

A movie poster for the film 'Hitch'. It features a shirtless man with a short buzz cut and numerous tattoos, looking down in a dark, moody field under a cloudy sky. The word 'HITCH' is written in large, bold, red capital letters across the center of his chest. Below it, the text 'a dark stalker romance' is written in a smaller, white, sans-serif font. At the bottom, the name 'AUDREY RUSH' is written in large, white, sans-serif capital letters.

HITCH

a dark stalker romance

AUDREY RUSH

HITCH

A DARK STALKER ROMANCE

AUDREY RUSH

Hitch: A Dark Stalker Romance by Audrey Rush

Independently Published

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any persons appearing on the cover image of this book are models and do not have any connection to the contents of this book. This book is intended for mature audiences only. Any activities represented in this book are fictional fantasies only.

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*for my husband
may our darkest fantasies come true*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This content notification contains spoilers.

This book follows the romance of a murderous stalker and a stripper. The stalker will do anything to get what he wants, with or *without* permission. As such, this story contains spice that lacks approval. This couple also indulges in dark games featuring weapons and blood. Additionally, the murderous stalker shares the stripper to fulfill *her* fantasies, but realizes that this is in extreme conflict with his jealous and possessive nature. Thus, he vows to “take care” of the men who have experienced her.

Furthermore, this story also contains blackmail, drugs, murder, sex work, and mentions of family trauma. For more information, please visit the author's website.

Reader discretion is advised.

HITCH

CHAPTER 1

DUANE

six months earlier

THERE SHE IS—A SPEC ON THE SIDE OF THE ROAD, AN ANT I COULD CRUSH with my fingertip. But that don't stop me from staring. Black hair runs down her back in a heap of waves and tangles, dark eyes rimmed with black makeup. Amber skin. Full puckered lips sucking the music right out of the radio. Her jeans are cut off at a jagged angle like she cut them herself, her ass hanging out the back like she don't mind if anyone looks. In fact, she encourages it. The kind of woman you can have a good time with and never ask her name. A knot in a ball of rope where all you need is a good tug and she'll roll over every which way for you.

Her hips sway as she walks inside the only gas station for fifteen miles. The convenience store's fluorescent lights beam down on her like she's the star on a movie scene.

I drive past, knowing that she's a good way to get lost. I don't need that tonight. I know what's in the bed of my truck, and I need to get rid of it.

But as my truck rumbles past, the yellow lines on the road transform into visions of black hair wrapped around my fist, makeup bleeding down her cheeks as those dark eyes look up at me. My head spins. Maybe it's the fact that I haven't been with a woman in a long fucking time. Maybe it's because of what I just got done doing that makes me ache for my length between those pretty puckered lips.

After what I've done tonight, I make an exception. Might as well break another dry spell. Whether it's blood or come, everyone deserves a reprieve every now and then.

I swing the truck around and head back to the gas station.

My truck's got half a tank, but I fill her up anyway. My boots carry me languidly inside, the rubber soles thudding on the floor. Dirt lays a trail around my shoes, tarnishing the white tiles. Doo-wop music plays, bringing in all of that fifties nostalgia. Bright lights illuminate the space as if to prove that this is a clean, honorable establishment. Even the aisles of chips and candy bars are lined up like they're ready for an order, except there's no one in the store, but me. Everything's immaculate, exactly the last place you'd expect a woman like my little ant to come wandering into.

But there ain't no sign of my girl.

I head for the corner to find a bathroom, assuming that's where she went, but it's all boxes and cases of coke.

I'm about to head back to my truck—I ought to make sure the tarp is securely fastened so no one sees what's underneath—when I catch a glimpse of a door leading outside. Slightly ajar. Calling out for another visitor.

Waiting for someone like me.

The door swings open to the back of the building. The moon is full, the night freckled with starlight, the cicadas serenading their lullabies. Still, I don't see my girl. But then on the backside of the building, I catch another open door, leading to a dark room. Like a white rabbit, I follow the path, bringing myself into a bathroom. Dim fluorescent lights decorate the place, but the only one that works is above the sink, leaving the two stalls pitch-black.

But I forget all about that, because between the smell of piss and shit, I can smell *her*, that nauseatingly sweet vanilla drifting through the dirt and depravity. Graffiti and muck cover the walls. Posters ripped in half are glued to the ceiling. And phone numbers are scribbled in the shadows. The damn near opposite of the store inside.

Both the stalls have floor-to-ceiling barriers, and that don't help with the lack of light. I check the far stall, but it's locked, so I go into the one next to the sink. Inside, I find a hole right at my hip level. After a while, my eyes adjust and I can see a patch of amber skin through that opening.

Then her tongue sticks through the hole, and those cherry-red lips are suctioned and ready for me.

So Todd wasn't lying. There *is* a glory hole on Mariposa Highway.

I unzip my jeans, my rod angry and red. Blood pumps with recklessness in my veins, surging straight to my groin at this anonymous act of perversion.

I don't even know for sure if it's my black-haired vixen on the other side of the wall. Could be a man. Could be a woman. Could be someone not on the binary at all. But the excitement of it gets to me. This person is a complete stranger, and I'm about to trust myself inside of their mouth. It's idiotic. Dangerous, even. No sane man would do it.

But goddamn, I want that mouth on me.

The tip of my length scrapes against the hole's rough edges, sending a subtle jolt of pain to my spine, but that don't stop me. I press myself against the wall, letting my cheek and forearms rest against the sticky surface, squeezing the base of length. My balls tighten against my boxers.

And then that stranger's tongue settles on my tip, simmering me in a pool of paradise. My eyes roll back into my head as she swallows me up. It's like getting wrapped in a glove, the way her tongue takes me in. She tries to take me deep—a gagging noise blubbers out of her mouth—and that *need* sets me off. I thrust against the wall, rattling the whole fucking stall. It's like an earthquake about to break loose, but I shove forward again, the desire for her throat overwhelming me. I plant my hands on the walls for leverage, grime coating my fingertips, my nails tearing into the paint-caked plastic.

Then she takes it, past that dangling flesh, down her throat. Pleasure destroys my last sense of control and I *unleash*, fucking the hole in the wall, because I need more from her. I need her mouth around me until she chokes so bad, tears ruin her makeup, proving that I'm destroying her. Her hands grasp my length, a flash of chipped black polish coating her fingernails, her red lips so full and soft, even this tiny glimpse of her makes her look like a depraved angel.

Her teeth barely nick my skin, a sharp bite of pain jumping through my bloodstream. Invigorated by her teasing, I thrust against that hole harder and harder, until the wall shakes like it's about to fall down. My girl gasps so sweet and fearful that I growl a deep and guttural noise. She moans back, just as beastly for me. Her lips reach for my length once again, so eager to please. And at that, the spasms take hold of me, and I pull back, exploding through that hole, no doubt coating her tongue and lips. She licks me up, greedy little thing, moaning again at the taste, and I let out a sigh. My head spins all over again.

Within seconds, the door for the next stall crashes open and slams shut, like the dark-haired devil couldn't wait to get out, possibly second-guessing her life choices right about now. I don't blame her. I honestly never thought

I'd get that lucky sticking myself in a hole like that. I ought to have gotten the whole thing bitten off, trusting myself with a stranger. But I chuckle, rinsing my hands of it. What's done is done.

At the sink, I twist the handle, but the faucet stays dry. I wipe my hands on my jeans, letting those drips of come mix with other brown and red stains on the fabric. After the night I've had, stains are the last thing I'm worried about. Nobody's going to question someone in my line of work. You expect that kind of thing when you own a farm.

Once I close up the gas tank, I get in the truck, humming to myself. The engine buzzes to life and we return to the road, back to the main task at hand.

But then I see that little knot of a woman on the side of the road again. I turn off the radio.

Ass jiggling. Black hair shimmering. Those red-stained lips.

She turns over her shoulder, her eyes lit up with the headlights, wiping her mouth on the back of her hand. She puts out her thumb, asking for a ride.

I pull over in front of her. This way, she's got a chance to listen to her gut instincts and do the right thing by going in the opposite direction. She doesn't need to get into a truck with a man like me. Anyone with half of a brain would know better than that.

But the little devil comes forward, opening the passenger door.

The heat of her sex swarms me. A hint of body odor—don't blame her, she's probably been hiking a while—and a whole lot of vanilla, like she bathes in ice cream. A hint of musk on her lips.

My musk.

I know it's her.

I pull back onto the road.

"Where you heading?" I ask.

"Stockton."

After that, it's silent for a while. The blue tarp flaps in the back of the truck, the ropes binding it down. I don't bother with the radio; with a woman like her next to me, I don't need anything else messing with my heart rate. Her legs spread out on the seat, her thighs thick and decadent, and she tips to the side, her cleavage pushing against her arm, barely contained by her black tank top. The seam of her shorts pinches right in the middle of that valley between her thighs, giving away all the angles that show exactly how she's made down there. I lick my lips.

She meets my gaze. Her brown eyes are filled with burning wood,

drawing me closer to her fire. Asking if I like what I see.

“What’s in Stockton?” I ask.

“A strip club.”

Double Take, the only joint like that for miles. I know the owner. The same man who told me about the glory hole.

“Some people might say you’d be getting into trouble going on that way,” I say. “You stay away from places like that. Wouldn’t want to see you end up in handcuffs.”

“Maybe I’m done with men telling me what to do,” she says.

My jaw unhinges for a second, but then I can’t help it: I chuckle. Didn’t expect a phrase so defiant from her, especially directed toward me. She’s got some fight in her; I’ll give her that. But the little devil doesn’t know what I’ve done tonight. I wouldn’t mind putting another body in the back of my truck, especially one as pretty as hers.

“Then why do it?” I ask.

The air puffs through her cheeks like she’s angry that I’m even questioning her.

“Why not?” she finally says. “No one’s tying me down anymore.”

“Ah,” I say. “So it’s an ex. Typical, ain’t it? Must be one unlucky son of a bitch.”

“This has nothing to do with any piece of shit ex.”

“You think I’m stupid?” I ask. She raises a brow at me, and I smirk. “A woman like you don’t find herself on the side of the road, taking rides from strangers, *unless* she’s got an agenda. You got another plan under all that frustration. I can see it in your eyes.”

For a moment, she focuses on the road, the headlights shining on those yellow stripes like they’re made of the sun. Cornfields stretch up on either side of us, rustling from the speed of the truck.

“Now tell me,” I drawl, “what did he do to lose someone as good as *you*?”

Her bright red lips press into a faint side-smile, pleased with the unexpected compliment. My bulge fills with blood, thinking of those red lips wrapped around me all over again. Does she know that she sucked me off? That I *know* it’s her?

The pleasure fades from her expression.

“He said I’d be homeless without him,” she says under her breath. “That I can’t make it on my own. That I have no skills.” She crosses her arms. “But

he's the one with no skills."

"That so?"

"I had to fake it *every* time."

My length pulses at that thought. A woman like my little devil, neglected by some man who doesn't know how to give her pleasure? That ain't right.

"He wouldn't even touch me. He just used these vibrators on me, thinking if it was anywhere *near* my clit, it would get me off," she scoffs. "But I know what I want, and I'm not going to sit around and wait for it. Not when I don't need him anymore. I don't need *anyone*."

And then it hits me. *That's* why she found herself in a glory hole. Her man wouldn't touch her, so she found a way to make another man lose control.

Me.

The tarp flies open, the plastic whipping against the wind like a bird losing velocity.

"Shit," I mutter.

"I'll fix it," she says.

"Don't—"

But she's already reaching through the back window, grabbing the tarp.

She freezes when she sees it.

A lifeless body, lying face up toward the night. The speckled sky reflecting in the corpse's vacant eyes.

She turns back to me cautiously. I keep my eyes on the road, my knuckles straining white against the wheel.

"Listen now," I say calmly. "This ain't nothing you need to concern yourself with."

She smothers her duffel bag against her chest like it can protect her from me.

"Don't make this hard on yourself," I warn.

Her eyes dart to the gun in my holster, as if she's just now noticing it. I lean to the side, ready to keep her pinned in place. The little devil needs to think harder before she gets into a truck with a stranger next time, though it's looking like there won't be a next time.

But she opens the truck door and rolls onto the asphalt, straight into a muddy ditch.

I curse under my breath, swinging the truck around and parking along the road. The corn stalks whisper to each other as she disappears inside their

arms. I follow her in. The husks catch on my flannel shirt, itching against my bare arms where the sleeves are rolled up. I don't see her black hair, but I can see the green stalks shimmying back and forth, showing me exactly where she disappeared to.

She's a knot I need to pull out. A damn hitch in my plans.

"I can hear you, girl," I call out. "You don't know what you saw."

I pause for a moment, listening to her movements in the field, and hear her aiming to the right. I anticipate her next movements, moving as slow as the setting sun as I get ahead of her. She pushes the stalks aside, her eyes widening as she sees me. She screams, her fists hitting my chest. I pull her into my arms, blood draining from my head and going straight to my groin as she struggles against me, primal instinct kicking into full drive. Her fist connects with my eye socket and I laugh in her face.

"You got so much fight in you, huh, Hitch?" I ask as I wrestle her wrists to the ground. "But not enough to overtake me."

"Get off of me," she hisses.

"It's not enough. Not when I'll fuck a hole just to get to your mouth."

Her eyes widen, realizing it was me back in that glory hole. "Please. Don't—"

But all it takes is one hand on her throat, and her legs spread for me. Her cheeks purple as I undo my pants.

"I'm just like you," I say, gripping my length as I pull myself out of my boxers. "I just want to have a good time. I know what I want, and I'm done neglecting these urges. These *needs*."

"Stop—" she tries to say, but she can barely get enough air to get the one word out. I smack my free hand against the seam of her shorts, and she instantly parts her thighs even wider like a good little devil. I dig my fingers into the fabric and her flesh until the fabric moves to the side, and there's enough room that her wet slit runs against my fingers.

I don't care what she wants. I don't care if this is wrong or right. I take what I want. I do what I want. I kill what I want. And if I'm going to kill her, I'm going to fuck her pretty little slit first.

I thrust inside of her wet heat, and she moans.

"Please stop this," she says, but her eyes are glazed, full of a need so deep that she can't even tell that her body is calling out to me. Then shame blossoms in her cheeks like a red apple, like she knows she hates herself. Because secretly, she wants this as much as I do.

“That’s the funny thing about this,” I chuckle. I push deeper inside of her, the seam of her shorts rubbing against my groin, my length hitting her cervix. She winces at the pain, the tension dissolving into a warmth so tender that she licks her lips. “I ain’t your ex. I’m going to take what I want, when I want,” I say, my voice deep and gravelly. “And what I want right now is *you*, Hitch. Then I’m going to kill you.”

She cries like a helpless little rodent trapped in a cage, and I lick her neck in a brazen heat, scraping my teeth against her skin. I shouldn’t be doing this; I swore I would concentrate on the business, only letting myself indulge in blood when it came to *work*, but this feels right. She fits me perfectly, like the planets aligned just to make her for me, and so, I lose control. Her lips are too sweet. Her hips too plush. Her hair *needs* my fists.

