panties to the side and su
ie can’t thick fingers into my pussy—” She gasps as I thrust two of my own
into her.

l to her “And then?” I demand, my voice low and gravelly, my need to sin
soaked than just my fingers into her so fucking strong. “Did he fuck you sw
he heats slow like the princess you think you are or hard and rough like the
know you are?”

r hands “Soft,” she mutters, and I huff, displeased with this answer. “A
more. I hard.” That makes me grin and shove my fingers, now coated so nicely
t didn’t arousal, deeper and then draw them out to do it all over again.

to fight Her breath skates in and out on sweet little moans and then she par
used his thumb to rub my clit.” I do the same and look at her as if to s
it and *this*? She nods vigorously, her heartbeat quickening, like a drum aga
get for hand still around her neck.

Her eyelids droop and her pussy flutters around my fingers. My fingers slide up her. Ifucking throbbing in my slacks, and I rock my hips forward to grind my painful bulge against her for a little goddamn relief. I curl my fingers around her, and she bucks into my hand. “Fuuck.”

“That’s it, baby, ride my hand like my greedy little plaything.” I can’t tell if she truly hates being called that or actually loves it, but either way, I like it. I bite her lips open.

“If you think fingering me at dinner is dirty, you should hear what she said to me in the limo ride over.” She sneers, and jealousy ignites in the pit of my stomach even though I fucking know she arrived with her parents.

“Tell me, princess.” I pull my fingers out, loving how her breath tastes. “It’s not good.” “And we’ll see who does it better.” Her eyes heat as she watches me suck her fingers clean.

I gently part her lips with a thumb on her chin and spit into her mouth. “Taste that, Ef? Taste how fucking sweet you are.”

“Tastes like the best head of my life,” she smirks.

“Is that what he did to you in the limo? Ate that perfect pussy?” She looks at me with a sweet and her lips and nods. “Well, then.” I dip down to pick her up, her legs wrapped around my waist, and carry her to the sink. She looks like a goddess, and I set her on a bathroom counter, and I’ll fucking kneel at her altar.

There’s a sharp knock at the door, and she slams her legs closed. “Don’t stop. Spread your legs, princess. Let’s see who makes you come harder.” She looks at me with her knees tight against my palm trying to push them apart.

There’s another rap at the door and she looks at me then then she looks at me. “Someone’s in here.” I growl and force her knees open, clamping a hand against my thigh to hold her open for my worship.

There’s a panic in her eyes, like she’s scared someone is about to b

dick is but I get her attention back by biting her inner thigh sharply.
and the Another pounding at the door and someone shouting on the other side
s inside fucking occupied!” I yell back. When I look up, her eyes are back
door. “Eyes on me, princess. Watch me ruin you for all other men, especially
an’t tell that so-called fiancé.”

her eyes “But—” she whispers nervously.

“Shh, I don’t want you making a damn sound unless it’s my name
: he did you come on my tongue. Understood?” She clamps her mouth shut
t of my growing even brighter on her cheeks, but she nods. “That’s my girl. I
back.”

hitches. I tug her ass to the edge of the counter with one hand and use my c
uck my push her top half flat. Her legs clamp down on either side of my head
first heavy drag of my tongue over her clit. Her body’s instant reaction
er open gives me a high like nothing else ever has.

I thrust two fingers back inside her dripping cunt. “So fucking
baby,” I groan as I lap the length of her pussy. She whimpers, and I
he lick only one of her hands is gripping the edge of the counter. I can only
rapping that the other is covering her mouth.

even on I can tell the moment she finally blocks out the people I am sure are
up outside because she rolls her hips up and rides my face like it’s the
‘Un-uh,’ to all her questions. I focus on fucking hard but slow with my finger
e keep keep my tongue flat on her clit, letting her movements grind it just the way
she wants it.

e door. My dick leaks in my pants, and I couldn’t care less about my own
and on while she’s getting lost in the pleasure I’m giving her. I feel her pussy
around my fingers and her moans, muffled by her hand, escalate.

arge in, I groan into her, not changing a single thing, while she rides hard

her release. Her hands fly to my head and her fingers tangle in my hair. “It’s shatters. “*Oh god, fu—fuck!*”

on the “My name, princess. Scream my fucking name.”
specially “F—F—Finn,” she cries in pure rapture, and it’s a sound I will remember for the rest of my life. One I never thought I’d hear again.

Her saying my name without an ounce of hate.
e while And it chips away at the cold, black thing beating in my chest in a way that, blush not sure I’m ready for. I swiftly push the uncomfortable feeling away from my hand away and stand abruptly, while she’s still crashing down from high.

other to I straighten my jacket and take in her heaving form laid out before me. Her dress hiked up to her hips, strands of her chestnut hair sticking to her forehead with beads of sweat.

“Finn?” She props herself up on her elbows and looks at me with a sweet, her eyes that I can’t stand to look at.

[notice “People are waiting. Get up,” I say gruffly and refuse to look her in the eye. She guesses she stands on shaky legs and pulls her dress down.

“You’re an asshole.” She brushes back her hair with her hands and pushes past me.

answer “And yet, you still followed me in here.” She pauses like she wants to say something in response, but then continues on toward the door. I stop her, spinning her around with a hand on her shoulder. “You thought people were waiting,” She’s mad. I don’t blame her. I *am* a prick.

“You’re an asshole.” She brushes back her hair with her hands and pushes past me.

“C’mon, I’ll help you out the window. Unless you want everyone to see you walk out of the men’s bathroom after me looking freshly fucked,” I say, and she looks toward the door.

r as she twists her face up in annoyance but knows I'm right and heads to the
the bathroom.

I crank the window open, then use my hand as a step to lift her up
membersill. She leans over and tries to swipe her panties from my coat pocket
laugh, clamping my hand over them. "Nah, I'm keeping these."

She hops down off the window ledge. "Night, asshole," she says, waving
away I'm away.

and rip "I'll be in touch about that *photography session*," I holler after her.
from her

ne. Her
to her

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hurt in

way as

as she

to turn

the door.

What? I

fucking

seeing

d." She

twists her face up in annoyance but knows I'm right and heads to the back of the bathroom.

I crank the window open, then use my hand as a step to lift her up to the sill. She leans over and tries to swipe her panties from my coat pocket. I laugh, clamping my hand over them. "Nah, I'm keeping these."

She hops down off the window ledge. "Night, asshole," she says, walking away.

"I'll be in touch about that *photography session*," I holler after her.

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CHAPTER 6

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CHAPTER 6

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Pet

Effie

In the past week I've become a glorified babysitter to a girl who's been a criminal, been blackmailed and married off. Not to mention I've been finger fucked to high heavens by my enemy—and not entirely unwilling. To say it's been an eventful week is an understatement.

It feels like there's only one thing that's actually in my control. So I send Hudson an email on the investment firm's website he's partner at, but I don't know why would I have my supposed fiancé's phone number? That would be a little too reasonable. There's no email anywhere on the site, and I end up having to message him on LinkedIn. *Fucking ridiculous.*

Hudson responds almost immediately, accepting my invitation to join me for lunch today. We need to get on the same page and ideally the not-everything page. At least not yet and certainly not while Finn is still holding my photos over my head.

I know most people would be devastated to be told who to marry and when, but I grew up knowing that was what my future held. It was a pretty big deal to me because I never dreamed of anything else. And if I'm being honest, Hudson is much better looking than most of the men I knew

the running. He was polite, decently funny, and I didn't totally hate around him. He's Governor Campbell's son, so I'm sure he's not a made man either.

Once we're married and the alliance secured, we may even have a normal life. If I even know what normal is.

Picking out my clothes for our lunch date, I feel like I'm overcompensating for my bathroom rendezvous at the gala. I was able to slip back into the party without raising too much suspicion, but I want to get away any inkling he may have that I am anything but wife material.

So, I slip on a white shirt, no frills and minimal cleavage, paired with an A-line skirt with small white flowers, I am the picture of innocence *maybe not innocence*. But it's a start.

I'm waiting for an Uber outside of the apartment building when I look at my phone.

Cute skirt. Imagine how easily I could slip my hand under there.

Fucking Finn. I look around, trying to spot him, but he's not outside, and the sun is creating too much of a glare to see into his window. I know he's watching though, so I don't look too desperately. I'm sure he loves to see me flustered. Instead, I type back.

Effie: That's exactly why I wore it...

Finn: Trying to play, dirty girl?

Effie: Can't wait for the dirty things my fiancé will do to me at lunch when he discovers I'm not wearing any panties.

Finn: Be sure to count how many times he makes you come. So you can double it.

Effie: Goodbye, Finn. I have a date to get to.

Finn: Hudson.

e being *Effie: Oh, so you do know his name.*

int, but *Finn: Just wanted to remind you of it.*

My driver arrives, and I slide into the backseat wondering what t
chanceFinn is on about. But then I get another text and nearly throw my ph
the damn window.

eed to *Finn: Since you're so used to screaming mine.*

o sneak I type out a string of expletives and a colorful description of where
to wipeshove it. But then delete it and decide no reply is the best reply.

Leave the bastard on read.

th a red

. *Okay,*

I get a



sitting*Bella's Bistro* is as sweet and charming as it sounds. A French Ar
ndow. Irestaurant known for their long menu of crepes and decadent Sunday
re he'dThe decor is a mix of florals and antique finds.

The hostess points me toward the patio where Hudson is already w
walk toward his table. The sun brings out the copper hues in his hair,
jacket folded over the back of the chair next to him. He has his back
:h whenand as I approach, I try to picture this being my life, my everyday

Meeting my husband for lunch at our favorite restaurant between m
) *I can*because no matter how busy his day gets, he always makes time for
jasmine wound around the patio fence makes the air smell romantic
aromas of the kitchen give it a homey feel.

But when I get close, he notices me and something about the far domestic bliss dulls. He smiles and stands, pulling out the chair across from me. I sit with a topsy-turvy feeling in my stomach, like maybe his teeth are a little too white or his hair is coiffed a little too neatly. Like it all is a mirage or a gilded front. Almost as if he isn't gritty enough to be tangible. Almost as if he can't be real.

He can't. "I was so happy to get your email." He sits after tucking in my chair, his dimple popping as he smiles adoringly at me. It should make me feel beautiful the way he is looking at me, but instead it just makes me feel...played. I'm just a pawn in this game.

Which reminds me why I'm here. "I wanted to talk about the gala and what was said."

He scoots back in his chair, sitting a little bit taller, "And what exactly did you say?" *And there it is.* There is that slight gleam of chicanery in his eyes, that touch of guile in his voice. It's something so subtle, barely imperceptible. I hadn't grown up surrounded by men just like him that developed much sense for these things.

"You know exactly what you said. And I just want to make it clear. I will not be caught in the crosshairs of some dick swinging match. His suit eyebrows raise, and I continue, "I'll play the dutiful daughter and wait for you to be married, then I'll play the dutiful wife. But until then, you won't be the reality around words like *fiancée* before it is mutually decided upon. Do you understand, myself clear?"

I unfurl my napkin and lay it over my lap to give my shaking hands something to do while I steady my breath. I don't talk to people that way, especially not men who will soon hold my life in their hands. But

itasy of been something about going toe-to-toe with Finn lately that is mak
ss from want to push back against everyone and everything.

th are a Or maybe I'm taking the stress of being blackmailed out on Hudson
s just a "Yes ma'am." He chuckles and leans forward, pushing up the sle
ible, to his dress shirt. "As long as I make it clear that I will not be made a fo

there's anything between you and that little Fox shit, shut it down.
hair, his want scandal or..." he looks me up and down with an evil sneer, "
ne feel cunt."

kes me *Sit. Smile. Nod. Sit. Smile. Nod*—No, fuck that.

I push out of my chair, throwing my napkin down and pitching f
id what slapping my hands on the table. "You need me more than I need you
forget that next time you think about speaking to me that way."

tly was I storm out the way I came, my heart pounding in my chest and
eyes, aaching to smile in victory. Riding the high, I pull out my phone and
ble, if I one number I should be avoiding:

y sixth *Meet me at Peaches.*

Then I walk down the block to a jewelry store and buy myself th
ir that I expensive engagement ring in the place.

h." His

will get

rowing

I make



; hands

at way, The strip club smells like Clorox and overly-fruity body spray. I s
there's floor. There's only one dancer on stage and the crowd is minimal. Sing

ing mein trucker hats and groups of two of three in business attire. It is bar
noon on a weekday after all.

... I suck in a breath as my eyes bounce around the edges of the
eves of looking for cameras. It was a stupid fucking idea coming here of all
ol of. If But I was so high off telling Hudson to show some respect that I didn'
I don't I wanted to confront Finn and knew Peaches was close by and it w
a loo setake much convincing to get him here if he wasn't already.

And if I'm successful, I'll have him delete any footage from the clu
too.

orward, I text him that I'm here, then remain standing and twiddle my ne
. Don't The movement is subtle enough to make him think it's subconsci
obvious enough he'll catch it from wherever he's lurking. The corn
cheeks edges of the club are dark, intended for patron privacy I'm sure. Mos
text the purple-hued light is trained on the stage. My skin crawls knowing
watching me. I'm certain he is.

I can feel his presence as precisely as I can feel the hairs on m
ie most standing and I hate that it's not all in dread. There's excitement there
pulses when my phone buzzes with a new notification. He replied to m

Finn: I know.

Effie: Why do you have to be so fucking creepy all the time?

Effie: Come out.

I pop my hip and stop scanning the floor. Instead I stare straight ahe
a look that I hope mimics teachers right before they say *I'm waiting*
wants to act like a child, I'll treat him like one.

can the *Finn: How was lunch? Ended awfully quick. I knew he wouldn't be
gle men get you off, though I was looking forward to making you count for me.*

That's it. I spin on my heels and storm toward the door. This

ly pastfucking game for him, a way for him to get his dick wet. But this fucking life he's messing with. And I don't say that hyperbolically. I ceiling, pictures get out, I wouldn't be surprised to find myself dead in a ditch. places. Which makes coming here even stupider. But I'm here now, so I'n't think. to fucking get what I came here for. I turn back around and make a beouldn'ta table of middle-aged businessmen. I pick up a high-ball glass and sla whatever is in it, praying for something strong. I set the empty glas b today and ignore whatever they're saying as I saunter closer to the stage.

My foot hesitates on the first step as I look down and see my che w ring, skirt brushing across my knee. I wore this damn skirt to refine my inous but obedient daughter image, and somehow I doubt that climbing on sta ers and Fox-owned strip club will help.

t of the Then again, I guess some things are worth it to get under a Fox's ski g he is I suppose my father and I have that in common.

I climb the steps and stare down the pole like it's an opponent, m y arms beat surprisingly steady. My foot inches forward and my fingers fal e too. It buttons of my blouse.

ly text. One step. One button. Another step. Another button.

The stage shakes with thudding footsteps as Finn barges out of his corner and leaps onto it.

“Oh, there you are. Come to enjoy the show?” I tease and hurriedl ad with the distance to the pole. I only get in one swing around before he's th g. If heme over his shoulder.

“There will be no fucking show.” My stomach swoops, and I'm cer able to due to the possessiveness in his growl and not the change in elevation.

¹ I pound on his back with my fists and try to flail my legs, but he is all a arm like a steel bar across my thighs. “Finn, you goddamn caveman,

is mydown!”

If those He carries me off the stage and across the floor, busting through a door and unceremoniously tossing me down in a desk chair. I sweep in going out of my face, seething. “You can’t—”

eline to “What did I say about you telling me what I can and can’t do?” He m back in between the chair and the desk, leaning back against it. I try to stand s down tugs my seat closer so that if I stand, I’d be chest to chest with the ass h
“I’m pretty sure that conversation ended with me slapping you.”

erry-red “No, princess. It ended with my lips on that pussy and my name on nocent, He chuckles smugly, and I freeze when he gently thumbs circles on m ge at a knee. “So what is it? You asked to meet so a real man can get you off?

The upper hand I thought I had is slipping the more I let him toy w in. And he’s so good at it too. “That’s not—”

My sentence is cut off when he swiftly shoots his palm up my thi y hearts naps the elastic of my panties. “Thought you weren’t wearing any?” I l to the “I want you to delete the photos.” He only raises a brow at my dema if I said something inconceivable, so I add, “I’ll keep you apprised operation, but I want assurances that those photos are destroyed *first*.”

creeper He swipes his tongue across his teeth, a rueful grin teasing his lips. not how blackmail works, princess. I hold the leverage, I make the de y close And if you *behave*—” I flinch at the insinuation in his words while h rowing still rests under my skirt. “—Then those photos will never see the day.”

tain it’s I swallow hard. “You’d really do that? To me?”

“That and so much worse.” There isn’t an ounce of remorse in h has his Only cold, calculating honesty. And it fucking hurts.

put me But like any good soldier, I know to raise my shield when goi

battle. “Well then, where do you want to start?” I ask, and something almost sorrowful flashes in his eyes but it’s gone so quickly I won’t notice. My hair was all in my head.

“Let’s start with what the fuck that thing is on your hand.” He slides his hand over mine. I look down at the diamond sparkling on my hand and wiggle my fingers but he before cutting my gaze back up to his. “My engagement ring. I got it from the jeweler.”

“You’re not fucking engaged.”
“You’re not fucking engaged.” “Then how do you explain this, huh? You think I bought this for you just to convince you I’m engaged? Please, you’re not worth near as much.”

He barks a laugh, and it takes me off guard. “Yes, I think that’s what happened.” His dark eyes gleam as I’m sure he sees the blush blanching on my cheeks. *Damnit.*

He lightly wraps his fingers around my hand and lifts it to kiss the knuckles, as if to freeze as he locks eyes with me and says low and greedy, “Either way, it looks great on our beautiful ring. You—I mean *he* has great taste. You know where it looks great?”

“That’s fine,” I humor him, “Where?”

He leads my hand to palm the bulge in his slacks. “Wrapped around his handcock.”

I attempt to rip my hand away. “Be fucking for real, Finn.” I scoff but he keeps it clutched tight to his groin, even going so far as to grind his fingers into my palm. And yet, at the same time I paint a look of disgust on my face. I can’t help but squeeze my thighs together.

“Go ahead, princess: take what you want.” He flicks his chin and scans my heated cheeks, chest.

tender, My lips tug in snarl. “You’re fucking delusional.”

ler if it “You want those photos deleted right?”

My eyes narrow and I stop trying to pull my hand away. “Every sin you sent me.”

fingers “Okay—”

it back “And the audio clip,” I rush to add.

“Done.” He laughs coldly and leans back on his hands as I swallow pride and tilt forward.

myself Even as I reach for his zipper and tease it down, I know this dealy that good to be true. But it’s also *true* that I am out of options. And hell, I

hand job to Mikey Carlorino in the eighth grade so that he wouldn’t *exactly* parents that he saw me sneak out to go to high school parties from looming door window. If thirteen-year-old Effie could do it, certainly twenty-year-old Effie can—and the stakes are much higher now.

ring. I I keep my eyes trained on the task, knowing that if I was to looky, it’s a whatever I saw looking back in Finn’s eyes would make this much hot would or hotter. And the latter is much worse. My fingers creep under the waist of his briefs, his abs tensing as my skin skims against his.

My breath hitches when I free his cock and realize...I suck my bottom and my between my teeth and feel my throat bob as my eyes take in the silver piercing below the head. I shoot him a cutting glare when I feel, rather but he see his smirk. He tongues his cheek like he knows exactly how my ass pelvis flutters wondering what the jewelry would feel dragging over my clit.

my face, “Whatever you’re imagining right now, I guarantee it feels ten times better.”

ly coolly “Gross.” I roll my eyes, but internally, I clench.

I tentatively circle his cock, the tip already glistening with pre-cu-

give a few testing strokes. I zero in on the flex of his thighs like he's
back the urge to thrust forward.

gle one "Come on, Ef, I know you can do better than that. I can take as good
give." His chuckle is deep and gravelly.

I scowl and meet his eyes. I'm sure mine are full of malice as I
saliva in my mouth and let it spill out of my lips. My spit drips down
low my onto his red tip. It's grotesque and resentful, and the moment he groans
it hits his dick it becomes hot as hell.

I remind myself this isn't hot. This is fucking bribery, coercion.
I should hate him. I *do* hate him.

I channel my confusing mix of lust and anger and smear my spit down
his next shaft, rotating my fist up and down. I rub my thumb over his leaking
y-eight-and piercing on every upstroke making a deep rumble resound from his
"Fuck, that's it."

The husky sound makes my insides melt, and I tighten my grip, stroke
arder...his cock more vigorously, needing this to end. He pushes air out of his
nostrils and rolls his head back, his dark hair sweeping off his forehead.
I force myself to look away, to not trace the corded muscles of his neck
back a moan.

"Christ, Effie. That's so fucking good." The way he's enjoying this
er than me sick. His praise only makes me wilt because it's not *good*. It's
pussyhate-filled. But he's too much of a self-absorbed fuckwad to notice.

I notice his hips jolt the more attention I pay to his piercing, so I focus
1 time that, adding more spit to glide my movements. I want this over as soon
possible. He responds by clenching his jaw, and I yank my head to the side
when he tries to reach out and stroke my hair. "Don't fucking touch me
um, and His laugh is interrupted by a knock at the door, and I freeze. The sur

holding all he needs to thread his big hand through my hair and grip the back of my head, forcing me to look up at him. “You’re not done.”

God as I “Finn—”

“Let them see that hand where it belongs. No matter whose ring is on it.” He calls over his shoulder to tell whoever it is to come in. As the knob turns slowly, he stares back at me, stony-faced. “I won’t ask nicely again.”

It is when I recognize the white woman that steps in as the dancer from the show earlier. Her neon green, sequined bikini is obnoxiously bright under the fluorescent lights. She spots me and stutters to a halt in her high staccato. “Oh sorry, I thought you said come in.”

He shrugs. “I did. What is it, Mira?”

My head spins. “Uh—I can come back.” She takes a step backward, but there’s a spark of interest in her voice.

“Fucking hell, what is it? You came in for a reason. Now tell me what it is.” She rips at the hem of her dress, the fabric snapping.

She flares. “I just finished my set, here’s my cash for the safe.” She crosses the street and sets a money bag on the desk. I catch her eyes going to his crotch as he licks her lip. *Fucking hell.*

“Mirabelle, this is Effie.”

She makes a face. “Hi, Effie,” she says sweetly, and I scowl back. This is the exact last thing I need. This is so fucking bad. Somebody witnessing me jacking Finn off in his office. I grit my teeth and try to calm my beating heart. Deal with one problem at a time.

Soon as she speaks, one devil opens his fucking mouth again. “She’s going to marry the governor’s son. See that ring? It’s from him—supposed to be a diamond. Doesn’t it look nice wrapped around my cock?”

In surprise, she teeters closer and peers down, nibbling her bottom lip. “It could be a diamond.”

of my does,” she says breathlessly.

Finn’s jaw grinds, his abs flexing, and he twitches with each stroke. “Fucking. Good.” He growls as he comes all over my hand. Mira’s face on it.” clearly turned on. He leans back against the desk as the hot liquid drips down my arm. “You’re a good girl,” he says, his hand turning, my fist.

I rip my hand off, disgusted with him, with her, and especially with the whole scene. I go to wipe my hand, but Finn’s hand snatched my wrist, holding it under the side of my face.

“Lick it up. Clean that pretty ring, princess. Make it *sparkle*,” he says, his hand moving down my arm. “You’re a good girl,” he says, and my spine goes rigid as my lips draw into a tight line.

“Fuck. No.” I growl back.

“If you don’t do what I ask, I won’t do what you ask.” He pushes me closer to my mouth, and I pull my head back. My eyes bounce back at him. “You’re a good girl,” Finn says, and Mira’s who looks like she’s nearly salivating. It’s obvious she feels something for him, the way her pupils blow wide, and she looks at him hungrily at his pearly cum coating my hand.

She can have him for all I care...which doesn’t explain why it gives me a wicked ping of gratification to lick him off my fingers while looking him in the eyes. Her lips part when I suck my ring finger into my mouth.

Our weird, jealous showdown ends when Finn reaches out for my cum. He picks it up with two fingers. “She makes such a pretty pet.” I purse my lips. “You’re a good girl,” he says, and he holds out his hand for me to spit the cleaned ring into his palm. “You’re a good girl,” he says, and he holds it up approvingly, letting the light catch on the finely cut edges.

“You’re a good girl.”

ly. But Mira leans across the desk and whispers in his ear, “She’d look a lot prettier on her knees.”

I hope he doesn’t see the inexplicable jealousy in my eyes. I hope

doesn't see the thrill simmering low in my stomach at being watched. "So, when—or especially when—the stakes are so high. I tear my gaze away from his before it gives me away and instead turn to Mira, "Funny. I think a downlook much better on his."

I lick my bottom lip and part my thighs, my heart thudding heavily against my ribcage. I hold my breath in shock and anticipation when Finn grins in front of me and drops to his knees. Pleasure flies up my spine at the sight of him on the floor between my legs.

I let my skirt hike up to my hips as I drape a leg over each armrest and drawls, "I let my skirt hike up to my hips as I drape a leg over each armrest ahead, *pet.*"

Finn's eyes darken, like sinking to the bottom of a deep, frigid sea. Without words, I know exactly what he's telling me as he slides his hand between my palms up my inner thighs. *Watch it, princess.*

I know I'm playing with fire talking to him like this, especially in front of Mira, but I can't help myself. I can't help the devil on my shoulder who always grows louder when I'm around him. And he knows it.

I wouldn't be surprised if he pushes me, not for his own gain, but to spite me, to make me even madder with myself in the morning. He's

along now for the same reason he used pleasure to force information from me. It's psychological warfare. He doesn't need to break me down by using my lips, because he knows I'll do it all on my own.

This realization infuriates me. Even if this ends now, he's won again. "That's compromised me. *Again.*"

Well, if he's already won, I might as well get an orgasm out of losing. Mira teeters backward on her staggering heels, trying to excuse her behavior. I don't know what compels me, but I find myself ordering her to stay.

My skin lights on fire, both under her gaze and under his touch. He

d, even drags his hands up my thighs and then makes me yelp when he r
ay from panties in half with a sharp tug.

ak *he'd* "I'm keeping these too." He tucks them into his pocket with a wick

"Look at that wet fucking cunt." His low timber has shivers running
7 in my arms which turn into a full body shudder when he drags his wide
ins and firmly up my slit.

e floor, "So fucking sweet, princess," he moans and wraps his hands arou
ass to yank me to the edge of the seat. I get a small pinch of glee
st. "Go notice Mira's lip twitch at his pet name.

I intertwine my fingers into his hair as he works me with his sinful
d lake. He sucks on my clit and makes heavy, steady strokes. A mewl spills fr
s rough lips, and he doubles down on his movements. His fingers dig into r
while he traces perfect circles around my clit. The next time he applie
front of pressure to my clit, he slips two thick fingers into me, and I buck aga
der that palm.

He's too fucking good at this.

: just to Pleasure makes my toes curl and heat coils up my legs and arou
playing spine. I dig my stilettos into his back and the way his lathing incre
1 out of fervor I'm not the only one who enjoys a little bit of pain.

himself, "Fuhh—" I bite my tongue as my pussy throbs, my orgasm building
delicious tension. I throw my gaze to Mira's as my breathing quickens
n. He's brings me closer and closer to the edge. I claw at Finn's scalp, tugging
hair as I am pushed violently over into spiraling bliss.

g. "*Fuh-Fuckk*," I cry, fighting the urge to squeeze my eyes closed
erself. I pleasure rolls over me so that I can keep them locked on Mira's.

She swallows hard, wringing her hands in front of her and her chee
slowly a brilliant red. But not in a turned-on way, in an embarrassed way, and

lips my deny that I enjoy that fact more than a little. Maybe I'm more ruthless
I've given myself credit for.

ed grin. Finn sits back on his heels and licks his lip with a devilish smile up
up my keep my returning gaze cold, not wanting him to know how hot he ma
tongue How he lit me on fucking flame. I turn that same cold gaze back to M
say, "You can go now."

and my As she leaves, Finn uses my skirt to wipe his mouth before risi
when I brushes his knuckles against my cheek. "Such a feisty little plaything."

He turns around and opens a laptop on the desk. I push out the c
tongue. watch over his shoulder, ignoring the way my legs wobble slightly
rom my getting through several security measures, he pulls up a folder of do
ny skinmedia files.

s direct I gasp when I realize the extent of it.

inst his *Every second. Every angle.*

He sorts by downloaded files and highlights the ones he sent me, en
each image preview so I can see they are the same. Then he deletes the
and my He turns to face me, "Done. A *pleasure* doing business with you."
ases in "What about the rest of them?" I can't keep the panic from leaking i
voice.

g into a He laughs, "You really thought I was going to delete everythin
and he fucking handjob? Nah, princess. Our deal was to delete everything I
g on his *you.*"

"That's before I knew you had a whole fucking museum of shit!"

l as the "A museum? Maybe I should frame some."

I shove him in the chest, my voice strained with poorly-concealed e
ks burn "You're a fucking monster, Finneas Fox."

l I can't I realize this moment was the one he was striving for all alor

less than ultimate way to spit in my face and rub in my humiliation. I know the convincing him to delete more so I storm to the door.

at me. I rip it open but pause in the frame. I look back at him and say with sincerity, "If you leak those photos, I will never forgive you. *Never.*" The door slams shut behind me.

My blood is pumping, my sanity hanging on by a thread. Why do I let him play me like this? Like a fucking mouse to a trap. I'm a goddamn Luciano, and I'm being made a fool.

I weave through the club's tables, scrunching my nose at the sickly smell from before. I spy Mira's shimmery, green bikini disappearing into a hallway labeled employee only. She's a reminder of exactly how *fucked*

So when I pass a table with an empty beer bottle, I pick it up and

The hallway is dark but lined with red toe-kick lights. My veins pulsing with determination and the need to gain back an inkling of control. I grip the bottle by the neck and smash the body against the wall. The heavy bass of the music covers any sound.

I open the only door at the end of the hallway and quickly realize it to be the dancers' locker and changing rooms. A long vanity table trails along for a mirror-covered wall lit up with big, round bulbs. A makeup bag is *sent to* and half its contents strewn out on the table next to Mira, seated in front of the mirror.

She's distracted by something on her phone, so she doesn't see me until I have her high ponytail fisted and head yanked back. Her eyes widen as they meet my crazed ones through the reflection.

Her mouth opens for what I'm sure was supposed to be a scream, but she quickly smacks it closed when I push the jagged beer bottle edge

re is nooutstretched neck.

“Do you know who I am?”

utmost “Ef-Effie Luci-Luciano.” Her trembling voice almost gives me
—almost.

“That’s right. And I’m sure I don’t have to tell you what will happen
speak a single word to a single soul about what you saw today.” She n
candiedhead as much as she can without grating the glass against her skin. “*Ri*

“Yes, yes. Of course.” Her voice shakes, and I press the bottle
y-sweetharder until she spews, “I won’t tell anyone. Not a soul, I promise.”

down a “Terrific.” I release her head with a shove and turn to leave, confide
d I am. scared her silent.

follow I pause before exiting the changing room and turn back to see her c
a slight drip of blood with a cotton pad. “Oh, and I’d go with the
se witheyeshadow. Complementary colors and all.”

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1. ALPHA—Layto |

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outstretched neck.

“Do you know who I am?”

“Ef-Effie Luci-Luciano.” Her trembling voice almost gives me pause—*almost*.

“That’s right. And I’m sure I don’t have to tell you what will happen if you speak a single word to a single soul about what you saw today.” She nods her head as much as she can without grating the glass against her skin. “*Right?*”

“Yes, yes. Of course.” Her voice shakes, and I press the bottle a touch harder until she spews, “I won’t tell anyone. Not a soul, I promise.”

“Terrific.” I release her head with a shove and turn to leave, confident I’ve scared her silent.

I pause before exiting the changing room and turn back to see her dabbing a slight drip of blood with a cotton pad. “Oh, and I’d go with the purple eyeshadow. Complementary colors and all.”



CHAPTER 7

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CHAPTER 7

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Girls' Night

Effie

It's a weird feeling, looking at your hands and wondering what they look like covered in blood.

I was so close to pushing that bottle a little harder, a little further. In that moment, Mira was me, and I hated her. I saw the way Mira looked at me and I saw myself. I saw the way she cowed and bent to his air of dominance and I fucking saw myself.

My brothers killed their first man at age sixteen. Some kids get a car at sixteen for getting their driver's license. In our family, you got a car if you killed someone. And were born a son.

Instead I was taught how to sit straight, shut my mouth, and look down. Look where that's gotten me. Under the thumb of another fucking man.

I laugh alone in my temporary bedroom at the thought because I can't stop talking about Finn or Hudson. My father never taught me to fight because he needed me to be compliant and dependent. It's dangerous when a woman starts believing in her own strength.

But despite not having any of the training my brothers received, I'm still trying to fight back. I've lost some battles, but I haven't lost the war.

After all, I've gotten Finneas Fox on his knees...twice.

I wonder if he's realized the same thing because I haven't heard from him in two days.

If I've been able to flip the script one way, maybe I can flip the script the other way and use his own strategy against him.

I've been terrified the crew will find out he's blackmailing me and his family is their target, but these women are the best of the best. If they will be able to work with this predicament I've put us in.

I slide out of bed and open my door with a direct line of sight into the apartment's living room. Hadis, Linnie, and Marguerite are already in the living room, lounging on the basic navy couch and cream-colored armchair. The apartment came furnished, and while it's nothing special, it's temporarily living here comfortable enough. It reminds me of hotel furniture meant to look pleasing but still durable.

I head to the kitchen and grab a bottle of wine, weaving four glasses between my fingers before returning to the living room. I kneel by the table and uncork the wine, "There's something I need to tell you guys-

"I win," Hadis says, and the other women laugh. I look up confused.

"We had a bet going on when you were gonna tell us what was going on with you and Finneas Fox," Linnie explains, and I set the bottle down. "Don't spill it."

"I see..." There's no point in denying it, even if they didn't already know I was planning on telling them. I sit back on my heels and scan their faces. They don't look mad...or smug...more amused than anything. "What do you know?"

"He has something on you, but we don't know what. And we've a plan since we are still alive, he hasn't told his older brother about us yet."

speaks casually, but her eyes bore into mine with intensity. “But w
om himplay the guessing game all night or you could just tell us.”

“Right then,” I begin to pour the wine while I try to formulate my w
ot again “Only three glasses. Hadis doesn’t drink,” Marguerite adds, and I nc

Once I finish and everyone who wants one has a glass in their
. knowsbegin. “Finn and I were once good friends. Families in business and
’m sureafter—what do you know about his father?”

“All of it.”

: to the “Okay, well you can imagine we weren’t friends after that. We r
n there,*reconnected*—” I internally wince using the same word he used tal
s. TheHudson. “What I thought was a chance encounter obviously wasn’t.
makesvideos and photos of it all and wants me to pass him information
rniture,operation ‘or else,’” I say with air quotes.

Hadis leans forward, resting her elbows on her knees, an excited g
s stems her eyes. “This is brilliant.”

☺ coffee “Brilliant?” I take a big chug of wine.

—” “He doesn’t know anything, because you don’t know anything—”

. “He knows the target,” I confess.

oing on She waves her hand. “That doesn’t matter. Banks always know
wn so Imoney is the target. Museums always know their art is the target. But l

he doesn’t know anything, we can feed him exactly what we want
/ know,know. So...” She sits back and pulls her dyed blonde hair into a p
r faces. “What do we want him to know?”

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Linnie

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hand, I

all. But “So how did you all get together?” I finally ask, two hours later.

planned exactly what we—well, I’m—going to tell Finn, and what t
going to do instead, and at this point, are just talking about their
recently places they’ve eaten since they’ve been in town.

king to They all look at Linnie who chuckles lightly. “I guess you could say
He has have family businesses. My father was a bank robber, as was his fat
on our his father’s father...you get the idea, no?” I lean forward, intrigued.

learn in Marguerite laughs. “Some families have sweet Christmas or
traditions. Our family’s tradition is robbing banks.”

“Our?” I ask, trying to spot any familial resemblance between the t
hard but not impossible to see, what with Linnie’s bold curly blonde h
Marguerite’s tight buzz.

“Cousins,” Linnie continues, “But we met Hadis when the diamond
w their was working at—to rob, of course—hired architects for remodels.”

because “I was an intern, still in university at the time,” Hadis adds.

him to “And I noticed she would come in separate from her coworkers to
onytail. blueprints and information for things that had nothing to do with the j
were hired for. Layout for the air duct system, the blueprints of th
room, name of the roofing company...” Linnie swirls her wine and
amused at Hadis. “Like recognizes like.”



“You were casing the store?” I look at Hadis who raises a brow with a smile.

“It’s in my blood. I come from a family of smugglers. Growing up it felt like nearly everything not Iranian produced was illegal. Western cars and clothing, non-Islamic art or art with any kind of nudity, alcohol – if you knew the right people and had enough money, you could get just about anything from people like my parents.”