My mind overflows with pure, primal desire as her walls clench around me like she’s wringing the blood out of my body. My length twitches for the second time tonight, my come squirting deep inside of her, and for the briefest second, my eyes close, the uncontrollable pleasure taking hold of me

Then something cold presses against my forehead.

I open my eyes, staring back at my own gun clutched in her hand.

My come never stops filling her up, and she breathes through her lips, staying still as the moon, almost like she wants to savor this moment. The last twitch of seed flicks through me, and her eyes glance down between us, almost as if she expects to see me limp.

But I’ll never be flaccid. Not when it comes to her. I’m still hard and I need *more*, the blood pumping through me as if every cell in my body *knows* she’s near.

Adrenaline fuels me, bringing a hint of a grin to my lips. There’s nothing quite like having a beautiful woman put a gun to your head when you’re deep inside of her.

Still, I pull out, knowing it’s what she wants. My fly hangs open, my jeans around my hips as I get to my knees. She keeps the gun aimed at my forehead. The corn stalks rub against my flannel shirt, but with her shorts and tank top, she’s going to be scratched as hell when the sun rises.

What I would give to see her torn up like that, the morning after.

“You going to shoot?” I ask. “Go on, now. Give yourself some trouble.”

She examines me again. My arousal is obvious; bulging, red, veiny, and ready for her. Her lips pucker, almost like she knows just how much power

she has over me: a man torn between desire and survival, the need to fuck her winning over the need to kill her for what we both know she saw. Hunger lingers in her composure as her pupils dilate further, almost like she *likes* the desire I have for her, even if she mentally denies it. The strong woman inside of her should resist a man who *forces* her to do anything.

But now, she's got me trapped.

I hold the base of my rod, squeezing it. Another drop of pre-cum pools on the tip, begging for her. I roll my finger in it, teasing myself as I fixate on that black-haired beauty in all of her glory. Hair tangled. Covered in dirt. Red puckered lips. Come dripping down her thighs. Holding a gun. Ready to kill me.

"Look at what you do to me," I growl.

A sharp breath trickles through her throat, bringing her back to her senses. She runs through the field, taking my gun with her. I fist my length, feeding off of her fear, listening to the corn stalks fight against each other as she flees. I find my feet, still clutching myself with my palm, knowing that I'm *letting* her get away.

Waiting until I start coming to steal my gun? Hell, she deserves it.

Maybe I want her to get away.

"Let me give you a warning," I shout, still touching myself. "If you don't keep quiet, I'm going to find you." The remnants of her vanilla scent waft through the night air, and I suck it down like it's the last breath I'll ever have. "And I'm going to get my fill. And when I'm done with you, I'm going to put you in the ground."

CHAPTER 2

DUANE

present

TODD MOTIONS ME INTO HIS OFFICE, BUT IT AIN'T AN OFFICE. IT'S MORE LIKE a hole in the heart of the strip club, covered in coffee stains, loose papers, and my favorite part: the surveillance cameras. He pulls the edges of his red vest, smoothing the silk over his white button-up shirt, as if formal clothes hide all the illegal shit he does underneath.

I don't care what he does. As long as he sticks to our arrangement.

"I didn't realize she was coming in today," he says.

Todd and I—we've got ourselves a deal. I give him our product, which he sells to his clients. He gets a bigger than typical cut of the proceeds, and as a bonus on my end, he 'hires' me to come watch the surveillance footage, keeping an eye on things. Really, we both know I'm only interested in Secret, his stripper from Oakdale. I like seeing my little Hitch in action.

I've been stalking her for months now.

"You good for a while?" Todd asks.

I tilt my head toward the back of the building. "Left a case in the back of the truck."

"Exactly what I like to hear."

He closes the door behind him, leaving me alone. I lock the door, then slide into the office chair, the hinges squeaking as I relax into it.

Unzipping my jeans, I pull myself through the hole in my boxers, playing with the head as I watch Secret enter the private room. It's my favorite pairing today; Secret and the Mortician. He comes every other week, but he's the *only* one she lets touch her.

Lucky son of a bitch.

The Mortician rests his open palm on his thigh. I learned his legal name once, but don't care to remember it now. Not like I remember every detail about my Hitch. Regina 'Reggie' Flores, known around these parts by her stage name, Secret. Twenty-three-years-old. A young woman who recently broke it off with her sugar daddy. Information I got from the strip club owner.

Her sugar daddy was an idiot, though. Couldn't keep my woman satisfied, it seems. And how do you let a woman like that go?

But it explains some things, like why a woman like her moves aside her panties as she lowers her sex onto the Mortician's hand. Sliding back and forth, wet and ready for him. My bulge aches with jealousy. I roll the palm of my hand over the crown of my arousal, using my pre-cum to lubricate the shaft. It's been six long months since I first met Reggie, and every day, I've rubbed myself raw, punishing myself for letting her get away. It was a stupid mistake. I should've killed her months ago. A witness living and breathing so close to my farm isn't the kind of hitch you want screwing up your plans.

But she's smart enough to know not to betray a man like me, and I'm not dumb enough to forget about her now. When she applied at this club, I took a couple of photocopies of her application. One on my desk back at the farm, and one in my wallet. I like having her info with me. The one in my wallet is creased and grainy as dirt, but it's my piece of her, so she's always under my thumb.

If she keeps her end of the bargain—keeping her mouth shut—then I have no reason to get closer. A woman like her is sure to claw her dainty chipped fingernails into my brain, and I don't need a weakness like that pulling me apart from the inside out.

But I still dream of fucking her, melting her shame into pure bliss.

If I get that close again, I'm liable to get out of control. Which is why I stay back here. Behind the screen. Watching her.

On the screen, the Mortician jerks his head to the side, using his nose to get inside of her bra. His mouth opens, taking in those tender brown nipples like they're the fountain of youth. Reggie, Secret, *Hitch*—whatever you want to call her—rolls her head back like she's losing herself in ecstasy. She's such a pleasure slut, always hungry for more, ready to take whatever is given to her.

The funny thing is that the Mortician doesn't even get himself sucked off;

he pleases her and *pays* for the privilege. My girl likes to gut the customers and suck their wallets dry, out for no one, but herself. Always has been a predator.

I like that about her.

Now that my Hitch has had her fill, she takes a break from dancing, settling on the leather sectional next to the Mortician as they drink their beer and wine. I stroke myself, her dark eyes ripping a hole in my soul. But I don't want to come like this; I want to save it for later. I use some tissues to clean up, then text Todd, letting him know that I'm leaving the club now.

As I drive through Stockton, I find Reggie's one-bedroom apartment on the ground floor of a cheap complex. Brown paint with white trim. Sparse bushes hacked to bits by the tired landscapers. A neighbor across the hallway waves to me, and I nod back as I let myself inside of Reggie's home. Her neighbor must think I'm Reggie's boyfriend, the way I come in and out all the time. Nobody cares to ask for the details around here. You live, you work, you die, and who cares if your neighbor has a big southern boy coming in all hours of the day and night, so long as he pays his bills and nobody's screaming?

Goddamn, though. I loved hearing Reggie scream.

I suck in the scent of her living space; the remnants of a frozen meal hang in the air, dust and citrus cleaning spray mixing with it. I pry through her fridge, taking mental notes on her menu for the week. Crossing over to the bathroom, I'm drenched in synthetic vanilla fragrance, a stripper's bread and butter when it comes to seduction. And it should be; it *works*. Her real estate textbook lies open on her dresser for once; perhaps she's actually going to register for that state required class this time.

I lean against one of her bedposts, and the damn thing creaks in annoyance. A holey zebra comforter is thrown over the mattress, probably from when she was a teenager. Pulling the cover off of her pillowcase, I jerk off, my length needy and veiny, as I imagine she's dancing on top of *me*, that she's rubbing her slit against *my* hand, that *I'm* the one who get to suck on those pretty brown nipples like she's going to bring me back from the dead. Images of her sleeping on that same pillow flood my vision as I think of the times I *didn't* fuck her in her sleep, but jerked off inches away from her face. She's a heavy sleeper, so unaware of the evil she's within arm's reach of. A man who could strangle her to death and come from the pleasure of doing it.

I explode over her pillow, wet stains coating the fabric like drops of rain.

I pull the case back over the pillow, hiding the evidence, knowing that it'll look like a drool stain, and my woman won't even notice it. She's been sleeping with my come rubbed up against her cheeks for months now.

It wasn't always like this. I had work. Everything was stable. The mushroom business was booming, and I had the corn to keep us covered from the law.

Then I killed my first victim in years, the same night I met Reggie, and everything came undone. It's like she put a spell on me.

I'm goddamn insatiable.

I wipe my mouth and fix my belt, then pull open the top drawer of her nightstand. There it is. My gun. Right where I moved it last time. A pistol I took from my father, engraved with his lifelong motto: *Life Always Ends*. The bastard was too confident in his own abilities, but I still respect what he taught me. It's how it got me to where I am today, while he's underground.

It's the first time Reggie hasn't taken the pistol with her to work at the Double Take. Either she doesn't know where I put it, or she's getting too confident now.

I ought to change that.

I head back to the Grainswept Fields. It's about a thirty-minute drive from Stockton, but once my cornfields come into sight, the back of my neck tingles, and I don't know why. Something bad is about to unfold in front of me; I can feel it. I finger my new pistol, ready to fix any unsavory problems that arise.

But nothing happens, so I drive up the gravel road to the farmhouse. It's got three stories and enough rooms that Braden—my laboratory manager—and I don't run into each other much. There are even secret rooms, something that could be handy in our line of work, but most of the time, I don't remember them.

After all, working and living together, you need space. So when you get a man like Braden working for you—forging papers, growing illegal mushrooms, covering your crimes—you keep him happy, but most of all, you keep him *close*, since you never know who will turn their back on you, especially after what happened with Braden's little sweetheart. A crush, really. He barely had the nerve to talk to her. Still, things have been different since I killed her, but business comes first.

When you have an illegal business that gives you a good excuse to indulge in your violent pastime, then you make damn sure that you don't get

caught. And that means getting rid of loud mouths.

I check the mailbox, pulling out a few bills and junk envelopes, but then I find a coarse, cardboard envelope without a return address. My name and address are handwritten on it in capital letters. It's personal. I press my lips together as I tear open the envelope and read the writing on the square napkin inside, the ink messy, as if the writer is trying to hide their identity. All caps with those letters too.

I scan the area to see if Braden is around. If Todd happened to drop by after leaving the strip club. If any of our sellers are out here, waiting to see my reaction.

But I'm alone.

I grit my teeth and read the note again: *I KNOW WHERE YOU KEEP THE BODIES. SELL YOUR BUSINESS NOW, BEFORE I END YOU.*

The threat of violence lingers on the napkin, like the writer actually thinks they'll get me. Blackmail with the intent on getting every last penny of mine.

Except this blackmailer isn't asking for money. They want me to *end* my business.

Shit.

It could be anyone. Maybe it's another one of Braden's crushes. Or maybe it's a random seller who can't shut the fuck up. Or hell, it could be Todd or Braden. But Todd likes the product I sell him, and Braden *knows* that he'd be just as incriminated as I am with all he's done for the business.

Which leaves just one person.

My little Hitch.

It's not just confidence that's keeping my pistol tucked in her nightstand these days, is it? Maybe Hitch is so sure of herself that she's willing to blackmail me.

Perhaps it's time I made my presence known. Perhaps it's time to show her that I've been near her for months now, waiting for the right time to crush her under my fingertip.

CHAPTER 3

REGGIE

A RESTLESS TENSION ROLLS THROUGH MY STOMACH AS OUR EYES MEET. I know that face. Eyes so blue they can drown you in an ocean. Stubble covering his jaw and cheekbones. Tattoos poking up his neck, the sleeves of his flannel shirt rolled up and exposing his muscular arms. His entire body brawny and muscular like he does manual labor. Tanned skin. Stiff posture. Broad shoulders. The core of my body heats, bringing me back to that night in the glory hole, in the cornfield, the night I ran away from my old life. How helpless I was underneath him, and yet, how power rose inside of me like water in a sinking ship, ready to drown everything inside of it.

How he needed to fuck me more than he needed to live.

My arms shake, but I grab the stage pole, steadying myself. Then, using my thighs and ankles as leverage, I climb up to the top, as if that height difference will give me some power over him, but it's like running away from a bear. I'm already caught, and my skin is sensitive and tingly, like my instincts are warning me that I'm about to die.

Is he here to finally kill me?

It's not normal for someone to go to a glory hole. And it's also not normal for someone to *want* to become a stripper. But after years of lying on my back and faking it—I just wanted power over a man. To be in control for once. I needed something that night, and that monster took everything I had.

And now, he's back to finish what we started.

He inches forward, his fingers tucked in his belt loops, his eyes all-knowing, like this is exactly where he expected me to be. Like he's known where I've been this entire time.

A charge of fear runs up my spine as I arch my back. I couldn't find my

gun this morning—*his gun*, actually. I knew it was a bad omen, but now, I realize it was more than that. It was a warning. A red flag. I bite my bottom lip, then slide down the pole like normal, hiding my nerves.

Maybe it's not the same guy. Maybe it's just a coincidence. Maybe I'm freaking out over nothing.

But then his palm slides from his belt loop to another holster, carrying another shiny gun clipped to his side.

Why did the bouncers let him in *with a gun*?

I open my mouth to scream, but the man removes his wallet and places a hundred-dollar bill at the edge of the stage.

My stage. A tip. *For me*.

Is this a trap?

A war wages inside of me, wanting to hide that money before a customer or a stripper steals it, *and* wanting to shove it back in the man's face and shout that I've kept my mouth shut for six months. Six grueling months of trying to start over again, to forget that I saw a body in the back of his truck. Six months of trying to forget the way he made me desperate and ashamed.

Six months of trying to forget that I liked it.

I look at everyone else—the customer at the other end of the tip rail and the regulars in the booth next to the stage—but the man's scrutiny becomes a heat lamp warming me up, even as I look at everything, *but him*.

His gaze stays locked on me the entire time.

There's a current riding through him, calling to that dark part of me.

But I know better. He's dangerous.

Once the song is over, I scramble over to my tips, thank the customer sitting at the stage, then snatch that hundred-dollar bill without even acknowledging the monster from the cornfields. I'm supposed to dance for another song and take off my bra, but I don't care. I need to get away from him.

I disappear behind the curtained door separating the stage from the dressing room. Taking the steps down to the tiled floor, I let out a deep breath. Nerves tumble in my brain, my temple pulsing with each anxious thought. On cue, one of the lightbulbs above my vanity goes out, another omen that it's *him*. My stomach churns. I should reapply my makeup at this point in the shift, but my hands are trembling.

It's him. I know it's him.

I peek out of the door to the main floor and see him again. Pressure builds

between my legs, sparks of anticipation rolling through my neck.

I've been good, haven't I? I've kept my mouth shut.

"You look like you've seen a ghost," a male voice says from behind me.

I startle, slamming the door shut, and spin around to find the strip club's owner, Todd. He runs a hand through his thick brown hair, then adjusts the collar of his usual uniform: a white button-up shirt, a shiny red vest, and black slacks. Though he's the owner and not a bouncer, he's trim and tall and has enough muscle on his bones to take out any idiot who tries to get handsy without our permission. I've always liked that about him; he's not afraid to get involved when it comes to protecting his club.