“You smuggled alcohol even though you don’t drink it?”

“Just because that’s how I choose to practice Islam doesn’t mean everyone should be forced to do the same. Plus, our biggest clients were always the government. Hypocrites, the lot of them.”

“Really? What types of things would you get for them?”

“Lots of things. *Juicy* tracksuits, playboy magazines, *Star Wars* action figures, the *American Idiot* album for the Speaker of Parliament’s daughter. She shrugs and I laugh, but it’s hard to imagine Green Day as contraband.

I pour the rest of our second bottle of wine into my glass. “And how do you end up at an architecture firm in Paris?”

“My parents immigrated to France when I was a teen. I went to university intending to become an honest architect, but my brain was constantly thinking about how to break into the buildings, not create them.”

“I remember the day Linnie called me.” Marguerite sits up. “She was so excited. She said, ‘Who better to know a building’s weaknesses than the people who built it.’”

“Our fathers hadn’t been able to keep up with new banking technology, so we kept going for smaller and smaller targets. Jewelry shops, armored cars. But I knew with Hadis’s expertise, we could take it to the next level, ;

th a slytargets we'd only ever dreamed of.” There’s an energetic flare to t

Linnie speaks. Pride in what they’ve created.

in Iran, “So, she confronted me the next time I came to pick up materials.’

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targets we'd only ever dreamed of." There's an energetic flare to the way Linnie speaks. Pride in what they've created.

"So, she confronted me the next time I came to pick up materials." Hadis grins. "And *Les Arnaqueuses* was born."

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CHAPTER 8

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CHAPTER 8

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The Wild Stallion

Finn

I've grown impatient waiting for them to make a move. And it was just my fucking luck that the one time Cash takes a vacation in Texas is the same time the most elite heist crew in the world decides to hit their mark. But I can't make a move without Cash, so I just need my own time.

I don't trust Effie.

Not until she gives me a reason to. And so far, she's only giving me excuses to think she isn't taking this seriously. Thinking she could strut into my office of business and make demands of *me*. What was that stunt she pulled with Mira anyway?

My throat goes dry remembering the silky feel of her thighs under my palm as I pushed her knees apart. I recall looking up from her lap, seeing the determined set of her jaw and heat in her gaze as she stared down Mira. She looked like a fucking warrior.

But she's spiraling. Lashing out and making rash decisions.

She's been thrown in the deep end and is desperately trying to stay afloat. Even the strongest soldiers can still sink.

I can't figure her out. Which makes me want to grab her by the thr
fuck the truth out of her. But also makes me want to stay far away, k
distance to just observe her, take all of her in like an animal in the wild

She's unpredictable, that much is for sure.

And she still hasn't given me anything about this plan of theirs. A
done waiting.

Finn: Peaches. 20 min.

Effie: No.

I can't deny the way my dick jumps at her ready defiance, the v
mouth waters with the need to break her down to nothing but yes, plea
ould be
n years
ake us
to buy
My foot taps against the leg of my chair as I wait for her response.

Finn: I know you get off on being a brat, but we need to meet.

My foot taps against the leg of my chair as I wait for her response.
my desk drawer in the Den's back office and pull out my growing s
Effie's panties. I twirl the torn fabric of the ones from Peaches arou
finger and smile to myself.

I pick them up and take a picture of it dangling from my finger, th
one in the drawer also in the frame.

Finn: I'm looking forward to adding to my collection.

That gets me an immediate response.

Effie: You're fucking sick.

Finn: Is that a yes?

Effie: Neutral territory of my choice. I'll text you an address.

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and I'm

The Wild Stallion Saloon.

I take in the weathered wood building. Its red paint has peeled an
away to a rusty color, the door and windows are trimmed in a woody
Matching green columns hold up a corrugated tin porch covering.¹
Over an hour outside of city limits, this is certainly neutral territory.

I wait in my car, assuming Effie hasn't arrived yet based on the f
muddy, lifted trucks are the only ones in the dirt lot. We're in the agri
part of this county, near Bartlett Farms and wonder if Effie realizes
simply a coincidence.

I can't be sure as she picked the location, but I'm thinking the obsc
this place is just an overcompensation for her foolish decision to mee
Peaches last time. I was worried she wasn't as smart as I remembere
she asked to meet there, but after Mira told me what happened in the d
room, my concerns were abated.

She's spent her whole life on the bench and is only now stepping c
field. Mistakes are inevitable, but she's learning quickly. Even if it is
in my ass to drive to the middle of nowhere.

A few minutes later a Mercedes SUV, just as out of place as my
pulls into the lot. I watch in the rearview mirror as the car door ope
—*fuck me.*

The yellow sundress flowing over her curves is way too sweet things it makes me wanna do to her. But I'm sure that was her intention. She thinks she's just a pawn, but she knows how to play the game as anyone. She does it with grace and subtlety rather than rage and carnage. It may be more effective, but the other is just as deadly.

My phone buzzes and I pretend the battering of delight in my chest is just a faded green. I texted me doesn't exist. Fucking childish is what it would be if I did.

Childish and a liability.

Effie: I'm here, are you inside?

I don't respond right away, give myself just a few more seconds to act that cultural or it's her in. Her dark, chestnut hair is straight down her back. Her matching eyes sift through the parked cars. I know when she's noticed my car because she stands taller and drops her wringing hands.

I track her through the mirror as she walks over, small blooms rising from her steps. I act like I don't see her, even when she steps up to the driver side window and taps the glass. Without lifting my head from my phone, I hold out a finger and can hear her huff through the window. Her frustration delights me.

When I finally give her my attention, she's glaring down at me. She crosses her arms impatiently, but the only thing I can think of is the way her movement pushes up her tits.

I roll down my window. "I'd be able to get out if you weren't standing in front of my door."

Her lips twitch. "I'll be inside at the bar," she bites out sharply. I turn my head toward the building, I hear her mumble. "Christ, I already drank." My hands ball into tight fists watching her ass walk away.

The inside of the saloon is just what I'd expect from the outside. The

for the yellowing American flag pinned on the wall next to beer posters and more. She deer heads. The crowd is blue collar, and a neon sign buzzes above the well-lit table where most of the people are gathered. It smells like old cigarette smoke. One fried food, and the wood floor feels sticky under my shoes.

A woman in a tube top is behind the big oak bar fixing a drink for that she. The hairs on the back of my neck rise as I watch every man in the place give her his lecherous gaze to her. Her dress sleeves are billowy and off the shoulder, showing her off her bronzed collarbones, and I bet every shithead in the room is imagining what that expanse of skin would look like with his hands on it. I want to soak mark.

My fingers go brown. Like they have a mind of their own, my fingers inch toward the gun tucked into my jeans.

Not that she's mine.

But she sure as shit isn't theirs.

I pull out a stool next to her at the same time the song changes from a low growl to a screeching wail. The sound of my fingernails scraping against the floor is loud in the relative quiet. She gives me a sideways glance before finishing her conversation with the bartender and walking away. I am not even there.

I don't like being ignored, it's disrespectful. And it would stoke the simmering fire below my skin if I thought she was truly ignoring me. But she's not.

She may not be looking at me, but all of her attention is on me. It's in the way she fiddles with her straw like it will soothe the itch my presence causes. It's in the way she swallows deeply without ever taking a breath. As she answers the bartender's "enjoy your drink" with "thanks, you too."

She's flustered. I make her flustered. This realization isn't new, but here's a delicious all the same.

ounted When the bartender walks away, I spin her swivel seat toward n
he poolhands fly out for stability, one landing on the bar, the other on my thi;
:smokethundering in my chest is instant with even the smallest willing-
accidental—touch from her.

r Effie. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think you missed me,” I say, looking
ice turndown between her hand on me and her eyes. She yanks it away, smoc
oulder,skirt and looks at me expectantly. “Do you have something to t
ie placeprincess?”

fucking A pair of men saddle up to the bar next to me, and she eyes them u
She stands. “Let’s dance.”

tucked My fist tightens into a ball at the same time my jaw clenches. “
dance.”

“They’re too close,” she nods toward the men.

“Then we’ll move.” I stand and grab her hand, stomping to a h
and the table.

me one She shakes her hand out of mine, and I have to fight the urge to l
ike I’m tighter. “And then what if someone gets close again? We can’t keep
leapfrog in the bar. It’s suspicious as hell.”

always “I thought the point of picking a place in bumfuck nowhere was l
ne. But nobody would know who we are.”

“It’s not a risk I’m willing to take. Now, fucking dance with m
s in the grips my bicep and I let her drag me onto the dance floor desp
ximity protesting in my head. I stiffen when she places both hands on my sh
sip and and squares her hips with mine.

“Oh don’t tell me you’re scared of a little dancing?” Her lip curls
but it’s corner and I bite my tongue. “You kill people for a living—and I’n
sure for fun too—but you can’t dance?”

ne. Her “You’re stalling.”

gh. The “And you’re scared of *dancing*.” She smirks and wraps her arms—albeit my neck and tugs me closer so I’m forced to sway with her body. I can appreciate her soft tits pressed against my chest, or the way her hip up and across mine over the stupid fucking noise in my head.

ths her The noise that demands a Fox never show weakness.

ell me, And as idiotic as it is, dancing is a weakness and years of survival t has me bursting at the seams to avoid it.

neasily. I tug her closer by the waist and lower my mouth to her ear. “Start princess.”

I don’t “What do you want to know?” Her own breath flutters against m and a heavy, hot weight settles into my stomach.

How your voice sounds in the morning. What sounds you make high-topsleep. How you’d look at me if you didn’t despise me. “Everything.”

“They’re keeping me at arm’s length, I don’t know much.”

hold on “That’s not good enough.”

playing “It will have to be.” She blinks up at me, a challenge glimmering eyes.

because I tuck a strand of hair behind her ear and cradle her jaw. “You like games, don’t you, pet?”

e.” She “Not as much as you. Though I have to admit, yours are getting a bite theShe steps back, taking my hand with her and spins beneath my oulderstaunting smile on her lips.

My eyes trail up the small bit of extra thigh exposed from her t s in the skirt. I let her swirl back to me and lock her in place with a firm hand 1 prettyhip, the other caging her hand against my arm like they did in those old dances.

To distract her from my awkward and stilted attempt at having her
around throw out an offer she can't refuse. "Let's make it more interesting than
I'll even give me a solid piece of intel, and if it proves to be helpful, I will
is grind everything."

Her feet halt and she sucks in a hopeful breath. "*Everything* ever
This isn't some semantic trick or twisted wording?"

training "Every single morsel of evidence that that night ever existed."

"Okay, it isn't much but..." She gives a quick scan of the bar floor
talking, more before continuing—I'd do the same if I hadn't already been
attention to every single person who's passed through the door since a
y neck. "The rooftop. It's the only entrance you never have men on. I don't
exactly what they're gonna do, but they're going to create some
in your problem that requires you to build scaffolding to fix it—"

"They want me to give them a ladder right into the castle, huh?"

"Something like that." She shrugs, and I try to read her face for
minuscule hint that she's lying. Instead I find myself fixating on
; in her grouping of scratch-like scars by her eye that I've never seen before.

"When did this happen?" I don't even realize I've reached out to brush
playing scars with my thumb until I feel her hot skin, and then she jolts her
back.

it old." "A lot has happened in ten years, Finn." She rips out of my arms
arm, boots clack across the floor to the exit. I feel each step like a lead ball
in my stomach.

wirling I chase after her and grab her wrist when I catch up to her in the
l on her lot. I spin her around and my throat ties into a knot when I see water
d-timey her eyes.

"What the fuck was that about, Ef?"

hythm, I She shoves me in the chest, and I drop her wrist, her voice strained. You sudden emotion, “Don’t start acting like you care. Not now, Finn.”

I delete I let her walk away. My armor is too tight for her words to cut.

I think.

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1. Bottom of the River—Delta Rae |

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She shoves me in the chest, and I drop her wrist, her voice strained with sudden emotion, “Don’t start acting like you care. Not now, Finn.”

I let her walk away. My armor is too tight for her words to cut.

I think.

1. Bottom of the River—Delta Rae |

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CHAPTER 9

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CHAPTER 9

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Plates, Picture Frames, and Paintings.

Effie

T*en years ago*

Sometimes when my father's angry, I can see it coming from away. There's a change in the air, a prickle at the nape of my neck. The sense of knowing even without proof, like when you feel you're watched.

When this happens, I know to lock my door before he shows up. I pound and pound on the wood and be grateful it's not my face.

But today, I didn't see it coming.

My mother's powder room is thick with the scent of her perfume hairspray, but it has the best mirrors in the house. I want to try my portrait painting rather than my usual landscapes. Figured self-sketches would be a good place to start and this vanity table with three of mirrors would be excellent. The end two mirrors are on hinges to different angles. I unscrew half of the globe bulbs around the perimeter to dim the lighting—I'm not trying to draw every single pore.

I'm on my third sketch when the door slams open, ricocheting off the wall. I catch my father's red, twisted face in the mirror.

“Like mother like daughter, who are you in here whoring yourself Euphemia?” Spittle hits my cheek as he yanks my head by a rough fistful of hair.

There’s no makeup on the table, only my pencils and paper. “I was just—”

“And how in God’s name did you manage to break every other lightbulb? You’re a spoiled brat, breaking everything you touch.” Before I can explain they aren’t broken, my head is flung forward and my nose smashes into the vanity.

My eyes instantly water, and I taste a trickle of copper down my throat. I try to shuffle my sketches out of the way so I don’t drip blood onto the table. They aren’t great but I would like to keep them. Unfortunately, that only draws my father’s attention.

“Yourself. That’s all you fucking think about.” He holds up a sketch of a woman on a piece of paper and examines my work with a sneer. “Heavenly Father, tell me how did I let him do to deserve such a self-conceited bitch of a daughter?” I wince at the ripping sound as he shreds my work into pieces.

I should have predicted this. He has a tendency to destroy whatever is in his hand when he’s like this. Plates. Picture frames. *Paintings*. He snatches another off the table, and I use the few seconds it takes for him to tear it in half to stuff the only remaining one into my pocket.

“Clean this up.” He pulls a silk handkerchief from his jacket sleeve and captures the blood, then throws it at me. “And don’t get fucking blood on my rug.”

I don’t watch him leave, just listen to his Italian loafers scuff against the carpet as he crosses the room and slams the door just as loudly leaving me alone. I didn’t enter. I dab at my nose, sniffing back and swallowing the rusty taste of my own blood that drips down the back of my throat.

up for, My phone vibrates on the vanity, and I jump at the sudden sound of a now-quiet room.

I don't look at the caller ID, quickly answering to end the shrill sound as I draw "Hello?"

"Hey, Eff, I'm at the corner." A soothing warmth sinks into my bones with the smile in Finn's voice, and I picture the way his left eye crinkles as he smiles. ¹

"I lost track of time drawing, but I'll be right there."

"Okay, see you soon."

I swipe my watery eyes with the back of my hand and inspect my nose, which has mostly stopped bleeding, wiping the tip of my nose before I get up the shredded remains of my sketches and tightening the light bulbs.

As I crack the powder room door open, I listen for my father, trying to place his whereabouts in the big house. Luckily, I can hear him down the hall in the kitchen shouting at someone on the phone. Even though I can't hear exactly how far away he is, I still race to the front door with a beating heart if he's going to jump out at any second.

My brothers are in the driveway, smoking by their cars. "Hey, what's going?" Gianni shouts and flicks his cigarette butt to the ground.

"Out." I raise my brow and give him an impatient look.

"Yeah, okay, don't tell me." He laughs. "Dad know?"

"He'll be happy I'm out of his sight, trust me."

"Whatever," he waves his hand and returns to his conversation with them. Not that I'd expect them to care given the sum total of zero times I've stood up for me.

Once I'm out of their sight, I climb the iron fence surrounding our property so I don't have to deal with the guards at the gate, and run the rest of the

I in the down the sidewalk. I don't need to run, no one's coming after me, but always a nervous giddiness I get when I'm seeing Finn.

sound. Like I'm buzzing with energy and just *need* to sprint to get it out.

I can hear his old truck rumbling before I see it. He's the only guy ones at who doesn't have a luxury car worth at least a quarter-million. He s s in the because new cars don't have enough problems. He likes tinkering un hood and fixing the parts that are always breaking on an old car. I do the appeal, but I can't say I hate the way he looks in grease-stained c and no shirt underneath.

ny nose I bite my cheek, trying to get the image out of my head as I climb leaning cab so I'm not blushing. He leans across the wide bench seat to offer hand and pull me in.

ying to "Hi." I say, slightly breathless and quickly add, "I ran," with a s the hallexplain why I'm out of breath. Because it's most definitely *not* because an hearway his dark hair brushes across his lashes and the way my lungs s heart as when I meet his forest-green eyes.

"Hey—" His smile morphs into a frown, "You're bleeding." His ere you pinch in concern, and I quickly turn toward the window and wipe at n with my sleeve. *Crap.*

"Your father?" There's a black shadow to Finn's growl that's co vengeful and it equal parts scares me and thrills me. "This is the last : time." He veers away from the curb and slams on the gas.

Renzo. "Finn, he's not worth it," I plead as he approaches my gate. Beca they've reality is, no matter how satisfying I find the image of Finn mak father's nose bleed instead of mine, this wasn't the first time and it's f roperty the last.

he way "But *you're* worth it." He cuts me with a deep stare, and it strikes a

there's me that has been told my whole life I am *not* worth it. Not worth resp
standing because I wasn't born a son. Not worth a voice or say beca
just a pawn.

I know He pauses in the road when I put my hand on his arm and urge him
ays it's at me. I can see my father's men at the gate start to walk toward us, c
ider the "What's there to do? He's the Don. You storm in there and try to t
on't get how to run his family and he'll take a finger or bust a kneecap just bec
overall scan. If you even make it that far."

His knuckles whiten around the steering wheel, and he presses his l
into the firm line as he stares straight ahead at the men closing the distar
me his pointedly reaching into their jackets where we both know they are carr

"Let's go, okay?"

hrug to He works his jaw like he's chewing on words unsaid. His foot stalls
e of the brake for a long, heavy pause. Finally, he puts the truck in reverse an
squeeze at me. "Promise me one thing."

"Okay." I nod and he removes one hand from the wheel to cover r
; brow his arm.

ny nose "Next time, you call me, and I'll be there."

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1. Something to Someone by Dermot Kennedy |

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me that has been told my whole life I am *not* worth it. Not worth respect and standing because I wasn't born a son. Not worth a voice or say because I'm just a pawn.

He pauses in the road when I put my hand on his arm and urge him to look at me. I can see my father's men at the gate start to walk toward us, curious. "What's there to do? He's the Don. You storm in there and try to tell him how to run his family and he'll take a finger or bust a kneecap just because he can. If you even make it that far."

His knuckles whiten around the steering wheel, and he presses his lips into a firm line as he stares straight ahead at the men closing the distance and pointedly reaching into their jackets where we both know they are carrying.

"Let's go, okay?"

He works his jaw like he's chewing on words unsaid. His foot stalls on the brake for a long, heavy pause. Finally, he puts the truck in reverse and looks at me. "Promise me one thing."

"Okay." I nod and he removes one hand from the wheel to cover mine on his arm.

"Next time, you call me, and I'll be there."



CHAPTER 10

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CHAPTER 10

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Only Yourself to Blame

Finn

Present

After receiving an anonymous complaint, we sent a city inspector who determined that the brick facade of your building has lost a substantial depth of mortar. To avoid a building code violation a licensed contractor must be used to repoint all brick with a mortar depth at or above the depth within 30 days to avoid resulting fines of no less than \$5,000.

I read the letter from the city's code enforcement office again and deny the smirk that plays on my lips.

My naughty plaything decided to abide by the rules this time and get the truth.

I suppose that means it's time for her reward.

I make a mental note to find out who to bribe at the city office to prove this violation—if there is even a violation. I'm betting *Les Arnaut* greased some palms to get this letter, and I'll just need to find whoever paid and offer them more.

I type out half a text but decide better of it and call Effie instead. V rings, I tap my finger against my thigh.

She answers, but I only hear an aggravated sigh. I wait, my skin knowing how antsy she must be getting from my silence. I'm proven when she huffs, "You called me, Finneas. What do you want?"

I chuckle and absentmindedly spin in the desk chair in the Den's office. "I want to see you."

"Oh boy, let me just hop to it then," she says in a sarcastic tone that grins.

"Deflecting nerves with sarcasm is a common defense mechanism."

"You don't make me nervous, Finn."

spector "I make you feel *something*." I sense her being seconds away from latching up on me, so I quickly add, "I, on the other hand, always keep my pr tractor Do you want to see for yourself?"

1/4" of "You're gonna delete everything?" I can hear a reserved hopefulness in her voice.

id can't "Yes. The Den doesn't open for a few more hours. Come over." I explain the beat that rises in my throat while I wait fucking...nervous her reply.

ave me "Okay," she says, and the call ends.

I didn't realize how desperately I wanted to see her until those few seconds clutched my lungs.

ostpone *This is getting fucking ridiculous.*

queuses Against my will, she possesses my every waking moment—and her they being honest, most of my sleeping ones too. I can no longer pretend of concern for my family and the war that is brewing.

In the office at Peaches, she told me to get on my knees, and I felt

While itsinner begging for salvation.

Then something switched inside me when I saw her eyes well up
buzzingdusty parking lot. I've always been possessive when it comes to h
en rightwhen I saw those scars I became protective too. Summoning back
feelings that will do nothing but get people hurt.

office. "I I drum my fingers on the desk to the tempo I know by heart and pi
bridge of my nose with a determined exhale. I'll use the next time I see
has mean opportunity to remind myself that a cooperating blackmail target d
make an ally.

She's still a Luciano, she's still the enemy.

ranging

omises.



s in her

I can'tTen minutes later, she's walking through the Den's heavy wood doc
usly fordark hair is piled up on top of her head, like it was thrown up hapha
but the messiness suits her. Her eyes harden when they meet mine beh
bar; she lifts her chin in greeting.

passing She weaves through the tables to me and raises a brow. "Well, I
this."

My hand finds the small of her back while I guide her to the Den's
if I'mIt's an automatic gesture. But the moment I touch her, I realize ju
it's outfucked I am. Because I don't want to just lightly lay my palm on her,
to dig my fingers into her until my hold is bruised and branded into her
I like a

want to brush the tendrils of hair falling down the nape of her neck against my teeth until she carries my marks.

There's so much I want to do with her, *to* her.

And that pisses me off because I am realizing with disturbing clarity I lack control when it comes to Effie Luciano.

I follow her into the office and leave the door open, dropping into the chair beside her. I already have the folder opened and I look at her beside me, see no other face as she looks at the dozens of photos and videos.

To Effie's credit, her face doesn't give much away. But then she blinks and I notice her thighs twitch tighter where she stands next to me.

I stand and she turns to face me. I dust my thumb across her lip, grazing across the teeth riveting into it. "Should I press play for posterity's sake?" I whisper in a husky whisper that makes her pupils blow wide, her eyelashes flutter.

Her lips part, and her breath hitches when I drag her soft bottom lip. *Fuck*, I want to ruin her.

"Delete the files, Finn," she says almost breathlessly. But I can't. Her control is hanging on by a ratty thread, I can almost feel the fibers tearing bit by bit while I coast the back of my hand down her neck.

I lightly collar the base of her throat, my thumb rubbing softly against the hollow between her collarbones. I feel her swallow, and my stomach clenches. Her eyes are like ice, cold but fragile. And able to melt if the heat is enough. "Do you want me, princess?"

"I want you..." My pulse jumps. "—To delete the files." She juts her chin and pushes into my hand. "Now."

"As you wish," I say dryly and sit back down. A few clicks of the mouse and I read aloud the dialogue box for her even though she's watching.

and sinkeverything over my shoulder. “Deleting these 237 files from the cloud delete them permanently from all devices. Do you wish to continue?”

“Good. Do it.”

y that I Another click and all evidence of that night is gone. Except memories. Those will never leave me, like a brand from a hot iron.

he desk “Well, pleasure doing business as always, princess,” I spin in the canningface her and my stomach swoops when I realize how soft her eyes are. *Thawed.*

ites her Her mouth moves subtly, then falls partly open as if she was about to kiss her lip but stopped. “Ask me again.”

hosting I tilt my head in question and she raises her brows in implication. “Do you want me?” It’s through my nose when I realize what she means, my body tensing and preparing for a fight. Despite the rapid fluttering in my chest, I throw my thumbs into the belt loops of her jeans and tug her between my legs. “Do you want me?”

it pull Her thick thighs wedge between mine, and I drop my thumbs to grip her palms over her round ass. She nods and pushes her pelvis forward, but excited glimmer in her eyes.

in the “Is that a yes?” It feels like my spine is made of kerosene and I can’t help but flip. anticipation of a match about to strike. She nods again, the smallest of smiles strongtugging on her lips.

I stand, tightening my grip on her hips, I crowd her until our foreheads are nearly touching. “Say. It.”

We share a held breath.

mouse “I want you.” And the match is struck, lighting up my body.

atching Grabbing her thighs, I hike her off the ground, and she responds by wrapping them around my waist. The soft, needy moan she makes will

and willmouths crash together is all it takes for me to say *fuck it*.

I spin us around and set her on the desk in front of the computer. Her gnawing hunger paws at me as she skates her hands under my tee shirt for theurges it over my head. If losing control is what it takes to sate this hunger, then consider me off the rails.

I clutch her face in my hands to deepen our kiss. It's frantic and has been here now. horny teenagers, but it's also perfect. The way she battles back as I coax my tongue further into her mouth. Neither of us willing to come to bite. She's lighting little fires everywhere she touches. My chest. My arms. My back.

I sigh. She gasps for air when I break our kiss. There's a flash of something like it's eyes—wariness, regret, acceptance—I can't tell. But it doesn't lead me because all I can think about is claiming her. Taking her. *Owning her*. Do you? "I told you once that I own you, you remember that, Ef? That *everything*." I cup her pussy.

She mewls in response. And I work on the button on her jeans. I slide my hand down her thigh. She continues, "I own you, not because of some fucking photos, not to taunt a timid continue, "I own you, not because of some fucking photos, not to taunt a fake-ass fiancé, but because—" *We were always meant to be* is what I feel the say but it's not what comes out of my mouth. "Because you're desperate for me as your cunt is for my cock."

I kiss and bite a path down her neck, and she leans back, encouraging me. Her hands are away I ache to devour her. One hand is knitted tightly into her hair while the other fights with her zipper—*these fucking jeans*. I'm so close to breaking a knife and just cutting them off her.

I thrust my hips between her legs, and even with our clothes, she moans angrily, hungrily when my hard cock rubs against her pussy. I lean forward and kiss her neck. She moans. I lean forward and kiss her neck. She moans. I lean forward and kiss her neck. She moans.

whisper in her ear. “So fucking desperate for my cock, just begging for it. A fucking claimed and fucked full of—”¹

start and I catch movement in the corner of my eye and my body floods with hunger. I grab her wrist and wrench it forward. She yelps at the painful grip. “the fuck is that?”

sty, like Her fist tightens, but I pry it open. A USB stick. That she was attempting to slot into my computer.

concede. “You think you’re above all us pitiful little humans, but you’re just a fucking man: led around by his cock.” She snarls, and ice turns to white-hot rage.

g in her *She fucking played me.*

matter I’m too stunned by how far I’ve fallen that I don’t see it coming when she knees me in the groin and pushes off the desk. She sprints from the room, and I pound my fist into the desk with a roar.

Just once. Just once, and then I collect my wits and think fast. A few minutes on my phone and seconds later I have the entire Den locked down remotely. She’s trapped.

want to I hear her rattling the interior doors before the wooden doors, tugging just at the handle and cursing. As beautiful as her sweet whimpers were, the frustrated, harried sounds she makes now may be even better.

ing the “*Oh, princess,*” I sing-song as I step out of the office unhurried, hiding them in my pockets. There’s no need to rush. She’s not going anywhere. I’m always my favorite part, knowing my prey is trapped and just waiting to find them.

moans It’s easy for my mind to switch gears completely. From lustful fool to predator. I settle into my skin, feeling at home. *This I know. This is where I’m truly in full control.*

g to be “I gave you a head start, but you can’t hide. I will find you. Better praying I’ll show mercy when I do.”

ice. I stalk into the dining room and see her scamper through the tables. “What the kitchen. *Perfect*. I can’t wait to spread her over the large counter to make her beg.

tempting When I enter the kitchen, my heart’s pounding steadily. She’s yanked the back door’s handle, and my mouth waters for retribution, to balance the scales. She’s broken the truce, and now betrayed me again with this turn of events.

“Knock, knock,” I chuckle, and she whips around, eyes wide and Her chest heaves and falls. Her eyes ping-pong around the room until she stops and narrows on a distant wall. I know exactly what she’s spotted, the knife, and every inch of this place. The knives that are lined up on a magnetic strip.

“Think you’ll make it?” I taunt and see her calculation process on her face. She makes a run for it, but I’m faster, closing the distance between us. When she reaches across the counter for a knife, I flatten her over the counter and pin her down by the neck. And for a split moment, there’s a flicker of disappointment, maybe even loss, that it had to be this way.

But it’s gone as quickly as it came.

I pull a gun from my waistband and swallow down the growing lump in my throat, pressing the muzzle firmly to the back of her head.

This is Right above the wispy bits of hair that just minutes ago I wanted to touch for me so I could breathe in the scent of her skin.

A goddamn fool.

“Give me one good reason not to kill you right now.”

She stopped fighting my hold as soon as I put the gun to her head, now turns her cheek as much as she can to look back at me, a cutting glare.

er startfull of venom I can almost feel the sting. “You thought I could ge
want you after everything you’ve done? You repulse me, Finn.”

toward I ignore the blow to my gut her words cause, telling myself they’r
ter andeven though I’m not sure they are. “Is that supposed to make me wan
you *less*? Saying that I repulse you?” I force a laugh, it’s dripping wi
king onbitterness.

nce the Her eye contact never wavers. “You’re not going to kill me becau
double-could never live with yourself if you did.”

I scoff. “I’ve killed people for much less, princess. And I sleep just f
frayed. “You can tell yourself you hate me, but you don’t. You despise y
til theybecause you can’t hate me, no matter how hard you try.” The truth
I knowwords is a bomb in my stomach. “It’s why I was able to get so close
ip. Because even though I could never bring myself to fuck you, you c
er face. wait to jump at the chance.”

us right Another blade digs into my back, and this time, it’s one I put there
counterBecause she’s right. My desire for her is holding a knife to my own thr
lash of But I can’t let her know that. No, she can’t know how dangerously t
words are. I reach for my belt buckle and make extra effort to ensure
hear the clanking of metal. She flinches under me. “I should take yo
ump inhere. Show you how wrong you are. How little I care.”

She laughs but there’s a barely-there wobble in her voice when sh
o brush“*You’re right, it is little.*”

I growl, ripping her off the counter and shoving her shoulder dow
on your fucking knees, Effie. And watch your mouth before I fill it.”
the gun between her and the ground, and she drops to her knees, a c
but shesmirk flitting on her lips.

glare so “Go ahead, Finn. Force me to give you a blowjob at gunpoint. I c

uninelypossibly hate you more than I already do. So go ahead, because app
the only way you can get a girl to touch you is with blackmail or a gu
re a lie,licks her lips, then holds open her mouth, tongue out, welcoming,
t to killmenace in her eyes is pure and unadulterated.

ith dark I look at her wet tongue and mouth, open and ready for me. I c
easily slide my cock between her ruby-red lips and make her cho
ise youruthlessly fuck her. Her eyes would water when I force myself all the
the back of her throat until she gags. Then I'd make her swallow me
fine." every fucking drop.

yourself I could.

i in her But I don't.

e today. Instead, I tuck the gun back into my pants and step over to the bac
ouldn'tEntering the code on a keypad, it unlocks, and I open it. "Get the fuck

She looks over her shoulders at me warily but slowly rises to her fe
myself.takes tentative steps toward me and freedom as if it's a trap.

roat. "Go." I say bitterly

true her She hurries out after that, but when she's a few paces away, I ca
she canlong as we're clear..." She pauses and looks back at me. "Whatever h
ou rightnext: you only have yourself to blame."

ie says,

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CHAPTER 11

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CHAPTER 11

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What Happens Next

Effie

It's been three days since my failed attempt to get into Finn's compound. I talked a big game—and I'm proud as hell for keeping it together, but I thought I was going to puke all over his Italian leather boots when he made me get on my knees. My stomach drops uneasily just thinking about it. Sitting on the couch, I draw my legs closer to my chest.

I get a chill down my arms remembering the cold metal of the gun when I heard my father's men and my brothers talk about being shot. You always feel it like you might think. Your body reacts so quickly, pumped up with adrenaline and setting you in shock, that you notice everything, even the pain.

The smell of gunpowder.

The sound of your body hitting the ground.

The warmth of your spilling blood as your body grows cold.

But sometimes, they say, you can feel nothing but pain. Hot, searing, mind-numbing pain.

When the muzzle dug into my spine, I wondered which experience I'd have when he finally shot me. I considered the location he'd chosen.

thought perhaps I'd avoid both. He was sparing me this one kindness, shot kill.

The crew is out right now, probably somewhere deciding whether it is even worth it now that I've fucked it up even worse. So, I'm left to ruminate on how close I came to dying, how I've destroyed the one father ever entrusted me with, and how—

A sharp knock at the door pulls me out of my spiraling pity party.

I hop off the couch and go to the door, standing on my toes to look through the peephole. All the air in my lung escapes as panic settles over me.

Hudson.

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about it.

His hair isn't in its usually perfectly coiffed fashion and dark circles under his eyes. The collar of his coat is popped only on one side and his dress shirt is untucked.

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There is no reason for him to be here. None. He shouldn't even be here about this apartment.

“Effie, open the door.” He drawls drunkenly and leans his forearm against the door to peer into the peephole like a parrot bobbing its head. “I need to apologize,” he slurs so it sounds more like *I need a pawl-a-size*.

Christ, he's wasted.

He stumbles back from the door and clutches his mouth. “I think I'm sick...” He starts to curl over, and I whip the door open.

searing,

nce I'd

sen and

“Okay, just get inside, I'll get you to a toilet—” My words are suffocating in my throat as he wraps his meaty hands around my neck and pushes me back into the apartment.

There's not a whiff of alcohol on him when he pushes his nose against mine and snarls in my face, “You fucking slut.” Words crisp and clear.

“*Huud*—” I can't get any air, let alone words, out as he squeezes

, a one-kicking the door shut. Panic crawls up my body like a thousand pin
demanding my body to react, fight, do *something*. But every tho
this joboverridden by the aching wrench of my lungs for air and the feel of l
alone tocrushing down on my esophagus.

job my He throws me to the floor and my knees skid on the wood, skin s
But I can finally breathe again, even if it's in sputtering, painful gas
elbow throbs where it broke my fall.

through “Recognize these?” A ball of fabric lands by my head and I prop my
to look at it.

The underwear Finn tore off me at Peaches.

les ring “If you're having trouble remembering, I can show you quite the v
ss shirtjog your memory. Received it in an unmarked package but I'm sure
know who it's from.” *Fuck. This is bad. Really fucking bad.* My mind
1 knowwith filthy images from what Finn made me do and what he did to
Hudson has seen even a few seconds of what transpired...

onto the My pulse is so loud, blood pumping in my ears. He drags me fr
need tofloor by my hair. I'm sure I scream at the tearing against my scalp, b
hear is *thump, thump, thump*.

My body doubles over when he delivers a wrenching blow to my st
I'ma beBut I'm yanked right back up again, his grip in my hair strong as ever.

Spittle lands on my face when he presses on. “You throw that fuckin
ocatingthe lunch about being called my fiancée, and then turn around and j
hes methat piece of shit wearing a ring that's supposed to be from me?”

Before I have a chance to respond he punches me in the jaw, m
againstwhipping and pain radiating like I was struck by a baseball bat. The
makes me bite my tongue hard and blood wells in my mouth.

harder, “I'd ask if you have any idea how terrible that makes me look, but I

pricks, that was your intention, huh?” His face is scrunched in rage as he bellows. I’m just catching my breath when I spit bloody saliva at his feet.

his grip “Or maybe I just wanted a real man to get me off before I’m forced to marry you.”

splitting. His jaw bears down and his nostrils flare, red spreading into his eyes. My Enraged, he reaches for me again, but this time I duck and dodge around him.

He spews filthy cuss words and accusations while he comes after me. I don’t make it far, my airways feeling bruised and winded. He catches me before I reach the door, fisting the back of my shirt and flinging me back into him. I collide into his chest, and he hooks his arm around my neck.

“*You fucking bitch,*” he hisses, and his elbow squeezes, pinching my carotid arteries, cutting off blood circulation.

I claw at his forearm, but it’s as immovable as a tombstone. Very quickly, my vision blurs and black dots begin to speckle the room. I have an eerie body awareness that this is a much better way to die than being slowly suffocated.