But could he take my monster?

I squeeze my fists and shut my eyes. Why did I say '*my* monster'? He's not *my* monster. He's *a* monster. *The* monster. He's not mine in any way, shape, or form.

"Don't scare me like that," I hiss at Todd.

I peel open the door again, but this time, when I scan the main floor, the monster is gone. I swallow a gulp. Blood races in my ears as I check the bar area frantically too. Where did he go? Is he going to kill me this time?

The monster's angled jaw catches my eye, and for once, he's not focused on me. I exhale slowly, then point to him, showing Todd my monster.

The monster. The monster.

"Who is he?" I whisper.

"Him?" he asks. "Duane? He's a friend. Why? You know him?"

My stomach drops. That's what you get living in a small town. Even if Stockton is technically a bigger city, it's still a tiny world out there. Everyone knows everyone. And apparently, my boss *knows* my monster.

The monster.

"Kind of," I say. "Duane? Duane who?"

"Duane Patrick. He owns Grainswept Fields."

I wrinkle my nose, though I repeat the words in my head—*Duane Patrick, Grainswept Fields*—as if that trickle of information will help me somehow, exposing clues I didn't know existed.

But nothing rings a bell.

"Is that a farm?" I ask.

"Yep. Between here and Oakdale."

My cheeks flush. Oakdale. Where I used to live with my sugar daddy. Where my mom still lives.

Duane—the monster—twists in my direction, his eyes instantly locking me in their embrace. Warmth coaxes through my body, filling me up from my extremities back to my core, as if my entire nervous system is already itching for his touch. I dig my nails into my palms, irritated at myself for having this much of a reaction to him. It's like my body *wants* him to dominate me again!

Another stripper passes between Todd and I, and I close the door quickly behind her, keeping Todd and I safe inside of the dressing room.

Todd laughs. "I know that look."

I roll my eyes. He must think I'm drooling over Duane, but I'm not. He's a creep, and if he's showing up here, it's bad luck.

If he knows where I work now, then I've got to be smart about what I do next. My life may depend on it.

"It's not what you think," I mutter.

"Then what is it?" Todd asks, eyeing my open clutch. I put a hand over the broken zipper. "Is he the one who gave you that Franklin?" He nods toward the door. "He must like you. Go dance for him."

I huff through my nostrils. Usually, when a customer tips like that on a stage show, you *know* he's worth a lot more than that. But I can't trust Duane. He threatened to kill me.

I eye the door again, imagining Duane on the other side, listening to our dressing room gossip. My stomach cramps with anticipation. I shake my head, disgusted with myself.

"He's too creepy," I say.

"I thought you'd be all over him."

I raise my brow. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"All you girls. He's a hot one. Why not make your shift fun?"

It helps when a customer is good looking, but when a man comes in, bathed in red flags, I have to keep my distance, even if there's a seed inside of me that knows he can give me the ache I'm searching for.

Todd reclines against the wall, his black dress shoes dipping into a puddle of spray tan.

"You'll be watching the surveillance footage?" I ask.

"Have I ever let you down before?"

I lift my shoulders, eyeing him cautiously. I don't trust anyone, but Todd hasn't given me any reason to think he's untrustworthy...yet.

"Five hundred," I say.

Todd snorts. "For a half hour?"

"No. Two songs."

Todd's laughter echoes through the room.

"The hell is your problem?" I ask.

"Don't get me wrong. You're worth every penny, Secret," he says, using my stage name. "But you gotta take him in the easy way. Let him think it's *his* idea to give you two-hundred and fifty per song."

In the closest vanity mirror, I adjust my breasts so that a hint of my nipple peeks over the edge of the bra. We're supposed to keep our nipples completely covered unless we're dancing on stage, but I like having that tease. It works in my favor, and Todd never says anything about it.

"He gave me a hundred for dancing on a stage. He can afford two-fifty per song," I say dismissively. "Trust me."

I walk through the door and resolve to act like Duane—the monster—doesn't exist. Because for the last few months, he hasn't. I haven't spoken a word about that night, even if I think about it all the time. When I'm alone. When I'm in the middle of a private dance. When I let a customer touch me how I like it. When my mind slips away to dreams of Duane forcing his dick between my legs.

A flush builds in my cheeks as I head to the bar. I dismiss those daydreams. A hand smacks my ass and I whip around to scowl at the perpetrator, but my eyes laser over to the assailant.

Brittle fingertips. A dashing crooked nose. A charming smile. Another hot one. The Mortician, one of my best paying regular customers.

Excitement spreads across my face.

"Two days in a row?" I shout. "You're spoiling me!"

"Let's grab a drink and head back," he says. "You know how it's been lately. Gotta get my mind off of things a lot these days."

A smug sense of pride spreads through my shoulders as I let my hips sway, leading us to the VIP room. Duane's blazing eyes lock onto my body, his jaw clenched like he can't believe I'd go with someone else after he tipped me a hundred dollars on stage. I pretend like I don't see him, but his gaze sears into me, a palpable, tingling sensation licking across my bare skin.

The Mortician pays for his hour, and secretly, I'm glad for a reason to get my mind off of the monster. In our usual private room, a white pleather sectional sits in the corner of the booth. It's big enough for both of us to sit and stand comfortably, but small enough that it's economical for the Double

Take. A tear stitched together with clear tape, rips through the far right cushion. The Mortician sits to the left, making himself comfortable. Red lights beam from the ceiling.

I hand The Mortician my phone. Anticipating my request, he flips to the camera app and takes a few pictures of me.

“You’re a fucking queen,” he says. With him, the title fits. The Mortician likes to think he’s in control, but he’s paying me, and I’m the one leading our dance. I’m the one who lets him finger me. I’m the one who charges him triple the price once the privacy curtains close. I’m the one who uses my sexuality to work for me.

After being in a sexual drought for years, having to lie on my back while I faked orgasm after orgasm for my sugar daddy, I’m not going to let anyone tell me what to do. Even if that means doing risky things, like becoming a stripper, or sucking off a stranger in a glory hole, then getting into his truck.

I grab my phone from the Mortician and quickly open up my favorite social media app and post one of the pictures with a high contrast filter.

Never let a man tell you what you’re capable of, I type in the caption. I love quotes like that. I need the pep talk, to convince myself that I’m worth so much more than I let myself believe for years. *You are your own woman. No one controls your life, but you.*

I close the phone and straddle the Mortician, pressing my lips together, ready to dance. Back here, I’m Secret, and not even a monster can scare me away from good money.

But the thrill of being near the monster swells in my lower stomach. Inside, I know I like being near him, especially with how he keeps his eyes on me. There are plenty of other gorgeous day shift strippers, but he’s focused on *me*.

There’s a certain power in that.

CHAPTER 4

DUANE

I FINGER THE NAPKIN FROM THE BLACKMAILER, HUMMING AS SECRET —*Reggie*—dances on the stage again, this time in a white lace ensemble like she's a precious angel. Since moving to the big ol' city of Stockton, she's flourished like a damn butterfly, and there ain't nothing anyone can do to cage her in a cocoon again. After all, she transformed that night when she put a gun to my head; why wouldn't she blackmail me?

But why do it *now*?

Todd sits on the corner stool of the bar, slurping his coke. I take the seat next to him and tap the counter. The bartender brings me a beer. The tangy bitterness skates across my tongue as I gulp it down like a man dehydrated out in the desert. That's what she does to me, my Hitch. Makes me desperate for nutrients only she can provide.

Todd taps his plastic cup on the bar top as Reggie makes her way from the stage to the VIP room with another customer. Todd used to be friends with my spore house manager, Braden, a long time ago when Todd was passing through Florida. Nowadays, Todd owns several properties, like a trailer park on the south side and this here strip club, the Double Take. It's a good way to clean money for him, just like I use the farm for my own.

When we were skipping town, Braden reconnected with Todd, and then Todd put me in contact with the original owner of Grainswept Fields, who sold it to me.

I said goodbye to that life in Florida. Coming out here to the west. Doing everything my father *despised*. Showing that dead fucker just how stupid he was to sell the business out from under me.

"You're out early this time," Todd says.

“I’m done watching,” I say bluntly.

“I hear that.”

He starts yelling for his bartender’s attention, and I glance back at the VIP room.

Hitch is back there. A goddamn thorn in my side. If she’s the blackmailer, I’ll have to kill her, sure, but I’ll respect her too. Maybe I’ll even make it fun for both of us. She’d like that.

But after what she did that night, and how good she’s been keeping her full lips sealed for me, I ought to return that respect, and confirm it’s her, before I finally kill her. I owe her that.

My phone buzzes the same time that Todd’s does. We both check the message; Braden sends a group text: *The new seller says he’s going to the cops. He thought I was just a seller too.*

The next message comes in shortly after: *Fix this!*

I study Todd. He’s the one who *knows* people, the one who hired the new seller in the first place.

Braden’s the expert, working on the product itself with precision. Todd finds us new sellers and moves the product as well.

And me? I’m the owner of the operation. I take care of any loose ends. It’s what I’ve done since I was a teenager. And now, I have a good excuse to put those skills to work.

It’s my favorite part of the business.

“You say your peace?” I ask, briefly wondering if Todd is friends with the seller.

“Fuck ‘em,” Todd says. He bows his head. “The man’s got no family, and that’s because he’s shitting on the people who help him. You give a man a job and a roof over his head, and this is what he does with it?”

I don’t care what the man does, so long as it’s *me* who gets to kill him. The corn and mushrooms are only good for the opportunity to exert that raw power.

I slant my head toward the VIP room.

“When Secret comes out, talk me up to her,” I say.

Todd grins. He thinks I’ve got a crush; he has no idea how valuable Secret—my little Hitch—is to me. How I should’ve killed her months ago. How if anyone can blackmail me, it’s that black-haired devil.

“She says she’s charging you five hundred for two songs,” he whistles.

I shrug. “She’s worth it.”

If you can't make her come to you, you come to her. Offer an opportunity she can't refuse. And I *know* my Hitch. She *likes* using sex as a weapon. Using her pussy to suck the power out of the men around her.

All I have to do is offer her an option where we both get exactly what we want. Then she'll expose her blackmailing self.

And then, I'll kill her.

My eyes catch Reggie and the Mortician walking out of the back room. My dick twitches with blood, jealous that it's not my saliva drying on her tits or my palm with her pussy cream soaking into my skin.

Give it time, though. I'll be the last man she ever fucks.

CHAPTER 5

REGGIE

THE MORTICIAN PUTS HIS ARM AROUND MY BACK AS WE RETURN TO THE MAIN floor. The club is busier than before—which is what happens when you get closer to the night shift—and the anticipatory buzz is ripe in the air, mixing with the scent of sweat and fruity cocktails. The nerves that made my stomach twist earlier are long gone, replaced by confidence. When I'm here, I'm Secret. And Secret is powerful.

But then, I see *him*, and the heat drains from my face, shooting between my legs like I'm roasting my pussy over a fire.

Why is it that just seeing Duane does this to me?

His blue flannel shirt is rolled up to his elbows, showing off his tattooed forearms. The same arms that held me down in the dirt of the cornfield. *And* he's wearing the same dusty boots. Todd refuses customers wearing sports jerseys; how can he let Duane wear boots that are so dirty, they're literally leaving a track on the carpet?

And why does it turn me on that he's so filthy?

The Mortician is rambling about something, and I pretend like I'm listening as we take our spots at the bar. Todd eyes me, motioning for me to talk with him in private, and Duane's gaze lingers over my backside.

The hairs on my neck stand up. What does Duane want?

I tell the Mortician I'll catch up with him later, then I go to the hallway to meet Todd.

"Two hundred and fifty per song?" Todd asks. He must be talking about Duane, then.

"Minimum," I say. Even if Todd watches the surveillance cameras like a hawk, there's no way I'm getting that close to a potential killer without

getting a good chunk of cash out of it.

“Let me give you some advice, Secret,” Todd says, his thick eyebrows high in judgment. “He’s a whale. Worth way more cash than you realize. You can gut him for a couple hundred now, but you want to make sure he comes back for more, right?”

I shake my head. “Farmers make a lot of money, but he can’t make *that* much.”

“Trust me on this one,” Todd says, pressing his lips together. “You can milk a wallet like Duane for a ton one time, and one time only. *Or* you can forge a ‘relationship’ with him, and make him an endless cash cow. Find his weaknesses. Use them to your advantage. Everyone’s got secrets, right?”

He winks at the clever way he’s snuck my stage name into our conversation. It’s something people love to do around here to tease me. I roll my eyes. I don’t like being told what to do, but Todd is right. There are always short term and long-term options. A loyal customer, no matter what your profession is, is a good way to guarantee your income. You don’t want to screw yourself out of a routine paycheck.

But something else calls to me too. A sense of desire, begging to crawl closer to Duane. To overwhelm him with sexual need again, so that he *has* to have me.

So that I can’t do anything, but *let* him.

I bite my lip, knowing that what I’m about to do is probably a mistake, but I can’t stop this urge.

Besides, Duane hasn’t killed me yet.

I head back to the bar, when the Mortician bumps into me, cornering me between him and the wall.

“Let’s go for another dance,” the Mortician says, his words slurring. Duane and I briefly exchange eye contact over the Mortician’s shoulder. My stomach flips as I force a smile at the Mortician.

“I need to talk with an old friend,” I say. “Maybe we can talk after.”

“But you promised—”

I shush in the Mortician’s ear, letting my lips tickle his skin. “Just wait for me, baby.”

The Mortician is quiet, though he follows my vision over to Duane.

And suddenly, the world stands still.

Duane holds his half-empty beer like this is ordinary. Like he’s simply waiting for me. Like he’s confident that I’ll come running toward him, just

like I ran away from him.

As soon as I'm within a few feet of his body, that earthy, musky scent swallows me up like quicksand. His ocean blue eyes hold me captive, and I gnaw my bottom lip.

Customers never make me nervous, even when they're attractive. In the end, stripping is just an entertainment job with some brief nudity. It's a transaction. We know the drill.

But even though Duane tipped me a hundred, he doesn't *feel* like a customer. He's been living in my nightmares and my fantasies for so long that I convinced myself that he wasn't real. That I imagined the entire night.

But then I had his pistol to remind me that he wasn't a ghost. *He is real.* And now he's standing right in front of me.

I huff through my nostrils.

This is a job. Nothing more.

"Todd says you want a dance," I say.

Duane nods, the jerk of his head sharp. "Two hundred and fifty per song? Is that right?"

"Cash," I say.

Duane straightens, then tilts his head toward the pay-per-song lap dance bench out on the main floor. Even in eight-inch stilettos, he towers over me, making me small. And I know that's another warning.

I should run. I should tell Todd how I know Duane. I should get Duane arrested. But something stops me.

The lap dance bench is out in the open, which is a little more safe. A monster can only do so much with an audience. Like standing behind bulletproof glass, I'm safe here.

Duane angles toward the lap dance bench.