Perhaps it will be an almost peaceful death. I have an eerie body awareness that this is a much better way to die than being slowly suffocated.

Perhaps it will be an almost peaceful death. I have an eerie body awareness that this is a much better way to die than being slowly suffocated.

Perhaps it will be an almost peaceful death.

Something I never considered I’d get in this life.

A calm settles over me as my eyelids droop. My surroundings are blurry and fuzzy. Still, even in this state, my thoughts float to Finn. *Would he even show up to my funeral?*

Would he even show up to my funeral?

Before my eyes give into the darkness, I spare a passing glance out the window to his building. There’s a light on in the living room. A soft glow emanates from the window.

I picture him reading a book in a big leather chair. Perhaps his hair is ruffled and unstyled after doing whatever he does all day. Maybe he’s in sweats and relaxed, or maybe he’s still in his business suit but has the top buttons undone. What tattoos might be showing?

What tattoos might be showing?

rows and For some reason that final thought—the fact that I will never know tattoos sprawl across his chest—spurs me into action. A sudden inexplicable burst of energy makes me swing my legs, fighting back.

Hudson grunts against my renewed strength and bends backward. His toes dangle off the floor. The black dots are turning into fully-fledged and him. Encroaching shadows, but something gold breaks through my haze.

A gold letter opener on the foyer table.

It shoves me. I swing madly. Using every last, fading morsel of strength I block and distract him by flailing all my limbs so hopefully he doesn't notice me reaching for it.

My vision goes black. The black has nearly seeped completely through my consciousness. I can't see anything but faint bursts of light. Yet somehow I manage to bring the letter opener behind me and not stop when the blunt tip meets the recessed part of his flesh.

Not. I'll A strangled cry is ripped from my lungs as his grip begins to slacken. I put everything I have into plunging the opener deeper into his neck.

I feel the wet heat of his blood spill onto my hand, still gripping the handle so hard my fingers ache. I only let go when he crumbles to his knees. He becomes garbled, choking gasp and releases me.

Somehow. My head spins, feeling dizzy as the room comes back into focus and the pressure on my neck gone. I scurry back on the floor until I hit a wall. I hear the *Thump. Thump. Thump.*

It's dark, cozy. My pulse beats heavily in my ears, ringing hollow and deep. It keeps me from hearing whatever sputtering sounds Hudson makes as he chokes on his death on his own blood. I watch him writhe until he stops but I do nothing other than the thumping.

I don't know if it's minutes or hours later but eventually my senses

what Hudson is no longer making any noise. His body lies lifeless, even though he has stopped spewing with the halt of his heart.

My mind draws a blank on what my next steps should be. I feel like I'm in a dream, still in a daze and waiting to wake up. Maybe I will sit here, formed, next to Hudson's body until it turns gray, then blue, then purple and de-

Somehow, I find myself holding my phone to my ear, the ringing distant and rumbling like the sounds of waves on a beach.

"Effie?" Finn's voice cuts through my cloudy mind, and I suddenly remember how and why I ended up with my phone in my hand.

"Do you—Do you remember when you made me promise to—to call you? I can't and you'd—"

"And I'd be there." He finishes my sentence and a weighty sense of responsibility doesn't quite understand settles in my chest. I hear rather than feel

heave a gulp of air. *I think I'm crying?* "Effie, where are you? Are you in your apartment?"

I nod as if he can see me and somehow he infers my silence as a yes. "I'm on my way."

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1. Lost It All—Jill Andrews |

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Hudson is no longer making any noise. His body lies lifeless, even the blood has stopped spewing with the halt of his heart.

My mind draws a blank on what my next steps should be. I feel like I'm in a dream, still in a daze and waiting to wake up. Maybe I will sit here forever next to Hudson's body until it turns gray, then blue, then purple and decays.

Somehow, I find myself holding my phone to my ear, the ringing feels distant and rumbly like the sounds of waves on a beach.

"Effie?" Finn's voice cuts through my cloudy mind, and I suddenly remember how and why I ended up with my phone in my hand.

"Do you—Do you remember when you made me promise to—to call you and you'd—"

"And I'd be there." He finishes my sentence and a weighty sense of relief I don't quite understand settles in my chest. I hear rather than feel myself heave a gulp of air. *I think I'm crying?* "Effie, where are you? Are you at the apartment?"

I nod as if he can see me and somehow he infers my silence as a yes.

"I'm on my way."



CHAPTER 12

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CHAPTER 12

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The Decision

Finn

I hate when anyone talks over the TV. Either turn the damn thing off or shut your fucking mouth. It grates on my nerves like a rusty, serrated blade. I fucking hate it. So right now, as Cash yells an endless stream of words I have no idea what the fuck he's saying. The governor's press conference is on the TV and his voice is like nails on a chalkboard.

I run my hand over my eyes to keep from ripping my goddamn hair out. I can't stand it anymore and slam the power button on the remote. Cash looks at me mid-sentence and whirls his eyes between where I am on his couch and the now-black TV screen.

"You better be listening to that, because 'the evil people responsible for what will be held accountable for their crimes' is you." He uses air quotes for what I'm assuming the governor said. "Your recklessness is gonna take this city on its fucking head. The one fucking time I leave you in charge, you don't start a goddamn war."

Cash clenches and unclenches his fists as he paces with a permanent scowl on this face.

“Christ, would you calm the fuck down. They haven’t even found the body.” I drum my finger on the rim of my whiskey glass before taking a sip. The whiskey slides down my throat warm and full of spice. “And even if they did—*which they won’t*—but if they did, nothing will trace back to us. I’ll dig out the bullets myself before dumping the body.”

“What bullets? I thought you said Effie stabbed him.”

“I did.” *God, this is getting boring.* I’ve repeated what Effie told me she stopped hyperventilating—to Cash at least a dozen times. I suck in a bitter breath remembering how she looked. Bruised. Bloodied. *Broken.*

“So what fucking bullets, Finneas?” Cash tugs on his hair like he’s losing his mind.

“Mine.”

She called me, whispering between sobs as if she was scared someone was gonna hear her. I didn’t even consider it might be another trap. I caught her fear through the phone, like ice down my spine. I recognized her soft voice, raw and raspy, instantly as the sound of someone’s voice after they’ve been strangled.

Hearing that twisted my insides like a fucking wrench.

“Had to make sure he was really dead,” I scoff with an ambivalence despite the fact that rigor mortis was setting in when I arrived. He was dead.

The truth is, as soon as I saw the angry red handprints marring her face, I couldn’t help myself.

One bullet for the brutal bruising on her neck. One bullet for the red mark on her jaw. One bullet for her raw, skinned knees.

And one last bullet that should’ve gone in me, for ever putting her in this situation.

and the
g a sip.
if they
. I even



—onceThe sky is overcast and a hazy gray, my favorite kind of weather. My brothers and I exit the car. We look like a motley crew of grim reapers, all wearing matching black outfits. I'm wearing a leather jacket, Lochlan only in a one-tight black tee, while Cash and Roan are in full suits, but we still look like we're reckoning all lined up.

Nonna Rosa's is a family-style Italian restaurant that doubles as the headquarters for the Luciano family. Apparently cozy and crime go hand in hand.

Cratchy Roman, our head of security and Cash's second, has already scouted the perimeter and gives us the go-ahead from his post at the corner of the

My brother called this meet, but stepping on Luciano's turf means you never be too careful. On his all clear, Cash pulls open the door and we shrug him in.

plenty I don't know what to expect from this meeting so entering the restaurant leaves me weary and full of trepidation. The wooden chairs are flipped and stacked on top of the tables, the place closed to the public

A man shuffles behind the bar, and while he's dressed like a waiter, I'm sure he's a foot soldier and has at least two guns tucked out of sight.

Luciano's men greet us with metal detectors, and we each step up to be patted down. There's a ticking like a clock in my head, foreboding that something is about to go down.

“Geez, buy me dinner first,” Lochlan jokes behind me while assuming, he gets patted a little too thoroughly.

“This way,” one of the men says gruffly, and we follow him through the restaurant to the walk-in freezer.

A shelf in the back is already moved aside, and a hatch, that I’m usually hidden, is open on the floor. Silently, we are led down the steps. Myshoot Cash a questioning glance. *What the fuck have you gotten us into* I have a lot of confidence in my brothers and me, but being led down a door with no weapons feels like we’re just begging to be ambushed. Our steps echo, and I tap my middle finger and thumb together in a steady beat, steadying my breath and keeping my face blank. If we are being killed as the our deaths, I don’t want to give them even a whiff of unease. *Slap your hand in weakness.*

We descend into a room that reminds me of a 1920s speakeasy. The windowless room is lit with several small chandeliers, casting shadows on the ornate gold and jade wallpaper. Well-polished tables dot the floor, and a curved wooden bar lines the right wall. At a large round table sits Luciano, his Capo and—my lungs feel halved in size—*Effie*.

It’s been nearly a week since she killed Hudson, but the bruises on her empty neck are still garish and prominent. Her jaw is less swollen, but still puffs out, and she averts her eyes as soon as they meet mine, making me want to punch the fucker from the dead to kill him again.

Luciano rises as we approach, Bruno and Effie follow his lead, and my blood boils when I notice a slight wince to her movements.

“Gentlemen,” Luciano welcomes us as we sit down. Cash is the only one who relaxes back in his seat. The others and I cross our arms or steel our fingers, elbows resting on the table. “We have a clear and unav-

son, I'm problem that threatens both our families." His snobby voice pisses me off, and I can't stop thinking that his slicked back black hair looks greasy. "You think? Breaking a decade old truce tends to make things a little bit messier."

"Sure is," Finneas says, and I shift in my seat, roll my eyes, and I shoulders and neck. "It's now irrelevant how we got in this situation. What matters is getting out of it."

"I won't deny the role my family played." I balk at his audacity, and I curse under his breath. "But this outcome is not one we ever intended." "Yeah, no shit," I slam my palms on the table and rise, "You interrupted our robbery, led to robbing us blind and starting another fucking war." I can't look at Effie, but she flinches at my raised voice.

"Sit down, son," Luciano orders, and I truly regret not sneaking in with a knife.

"I am *not* your son." My jaw clenches, and my fingers whiten on the table, and a "The governor's not going to let this disappearance slide under the table. Luciano, won't stop looking, and he won't hesitate to bring the full force of the state police, and his under-the-table goons down on us. Because unlike you, he pointedly flits his gaze at me then his daughter, "He's not stupid. He's seen what you sent Hudson, and he's putting the pieces together."

"It's all circumstantial and speculation. He won't find a shred of admissible evidence." I slump back in my chair and crack my knuckles. "Maybe not, but he can subpoena people he suspects to be witnesses. He has plenty of legal measures and political power to bring this house down on one of us." Cash picks up where Luciano left off. "We have knowledge that could bring Effie down, and she has knowledge equally as damning. So it's avoidable."

me off, come to a decision that will protect both our families and stop history repeating itself.”

the rocky I glance across the table and Effie looks just as surprised by this “decision” as I am. In fact, the only ones who don’t look totally confused by my going on are Cash and Luciano. I drum my fingers impatiently on the table, not caring about the side eye my brother shoots me.

My chest feels like a heavy weight is slowly settling onto it as we wait in prolonged silence, waiting for someone to catch us the fuck up. I can’t —” my gaze from traveling to her. Her long hair is brushed over her shoulders and down her back, a headband pulling it out of her face, leaving even when of her flawless features visible. Even battered and bruised, she’s still stunning, and I fight the roiling heat in my gut when our eyes lock.

at least Hers are heavy and sad, and it makes me want to punch something, myself, for sending that bastard to her doorstep. The thought that I could have gotten her killed makes my lungs feel like they’re collapsing.

rug. He “Spousal privilege,” Luciano states, “precludes spouses from being compelled to testify against the other.”

u two,” “I know what spousal privilege is, what does it have to do with murder. He’s soon as the question leaves my mouth, I realize the direction of the conversation, and it seems Effie does too.

ired of “No, absolutely not!” Effie pushes her chair back and crosses her arms defiantly. “He’s the fucking reason we’re in this mess in the first place. His voice cracks, and red deepens the olive tone of her cheeks.

umbling “Consequences of your own actions,” I volley back. “This,” I point to what can Luciano, “is the result of you breaking the truce.” I can’t bring myself to blame her, not when I sent that package. But her megalomaniac father?

I can blame him.

ry from “You started this, *you* fix this, Luciano.” Cash tries to stop m
standing, but I bat his hand away. “You think you can plot against
cision” then smooth things over with wedding bells? You’re fucking insane.”
what is “*Finneas*,” Cash hisses my name under his breath, and I relucta
e table, back down. He addresses the group again, taking an envelope from his
and unfurling the sheet inside. “It’s already done.”
e sit in “That’s not my signature, no way that will pass as authentic.”
n’t stop “It will when you have friends in the right places.” Luciano fixes me
oulders smug, sleazy smile. “All that’s left is to consummate it. Better ge
ry in lovebirds.”
fucking

namely
ld have



being
The drive to Bartlett Farms is silent. Not a word is spoken between u
ie?” A painful contrast to the last time we drove out here together. She spe
of this entire drive staring at the passing landscape through the window, but
last time, she never turns to look at me with softness in her eyes and
er arms smile on her lips.
e!” Her After realizing that this marriage was happening with or witho
consent—the right palms greased to pass the forged marriage certifi
joint at Cash sent us off to Bartlett Farms to lay low for a while. The last re
yself to passed a few years back, and the property doesn’t have any financ
? Yeah, back to us.

e from Objectively, it's a good plan. We can hide out without being too f
us, and June Harbor in case shit hits the fan. And being legally married...well
smart move. Protects both our asses if we both stay silent, but it's m
ntly sit assured destruction if one of us talks. I don't like the idea of b
pocket precariously tied to Luciano now, but I don't completely hate the
Effie as my wife.

Though she certainly seems to.

e with a All I can hope is that even though I failed to keep her safe, I can
et to it, her now.

We pull into the farm's drive and my low-riding sports car sounds
being torn up driving over the gravel. I park in front of the old barn.
better than the last time Effie was here. The roof isn't sinking inward,
gaps in the wood siding have been patched up. It's been a sort of pr
mine, I guess.

"Do you remember this place?" I ask, while I remove our luggage fr
small trunk.

s. It's a "Of course," she says, almost bitterly, and it stings.

nds the "I've been converting the upstairs loft into an apartment. We c
t unlike there." A motion sensor light on the barn turns on as I guide us aro
a faint corner.

Effie looks back at the farmhouse. "Why aren't we staying in
out our house?" *Because I can't stand the idea of you having that many re
licate—avoid me in.*

idents "It hasn't been touched since Mrs. Bartlett passed. Trust me, this is
ial trail but much better."

The barn's ground floor has been split in two. The front portion
garage where I used to tinker on my truck and other odds and ends I'd

ar from rummage yards. The back half is the small living room and kitchen
l, it's a converted apartment. I let us inside, and Effie cranes her neck to look
mutually high vaulted ceilings. The walls are the original wooden planks, but find
ing somewhere it was needed. It gives the whole place an earthy scent, like
idea of expect to be walking across straw on the ground. Except instead of straw
dirt, the ground is polished concrete with mismatched rugs I found
markets.

protect "Bedroom's upstairs." I nod to the handmade steps leading so
precariously up to the loft. Effie circles in place, looking around
like it's wrapped around her midsection like she's cold. "There's uh...no cen
It looks but um...there should be wood somewhere on the property. I can
and the stove going if you're cold."

object of "I'm fine."

"Okay."

rom the ¹Our words are so stilted, nothing like the sharp sparring words
wielded over the past few weeks. Maybe it's being back here. Maybe
being around her. But I suddenly feel like the shy twenty-one-year-old
an stay first took her here. My skin itches, like I can't get comfortable
and the presence, waiting for the next shoe to drop. *Waiting for the phone to ring*

At least not when she's like this. Shut down. Dejected. Like being
the big to me is the worst fucking thing in the world.

rooms to I know how to handle her when she's pulling my hair and screaming
name as she comes apart on my tongue. I know how to handle her when
smaller full of venom and spite. But this? This isn't a version of Effie I ever
see.

is my And I'm the cause of it.

I find at I notice she keeps looking to the corners of the room, and sud

of therealize why. “There’s no cameras here.”

at the “Yeah, alright,” she scoffs, and that small bite back makes heat
ixed up under my skin.

you’d I drop our luggage at the bottom of the steps. “I’ve been honest this
aw and time, Ef. *You’re* the one whose lies landed us here.”

at flea “*Honest?*” she balks. “Sure, you’ve been honest, if that means I
deceitful, manipulating bastard.” Her eyes harden and her shoulders s
newhat crosses the room to me. “You are not innocent in this, Finneas.”

l, arms “Maybe not, but you’re not some hapless victim either.” I step close
tral air, takes a step back so she doesn’t have to tip her head back to look a
get the can’t resist the urge to tower over her. Make her choose between stand
ground or cowering back. “Bed’s upstairs, *wife*.”

“Don’t fucking call me that,” she says sharply while brushing past
climb the stairs.

we’ve I follow behind her, bags in tow, dropping them at the top with a
it’s just think. She’s standing next to the bed with a death glare, her arms cross
old who She says something under her breath I don’t quite catch, then with
in hershe bends over the edge of the bed and hikes her dress up.

ng... I suck my lip between my teeth as my eyes rake over her full, dimpled
married Faded stripes of stretched skin cover her hips and get lost under her
panties. I’ve never had a stronger urge to sink my teeth into anything
ing my than I want to take a bite out her perfect, fucking ass right now.

en she’s My feet decide to break their stupor and I cross the room with rever
want to gaze upon my offering. My dick swells in my pants, and I groan
undo my belt and relieve some of the pressure on it.

My breathing deepens the closer I get, the stronger my need to sl
denly Ifingers between her legs and see if my wife is already soaked for me.

My wife. Effie Luciano. Fuck.

I crawl I slide my pants down my hips and stroke my cock, my piercing slick with pre-cum. I spread my palm wide on her lower back and skiss wholeher spine. I watch with delighted fascination as the fine hairs on her draped on the mattress by her head, stand on end. *I make her fucking s* being a I smooth both hands down her sides and grip her hips. I hear her drset. She deep breath, as if in preparation. I toy with the waistband of her pantsthen I pick her up and flip her over, pushing between her knees. Her. She Her eyes are sharp, her tone just as cutting. “What are you doing?” it me. I I stroke her thighs, inching her legs wider. “I’m going to look myling herthe eyes the first time I take her.” I reach for her panties again, but she my hand away. My brows pinch in confusion, and her next words are t me tothan getting fucking shot.

“I don’t want to see your face.” She flips back over and plants her a heavythe ground to bend over the bed. She shimmies her underwear down l sed. almost spitefully.

a sigh, My stomach churns, and my jaw clenches painfully tight seeing he presented to me with such...such *hatred*. led ass. I swallow down the sour taste in my mouth and reach around her purplewith one hand. I use two fingers to slide over the seam of her pussy, n g morejumping at the warm slickness waiting for me.

“Finn...don’t...” She looks over her shoulder at me as I part her l erence,press gently over her clit. Her brows are pinched and her eyes...the when I something cold and grating twist around my heart.

When I speak, it’s a whispered plea. “Let me at least make it glide myyou.” *Please*. She shakes her head and swallows deeply. I wonder if th caustic taste is coating her tongue.

“Just get it over with.” Her words slice my heart in two, like wire through an already-blocked pipe of clay. My stomach twists painfully as I realize she probably did it up something to a similar effect before bending over the first time. And her arms, at her sides like a clueless fucking caveman.

hudder. “As you wish,” I say through gritted teeth as I drop my hand and my jaw in my dick at her entrance. I suck in a painful breath as my head kisses her thighs. But heat. It’s everything I’ve ever wanted in the worst possible way.

“Please, Fi— Just do it.” The resentment and sadness in her voice constricts my throat squeeze around a rock with jagged edges. My teeth ache as I push my wife in into her, my jaw so excruciatingly tight as I hold back hot tears.

pushes A small gasp spills from her lips as I sink fully into her. I draw out a groan, knowing my piercing is dragging against her inner walls and wanting

her a chance to adjust to the new sensation. My hips punch forward and I bite back a moan. She feels so fucking good. Her cunt is hot and her legs My dick doesn’t know the difference. Doesn’t know that my cock is splintering with every inch I bury myself.

The loft is uncomfortably quiet. The only sounds are the soft puncture of my breath with each thrust and the slight creak of the bed. Somewhere outside, an owl calls into the night.

Every cell in my body is screaming to thrust harder, deeper. To dig my hips until my fingertips are imprinted on her skin. To bring my hands hot and fiery on her ass for the spark of causing a little pain. I so badly want to reach around and latch her clit with attention until I feel her clench around my cock in a rapture of her own.

But I can’t do any of that. Not without her hating me more. So rather than give into my carnal drive to break her down and reshape her as my own, I tap a rhythm lightly on her hip to keep from squeezing until she bruises.

rough a As my pleasure—if I can even call it that—builds, it’s sickly-swe
ly saidsensations that usually make me feel like a god, now make me feel di
I cameperverted. I try to concentrate on pumping in and out, keep it mechani
impersonal, but then I see her fists twist into the quilt, and it
ositionsomething in me. I squeeze my eyes shut as I focus on the rising ti
er tightballs drawing tight and tingling heat zips up and down my length.

“*Fu—fuck,*” I curse as hot, blinding pleasure pulses through me a
: makesher.

: I push I keep my eyes closed a moment longer, scared to open them. Scare
the one person I was supposed to protect and treasure, bent over, us
slowlyleaking my cum.

to give I gather my breath on shaky legs. When I tenderly pull out of h
l again,doesn’t move, just lays there, cheek against the mattress, intimately e:
id tight.She looks heartbreakingly vulnerable.

:hest is I know I should leave, just walk away, not prolong this experier
longer than necessary. But I feel physically ill leaving her like this.

ches of So without a word, I gently smooth her dress back down and brusl
ewhereon her shoulder.

I go straight to the garage and hit the punching bag until my knucl
into herraw and bleeding.

d down Then I hit it some more.

ly want

around

1. you broke me first—Tate McRae
ier than

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CHAPTER 13

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CHAPTER 13

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Lucky

Effie

I'm going to kill him. *I'm going to fucking kill him.*¹
I throw on whatever clothes I find on the floor after I run through the suitcase last night and left everything like a bomb went off. Before I stomp down the stairs, I spy a lavender cardboard box on the nightstand. I thought I couldn't get any angrier, but I guess I was wrong. I pick it up, seething, and barrel straight out the door.

When I get outside, Finn has the barn door to the converted garage open and just like he was *all fucking night*, he's pounding a heavy punching bag. The sun is barely cresting the tree line. Morning fog is clinging to the berry fields.

He doesn't hear me as I approach him from behind. He moves fluidly, his lean back muscles dripping with sweat. Each punch radiates power, and I swallow a humbling breath. It's not until this moment, when the strong, sinewy muscles of his arms flex, that I realize how much rage and violence he's been holding in, taking it out on the bag.

I shout his name. He doesn't respond, and I try again, raising my voice. Fed up, I slip one of my slides off and fling it at the back of his head.

“The fuck—” He spins, rubbing the back of his head and pulling out his bud. His scowl melts when he realizes it’s me. Mine doesn’t.

“It wasn’t enough to keep me up half the goddamn night with the sex you punching away, but you had to wake up at the ass crack of dawn to continue and ruin the little sleep I was able to get?”

He dips his chin and flicks his tongue out to suck his bottom lip under his teeth. He levels me with a heated stare that makes me squirm. He breathes heavily through his nose as his eyes rake over me hungrily. I can’t deny my own breathing grows shallow under the smoldering weight of his gaze.

“Did you hear—”

“Are you—Is that my shirt?” He cocks his head to the side, one eyebrow arched and curious amusement spreading across his face. I look down in horror, heat rushing my cheeks. I must have swept it up by accident. I give an angry rush.

“Don’t change the subject.”

He steps forward like a hungry predator but stops himself, and his gaze roams the canvas of his body. His tattooed chest rises and falls, and sweat beads in rivulets down his chiseled abs. The black ink spelling out *VULPE* in an arch above his diaphragm is a handsome contrast to his fair skin. Celtic knotwork twists and turns into the shape of a fox’s head on his sternum, and a pattern of smaller, traditional-style tattoos decorate the rest of his skin.

My hand crunches around the small box in my hand, and I throw it away from my feet. “And what the fuck is this shit? *Plan B*? You really think I’d let you stick your dick in me and risk having little Fox brats running around if I wasn’t on birth control?”

He glances at it but doesn’t pick it up and swallows hard. He fixes me with a stare that’s both angry and apologetic, as if he’s mad I didn’t accept his

t an earbut sad he thought it was necessary. “I didn’t know.”

“Of course you didn’t, because you didn’t bother to fucking as
ound of blood boils, temperature rising with my voice.

lawn to *Last night was terrible*, I tell myself while I’m trying to remember
breathe.

ider his I’m still sore, because despite what I said in the Den, it’s *not* lit
reathes from it and before last night, it had been a while. A moment that I’ve
ny that about for years as an intangible fantasy was ruined by the fuckin
jaze. we’ve found ourselves in.

I meant what I said last night. I didn’t want to see his face. But not
a lifted reason he thinks.

own in I didn’t want to see the apology in his eyes because I’m not re
t in my forgive him. I *don’t* forgive him. He’s hurt me in so many different wa

I still come crawling back for more. Maybe he’s right, and I like th

Whether it comes in the form of a paddle in his hand or the emotions
y eyes his eyes. Maybe I need the sting and burn and hurt to feel somethin
eat run than the cold detachment permeating my everyday life.

S in an I knew if he fucked me face to face, he would try to kiss me. And I
c knots let him. And whatever hope I tasted on his lips would make it all
ch work much worse.

“Looks good on you.” He flicks his chin at my outfit with a wolfish
it at his get the feeling he’s purposely trying to annoy me to avoid addressing
let you that he was too eager to get his dick wet than ask about protection.

and if I “You’re the fucking bane of my existence, you know that?” I tug t

over my head and throw it at him. His jaw slackens and nostrils flare
ne with eyes comb over my thin bralette. “I picked it up by mistake. Maybe I
his gift, have noticed if I’d gotten a lick of sleep last night.”

He balls the shirt up, and I notice blood is seeping through the tape
k.” Myhis knuckles. “You’re welcome to my shirts anytime. What’s mine is
wife.”

how to “Thanks for the offer, but it won’t happen again. Now I’m going
bed, and you’re going to find something to do that doesn’t sound
tle. Farfucking army of rhinoceros is going to bust through the floor.”

thought He calls after me as I walk away, “Next time, lose the bra and I’
g messyour body will entertain me for a long time.”

And then the infuriating pounding of fist on leather resumes again.
for the *Maybe I should have killed him.*

eady to 2

ys, and I’m puttering around the small apartment looking for someth
ie pain.entertain myself with while Finn is thankfully somewhere out of sight
behinda ring of keys by the door and decide to go exploring. *What’s his i
g moreright?*

Two keys go to the garage and apartment in the barn. Not super inte
[wouldThe other three keys are clearly meant for doors, so I figure the ne
hurt sooption is the big house.

Climbing up the steps, I have a strong rush of déjà vu about the nigh
1 grin. There last with Finn ten years ago...

the fact The truck’s headlights swept across the dirt drive, and I looked
window to the aged but clearly well-loved farmhouse. A few hours
he shirtFinn got into a fight with a cashier who was rude to me. I can’t rer
e as hiswhat started it, but when Finn told him to watch his mouth, he told
[wouldfuck off.

Then Finn broke his nose. The tired look in his eyes walking out

aroundgas station is burned into my memory. Even at twenty-one, he
s yours, reputation to uphold, but he didn't get any joy out of it. Not like now.

Now, I can see the way his eyes light up at the promise of inflicting
back toAnd despite any rational logic, I want to feel that pain.

I like a *Christ, I'm fucked up.*

The second key I test in the front door unlocks it. The door crea
'm sureslowly open it. I feel as if I'm breaking into someone's home though
it's empty. I try to tuck away the memory of the last time I was h
everything that followed, and distract myself with what's in front of m

Finn was telling the truth. The place looks completely untouched. I
previous owner just evaporated and nothing changed save the buildup

There's a rocking chair in the front room with a hand-knit blanket
ing toover the back and a book face down on the seat, still spread open to ho
t. I findpage.

s mine, The house looks suspended in time, glass lamps and doilies on me
tables and surfaces. Porcelain angels and other figurines are amon
resting.knick-knacks strewn about, the typical stacks of Stephen King and
ext bestPatterson books piled on end tables. Embroidered pillows and
blankets are piled on the corners of the couch.

at I was There's a sign by the front door that makes me smile. *Have a bern
day*, it reads, and I can picture a wife kissing her husband goodbye as
out thewith the sun to work in the fields. Maybe she wakes up before him to
earlier,pot of coffee and make his morning eggs. Or maybe he slinks out of l
nemberdresses in the bathroom quietly so she can continue sleeping undis
him toonly brushing a passing kiss on her cheek on his way out.

I stroll through the rest of the house with a sort of deference for the
of thatpeople who lived here. It's so easy to walk past the collection o

had casseroles and China plates and picture a happy family around the dinner table saying grace. To look at the height markers on the door, the words written in crayons and pencil over the years and imagine the house with the kids playing or coming in muddy from a day outside.

I find a hallway filled with black and white and sepia tone photographs hanging on the walls. They clearly tell the story of Bartlett farm from the early days to the present. I know generations. A pair of men stand in a freshly tilled field in work clothes and their arms draped around each other's shoulders. Accomplished smiles on their faces even as they squint into the sun and one of them proudly holds up his foot on a shovel head staked in the ground.

I recognize one of the men in another photograph. He's older and a woman at his side with a baby on her hip. They are posing in front of the old barn. I assume it is the original hand-painted sign for Bartlett Farms.

I watch the baby turn into a young girl, gain a younger brother, lose a sister, ride a tricycle, and jump off the pond's dock as a teenager.

I know these are idyllic snapshots of years of life. Life that is bountiful and full of laughter and tears, joy and heartache. But still I can't help but feel a chunky bittersweet pinch in my chest seeing happy, *normal*, childhoods. More than sweet.

The resentment that suddenly overcomes me is suffocating. I mourn the life I never got to have. It's a sad kind of anger that makes you want to scream and start a pillow and cry in a dark room.

But at the same time, I don't want to stop looking. Like watching a loved one who has a tragic end, I am drawn to the fantasy of the charming family life even if it hurts.

There's a photo that shows the barn in its just-built glory, another from a Fourth of July parade, and then one in particular that catches my attention.

and the looks like the family inside some sort of bunker or low-ceilinged
or jamb, dome, simple bunk beds built into the walls and cans of food lining
full of a bomb or fallout shelter?

I pull out my phone and snap a picture of the frame, curious
if anything structure is still on the property, and making a mental note to find out.
earliest The pounding sound has returned, different from the bag but still
overall, annoying. I leave the farmhouse and walk around back to investigate
as light though I already know who the culprit is.

ably has Finn swings the axe above his head and brings it down hard on the
wood. He's in jeans now, but just like this morning, he's still shirtless
and has a sweaty, and still so gorgeous it hurts.

What I Last night, he fucked me slow. He didn't grip my flesh nearly as hard
as I expected him to. He was unsettlingly gentle, but I wonder, was he
learning to throw back as he rocked into me, or did he keep his eyes on the job
of him like the wood? Was *I* just a job to him? Or a hole? Was I
just a fucking person?

It feels like Was the entire act a dream turned nightmare like it was for me?

It's bitter I kick a piece of gravel as I walk and Finn spins at the sound. 'What
you've been?'

What I "Around." His lip quirks at my short response.

It's a damn "So, is this what you do when you're not killing men and ruining
Play lumberjack in the country?"

It's a movie "Thought a fire would be nice." He looks down and brushes wood
off, farm-off the stump before looking back up at me. "It was cold last night."

"Oh." I don't know what else to say to the uncharacteristically thoughtful
gesture. In fact, it makes me uncomfortable, and I fidget with the keys
in my hand.

concrete “Anyway.” He clears his throat, as if my awkwardness is contagious shelves.—Come with me. I want to show you something.” He swings the lodge in the stump and picks a white shirt off the ground, shrugging if this his head.

“What is it?”

just as “Just fucking—” I widen my eyes at his tone, and he pinches the bridge—even his nose. “I mean, will you please come?”

“I’m shocked you didn’t gag getting that out.”

He shakes his head. “Follow me.”³

He walks in the direction of the woods and cold grips me when we enter the forest. Like the memories of what happened here linger in the air, as if time I entered these woods, life was never the same.

The path has narrowed since last time I was here, but Finn continues to be sure of the way. The pond is visible through the trees, and I wonder even if the dock is still there, it looked on the verge of collapsing ten years ago.

As if reading my mind, he says, “The dock is a quarter mile that way. I’ll take you on the way back.”

“Where is it still standing?”

He chuckles. “Surprisingly.”

We walk in silence until we arrive at a clearing and stop in front of a circular concrete structure that disappears into the earth. I recognize a similar shape to the shelter I saw in the photograph.

“Effie...” Finn starts but looks up, a crease between his brows as if struggling to find the words. “We’re on the same team now. Whether you want it or not, it’s the truth. You’re stuck with me now.” He forces a laugh. I don’t join in.

“Right, well, my point is, we’re a team—”

3. “I, uh “And we better get our head in the game? Where are you going with the axe to Finn?”

it over He sucks in a breath before trying again. “My brothers and I? unbeatable because the two things we value most are loyalty and honesty. We all should have died on the streets years ago, but we didn’t, and now we’re the most powerful fucking family in this country.

“Look at what happened with us, I wasn’t honest with Cash—I should have told him as soon as I learned about *Les Arnaqueuses*, but I didn’t. Here we are.” I give him a *speed it along, buddy* look. “The point is, we’re entering my wife and I’m your husband. Which means no more secrets, no more lies. Last plotting, no more backstabbing, or double crossing. Honesty and loyalty.”

Honesty and loyalty.

as if Two words that make my stomach roil, especially given the earnest look under Finn’s eyes. His hand opens and closes into a fist as if he wants to reach for me but decides against it.

y. I can *Honesty and loyalty.*

I don’t know if I will ever be able to give those things to a Fox—especially now. But more importantly, can I ever expect those things *from* a Fox?

“So I wanted to start with this.” He turns to the metal doors of the storage room, a semi- and slides a panel to the side. He places his palm on an electronic scanner. As he steps forward, a blue laser scanning his eye. Then he enters a password on the keypad.

if he’s I can hear the sound of locks as mechanisms disengage on the other side of the door and my stomach drops. Finn only confirms my suspicion with a dry whole thing started because you wanted our cache. Well, here it is.”

He pushes the unlocked doors open, the metal hinges groaning. “Biometric and password-based security. And before you get any ideas, the hand-

ith this, be attached to a person with a beating heart.”

“Dammit,” I quip. He gives me a wink over his shoulder, and I
We’re diffuse some of the tension knotting in my body.

sty. We We climb a ladder down into the bunker, and the air grows di
v we’re colder under the layers of earth and concrete. “It used to be a fallout

built during the Cold War,” Finn explains. “Added some security for
should and it’s now one of the biggest, most secure safes in the country.”

in’t and I take in the large room filled with stacks of art, wooden crates
you’re priceless artifacts, piles of gold and jewelry made of precious gem
stones or something out of an Indiana Jones movie.

ty.” “I can’t believe some of this stuff even exists,” I say in awe, my art
captured by a Renoir painting. I feel Finn come up behind me, every r
tiness in my body attuned to his presence.

each for “Do you still paint?” he asks in a low, tender voice and brushes hair
neck, a cold burst of air on the exposed skin.

“No,” I say, tilting my head at the painting, and Finn dusts a finger
especially the slope of my neck, making the hairs on my arms raise.

’ “Why not?”

structure I turn around, and he looks down on me, eyelids heavy and gaze locked
between and my lips. “Same reason you drive a million-dollar sports car and
n on tinkering on your old truck.”

He scoffs. “Touché, princess. I guess we’ve both given up things we
side of And wanders away slowly.

. “This I carefully flip through a lost sketchbook that once belonged to
when a loose sheet of paper slips out and flutters to the floor. I pick
ometric turning it over before tucking it back in place.

l has to My heart stutters looking at the drawing. I struggle to get in enough

if the oxygen has been sucked out of the bunker. Staring back at me, it helps own reflection, ten years younger.

My throat goes dry as I realize it's one of the last things I drew before I instinctively stopped. The self-portrait I'd drawn when my father flew into a rage at the shelter, up my drawings. Before rushing out of the house to meet Finn, I shoved it into my pocket. It must have fallen out of my pocket at some point...

I'd forgotten all about it.

Remembering that he brought me to the Bartlett Farms that day—like the tattered look of the drawing, I wonder if Finn found it on the ground.