"Go on," he says, giving me those same nonchalant words he said when he told me to shoot him six months ago. Eventually, I lead the way. He sits on the bench, his arms stretched across the back, like he's completely at ease. We wait for the next song to start. A stripper on stage twirls around the pole like a ballerina, and as I pretend to watch her, Duane hands me a thousand dollars. I triple count the bills and mark them with a counterfeit pen. Everything looks fine, so I put the money in my clutch.

Four songs. That's all I have to do.

Duane's eyes trace over my body, scrutinizing every inch of me to make sure that I'm exactly who I say I am. It sets me on fire.

“Why are you here?” I ask quietly. “Why now?”

Why me?

“I’ve got needs,” Duane says, his tone deep and gravelly, the word ‘needs’ sending shivers down my spine. I straighten, not letting it show. He lifts a brow. “Perhaps I should have explained myself. That night, it was just part of my calling. I had to exert the full extent of my power. I like to hunt.”

Hunt?

My hands moisten. I wipe them against my thighs. “Excuse me?”

“The chase. The challenge. I enjoy forcing my way between a woman’s legs. Making her take me, even when she fights it.”

My stomach clenches, and I suck down that desire, pretending it doesn’t exist.

“It doesn’t explain what I saw,” I whisper.

“What you saw was a trick of lighting,” he says, a slight smirk on his lips. But it’s a lie, and we both know it.

“What was it, then?” I ask.

“Halloween prop. My housemate likes to go all out on these things.”

The corpse’s lifeless eyes taking in the starry sky fill my mind. It was like she was trying to warn me that I was going to be next if I didn’t do something about it.

And I didn’t do anything.

I glance down at Duane’s holster, wondering if he’d notice me stealing his gun this time.

But maybe the body *was* a prop. Maybe that’s why I let Duane fuck me—because I knew it wasn’t real. Because my gut instinct held onto the fact that Duane wanted to fuck me *more* than he wanted to kill me. That in some strange way, he was protecting me.

The song changes, and though I should dance—that’s why Duane is technically paying me—I don’t move. There’s a knot inside of me that is frozen in place, too wound up to move.

Because this is a trap, and I don’t know how to get out.

“Needs,” I say, repeating his words, straightening my fingers at my sides. “So you want a sex worker?”

“Something like that,” he says. “Though I prefer to call it what it is. A beneficial arrangement for both of us.”

There’s a gleam in his eyes that unsettles me, like he can smell my pussy getting wet already, and that he knows it’s all for him. And I hate that he’s

right. I hate that I *liked* every depraved thing he did to me. How my shorts strained against my skin as he thrust inside of me. How his eyes rolled into the back of his head, like he wasn't sure if he was about to come or about to die. How he needed me in a feral way, like no man has ever wanted me.

I swallow down that self-hatred, knowing that it's for a good cause. If he's here now, then there's a reason, and I'm going to make money from it.

But still, I can't help the nerves from bubbling up, like I'm missing some other piece to the puzzle.

"You don't have a girlfriend?" I ask. "I'm sure there's someone who likes to fight, just like you like to conquer."

"I'm looking at her."

My knees loosen, every part of my body weak. Our eyes meet again, and I rub the back of my neck, trying to stay calm. He thinks I want to be conquered?

No... He *knows* I do.

Why does he undo me like this?

"I don't have time for a romantic relationship," Duane says, breaking through my thoughts. "Love is an emotion. It's not real."

I can agree with him on that. Some people argue that love is an action that you commit to doing for someone else, but when your dad walks out on you and your mom, leaving you with nothing, you learn that most people don't care what love is. Once it fades, it's gone.

Which is part of why I was a sugar baby for so long. Real love was never in the cards for me. Maybe that's why I was drawn to Duane in the first place. In the back of his truck, we saw each other for what we were—bodies to be used, nothing more.

"So, sex is a transaction, then," I say.

"And that's what we want. Sex," he says. "I want to be honest with you, Hitch. I've got money, and you can either split it with the house here, *or* you can take the profits for yourself. I'm sure you've got something you want to pay for."

My mom's car broke down a week ago, and I've been paying for her rental while it gets fixed. She thinks I'm a real estate agent.

It would be nice to just *buy* my mom a brand new car. She raised me to be frugal, but maybe it's okay to buy something new. Especially if your daughter buys it for you as a birthday present.

"How much are we talking?" I ask.

“What’s fair?”

I smack my lips together, pretending to be confident, when in reality, it’s an out-of-body experience. I’m watching myself make one of the biggest decisions of my life.

But I’ve done this kind of thing before. If you know you’re not going to get hurt *and* you’re going to get paid, who cares if you meet a customer outside of the club?

But this time is different. I *know* he’s dangerous.

“Five thousand an hour,” I say.

He whistles. “Do you drive hard bargains all the time, or just with me?”

“It’s the same rate you’re paying right now.”

His jaw ticks as he presses his lips together, his eye contact intense. It’s a lot of money—more than I’ve ever charged—and more than I made as a sugar baby. And it’s a way for me to get *out* of this arrangement without bringing up the Halloween prop again. He’ll *never* agree to an amount like that. There’s just no way.

“All right,” he says.

All right?

“You’re okay with that?” I ask.

“Let’s start with every other day.”

The farm owners around here have a lot of money, and they like spending it on us at the Double Take. But that’s twenty grand a week.

For sex.

There has to be something more to this. It *has* to be a trap to kill me on his own property.

“People will know where I am,” I say. “Todd will know. I’ll tell my mom too.”

Duane stares at me vacantly. “As you should.”

My stomach hardens with anxiety. I’m not sure whether to be glad that he’s okay with people knowing my location, or if I just put my mom and Todd at risk too.

“How did you find me here?” I ask. “Have you known this whole time?”

“Not many strip clubs in Stockton, is there? Or in the Central Valley, for that matter,” he says.

Heat floods my nervous system.

“Are you stalking me?” I ask.

An evil grin swarms his mouth. “Like I said, *Reggie*. I like hunting,

especially when the prey is particularly hard to catch.”

My thighs snap together as a chill runs down my spine.

How does he know my real name?

“My name is Secret,” I say.

“That’s right. They call you Secret around these parts.”

Saliva gathers in my mouth and I swallow it down. Duane’s eyes flick to my throat. I gnaw on my lips, concentrating on what I know.

Duane is dripping in danger, and yet, my stupid self wants him even more.

But I don’t have to give in yet.

“How do I know this isn’t a trick to get me alone so that you can kill me?” I ask, internally begging him to put my fears to rest. “You just want me to trust you. Then you’re going to put me in the back of the truck like that other girl—”

He lurches from his seat, grabbing my throat tight. Blood rushes to my temples as I grab his hands, trying to pull him away, but he doesn’t budge. His eyes laser into me, daring me to move. I gulp, a whimper escaping my lips. A cackle of male laughter erupts from the bar. No one is paying attention.

No one is coming to help me.

“If I wanted to kill you, I could’ve done it by now. Couldn’t I, Hitch?” he says, bringing me closer to him. Pressure pools in my cheeks, my skin hot as our faces near each other. His eyes flicker down to my legs, spread across his lap, straddling him.

He loosens his pressure on my throat. My lungs swell, but he keeps his hand on me, controlling my life and death.

“Something tells me you like the risk, Hitch,” he murmurs, and my hips grind forward, riding on his jeans.

Because he’s right. Even that night, when I held a gun to his head, he could’ve overpowered me, but he *let* me run. He wanted me to get away.

It’s the exact reason I feel something—whatever *this* is—with him.

He lets go, leaving my neck empty. His arms spread across the back of the bench again as if nothing happened. There are only a few customers and one stripper up at the bar. Everyone else is in the VIP room, including Todd and the bouncers.

“Why do you keep calling me ‘Hitch’?” I ask.

“You hitched a ride with me, didn’t you?” Duane chuckles. “You could

say you've been living easy all this time, but it's not the same for me, Reggie. You're a hitch in my plans, causing all kinds of trouble for me. Luckily, I *like* fixing problems."

I fixate on his lips, pale and pink, his smile so wide, it's like he's pulling his expression with strings, forcing himself into a mask of normalcy.

Find his weaknesses.

Todd's voice echoes in my mind. I think of everything Todd said about making Duane into an endless cash supply. Duane didn't even hesitate with the thousand dollars, and I know he had more in his wallet. I can get a car for my mom in two or three weeks of work. I can even get a nice one for her. *And* for me.

But this isn't about that.

Everyone's got secrets, right? Todd had said.

But my secret is that I *want* to see Duane again. I want the reckless *need* he had for me. How he *made* me take him.

"All right," I say. I offer my hand. "Deal."

The monster shakes my hand. "You can call me 'Duane,'" he says.

"Secret," I say.

His lips curl. "I think I'll call you 'Hitch.'"

His fingers crunch around mine and I force myself to smile, an uneasiness gripping my stomach like a stress ball. But for some reason, I want to do this. Whatever this is.

As we're exchanging numbers and making a plan for tomorrow, a hand lands on my shoulder, jerking me to the side. The Mortician scowls at me, his breath heavy with mustard and beer.

"What's taking you so long?" he asks. "This is a lap dance bench, not a debate hall. Finish up already."

His nails dig into my shoulder, and I cringe in response. There are a lot of good things about the Mortician: he's cute, he can make me come, and he pays well. Still, putting up with his random drunk aggression can be annoying.

"I'm almost done, baby," I whisper. "Why don't you—"

He smacks my ass so hard I jump.

"What the hell?" I shout.

"I'm done waiting," he hisses.

I open my mouth, but Duane stands from the bench so slowly, it's almost as the world is adjusting to him. The club falls to silence. The DJ even turns

the music down as every customer and stripper gapes in our direction, waiting to see what Duane will do.

“This has nothing to do with you,” the Mortician says to Duane.

A coldness more vicious than a glacier pulses through Duane’s demeanor as he locks his thumbs into his belt loops.

Duane almost choked me out in the open, and I’ve got the feeling he’s going to hurt the Mortician more than that.

“It’s not a big deal,” I whisper to Duane. “He’s just messing around. He always spansks me. It’s a joke.”

“Not a joke I’ll accept,” he says. He looms over the Mortician. “Apologize,” Duane demands. The Mortician quirks his brows together.

“I’m not doing that,” the Mortician says plainly.

My heart clammers in my throat, drumming through each vein. I have to stop this before it gets out of hand.

“It’s fine,” I say, touching Duane’s arm to calm him down. “Really—”

“No, it’s not,” Duane says. “I don’t tolerate disrespect. And neither should you.” He wrenches back to the Mortician. “Apologize to the woman.”

“She owes me,” the Mortician snaps. He drunkenly pushes Duane, but Duane immediately pulls the Mortician’s arm behind his back, rendering him defenseless. The Mortician cries, falling to his knees.

“Okay. Shit,” the Mortician shouts. “I’m sorry, Secret. I’m sorry for spanking your ass.”

“Apologize for disrespecting her,” Duane snarls.

“I’m sorry for disrespecting you!”

Duane shoves the Mortician to the ground, and the Mortician wails like a wounded dog. Eventually, the Mortician finds his feet. His eyes are wild with panic, roving over everyone on the main floor.

“That fucker hit me!” he shouts.

Todd emerges from his office. “We saw who pushed who first. Now get the fuck out.”

The Mortician stumbles, a trail of curses exploding behind him. My head pounds.

Men do stuff like that all the time at the strip club. If we don’t want their money, we throw them out. We can take care of ourselves.

So why did Duane defend me like that?

Duane pours over me, his dark blue eyes twinkling with satisfaction. Like he knows how deeply he’s gotten to me.

“You didn’t have to do that,” I say, crossing my arms over my chest to hide my shaking limbs. “I don’t need anyone to protect me.”

Duane’s gaze burns icy holes into my skull, sending pangs of anticipation across my brain until it’s dripping between my legs.

It’s a lie, isn’t it? I *do* need someone to protect me.

From him.

“I don’t do anything I don’t want,” he drawls, his southern accent thick with his words. “It’s best that you learn that before you find yourself in real trouble.”

He bows his head, then exits, as if to follow the Mortician out. For a split second, I imagine the possibility that Duane might kill the Mortician too. For disrespecting me.

But that would be crazy. Why would Duane kill someone for me?

Right as Duane disappears, the DJ calls me to the stage. I force those thoughts away. I can only control my own actions right now.

Even when the monster defends you, the monster is still a monster, and you have to keep both eyes open in the darkness.

CHAPTER 6

REGGIE

THE NEXT AFTERNOON, I PUT THE KEY INTO THE IGNITION AND TURN, BUT IT clicks, and nothing happens. I huff, my nostrils flaring.

I pull out the key, wait a second, then try again. But my car doesn't start.

Of course it doesn't.

I should've saved up for a better used car, but I was taught to be careful with money. My car *usually* works; there's no reason to spend money on a better one. Not when I can just hitch.

I walk to the main road and text Duane quickly: *Car trouble. Be there soon.*

He responds instantly: *You need a ride?*

I scoff to myself, then close the messaging app.

"Not from you," I mutter. The last time I got into a car with him, I got road rash and corn husks so deep in my hair that I had to wash it six times.

As if that's the only trouble he gave me.

I stick out my thumb on the side of the road. This early in the day, you're more likely to get an older woman or a couple, non-threatening types. A handful of cars pass me, and I keep walking on the side, listening for another engine. The crop fields shine in green and gold, and my stomach clenches, thinking of Duane's hands on my body as he took what he wanted from me in between the corn stalks.

There's more to this than buying my mom a new car. After years of wondering when I would start living again, maybe I *like* the way the danger feels.

A dark blue truck, the oversized kind with extra wheels, pulls over to the side of the road. I hold my breath. It's not Duane's truck; his truck was older,

white, and beat up, while this truck is shiny and new. But for all I know, Duane could have multiple trucks.

But there's no way Duane could pick me up already. It's not like he knows where I live.

I ball my fists, then I send my mom my GPS location. *Getting a ride from a friend*, I text. Her read receipt comes through, but she doesn't respond.

I open the passenger door. Inside, a tall, thin redhead sits awkwardly in the driver's seat. The truck rumbles forward before I can buckle my seatbelt.

"Where you headed?" he asks, his voice thin and wiry, with a similar twang to Duane's accent.

"Grainswept Fields," I say.

"Are you the new seller?" he asks.

I wait for more information. He doesn't add anything.

"Seller of what?" I finally ask.

"Are you one of Todd's hires?"

Is he talking about Todd, the owner of the Double Take?

I lift my shoulders. "I'm just visiting a friend."

"Duane?"

I nod. "You work with him, then?"

"Something like that," he mumbles.

He scowls as he stays focused on the road, driving exactly the speed limit. This driver is the opposite of Duane; sinewy and quiet, where Duane is burly and abrasive. It's hard to imagine the two of them working together, but I don't know much about farming, except that the farm owners like to come into the Double Take every once in a while. They're always polite and pay well; that's all you can ask for in a strip club patron.

Still, I clutch my purse to my chest. I still can't find my gun, even though I checked every drawer and shelf in the apartment, but I *do* have a stun gun. It's comforting, knowing it's there.

After twenty minutes, the cornfields stretch up on either side of the road, and my muscles tighten instinctively, knowing that we're *here*. Just a couple more miles, and you'd be in Oakdale, my hometown. That first night, I had thought that we were running into random crop fields, but this entire time, it had been Duane's territory. Back then, he was chasing me into his lair, and I didn't even know it.

But now, I'm *choosing* to go here.

It's idiotic. But I can use the money, and there's this hope inside me that

he was telling the truth. That it was a Halloween prop. That he has no intention of killing me.

But logic rails inside of me too: *You're an idiot. A fucking idiot.*

I text Todd quickly: *You said you're coming, right?*

At least if Todd is at the farm, he'll watch out for me. At least, I *hope* he will. He wasn't much help when Duane choked me at the strip club yesterday.

But it's not like you tried to stop it, my brain retorts. *You even liked it.*

I scowl at myself, and my phone vibrates.

Already here. See you soon, Todd responds. I let out a subtle breath of relief, then glance back up at the redheaded driver. If he knows Todd *and* Duane, then he must be higher up in their farming business.

Or maybe I'm screwed, and everyone knows everyone, except for me.

"What's your name?" I ask.

"Braden," he says, his tone clipped, like he'd rather not be answering.

"I'm Reggie," I say impulsively, even though he didn't ask. It's like my brain thinks that if he knows my name, it'll protect me somehow, but he doesn't say a thing.

Clearly, he doesn't care.

We drive up a gravel road, winding between the cornfields into a stretch of grass and oak trees. In the middle of the lawn stands a big house—three stories with who knows how many bedrooms—and a wraparound porch. From the front, you can see a few tall buildings behind it—a large, classic barn and two concrete buildings. I'm not sure how long Duane and Braden have been here, or why they left the south.

But Todd's right. Everyone has secrets. I do. Braden does.

And Duane has the biggest secrets of us all.

Duane steps out of the front door, his flannel sleeves rolled up, his arms flexed like barrels, as if he's ready to cut down a massive tree with his bare hands. Braden opens his truck door and jumps out.

I quickly run after him. "Thanks for the ride—"

"I'm tired of this shit," Braden says, pointing a finger at Duane. "I told you. We don't need any more people coming around here. No more new sellers."

"Ain't you the one who brought her here?" Duane chuckles.

"She was trying to hitch her way up to the farm. Who knows what kind of creep might've given her a ride?"

My cheeks redden. Duane picked me up six months ago and chased me through the fields like a creep. Duane, who must be thinking the same thing, smirks.

“We don’t need anyone else in our business,” Braden adds.

“She’s just a hookup,” Duane says, his eyes falling over my body, sending a low hum of electricity through my nervous system. “Nothing more.”

I don’t *feel* like ‘nothing more.’ And I definitely don’t feel like ‘just a hookup.’

Braden’s hollow expression washes over me. He swivels back to Duane.

“You sure about that?” he mutters.

“She’s nothing you need to concern yourself with,” Duane says. “Go on. Let me handle it.”

At those words, Braden glowers at me, but that anger sinks into sadness, almost like he knows every detail of the trap I’m walking into. He shakes his head, his mouth opening, but the words don’t come out.

My stomach sinks with dread. What is he holding back?

“Is he telling the truth?” Braden asks.

I cross my arms over my chest. “Why do you ask?”

“If you’ve got half a mind, you’ll ask me to take you home right now.”

I lick my lips, turning away from Braden, not wanting to face the truth we both know. Duane chuckles at my body language, and Braden scoffs.

“Is Todd here?” I ask.

“You think Todd is your friend? Wow,” Braden says, then he walks past us, up into the house. Right as he leaves, Todd emerges, dressed in jeans and a shirt. Two other men follow behind him, talking amongst themselves.

Duane gestures at the red barn behind the house. “I gotta fix up this tractor before we get started. You okay hanging out with Todd for a while?”

Grime coats Duane’s fingertips in streaks of oil and dirt, the kind of touch that will leave a mark on you.

“Sure,” I say.

Duane squints at me for a brief second, then disappears through the house as well. Todd and his friends talk about something in hushed voices.

“Just give us a second,” Todd says to me.

“Sure,” I say again. Then I pull out my phone and take a selfie with the cornfields in the background. The lighting is nice, and when I add a filter, it makes the whole picture dreamy.

“Hey Secret,” Todd says.

I spin around. “You don’t have to call me that here,” I say. “Duane knows my real name.”

“Habit, I guess,” he says, shrugging. “Listen, I gotta run back to the city to drop off something. Can you wait here on the porch?”

I bend forward. “So, you’re leaving me here. Alone.”

Todd laughs and the other two men exchange looks.

“You were going to be alone with Duane anyway, right? It’s not like he’s paying *me* for a dance.” He puts his arm around my shoulder, his weight heavy against me, and I raise a brow. “Duane is fine. Trust me. And if he tries anything you don’t like, just leave.”

“Just leave?” I say. “And run where, exactly?”

“You’re a smart girl. You’ll figure it out.”

I roll my eyes. “Thanks. You’re so helpful.”

“If you thought you were in real danger, you wouldn’t have come,” he says. “Relax. Don’t work so hard.”

He winks, then the three men pile into Todd’s SUV. The car disappears behind the fields, but I stare in their direction, trying to steady myself. I’m alone on a murderer’s property. A man who forced himself on me.

Granted, he’s not *exactly* a murderer. He’s just really into Halloween...

In the back of my mind, Duane’s warning repeats endlessly: *If I wanted to kill you, I could’ve done it by now. Couldn’t I?* It shouldn’t be comforting, but it is. *And* it unnerves me.

What am I doing here?

I close my eyes and take a deep breath, and when I open them, I resolve that I’m not a safe person anyway. I’m here with bad intentions—both to illegally fuck for money, and to satisfy my craving to do something dangerous. It’s an adrenaline rush, and I need more.

Which is why I don’t stay on the porch.

Around the side of the house, there’s a small chicken coop, and the hens cluck as I pass. A large red and white barn is directly behind the house—the one I assume Duane went inside of to fix the tractor—but the two concrete buildings behind it seem new. Freshly painted. No windows. On top of that, the entire property is surrounded by cornfields, like an agricultural fortress.

If Duane is killing people, there are a *lot* of places to bury bodies here.

That’s your imagination talking, I think to myself. And at this rate, a secret like that won’t stay hidden for long. If he is a killer *and* I’m in danger,

then eventually, my instincts will kick in and shut up that voice inside of me that *swears* this is fine.

My eyes catch on a padlock hanging from the door to one of the concrete buildings. There's something inside of there that he wants to keep hidden. *But what?*

My stomach churns, imagining the possibilities. Maybe I don't want to know what he's hiding.

I spin around and see that the other gray building's padlock is hanging open on the u-bar. Someone must've forgotten to lock it up. Before I can change my mind, I quickly stroll across the lawn, scanning the area to make sure that no one is around, then I remove the padlock. I close the door behind me, then put the padlock on the ground right beside the door.

Inside, it's warm and dark. A fan pumps against me, the pressure rippling my tank top. Shelves line the walls, but I can't see much. I search the wall until I find a switch.

Red lights flicker on, casting the room in an ominous glow. Each shelf is stacked with small, transparent dishes, with white growths stretching across the inner surface like strange, pressed flowers. A door is in the back, and when I open that door to the next room, another fan blasts down on me.

I scan the second room and gasp.

Cylindrical plastic bags, full of dirt and some sort of white substance, are strung up from the ceiling, like body bags hanging in a walk-in freezer. Each bag is torn with holes, mushrooms growing out of each opening like bushes of fungus.

Why is Duane keeping these mushrooms locked up? Is he protecting them, or is this illegal?

Is that why he had that padlock on the outside?

This is crazy.

I'm not even sure what I'm seeing, so I take out my phone, snapping as many pictures as I can. The shutter echoes in the darkness, increasing the anxiety building inside of me. But when I check the gallery, the photos are red and blurry; you can't see anything. So I switch on the flash, and the mushrooms illuminate under the strobe light as if they're dancing in the darkness. These must be magic mushrooms—psilocybin mushrooms—a fungus illegal in most parts of the country. Even *most* places in California.

Maybe it *was* a body in the back of his truck. If someone found out what he was doing, and he thought they were going to tell, what would he do with

them?

My hands shake as I send my GPS location to my mom again, then I try to send her a picture of the mushrooms. But the pressure in the room changes, and a form goes through the fan. Boots thud against the cement as I stuff my phone in my pocket and try to reach for my stun gun, but it's too late.

I spin around and come face to face with the barrel of a gun. My entire body goes rigid with fear.

"You don't listen, do you?" Duane drawls, his voice low and full of warning. "I told you not to go looking for trouble."

CHAPTER 7

REGGIE

THE END OF HIS GUN COMES INTO SHARP FOCUS, BLURRING EVERYTHING around it. I tremble as my eyes move to meet Duane's. His body is cast in red under the glow of the lamps, and there's a tension in his expression that makes me tighten everywhere.

"Hand over the phone," he orders.

Why does he want my phone? This mushroom building *has* to be illegal.

But I can get out of this. I can *lie*. I can make something up—

"I've never seen a mushroom farm," I say hesitantly. "I just thought I'd —"

"You and I both know what you thought," he says, clenching his jaw. "Now, give me the fucking phone."

His hand traces the hammer, locking it into position with a subtle click. I'm in his territory, but Todd and my mom know where I am. They know where to search for me if I go missing.

This isn't where I die. I swear, it's not.

But my lips quiver with nerves. I look from Duane's eyes straight into the barrel of a gun.

I reach for my purse, but in a sharp movement, Duane uses his gun to knock my phone out of my hand. I gasp, shock flooding through my veins, but before I can pick it up, he hurls it at the wall. The screen shatters, and the device bangs into one of the mushroom bags, spilling some dirt onto the floor.

He wrecked his own mushrooms, just to destroy my phone. To ruin the evidence. Photographs that could get him into trouble.

I'm in way too deep.

My palms drip with sweat. He squints his eyes down at me like he can smash me under his boot. The stupid part is that I *know* he can, and I came here by choice. The back of my throat is on fire like I'm swallowing burning coals.

"I don't even know what kind of mushrooms they are," I whisper.

"You're smart, Hitch. You can put it together. That's why I like you."

My heart pounds in my chest. But a low heat travels through my ribs, slithering down between my legs. My thighs are jelly.

Duane likes me?

He thinks I'm smart?

Why am I so caught up on those words?

"How do you like being on the other side?" he murmurs.

He's right. Just six months ago, I aimed a gun at his head. Now, I'm the one about to die.

I try to open my mouth, but my tongue is dry. "I—" I stutter, "I—"

His tongue flicks across his lips like a snake.

"Get on your knees," he says, "and open your mouth."

Air pants out of me as I try to contemplate my options. If I refuse, he may kill me. And if I obey, there's a chance that he won't shoot, but he'll still have the upper hand. He's got a gun, for fuck's sake, and I've got what, a stun gun in my purse?

But it's something.

He presses his palm between my legs, and I jump with sensitivity. The tip of the pistol presses against my forehead, and I'm ice from the inside out.

"You like knowing that I could kill you at any second, don't you?" he says.

But those words startle me out of my trance. Maybe this is part of our 'beneficial arrangement.' How I'm going to earn five thousand dollars.

What kind of sick, twisted game is this?

I start, "You seriously don't think—"

He moves the gun to the side of the building and shoots, blasting a hole right through one of the hanging bags. Dirt and mushroom caps splatter the floor. If this is illegal, just like I've got this gut instinct it is, then he destroyed his product to scare me. To show me he's serious.

My chest pounds with adrenaline.

"On your knees, Reggie," he says, my name slimy on his tongue. I kneel, the concrete scraping against my knees. A tear slips down my cheek as he

presses the metal barrel into my forehead.

“Aren’t so brave now, are you?” he murmurs. He lowers the gun, pressing the barrel to my lips. It’s cold and weighty, and my breath brushes the metal with fog. “Suck it like a good girl.”

His blue eyes are filled with an iciness so deep, I shiver. There’s no soul in this man; only a cruel, dark heart that needs to feed on fear to get off. And I’m fucking scared. I open my mouth, and he slides the barrel deeper. The metal scrapes against my teeth.

“Wrap your lips around it,” he orders in a hoarse voice.

I close my eyes, my cheeks blazing with shame. My lips suction around the gun. All it takes is a flick of his finger, and I’ll be gone. And yet, here I am, on my knees, while he makes me suck off his gun.

“Goddamn,” he growls. “You’re so fucking hot like that. Try and hide it all you want, but I know what you like, Hitch. Your pussy is dripping for this.”

With that, I narrow my eyes. He’s got a smug expression, like he knows he’s right.

And it’s irritating, because my thighs *are* damp.

I should’ve killed him that night. Left him dead in his own cornfield and told the cops the sick shit he did to me. It would’ve been self defense.

But maybe I deserve this torture. Maybe it’s what I get for running away. For not opening my mouth that night like I should have.

“Angry little bitch, aren’t you?” Duane says. “Angry because you know how much you like it.”

He pulls the gun out of my mouth and I hiss, “You’re a sick man.”

“Let’s see what your cunt thinks,” he says. He motions with the gun. “Go on. Take off your clothes now.”

I lower my shorts—I don’t wear underwear unless I’m at the club—and keep my eyes on Duane’s dirt-crusting boots. A low groan rumbles through him, then he eyes my purse. I lift the shoulder strap over my head, then put the purse on the ground next to me. I have *no choice* in getting naked, but I *can* keep my stun gun close to me.

There’s a hunger on Duane’s mouth, like he’s practically salivating at the sight of me. And I realize that I’m lying to myself.

I did have a choice, and I chose to be here. I knew exactly what I was getting into.

Why did I come here to fuck a deranged man for money?

“All of it,” Duane instructs coarsely.

I exhale as slowly as I can muster, then I pull off my bra and shirt, letting my heavy breasts hang down. He licks his lips.

“Lay down on the ground and spread yourself for me,” he says.

I blink, afraid of what’s coming next, and Duane shoots at the ceiling this time, pieces of cement cracking and falling on top of me. I scramble to the floor, lying on my back, my knees shaking as I spread them wide.

“Pull apart your pussy lips,” he says. “Show me how wet you are.”

I huff, keeping the tears inside, but I do as I’m told. I’m so wet, it’s dripping between my ass cheeks, my face flushing with embarrassment. He could shove his fist inside of me right now and I’d be lubricated enough to take it.

He runs the tip of the gun along my folds, the cool metal like a million little knives pressing against me, keeping me still. He rides the pistol along my clit, teasing me with the cool sensation. My hips instinctively writhe, wanting more of it, and I bite my lip.

This is so messed up.

“Such a little eager thing, aren’t you?” he chuckles.

“You’re a sick, sick man,” I mutter.

“Only as sick as you,” he grunts. “Get on your hands and knees.”

My nostrils flare, but I roll over. The cement bites into my knees again, and I glance over my shoulder. Duane licks the tip of the gun, tasting my pussy juices on it. His eyes lock with mine as a groan of pleasure erupts from his chest, then he sucks the rest of my liquid off of the pistol.