There's dirt on the brushes and the pencil lead is smudged in some areas. I don't know how to feel. I don't know what to think. My jaw grows tight and my eyes sting with tears. I have so many questions, most of all why

is this here? Why is my silly, little sketch among gold artifacts and locked away from my masterpieces?

I'm not sure I can handle the answer, so like a coward, I close the door and tell Finn I'm ready to leave.

I'm silent on the walk back, my thoughts so preoccupied by what he said and what it means, that I don't realize he's led us right to the dock. The ground is dark underfoot, and the last bits of rusty sunset are giving way to indigo. I stop and stare at the stars. The moon is tucked behind a cloud, but crickets still sing to welcome her rise.

"I love you." Hit with a wave of emotion and what we could have been, I barter with my words.

Finn sweeps my hand in his and guides us to the edge of the dock. Just like in the painting, water lilies float on top of the inky water, catching the final bits of light in their white petals.

Finn faces me and brushes a piece of hair behind my ear. "I should have kissed you that night."

is my His words take me by surprise. “It wouldn’t have changed
happened.”

efore I “I know.” He slowly rubs his thumb in circles in my palm. “But
nd tore have changed me.”

ved one “How do you mean?”⁴

“Sometimes, I think...maybe I could have kept more of my human
had shared it with you. Even if only for one night.” Like a razor-sharp
-and by his words carve into my chest, clawing apart something already too bri
nd here. “What humanity? Did you ever have any to begin with?” I don’t rea
rage seeping through the broken pieces until I hear the anger in n
/s tight, voice. I shove him hard in the chest, “Where was your humanity wh
hy is it killed my people? When you tied me up and tortured me? When you
ong-lost got me killed because of videos you leaked?”

Tears stream down my face, cathartic yet bitter. I push him ag
journal again. “When you held a gun to my head? Where the fuck was it then?

He takes each blow with a step backward, but no words. Doesn’t ev
I found me the dignity of a reply. Stone-faced and cold. “*Answer me, you fuck*
e sun is my breath catches on a sob, “*bastard.*”

igo and He’s only an inch from the edge of the dock, but it doesn’t stop n
elcomeslamming into him with all my weight. His eyes fly open as his feet s
he falls back. Grasping out, he grabs my wrists and we both go flying
ely feel frigid water.

ike that The sting of the cold water fuels my fight, and I come up for air, spi
s of sun but intent. I find Finn’s shoulders and try to push him back down. C
tangle in the water lily vines and water splashes in our struggle.

ld have He tries to shove me off, but I swing around to his back and wrap m
around his neck. “Why, Finn? Why are you so determined to destroy n

He still hasn't said a word, only grunts and gasps as I kick him in the stomach or plunge his head under the surface.

"Say something, you coward!"

He dips under the water again, but this time, he twists on his asc and grabs my arms, propelling us until my back hits the small metal ladder. I fight in his vice grip, screaming and kicking.

"Effie, *Effie!*"

"You ruined me. You *ruined* me, Finn." I sob, thrashing in the water. He pinches me with his hips, and I buck against him, pushing as much as I can. My own arms captured.

The paddle. The ring. The sketch.

All these things flash through my mind and my heart, and it feels like my soul is being torn in two different directions—

Suddenly, hot lips are on mine, rough, cold hands are clutching me. My head spins and I give in to the urging tongue, licking at the sear. When I give my mouth, I melt into the palms on my cheeks.

Finn breaks the kiss but keeps my face held tightly to his. "Christ, I don't know what else to do," he says breathlessly, and I'm sucking in hungry air from the water.

"I hate you."

"I know," he sighs, pressing his wet forehead to mine.

"So let me go." I twist and turn, but he keeps me pinned against the edges of the ladder. "Finn, goddammit, let go of me!"

"I *can't*," he says like it physically pains him, and I get the impression he's not just talking about right now, right here. His hand skates down my arms and bunches in the soiled material of my dress caught up in the water.

The tighter he holds me, the harder I fight back, tearing and pulling at the material.

in the shirt until it rips. My hands hit his bare chest, and a bolt of lightning
through me. I can't help it.

All the energy put into pushing him off begins fighting to pull him
ent and He desperately palms my bare thigh, pushing away my dress.

off the Our mouths crash into one another again, and I can hardly breathe
can't get enough of him either. I twist my finger into his hair until he
against my lips, and I eagerly swallow it down.

ter. He His hands are everywhere at once. Roaming my thigh. Pulling away
an with panties. Groping my breast. Pinching my nipple. Collaring my
Tugging my hair. I am lost in the heat of him and the cold of the water

His torn shirt flutters at his sides, and I rip it off his shoulders, baring
like my all to me. My fingers dip deeper to wrestle with his soaked jeans and
undo the button he kicks them down.

my face. "*Finn*," I breathe.

1 of my "I'm here." He rocks into me, and I feel his erection slide up my stomach
reach out for it, and he bites into my shoulder when I twist up and down
I didn't shaft. "Fuck, Effie. If I've ruined you, you've *obliterated* me."

my gulps I need him. More than I've ever needed anything. I can't explain
definitely don't understand it. But there's not a cell in my body that
ache to feel him consume me the way he seems ravenous to.

"Reach behind. Grab the ladder," he growls into my ear. Then he reaches
he hard teeth down my neck.

He cups my cheek in one hand, delicately plucking my lips in a kiss
on he's slots his dick along my entrance. "Do it, Finn. *Please*."

my waist Once his head is positioned just inside me, he wraps his arm around
waist and slams into me, sheathing himself in my pussy.

g at his "*Oh—god*." I feel so full, but unlike last night it's a sense of

courses completed. It's a moment of genuine intimacy, not duty.

“*Effie—*” He cuts himself off with another sharp thrust of his hips closer, slams me against the ladder and brings water spraying between us.

I remove my hands from the ladder to clutch his face and demand the but my eyes even in the quickly fading light. “Fuck me and tell me how groans you are.” He stills his thrusts and breathes heavily, taking in my words

lucky you are that after everything that's happened, everything you've say my I'm still here, still *wanting* you.”

throat. I see him swallow and close his eyes before gently plucking my hair from him and placing them back on the ladder. He fixes me with a darkening gaze imploring me to hold on.

l once I My fingers dig into the rusty rungs, and then he's giving himself pouring himself out with body and words. Each punch of his hips is an apology, another praise, another expression of gratitude.

mach. I I don't know when the tears start again, but he licks them up, presses his kisses in their place on my cold damp face. I squeeze my legs around his waist and moan as pleasure skitters like sparks over my body. He pulls me down while lifting my knees, hitting a new angle which makes my heart doesn't throb and flutter around him.

His movements become hurried. “*Effie,*” he pleads, “Come with me makes his I mewl, leaning into the high building in my core. “*Yes. Don't stop, don't stop.*”

as as he “You feel so. Fucking. *Right.*” He pumps fiercely into me on each stroke, holding my body tight and my knees high. I tip over the edge, and my head and my body crashes through me until I can't feel the cold of the water. “Fuck coming like that on my cock and I—” He slams into me once more and I feel his face in the crook of my neck.

I hold his head, breathing heavy, and stroke his wet hair. His arms envelop mine as I tether us with a hand on the ladder.

I don't know how long we stay like this, sharing one another's breath in the water. Clinging to each other's broken souls. But I do feel lucky when he finally carries me out, we are not the same people we were when we fell in.

He done,

ends off

1. Fine—Kyle Hume

and stare,

2. Continue playing Fine

3. Stop playing Fine

to me,

4. Tears of Gold—Faouzia |

another

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leaving

and his

pulls me

by pussy

.”

please,

in word,

orgasm

and keep

and buries

I hold his head, breathing heavy, and stroke his wet hair. His body envelops mine as I tether us with a hand on the ladder.

I don't know how long we stay like this, sharing one another's rawest forms in the water. Clinging to each other's broken souls. But I do know, when he finally carries me out, we are not the same people we were when we fell in.

-
1. Fine—Kyle Hume
 2. Continue playing Fine
 3. Stop playing Fine
 4. Tears of Gold—Faouzia |



CHAPTER 14

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CHAPTER 14

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Flowers and Gold

Finn

Her teeth are chattering by the time we arrive at the barn, her weight clinging to her body. ¹ I climb the steps with her in my arms, bring her to the bathroom. It's a tiny fucking thing with a slanted roof, tucked under the eaves. I set her on the toilet while I turn on the shower and grab a blanket from the bed.

“Let's get you out of this thing.” Gathering up the hem, I lift the blanket and over her head. She shivers when her wet hair lands on her bare back. I quickly wrap the blanket around her.

She's silent, hasn't said a word since the lake. I'm worried she might be going into shock until she delicately slips her icy fingers into the waistband of my jeans, tugging me forward. My chest swells as her numb fingers struggle with the button and soggy denim. When she finally gets it, she pulls them down, and I step out of them, waiting for her to look up at me.

Steam starts rising from the shower. She shrugs the blanket off her shoulder, and we're left naked in front of each other for the first time. Our eyes stay fixed to our feet, but I need to see her amber eyes. I lift her chin with two fingers. I need her to see my eyes, see the truth in them when

“You’re so fucking beautiful, Ef. Sometimes it feels like I can’t breathe.”

The crease between her brows slackens, and she rises on her toes to kiss my nose. I don’t think I’ve ever been kissed there before and the intimacy of it makes my heart lodge in my throat. Her eyes are soft and her lips curl ever so slightly as she takes my hand and pulls back the curtain.

The shower is cramped, and our bodies are forced to shuffle against each other. I use both hands to brush the hair out of her face as I take her in. *fucking stunning.*

She looks up at me, and there’s a reluctant comfort in her eyes, but I can’t quite let herself feel secure in hoping for this new version of us. I don’t blame her. I’ve given her no reason to trust me. I can only hope that she’ll take the olive branch as an olive branch. Not as an attempt to wrap everything up with a pretty bow. But the first step on a long path toward redemption is becoming a man deserving of her.

Because deep down, I’ve known, it’s always been her. And it always will be.

“Turn for me, princess.” I can’t help but run my hands down her back as she faces away from me, her ass just barely brushing up against my fingers. I shampoo her hair, and she lets her head fall back as I massage her scalp. Her eyes are closed, and she sighs the sweetest little hum. It’s such a contrast to the explosive, defensive, and rage-filled Effie, and I feel distinctly honored that she’s showing me this side of her. She may just be too exhausted to come back, but maybe—hopefully—she’s slowly letting down her walls.

She’s been so quiet, that when she asks me a question as we towel-dry, it almost startles me. “Where did you sleep last night?”

fucking I ruck the towel over my hair. “In the garage. In the bed of my
Though I didn’t get much sleep, haunted by her words.

to kiss *I don’t want to see your face.*

casual *Just get it over with.*

and her I follow her to our bed—*her* bed—taking particular pride in the ne
shower of her skin that has replaced the goosebumps that covered her body

She pulls the quilt back, but instead of getting in, she turns to n
ist each worries her lip with her teeth and avoids my eyes. I know whateve
1. *Truly* about to say is gonna hurt like a bitch.

“You don’t have to sleep in the garage, but maybe the couch?” *Fuch*
ike she *that stings.*

I don’t I take a deep breath, tying the towel around my waist. “Course.”

she saw “Thank you,” she says meekly.

o neatly I give her as much of a smile as I can manage and lean forward to k
tion, of She turns to give me her cheek, and it feels like an arrow to the chest.

I step back and give her the space she clearly wants. I hope the hu
ays will evident in my eyes. I don’t want her to feel bad for doing what she fe
must.

arms as “Good night, Finn,” she says as I walk away, and I look back o
cock. I shoulder and see her wringing her hands, a sad smile on her face.

up. Her “Night, princess.”

it contrast to

ionored

to push

l off, it



truck.” “Well, you could go with something like this or like this.” The unhelpful art store associate says, holding up two canvases that are basically the same fucking thing.

“Will both fit on the easel?” I’m actively trying not to pull my gun with a flushdude to speed up this process.

before. “Uh, let’s see...” He tries to place one of the rectangular canvases on the easel I’ve picked out and it doesn’t fit between the spacers. “Or she’s guess not.”

I grab the canvas from his hand and flip it on its side and it lays perfectly. *Yeah, fucking hate incompetence.*

“Oh yeah, and you can adjust this,” he says, pushing up the top rail. *you look at that.*

“Good. Fine. What paints are right for this type of canvas?”

Miss her. “Man, you have a lot of good questions.” He chuckles. I’d rather pop eyes out with a hot fire poker than spend another second with this man. “Art isn’t. You know what, google is fucking free. I walk away from him and I check my phone. Ten seconds later, I’m in the acrylic paint aisle throwing every color and the brushes next to them into my basket.

Over my shoulder. At the register, the man begins to scan every tube of paint at the speed of a ninety-year-old woman and my foot taps anxiously. The only reason I’m comfortable leaving Effie alone at the farm was because I thought this would be a quick visit. My skin itches thinking of her on the property by herself. No one would hear her—

The next thing I know my gun is drawn and the man is shaking, holding the air. I throw my credit card on the counter. “Just charge it for a thousand, that should more than cover it.”

He looks at the card like it’s a ticking bomb and stutters, “I—uh—

the most—I have to ring each item.”

Basically “Jesus fucking Christ,” I groan and pull out a wad of hundreds from my wallet, at least a couple thousand, and drop it on the counter. Then I shove everything back into the basket, card and all, hike the easel and canvas under my arm and leave before I fucking kill someone.

Even though the store owner would probably thank me for taking the cash, I still feel like a damn, incompetent ass.

When I get back to the barn, a mouthwatering smell fills the space perfectly. My heart squeezes, seeing Effie cooking on the wood stove, in tiny shorts that disappear almost completely beneath a long sweater. There’s soft music playing in the background, and she sways ever so slightly, I don’t realize she’s doing it.

I’m frozen in the doorway soaking her in, she looks good here. Like my whole life was always meant for the slow life. She starts singing along into the microphone, and my heart goes from being squeezed to being crushed as I realize how good she pulls off. It’s because she looks happy.

I’m mesmerized by her hips, rocking back and forth, making her sweater rise and giving a little peek of her perfect ass in tiny black shorts. She turns around with her spatula-microphone and jumps with a scream when she sees me. “Fucking hell, Finneas!” Her hand clutches her chest like she’s trying to keep her heart from jumping out of her chest. “You scared the shit out of me.” I lift a brow, and she glares back.

“What are you making?”

“Breakfast hash,” she says, still pouting and crossing her arms.

“Smells delicious.” I head straight for the stairs before she starts asking questions about what’s in my arms.

I set the easel up by the far window, I feel like I’ve heard artists

about natural light or some shit. There's not a lot of room in the eav
om myenough to stand in the middle. I drag one of the nightstands over and
1 I tossthe paints and brushes I bought in the drawer. I step back and look at
anvasesup and know something's missing.

It clicks, and I hurry down the stairs. Calling to Effie as I leave, "D
out hisupstairs."

My first stop is the garage, but I come up empty. Luckily, I find w
ce. Mylooking for in the big house. Returning to the barn, Effie isn't downst
rts thatcourse, *she isn't*.

: music I told her not to do something, so she obviously did exactly that. I
ubt shehave known.

I climb the steps and find her staring at the easel and canvas, paint
like sheopen. She's toying with the long sleeve of her sweater, and I can't r
spatula,face properly from this angle. She hears me and turns. My stomacl
why sheseeing tears in her eyes.

"It wasn't done yet," I say defensively, placing the stool I found
sweaterher.

e twirls "Is this—Is this for me?" Her voice cracks and her bottom lip tru
ne. Her eyes are so sad and heavy that I can't stop myself from wrapping l
ying tobody in my arms.

: out of "I'm sorry, I didn't know it would make you sad. I will get rid—"

"No!" She rears back but keeps her balled fists against my ches
please don't. I'm not sad."

I brush a tear at the corner of her eye with my thumb. "Princess,
askingcrying."

Her mouth cracks in a small smile. "I'm just surprised is all." She v
talkingher eyes and fixes me with a warm stare. "I love it. I promise."

yes, but I bite my cheek, feeling so relieved I could pick her up and s
. put allaround. I'm not a gift giver. Hell, I'm not a giver at all. And I definitel
: the setthink I've ever made someone cry anything but terrified-for-their-life t

“Oh, there's one more thing,” I say quickly, remembering my coat
on't goHer mouth pinches, holding back a smile as she looks up at me all do
and I temporarily forget my own goddamn name. I pull the sunflower
hat I'mmy pocket and— “*Fuck*, it's all wilted.”

airs. *Of* I go to shove the smooshed flower back in my coat feeling
imbecile. *Who puts a delicate flower in a pocket?* Christ, I'm hopeless
shouldstuff.

But she stops me, taking the stem from my hand. “Thank you, Finn.
drawer “I passed a bunch on the road, I can go back and get a new one.”
ead her “Finn, would you calm the fuck down?” My eyes snap to her. “You
1 droponly person I know who gets more frazzled giving someone a flow
disposing of a body.”

next to I laugh dryly. “Yeah, well...”

“Sunflowers are my second favorite flower.” She looks at the yellow
embles.with a smile.

ner stiff “Yeah? What's your favorite?” I brush a lock of hair off her neck an
it around my finger.

“Water lilies.” *Fuck*. Warmth spills down my spine and pools
it. “No,stomach. My fucking chest hurts hearing her say those two words.
nothing more than to pick her up and throw her onto the bed. To stay t
you'reday, fucking until we lose track of time and space and all I know i
inch of her body, every note of her sweet scent.

vipes at But I remember last night and her not letting me in her bed and c
better not push my luck. Especially not right now when she's looking

pin herlike she not only doesn't hate me, but she might even like me.
ly don't "Enjoy, princess." I tug her in by the hip and press a kiss to her fo
ears. walking away before I lose the ability to control my darkest urges.
pocket. "My dad called," she says as I retreat, and my skin crawls thinking
e-eyed,fucker. "He wants us to go to the Children's Hospital charity gala nex
r out ofThe governor will be there, and he wants to put on a united front."

Memories of the last time we attended a gala together flash in m
like anand I smile. "Are you asking me on a date, Ef?"

s at this She rolls the sunflower stem between her fingers. "I guess."

"You want me to be your boyfriend, huh? A little arm candy to sho
" I tease.

"Well, you *are* my husband." She pats my chest and smirks. "Remem
u're the And fuck, those few words nearly bring me to my knees.
er than

v petals



nd twirl

My hand is falling asleep tucked behind my head while I'm lying
in mycouch, staring up at the ceiling. I listen to the final ashes of the fire cra
I wantthe stove, providing the faintest orange glow while the rest of the r
here allshrouded in darkness.

s every Effie went to bed a few hours ago after painting all day. I wish
blame not being able to sleep on the lumpy couch under me, but I know
lecidе I not true. It's the woman curled up under the quilt upstairs. I imag
g at me

wrapped in the white sheets, and I bet she would look like a water lily
rehead, silvery-white petals if the moonlight hit just right.

I don't know where we go from here. There's nothing keeping us
of that anymore. No family rivalry, no heist, no fiancé or arranged marriage
t week. the sins of our past.

She's mine by law but not mine by soul. Not fully. Not yet.
y mind She was for a few precious moments in the lake. I could feel her body
open, letting pieces of her soul drift out to me, trusting I would catch
She wanted to be ravaged as much as I wanted to consume.

ow off," I perk up at the sound of footsteps upstairs. I listen carefully to see
just going to the bathroom. She isn't.

mber?" I lay still for another few minutes, my heartbeat growing heavier,
like it's drawing me to her. I throw back my blanket and head up
nothing but sweatpants. I find her in her makeshift studio, bathed in
moonlight and the same shirt of mine she wore yesterday. Her bare legs
on display and my fingers itch to brush the smooth skin, hoping goose
raise on her skin at my touch.

She turns her head as I slowly approach. I move unhurried as if
mirage that might dissipate if I go too quickly. "Can't sleep," she says
on the tugs on the shirt neckline.

ackle in "Me either." I close the distance between us and sweep her face up
room is finger under her chin. "What's in that pretty head, princess?"²

She pulls her bottom lip between her teeth and swallows slowly. "I
I could Finn." My finger trailing up her jaw stops in its tracks, her voice
w that's despondent it makes my whole body cold. Her eyes fall back to her canvas
ine her abstract swatches of bold colors and gold paint.

"I feel like I can't trust myself when it comes to you." Like a p

ly with blow, her words make me take a step back, dropping my hand. “I’ve had anyone I could trust, until you. But then what my family did to you is apart we went to war, and I didn’t have you anymore, but I always had you. Only now, I’m not sure I do.”

“Sometimes I feel like a body, bartered and bought, not a person. What happens when you realize you’ve been sold damaged goods? Will you ever really want me?”

h them. My throat constricts and any reply dries up. Words fail me, nothing adequate. No apology big enough. No comfort strong enough.

if she’s I don’t know what compels me, but I step up to the easel and squeeze gold paint on a palette. Picking up the first brush I see, I swipe it through the paint and lift the hem of the shirt until she pulls it over her head.

tairs in My heart slams against my ribcage seeing her completely bare on the bed. She curls inwards and wraps her arms over her breasts. I don’t tell her to uncover herself. I don’t tell her I need to see. I kneel at her side, facing the curve of her hip and thigh as she sits with one leg crossed over the other.

I remember the stretchmarks I saw our first night here and think she’s never seen anything more beautiful. She tenses when the cold paint touches her skin but relaxes under the brush strokes. I trace each line until her legs are striped in gold.

with a I move to her other side and highlight each mark and scar with additional paint.

She sharply inhales when I kneel in front of her and nudge her knees together. I’m lost, gently lift her leg and set it on my shoulder, gathering more paint on the brush before tracing the stretch marks on her inner thigh. I place her on my shoulder and her hands fly to fist my hair for balance. I can feel the

heat of her cunt and smell her arousal, making me groan and run my hand over her thigh before painting her stripes.

e never Once I'm done, I press a kiss to her pussy, hoping she can f
ours...reverence in it. She shudders as I drag a long, wide stroke from entr
myself.clit. I look up at her, her teeth notched in her bottom lip and make s
eyes are on me. "Tell me all the ways I've hurt you."

i. What She stays silent, and I lap her pussy again with a slow and heavy
ou stillmy tongue. Then I hover a breath's width from her sweet heat, waiting
"You manipulated me," she breathes, and I take another purposef
; seemspausing again at the top until she speaks again. "You forced me." /
heavy stroke.

re some She sniffles, and I rub circles into her thighs. "That's good, princes
ugh thegoing."

"You humiliated me..." My tongue drags from bottom to top.
e stool. Another grievance, another apology.

her to And we continue like this until her thighs are shaking on either side
ing thehead and her raspy, close-to-tears voice has turned to breathy moa
er. fingers pull on my hair, and I groan into her.

ing I'd "*Finn...*" her voice floats out, and I know what to do next.

touches I carefully set her feet down and stand, grabbing her hand and pull
r hip isoff the stool. She trails behind me, her hand feeling so small and tru

mine. I position her in front of the full-length mirror by the small ward
oration. "Look at you, a fucking masterpiece." I stand behind her and sk

apart. Ihands over her shoulders and down her arms. She leans back, settling
on themy warm chest, and I melt at her trust. Laying my arms over her shou

ther legcup her breasts and fill my palms with them. I tease her nipples, rul
feel thethumb over each one, and she rolls her head to the side and onto my sh

nose up I watch her eyelids fall closed, and her lips part on a contented sigl
reflection. I gauge her reaction as one of my hands slips over her stom.

feel the between her thighs. Her eyes open and they lock with mine through the mirror drunkenly, telling me it's okay. Maybe even better than okay.

So I spread her lips and drag a finger over her wet slit, feeling her clit. Blood rushes to my cock, and I try to push my hips back, so she can feel it, but she reaches behind her and wraps a hand around it on her sweatpants.

A lustful lick, "*Fuck*," spills from my lips with the slightest tug of her fist.

Another She looks at me, a silent plea in her eyes. I know what she wants, but she doesn't want to ask for it. So I swallow down the ball in my throat. I whisper in her ear, "Hands on the mirror, princess."

She leans forward, arching her back. Her eyes never leave mine in the mirror even as I strip and slot my cock at her entrance and push in. Her mouth falls open, and I fill it with my finger. She sucks on it, and I come off myself to the hilt, a deep groan pulled from my chest.

ns. Her "Again. Tell me more." I pull my finger from her lips and rub it against her clit, still buried deep in her.

"You..." I slowly withdraw, dragging my piercing against her lips. "Made me feel safe and then took it all away." And I punch my hips forward, pushing all the way into her. She gasps.

I pull out carefully, and she continues breathlessly as I continue to rub against her clit, "You made me feel like I wasn't worthy of gentle love." I lean back in, my heart cracking at her confession.

"*Oh god*," tumbles from her lips as I drag against her inner wall. I firmly rub her clit. I feel her body begin to tighten around my length.

"Don't stop, princess."

"And I hate—*oh fuck*." I thrust again and her body trembles, her head cresting.

igh the “What do you hate?” I say through gritted teeth. Her clenching cu
like heavenly torture.

swollen “I hate that I *can’t* hate you,” she cries and shatters.

doesn’t “I know. I’m so sorry.” I groan as her pussy contracts and demanc
ver mymoment of raw vulnerability is seared in my mind forever. It pulls n
release from me, and I hope she can feel she is so much more than
body, that these bodily pleasures are just the bridge to something
but shebeyond family rivalries, forced marriages, lies, and betrayals.

eat and I fold over her, breathing hard and sated. My arms tightly wrapped
her waist even as my legs threaten to give out. I gently pull out of h
in theshe whimpers like it’s a loss. I pick my sweatpants off the grou
slowly.tenderly wipe away my cum spilling out of her, though I can’t help but
d I sinklittle back inside.

I pick her up and cradle her tight to my chest, soaking up the
inst hermoments of her warm skin against mine. I set her on the bed and p
quilt over her. She’s curled up on her side, and I kiss her temple, breat
g-spot.her addictive scent.

orward, When I walk away, a hand reaches out and stops me.

And she says one word that has me carving out my heart and handi
o circleher, bloody and beating: *Stay*.

ound

ills and

1. Something in the Orange—Zach Bryan
2. Darkest Hour—Andrea Russett

orgasm

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CHAPTER 15

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CHAPTER 15

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Married Man

Effie

For someone so cold in affect, Finneas Fox is a goddamn Bunsen burner. His front sticks to my back with a thin sheen of sweat as he burrows into my neck. I slowly try to extract myself from his koala grip, but he's not waking him. I pick up his wrist and carefully lift it off my waist, but it falls back down and he growls behind me, "Where do you think you're going, princess?" His morning voice is raspy and warm and makes butterflies flutter in my stomach.

"You're a thousand degrees, Finneas. I'm going to shower." I roll onto my knees and kiss his cheek before making another attempt. He grabs my arm and tugs me back.

"I like that you smell like me," he moans and pins my body under his. He lightly rocks his pelvis against my ass and heat strikes my core. *Oh, how I would love to flip over...*

But I'm sweaty and covered in paint—*Shit!*

"The sheets!" Anxiety throttles through me, and I thrash under Finn to get a look at the damage. Gold paint is smudged all over the middle of the bed. "Oh my god, I ruined them."

Like a rising tide of guilt and shame, I feel the strongest need to fix it, anything to avoid the repercussions. “Finn, get off me!” He ke trapped and nerves turn to frustration. *Doesn't he see the problem?*

“Effie, what the fuck is going on?” There’s annoyance in his because of course there is, he must be pissed.

“Let me go and I’ll fix it,” I beg, and he flips me over, pinning my by my head and looming over me. I flinch, tensing, waiting for a never comes.

“What are you on about?” He peers down at me, and there’s noth concern and confusion in his eyes. Which concerns and confuses me.

“Your sheets.” Anxious tears choke me. “I ruined them, there’s p over.”

“Okay. I’ll buy new ones.” He shakes his head and brushes the hai my face that got all mussed from the struggle. “I bet there’s paint all c face too...” I look at the side of his face, and there is indeed paint sr on his cheekbones and flecks in his hair. “From being in between gorgeous thighs...” He slinks down my body, biting my stomach and each inner thigh.

“I’m sorry.” I can’t handle the caring intensity in his eyes when h up at me, it makes me feel off balance.

“For *what?*” He sounds exasperated. “I don’t give a shit about the sl I close my eyes, trying to quiet the racket in my head.

You ruin everything, I can so clearly hear my father’s rage-filled v my carelessness, his face turning beet red.

“Effie, look at me.” Finn plants his hands by my sides and hovers me.

I slowly peek open my eyes. “You’re not mad?”

it, hide “Why would I be mad? I was the one who painted you for Christ
eps meAnd I’m certainly not mad that you spent the night in my bed.” H
forward and kisses under my jaw and down my neck.

voice, I lean into the comforting weight of his body on mine, the way I
brushes against my skin. *He’s not mad. He’s not my father. Just breath*
/ wrists He licks a trail up my throat and dusts his lips over mine. “Now
hit thatconvince you to stay in bed a little longer.”

I run my fingers through his dark hair, pulling him closer to kiss hi
ing butletting him grind in the cradle of my hips, and I explore his mouth v
tongue. He moans softly, yet hungrily. I bite his lip sharply and he reai
aint alla mix of heat and mischief in his eyes.

“You cannot,” I say with a small laugh as I weasel out from under h
r out ofleap from the bed. “Ow.” I whip around, my ass burning from a fie
ver myHe’s completely stone-faced, but then the corner of his lips tug up
nudgedsmirk.

n these
kissing

e looks



reets.”

When I get out of the shower, Finn’s standing with his back to me, dre
/oice atblack jeans and black button-up. He turns around, rolling up his slee
wetting his bottom lip. He looks like he wants to eat me alive.

s above And I want to let him.

“I have business in the city to take care of today. Calvin is on his w
for security.”

's sake. I cringe. "Does it have to be Calvin? Anyone else but him please understand people like me need protection, so I won't protest that. I have body security all my life. The only reason I didn't have a bodyguard while I was with the crew was my father was worried his men would be too conspiratorial." "I wouldn't leave you with anyone I don't have full confidence in, can I keep you safe." Finn reaches out to stroke my cheek with the back of his hand.

firmly, "It's not that," I say looking down.

with my hand. He tilts my chin back up, "Then what is it?"

steps back, My lip trembles, humiliation tumbling in my chest, "He was the one who did this to me...He saw me..." As terrible as the interrogation was, being four hours in a room and naked, covered in sweat and tears in a ball on the floor was ten times worse than any slap. "What?" Realization dawns on Finn's face and he sniffs, pulling his hand away as it clenches into a fist. "I see...I'll make some calls, get someone out here."

"Thank you." I clutch the towel tighter around me. There's a hurt in his eyes that for some reason makes *me* feel vulnerable.

"I should have never put you in that situation." He doesn't try to touch me but I can tell he wants to, his shoulders rolled back, hands in fists. Like he's preparing for a fight, but he's his own worst enemy.

There's a lot of things I could say right now.

pressed in my chest. *It's okay, look where we are now.*

eyes and a smile. *It doesn't matter anymore.*

I'm fine, don't worry about it.

But why would I?

say here. "Yeah, you shouldn't have. It was fucked up and cruel." I enunciate each word clearly to make sure he knows what I'm asking of him: Own up

ease.” I shit.

’ve had The emotion on his face shutters closed, tucking everything away
e livingbehind a mask of cold apathy. A defense mechanism, but I see through
uous. nods and heads downstairs and out the door.

n, he’ll There’s a brief moment when I feel bad. The deep programming all
of hishave to protect men’s emotions even at the expense of your own. I sh
feeling down, because *fuck that*.

Last night may have changed things, but it didn’t fix things.

After he leaves, I check my phone to find a dozen missed calls fr
ere thatfather. My heart drops to my stomach. There’s a single text. I read
nd half-blood going cold.

worse. *Euphemia. I won’t tolerate another disappointment.*

is hand I delete the text and all the missed call notifications. I don’t trust F
me elseto go through my phone. My father must be getting desperate to
reckless and text me so blatantly, without any precautions.

his eyes I slip on a pair of underwear and Finn’s big t-shirt, some band I’ve
heard of on the front. It smells like him and rather than soothe me, it
ich me,me want to cry on the heels of my father’s message.

ke he’s *Honesty and loyalty.*

That’s all he’s asked of me.

I wander over to my makeshift studio after making a pot of
Clutching the warm mug in my hands, I sit on the stool and look
window.

It’s humbling looking out there, seeing the dense forest and know
the riches and masterpieces that are hidden away under it. So much
ite eachso much talent. Knowing that the cache was the start of all this and
to yourclose to my fingertips.

I return my attention to the canvas in front of me, rolling all these thoughts neatly in my mind.

He hops off the stool and goes to my luggage. It takes a little digging, but finally I find it: a burner cell phone I packed for situations just like this. I dial and listen to it ring.

“*Oui, allo?*”

“Linnie, it’s Effie...I have a job for you.”

From my

point of view,



I can't

be so **Finn**

It feels like my lungs are full of glass. My fingers tap on the stick slowly, a fucking maniac. As if anything can rid me of the sick, self-hatred I feel when I see Effie’s face when I mentioned Calvin. Fucking tore a hole in my chest.

I’m pushing ninety miles per hour, and it doesn’t feel enough. Nothing can be fast enough to outrun this feeling.

Guilt fucking sucks.

I much preferred not caring, not feeling, not having my ability to breathe tied to the emotions of another person.

I called Roman as soon as I left the barn, and he’s sending someone to Bartlett Farms. Then Calvin told him to turn back. Now I have a call to make, and it makes my palms sweat.

It’s so

thoughts I ring Stella. When she doesn't answer, I give the Den's office nu
try. They open in half an hour, so she's probably there.

ng, but "What?" Cash's gruff voice answers, and my fingers tighten, ar
s. around the wheel.

"Stella there?"

"Yeah—*Oh fuck, baby, just like that—*"

"Fucking hell, Cash! Stop picking up when you're balls deep in
I'm about to hang up, but before I do, I shout, "Tell Stella to call me, y
motherfucker."

When I'm twenty minutes out, I answer the phone to Stella's
"Finneas."

"Meet me at Phantom in twenty."

"Dude, we're opening in five minutes—"

"I'm not asking," I growl, beginning to regret this entire idea.

She scoffs. "And I'm not going, goodbye Finn—"

lift like
d I felt
y chest.
ing will
you soon."
"Wait." I'd rather get in a full-speed collision than tell her what I n
help for, but somehow I get it out without intentionally crashing.

"Why didn't you lead with that?" She sounds disgustingly excite
ing will
you soon."

I groan, wanting to turn the fuck around. But I remind myself w
doing this for, and *Christ*, is she worth it all and more.
fucking

liers to
one last



umber aStella is waiting for me at the bar. The club is completely empty, not c
for another six hours. I see she's already poured herself a drink and
moyed,I'll need one too—or three.

“First, if you tell anyone about this—”

“Yeah, yeah, you'll kill me.” She sucks on the skinny cocktail dr
rolls her eyes. *This was a terrible idea.* “What's the second?”
pussy!” “Pour me a scotch.”

ou sick She hops over the bar and slides a glass with two fingers down th
wood to me. I tip it back and down it in one go. Like a game of shuttle
cheery,I send it back to her. “Another.”

“I'm all for loosening up, but let's try to get a little work in sober fir
I sigh. “Fine.”

She walks out from behind the bar and starts playing music from he
on the club's stereo system. “I made a playlist that will be good for c
the basics.”

eed her I meet her in the middle of the dance floor and feel like I'm crawling
my goddamn skin. “Let's start with the easiest: pop.”

d. “See Some boy band crap plays on the speakers, and Stella starts bobbi
weaving her head. “Okay, so just relax and move with the energy
who I'mmusic.”

I try to mimic her movements, my back rigid and muscles tight.

I've skinned a man alive. I've been stabbed four times, and I've de
bomb with three seconds on the clock. Yet none of that is even close to
feel right now. Effie was right, I *do* kill people for fun, but a little d
Fucking terrifying.

“You look like a goddamn chicken, loosen up a bit.” Stella laughs
jaw clenches, wanting to put my fist through a wall. “Don't just mov

openinghead. Flow organically with the movement, you know? Roll your shoulders, I thinkbit, bend your knees, rock side to side.”

I hold out my hand, “Whoa, slow down, that was like ten different things in one.” I shove my fingers into my hair and yell, “*Fuck*. This is a disaster.”

“Okay, let’s try something else,” she says calmly, using her hand to settle me with settling motions as if I’m a wild horse and she’s trying not to get trampled. She changes the music to something slower, almost sensual.

“Come here.” I go over to her, my chest hammering like I’m walking on enemy territory. “Put your hands on my hips.” I reach out hesitantly. “I’ll do as she asks, keeping a foot between us. She quickly closes the distance, wrapping her arms over my shoulders and pulling me in until our pelvises are pressed together.

I jump back like I’ve been burned. “Christ, lady, I’m *married*.”

“Boy, please.” She purses her lips. “I love you Foxes, but y’all are going out of your minds, like if someone gave a bunch of toddlers guns instead of a nap, do you want to learn how to dance like a fucking man, or like attending a catholic middle school dance, leaving room for Jesus?”

Stella is the only person outside the family who can put me in my place without getting shot. It annoys the hell out of me, but I respect her for it. I really need her help, so I swallow my fucking pride and grumble, “I’ll do as you say, man.”

She sets her arms back on my shoulders, and I clutch her by the hips. “Dancing?” she smirks and speaks slowly, like when trying to get a child to say their name.

“*Sorry for being a dick, Stella.*”

I cut her a glare. “Don’t push it.”

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CHAPTER 16

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CHAPTER 16

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Rocky Balboa

Effie

The villain is about to kidnap the princess...or maybe the knight is to save her from a dragon or...I have no fucking idea what happened these last three chapters because while I've been trying peacefully read in bed like a half normal person, Finn has been up boxing.

I slide out of bed and aggressively shove my feet in some slippers. I go down the steps and out the door, wrapping my arms around myself against an unexpected chill. *It's a perfectly reasonable request*, I tell myself as I head on my way to the garage.

There's a bright flood light aimed directly on the bag, throwing the rest of the garage into shadows. Finn works his way around it with lithe weaving and bobbing around an imaginary opponent. He notices I'm here and stops, grabbing hold of the swinging bag.

"Hey, princess." He's slightly out of breath and lifts his shirt to wipe sweat on his forehead.

"Finn, it's nearly ten at night, do you need to be doing this right now?" I look at him sideways.

“I didn’t know you were sleeping already,” he says, stretching and his taped fingers.

“I wasn’t but—”

“Ten more minutes?” He gives me what I think is supposed to be a dog look and while it’s not adorable in any traditional sense—more Belgian Malinois than a Golden Retriever—it still makes me crack.

“Fine, but you have to teach me. If we both have to be awake, I might well get something out of it,” I throw back, thinking he’ll call it a night and head in rather than train with me.

He perks up. “You got yourself a deal.” He looks me up and down and shrugs. “That’ll work, but maybe lose the slippers.”

“Are you serious?” I ask, getting tinged with excitement and nervousness.

“Of course. Do you have one of those things for your hair?” He waves his hand in a circle above his head.

It takes me a second, but then I laugh. “Do you mean a hair tie?” I find an elastic around my wrist.

“Yeah, sure. Put your hair up and then we can get started.”

As I wrap my hair into a ponytail he peppers me with questions about training I have, what I already know, and I quickly get overwhelmed. Growing up with killers and fighters, I should at least understand half the things he asks, but most of it is gibberish.

“Jesus, all I know is that punching you in the face right now sounds good.”

“Okay.” He smirks with a confident chuckle. “I always say learn by doing. Go ahead, try to punch me.”

“What? You can’t be serious,” I balk.

“As a heart attack.” He clasps his hands behind his back and sti-

flexing head forward. "Tick tock, princess," he jeers.

God, he's so annoying. I lunge, swinging my arm, and he dodges side, arms still behind him. I huff, peeved, and try again. And again puppy again. Each time he dips or bobs, and my fist goes flying past his face, re of nothing but air.

"Dammit, I thought you said I could hit you," I grumble, and right astwitches in amusement.
ght and "I said *try* to punch me."

I throw my hands in the air. "Well, I *tried*. Are you going to tell me anything or just point out how incredibly useless I am at defending myself?"

"You're giving yourself away, keep your movements small and varied. You don't see your punch coming from a mile away. Keep your hands like a cat's paws. He brings his fists to his face in a guard and moves them dynamically, bouncing on the soles of his feet.

I try to mirror his movements, and he circles around me, nudging me into proper position, pushing my shoulder to get me to bend my knees, tucking in my elbows.

"There ya go." He comes back to my front and nods approvingly. "Good. jab with your left, quick and fast, sharp and tight foot movements." He demonstrates once and then I mimic him.

"Good, good. Again, and this time add your right, drive through your punches. His left fist snaps out and back and is immediately followed by a powerful twist of his hips and right hand.

We go back and forth, working different combinations of the punches. I know there are more punches, but he keeps me practicing these two basics, tweaking my form or reminding me to bring my guard up. After only ten minutes, my heart is pumping and I'm feeling encouraged.

He stands behind me. I can feel his breath on the side of my face as his arm stretches out next to mine. “Your jab isn’t a power punch, it’s more of a mosquito. You’re not trying to knock anyone out, so get it out of your hand and snap it right back, okay?” He demonstrates, moving so fast if you weren’t watching you’d miss it.

His lip curls. I try, and he repeats *faster* after each jab. His hands drop to my hips to try to keep my breathing even. On the next punch, he rotates my hips to get a better grip and calls, “*Right.*”

Each time he twists my hips, I shoot my right arm out with more power and precision than all night. “There it is!” He claps and walks back in front of me. “Good so I can work, princess.”

“I’ll be here.” He gives me a tight-lipped smile, and I squirm under the intensity of his focus on me. I try to shake it off and say, “Same time tomorrow?”

“See you then.” He flicks his chin with a grin. As I begin to walk away, he chuckles, “Maybe next time you’ll land a punch—”

My knees buckle. I’m fast and powerful, just like he taught me, spinning on my heels and throwing my fist into his cheekbone. His head whips to the side from the impact. He straightens back up, a burning heat in his eyes that makes my stomach flutter.

“That felt good, didn’t it?” His eyes darken and he takes a step toward my hip. “Do it again.”

I try to brush him off with a roll of my eyes and shake of my head.

“Do. It.” He repeats, a hunger in his eyes that calls to me.

“Why?” I eye him suspiciously as he continues to close in on me, just corralling me up against a workbench.

“Because I deserve it. Now fucking hit me.” His words sink in, and I search his eyes for a trick or a trap. But all I see back is the same hungry

his left before, but this time I understand it.

ore like I push on his chest making him take a few steps back so I'm not cut there anymore. My fist closes, aching from the first punch, and I look at the red mark already forming by his eye. He pleads with me wordlessly, and like a fucked-up version of couples therapy, I give him what he wants: A fist to the nose and a jawbreaker. To the temple. To the cheek.

with his Each hit, he straightens back up and looks ready for more, like I even put a dent in the penance he thinks he deserves.

id force I roll my neck side to side and try to make a fist again, but I wince. "Nice knuckles and tendons sore. He reaches for my hand and gently massages the pads of my palms. "I'll get you a pair of gloves for next time," he says with a weak laugh.

There's a strange energy hanging between us, like I've given him something he can't give me in return. I swallow the uneasy feeling and make a joke. "Are you gonna tell people you got beat up by a girl?" He shrugs. "Nah." He shakes his head, looking down and bites his lip. His eyes are on the back of my head. "I got my ass handed to me, but I had it coming." He leans in and brushes a kiss over my red and swollen knuckles.

His lips feel like satin over my hot skin, and I'm about to lean in when he pulls away. "I won't keep you up any longer." He drops his hand and steps aside.

"I don't feel so tired anymore," I joke, but go to leave nonetheless. While walking out, something on the bench catches my eye. "Is that a project?" I walk over and pick it up, checking it out. "Does it work?"

"Yeah, I think so."

, and I "Cool, well, good night." I leave, already excited and thinking of turning the barn into a rustic home theater.

Back inside, I decide to take a shower after working up a bit of a sweat from the day's work. I get in the shower, wash my hair, and get dressed in my nightgown. I was never someone who had a lengthy routine, but having brought only a small toiletry bag to the house, it's even shorter.

By the time I'm done, Finn still isn't inside. I hope he's not planning on sleeping in his truck again. I know I just punched the shit out of him, but he hasn't told me to, and I think it was possibly more cathartic for him than me.

I find a bag of corn in the freezer and take it out to him, a peace offering. When I walk outside, the side of the big house is lit up in a glow of warm white lights. I turn the corner and feel my stomach drop at the same time as I see the truck with its lights on.

The bed of Finn's truck is layered in quilts, knit blankets and pillows. There's an old, metal camping lantern on the edge and half a string of Christmas lights dangling off the side view mirror. On the top of the cab is the projector, pointed right at the broad, white side of the big house. I look at the ramshackle set up and feel warmth spread through me like I'm winking drinking hot cider on a winter night. "Finn?" I call out.

He pops out from deeper in the garage with an oil smudged cloth in his hand. He looks at me, then at the truck and everything. He half-smiles. "In case you couldn't sleep."

He throws the tarp over the flood light and walks toward me. "You weren't tired." He draws me to him with a hand on my hip.

"I'm speechless... And I'm frankly a little concerned about that fire hazard." I brush past him and take the oily cloth off the flood light. "What was the point of that?" I laugh. "I don't know, ambience or some shit, right?"

"That explains the half-lit string of Christmas lights."

a sweat “Plugged them in and half the bulbs were blown.”
ne with “I see...” I nod, trying to fight my smile. “Well, what are we watchi
e farm, His eyes light up at my question, and his mouth dances in a devilis
before I’m thrown over his shoulder with a scream. “*Finneas!*”
ning on He sets me down on the tailgate and hops up next to me. “Have yo
, but he*Rocky?*”

“That seems fitting.” I scoot back into the nest of blankets, a gentle
ering of comfort settling over me as he sets up the movie and presses play.
growing Finn cuddles in next to me, scooping me under his arm, and I rest n
y heart on his chest. The opening credits begin, and the sound is old and scratc
vinyl. It’s barely louder than the chorus of crickets and frogs.

I throw There’s a small gust of wind that blows into the garage and Finn t
f-lit up closer, folding a blanket over our laps. He holds the bag of corn I bro
p of the his cheek proudly, like it’s a trophy. There’s a small popping sound an
use. I look behind us, the rest of the Christmas lights have gone out. Fin
y body, me a look that says, *well, I tried*, and then he goes back to playing w
wet hair.

tarp in I guess I was more tired than I thought because I don’t make it throu
shrugs. the movie before my eyelids start growing heavy and Finn’s warm che
the rhythmic beat of his heart seems like the world’s best pillow.

ou said As I drift off to sleep to the iconic theme song playing in the back,
there’s one thought I keep coming back to: I’ve never felt so safe.

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CHAPTER 17

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CHAPTER 17

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Shuttle-Dicks

Effie

This is so weird.

This is *really* fucking weird.

Cash, Roan and Lochlan all sit on the couch, sunken into the cushions. Relaxing back, they smile at me. “Great to see you all...” I say through a gritted smile. I turn my head to Finn next to me. “Finn didn’t tell us you were coming.”

“I didn’t know,” he hisses under his breath as if all three of his brothers aren’t able to hear him five feet away.

Cash uncrosses his legs and stands, thrusting—dare I say, aggressively—a pastry box into my hands. “A little quality time, a chance to get to know the newest member of our family.” His words are warm, his tone is charming, but his eyes look like he could gut me alive without breaking a sweat.

“Sounds lovely.” I don’t worry about disguising the forced friendliness or sarcasm in my voice. Cash Fox knows exactly what he’s doing. This is a good-hearted house call, so why would I act like it is.

Cash is checking up on his assets. Or his liabilities.

“Dude, put your fucking shoes on—your feet smell like ass.” Roan Lochlan, who has, in fact, removed his shoes, in the shoulder. *Make y right at home, boys.*

I look back to Cash. “Sorry, we don’t have more to offer. Maybe run to the store for something.” I lock eyes with Finn, hoping he gets t

“No worry, *sister.*” He says the word like a threat. “The girls are b barbecue.”

“Delightful. Can’t wait.” *Who the fuck are the girls?* I’m pictur family picnic equivalent of cigarette girls.

Cash walks away, and Finn sweeps me aside, his big hand on my swear I didn’t know they were coming.”

ishions,
ough a
me you
hives.
“It’s fine, but what are they expecting us to do? We have one tab two chairs.” My mother’s aggressive and demanding attitude around was beaten into me growing up and this situation is about to give me :

rothers
expecting a Michelin star experience, Ef.”

passive
ance to
palms into my eyes and try to think. I’m overwhelmed.

and his
without
say that now but then will start dropping the passive aggressive comm a few hours about how I embarrassed him in front of his family.

ess and
isn’t a
“Okay, I’m just gonna put some water out for everybody.” It’s the can do. It’s not like we have lemonade or iced tea or anything re decent. *Are there even enough cups for everyone?*

I give a tight smile to everyone as I walk across the room

shoves kitchenette. Opening up the cabinet, I only count three glasses. *Shit.*
yourself remember there's one in the bathroom.

"Excuse me," I say, crossing the room *again*, feeling like a fool
we can back and forth. I climb the steps and go straight to the bathroom. I pick
the hint. cup by the sink like it's the holy grail and—*Jesus Christ!*

ringing Finn appears in the doorway, startling the daylight out of me. I squa
drop the glass, it shatters on the floor. The stress of everything com
ing the until it weighs on my chest.

I can't do anything right.

hip. "I *I break everything.*

I'm never good enough.

le with "Oh my god." My throat burns and tears threaten to spill.

hosting *I can't do anything right.*

fucking *I break everything.*

I'm never good enough.

they're "Effie...*Effie.*" Finn tugs on my hand and I can't bear to look at hi
you want to tell me what is going on?"

l of my I suck in a choppy breath. "We already didn't have enough cups, a
I've broken one, and—*Fucking hell.*"

down, "Okay...?" Finn tilts his head to look me in the eyes, his brows
s. He'll together. "My brothers can drink out of the goddamn toilet for all I car

ments in I ignore his absurd and unhelpful comment and squat down to fra
sweep up the broken glass. "Ah shit," I hiss when a shard slices my fin

at least I *Great, now there's going to be blood to clean up.* My head poi
motely anxiety beats like a drum through my whole body. If I can just make

make it perfect, maybe my ribs will stay intact, and my heart wor
to the through my fucking chest.

Then I Finn bends down next to me and snatches up my hands in his, wrapping a hand towel around my bleeding finger.

“Ef, hey—” My eyes are glued to the shattered glass, my hands itching up theitchy and uncomfortable being held still instead of picking it up like I should be doing, *need* to be doing. “Effie, look at me. *Effie*.” His voice is like a sharp crack of a whip, my head jolts up to look at him. “We’ll get it cleaned up. I’ll have someone go pick up some cups. It’s not a big deal, okay?”

“I know that!” I snap but instantly regret it, knowing he was just trying to help. “I know that up here.” I tap my temple. “But it *feels* like a big deal.”

“Remember when you busted into Peaches like you owned the damn place—”

“What does that have to do with anything?” I gawk at him.

“All I mean is—You—” He clenches and unclenches his fists like he wants to shake me. “You told me I had a small cock when I held a knife to your head. Do you know how many men have been in that same position. “Dopissed themselves, crying for their mama? You’re the fucking bravest I know, so why are you freaking out over a goddamn cup?”

He sounds frustrated but genuine, and I just wish it made sense.

“I feel, how I’m spiraling over something that is admittedly stupid. “The thought of survival, Finneas. Do or die. But this...this is just me, and just me in a way.”

He looks truly wounded by my words and shakes his head.

“It’s just—I want everything to be perfect.”

“Who says it has to be perfect?” His question stuns me.

“Uh...I don’t know, everybody?”

“Who’s everybody?” he asks, and I look at him like he has three heads.

“My parents—”

pping a “Aren’t here.” He cups my face between his palms. “You’re p
enough. And all this?” He swipes his arms wide. I open my mouth in
feelingbut he presses a finger to my lips. “They’re only things.” I try to abs
shouldwords and quell the hammering in my chest, but I still feel the anxiet
like the storm.

cleaned “You don’t believe me.” It’s not a question, he’s making a statem
, observation and I nod. I don’t believe him. “Fine.”

ying to He drops his hands and storms out, my heart sinking like lead.

al.” I tentatively poke my head out, and I see Finn taking a pocketknif
in placebed sheets. “*Finn—*”

“They’re just things, Effie.” He cuts into the fabric, then rips a lo
down it. The second set of sheets ruined in as many days. Next, he pic
he justlamp off the nightstand. “Just. Fucking. Things.” He throws it at the w
gun toI gasp as the shade is knocked off and the glass stand shatters.

ion and “Shall I keep going?” he asks, and I’m momentarily paralyzed. It n
personhard to breathe picturing all that broken glass. He stalks toward the
with a testing look.

How I “No, Finn, I get it.” I step in between him and the mirror, hands
nat waschest.

s never “Do you?”

“Yes, they’re just things.” I repeat his words back to him with not n
much conviction, then add, “And I like this mirror...I want to ke
memory of us.” I like the way his eyes light up when I say *us*.

He sits at the foot of the bed and pulls me in between his legs, hold
back of my thighs. “I’m not him, Effie. I’m not your father. You w
ids. punished for being human.” His words make a gnarly knot twist in my

perfectly “Honesty and loyalty are all I want from you. Not some Stepford-wiv
1 retort, okay?”

orb his I swipe my knuckle at the corner of my eye. “Okay.”

y like a “Now, tell me, princess, and be honest.” He looks at me earnestly
nod. “Are those scared tears or those other types of tears like when
ient, anyou the easel?”

I can’t help but bark out a laugh at his preciousness. The smile that
on my face feels warm and right. “They’re the sunflower type of tears.
e to the He sighs and folds forward, resting his forehead on my stomach li
never been more relieved in his life. “*Thank fuck.*”

ng tear

ks up a

all, and



nakes it

mirror

More and more people keep arriving. Okay, only four more, but it fe
on histen when I only vaguely remember who they are from the surveillance
with *Les Arnaqueuses*. Finn helps me set up a fold-out table that he c
of the big house—along with more than enough cups.

early as Cash is helping Lochlan set up a badminton net in the lawn a
eep theunearthed it in “all that old people stuff.” I absolutely can’t picture th
dangerous gangsters on the East Coast playing badminton. I’ll be
ling thewhen I see it.

on’t be I throw an orange, purple, and green tablecloth straight out of the ’8
throat.it. I scoot closer to Finn and whisper, “So, who are all these people?”

es shit, He loops his arms around my lower back, and I mirror him. He p
tight, and it looks like we are just having a cute, couple conversation
two men who just arrived are Roman and Alfie. Roman is the m
/, and I makes sure we don't get ourselves killed, and the twig with him, Alfie
I gavenarrows his eyes in thought. "Honestly, I have no idea how he made
far, but he's loyal as hell."

spreads "Okay, and I recognize Harlow. She was in the news a ton a few
" back."

ke he's "Yeah, she's a real one. She certainly matches Cash's crazy, an
proven she deserves her spot at his side." I nod along, trying to i
someone equally as crazy as Cash and thinking only his brothers comp

"And this is Stella." Finn gestures over my shoulder and I turn, gre
a woman I've seen many times across the street at the Den.

"Hi, thank you for bringing the food." I shake her hand, and she gi
an approving smile.

"Giving her the run down on everyone?" She looks at Finn. When
els like lifts a brow, I'm reminded of how shuttered he is in the public eye an
we did swell of honor that he's shown me so much more the last few days tha
dug out people ever get.

"He probably told you I'm the manager at the Den, but most of t
after he I'm just managing these four numb-nuts and making sure they don't k
ie most other."

lieve it I laugh at the picture she paints and quickly realize she must b
important to the Foxes if she can talk about them like that. "Didn't y
Os over Roman was the person making sure y'all didn't get killed?"

"Yes," Finn says gruffly, then gives me a mischievous smirk. "H
other people from killing us, Stella keeps us from killing *each other*."

ulls me “Exactly, and they’re damn lucky.” Stella gives Finn a nudge
n. “The shoulder and walks away.

an who “He’ll never admit it in this lifetime or the next, but Stella is Cash
...” He friend. She’s family.”

e it this “Best friend?” I bite back a laugh. Men like Cash don’t have *friend*
have associates, acquaintances, mutually beneficial relationships, 1
months friends.

“Like I said, he’ll never admit it, and you didn’t hear it from m
d she’s brushes a piece of hair behind my ear, and his jovial expression s
magines something more serious. My stomach twists for whatever he’s going
are. next. “You’re so fucking beautiful.”

eted by My cheeks warm and my heart skips. Words get twisted on my tong
just rise on my toes to kiss his nose. “I’m going to help get the food pl
ves return away, a smile on my lips.

He grabs my hand as I walk away. “I like when you kiss me there.”
he only I bite my lip to hide the ridiculous grin trying to break free. “Finne
d feel at the romantic,” I tease while leaving.

an most “Tell anyone and I’ll kill ’em,” he shouts after me.

I laugh, and all I can think is *how the hell did we get here?*

he time

ill each

oe very

you say



ie stops Who knew lunch with your family’s biggest enemies and rivals coul
pleasant?

in the Harlow and Stella are lovely and funny, and it feels good to not be the
girl in the room—or outside table.

1's best Alfie has not shut up about the mac and cheese, and why didn't t
macaroni salad instead so that he doesn't "blow up the bathroom
s. TheyWhile on the other hand, Roman hasn't said more than three words.

but not And the Foxes...well, they almost seem like normal brothers. If you
the fact that when someone makes a joke about stabbing the other
ie." Heactually pull out a blade.

hifts to But there's an air of camaraderie and equality that I never see betw
; to saybrothers. Sure, my brothers are close, but there's always the e
competition and the need to prove one is more deserving of the I
ue, so Iname.

ated." I I find it fascinating. Observing them all together, picking up
character quirks. Cash is the clear leader, but he doesn't act like he'
than the other three. Roan is easy to read, wears his emotions on his
as Fox,and is the quickest to get upset. Lochlan, the baby of the group, se
annoy everyone the most, yet makes everyone laugh the most.

Finn is just as quiet and brooding as ever, but there's a lightness to
of his shoulders, a loosening of his jaw. He brushes his hair out of h
and his deep, green eyes lock with mine across the table. I feel a
energy crackle between us and settle in my core. His eyes darken sub
the corner of his mouth ticks like he knows exactly what I'm feeli
eyes drop to my lips while he licks his own and—

"What the fuck did you just say?" His head whips at Lochlan seated
me, and anger twists his features.

d be so Lochlan laughs it off. "I was commending Effie on a great home vid
"You fucking watched it?" Finn growls. He stands and leans acr

he only table, his fingers whiten on the table and his muscles are wound tight to pounce.

hey get “An Oscar-worthy performance.”

” later. Humiliation lands like a fucking bomb in my stomach. I look down at the plate and wish I could evaporate into thin air.

I ignore “That’s my *wife*.” Finn reacts as fast as a viper, grabbing him by the collar, then yanking him out of his chair. His other hand holds a switchblade under Lochlan’s eye. “I should carve your fucking eyes out.”

been my No one else at the table has moved, looking, quite frankly, unbothered while I’m frozen from embarrassment.

Luciano “Chill dude, if it was gonna get your panties in such a twist, you should have left it on the family cloud. Plus, I didn’t think you’d care after you got small shit to half the city.” Another bomb detonates in my stomach. *Half the city is better* Finn’s face flashes from rage to hurt then back so quickly that I miss it. “It wasn’t half the city. It was one fucking person, and I’ll live with the knowledge that I almost killed the one fucking good thing in my life because of it.” He releases his brother with a shove. “Now sit tight until the setdown, and if you ever disrespect my wife again, it won’t matter that it’s your face, my brother.”

zap of The table is quiet as Finn takes his seat. A heavy silence hangs in the room until Alfie clears his throat and all heads turn to him. “Um, weren’t we talking about badminton or something?”

The tension is cut as the table breaks into laughter, but I’m still stumped by the fact that the person sitting next to me has seen me in my most degrading moment. I look up at Finn and he’s already staring at me, apology ricocheting in his eyes.

across the I know he regrets what he did, but that doesn’t mean it didn’t hurt.

Doesn't mean I don't feel violated all over again. As people move
lawn, Finn and I are the only ones left at the table.

"Which parts?" I finally speak. "Which parts of the video did he see
n at my Finn takes a deep breath before responding, "If he watched what
Hudson, then just enough to get the idea."

"How much, Finn?"

"You unzip my pants and the first stroke, then I cut it to you clean
he says it so clinically, devoid of emotion. It hurts him to relive what
othered done. He's no longer pleased with my humiliation or satisfied by t
me.

"You warned me something like this would happen," I say, remem
ou sent his last words as I left the kitchen the day I failed to hack his compu
ty? nods solemnly. "Do you still believe what happened is on me?"

We've been sitting across from each other like colleagues at a meeti
have tonow he gets up and comes to sit in the empty chair next to me. He spin
g in my seat, hands on my thighs between his legs. "Listen to me, Effi
he fuck happened is *not* your fault. We've both hurt each other, double cross
you're other, but you almost getting killed? That's on me and me alone."

I sigh, a relief lifting in my chest because I know I'm not innocent
the air far from it, but hearing Finn acknowledge his role in the damag
e gonna something inside me.

"And I will spend the rest of my life trying to make up for it." He c
wing in cheek and I lean into the warmth of his rough palm. "I'm not a good
grading and I'll never be able to atone for all my sins. But if there's one sin
h in his penance for every fucking day, it's ever putting you in danger."

I let his words sink in and feel the honesty and earnestness behind
happen. When it's clear I don't know what to say in return, he adds, "If you'll l

to the Finneas Fox is not a good man, but he is *my* man. “Okay.”

He fights a small smile, and there’s a hint of hope in his eyes that I’ve
?” seen before. “Okay.”

t I sent It’s almost a relief when the intense moment is broken by Roan shouting
“Go get your fucking shuttle-dick!”

“It’s a shuttlecock, you dumbass,” Lochlan hollers back, and both Finneas and I
ng up,” I break into laughter. The smile on my face feels good and right, and that
at he’s in front of me feels good and right.

laughing “Your brothers are ridiculous.” I laugh.

He shakes his head. “Fucking clowns.”

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Finneas Fox is not a good man, but he is *my* man. “Okay.”

He fights a small smile, and there’s a hint of hope in his eyes that I haven’t seen before. “Okay.”

It’s almost a relief when the intense moment is broken by Roan shouting, “Go get your fucking shuttle-dick!”

“It’s a shuttlecock, you dumbass,” Lochlan hollers back, and both Finn and I break into laughter. The smile on my face feels good and right, and the man in front of me feels good and right.

“Your brothers are ridiculous.” I laugh.

He shakes his head. “Fucking clowns.”

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CHAPTER 18

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CHAPTER 18

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Actions and Consequences

Effie

W*hat are you supposed to say to the man whose son you killed?*
I guess I will find out soon. The car to take us to the church should be arriving any minute. In a way, I'm relieved it's almost time. I've been so anxious about tonight, and running into the governor, that I've been on the verge of throwing up all day.

I'm ready on time, all that's left is for Finn to help me into my dress. It's a gorgeous strapless, form-fitting dress in heavy, emerald satin, with a slit in the back and a large playful bow that covers my entire back. We're in his condo in June Harbor, so I walk down the hallway to his suite for the guest bedroom I've been using to get ready in.

I find him in a walk-in closet easily three times as big as the bathroom. His back is to me, and his white dress shirt is at his elbow. His strong, capped shoulders are bare. He's not even halfway dressed. "Finn can't believe you're not dressed yet," I whine, anxiety coursing through me.

He turns slowly, tongue in cheek and gives me a lazy look up and down. His gaze rakes my skin and my stomach flutters. "That's rich coming from someone in nothing but lingerie."

“I need you to help me with my dress. The car will be here any minute.”
He slowly shrugs his shirt over his shoulders. “You’ll wait for me, but I can wait for us.”

“Why are you being so fucking difficult?” He only replies with a look of coolness. “Jesus Christ, come to my room whenever your *highness* is done making everyone else wait on him.”

I storm back around. My palms sweat and my heart rate increases. ¹

A heavy hand grips the back of my neck and tugs me back. Finn spins around and gets so close our noses nearly touch. “We’ve been playing a sweet game of house lately, but you’re dancing with fire. Do I need to tell you the kind of man I am?”

His eyes darken intensely, and his dominant display is making me feel something other than stress for the first time all day. My heart thumps against my sternum, and I can’t help but push him, riding the high of a small rebellion from the anxiety. “We don’t have time for that either.”

“The moment you became my wife is the moment you stopped letting anyone or anything else dictate your life. The car will wait. The governor will wait. And the governor? He can kiss your fucking feet.”

“That’s not how the world works, Finn.” I bite back. “Point A, I’m not coming to you.” I shove him in the chest. His hands clamp down around mine against my bare chest. I feel his heart pound under my palms.

“You’re right. And as your husband, it’s my responsibility to get you out of your head.”

He whips me around and bends me over the island of drawers in the middle of the closet. My cheek presses against the cool glass top. He leans in, his breath near my ear and his breath sends chills down my spine. “Don’t move an inch.”

The island is taller than my hips, so I’m stretched on my toes to lay

ite.” releases my neck and grabs a tie from the drawer. “Hands.”

the car I bring my arms behind my back, and he ties them with the silky ma

I test the restraint, and the next thing I know a blinding pain is l
a smug across my ass. I gasp, too shocked for words. The sting is so good I in
decide to crave more. He trails a finger up my spine. “I told you not to move
now on, every time you fidget even the slightest bit, you’ll earn another
Do you understand?”

pains me *Fuck me*, I know I should be pissed, but instead my body rai
aying a degree, and my inner thighs slicken.

remind “I understand.” Immediately I want to defy him, move just to spi
And to get his hands back on me, because when he’s touching me, I
ne feel like I can breathe.

against He steps into my line of sight, and I practically drool watching him
eprieve—*painfully so*—button his shirt. I’ve never seen anything hotter than l
Fox getting dressed with his eyes intently on me.

letting One by one, he does each button and covers a bit more of his t
ala will muscles. I’d mourn the opportunity to see the work of art that is his bc
he’s just as striking when so sharply dressed.

married “One,” he says, low and deadly. I didn’t even realize I’d move
e on his burns in my core.

He slowly walks behind me and my entire body lights up in antic
you out He caresses my cheek, still stinging from the last blow. “You look
divine bent over like this.”

in the My pulse races waiting for the strike. His presence behind me is sc
rums in and palpable he might as well have his hands all over me. His palm
h.” down my thigh and then in between my legs. His light touch as he app
flat. He the edges of my panties makes me squirm. “Two.”

“Fuck,” I whisper.

He laughs darkly. “No, princess, I won’t be fucking you. That would be a punishment, now would it?” He drags his fingers over my pussy and I instantly inhale sharply, every muscle in my body struggling not to writhe. “From now on, you’ll enjoy being punished just as much.”

His hands leave me, and I feel cold without him. He grabs cufflinks from a drawer in front of me and begins tediously fastening them. My arches tense and my calves burn from the position. “You can’t go any faster?”

“Three.”

He looks at me. “You never said I couldn’t talk—”

Finally, “*Four.*” I bite my tongue and glare at him, he lifts one brow and smirks. *Arrogant bastard.*

Why do his cufflinks make me want to drop to my knees and undress him? Why do his work clothes he’s just done getting dressed? Why do my insides melt with his touch? Why does he straighten his sleeves, giving each wrist a little tug?

There’s also something about the way his gaze is constantly roaming over my body, but skin, soaking in every inch of my exposed body like a predator stalking its next meal, which heightens all my senses and demands all my attention. Heat could be late to meet the goddamn Queen, and I wouldn’t care less, but all I can think about is the beautiful man in front of me and the delicious anticipation. Moments hanging in the air before he touches me next.

He picks up a bow tie and turns away from me to tie it in a mirror. I lean back in relief and take the brief moment of his back to me to stretch my back.

“Five.” My breath catches in my throat, and I look up to see his hand glide over my shoulder, locked on mine through the reflection. I don’t know how he does it, but he never looks away. He reaches for the cufflinks to finish his task without ever taking his eyes off mine.

The tension and silence gnaw at me. Eagerness and electricity hum in the air.

me. I can't handle it a second longer. "I thought you said I would enjoy this, but you've only bored me. I can't handle it a second longer. "I thought you said I would enjoy this, but you've only bored me."

His lip curls menacingly as he slowly turns. "Then get up, prince. But I taunts. "There's nothing stopping you."

He's right. The restraints on my wrists would do nothing to stop me from standing up and walking right out. But of course, I won't do that. I like the game too much. His eyes glow like embers when I refuse to move. He takes the tux jacket off a hanger and slips it on.

He rounds the island in slow, predatory movements. I sense him behind me, everywhere all at once. He kicks my legs apart and I have to stretch further on my toes to remain flat. His fingers ghost over my clit and down my slit, so lightly it would tickle if it wasn't such an infuriating tease. "Always this wet when you're bored?"

And then his hand is gone, and my body vibrates in his absence. I retreat and my heels sag, inching a touch down the island.

"Six." His voice wraps around me like smoke.

I hear the clinking of glass and the sound of liquid pouring. "I'd of course, he would have a bar in his closet."

He comes to stand behind me, and I feel high with anticipation. I can hear his breath, steady and strong. I can see his hands in my peripheral vision, hovering over my hips. Every cell in my body is in attention, craving what only he can give me.

Finally he touches me.

His hands feel cool against my searing skin. He begins to leisurely touch my panties and I hear him suck in an awed breath. This shaky inhalation through

by this, first time his control cracks, and I'm pleased to see I'm not the only one affected. "How many, princess?"

"Six," he says. "The urge to thrust back into him is powerful, especially when you consider how he might punish me if I do."

"You know why I'm doing this don't you?" He asks, my panties moving and his hands lightly roving up the swell of my ass.

"Yes." I hardly consider his question because somehow I intuitively know the answer. He's doing it for me. It's not just about the tease, but about the care he has for me. He knows how the anxiety of tonight has been eating at me and these tantalizing moments are the only time it's melted away.

"Good. Because I won't be gentle. You may be a princess, but I'm not treating you like my whore." I brace for the spank I'm sure will follow, but instead I feel cold liquid spilling down my ass.

I turn my head the smallest amount to see Finn letting whiskey spill from his mouth onto me. "I'll let you get away with that one." He smiles and kneels behind me. My pussy clenches when I feel his breath flutter over my hot skin. He groans quietly, as if he didn't mean for me to hear. He spreads my cheeks, taking one long, indecent lick from hole to hole, then licks up the whiskey.

He stands and grabs my jaw, twisting my head so he can give me a deep, lascivious kiss. He pulls away and my head spins, my breath comes in gasps. "Doesn't your patience taste sweet?" I moan, savoring the taste of him, the whiskey and my own lust.

And then without any other warning, his fist closes around my bony ass while his other hand comes down hard and sharp. It takes a moment for the burn to settle in, for the heat to spread, and *fuck*, nothing has ever felt so good.

one so Except for the next slap, and the one after that and the one after that
one layers sensations on top of sensations, the pain and pleasure
when I building exponentially. By the time he finishes all six, I'm ready to
more even though my wrists ache under his bruising hold and my
d-thigh nothing but white-hot fire.

I'm breathing so heavily the glass by my face has fogged up and I can
y know my own heartbeat. I'm still coming down when I feel another
out the something wet on my ass. The cool liquid is like sweet honey again
ating a tracing skin. My mind is a haze, not even trying to deduce what is hap
until a finger spreads the coolness between my cheeks.

I'm gonna He's thoughtful and confident in his movements. I never doubt I'll
ow, but whatever he does next. He knows when to push me and when to hold
finger wanders to my back entrance and smooths the gel-like liquid
ill from the hole, pressing softly. I whimper pleurably as his finger break
rks and tight ring. "Tell me to stop, and I will. But I don't think you want me
against you, princess?"

ar, and I suck in full breath and on the exhale, he pushes further, sink
lapping "That's it, good girl," he praises as I relax and welcome him in. I
something uniquely vulnerable but comforting in relinquishing control
a long, this. It makes me feel both scared and cared for.

pletely He continues to lavish me with encouragement and begins to slowly
taste of in and out of my ass. Soon, I become lost in the rhythm, feeling fully
body and in this moment.

id wrist "Fuck, if you keep making those sounds, I'm gonna forget about me
for the and fuck your tight little ass right here." Finn groans and squeezes
hurt so harder. "You like this don't you? Such a filthy little plaything."

"Yes," I breathe on the next moan as he works his finger in a

it. Eachsweeping circular motion inside me. It's mesmerizing and so fucking
re bothfind myself pushing my hips back, eager for more.

beg for "I'm gonna pull out, but stay just like this, okay, princess?" The h
r ass ismy hip slides up my back with a firm pressure and I nod. He wit
slowly and the sensation is just as overwhelming as when he entered.

an hear I hear him move several paces away but then he's back. He opens a
spill ofbox at the side of my head so I can see as he pulls out its contents. I
inst myyou to wear this tonight." He twirls the butt plug so I can see its s
openingshape and the jeweled base. "And every time you feel it, I want

remember what happened here tonight. If you get anxious or overw
ll enjoycome back to this place where nothing matters but me and you." He
me. Hismy hair and searches for understanding in my eyes.

around "Okay." I swallow, oddly touched by the gift.

hes the He circles back behind me and again gently pushes a lubricated fing
: to. Dome. I relax much quicker this time, enjoying the fullness instantly. He

out and next I feel the hard, metal tip of the plug prodding where his
ing in.used to be. I focus on my breathing, relaxing my muscles and putting
There'sweight onto the island.

rol like "Look at you," he says with awe, "my perfect, little wife."