“So fucking sweet,” he says.

Quicker than I can blink, he pulls out his cock and shoves inside of me, impaling me on his dick. I cry out. I’m wetter than I’ve ever been, and because of that, his cock immediately hits my cervix, sending an ache charging through my core. He thrusts in again, fisting my hair with one hand, holding the gun to the back of my head with the other. I arch my spine, forcing my ass back, and his cock goes deeper.

Anger surges through me, because it’s easier to be mad than it is to be ashamed. To know that he’s right. That I *do* like this.

“You know why I haven’t killed you yet?” he grunts between thrusts. “Because you’re just like me, Hitch. You get off on this just as much as I do.”

His hips bang forward, throwing me off of my palms, and I stumble forward, landing on my purse. *My purse!* I stumble, keeping my head

forward, hoping that he doesn't notice as my hand sneaks through the opening. My hand finds the stun gun, and I clutch it, waiting for the right moment to strike like I did in the cornfield. His cock twitches, rubbing against my velvet walls, and I know he's close. I hold my breath, pressing my finger on the stun gun's trigger.

"Give me that fucking cunt!" he shouts.

I whip around and shove the stun gun against his shoulder, turning it on. He jolts, convulsing into my hand and knocking the weapon out of my grip. It skitters across the pavement and out of reach.

I pant uncontrollably. *Shit!* Why did I drop the stun gun when I need it right now?

I crawl forward, gathering up my purse, searching for something else—anything! But Duane rips the purse from my hands and throws it against the wall. A gunshot echoes through the building, and another bag bursts with dirt and fungus. My throat swells. He grabs the stun gun off of the floor, trading it for his pistol, then he uses his weight, putting me back on all fours, holding his body against mine. I shudder in complete fear.

"What the fuck, Duane?" I whimper.

"I don't need this to dominate you," he says, holding the stun gun against my neck, ready to zap me. "I don't even need a gun. I could kill you with my bare fucking hands."

"Oh god," I cry.

"Electricity ain't my thing, but goddamn, I bet it's yours," he says. Before I can look over my shoulder, he presses the stun gun into my arm. The electricity shoots through me, locking every bone and joint into place, paralyzing me for a few seconds.

I can't breathe. I can't do anything. I'm helpless.

Then it's done, and I swallow as much air as I can. I'm at his mercy like this.

And he laughs.

"Breathe, little Hitch," he murmurs, pulling me back up against his body. A strange, comforting heat blooms inside of me, and I exhale, finally relaxing enough to steady myself. He wants me around. He won't kill me because he likes me too much.

His cock finds my pussy again, sliding in my slit. The stun gun is on the floor in front of me now, almost like he wants me to use it again, just so he can force me back into this position. But I'm not willing to do that anymore.

He cups my neck with one hand, holding his weight on his other as he buries his cock inside of me.

“You best learn one thing, Hitch. Don’t fuck with me,” he says. “You want trouble? You got trouble. You want this next bullet in your head? Then just keep fucking with me when we both know you *want* me to crush you.”

His hips pulse into me harder and harder, until I’m forced onto my stomach. My skin scrapes against the cement, and he uses his size to overpower me, thrusting and fucking me so deep, I scream. My clit presses into the ground, rubbing against the rough surface, sensitive as hell, and an overwhelming pleasure begins to shoot through me. He reaches for the pistol.

“No,” I cry. The tears come down, pouring like an endless wave from this catharsis. It’s just *us* now. Just us fucking. And my body starts cresting over that peak. But god, I don’t want to come right now. “No. No. No! Not now!”

But then I hear the click of the hammer pulling back, the metal pressing against the nape of my neck, and it’s too late. My limbs quake with Duane’s cock inside of me, his gun pressed to my neck. Burning light spins across the back of my eyes, and I come like I’ve never come before.

And it terrifies me.

I pant as I come down from the orgasm, shame wriggling up my spine. Duane pulls out, holding the gun limp at one side and jerking off with his other hand so hard that for a split second, I wonder if it’ll break.

Then he loses control too. Hot ropes of come strike my skin.

When his breathing calms, we both stare at each other, unsure of what to do now. But then a smile creeps across his lips, and he holsters his pistol. He pulls the zipper of his jeans with ease, like this was only sex between two consenting adults.

But me? I just want to be alone. I don’t even want to move. I cross my arms, covering my tits.

I’m disgusted with myself.

“Filthy,” he says, and I shoot him a glare, daring him to finish that sentence right now. “So fucking filthy and pretty,” he continues, his voice wistful, as if he’s enraptured by me. My stomach backflips, not expecting the compliment. But then I scowl at myself for being so easy when it comes to him.

He chuckles to himself, handing me my clothes.

“What?” I snap. I scramble into my shorts. I hate wearing wet clothes and my shorts are nearly soaked right now, reminding me of my own idiotic,

lustful reaction. It pisses me off even more.

“Why are you so angry, Hitch?” Duane asks with humor in his voice. “Tell me.”

“Because you’re disgusting,” I say, though I know it’s more about myself than him.

“I’m not the only one who got off, am I?”

Shame flickers through me like a tendril of fire, but I don’t want to talk about that anymore. I don’t want to admit that he’s right. I pull on my shirt and change the subject.

“You broke my phone,” I say.

He lifts his head. “I suppose I could buy you another.”

I wrinkle my nose and hold out my palm. “Pay me and add extra for a new phone.”

He takes out his wallet, putting a large stack of hundreds in my hand. I blink at the money, then get my purse, my hands running over the stun gun as I grab my counterfeit pen. I check each bill, then count it again, carefully this time.

He overpaid me by forty percent.

When I look up, his eyes are glued to me, like he’s completely obsessed. And damn it, if that desire alone doesn’t make my knees quake.

Why does a man this fucked up want *me*?

“You’re a hard worker, Hitch,” he says.

I don’t know if he’s mocking me or being serious, so I ignore him.

He continues: “I ought to find you a more permanent place on the farm. One where we can really use your talents.”

His dark blue eyes simmer with lust, and my gut tingles. I hate that I like the way his words make me feel, because now, I *know* he’s being serious. Everything he just said is an actual compliment.

But there’s a question inside of his words too. Is he going to hire me for a more permanent job, working on his illegal mushrooms, *or* is he going to kill me and bury me here so that I can never leave?

I don’t know.

But I know I’ll find out.

CHAPTER 8

DUANE

THE SUN BLAZES ABOVE ME, MELTING THE LANDSCAPE LIKE IT'S A DAMN oven. I hold the new napkin note up to the sky, blocking the sunlight, letting the shadow spread across my face. The faint scent of cigarettes and vanilla flutters down from the note, like my little blackmailer wrote it while she was at work.

It's been a few days since I fucked Reggie in the spore houses, but with how heavy my balls are, you would think it's been months. But that's not my concern right now. I'm waiting outside of the newest seller's trailer. Todd owns the trailer park. Must've been how he found this seller.

I've got no sympathy for someone who thinks it's smart to go to the cops when he's about as wrapped in this business as any of us are. He should know that's how you get killed.

The seller's shadow flickers from the bedroom to the living room as he slumps in front of the television. The noises of a court show echo through the thin walls, loud and angry, and flashes of color light up the curtains in the window. The seller yells at the TV, then chuckles to himself, like it's the funniest damn thing he's heard all year.

The front door isn't even locked, and it's like killing a baby deer, knowing that it's stupid and helpless before you. But I learned a thing or two growing up on a ranch. When it's time to put a cow down, you don't drag out the inevitable because she was a cute calf when she was a baby; you do what you have to do to fix the problem and put the cow out of misery, before it affects the whole herd.

But killing a cow isn't quite like killing a human. That's why this bloodlust always trickles in my veins, yearning for more. It's why I killed the

competition for our ranch back in Florida, and why, in the end, I killed my own father to get what I deserved.

The door shifts open without a sound. The scent of loaded baked potatoes wafts through the air, as if this is a restaurant, not a mobile home. The seller's laugh echoes through the hall, so convinced of his own safety, that I ought to put his ass out just for being this dumb. You don't deal drugs and leave the front door unlocked.

Though I suppose he thinks he's safe since he was planning on calling the cops anyway.

From right behind him, I take the knife and stab his cheekbone, a wound that won't kill him—at least, not until infection sets in—and he jolts, howling so loud, my skin catches on fire with adrenaline. Spit flies through my teeth as he attacks me, and his hands wrap around my throat. I love it when they fight me. It makes the hunt that much better.

I wish he was Reggie right now.

"What the fuck, man?" he sputters, but his wounded cheek makes it nearly impossible to talk. "T-the hell is this?"

I could tell him the reason I'm killing him, but that would mean I care about justice and rules. But the truth is I don't give a damn about *any* side of the law. I care about *respect*. And if you don't respect your boss enough to keep your mouth shut or respect yourself enough to lock your fucking door, then you don't deserve to live.

I let him choke me for a minute, blood rushing to my groin at the chase, imagining it's *her*, my little Hitch, thinking she's winning the fight, like she's about to kill me. My dick is hard, and when the idiot notices, his jaw drops. I shove my body forward, rolling us over until I'm on top again. I stab the knife into the bastard's throat this time, and that's the killer hit.

His weak eyes gaze up at me, blue and solid like mine. Not an ounce of brown, like my girl's.

My gloves crunch as I straighten my palm. Blood stains the carpet, and soon, the stink of death will overpower the stench of baked potatoes. That's one advantage of murders on the farm; you can get your hands dirty and not worry about history flaking off of your skin, leaving evidence behind. But out here, in another person's home, you got to be more careful, and yet, you want to leave a mark too. Make sure everyone else *knows* that this is what happens when you mess with Duane fucking Patrick.

I text one of my other workers, one of the three that are left, telling him to

take care of the mess. He'll tell the rest, and then, they'll *know*.

On the way back to the farm, I take my time, taking the back roads while I sing along with the radio. I ought to call Reggie with the way I'm feeling. My balls ache for her. Surely, she's had enough time to process our last session.

But when I pull up the gravel driveway, Braden's on the porch, scowling like he always does lately. Back in Florida, he was loyal, and was actually the first to jump up when I said I needed help forging my father's will. But since I had to kill his crush for blabbing her big mouth, he's been uptight about the whole thing. Braden could barely talk to her, let alone *fuck her*, but he got all self-righteous about the whole thing. Something about how this was getting out of hand.

That was six months ago, and he's been a different man ever since. Still, I respect Braden. He was always with me back in Florida. Why not give him the benefit of the doubt? Besides, he's in too deep with me to think he could come out of it with clean hands.

I slam the truck door and Braden's eyes flick to the gloves I'm carrying, stained with dried blood. He mutters under his breath, and I lift my chin, daring him to voice his complaints loud and clear.

He doesn't hesitate.

"You murdered him too?" he asks. "Not everyone has to die."

I cock my head to the side. "Then what do you suggest?"

"You figure out what they're saying and discredit the source. You make *him* seem like the idiot."

"Sounds like some peace-loving bullshit."

Braden snorts, and Todd rounds the corner of the house, then leans on the exterior beside Braden.

"Cops would've come to the farm if any word got out," Todd says to Braden. "Duane did the right thing."

Braden spins around to face him. "If we keep killing everyone who comes here, the cops *will* show up."

The two of them argue for a bit, but I finger that napkin note in my pocket. Braden found the blackmail note this time and gave it to me, and the more I think about it, the more interesting it gets. After all, Braden and Reggie arrived at the farm *together* the other day. What's to say that they aren't working together to take my business out from under me?

I studied Reggie long before I made my presence known at the Double

Take. She used to draft inspirational quotes on those cocktail napkins before she posted them with her selfies on social media. She always perfected her online image, as if she was pure power and grace. It always amused me, mostly because I knew that all it would take was showing my face again, and that strong composure of hers would dissolve into a blubbering mess of wetness and panic.

Cocky little thing thinks it's funny to blackmail me on one of those same napkins. I ought to kill her right now, seeing as she's a devil in disguise and things will only get worse for me. I ought to show Braden that I'm not fucking around. I'll kill her too. I'll even kill him.

But it's just a hunch, and Braden wouldn't disrespect me like that. But I can't say the same things about my girl. How far will Reggie take it? How much is she willing to risk?

I yank the napkin out of my pocket and hold it up in their direction, more so at Todd than at Braden. Braden's already seen it.

"What do you think about this?" I ask. Todd squints at the smashed handwriting. Again, it's all capitals. Can't tell shit about who wrote it. I even compared the note to the photocopy of Reggie's Double Take application the other day, sitting in my office like an amateur detective. Some of the curves seem similar, but it's hard to tell. Handwriting is not my expertise.

"The hell does it even say?" Todd asks, tilting his head.

Braden snatches it from him. "*I know where you buried them,*" he reads aloud. "*Sell before I tell.*" He rakes his fingers through his tomato-red hair. "Jesus christ. What are we going to do about this blackmail?"

"Not 'we.' *Me,*" I clarify, quite aware that the note is referencing my murders.

Braden scowls at me, like he's annoyed that I'd even bring that up.

"We never should've done this in the first fucking place," he says.

I study Braden with building irritation. He was fine with moving to California and helping me get the cornfields up and running, and he was the one who put me in contact with Todd in the first place. Braden even offered to perfect our mushroom labs, and eventually became my spore house manager. It was only when I killed his crush for being a rat that he started acting like a resistant motherfucker.

"Are you playing a trick on me?" I ask, stepping closer to him, the edge of my boots on the bottom stair of the porch.

"Why in the hell would I do that?" Braden asks.

“Maybe you got some need for revenge. Maybe you’re still hurt over that pair of ass and tits.”

He sneers. “Watch your mouth.”

“What are you going to do about it?”

Todd chuckles as Braden scoffs at him.

“Think about this for a second, Duane. If you go down, it’s only a matter of time before they come after me too. Fuck, even Todd is in this now! If you’re not careful, we’re *all* going to be arrested.” Braden smashes his fist into the side of the house. “Jesus!”

A moment passes, then Todd addresses me. “Who do you think it is?”

I stare at him for a moment. Todd’s muscular, like he wants to be a brown-haired movie star stunt double and uses that physique to intimidate others, but when you’ve done what I’ve done, no amount of muscles, tattoos, or grease on a man’s hands can scare you. I don’t doubt with Todd’s ease in this business, that he’s taken a few lives as well. After all, Todd suggested the mushroom idea.

And Braden knows better. Even if I give him a hard time for being afraid of the law, we respect each other too much. Bottom line, he isn’t stupid enough to cross me.

On the other hand, my girl doesn’t know what she’s getting into. She thinks she’s safe because I like the smell of her pussy. And hell, *I do*, but a smell like that will only get you so far. I like to kill *too*, especially a pretty little thing like her. They always die like they come, and goddamn, it’s a sight to see.

“What about Reggie?” I ask.

“Secret?” Todd repeats. “Really?”

“The black-haired girl you invited here the other day?” Braden asks.

I run my thumb over my lips. I don’t like that Braden remembers her hair color. Either I’m right and they’re working together, *or* he’s noticed her a little too much for my liking.

“That’s the one,” I say coldly.