He takes his time fitting the whole thing and once it's fully seated he
y pumpeach dimple in my lower back. He gently pulls my panties back up an
/ in myat the thin fabric against my smarting skin. He unties my wrists, a
hands fall to clutch the edge of the island.

y plans He drags a soothing palm down my back. "Let's get you into that dr
my hip

a wide,

g hot, I

and on

draws



sealed. The car did, in fact, wait for us.

“I want However, it feels like the driver is determined to hit every pothole and
size and other goddamn hump in the road. Each jostle and bump I feel ten-fold
you to sore, full ass. Finn is casually sipping a drink with his arm along the wheel
welcomed, his fingers drumming lightly on the rim. He looks at me from the corner of
strokes his eye every time we hit a bump, but I won’t give him the satisfaction
reaction. I’m sure he’d love to know I can still feel him even when he’s
touching me, but taunting him feels just as gratifying as giving in.

ger into He looks downright wicked in a full tux. His dark hair is swept back
pulls it two small strands have fallen making him look polished but still
s finger around the edges, like he could kill you without getting a speck of blood
; all my his crisp white shirt. My fingers itch to loosen his collar and dust a
teasingly light as he did earlier. I’m getting lost in thoughts of us, and
taken by surprise as the limo turns sharply and I gasp, squirming.

e kisses At the sound, Finn’s head slowly rounds on me, tongue in
d I hiss. “Something bothering you, princess?”

and my “Nope,” I say and sit taller.

He lifts a brow. “Is that so?”

ess.” “Mhmm.” I grind my teeth as the car stutters to a stop at a red light
muscles aching.

He nods thoughtfully, but a devilish glint sparkles in his eye. He looks down without ever taking his assessing gaze off me.

“Seems like I left my wife wanting.” His hand lashes out and grasps my wrist, dragging me quickly and effortlessly across the limousine seat and into his lap. My stomach and hips rest on his legs, my ass facing up. He rests his heavy palm languidly from my ankle to my thigh.

and any “Finn, what are you—”

l on my “I promised not to be gentle, and if you’re still able to sit, I didn’t do
window, His words are rich and goading. He smooths a palm over one of my
corner of and even the light pressure wiggles the plug and rubs at the ache.
on of a didn’t do it, maybe we should try for ten.”

ie’s not He raises his hand and my heart pounds deliriously. “Wait—wait, Finn.”

“What’s that, little wife?”

ick, but I turn over in his lap and sit up, settling myself between his knee
l rough my legs hang over one side of his. “Every bump in the road, every
load on move, I feel you.” He looks down his nose at me and I trail a finger down
kiss as cheek, and I feel his jaw clench under my touch. “Thank you.”

nd I’m His lip twitches, and I can see pride soften his eyes. His arms encircle
waist, and he plants a soft kiss behind my ear and whispers, “You did so
cheek. princess. I’m so proud of you.” I fucking *melt*. “I can’t wait to reward you.”

ght, my Our driver pulls into the queue of cars at the hotel hosting the gala. At
least this one is for a deserving cause and not to raise money for rich people
to get a new golf course. Seeing the cameras flash up ahead sends me
back to the last time I was at a gala. The scene will play out eerily
except this time, I will be walking in with Finn on my arm instead of F

Finn must notice my accelerated breathing the closer we inch in line. He
places a weighty palm on my chest and reminds me to breathe. We are

sets his face to the front when he says, "One last thing..." He pulls out a small black box and tells me to breathe, which is pointless because the emerald ring inside is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. "Can't let you go in there without everyone knowing exactly who you belong to."

slides a "Jesus Christ, Finn, that's the biggest rock I've ever seen."

He slips it on to my finger, a pleased smile playing on his lips. "Guys are bigger and better than him in two departments." "Guys are bigger and better than him in two departments." The joke, as ill-formed as it is, makes me laugh and helps chase away some of my nerves. I look down at the new ring on my finger and laugh. "If I had bought that last one myself."

"I know," he says smugly.

"No, you didn't."

"Spiteful, stubborn and rich enough to pull it off." He gives me a wide smile. "Though, I may not have thought of it if you hadn't given me the ring." I look at him confused, and he parrots my words back to me, "You bought this for myself just to convince you I'm engaged?"

"Oh." I bite my cheek.

"It doesn't matter, that ring was never meant to be on your hand so well, this..." He holds up my hand and takes in the sparkling emerald. "—you." "It also looks great wrapped around my cock."

"*Finneas Fox.*" I slap him in the chest.

He looks proud when he says, "Did I not say that's where this straight belongs no matter whose ring is on it?"

The car stops and seconds later our door opens, I shoot Finn a testy look. "If you mention anything about your cock near my father, I will save you." He holds up a rusty blade. "Do you hear me?"

He gives me a wolfish grin. "Loud and clear, darling," he says.

ck box, accepting a challenge not a threat.

le is the “I’m serious, Finn.” I hiss through a smile as he helps me out of the
without He places my hand in the crook of his elbow and we begin to glide
the red carpet. “As am I.”

ess I’m

e away

ugh. “I



The ballroom at the Ritz has been transformed into a luxury casino
off the sea cliffs of Monte Carlo. Everything is dripping in gold and
: a wry and I’m reminded how little these events have to do with the actual
e idea.” and everything to do with the who’s who of June Harbor. We are some
think I youngest people here, but that doesn’t surprise me. We’re only here
request of my father anyway.

Speaking of Satan himself, I spot him across the room, and he us
nd. But over, his smile as wide as it is fake. I can feel Finn tense as we approach
–would I’m starting to wish there were metal detectors at the door because
pulling out a gun at a charity gala feels completely on brand.

“You’ll be fine,” I whisper and give his arm a squeeze.

is hand “I’m not worried for myself, princess,” he says, his voice low and le

“Euphemia, my dear,” my mother squawks and flings her arms around
g stare. “I feel like I haven’t seen my baby in forever.” I try to loosen it
w it off embrace, but I feel like I’m in the jaws of a lion. She finally releases
turns gushing to Finn. “And my goodness, Finneas, is that really y

’s as if

grown up.” She grasps his cheek, and now I’m not only worried about my father getting shot but my mother too.

“And wow, look at all those tattoos,” she says with mock astonishment as she takes in the ink sprawling out of his neckline and sleeves. My mother is happy to pretend my brothers don’t have any tattoos as long as she can’t see them.

But to my surprise, Finn turns on a dazzling, panty-melting smile at Luciano, you haven’t aged a day in ten years. I see where my wife gets her beauty.” He gives me a warm smile, but it radiates with the same type of confidence I imagine hell has.

“Yes, how is married life treating you two...” My father pauses to look at me, up and down with taunting amusement in his eyes, “...lovebirds?” I roll my hand balling into a tight fist. *Lovebirds?* He knows exactly how the marriage came to be. Why pretend when we all know the truth.

“Little Ef!” I turn at the nickname only two people call me. “Look at you, all grown up and married, huh?” Renzo strolls up to us with a cocky grin, a drink in hand.

“I didn’t know you were back?” It shouldn’t matter but for some reason Finn’s brother’s surprise return has me feeling off balance. “Is G here too?”

I don’t get a response. Instead he turns to Finn and offers a terse, “Finn.” Finn’s calm composure gives me an anchor. If anyone were freaked out by this bombardment of Lucianos, it’s him. I watch my father’s eyes narrow, scrutinizing the interaction. An unexpected smile comes to her pride wells, seeing Finn so confidently holding his own. Not that I’m surprised.

Two hands land on my shoulders from behind. “Baby sis, look at you, grown up.”

out my I turn with a sneer to face Gianni. “Did you two rehearse that fucki
or something?”

ment as “Euphemia, *language*,” my mother chides. Being treated like a
other ischild makes my anxiety rise.

an’t see “Please excuse us while we find our seats.” Finn’s steading palm fi
small of my back, and he pulls me into his side.

. “Mrs. “You’re at our table, son,” my father says, and Finn’s jaw
gets herremember the last time my father called him son and his eyes have th
of heatmurderous energy as they did then.

Christ, this is going to be a bloodbath.

look us

cringe,

ow this

1. Love Is a Bitch—Two Feet |

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I turn with a sneer to face Gianni. “Did you two rehearse that fucking line or something?”

“Euphemia, *language*,” my mother chides. Being treated like a fucking child makes my anxiety rise.

“Please excuse us while we find our seats.” Finn’s steading palm finds the small of my back, and he pulls me into his side.

“You’re at our table, son,” my father says, and Finn’s jaw ticks. I remember the last time my father called him son and his eyes have the same murderous energy as they did then.

Christ, this is going to be a bloodbath.

1. Love Is a Bitch—Two Feet |

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CHAPTER 19

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CHAPTER 19

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Amongst the Stars

Finn

Amazingly, I make it through dinner without plunging a fork into the hands of the Luciano brothers. I've been determined to keep my burning desire to slit everyone's throat, if only to avoid making it worse for Effie. Though, I'm starting to think she might thank me if I seem more uncomfortable around her own family than mine, and that's something when she had a full-blown panic attack over fucking cups.

I can't help the territorial hand I keep on her leg the entire time, tapping a soothing rhythm to remind her I'm right here and I'm not leaving.

Except to maybe piss because I've held it all dinner and things are urgent. When the final speaker for the night ends, he welcomes the guests to the dance floor and her father asks Effie to dance. I grip her thigh tight and she gives my hand a small, reassuring tap and stands.

I figure this is my chance. I excuse myself from the table and make my way to the restroom. The lively chatter of the evening and music fills the room, and stepping into the hallway is a relief to the senses. It's quieter, which means I instantly notice when the ballroom door opens.

I spin as casually as I can while also sticking my hand in the pocket to pull out my switchblade. Sure, it could be any number of guests innocently following me behind me. But I've seen too much shit to believe in coincidence. The fact that someone entering the quiet, empty hallway at the same time as me isn't

"Governor," I step toward him. I see him flinch minutely, but he quickly recovers.

"You won't get away with this, Fox. I *will* find him."

"Find who exactly?" There's nothing but dryness in my tone, not even a hint of sympathy.

"Just tell me, is he dead or alive?" he orders, as if he has any fucking authority to make demands of me.

"In case you're losing your hearing, I'll say it again: I don't know who you're talking about. Now, I suggest you go right back through that door and enjoy your night." I give him a pointed nod and walk away.

"You have no idea the enemy you've made, boy." His voice shakes with anger.

I turn slowly, straightening my lapels. "What did you hope to accomplish with this little hallway ambush? To intimidate me, threaten me? Because you obviously know who I am and that *this*," I wave a bored hand, "won't stop me."

"I won't stop until I find him." He glowers, and I meet his stare eye for eye.

"I sure hope you find whoever you're looking for. Good evening, Governor."

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again.

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When I return, it doesn't take me long to pick Effie out of the crowd down right show-stopping in that sinful emerald dress. I weave through the dance floor of people toward her and her father. They lock in tense conversation, her forehead is fretted and her eyes are down. I take all the control I have to not storm up and rip her away from him, her over my shoulder and take her far away, somewhere we can be two of us.

They don't see me coming and I hear the tail end of their conversation. "I don't want excuses. I want results."

"It's taking longer than I thought, but I'm trying, Papa."

Their hushed and suspicious tones make my stomach turn to lead. I tell myself not to over analyze their out of context words. *I trust Effie*, I tell myself. Before I have too long to question what evidence she's given me, she spots me and waves, relief clear on her face.

I instantly warm from the smile that tugs on her lips, the creases around her eyes, her brow melting away upon seeing me.

"I'd like to steal my wife for a dance."

"Of course." He inspects me as if searching for signs of tension that will tell him whether or not I heard their conversation.

Effie accepts my hand and I pull her into me. I like the way she settles soon as she's firmly in my arms. "I thought you don't dance?"

“I never said that.”

She narrows her eyes at me, and my chest expands just having her ; me, my bow tie suddenly suffocating. “You had a fit last time I tried you to dance.”

“I dance now.” To prove my point and that my lessons with Stella, she’s paid off, I swing Effie out and then reel her back in, wrapping my way around her and dipping her low. It’s smooth and graceful and just a bit to the man she deserves.

But as I pull her back up, I give her plump ass a squeeze, and she gicasts. It a mix of arousal and pain. She tries to cover it by asking a question. “l, throw changed?”

“You.” I brush a chaste kiss across her pinkening cheeks and whistion. “I her ear, “Tell me, princess. Are you blushing from this dance or be just reminded you who owns that perfect ass?”

She gives me a coy smile and looks up at me through her lashes, l. I tell one brow as if to say *wouldn't you like to know*. So I grab a handful of remind again and she blushes even brighter and buries her face in my chest n me to me all the answer I need.

I laugh into the top of her hair, and she only comes back out of ; in her flaming cheeks have cooled. “I haven’t seen the governor yet, ma didn’t come?” There’s an excitement in her voice that makes me want just to keep her smiling. *Honesty and loyalty*.

“I ran into him in the hallway.”

Her face blanches. “Did he say anything?”

“Only idle threats from a limp dick old man.”

“He knows, doesn’t he?” Panic leaks into her voice and her eighs as around the room nervously.

I wrap my hand more tightly around hers and hold it to my cheek. He doesn't know anything. But more importantly, he can't *prove* anything. His brows pinch together, and I want to kiss the tension away, but I know it won't help.

la have “How many people do you think I've killed?”

ly arms “*What?*” Her attention whips back to me, eyes scrutinizing.

t closer “Well, if I started when I was fifteen and average *at least* one per —”

gasps in “Finn, where the fuck are you going with this?” she whisper-ye. What's internally I am celebrating that she now looks infuriated rather than fo-

“If we're being conservative, that's more or less a hundred and fifty isper in—”

cause I “*Finn,*” she hisses again, and I take her by surprise with a spin un arm.

arching “As I was saying, it's not a small number. Do you know how man her ass I've been convicted for murder? Or even arrested?”

: giving “I don't know,” she says stubbornly, still peering around neighboring dancers.

nce her “Oh, come on, take a guess.”

aybe he “Jesus, Finn, I don't know...ten?”

it to lie “Zero.”

She stops in her tracks. “Zero?”

“I've never even been brought in for questioning about a mu disappearance.”

She nibbles on her lip. “You're really that good?”

yes flit I chuckle. “Baby, I'm the best.”

“Whatever.” She rolls her eyes. “Dance with me.”

st. “He
g.” Her
ow that



month The later into the evening we get, the more into the drink Effie gets. S
her third martini and I am quickly realizing she is a lusty drunk. She’s
lls, and control of her senses, only a touch past tipsy, but her eyes as well
florn. hands keep roaming.

people My blood is on fucking fire with every graze of her fingertips aga
thigh or up my arm. My jaw aches from clenching it so tight in restrai
der my makes it look like they are accidental touches but the heady look in h
after is a dead giveaway.

y times We’re seated at the table, just the two of us. The rest of her fa
mingling while everyone waits for the auction to begin. This particula
at our infamous for being a battle of the riches. People drop obscene amo
money on things not nearly worth it, just to be seen doing it. It’s a
million-dollar dick swinging contest.

She idly plays with poker chips left on the table from a previou
while I drum on the rim of my drink. Her eyes catch on the movemen
have nice hands.”

order or “Thank you?” I cock a brow at her.

“They would look good around my throat,” she says hushed over h
as she takes another sip.

“Jesus Christ, Ef...” I breathe.

“You’ve told me plenty of times where my hands would look good just returning the sentiment.” Her pink tongue darts out and wets her lips as she gazes up at me. “Do you not agree?”

“I—”

“She totally got a boob job,” Renzo plops down across from me.

“No, she’s always had massive tits,” says Gianni as he also sits.

“Who are you talking about?” Effie asks her brothers.

“Marcella DeGrossi,” they answer at the same time.

She leans back in her chair and smirks. “You’re both wrong.”

“No, I’m not—”

“How do you know—” *Are these fuckers capable of speaking out of their asses?*

“She’s pregnant. And I know you both have fucked her...” She wiggles her eyebrows and both brothers’ jaws fall open. They exchange curiously amused glances, and then Effie bursts out in laughter. “Jesus, you two are one fucking gullible.”

The three of them heckle back and forth, and I tune them out, multi-tasking—watching the light in Effie’s face, the brightness of her smile. Being witness to her like this, without the weight of stress or fear, is a fucking game. Their debate on Miss DeGrossi’s boobs is cut short when the auctioneer announces the start of the auction. Numbered paddles are distributed with a pamphlet on the night’s items. ¹Effie twirls the toothpick from her olives between her teeth, giving me a look that sends blood straight to my cock. She proceeds to wrap her lips around an olive and pull it off with her teeth. Then has the audacity to pretend she has no idea what she’s doing and looks at me innocently, mouthing, “*What?*”

The auction begins, and I’m having trouble focusing on anything.

od. I'm than the rise and fall of her chest against the brilliant green of her
r lip as Tension crackles between us like we are both waiting for the other to
I'm finely attuned to each subtle shift of her seat or tightening of her l
tell me she is still feeling my gift. I could watch her all fucking night a
find things that mesmerize me.

Strands of her neatly styled hair have fallen loose, and I idly tw
around my finger. I brush my thumb across the tiny scars by her eye
blinks at me, her eyes rich and moody like whiskey. I bracket m
around the back of her neck and tug her to me, kissing the scars and br
into her flushed skin. "I can't believe you're my wife."

ne at a Her hand drops to my thigh and ghosts over my groin, she looks up
with a pouty bottom lip and hooded eyes. "To do with as you please...
gles her I shudder, my skin becoming electrified and my hunger for her c
us and me.

o are so A laugh flutters out of her lips and she tries to scoot away, but I k
locked at my side, hand grasping her thigh. She gets a wicked glint in
instead like she's about to come back with some smartass comment but th
able to auctioneer announces some random French name and Effie nearly juri
gift. of her damn seat.

he MC "Oh my god," she says awestruck as helpers bring out an impre
d along painting on a canvas the size of a twin bed. I have no idea who the a
om her and quite frankly, don't care. All I care about is her reaction to it.

t to my "We will start the bidding at a half million—"

with her "Six hundred!" Someone calls out immediately.

doing, Effie's eyes ping-pong around the room as a bidding war quickly
the price up to five million. Soon it's down to the governor and on
g otherman.

r dress. “You want it?” I ask, and her head snaps to me.

o strike. “It’s too much, no way.” She shakes her head and fidgets with her d
ips that “Five point one—do I hear five point one—” The auctioneer pratt
and still the man battling the governor sits down defeated. “Five point one goi
going—”

rist one “Do you want it?”

ye. She “Fin—”

y hand I stare into her eyes while I raise my paddle. “Five, three.”

eathing Effie bounces in her seat and latches onto me giddy. Her petite han
around my forearm draped over her leg while the governor glares at n
p at me across the room. My lip curls into a smirk.

” The bid climbs to five and a half million and I lazily raise my padd
laws attack a leisurely, warming sip of my whiskey. “Five.” I say under my
for only Effie to hear.

eeep her Another bid, another raise. “Four.”

her eye Another bid, another raise. “Three.”

hen the “What are you counting down to?” She whispers excitedly.

nps out “Until we win.”

She rakes her teeth over her bottom lip. “We?”

ssionist “You, the painting. Me, the pleasure of my wife sitting on my
rtist is, gratitude.” Her mouth hangs open, and I can’t help but brush my
across her bottom lip.

“We *can*’t—”

“You can’t deny me what’s mine, princess. You should know by no
r drives always get what I want.” I’m barely paying attention to the auction,
ie other my paddle while my eyes are fixed on the increased pace of her breath
blushing cheeks.

I only know we've won because Effie starts jumping up and cheering, and when I look at the governor he is angrier than he was a week and a half ago. I stand, as the room claps, I'm sure this was the highest big night since the evening. I grab her by the hips and tug her in front of me, my cock celebrating our victory.

She feels my erection against her back and taunts over her shoulder, "Luck, getting that anywhere near me in this dress."

She's right, her dress would certainly prevent anything I have in mind. Luckily, with our table in the corner, our backs face a wall. I reach for my switchblade and hold it to the slit at the back of her dress.

"*Finneas.*" She gapes, looking behind her. "Jesus, control yourself." I graze my teeth along her ear. "I lost control around you a long time ago." Then I'm cutting the dress straight up to the small of her back. My hammer the more I reveal of her perfect body and the need to sink inside her is dizzying.

I sit, pulling her down onto my lap and she gasps, no doubt because her toy being jostled. "Hips up, princess." My breath on the back of her neck makes her shiver, and I want to lick away the goosebumps.

She rises a few inches but never enough that the billowing sides of her dress don't keep her covered. I swiftly undo my pants and cut her pants with my thumb. I see the jewel in her ass and my heart feels like it's going to beat out of my chest. Knowing that everyone can see the emerald on her finger, but only one who gets to see this one makes me impossibly harder.

Now that I have her hips all the way back at the same time I take my dick out and raise her up with the tip. Her fingers grip the table as she lowers herself coming and deep groan threatening to spill from me.

"*Fuck, you're so tight.*" Her pussy clenches around me as she takes

l down the hilt, the toy in her ass making everything narrower.

s in the “Oh my god,” she gasps, and her hands twist into the black tablecloth of these...much.” There’s an intrigued and excited tinge to her voice as she already relaxes back a little.

“Look at you, such a good fucking girl, taking my cock with you.”
“Goodfilled. My princess and my *plaything*.” I nuzzle into the back of her neck, nipping the skin, fighting the urge to sink my teeth deeper. “You’re a good girl. As fucking good.”

I whip her around. *Christ, too good.* It’s taking everything I have not to thrust up into her wet cunt like it’s the only place I’m ever meant to be.

’ “God, Finn, I’m so full.” She wiggles a little in my lap, and I bite her neck. “I could come just like this.”

my chest “Gonna come for me in a room full of people? Naughty wife.” I press myself against her neck.

“Still got money in the bank after that for a game of poker?” Gianni breaks off from the conversation with his brother. They both turn to look at me. Effie’s back goes rigid. I give her hip a reassuring squeeze.

I brush off his dig and start stacking my chips together as an answer to her wiping their asses in Blackjack earlier in the night, I’m surprised they’re still coming back for more. “Hold ’em?”

t of my “You’re on,” Renzo says, shuffling the cards with ease and dealing them. I’m the first hand.

Poker is technically a game of luck, but I have a feeling my princess is going to lose tonight. “Good luck,” I say and press a quick kiss to her cheek.

down, as I keep one hand on Effie the whole time, drumming on her hip. Anytime she may have had dissipates and she’s left with the glowing thrill of the secret. I smile to and our illicit secret.

As we play several hands, I notice how her hands ball into fists on the table. “It’s and I find it amusing how she seems to be more emotionally invested in the game than anyone else playing. Her sweet face scrunches up in frustration anytime one of her brothers wins a hand and takes a portion of her winnings. I give her a small punch of my hips, disguised as repositioning in my chair, and she gasps, any traces of irritation melting away. She shoots wide eyes at me, but I look straight ahead, my tongue tracing my bottom lip. Her expression morphs into a cocky grin, as if to say *challenge accepted*.

Her luck seems to change after that as she plays the next hand. Renzo and Effie glance at her holding cards. I peek over her shoulder and see she’s back holding pocket aces. As I glance at her, I notice she’s trying to hide a smile. I think she’s going to slow play it as she calls the bluff bet Gianna makes. Her breathe obviously made. “Pot’s right” Renzo says, and as the turn card comes, she reveals her third ace and know she’s won. Everyone lays down their hands and Renzo says, claps and reaches forward to scoop the pot. Her pussy slides up and down my shaft as she clutches the chips to her chest, and it forces me to grind my teeth together to avoid groaning out loud.

After that, when it starts to feel like every inch of my skin is on fire, I dig my fingers into her hips, stilling her, and growl in her ear, “Princess, I swear to you don’t stop bouncing on my cock, I’m going to bend you over the table and let everyone hear how you sound when you get *truly* fucked by your husband.” She sharply inhales and presses her lips closed, a guilty but won’t-mischievous look on her face. “Unless that’s what you want?”

She looks over her shoulder at me and worries her lip through her teeth. Nervous she shakes her head but the love-drunk look in her eyes says otherwise. “Let’s finish this game and then I’ll take you somewhere I can give you everything you’re craving.”

he table Renzo deals the last hand. Effie grabs her cards, peeks at what she h
l in thisfans the cards out in front of her perfect pink lips. As the flop come
strationlow and hushed, “By the end of the night those pretty lips will be w
nings. around my cock.” Her pussy flutters at my words, and I breathe, strair
ny seatchest tightening.

eyes at Once the rounds of betting have occurred and the turn comes, she e
ler facecheers, takes the remainder of the chips, and her brothers groan in defe
twists in my lap and grabs me by the face for a kiss that knocks all the
o dealsof me. This singular public display of affection is the first time that I’
e she’sfelt like I truly belong to her—not even my cock inside her or the
smirk. Iher finger has made me feel this way.

mi just She’s always been mine, but now I’m hers, too.

s, I see

id Effie

own my

ry teeth



fingers

God ifHer laughter is bright and fills me with warmth as we run up the stairw
is tablehand in mine. My tux jacket is slung over her shoulders to co
y your*modifications* I made to her dress. I push open the heavy metal door at
lty butand drag her onto the hotel roof with me. The air is cold and sharp.

hundred dollars to the security guard, and we have the rooftop por
r teeth,that’s closed for renovations all to ourselves.

erwise. Effie drops my hand and wanders ahead of me, neck craning to tak
ve youcanvas of stars above us. She faces me with a heated look, and I stalk

her, ready to burn. She walks backward, a devilish smile playing on l

was, and as she drops my jacket off her shoulders. She hits the railing and leans, I say into it, impatience and lust radiating from her. I stop a foot away from wrapped draping over her body with my gaze. She tilts her head and assesses needed, my back.

Our stares latch, and I feel the universe looking back at me. Getting rupts in her eyes is so easy, and I never want to be found. I undo my pants and eat. She my cock out. “Lift your dress.”²

air out Keeping my gaze locked on hers, I drop my hand to her bare ve ever Tracing my fingers over her swollen clit, she moans, and the sound hanging on down to my very bones.

I drag my fingers lower and slip them into her. Her mouth falls open can't help but bite her lip, swallowing the sweet sounds spilling out drinking them down as if I can consume her soul through them.

She reaches between us and strokes my cock. “If you don't fuck way you've been threatening to all night, I'm gonna lose my goddamn Finneas.”

I clutch her chin and kiss and suck under her jaw. “And which way princess?”

ell, her “Like you're trying to ruin me.” *Fuck.*

ver the I hike her leg around my hip, and she positions me at her entrance as the top my two fingers coated in her arousal between her teeth. I slam into A few thought I already ruined you,” I grunt as I withdraw and thrust bold deeper, harder. I slip my fingers from her mouth and collar her throat

“You did. But the only time I feel whole is when you're break e in the part.” Her nails dig into my shoulders, and I give her everything I toward pour my fucking soul into each thrust, give her my heart with every p her lips

ns backmy hips as if through her, I can claw my way to salvation and out
om her,darkness before I bring her down with me.

ne right “*God, Finn,*” she mewls, “You feel amazing.”

My abs constrict and pressure builds in my balls. “Do you want
; lost income in your cunt or your ass, princess? Because I’ll be having both to
nd take “Stop asking me questions and just take me how you want,” she par

I recognize the heady need in her eyes. She wants to just let go, ;
pussy.control and forget about everything but the pleasure I’m giving h
eats mesubmission I’m demanding of her.

And I’d rip my own heart out before I deny her that.

n and I “Fucking you is a gift, calling you mine is an honor.” I stroke her c
of her,I lower her leg and whisper against her lips, “Now get on your knees.”

I step back, gliding out of her and giving her space to kneel in front
me theShe looks up at me, doe-eyed and supplicant. I tilt her chin up. “Go
n mind,princess. Clean up the mess you made.”

Her eyes darken and her tongue flicks out to lick her lips. She sli
is that,palms up my thighs and licks me from hilt to head. “Eyes on me. Yo
away, and you don’t get to come.”

She desperately latches onto my gaze and my chest expands, fillin
s I pushthe purest form of greed. She languidly drags her hot tongue up and
her. “Iswirling around my piercing and making pleasure wind like a tig
ack in,around my spine. “Put your lips on it.”

Obeying like a fallen angel, she wraps her pretty lips around my co
ing mebobs tentatively past the tip. “Now choke on it.”

have. I I scrutinize every subtle message she subconsciously sends me w
unch ofbody. Her eyes widen in excitement with a hint of fear. Her thighs s
together, and her breathing deepens. She sinks her mouth further do

of thecock, and she feels like fucking heaven itself. “That’s a good girl. way.” I encourage her, my fingers only lightly wrapping around her love your fire. Christ, it makes me wanna burn alive. But your submit me toThere’s nothing sweeter.”

might.” I hit the back of her throat and it constricts around me as she gasps, and“*Fuuck.*” Even as her eyes well with tears, she doesn’t break eye contact give up“Do you like tasting yourself on your husband’s cock?” She bobs her head, theyes, and I wipe a fallen tear with my thumb.

“Play with the toy.” She reaches behind herself and moans, vibrations shooting down my length and my whole body tenses to hold her cheek asmy climax. I pull her off me. “In my jacket pocket, there’s a small bottle get it.”

of me. When she stands, I sweep her against me and kiss her long and hard ahead,pull about, both gasping for air. “And then, I’m gonna take that sweet don’t care if you have to work for it, you’re going to love every fuckides herI give you.” She swallows hungrily and then scampers away.

ou look Mere seconds later, she’s back and hands me the small bottle of lube. I sets it in my palm. Then she turns around and grabs the railing. The jolt of my base glints, and my handprints turning light purple on her ass are a wonderful down,art. She pushes her hips back as I spread lube up and down my shaft. I give it a small wiggle. She whimpers, and it makes a dark part of my neck andup.

I gently begin to pull it out. “Has another man ever had you like this with herstop myself, “Doesn’t matter, I’m erasing all those memories tonight.” I squeeze She hisses as I pull it all the way out. I apply more lube to her own mynudge the tight hole with my tip. “Say sunflower if it’s too much. Other

All that, don't make a sound until I give you permission. Nod the hair. "Understand."

permission? She bobs her head and I stroke her back, encouraging her to relax. I slowly push my hips further. "*Fuck, so good—*" A groan engulfs my ears. Her tight ass feeling like a hit of the strongest drug. I want to be gentle with her contact. But fuck, the feel of her, the sight of her, shimmering emerald dress, her hair played at her sides, it's driving me insane. I close my eyes and drop to a slow rhythm of my index finger tapping a beat while my other fingers' grip sends bruising.

Her head drops forward and bites her wrist, and I realize I've picked up the pace and force, fucking her with strong and powerful thrusts. I brush her loose hair out of her face. "I tried to be gentle, but you make me hard. We crazy. Taking my cock like this, every inch without a sound.

"You've been so good, princess. It's time for your reward." I slide my hand to her front and find her clit. Her teeth dig into her skin deeper, her brows pinch together when I stroke her clit, my fingers slick with her own juices. "*Christ, you look so beautiful like this. Amongst the jewels with my cock buried deep inside your ass, covered with my handprint.*" She grinds into my hand and her body tenses around me, strained. I squirt coming from her. "It's hard to hold back, isn't it? Hard to stay quiet with the plug. You want to do is fuck me until you're screaming and crying my name." She looks at me, a crease tugging between her brows, teeth digging into her lip and desperately nods her head.

"Then do it, princess. Fuck yourself on my cock." I give her an approving smirk I know will make her mad. "I won't tell anyone how much you like your pretty ass fucked."

Her first sounds are pained moans like she'd been close to death.

at you them back. She begins to pump her hips back, eagerly taking every
my dick. “Oh god,” she cries into the night. “Oh, god, Finn. Keep
ax as I with my clit. I’m gonna come. *F—f—fuck!*”

words. “That’s it, princess,” I groan, her tight ass stripping my cock,
le, I do. pleasure build and build. “Scream. Moan. Cry. I don’t care as long
cut and remember it’s your husband making you feel this good.”

into the “Finger my pussy,” she begs, and I shift my hand to plunge two fir
ip turn her dripping cunt and circle her clit with my thumb. *Fuck*, through her
I can feel my fingers drag against my piercing with every stroke.

oked up “*Yes—Jesus—Oh god!*” Each nonsensical word she spews is like k
ush her on a fire, igniting the monster inside me that wants nothing more than
fucking her shatter.

“Give it to me, Effie. Come for me, my perfect plaything—” I thr
ide my her, pouring every good and kind part of me into her. Gifting them to
and her she can keep them safe. After all, maybe she’s the only good part of m
ibe and “*Finn, fuck—*” She cries as her body shakes and her pussy squees
ie stars fingers, her clit throbbing. Even her ass clenches down hard arou
” pulling my release from me. I spill into her with a rumbly groan.

sounds I carefully and gently pull out of her, taking a handkerchief c
when all cleaning up my cum spilling out of her. She sighs softly and cor
e?” She blissed out and beautiful. I envelop her in my arms, holding her back
into her my chest, and release a sigh of my own.

“I wish I could live in this moment forever,” she says, sinking back
rrogant me.

ou like “Then forever it is, princess. You and me, *forever.*”

holding

inch of 1. Insane—Post Malone |
playing 2. Love is a Bitch—Two Feet |

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1. Insane—Post Malone |
2. Love is a Bitch—Two Feet |

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CHAPTER 20

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CHAPTER 20

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Juicy Tracksuits and Star Wars DVDs

Effie

We spent another night in the city after the gala but then came Bartlett Farms. While I know we are technically here for safe starting to become much more than just a hide out. Before moving Les Arnaqueuses, I stayed with my parents. I wasn't permitted to live own for "security" purposes, and I certainly wasn't allowed to live w boyfriend before marriage.

For years on end, I was never able to fully let my guard down. I alw like I was walking on eggshells, waiting for the next shoe to drop. exhausting, chipped away at everything that made me, *me*. Things th has embraced and even encouraged—like this sweet little painting set at right now.

There's something comforting about knowing that anyone who w reach me has to drive over an hour to get here, and I can guarantee no my family cares enough about me to do that. I like the simplicity of t apartment too. There's nothing fake, unlike the home I was raised in, no need for something garish to distract from an ugly core.

It's been four days since the gala, and the conversation with my father has been weighing on me. The stress has been getting to me, so I've been painting my life away. I need to reach out to Linnie again soon and discuss our next moves.

I nibble on the end of my paint brush in thought. I get a swooping feeling in my stomach like I'm going to be sick. There's so much on the line and so many things that can go wrong. And last time things went wrong, it nearly killed me.

But falling for Finneas Fox? That was certainly never part of the plan. It makes it even more crucial that things are executed sooner rather than later. The further things go with Finn, the greater the potential for hurt.

I peer out the window and my chest squeezes seeing Finn working on the truck. He's messing with something on the engine, his forearm pressed against the propped open hood. Since we got back from the city, he's been working on it nearly all day every day. It tugs on my heart strings to see him back at it after so many years.

He steps back, wiping his grease covered hands on a rag. I look down at my own hands, covered in paint, and in some way I can't explain... it feels like healing.

When I look back up he's waving at me and I go over the window, opening it open. "I have to run to the auto shop for a part, shouldn't be long, maybe twenty minutes. You good?"

"Yep, see you soon."

"Okay," he smiles softly and heads to his operable car. I go back to the stool and listen to the engine rev and drive off.

It feels like mere seconds have passed when I hear the sound of crunching gravel again. I pop my head out the window, "What did you forget—"

her has My heart slams into my sternum when I see my father's car creeping
e been the drive.

nap out

feeling

and so

, I was



lan and **Finn**

in later.

I'm probably driving faster than I should on these winding country
but I'm chomping at the bit to flush out the last few corroded lines. Le
; on his truck in a barn for a decade tends to leave things eroded and rusted
leaning I'm right, this should be the last obstacle to getting her started
's been running. I can't wait to hear that rumbly groan of her engine again.
see him

I zoom past a whir of yellow. Realizing, it's the patch of sunfl
passed last week, I pull a quick U-turn. I get out of the car and cut dow
lown at big flowers, being extra careful setting them in the passenger seat whe
.it feels won't get ruined like last time. But just in case, that's why I got three.

I speed over the gravel drive and whip behind the big house, slam
pulling the brakes and skidding when another car is in my usual spot.
ger than

My pulse dive bombs, and my heart nearly stutters to a stop. *Fear.*
what floods my veins. A rare and disturbing emotion that propels me
my seat and has me sprinting to the barn. I know whoever I find won
k to my friendly. No one would come without a heads up unless they wanted
inching shot on arrival.

g down I draw my gun before throwing open the door. The scene before
enough to make my stomach churn. Some burly fucker I recognize,
name I can't remember in my fear, has Effie's hands held behind her
her father plows a fist into her stomach. Her legs lift off the floor, and
air is pushed out of her lungs in a pained groan. At the sound of my er
Luciano spins around, stepping aside and her head is hung limply, giv
a straight shot.

Blood sprays as the bullet enters and exits the burly fucker's head
collapses without his hold, and I fight the instinct to run to her, turn
gun on Luciano. His hand is reaching behind him, and I growl, "Drop
won't hesitate to put a bullet between your eyes too."

He plucks his piece from his waistband, dangling it with his hands
as he sets it on the ground, kicking it over to me. I pick it up and sti
my pants. My blood is pumping and my hand shakes trying to con
trigger finger because every ounce of me is screaming to kill the m
hurt my wife.

"Finn." Her voice is the softest velvet as she places a hand on my a
lowers my gun. Air struggles to leave my lungs as I can barely cont
rage—rage doesn't feel like nearly a strong enough word.

"Get the duct tape out of the top drawer, Effie." My eyes never lea
A slick, disgusting smirk grinning back at me. I imagine my fist knock
fucking teeth out before I cut out his tongue.

Effie hands me the roll of tape, and I gesture for him to sit in one
dining chairs. He only chuckles mockingly as I quickly tape him to th
As soon as he's immobilized, I am going to Effie and wrapping her
arms so tightly it would take a fucking titan to pull us apart.

I loosen my hold just enough to look her in the eyes. "Fuck, I'm so

I scan her face for any other signs of injury and don't find any. "Are you
whose anywhere?"¹

She ignores my question. Her voice is soft and airy. "You killed for
I cup her cheeks, brushing the sweaty strands of hair out her face.
I'd *die* for you."

She closes her eyes with a heavy sigh, and it hurts that she ever
that. "Now to deal with this piece of shit." I pull away and face L
d. Effie "What to do with you?"

"Well wasn't that a sweet moment," he sneers.

"I don't care if you're her father or God reincarnate, no one hurts n
and walks away scot-free."

"I don't know if it's honorable or embarrassing," he muses.

"What is?" I'm already sick of these games.

"You playing white knight for a snitch." He cocks his head to the s
an whomouth curling into a smug taunt. My jaw shifts, my fingers tightening
my gun as I process his words. I clench my other hand into a fist.

"Do you want to tell him or should I?" He looks past me to Effie, a
ain mya sinking feeling like my entire world is about to implode. "Ach, I'll
for it: I know about the fallout shelter. It's only a matter of time be
ve him. figure out how to get in."

"Is this true?" I flick my gaze to Effie, and she breaks eye conta
away, staring at her feet. That one small movement is enough to sh
e of theheart like it's nothing but a piece of paper. Effie's always been able
e chair. me in the eye, even when I held a gun to her head she didn't waver.

That one glance tells me all I need to know but I still storm over
"Tell. Me." I can't conceal the hurt in my voice, it's ripped from me th
sorry." way my tattered heart is ripped from my chest.

you hurt “Yes, but—”

There is no *but*. “Leave.”

me.” “Fi—”

“Baby, “If you don’t walk out that door right now, you’ll be leaving in a bag.” My voice is stripped of emotion, cold and detached because I doubt into what I’m feeling I’ll burn this fucking place to the ground, and Luciano care who’s inside.

I cut Luciano out of the tape next. “The only reason you’re still here because I haven’t decided how I want to kill you yet,” I say with my wife intent.

He gets up, acting like he doesn’t have an ounce of fear in him, but the sweat stain down his back and the heavy exhale he releases. Effie standing at the same place I left her. “Euphemia, let’s go,” he says aside, his not waiting for her before disappearing out the door.

around She gives me one last teary-eyed look before following him.

without thinking and pull her back by her hand. There’s a flicker of hope and I get her face before I speak, crushing every speck of light in her pale just go beautiful eyes.

fore we “This is the last time. If you ever betray me again, it won’t matter sweet your pussy is or how I once felt for you, I’ll just fuck you one last ct right before slitting your throat.”

red my ²Then I let her leave. I let her leave so she doesn’t see me crumble.

to look Her words from the gala dance through my mind, soft and pleading
I could live in this moment forever.

to her. What I thought was the start of forever, was just a spoonful of sugar the same the poison. I realize now, she wanted to stay in that moment because she knew *this* moment would follow. I close my eyes, willing my brain

down those sweet memories plaguing me so I can think about my moves.

I've never had trouble shutting off my emotions. It was like flipping a bodyswitch, if the lights were even on to begin with. I came to prefer operating in the dark. Easier, cleaner, and hell of a lot less painful. But right now, I won't try to stop a flood with paper walls. *Useless.*

Well, I can start by getting rid of the dead body on my floor. But I'm not living in here any longer, I feel like I'm drowning in memories of her. I call the deadly cleaning crew while walking to my car, it's a ten-second conversation.

I get in, sliding behind the steering wheel and slamming my head back against the headrest, not feeling any less like I'm drowning. I glance to my right and still see the sunflowers I never grabbed in my haste to save her.

Gruffly, It's like the sunshine yellow of their petals is laughing at me. *What a blind fool.*

I react I stare at the flowers a little longer, are they laughing at me or screaming on me to open my fucking eyes? Or maybe I'm just losing my goddamn damn plants are talking...

I'm trying to think through the torrent of emotions battering my inner self how force myself to focus, drumming my fingers in thought.

Last time If Effie was working with her father behind my back, why was he hitting her? I wouldn't put it past the son of a bitch to hit her over a small slip or imagined. But I've conducted enough interrogations to recognize the signs: *I wish* Fuckhead holding her arms while her father took swings...yeah, the signs after information that she clearly wasn't giving them.

Before I hop out, slamming the door behind me. Effie was up to something she wouldn't think it was betraying me...at least not intentionally.

to push Or maybe I'm letting my emotions cloud my judgment. I think back

my next conversation I overheard at the gala. Her father was again trying something out of her, but was she participating?

cking a It's too damn hard to be objective when the person I've grown to t ating inmost in this fucked-up world is being accused of breaking the one it's like asked of her: honesty and loyalty. My mind and heart are tied u crippling knot, and there's only one way to untangle this mess: Find o can't beshe was planning.

call my Storming back into the barn, I check the downstairs first before con empty. I try her studio next, finding exactly what I was looking for oack on drawer with her materials. I pull out her phone, my chest cracking ope ght and I read the painted message on the back.

Inbox

a love- I ≡ u

I navigate directly to her messages and open the top chat. The numb ming ata saved contact, but the most recent interaction was an outgoing text: mind if *Finn is going to call, tell him everything. Juicy tracksuits and Sta DVDs.*

sides. I I read the damn thing ten times. I have no idea what the second half but the first part is pretty fucking clear. I call the number, my heart wa beating my throat while it rings.

ght, real The line connects. "It's Finn."

ze one. "Ah, the great Finneas Fox." There's something familiar abo y were feminine voice, but I can't place it. "We need to meet. I'll text address, get there as soon as you can."

g, but I

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2. Hurt Me—Låpsley |

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CHAPTER 21

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CHAPTER 21

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Transgressions and Penance

Finn

Three women who were once my enemies are sitting across from me in a diner booth. The buzzing neon Open sign on the window next to me is giving me a headache and washing us in red like hellions. I certainly feel like I'm in hell.

“How soon can you execute?” I ask.

“Thank you.” Linnie smiles at the waitress refilling our coffee mugs and then turns back to me. “We can do it as soon as tomorrow. We just need your art.” They've spent the last forty-five minutes walking me through every detail of the plan they'd been working toward with Effie.

I scribble a number on a napkin and slide it over to her. “This will be the number for Roman who will get you to Cash. I'll fill him in and make sure he gets you whatever you need. But we can't do anything until my wife is back to me.”

“Understood.”

I slump back in the long booth, trying to figure out why I still feel like I've been sucker punched. Even after finding out Effie hadn't purposefully betrayed me. “What's in it for you guys?”

“Is helping out a friend not reason enough?” Hadis poses.

“No. Not in our world.”

Marguerite pushes her ketchup-soaked hashbrowns around her plate. She’s never understood breakfast for dinner, and she’s not making it seem appealing. She looks to Linnie to answer for them.

“We fucked up,” Linnie says honestly. “Not as much as you, but we weren’t there for Effie. We let her loose on you without any proper trial. We tried to use your blackmail plot to our benefit instead of trying to eliminate it. And we were off licking our wounds when Hudson showed up at our door.”

me in a
o me is
eel like
“You’re saying you owe her?” All three nod and I realize that’s not what was bothering me. I know exactly what is. “Why didn’t she tell me what she was planning?”

If she had told me, I wouldn’t have reacted so cruelly. I could have apologized to her. But what hurts the most is that, even after everything we’ve been through, she still didn’t trust me enough.

Linnie looks at me thoughtfully. “When no one else was there for her, it was me. She called and you came—”

get you
will get
s safely
“I fucking put her in that situation.” I slam my palms on the table and the saltshaker tips over and the utensils rattle. Three unimpressed faces stare at me.

“Yes, you did and honestly, fuck you.” Marguerite shoves a bite of hashbrowns in her mouth and waves her empty fork at me. “She’s not a better person than me, because I wouldn’t have forgiven you, let alone felt indebted to you.”

osefully
I swallow stiffly. My transgressions are piling up, but Effie is the one being punished.

I have to get her back.

My wife belongs at my side, and I belong at her feet.

e—I've
m very

but we
raining.
ying to



ed up at ¹The drive from the diner to the Luciano mansion is the most excru
twenty minutes of my life. My lungs feel splintered, my skin too tig
ot whatheart one beat away from giving out.

hat she I shudder to think what will happen if she doesn't give her father v
wants, or worse, if he finds out what she was planning behind his bac
helpedmade a lot of mistakes in my life, but if something happens to her
e gonehands of that monster, not hearing her out will be my biggest one. I s
the gas and shift gears, blazing through the residential streets at dar
ier, youspeeds.

I roll down my window as I approach the gate to their drive, one h
ole, thethe stick shift, the other on my gun pointed at the guard. "Open the gat
re back "No—" I shoot him in the foot, and he screams, hopping back on on
"Open it or the next one goes in your knee, Hoppy."
f soggy He curses amid groans, but all I care about is the gate hinging open
a betterof me. *Has it always been this goddamn slow?* I consider blowing thr
t like Ipartially open to save time as it lazily yawns open.

I race down the driveway lined with hedges and column statues
he one with lions. I round the last turn of the winding driveway, a grand c

revival estate home coming into view. Porsches and Ferraris are lined up outside despite the four-car garage.

I guess my friend at the gate must have been able to alert my father because I'm greeted by six armed men, guns raised and pointed at me. Every single one of them has the same slicked back hair, like they are models for a hair commercial rather than defending the Don.

"This seems like overkill," I say, getting out of the car, ignoring the barrels trained on me. I recognize Renzo among the men, looking obnoxious and arrogant as ever. "Bring her to me now, Luciano"

"Who?" He cocks his head to the side with a snide grin.

"My. Wife." My fingers flex around the gun at my side. "If something happened to her..." My growl is predatory, ready to tear anyone limb from limb. I've never seen anyone who stands between us.

"Oh, my sister? No, she's fine." His lip curls. "But she's not your daughter anymore."

"The fuck she isn't—" The front door opens, and her father steps through the doorway.

All my attention is directed to him when I demand, "Where is she?"

"You're too late, boy." He clasps his hands in front of him. "Euphemism. She's getting married."

"*She's. Married. To. Me.*" I slap my chest punctuating each word.

"Not for much longer," He straightens his lapels like this conversation is wrapping up, but it's only getting started.

"I won't fucking sign." I shove my gun into my waistband and step forward, face to face on the cobblestone porch.

"Come on, you're smarter than that. We don't need you to sign anything. Hell, we didn't even need you to sign the marriage license." He scoffs.

ned up my blood curdles. “We paid to get your phony marriage on the books, but we’ll pay to get it annulled. With or without you.”

arrival Venom laces my words as I tower over him. “That will never happen. Now, where is she?” I shout while fisting the collar of his shirt. Multiple pairs of hands grab my arms, dragging me off, but I never stop yelling, my heart raging. “Where is *my wife*?!”

all the A sharp sting hits my neck and my hand flies up to the spot. My vision instantly blurs and my equilibrium shakes. I look over my shoulder at a flashing glance of Gianni holding a syringe before my knees give out and I slam into the pavement.

nothing My head spins, like it’s stuck in a whirlpool. Everything in motion becomes fluid, bending and flowing as my surroundings fade into a dark current.

ur wife

hrough.

emia is



I don’t know how long I’m out for, but when I wake up, the sky is a pale pink. I can see the rising rays of sun through the small square window. The...*where the hell am I?*²

pop up to I smell gasoline and dirt and as I wriggle in my bindings, rough unforgiving wood scratches against my cheek on the floor. My head feels like anything, stuffed full of kerosene-soaked cotton balls and then lit on fire. Even a sharp jab to my eyes to the darkness sends blinding pain through my forehead.

ks, and muscles are stiff and sore like I've been in the same position on the surface for hours.

fucking My feet, bound at the ankles, kick out and hit long poles of son's shirt. They clatter loudly to the ground. One of them falls in front of my father's stop dirty head of a shovel, and the pieces come together: I'm in a garden in

I laugh out loud in the dark space. Effie's idiot brothers must have a vision charge of my captivity because a shed full of tools doesn't make them a secure location.

it and I In addition to my ankles, my wrists are tied behind my back. Judging the scratchy feel against my skin, the rope is crude fiber. Sawing through my sight ties with the edge of a spade won't be quick, but it's not impossible.

a black I flop around like a goddamn fish out of water until I'm positioned where I need to be and get to work. I drag my bound wrists against the blunt edge of the spade until my wrists are raw, my back is cramping but I'm finally

As soon as my hands are unbound, I am ferociously ripping at the ropes around my legs. My fingers feel like I'm fisting ice made of broken glass. As circulation returns to my hands. Each tug at the ropes is a sharp pain, but I don't care about any of it. Don't care about anything other than stopping this fucking wedding.

a hazy My insides are like an inferno as my thoughts fill with her wearing a dowry from another man, warming another man's bed. But what shatters me is knowing that she's facing all this alone, thinking I hate her.

inished I won't even entertain the option that I won't get to her in time. I know it was to know that I fucked up, I judged her too quickly. I didn't give up on opening haven't given up on us. I'm going to fight until she's by my side or I'm dead. My feet under.

I stagger to my feet, my head spinning with the lingering effects

the harddrug. I reach for the knob, but even though it turns, the door doesn't
try again and again until I come to the conclusion that something is
of some sort blocking it from the outside.

Instead, I take to ramming my shoulder against the door, throwing all my
weight into the cheap wood with so much force I'm surprised I don't dislocate
my shoulder. At last, I hear the sound of splintering planks and know I am
in there. A few more slams and the boards that were nailed over the door
split in half and I'm stumbling into the cool, early morning air.

Running by I try to get my bearings, scanning the manicured lawn and rose bushes
in the front of me. I could still be at the Luciano's, but I can't be sure, I never
spent much time here. I could circle back and if I haven't left their property
where I might be able to get to my car. That poses a larger risk of being seen, but
my edge of advantage right now is they don't know I've escaped. And while her
brothers are not the brightest, I doubt even they would be stupid enough to leave
the keys in the ignition for me.

As I creep further out into the lawn and away from the shed until I can
get a better view of the house and confirm it is the Luciano's. Which means
that the fence across the grass should border the road. I sprint across the
lawn, praying there aren't motion sensor lights or that I get another dizzy spell
and a ring sends me eating shit.

What most is I make it to the iron fence, my shoes soaked by morning dew. I climb
over and onto the street below. Of course, in this rich as fuck neighborhood
there are no beater cars parked on the street. Nothing I can hotwire and get
out of here, so I continue on foot.

I'm six feet tall. No phone, no weapon, no plan—yet—but despite all that, my end
game is crystal clear: I am getting my wife back.

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CHAPTER 22

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CHAPTER 22

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Née Luciano

Effie

My father took me directly to one of his safe houses from the far side of the city. He threw me in this room. ¹ The deadbolt in the door turns, snapping from my riveting game of counting bricks on the wall. It's a newly installed deadbolt, I assume to be able to lock me in from the outside. One soldier was outfitting the door and another was removing everything from the room except for the mattress I'm sitting on.

Either they are exceptionally confident in my lock-picking skills, or they know what they have planned is at risk of making me suicidal. Honesty could be both.

My father enters the room and looks down on me on the bare mattress with disgust, as if he wasn't the one who put me here. "You're getting married."

My first reaction is to laugh. "I feel like we've done this before," I say. "Don't be cute, Euphemia. You have continued to fuck up every opportunity I've given you. This is your last chance. You'll be marrying the youngest Campbell son—"

I shoot to my feet. "Are you trying to get me killed? Hudson murdered me for being seen with another man—and we weren't even together!"

engaged! They'll finish the job he started if they find out what happened." I feel like a roasted pig offered up with an apple in my mouth.

My father doesn't even flinch. "Then you better ensure they never find out. The governor only suspects Fox, make sure it stays that way."

The mention of Finn is like being doused with ice cold water. "What's going to happen to him?" I knew my father had sway with powerful people, but I never realized that he could make my marriage to Finn disappear in a blink of an eye. Will the Campbells compel me to testify against Finn in exchange for the protection of spousal privilege? The thought makes my stomach churn.

"What do you care?" He squints at me. "Don't tell me you fell for that bastard? I guess you did spend a lot of time together out in that ramshackled hut. I thought he'd never leave." He tuts, and I try to piece together his words.

"You were waiting until he left to confront me at the farm?"

He scoffs. "Wasted fucking hours just for him to kick you to the curb anyway. I don't know why I bothered, you're as goddamn useless as ever. At least now you won't be able to fuck anything up as long as you're locked up 'til the wedding."

I can feel him slamming the door by the violent vibrations in my ribs. "And just like that, as if the last few weeks never happened, the game continues. My father is vying for more power and connections, and using my hand in marriage to do it. I wonder if he'll ever realize his own greed is getting us into these situations."

The only reason my father decided to threaten the decade-long trust of the Fox family was due to his own greed. When he orchestrated my marriage to Finn, he wasn't satisfied with being connected to one of the most powerful people in the state. He wanted more.

to really crime families. No, he made it clear that despite the marriage, our loyalties hadn't changed. We were still going after the cache.

It didn't end out. I was so mad at Finn, so livid at myself, so exhausted and traumatized by everything, that I went along with my father's plot. I saw the photograph of the shelter and sent it to my father, saying it was a potential to explore. When Finn took me to the cache, I realized what a bomb that one would end up being. I knew at that moment that I would eventually be without heart. I never guessed that moment of curiosity in the hallway would turn into this liability for our relationship. He asked for my loyalty and honesty, and selfishly, I promised him something I'd never be able to give.

That small mistake became like a neglected hangnail that festered into her deadly infection. I knew I'd messed up beyond repair with Finn. I thought I'd try, even if it was a fool's errand.

The governor was the biggest threat to our future. Spousal privilege didn't curbs long as he was trying to solve his son's murder, Finn and I were never safe. A corrupt politician with criminal connections had picked up a formidable opponent and he was ready to knock down our door.

When I killed Hudson, I put a target on his back. I owed it to him to fix this. We were being hunted from both sides. The governor tried to find his son, and my father still intent on destroying our decade-long marriage. I thought I could hold my father off for the time being, but I knew moves had to be made to eliminate the governor and the constant threat he posed.

I lay back on the mattress and trace the cracks in the ceiling with my fingers. I am both exhausted to the bone and humming with uncontrollable energy. I can't stop thinking about my phone and the message I left for Finn.

Did he find it? Did *Les Arnaqueuses* fill him in on our plan? A

jectivegoing to finish the new plan we put into motion?

Does any of it even matter when I'm marrying the brother of the
ized bykilled?

raph of The turning deadbolt startles me, and I sit up, on constant alert. One

. father's soldiers enters. He sets a bowl of minestrone in front of me

e photofloor. No silverware. Not even a spoon. *Do they really think I'm going*

reak hisable to get out of a room four-stories up with nothing but a spoon?

become "Have they picked a date?" I ask.

ity, and He nods. "In four days."

l into a

. But I



or not,

e never

is is a ²Four days later, I'm staring at my reflection dressed in white. I feel a

hollow. My usually full cheeks that now look slack from nothing but s

—to usfive days. The bags under my eyes are dark and pronounced despr

ying to mother's best effort. She loops a string of pearls around my neck and c

truce to in the back. It feels like the noose of a condemned man.

ig but I She prods me in between my shoulder blades. "Stand up straight, yo

it threatwant to look like a hunchback in all your wedding photos, now do you

"Does he really not know? Or does he just not care?" I ask, my s

y gaze.churning.

nergy. I "About what?"

"That I killed—" She claps her hand over my mouth.

re they

“Men will forgive almost anything in the name of power. And you must remember just how powerful these men are. When it comes to the governor’s son, you know nothing. Do you understand me, Euphemia?” Her eyes that look just like mine implore me to fall in line through the mirror on the wall. “Which one? My first fiancé or my second husband?” My head whips to the side, my cheek burning from her slap.

She purses her lips. “If you want to survive in this world, be sweet and when the time comes, spread your legs.” Why she bothers telling me I don’t know. I’ve already been here before, face down, ass up as Finn made me his wife. As transactional as that night was, it seems like a blip compared to what I’m about to face.

She pats my shoulders and fluffs my veil, a sickly-sweet change of voice. “You look beautiful, dear.”

I struggle to find my mask again. The meek compliance I used to wear, often it became a second skin is now difficult to summon. Finn said he heard me. Maybe even loved me without it. And now, trying to shove myself down, my true self feels like carving myself in half. Before my mask hid my comfort, a security. Now it’s just treachery.

“Take a minute. But not too long, everyone’s ready downstairs.” Her mother gives my shoulder a squeeze and leaves the room.

I try not to let my mind wander to the message I left for Finn on my phone for the hundredth time in the last four days. Surely by now he must have found it. Which means if he found it, it wasn’t enough to make up for what I did. Or maybe he couldn’t get in touch with *Les Arnaqueuses* or—*No*, the deal is done.

There’s a church full of people downstairs. Who are they? Does it matter? This wedding is happening, and innocuous details won’t change that.

ou'll be I was a survivor long before I was a wife. I still am. The bat
s to the changed, but I'm just as strong.

a?" Her I take one long look in the mirror then head downstairs to the church
or. where my father is waiting. His black hair is slicked back, and his e
hips to dark as coal. He offers me his elbow. "You look beautiful, *principes*.

calls me princess and painful images flood my mind of lazy mornin
, smile, sunlight and the warmth of Finn's body wrapped around mine.

ne this, I wrap my arm around his, but I don't give a fake smile. I'll do m
n made but I won't pretend my prison is a castle.

blessing The organ music begins as we push through the double doors
sanctuary. It's a song that's supposed to make your heart swell with r
in her and joy, and instead it feels like I'm leading my own funeral processio

Seeing William at the end of the aisle makes my lungs collapse. It
wear so if my head is being held under water. My pulse races at the sim
aw me between him and Hudson until I'm dizzy. My body screams at me to
it back my throat grows tight as if Hudson's brutish hands are still clutching
κ was a father squeezes my hand on his arm to keep my stalling feet moving,
me toward a marriage I don't want.

s." My The people in the pews are faceless blurs. I don't even recognize the

It feels like walking onto a staged movie set, cold, impersonal, a far
/ phone only real things are the bouquets of white roses at the end of each row
st have somehow even those feel like part of a con.

what I My father unceremoniously passes me off to William, and his ha
what's just as sweaty as mine. His blue eyes bore into me with a dutiful chil

may have been handsome if I didn't have to fight for my life staring
matter? identical pair. A sour taste spills down my throat as the priest beg
ceremony, his words nothing but dry droning.

tle has When it comes time to exchange rings, there is no ring bearer. He pulls them out of his coat pocket and my hand goes numb as he grasps mine. Cold bitterness slides over my shoulders and down my back. The priest begins mumbling the most bland, simplified vows and William parrots them sentence by sentence. There’s nothing personal about them. We’re both softbother when all the promises tying this marriage together are inked on a contract by power-hungry, callous men. Not the two people standing by duty, altar.

Surprisingly, my hand doesn’t shake, but his does when he lifts mine to hold the ring at the tip of my finger. Perhaps my hand is steady because this brief moment I’m no longer in this church, I’m in a limo with Father. He’s telling me how proud he is of me.

William begins to slide the ring up my finger and someone screams first, I question if it was me, if I was finally snapping, but then more commotion stirs.

The priest is yanked back and a sharp, silver blade presses against my throat, and Cash Fox’s wild grinning face appears over his shoulder.

“Nobody moves or Father here gets a VIP meet and greet with that God-fearing priest, so fond of.” He looks to me with a wicked smile and quick wink. The afternoon, Mrs. Fox.”

The double doors at the back of the sanctuary swing open. “Did we get to the ‘*speaking now or forever hold your peace*’ part? Because I often hear account that Euphemia Fox is already married. To me.”

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CHAPTER 23

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CHAPTER 23

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Run

Finn

The past four days were the longest of my life. ¹ My lungs had to learn how to breathe without her. My blood had to acclimate to cooking boiling temperatures. And my rage, my blood thirst, has never had to wait long to be sated. It took two days to finalize our plans and then two more days doing nothing but stewing, seething, dreaming of the ways I would torture everyone involved in making this wedding happen.

Finding out she was getting married was like being hit by buckshot pellets tearing multiple tracks through my muscles and flesh. Waiting in agony, but it had to be done. Holding off until the wedding was the best plan for us to get to Effie and hit the governor at the same time.

I've been posted on a bench in the park across from the governor's residence for the better part of an hour. The Campbells own a large estate elsewhere, but the governor keeps this luxury townhouse in June Harbor for in-town business. I stand up when I see the first black armored vehicle arrive.

More SUVs with government plates start lining up around the building. A deep sense of satisfaction takes shape in my gut, the kind you can only feel when a plan comes together perfectly. While Effie is somewhere

ready to marry his son, her plan to take down the governor is in full
Despite the fact that the thought of her preparing for the wedding feel
hundred arrows to the chest, I am incredibly proud of what she starts
Les Arnaqueuses.

The men in tactical gear lining up outside the townhouse will soon
down the door to find rare, stolen masterpieces from our cache that
planted early this morning.

The crew meticulously planned every detail to ensure that there will
way he can wiggle out of the charges or get them brushed under the
They leaked small details about a potential raid of long-lost art in
relearn circles and circulated information through sources in the police to get
constant looking at the governor.
wait so

It only takes a few more minutes before I start seeing the satellites of
days of vans arrive around the block. Eagerness bites at me and I wish I could
like to longer, but I have a wedding to crash and a wife to take home. I would
not, the loved to see the FBI march out the lost masterpieces to a hoard of
ng was cameras. Every second of the bust will be publicized, the people will cry
est way accountability and scream corruption.

But as much as I want to see Governor Campbell's demise unfold
my very eyes, nothing compares to my desire to have Effie back in my
r's city I leave the park and hop on my motorcycle to race back to Cash's place
estate "How did it go?" Hadis asks me as I take off my helmet
labor for underground garage.
arrive.

"SWAT and news are flooding the street. Everything went according
lock. A plan." She smiles, satisfied, and I turn my attention to my brothers
only get loading our soldiers into SUVs. Roan is barking instructions, divvying
getting men appropriately, while Lochlan straps more magazines of ammo to his

swing. I wait to walk up to Cash until he is done having a goodbye kiss like a Harlow, like he's going to fucking war. "Remember to go straight ahead with priest. It will be our best point of leverage. Luciano will sacrifice just anyone else in that church." The Mafia's hypocrisy when it comes to religion break always amused me. They will treat clergy like living saints then turn that weand make a living off sin.

"I know she's your girl, but I swear to God, Finneas, if you remind me there will be no more time about the priest I'm going to blow your fucking brains out." he rug. I roll my eyes. "Then don't fucking forget."

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the FBI



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of news I'm last to roll up to the church. A decoy call has already been dispatched and the governor's security posted in the front of the church, so there's no way to stop me from walking straight up the steps and inside. Now, I'm in the hallway before and the object of all my thoughts, desire, my will to fucking live is in my arms. Those doors about to marry a stranger. I spark like a livewire as soon as I see her. The first screams, my signal to move.

in the I use both hands to swing the sanctuary doors wide and step into the sanctuary. My brothers have the governor's son and the priest at gun or knife point. The girl who looks heart-wrenchingly beautiful in white, eyes round and full of sorrow. "Who are you?" she asks. "Didn't she know I was coming for her?"

is up the "Did we already get to the 'speak now or forever hold your peace' ceremony?" she asks. "Because I object on account that Euphemia Fox is already married. To

ss withstride down the aisle at a cool pace, plucking my leather gloves
for thetossing them into the pews with smug indifference to the people sittin
it aboutAt Cash's orders, everyone in the pews is on kneelers and placing their
religionon top of their heads.

around I drink her in with every step I take toward the altar. Her chest
swept up and off her neck. Angelic body covered in satin and lace that
me onewait to rip off. Amber eyes igniting with deviant flames.

I reach the bottom of the steps of the altar and extend my hand. She
her lip, holding back a shocked smile. "You came..." she stutters and
her hand in mine, and for the first time in days, there's solid ground un
feet.

She hikes her dress off the ground and looks at me with a shy gr
looks ready to run, but instead I swoop her up and carry her down th
and straight out the door. I never got to walk out of the church with n
the first time, and even if this isn't quite the same, there's an ur
ched to satisfaction, holding her in my arms.

one to There's a limo parked in front of the church, streamers and cans tie
ie foyerback, *just married* painted on the windows. Alfie is tugging the drive
behindthe front. "You wanna die for this car? You know how many peop
s I hearprobably had sex in this thing? Gross. You should be thanking us for t
off your hands. Now, Jesus Christ, get out of the fucking car before
ie aisle.ya!"

it. Effie Alfie sees us running down the steps and shrugs. "Ope, time's u
urprise.shoots the driver in the knee and then shoves his crippled frame ou
car. I open the passenger door, and Effie hops in. I slide in behind l
e' part?bark at Alfie to raise the partition.

me." I We pull away, cans jingling, just as rows of police cars, sirens blari

off and down the street behind us. The blue and red of their lights is so big there, breaks through the tinted limo windows and dances across Effie's hands and features. "Your brothers," she gasps.

"They're not coming for them." I lean back in the deep seat, unable to tear my eyes off her.

"I can't." "Then who?"

"This morning, the FBI found certain Van Gogh and Renoir paintings in the home of one Thomas Campbell," I wrap my hand around her wrist, my fingers brushing against her hammering pulse.

"You found the phone." Her eyes crinkle at the corners in a soft smile.

"I did, and I love—" My words are swallowed whole when Alfie slams the brakes and we fly forward in the back of the limo, my arms leaping to catch her and pull her back to me.

"Oy, back to the nursing home if you don't know how to use a crosswalk," she hollers.

She looks up at me, cradled in my arms, with heavy eyes. "When I told the father, I didn't know—"

"It doesn't matter." I cut her off.

"I want you to know—"

"I know all I need to know, Effie. I know I hurt you, and you still gave me a second, third—*Christ*, a fucking tenth chance. I know that I was brutal,

cruel, yet you never gave up on me." Her bottom lip quivers, and I press my thumb on it. She kisses the pad of my thumb, and I wrap her in my arms, tucking her back where she's meant to be.

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²The sun is setting when I begin to wake Effie a few miles from
tings at Farms after she fell asleep in my lap. The sun breaks the horizon in
rist, my rays of copper and rust. The setting sun bathes the black cattle in p
along the road in a warm light, turning their backs the color of whiskey
le.

“We’re almost home.” I stroke her hair, plucking the veil from it, a
ams on taste hitting the back of my throat as I realize she is still fully in her w
g out to garb.

“Home?”

swalk!” “Yes, princess, *home*.” She nuzzles into my hand as she rouses, a
chest constricts at the sweet, mindless movement.

told my I carefully sit her upright as I sweep out from under her and kneel
limo floor. I lift one of her heeled feet onto my thigh and unbuckle th
around her ankle as she blinks the sleep fully from her eyes. “You
breathhtaking bride, but no way in God’s green earth am I bringing y
re me a my home in another man’s wedding dress.” I remove her second
ash and dangling it from the ankle straps before dropping it and taking
rest my switchblade.

y arms, Her eyes widen then darken as I flick the blade open. I suck
between my teeth and my gut swirls with heat at the dangerous desire
her gaze.

I slice into the hem of her satin gown. My eyes burn into hers as I tear a slit up the center, exposing her silky thighs. Little breaths slip between her lips the higher I go, and my body responds with a sharp pulse. Half the bodice, the fabric snags. I raise her ankle onto my shoulder, ghost my lips up her calf and inner thigh, until I reach the snag. I flip the blade and plunge it into the floorboard.

I lock my gaze with hers as I take hold of the dress between my teeth and tear past the resistance. Her breath gets stuck in her throat and her eyes go wide as I am left with unfettered access to her lace-covered pussy. Her heart beats erratically as I indulge in her untethering scent, dragging my nose over her hot core, feeling her legs tremble on either side of my head.

I nip at the fabric, pinching her skin, and growl, "*Mine.*"

"Yours," she agrees breathlessly as I free my knife from where it's hidden. I grab the top of her bodice, pull it harshly away from her body and tear down the middle while staring her straight in the eyes.

Heat crackles down my back as I flip her around onto her hands and knees on the seat. A blackness swirls in my gut as I rip the rest of the dress open, revealing a white lace bodysuit. I bring my hand down hard and hot across her ass. I lick up her spine before tugging her hair out of its pinned confinement. Her hair falls in heavy locks down her shoulders as I flip her back over to sit up on her hands and knees.

I clasp her jaw tightly in my fist. I roughly pull her chin to the side and devour her neck, shoving my face into her cascading curls and kissing her bruisingly into her skin. "*Mine.*" I bite, carving my claim into her with my teeth.

My voice is raw and rumbly as I promise, "I may not have been intended to see you in this, but with the devil as my witness, I will be here to ruin you in it." She sucks in an agreeing breath and arches her back.

begin to her breasts out into my greedy palms. “*Fuck*, I want to tear you apart piece by piece, break you down bit by bit, so that I can rebuild you as mine and my own way to mine.”

ing my I know we’ve arrived when the limo turns and begins to crawl over the smooth and rocky gravel. I groan into her supple flesh. She tugs my head up, her hair knotted in my hair, until we are nose to nose. “Finneas Fox, I’ve never loved anything but yours. But I’ll still let you try...”

her pupils She pulls me onto the seat next to her and spins to straddle me, my hands on her hips. My lips latch onto her thick hips. The car comes to a stop, and she clutches my nose between her hands. Her honeyed eyes fix on mine as if words even exist.

In the time that we stay like this wordlessly pouring our souls and appetites into each other, I hear Alfie exit and drive away in the car he left here.

staked. With her thumb, she traces under my eye, down my cheek and over my lips. Her touch is gentle and sincere. It makes me feel bare and seen. “I’ve never apologized for my role—”

and knees I stop her, “You don’t have to.”

off her “I *want* to.” She places a hand over my heart. “I’m sorry for playing with you. Betraying you. Hurting you. But I’m not sorry I’m your wife.”

finishes. It My breath lodges in my throat, my heart stuttering. “Say that again.”

right. She arches a brow. “I’m not sorry I’m your wife.”

side to A pleased rumble escapes my lips, and I tighten my arms around her neck, sucking her over my growing cock. “We never had a proper wedding night with my wife. This could be our wedding night. One we both will love.”

he man “Oh yeah? And what would that be?”

he man “Letting my husband do whatever he wants. Knowing I want it to happen.” She pushes off my lap to kneel at my feet, dragging her palms down the length of my legs.

iece bymy thighs as she does.

nd only A dark amusement drips through me when I ask, “You wanna pla
wife?”

ver the Her delicate pink tongue flicks across her teeth as she tucks her cl
fingersnods, looking up at me through hooded lashes. “Anything I want?” Sl
er beenagain, and fire licks up my spine.

I jerk my head at the door. As she exits the limo, I get a peek at t
y handssky, sun fading and stars just beginning to emerge. The perfect backc
hes myall the ways I want to ruin her.

ade her. I follow behind her, my darkest urges igniting. She faces me, and I
ologiessame need for depravity staring back at me. “What do you want me to

I look behind her into the dark of the woods. There’s only one thing
ver myof her.

1. “I’ve “*Run.*”

ng you.

1. I Chose Violence—iamjakehill |

2. Mount Everest—Labrinth |

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r waist,

ight.”

g night.

o.” She

ngth of

my thighs as she does.

A dark amusement drips through me when I ask, “You wanna play, little wife?”

Her delicate pink tongue flicks across her teeth as she tucks her chin and nods, looking up at me through hooded lashes. “Anything I want?” She nods again, and fire licks up my spine.