“Reggie’s not dumb,” Todd says. “She’s got other ways to get money off of you. How much did you say you’re paying for her visits?”

I didn’t tell him, but I ain’t ashamed of it. “Five thousand per hour.”

Todd whistles, but Braden scoffs. “If she doesn’t own this farm through the blackmail, she’ll bleed us dry with your dick.”

This time, I’m the one who warns him: “Watch your mouth.”

Braden crosses his arm. “She’s got you wrapped around her finger. Pussy-whipped like a—”

In two steps, I’m up on the porch, shoving him into the railing. The wood splinters slightly as it presses against his back. He grits his teeth, snarling at me, but he doesn’t move, keeping still as a scarecrow on the broken wood.

Braden likes to run his mouth—always has—but *never* to me. This is the first time he’s opened his mouth like that. Something’s changed with him, and I don’t like it.

“No pussy owns me,” I growl.

He spits to the side, and it pisses me off more, because I know the meaning behind his silence. I shove him again, letting him fall off of the porch, the railing finally breaking underneath him. He grunts as he gets up from the gravel, and I turn to the side, keeping myself in check.

“You can’t even think straight around her, can you?” Braden asks.

I lunge toward him, but Todd steps in front of me, blocking my path.

“Let it go,” Todd says. “He’s got a point.”

I snarl at Todd. “You want to be next?”

Todd lifts both of his hands in defense. “All I’m saying is that you brought her over here, right? We need to keep a close eye on her. For all we know, she is the one blackmailing you. And if she’s a problem for you, she’s a problem for all of us.”

“And you’re supposed to *fix* problems, Duane, not make them,” Braden adds.

A coolness settles over my chest as I look between them. They’re right. I do need to keep an eye on her. I saw her taking photos and videos of our mushrooms. I don’t know who left it unlocked, but it’s like they *wanted* her to find what was inside. Like she’s working together with someone already here on my farm.

It takes courage to do something like that. Stupidity too. It’s part of why I’m curious about her. Why I haven’t killed her yet.

After our usual work in the fields and the sun goes down, I head to Stockton. It’s a Tuesday night—the customers who come out for Two Dollar Tuesdays at the Double Take are a little too rowdy for my Hitch.

So I go straight to her apartment. There’s a light on in her bedroom window. She’s awake. Must be pretending to study for that real estate exam.

After checking her car—I made a spare key a few months ago and had Braden show me how to install GPS tracking software—I drive to the auto

shop and buy a new battery. I install it, using the toolbox from the back of my truck, and make sure it runs smoothly.

She refused the new phone I bought her and got one on her own. As irritating as it was, it made me smile, because it showed that she may have been dumb enough to blackmail me, but she was smart enough *not* to trust me. And she was right about that. I had Braden put tracking software on the device before I tried to give it to her. It's a good thing she refused.

I pull out my phone, clicking through the social media apps until I find her posts. The most recent one was posted a few hours ago from her newly purchased refurbished phone. The woman hates spending money on herself, no matter how much she makes. It almost makes me want to torture her by spoiling her with a bunch of things she wants, but doesn't need.

The picture was taken outside by the apartment complex pool. Her deeply amber skin glows, contrasting perfectly with those big tits in her white bathing suit. To top it off, she's got ruby red lips.

Strength comes from within, the caption reads, even when your haters try to make you look into the barrel of a gun.

The caption is a direct reference to me. As if *I'm* the hater. Like she thinks she's stronger than me, when we both know I could've killed her. I take out the pistol I used on her that day, opening the chamber.

I still have three bullets left.

When I think about the fact that Reggie may be my blackmailer, or at least, working *with* someone to blackmail me, then I have to get her to trust me—to let her guard down and spill the truth. And the way to do that isn't by shoving a gun into her pussy. It's by giving her a job. Making her think that I trust her. That I *respect* her, just like I want her to trust and respect me.

My mind runs south, my cock pulsing in anticipation. I'll give her a job, all right, but first, we've got some history to revisit.

I text her, then observe her shadow in the window, waiting to see her next move.

CHAPTER 9

REGGIE

THE TEXT BEAMS UP AT ME LIKE A LIGHT AT THE END OF A TUNNEL, BUT there's nothing about Duane's words that seem hopeful.

Go to the glory hole and tell me your darkest fantasy.

My stomach drops to my toes like I've been dropped into an ice bath. It's been a few days since I've heard from him—he tried sending me a new phone through the mail, but I refused the package—and I kept expecting him to show up at the Double Take like he had before, but he never did.

I realize I've been waiting for him.

Glory hole? I text quickly.

You know what I'm talking about, he responds.

My stomach twists in knots, knowing *he* was the one who fucked the wall so hard that the entire bathroom shook like it was about to collapse. It was hot. So fucking hot knowing that I had that much power over a man when my sugar daddy—a man who paid me to be his 'girlfriend' exclusively for years—would never let it go that far. Instead, my sugar daddy liked to get high and use a vibrator on the skin *above* my pussy, because he refused to touch me with his bare hands.

Side by side, my old sugar daddy is harmless compared to Duane. Sure, he's a condescending asshole, but he's not *physically* dangerous. Duane *is*. And yet, with every passing day, I grow a little more comfortable with Duane. As if he's someone I could get used to. Someone I wouldn't mind lying down for. A man who actually knows where my clit is.

But the red flags are still there. Duane may be worth a lot of money, but following him to a seedy gas station off of the highway is a good way to end up buried in a cornfield.

My car is out of commission, I respond.

Sometimes, we can have an off day, can't we, Hitch? Maybe it was the same with your car, he texts. *Why don't you give it another try?*

I raise my brow, then peer out of my bedroom window, expecting to see him standing in the parking lot next to his beat up truck, waiting for me. But save for the usual cars and one of my neighbors coming back from her shift at the grocery store, it's empty.

I glance in the bathroom mirror, as if that will determine my decision. In sweatpants and a hoodie, I look like I'm ready to crawl into bed, but maybe it's for the best. It's not like Duane gave me instructions to be my sexiest for the glory hole, and besides, it'll be easier to escape if I'm in clothes I can actually run in. I pull on my sneakers, lock the front door, and jog over to my car.

I drop into the driver's seat and turn the key; the car roars to life like it's got a brand new engine. A low hum shoots through my stomach, thinking of what this means.

Could Duane have fixed my car? Would he do something like that?

No, that's stupid. There's no evidence of a break in. He couldn't get into my car without me knowing.

Maybe my car *was* having an off day.

My fingers tap the steering wheel as I drive down the highway I'm familiar with now. Hitchhiking from Oakdale to Stockton wasn't what I wanted to do, but the night I left my sugar daddy, I was so pissed that I just left. I didn't think about the repercussions. I only thought about how I could show that asshole that I could survive, *and thrive*, without him, even if that meant walking down a road by myself in the middle of the night.

I pull into the gas station and search for Duane's truck, but I don't see his truck anywhere.

Inside, the gas station convenience store is well lit to the point of being eerie, like the building has an awareness, knowing the depraved behavior hiding in the back. No one is at the cash register, but in the corner, I see a red light coming from a surveillance camera. Relief flows through me, knowing that the security monitors have seen me here. If Duane tries to kill me tonight, at least there will be video proof of my trail.

I bite my lip, heat swarming between my thighs. This is a bad idea, but it's *my* idea. And I don't want to stop myself.

I want to play in his danger.

The door swings open to the back of the building. My senses are on high alert, the adrenaline bouncing off of my skin like rain drops. In the bathroom, it's the same as before—the light above the sink is dim, but the other two long strips of fluorescent fixtures are dark. Everything is layered with paint and pasted flyers from decades ago, like this used to be a cool place before it was inhabited by people like Duane. *And me.* I shuffle over to the stalls, my stomach churning with nerves and excitement.

No sane person goes to a glory hole like this. Especially not twice. The first time, you can almost understand why I did it. It was like I was proving to the world that a man could want me without even seeing me. That I could make a man lose control with my sexuality.

But now, knowing who's in here with me? It's ten times worse. Duane is probably a drug lord, and he may even be a killer.

And I'm the idiot following him into the darkness.

But still, I don't leave. I check the stalls; the one I used last time is closed, but I can see a darker shadow breaking up the thin opening at the bottom of the door.

I don't even know if it's him, but I enter the other stall and get on my knees, my skin prickling with goose bumps, waiting for what comes through that hole.

But the person on the other side doesn't move. My spine zaps with nerves, and I remember the second part of Duane's instructions—

Tell me your darkest fantasy.

I lick my lips, then press my mouth against the hole like it's a telephone I'm speaking into. This isn't about me—it's about fulfilling *Duane's* desires so that he pays me. That's all I need to do right now.

"Let me make you come," I say.

A low growl comes from the other side of the stall, like I've said the exact wrong thing. I quiver on my knees, blinking rapidly.

What am I supposed to say?

"Do you know how long I've been watching you, Regina?" he says, his voice so familiar by now that the tones twitch through me, flooding me with weakness. My birth name on his tongue is like a charge of electricity, zinging me down to my core. No one but my mom calls me that. It's like he's admitting that he's obsessed with me, like he knows way more than I've ever told him.

"How do you know my real name?" I whisper.

“You act like you’re tough, like no man can bring you down, and maybe, in some ways, you’re right. But deep down, you know what you really want. You want to know that you matter. That a man can be brought to his knees with the overwhelming need to fuck you. You want to be dominated. You want to be forced to take every piece of pleasure and pain, just as much as I want to destroy you.”

His words take the air out of my lungs, deflating me. It’s like he sees so much deeper inside of me, parts that I keep hidden, even from myself. What woman *wants* to be forced like that? She’d have to be insane. She’d have to be fucked in the head. She’d have to be—

Me.

As much as I hate it, it feels right to be seen like this. To be heard. To know that he wants what I want too.

I shift uncomfortably behind the stall, nerves banging my chest, need pooling between my legs. *Damn it.* I wish I could say it’s just for the money. It would be easier if it was just about sex. If I could fuck him like I let the Mortician finger-fuck me. If I could pretend to come like I did with my sugar daddy. If I could just get this over with. But it’s not that simple.

Duane sees me, and I can’t dismiss that like it’s nothing.

I keep listening for repositioning on the other side of the stall, to see if Duane is as unsure of himself as I am, but he stays still. So confident, it’s irritating.

And damn it, I *want* to show him this side of me.

“I want to be used,” I say. The words sound strange on my tongue, but they feel right too, admitting this part about myself. “Used like I’m a toy. Or an object. Both valuable and worthless, you know?” My words pick up speed as I continue: “Sometimes, I imagine two men fucking me at once. That I’m nothing more than their plaything, you know? Like a toy that they can’t help but want.”

It’s a daydream I’ve had for years, one that started with my sugar daddy. I used to imagine it was him and his identical twin—after all, he is a silver fox—but once I realized he would never touch me like that, the fantasy morphed into two strangers. How neither of them cared whether I liked it or not, only that *they got off*. How’d they’d do whatever it took to have me.

So, when I heard about the glory hole, I waited until my mom didn’t need the money for school. Then I told my sugar daddy where I was going, and he screamed at me through the house.

You leave, and we're done. We have an exclusivity contract.

You'll never make it without me. How will your mom pay for everything?

You walk out that door, and you can kiss her rent goodbye.

I pull myself out of those memories, hating myself for letting my mind wander that far. My sugar daddy was a dick, and I was an idiot for staying with him for that long and thinking it was a good idea. But at the time, it was the most practical decision: make money and make life easier for my mom.

"Is it always two men?" he asks.

"No," I say. "Most of the time, it's just one man. But it's always—" I pause, not knowing how to say it. I bite my lip, then let it spill out: "I guess I have rape fantasies." My cheeks redden. "I was with this guy for a long time. He paid for everything." I shake my head, embarrassed to admit it. "Whenever I brought up that I needed more from him, he guilt tripped me for wanting it. Wasn't he providing enough already? What right did I have to ask for *more*?"

A gruff growl erupts from the other side of the stall, more beast than man. My chest tightens; it's like this secret actually pisses Duane off. As if he's mad *for* me.

A warmth grows in my chest, knowing that there's a protective streak inside of Duane, building for me.

"Anyway, it's all related, I guess." I shift my weight, adjusting my legs underneath me. "If a man was driven by such powerful sexual desires that it didn't matter if I said 'no,' then that means something, right? That I'm in control. That I'm powerful. That I'm desired in a way I haven't felt in years —"

"Even when he overpowers you," Duane says.

My stomach drops, but I laugh nervously. "That's when you *know* you matter, I guess. Two men must amplify that."

I don't tell him that since the first night I met him, it's always been *him* in my dreams. Duane, my monster. By himself or multiples of him fucking me. Taking whatever he wants. Not caring if I get off, as long as *he* gets his fill.

"And that's why you didn't fight me in the end," he says. "Because you knew I was going to give you everything you had always dreamed about."

Desire spreads through my nervous system like electricity from a stun gun.

"Yes," I whisper.

"Then bend over and put that pussy up against the hole," he says, his

voice low and gravitational, pulling me down past the earth's surface to the molten core in the center. "Let me use that sweet cunt of yours."

I move so quickly that I practically stumble out of my clothes, pulling down my sweatpants and pressing my ass up against the hole. His dick teases my pussy lips.

"Oh, fuck," he says. "You're going to make me come and I haven't even gotten inside of you yet."

A delicious ache surges through me. He can't even see me, and if he did, he'd find me in a hoodie and sweatpants, the most shapeless clothes on the planet, and yet, he's hard as a rock, practically coming right now at the mere *touch* of me. I press my hips back against the stall wall, and the plastic creaks.

"You're so fucking dirty," he growls. "What kind of woman offers her holes like this to a stranger?" He chuckles, his words flaming through my veins. "A helpless little slut."

He impales me with his cock, my whole body jiggling with the pressure, and I'm back to that first night. It was so invigorating, hearing how turned on this stranger—Duane—was to be fucking a hole in the wall, knowing my mouth was on the other side. I push on the opposite wall, so that my body is flat against that hole.

"You know how many times I've come thinking about you in his glory hole?" he groans. "I've been watching you, Reggie. Learning your desires. Learning what you want. It doesn't take a genius to figure you out. But there's never been a pussy that feels the way yours does. I haven't even tried fucking another woman since I felt your lips around my dick. It's why I couldn't let you walk down that road. Why I had to pick you up."

Tension flies through me as the stalls rattle again, just like that first night. He may have been getting rid of a body, or shoveling a Halloween prop from one city to another, but instead of doing his job, *he had to have me*.

He thrusts against the hole so hard I fall to my knees, blasted away by the sheer force of his lust. I scramble back up, pressing my pussy to the hole. The walls shake violently as he impales me to the hilt, growling with primal need. It hurts, but I'm so slick with need that I push against it, and he gores me again. Then the walls suddenly collapse around me, knocking into my back, trapping me inside. Within seconds, Duane whips around the stall, yanking me out from between the walls, and carries me, bending me over the toilet in his stall, like it doesn't matter where we are, or how dirty this place is, or the

fact that we just destroyed someone's property. *He needs to have me.* I lean on the metal fixture, holding myself up, each pulse of his cock like a lightning bolt of pleasure. He holds my neck from behind, using it as leverage, and I come, convulsing around him like a dying animal.