I jerk my head at the door. As she exits the limo, I get a peek at the inky sky, sun fading and stars just beginning to emerge. The perfect backdrop for all the ways I want to ruin her.

I follow behind her, my darkest urges igniting. She faces me, and I see the same need for depravity staring back at me. “What do you want me to do?”

I look behind her into the dark of the woods. There’s only one thing I want of her.

“Run.”

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CHAPTER 24

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CHAPTER 24

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Can't Hide

Finn

I watch her chest rise and stay as she holds her breath as she takes one wish. Slowly she lets out an exhale through slightly parted lips a dash of mischievousness flits across her face and she tries to run. ¹ her wrist, and she looks down at my tattooed knuckles and shivers. until she looks back in my eyes to say, “And when I catch you, I want fight.” Then I release her.

With a squeal, she spins on her heels and runs deeper into the woods playing with fire and loves the way it burns.

I already feel my cock stiffening watching her hair fly loose and w her shoulders. Her bare feet patter into mulchy earth.

“Better run, princess,” I call after her, my blood already heating. “when I catch you, there’ll be no mercy.” I whisper into the night.

My inner predator narrows in on the bright white of her lingerie torch in the dark.

I want her. I need her. She’s mine, and I’ll have her.

I pick up my pace, but don’t run in pursuit... yet. I enter the wo disappeared into and laugh to myself as I can hear her giggling and br

heavily as she scampers. My pretty prey is making this too easy.

The moon is full, sending silver beams through the trees. I catch Effie behind a trunk, her back to me. I'm light on my feet. She doesn't see me approach until I'm right behind her. Her sweet scent goes straight to my cock. She spins at the last second and her scream of surprise is snatched by a kiss as I easily pick her up and slam us up against the tree.

"You found me," she purrs.

"There's no hiding from me." I can feel her heart beating in her chest. My fingers itch to wrap around her throat and bury my cock into her heat.

I grind into her. "You feel what you do to me? How hard I get for the taste of you." I devour her with a bruising kiss, bending her to my will, needing her to be as hungry for my soul as I am for hers.

I've survived dozens of fights I shouldn't have because I know how to spot the smallest changes in a person's muscles, their face, the quick flick of an eye. So when I dip my head to lavish her neck, I'm not surprised when her fingers twist into my hair and she yanks my head back.

What I don't expect is the slap across my face that follows. I drop to the ground as she gives me a devilish smile over her shoulder as she runs deeper into the forest. *Naughty, little plaything.*

"Cause I know every muscle in my body burns at her taunt.

I stalk after her like a monster in the dark. I wonder if she knows what she's doing to me. If she knows the way her dark hair shimmering in the moonlight makes me want to wrap it around my fist and fuck her until she'll feel me for days. If she knows the sound of snapping twigs underneath makes me want to throw her down among them and eat her perfect cunt until she's dripping and begging for my cock.

I wonder all this, but of course, she knows. Because she knows me just as well as I know her.

I know her pulse is hammering with anticipation right now, that she's just as excited about eluding capture as she is by the prospect of being caught.

She looks back at me, eyes wide and round with excitement, but that momentary distraction causes her to trip and stumble to the ground. I take the opportunity to close the distance in a few quick strides. She flips over and scuttles away on her bottom, but she's too slow. I'm right there.

She stares up at me, desperately scooting away as I undo my belt. I won't ever break eye contact. I drop to my knees and grab hold of her legs with both hands, yanking them down. She tries to wriggle in my vice grip, but while she puts up a convincing fight, I can smell her arousal. My first thought is of a little plaything—no, my naughty *wife* is soaked for me.

I rip down my fly and fist her lingerie, yanking it roughly to the side. I pull my cock out, hard and throbbing, ready to plunge inside her. She gasps as I tease her slick entrance. "This what you want? Me to fuck you into the cunt until you scream for mercy?" She bites her lip as I ease an inch in.

I close my eyes at the overwhelming feeling of sinking slowly into her, and "Christ, Ef, you're so wet for me."

"Mercy, my ass," she spits and kicks me in the chest. I growl at the pain as she scrambles onto hands and knees. I let her make it a few inches in, loving the view of her on her knees—before grabbing her hips with a grip so hard won't be able to break and press her into the ground. I twist my fingers under the sides of her bodysuit, my cock jumping at the sound of it tearing.

She looks over her shoulder at me, and for a split moment, I expect to see terror and pain written all over her face. But instead, she looks my most

just as the eyes and smiles.

“No mercy it is then,” I growl with promise. I shove my fingers into the mesh of the lace covering her pussy and rip it open, slamming into her. Her moans, and the sound is so sweet, I pull out halfway and thrust in harder to hear it again louder. Her sounds of pleasure only bring me closer and I get quick to my true monstrous self. Her hands sprawl out, clawing at the ground for any opportunity. I move my hand from her hip to pin the back of her neck and her head back clenches around me. I can’t contain the guttural groan that escapes me as she feels too fucking good.

without “*Finn*,” she mewls, and my heart threatens to shatter my sternum. I struggle with her hips, and she is so naughty.



side as I freeze
or needy *Effie*

into her. ²“You can scream as loud as you want. No one’s gonna hear your voice is drenched with dominance and the thrill of the hunt. I feel it against my skin like a physical thing.

loss of feet— He wraps my hair around his fist like a leash and sparks skitter across my skin as he gives it a sharp tug.

grip she “*Harder*,” I beg, my voice thick with insatiable hunger even as I claw at the earth to escape. He yanks my hips into the air and fucks me harder, deeper. I want it all and more, but I’m also not ready to give in to make him earn my submission.

nster in

The next time he plunges into me, I flatten myself to the ground and let him fall on top of me. Catching him by surprise, I'm able to flip over. She drive my elbow into his nose. Immediately, his hand shoots out and wraps around my throat, and I dig my head back into the earth trying to get as close as I can. He uses his other hand to wipe at the blood dripping from his nose. I use both of mine to push against him unsuccessfully as he drags her cunt across my chest, smearing me with his blood. My lungs struggle to breathe. *God*, between his weight crushing on top of me and the corset bra I'm wearing, I groan in frustration as my thrashing gets me nowhere.

"Aw, poor little wife." His fake sympathy makes me angry and I push harder but his hand at my throat just squeezes tighter. The fire in his eyes matches the fire burning in my core and *good god*, I'm incinerating myself.

He drags his hard cock over my slit, and I writhe and hiss, the pressure over my clit not nearly enough. "Always so needy," he teases and moves fast as lightning, releasing my throat to pin my hands above my head with both of his. He thrusts again, sliding over my pussy and I writhe in frustration.

"Will you beg? Go ahead. Beg me for more," he orders with a chuckle. His scratch "u." His chuckle, and I bite my tongue.

"When hell freezes over," I snarl, but internally I am pleading for him to fill me the way only he can.

"You don't like being teased?" He grinds harder and my toes curl. "I care. Not when it makes your husband feel so fucking good." He continues with a wicked glint in his eyes and my heart skips a beat for whatever he says next. I want "cks me" floated into his twisted head. "How about a taste?" He pulls my hand by my sides and slides up my body until his dick is inches from my face.

"Taste how much your body wants me." He pushes his cock over r

making and I try to turn my head away but there's nowhere to go. Heat coils over and burning rope in my core as I give in and lick a wide hot path up his latches "God, that wicked mouth," he groans as his eyes roll back.

way. I see an opportunity for one last fight. I suck his cock into my mouth, and I swirling my tongue over his piercing until he loses himself in the feel. His handgrip on my wrists slacken. Ripping my hands free I roll onto my stomach to fillmake a desperate attempt to crawl away.

aring. I He laughs darkly and the sound is like cool water dripping down my back, giving me chills. He grasps for my lingerie, and it continues to shred. I tussle. I feel his hands clamp down on my calves. "You won't get in his again. Whose pussy is this now, Effie?"

ing. My body lights up, and I yelp as he tugs me back by what's left of my grazing bodysuit and slaps my ass so hard it takes a few seconds for the burn to set in. He wraps my hair around one fist, tugging my head back wildly. The other hand wrenches my arms behind my back.

hine in "Go ahead" he taunts as he slots his dick at my entrance. "Make as much noise you want. No one could ever stop me from taking what's mine." A dark then he slams in, burying himself to the hilt and my back arches in deepness.

him to "Oh god," I cry out. He drives his hips forward and back, taking my breath away with every full stroke. "I need it, fuck, I *need it*." I plead for more. "I don't want to stop." He bites my shoulder, and the pain only adds to the pleasure. "More. More gets *amore*." He answers by pulling me onto my knees so my wrist is pressed just between my back and his stomach. The tantalizing feel of his piercing is enhanced with the new angle, making me see stars, and I can't help but bounce back on his cock. Especially when he wraps a hand around the back of my throat and my walls clench around him.

s like a “*Fuck, your pussy loves it when I choke you,*” he grits out on a s
length.breath.

I slip my hand between my thighs to play with my clit, whimpers
mouth, uninhibited from my lips. He matches me with deep groans and crude
and his as we rut like animals on the forest floor.

ach and Time and space begin to collapse, I become lost in the joining of ou

His heart is so sure in the way he possesses me that I feel what he pr
y spine, earlier, to break me down bit by bit, tear me apart piece by piece. The
l in our get to my climax and the harder he fucks me, the more I feel my
t away crumbling away and a new, stronger, version of who I was always m
be emerges in its place.

of my My mouth hangs open as my release dangles in front of me. He kno
to fully body and pleasure as well as his own, so he gives me a finger to bite d
hile the as my orgasm threatens to overwhelm me. “Come right now,” he den
scream around his finger, biting down so hard I feel the skin break, a
all the a roar, he shoots his cum deep inside me.

.” And I go limp in his arms and can feel his own exhausted muscles tre
at the keep us from collapsing. Panting and dizzy with ecstasy, he holds me
me. All my broken, burned and ruined pieces that now have new life b
/ breath into them.

e. He gently lays down, bringing me with him to lay on his chest. V
e, Finn, there, listening to the chorus of night sounds, bathed in silver moonlig
pinned our breathing slows and the chill catches up to us. He clutches me tigh
acing is I shiver, and as if reading my mind, he whispers with nothing but de
elp but “You make me so fucking whole, Effie.”

ie front

- strained
1. E-GIRLS ARE RUINING MY LIFE—CORPSE, Savage Gasp |
 2. Chills – Dark Version—Mickey Valen, Joey Myron

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CHAPTER 25

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CHAPTER 25

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Water Lilies

Finn

I wake to Effie tracing my chest tattoo. ¹ She lightly follows the v lines of the Celtic knot, and I pretend I am still asleep. I don't know Maybe because I don't want this moment to end. Her soft breath against my side with every steady breath she takes. My arm is wrapped around her back and her silky hair drapes over it. The birds are here new day outside the window, and even with my eyes closed, I can picture morning sun coloring the loft a hazy gold.

“Good morning.” Her voice is husky and sweet, thick with sleep.

“I'm asleep,” I mumble with a small teasing smile.

“You're drumming on my hip,” she laughs, and I squeeze my hand against her naked hip, unaware I was tapping, but not surprised. “Have you noticed often you do that? It's like you're trying to communicate in morse code or something.”

I open my eyes and look down at her face. Her dark eyelashes and honeyed brown eyes and a touch of pink from sleep colors her cheeks because I am.”

She tilts her head and rolls onto her elbow at my side. “You are what

I tuck a loose lock behind her ear and fight the urge to keep my s
little longer. The words are loose on my tongue, ready to spill but s
throat goes dry. I meet her gaze and swallow the last of my resistance.
morse code.”

She perks up, her interest piqued. “Really? What does it mean?” Sh
at me with a love I can’t even begin to comprehend, but at the sam
understand inherently. My love for her is woven into the very fibers
being, and I want her to know how deeply she has touched me.

“Water lilies.” Her mouth opens on a silent gasp. My throat ties i
knots feeling so exposed. But now that I’ve started, I want to clav
vinding anything left unsaid between us, so I continue. “It was the first and las
w why. ever felt true peace. That night with you. Since I didn’t have you,
ts push became my calm.”
rapped

“Stop.” Her lips tug in an unsure smile, her eyes well with tears and
lding a have to ask, I know they are the sunflower type.
ture the

“I can’t.” I roll us over and hold myself above her. “I can’t stop
you. I don’t think I ever did.” She clutches my face and pulls my mout
to hers. I fall into our kiss, trying to make up for ten years. My nos
over her tear-streaked cheeks, and I can’t control the overwhelming
exploding in my chest.
l on her
ed how

It’s beyond happiness, beyond lust, beyond this fucking life. She’s i
code or this lifetime and the next. Suddenly I’m questioning what’s ten year
we have forever?
rim her

I can hardly let her go when she pulls us apart, breathing heavy a
s. “It’s welling with emotion. “I love you, Finneas Fox.” My lungs somehow
t?” way to breathe, despite the weight of her words slamming into me v
force of a thousand comets.

secret a My jaw clenches painfully and my throat tightens into a tight ball. I still look away from her, my entire world between the palms of my hands. “Usingreaches out and brushes her thumb across my cheek. “I hope the sunflower tears.”

She looks I sniff and swallow the knot in my throat, falling forward and I lose myself in the crook of her neck. “Fuck, I love you so much.” I feel like I’m breaking apart, my ribs cracking open and my heart floating out to her.

She wraps her arms around my head and shoulders, hugging me to herself. But fuck, it’s not close enough. I kiss her neck, a burst of salty sweat apart from last night on my tongue. And I want more. I inhale the scent of her hair. I kiss a path across her collarbone, licking over my blood, and suckle her nipple.

She arches into me and threads her fingers through my hair. “Show me what you don’t she says on a breathy moan and reaches between our bodies to encircle my cock, directing it to her cunt.

My broad head slots against her pussy, and I grab her face, kissing her deeply as I sink into her, swallowing her moans like they are air. There’s nothing hurried or rough about the way I slowly rock into her.

She clings to my shoulders, biting down hard on my lip when I kiss her sweet spot inside her. Our breathless pants fill the space between our bodies. My tender pleasure skates up and down my spine.

If last night was a wildfire, this morning is the warmth from a hearth. A foundation of a home. A home that we have found with and in each other. Her pussy flutters around me and her kisses become pleading. I find a pleasure spirals. I keep my strokes passionate and intentional, her body pulling my own release forward. Our breathing becomes choppy as we share one set of lungs, our desire and euphoria cresting together.

I can't ignore behind my eyes as I come, but I can't look away from the
ds. She dancing across her face. Watching her brows pinch together and her
ose are falls slack on a silent cry as she comes with me is a beauty that would
the northern lights.

pouring My limbs become liquid, and I melt into her, falling to the side and
like I'm her into me. My hands wrap around her soft belly as her ass snuggles
s. crook of my hips. I catch my breath, slowly running my fingers through
tight tangled hair. My hand snags on something and I huff a laugh as I pull
y sweatout of her hair.

her hair "I think I owe you a long hot shower." I hold out the twig in front of
on her see.

She twists around in my arms to face me. "I'd say so. You have
w me," your cheek. But I don't really care..." She raises her brows with a
r cle my smile. "About that or the mud on the sheets."

ing her

r itself.



hit the

lips as

Steam fills the shower, and I rinse the shampoo out as Effie wrings her
th. The already done bathing. "By the way, what does Juicy tracksuits and St
ner. DVDs mean?"

as her She looks at me and laughs, a cute drop of water sliding down her n
r body had to do with a story Hadis told me. I needed to prove the te
s if we genuinely coming from me."

Sparks "I'd like to hear it sometime. The story."

rapture “Okay.” She smiles and gives me a quick peck as she pulls the
mouthcurtain back. I slap her ass on her way out. “Hey!”

ld rival “Spousal privilege.” I shrug smugly and step back under the hot stu
water.

pulling I’m finishing toweling off in the bathroom and just stepping into m
into the when the sound of Effie’s scream from the other room makes my bl
ugh her cold. My heart leaps out of my goddamn rib cage as I rush out
l a twig bathroom to see William Campbell pinning Effie to the wall with his

hand wrapped around her throat. His other hand holds a gun to her
f her to and I see red. A yell rips from my throat, “*I’ll fucking kill you.*”

I race across the loft, ripping him off her. My fist latches onto l
mud on hand, and we fall to the floor as I try to wrestle it from his grip. My b
a proud pumping harder than it ever has, nothing but white-hot rage coursing t
me. “Effie, the truck!” I holler and he manages to roll on top of me
struggle. “The keys...under the mat...I got it started—*Oof!*” I
distracted trying to track Effie and make sure she gets out safely t
bastard is able to knee me in the ribs with all his weight. I’ve had
broken ribs to know I just got one as my lungs gasp for air and pain i
my side.

“*Finn!*” Effie screams, and I can’t afford to look at her right now,
er hair, making contact with Campbell’s jaw, but he still has the upper hand.

ir Wars “Go. Now!” I yell, trying to flip us over with a leg lock. The fuck
have had some wrestling training because he skillfully blocks, and I
lose. “It manage to knock the gun from his grip.

xt was It skitters across the floor, and we both scramble after it. He lands a
my face and my head is whipped back, giving him just enough advan

shower reach the gun before me. He grabs it and leaps to his feet. Both his
shake, but he trains the weapon on me as I'm sprawled on the floor.

ream of I slowly sit up with my hands raised, needing to see if Effie made

The fist around my lungs loosens realizing she isn't in the barn and I
y jeans to bring my attention to the gun to my head. I lazily turn my gaze
lood go washed-up frat bro in front of me, feeling much calmer now that I know
of this safe.

fucking "Rough night?" I look him up and down with fake pity. He's still in
temple, from the wedding, his bow tie loose around his neck and his shirt un

His hair is disheveled and not just from our fight. His eyes have the
his gun look of someone who's been up all night drinking.

lood is "You—" His voice trembles with anger and adrenaline. "You've
through everything from me."

in the I leisurely wipe the blood from my nose with the back of my
'm too inspecting it with an unimpressed shrug before turning back up to
that the "You're gonna have to be more specific."

enough He roars in frustration and lunges forward, pressing the barrel
radiates forehead. "Where should I start? You killed my brother—"

"Um," I hold up my finger and interrupt, "I thought he was still miss
my fist "You goddamn know he isn't still alive," he growls, and pistol wh
across the face.

er must I flex my jaw back and forth, then yawn, his eyes glow red
barely indifference. "Sorry, you were saying?"

"You killed my brother—I don't care what the police say, I don't
foot in there's no body, I know it. You framed my father, destroyed our rep
itage to and stole my wife."

"I'm gonna have to stop you there, technically you stole *my wife*."

s hands “You arrogant bastard, I’m going to kill you!” He jams the muzzle
into my skull and—
e it out. “Not before I blow your head off.” My eyes shoot behind him to see
’m abledwarfed by the giant shotgun she has pointed right at her erstwhile gro
on the
low she

1. Dandelions – slowed + reverb—Ruth B., slater |

his tux

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e taken

7 hand,

to him,

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sing?”

lips me

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i’t care

utation,

“You arrogant bastard, I’m going to kill you!” He jams the muzzle firmer into my skull and—

“Not before I blow your head off.” My eyes shoot behind him to see Effie dwarfed by the giant shotgun she has pointed right at her erstwhile groom.

1. Dandelions – slowed + reverb—Ruth B., slater |

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CHAPTER 26

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CHAPTER 26

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Euphemia Fox

Effie

I escape the loft with the sounds of Finn and William's fight echoing. Hearing each grunt and punch feels like wind knocked from my lungs. I run to the garage, my torn-up feet from last night splitting over the stones and gravel.

I don't even consider getting in the truck. I just got him back, the fucking way I'm leaving him now. Not when he's fought for me again and again. Not when he's finally given me something I've always craved: safety.

My family blew up his world ten years ago. I won't let him become another casualty in my family's continued struggle for power.

I tear open every drawer and cabinet in the garage, knowing there has to be a weapon somewhere in all this rubble. There's not a single room in a parent's house that doesn't have a stashed gun, and I'm certain Finn is no exception. The same.

Fucking hell, there has to be. And if not—fuck it, I will go in there swinging with a goddamn socket wrench.

I hear a loud boom from up above that sounds distinctly like a body hitting the ground and my heart races. I throw open the door of a tall, free-

cabinet, telling myself if this one comes up empty, I'm going with a wrench.

I nearly scream with relief when I find an old shotgun with a tapered barrel and wood handle tucked into the corner. I frantically search for cartridges, fumbling to get them in the barrel. I take off manically again, hoping I'm not too late.

I creep back to the loft. I hear Finn taunting William and can tell by the way his voice shakes in response that he's one more insult away from my hands are slick with sweat and my heart pounds in my ears as I reach the top of the stairs.

choing. William jabs his gun against Finn's forehead and my legs almost give out. I lungs. I terror like I've never known poisoning my blood stream. "You are a craggly bastard, I'm going to kill you!"

re's no I slot the shotgun under my armpit and raise the barrel, willing my hands to remain steady. "Not before I blow your head off."

ain and Both sets of eyes spin to me, and I feel an eerie sense of calm. I safety. straighten my aim on William's chest. "Step the fuck back from my husband." become

as to be His eyes narrow in disbelief and his mouth falls open and closed in my lost response. His stunned silence is all Finn needs to leap up and knock the gun from his hand. Their arms tangle with each other as they grapple, will be and knees flying. My mind is racing a mile a minute trying to figure out how to help but knowing I don't have time to sit and think. n there

I just act, my need to see Finn safe loud and blaring, driving my movements. I close the distance and spin the rifle around to wail him in the back of the head with the butt. He goes limp, collapsing to the side like a dead weight. tanding

With the Finn scuttles over to the pistol on the floor before dashing to
yanking the shotgun from my hands. He checks the chamber, discarding
rusted cartridges before pocketing them and throwing the empty weapon on t
rch for He rounds on me, tucking the pistol in his waistband and clutching r
printing between his hands.

“Jesus Christ, Ef, do you even know how to use that thing?”

I in the “No.” I exhale shakily. “Thank god I didn’t have to.”

1 firing. He releases a laugh mingled with a sigh and tucks my head into hi
und the “Fucking mad woman.”

ive out,

rrogant



ands to

m as I We work together to tie William to one of our wood dining chairs. He
om my up halfway through, and I get the pleasure of holding his own gun to h
—sans bullets after Finn insisted I wouldn’t be touching a loaded v
with a until he teaches me how to “not fucking kill myself with one.” V
ock the scowls bitterly but stopped spewing obscenities once Finn threatenec
elbowshis tongue out.

out how “I’ll be right back.” Finn gives my shoulder a reassuring squeeze
walking out the door, returning shortly with a hunting knife.

ng my William’s eyes widen as Finn sits down on the couch next to the
1 in the toying with the tip of the blade with his finger. “Which hand was it
ke dead slowly raises his head to level me with his stony stare. “Which hand

me and have around your neck?" My stomach drops with his line of questioning. I can't deny the sick thrill that races up my spine too.

he bed. "That one," I say when he points the blade at his left hand.

ny face "Very well." He stands and pulls out his switchblade from his pocket. My mouth waters remembering that the last time I saw it was when he used it to cut off my wedding dress before chasing and thoroughly fucking me like a wild beast in the forest. William's wrist is tied to the arm of the chair. Finn pushes the handle of the hunting knife into his palm so his fingers are open on the wood.

I watch his breathing deepen as he looks on, frightened, both out of suspense to what Finn is going to do next. Finn stabs the switchblade into William's middle finger and into the wood, like a viper sinking in his teeth with a blood curdling scream from him. I clutch my hand to my mouth as bile crawls up my throat at the same time sparks of vengeful intrigue ignite in my system.

he wakes "I don't like anyone laying their hands on my wife, Campbell." His head drops to a low and dark timber. "I don't like it at all."

weapon Finn notches the hunting knife at his wrist, and he begins to scream. William wails. My shoulders roll down my back and I set my jaw, preparing to yell. I don't want to cutman be relieved of his hand.

As Finn slowly cuts into his flesh, I think he's purposely dragging the blade across the skin before him. But then, to sounds of agony, Finn begins to work the tip of the blade into the slit at his wrist and lifts the skin from his palm.

the chair, Completely undisturbed by the ear-shattering screams being torn from William's throat, Finn continues his bloody craft. Methodically, he peels every inch of skin, peeling it away from the muscle on his palm and

ing, butfinger until it dangles like a fleshy glove around the switchblade still through his finger.

Finn straightens back up after hunching over his work and rolls his ket. Myif stretching from a nap. Wordlessly, he saunters over to the kitchened it tobegins washing his hand, along with the blade.

e like a My feet remain glued to the floorboards, and I can't seem to tear n air, andaway from the raw, meaty lump dripping blood over the chair arm as splaythe floor. William is slumped in the chair, sweaty and pale. His

flutter, and his breathing is an odd mix between heavy and shallow f us insimilarities to Hudson are exceptionally striking at this moment. I can throughout wonder if Hudson's hand would look just like this skinned.

s fangs, I hear the faucet shut off and watch Finn walk casually back over uth anddrying his hands on a white towel before looking up. The darkness in l e shockslams into me but it doesn't scare me. It compels me because I ki

depths. Like the serenity and wonder that accompanies the terrifying s voiceyou get looking into the black of the deepest ocean. The deeper the d the fiercer the love.

, plead, He pulls the handgun from his waistband and holds it out to me, watch afirst. "I know I said you weren't touching a gun until I taught you how one, but if you want it, the kill is yours."

; it out. I look at the gun, then at the bleeding mess of a man in the chair e underback to Finn, letting a small smile peeking through. "I have a better ide

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ny eyes 1It's Sunday, ten a.m. Which means my father will be having espresso
nd onto playing chess at Nonna Rosa's after mass. When we arrive, the front
eyelids unlocked as restaurant staff are still coming and going with n
w. His deliveries before opening in a few hours. We barge in, Finn keeping V
n't help moving with a gun between his shoulder blades as he shuffles hold
bandaged hand.

' to me, I used to love coming here as a kid. It felt like family, the wait
his eyes cooks spending time at our table and always bringing out my favorite
now its without ever having to order. For dessert, when my parents got espresso
ig chill kids got vanilla ice cream in the cutest glass cups in small, melon-ball
arkness I used to like stacking the little globes into a snowman while my brother
would try to fit them all in their mouths at one time.

handle But as I grew up and realized the insidious underbelly of the place
v to use its charm. Men would disappear into the walk-in and come out hours
beaten and bloody. There were always groups of young soldiers who
: I turn at me with lecherous eyes and crude remarks as if somehow that was
ea." them their boss's daughter. This is a sanctuary for bad men, but it's
been for me.

Today, I don't feel any of that trepidation or unease of the hunted. I
I walk in like the hunter. I head straight for the walk-in freezer and
surprised to see a fresh-faced recruit standing in the back.

I look him in the eyes and order, “Open it.” His gaze bounces between the men behind me with a concerned and indecisive look. So I give little help deciding, I grab William’s wrist and he groans in pain as I wrap his bandaged hand at the guard. “Open the fucking hatch or you’ll be my husband’s next craft project.”

“M—Ma’am,” he sputters and hurriedly gets to lifting the floor panel. I’ve never been one to make a scene, constantly shrinking myself neatly in the background. But being the center of Finneas Fox’s world made me no longer content to stay in the shadows. So I’ll make a scene of a fucking entrance. I push William to the top of the steps and kick him back of the knees to send him tumbling down.

There’s chaotic shouting down below as he crumbles to the floor. I speak easy. I walk down unhurriedly behind him. My resolve hardens as I hear my father curse roughly in Italian. I step onto the floor as my father and his associates are all in various phases of reaching for their weapons. My unexpected arrival. Cigar smoke thickens the air and mingles sourly with the smell of fresh coffee.

“Father.” His eyes meet mine and for the first time in my life, I think I see the look of utter surprise on his face. I don’t have to look behind me to know Finn’s got my back. His presence and strength permeate the room.

“*Euphemia*,” he gasps and contorts his face with a sneer.

“I always knew you weren’t a good man. Or honest or loyal. But whatever was ever anything I respected about you, it was that you always did your dirty work.” He narrows his eyes in a silent threat. A gesture that would make me cower, now looks like a fragile and desperate attempt to intimidate.

“So imagine my surprise, when William here—” I kick his huddle still on the ground and he moans. “—said that he knew where to find

een me because *you* told him. Not only that, but you also suggested he ‘go get him ahead of his owed.’”

ave his He opens his mouth, but I hold out my hand. “Hudson Campbell is my Governor Campbell is going to prison for the rest of his miserable life.

William here,” I look down at him in disgust, “isn’t even worth my goddamn time—”

lf to fit “You’re nothing but a whore—”

orld has “*I’m speaking.*” I hold his stare, daring him to interrupt me again. “...and only reason I bothered returning your trash is to tell you this is the last time you meddle with my life, with my marriage.”

“Euphem—”

of the “Try again and I will put you down like a rabid dog.”

ns as I His mouth opens and closes like a fucking fish, red and steam rising from his face. He snarls, spittle flying. “You’re no daughter of mine.”

s at the His hands ball into fists at his sides, and I know with confidence that he will never hurt me again. “You’re right. I’m not a Luciano. *I’m a Fox.*”

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1. you should see me in a crown—Billie Eilish |

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because *you* told him. Not only that, but you also suggested he ‘go get what he’s owed.’”

He opens his mouth, but I hold out my hand. “Hudson Campbell is dead. Governor Campbell is going to prison for the rest of his miserable life. And William here,” I look down at him in disgust, “isn’t even worth my goddamn time—”

“You’re nothing but a whore—”

“*I’m speaking.*” I hold his stare, daring him to interrupt me again. “The only reason I bothered returning your trash is to tell you this is the last time. This is the last time you meddle with my life, with my marriage.”

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“Try again and I will put you down like a rabid dog.”

His mouth opens and closes like a fucking fish, red and steam raising on his face. He snarls, spittle flying. “You’re no daughter of mine.”

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Epilogue

Effie

T *hree months later*

The door to my newly built studio opens and Stella pops her head in. “You ready, babe?”

“Yeah, almost. Can you help me with this?” I hold up a gold necklace.

“Course.” She comes in, pausing to look at the canvases on the wall. The setting sun washes the studio in a warm golden light and Stella looks at the masterpieces in awe. “Wow.”

I tilt my head, still finding new things to appreciate in the paintings I bought at the gala. The colors are so vibrant and layered, the brushwork so crude in places and seamless in others.

Stella’s nimble fingers clasps my necklace around my neck, then she looks at me a once over. “Just gorgeous.” Her smile is warm and infectious. She offers me her arm. I loop mine around her elbow.

¹We built the studio on the farm just a short walk from the lake. The string lights hung in the trees light our path, and my stomach is awash with butterflies. I opted to go barefoot, something about it just felt right. Th

floor is cool under my feet and fireflies flickering between the trunks to
a whimsical feel into the air.

“Are you nervous?” she asks me as we get closer to the dock, and I
laugh.

“No, I feel like I’ve done this a hundred times already.”

Though as we round a small bend in the path and the dock comes
view, I’m not sure that’s honest. My heart beats faster as I make out
frame at the end. Harlow is the only one bringing a pop of color to the
in a slick, red dress. All the boys are dressed in black like it’s a funeral
than a wedding. Well everyone except Alfie who, when he turns around
watch us approach, is wearing a pink striped tie with his navy suit.

My eyes lock with Finn’s, and my breath is snatched from my lungs
in the dimming daylight, I can see the vibrant jade of his eyes and
clenches when he takes in my white, flowing dress. We step onto the
our footsteps making a hollow thump, and he drags his hand over his
with a slight shake of his head.

I can’t believe you’re my wife.

His words from the gala echo in my head, and my chest feels
realizing that after tonight, I finally will be, with no strings attached.
and him, forever. The way it was always meant to be.

Cash stands at the end of the dock next to Finn, his hands clasped
of him.

My eyes get misty as Stella walks me down the aisle—if I can even
that, with it being so short. She hands me off to Finn after a quick
squeeze.

I look down at the water and my first tear falls at what I see. (A
floating in the pond in between the lilies, lighting up the water, with g

breathes reflections dancing on the ripples. My bottom lip trembles, and he reaches out to brush his thumb against it as if we are the only two people here. He has one hand tucked to his chin while the other taps a gentle tattoo on my palm: water lily.

“Well,” Cash begins, “Let’s hope this is the last time we have to do this.” I snicker, but Finn cuts his brother a glare. “Alright, let’s get to it.”

To start the handfasting ceremony, Cash pulls out a green twisted cord. He has Finn hold one end of the cord and wraps the rest around our hands twice before handing it to the other end. The entire process, Finn continues to rub light circles inside of my wrist.

“Finneas.” Cash nods to him, and he takes a wedding band from his pocket with his free left hand. My heart skips a beat as I hold out my left hand. He slides the ring to my first knuckle.

Finn licks his bottom lip and meets my eyes. “I’ve made a lot of mistakes, but loving you was never one of them. I may not be a gentleman, but I’m worthy of gentle love, and I vow to give you all you deserve and more.” As he slips the ring down my finger, I struggle to see all the ugliness just past as anything but gifts because they carved the path to this moment.

“I never wanted a gentleman. I only wanted you.” I give his forehead a squeeze, and the taut muscles flex under my hand as he squeezes me back.

My throat constricts and warmth blooms in my chest as Cash passes me Finn’s ring. As he holds out his left hand for me, my eyes dance over a fresh water lily tattoo now covering the back of it. I find our story to be like the plant itself: incredibly resilient, still able to bloom even in the coldest winters.

My tongue twists around the emotion trapped in my throat, and I v

reachessunflower tears to wait until after my vows. “You’ve shown me the be ere. Hedarkness, the strength in myself, and the perfection in ruin.”

on my As I glide the ring to the base of his finger, Cash pronounces, “ power vested in me by Instant-Online-Ordination-dot-com, I now pro this.” Iyou husband and wife, *again*.”

Our friends and family clap, and Finn quietly clears his throat, givir ord anda nudging look. “Oh, right...you may kiss the bride!” Heat floods my old oneas Finn dives a hand behind my neck and through my hair before dipp ling melow with a kiss that burns through my entire body.

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and and In the time since we first stepped on this dock eleven years ago, spent so much time trying to find the razor fine line between love ar mistakesto stubborn and afraid to choose a side. When in reality, the line you areexisted. I’ve always been his and he’s always been mine.

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sunflower tears to wait until after my vows. “You’ve shown me the beauty in darkness, the strength in myself, and the perfection in ruin.”

As I glide the ring to the base of his finger, Cash pronounces, “By the power vested in me by Instant-Online-Ordination-dot-com, I now pronounce you husband and wife, *again*.”

Our friends and family clap, and Finn quietly clears his throat, giving Cash a nudging look. “Oh, right...you may kiss the bride!” Heat floods my cheeks as Finn dives a hand behind my neck and through my hair before dipping me low with a kiss that burns through my entire body.

Everyone roars in applause and cheers, and he pulls me back up but is in no rush to end it. I lean into him, feeling every layer of heartache, pain, trials, and tribulations it took to get here melt away.

In the time since we first stepped on this dock eleven years ago, we’ve spent so much time trying to find the razor fine line between love and hate, too stubborn and afraid to choose a side. When in reality, the line never existed. I’ve always been his and he’s always been mine.



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Dear reader,

Hey, thanks for reading to the end! Finn and Effie hold a special place in my heart and hope they stay in yours too. If you enjoyed it, it means the world to me if you could take a minute to review this book on Amazon. Even a one-sentence review helps! Reviews are truly the backbone to support indie authors, and I appreciate every single one. I know you and other readers do too.

Effie and Finn continue to make Bartlett Farms home...To read the extended *spicy* epilogue, visit SummerOtoole.com/HateMeExtra and get a sneak peek at who the next Fox brother to find love might be.

Feel free to reach out to share with me your theories, reactions or anything else you liked (or didn't) about this book on Instagram [@SummerOtoole](https://www.instagram.com/SummerOtoole) or TikTok [@SummerOtoole](https://www.tiktok.com/@SummerOtoole). Or we can go old school and shoot me an email at hello@summerotoole.com.

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Shani, I can't put into words how amazing you are and how much on your friendship and brilliant brain.

Val for keeping my life together. You're not only an incredible friend, a terrific PA and I literally couldn't do this without you.

I'd like to recognize the bravery of Iranian women. Hadis, one of the characters in *Les Arnaqueuses*, was inspired by one of the protestors whose life fighting for women's rights in Iran. While her story is fictional, threads of her life woven into the story are inspired by the complexities of Iranian women and their immense bravery, strength and selflessness.

Kimiya, thank you for helping me bring Hadis's character to life. May she forever be alive and happy in fiction.

Kelsey, I don't know what I would do without you. Thanks for being my best friend.

To my FHH, you all are the absolute best. Thank you Haylee for the crooner tunes, Angie for the excited screeches, and Mary for the descriptions and endless facts. I turned to you guys so many times and you were always there for me. Your support is unfathomable, and I consider myself so lucky.

To my Gabby, my forever valentine.

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