"Goddamn," he mutters. "You're going to make me come."

"Come for me," I cry.

"Get on your knees."

He pulls out and I flip around so fast, my head spins. My back smashes against the edge of the toilet bowl, but I stick out my tongue, eager for everything he has to give. His hot come splashes across my face, marking me like I'm just a dirty little whore.

Our breaths are heavy for the next few seconds as we both stay still in the comfortable silence. Then I find those blue eyes glued to me, almost lost in thought.

"What?" I ask.

"You're fucking beautiful," he murmurs, like he barely knows what to say. A burning sensation tingles through me. I'm covered in dirt and come, and god only knows what else is caked onto my skin from this bathroom's grime. Plus, I'm dressed in old sweatpants and a hoodie, and he's calling me beautiful? He doesn't seem like the kind of man to say stuff like that out of nowhere.

My stomach cramps in confusion. I don't know what to say.

"Wait here," he says.

He disappears as I straighten my clothes, and when he comes back, he hands me a packet of wet wipes. We both clean up, then the realization that this is still a transaction comes over me, bringing me back to my senses.

"You're still getting charged the full amount," I say.

He pulls out his wallet and pays me again. This time, I don't bother with the counterfeit pen or counting the total. I know they're real now, and I know he's overpaying me. Again.

We stand outside of the bathroom, near an empty field. It's not like I need pillow talk, but I don't *want* to leave yet, and I've got a feeling Duane has more to say too.

I motion around us. "Where did you park?"

He points to the other side of the building. "I knew you'd be coming from the other side."

"And you didn't want me to know you were here?"

He subtly nods, and I wonder if he wanted to excite me, to pretend like it wasn't him on the other side, but a stranger. If he knew my darkest fantasies before I even said them out loud.

Am I that easy to read, or does he just know me by now?

"I was thinking," he says, looking off to the side, "We need a new worker. Someone who can sell. Todd usually handles the customers at the Double Take, but you'd be able to do more."

I cock my head to the side. Is he suggesting what I think he's suggesting?

"Okay?" I say.

"Why don't you sell our mushrooms to your customers? You won't need this chump change anymore. You wouldn't even have to touch me, and you'll still be making bank."

A breath catches in my throat, but I swallow it down, pretending like I'm okay with being done with our 'arrangement,' when I'm not. A frustration fills my chest. How can I let this rejection affect me?

My mother worked two jobs when I was growing up, to save money for my private school tuition and our rent. After those bills were paid, every spare cent that we had went into savings, so that one day, I could go to college and use my brain to get ahead. But when I met my sugar daddy, our local video security company owner, and he gave my mom a place to live for a hundred bucks a month and gave *me* an allowance, my mom had enough money to go to school and pursue her *own* dreams. It felt good seeing my mom at ease for once, after everything she had done for me. Staying with my sugar daddy, even if he needed to be high to touch me with a toy, seemed like the best thing for all of us.

And now, I tell myself that this is the same thing. I'm only working for Duane to get ahead. I need more money.

But it's a lie. I just don't want to give up the sex yet.

"Selling mushrooms makes this—" I point to the glory hole door, "—chump change?" Duane nods deeply, and I continue: "What if I want to do both? Sex work *and* sell mushrooms?" I lift my shoulders. "I want to make as much money as possible."

"You're capable, Reggie," he says. "I trust you to handle it."

I hold out my hand. "All right," I say. "I'll let you fuck me *and* I'll sell for you."

The corners of Duane's lips pull up into a smile, and my heart squeezes in my chest like a balloon about to pop. But he shakes my hand, confirming our

agreement.

“I’ll call you tomorrow,” he says. “Go on. Get on home now.”

He walks me to my car and stands in the parking lot as I drive away, and the safety washes over me like a warm bath. After a few yards, I glance in the rearview mirror and see him with his thumbs in his belt loops, satisfied with himself. As if he knows he’s luring me deeper into his lair.

What did I just agree to?

You’re capable, Reggie, he had said, like he didn’t have any doubts in his mind. Like I was his equal. Like he knew I could do anything he asked of me.

I push on the pedal, speeding faster, so I can get away from him and think clearly. Duane is a bad person, and I still want to wring him dry of everything I can. Whether that means having sex with him for money or selling for him, it doesn’t matter. He’s an opportunity I can’t pass up.

And luckily, I’ll get some extra benefits from it too.

But as the Stockton lights come into view, I remind myself that I have to be smart about this. In the end, he’s still a drug lord, and he may have killed people for his drugs. But maybe if I get some of it on camera, I’ll guarantee my safety. If Duane tries something on me, I’ll have evidence. I can go to the police and put him in jail for good. Which means I need a better system than using the camera on my phone.

And that means I have to ask my sugar daddy for help.

CHAPTER 10

REGGIE

MICHAEL'S COLOGNE SEEPS THROUGH THE DOOR BEFORE HE EVEN OPENS IT. To think, he used a vibrator on my belly button. How did I avoid passing out from the fumes?

"Look at that sexy girl," he says, opening the double doors. "Come in. Come in."

He winks his big green eyes, his polo shirt crisp and clean, his head topped with silver hair, and I wonder if I truly *need* his help. Can I figure out how to install hidden cameras on my own?

But Michael owns a video security company. It would be stupid not to take advantage of his expertise.

"Hi Michael," I say politely. For good measure, I ruffle his hair, and he blushes like the flirting means something to him.

Over the scent of his cologne, citrus washes through the air. All the furniture is new and in woods, and the floor-to-ceiling windows highlight the scenic landscaping in his backyard. California is a wash of browns and dull greens, but you'd never be able to tell in Michael's home. Growing up in Oakdale, between the cattle ranchers and the factory workers, when I saw Michael—rich, older, sophisticated—I saw him like a lighthouse on a lonely shore, thinking he could save me and my mom, and give us the break we deserved.

"I like what you did with the place," I say, gesturing at the new furniture.

"I owe it to my girl," he says, tipping his head toward the back of the house. The door to the guest bathroom is closed; she must be in there. I need to work quickly before she comes out. "But we both know you didn't come here to compliment her interior design skills."

I swallow a gulp, *hating* that I have to do this, and with *him*, of all people, but I clear my throat.

"I need help with security," I say. "Like a button camera. Something like that."

He brings his brows together. "Why?"

I shrug. The request is obviously weird, but I don't want to explain myself to him.

"I don't know," I say. "I just want it, okay? Can you help me or not?"

"All right." He runs his fingers through his silver hair. "I can help you. For a price."

I gag a little, but swallow it down. He scoffs at me.

"Jesus, Reggie. What kind of monster do you think I am? I don't mean *that*."

I knew *that*, but his words came out full of sexual innuendo, and now that I've had exactly what I want—a man who makes me feel like the most irresistible woman in the world—the idea of lying back while Michael pretends to know what he's doing, is unthinkable to me.

"Sorry," I mumble. I need to stay on his good side. "I've got some magic mushrooms."

"Mushrooms?"

"Didn't you used to do them?"

I pull out a vacuum sealed packet of caps, the stems tinted with hints of blue and yellow. Michael's eyes widen, his jaw dropping.

"How the hell did you get this?"

Michael told me that I had no skills, and that I would never make it beyond him. When I threatened to become a stripper and use that to pay for the fees to become a real estate agent, he laughed in my face.

Of course, you'd become a stripper, he had said. You need all the attention you can get. Good luck trying to get anyone to take you seriously.

I'm sure drug dealing doesn't fall far from that tree, but I almost *want* to brag to him now. To prove that I may not be a hot-shot company owner like him, but I *am* doing it by myself. Maybe I'll even make more money than him one day.

But I don't say a word, because the best things are left unsaid. I'd rather wait and show him that I can walk all over him.

"I guess I know the right people," I say.

He holds the bag up to the light, licking his lips as he scrutinizes the

contents.

“How much do you have?”

“Enough for you to have as much as you want.”

He sucks in a breath, then puts a hand on my shoulder. “Let me call my team.”

It takes an hour, but eventually, some of his workers show up and set me up with the right equipment. Michael doesn't ask questions, almost like he knows that whatever I'm doing is nefarious, but since he's getting a lot of drugs for it, he doesn't care. He shows me how to reset the cameras so they're untraceable, even from his company. I don't know tech much, but Michael does, and as much as I don't like him, I trust him to be honest when it comes to that. He's too prideful to do otherwise.

In the meantime, I meet his new sugar baby. She's got black hair too, but blue eyes, and some of the best makeup skills I've ever seen. Of course, she's polite, but glares at me like I'm coming to take what's hers. She has no idea that *I'm* the one that walked out on him.

But to be honest, I see myself inside of her. I hope she gets exactly what she wants out of him.

Once we're done, Michael walks me back to the front of the house. I hand over the mushrooms. It's not everything that Duane gave me, but if I know Michael, this is an investment. He'll come back for more, and then I'll charge him extra to make up for this freebie.

For some reason, I want to thank Michael for the help, even though it wasn't a favor. He got drugs out of it, so it's an equal exchange. But then he points at my car, and I know what he's about to say. That gratitude evaporates.

“What'd you get that for? Five hundred dollars?” he asks.

I walk to my car, not giving him the benefit of an answer. “Bye, Michael.”

“Maybe you should get a real job and not spy on people,” he says. “Buy yourself a better car.”

“Who said anything about spying?”

I slam the car door shut, then cross my fingers that the engine actually works. It does, and I peel out of his cobblestone driveway as fast as I can. When I pull onto the street, I see his new sugar baby in the doorway, waiting for him to come inside.

I drive across town to an apartment complex. Two giant trees decorate the

entrance, but when I get to my mom's one-bedroom apartment, my shoulders sink.

Her apartment is half the size of the place Michael rented to her, but it's infinitely more expensive. And with her graduate school tuition, it means she's still scrambling between paychecks. And I'm even paying for her car rental right now.

"Regina," Mom says as she opens the door. "What are you doing here?"

Papers are scattered across the kitchen table, covered in red ink.

"Grading?" I ask.

"Actually, I'm editing my own paper. This thesis is the most anxiety-inducing piece of work I've ever had to write."

I scan the room, looking at my mother's dreams. She put her aspirations on hold when my dad walked out on us, knowing that she wanted *me* to get the best education possible. She applied for me to get into the only private school in Oakdale and took two jobs to cover the tuition and our rent, working her ass off, just so that I would have the best chance to get ahead with my intellect.

Of course, that was my mom's dream *for* me, not my dream. Still, it only seems fair to return that loyalty now. She's teaching at the local high school while also earning her doctorate degree in education. She deserves everything.

I wish I could say that helping her out is the only reason I'm working two jobs for Duane, but it's not.

"Why are you in town?" she asks. "I thought you were busy with real estate."

The truth is that I could've been done with my mandatory real estate courses by now, but after being Michael's paid-girlfriend, then finding a job at the Double Take, it's been hard to motivate myself to open up my computer and login to those classes. Not when my current job makes me more powerful than ever before.

If my mom knew about what I was doing with Duane—selling my body and selling drugs—she would be mortified, thinking I'm selling myself short. I don't feel that way; I just want a different life than the one she wants for me. And still, part of me still wonders if my mom would like Duane. If she'd see a man who respects me.

"I was in the area," I say. "Just wanted to check in on you."

"Don't worry about me," she laughs. "I'm doing fine. You worry about

you.”

It’s the same line she’s fed to me for years. Sometimes, I wonder what life would have been like if we could relax and not have to worry about money. If we would have had a different relationship now. How lying to my mom about how I’m paying for her car rental must make me an awful human being, but maybe it’s worth it if I can make her life easier. After how powerless we were for years, shouldn’t I give back to her, even if what I’m doing is illegal?

I fake an incoming phone call and give her a kiss on the cheek.

“I gotta go,” I say, then I head back toward Grainswept Fields.

CHAPTER 11

REGGIE

WHEN I PULL UP THE FARM'S DRIVEWAY, THE SUN IS JUST BELOW THE horizon, casting the fields in a cool glow. I park, then click the tiny camera on my purse, making sure it's ready to record. It's not that I expect anything bad to happen, but if it does, I want to make sure that there will be no chance that he'll get away with it. With this kind of evidence, he'll never be able to escape prison and come after me.

That's the idea, anyway.

Adrenaline pumps through me. I'm showing up unannounced at a drug lord's property. If I catch him off guard, will it reveal something I already know? Will everything make more sense?

I tell myself that my instincts are correct: Duane would *hurt* me, but he'd never *kill* me. With how he treated the Mortician for disrespecting me, I just can't see that happening. And if he does—well then, my dumb ass probably deserves it, messing with a murderer like this.

I skirt around the house, going through the grass, straight to the buildings in the back. I come up to the one that was left open last time, and my shoulders drop when I see the padlock cinched and hanging in place.

I trot across the yard to the other building, and that one is locked too. I huff, clutching my purse to my chest.

Well, damn.

The main house looms in the distance. Three stories. It's practically a mansion.

There's got to be a key somewhere in there.

My fingers tingle as I hold the doorknob. The hinges creak, and the door casts shadows inside. Wood tables and other handcrafted furniture decorate

the place. I creep through the kitchen, the floorboards shifting under my weight. None of the drawers have anything besides cooking utensils, so I head up the stairs. On the second floor, there's a loft and three locked rooms. The only door that's open is the bathroom. Whoever lives on this floor is paranoid, and for good reason. I'm a stranger in their house, basically investigating their crimes.

I go up the stairs to the third floor, and instinctively, I know this floor is different. Every door to the bedrooms is wide open, inviting me in. I go into the first door, and find a divided window with curtains pulled to the side, and a perfect view of my car.

Someone knows I'm here.

The hairs on the back of my neck rise, but I let out a calming breath. I'm not doing anything wrong. I am *technically* trespassing, but Duane knows who I am, and he trusts me.

And then I see it: a ring of keys lying on a wooden desk.

I stumble forward, grabbing the keys and rushing down the stairs to the ground floor. Before I can question myself, I run toward the buildings. My jaw drops.

The padlock to the first room is already open. Like someone left it unlocked. Again. *For me.*

My gut tingles, but I go forward, curious about who is inside. Maybe it's just Duane. Maybe I'm scared for nothing.

In the first room, everything is the same, but as I go to the next room and the flow hood blasts air over me, my eyes catch on the plastic bags.

Everything has been cleaned from our escapade. Some bags have even been removed. But in the second bag, there's a long object poking out between the holes.

A severed finger smeared with dirt.

My chest seizes, and I run forward, gawking at it. Is it a prop? I don't know. But it's cold and hard and rubbery, like it's a real fucking finger and not a plastic toy from a Halloween store. I gag, thinking of the people ingesting these mushrooms. Like Michael.

This is insane.

I stumble backward, but as my purse slings into me, I remember the camera. I aim the tiny button at the hanging plastic bag, hoping it gets it on camera, and as the blood pounds in my ears, the impulse to flee takes control of me. I need to go. Right *now*. And I need to put the keys back in the house

so that Duane doesn't suspect anything.

I rush back to the house, running up the stairs. But as I reach for the desk, placing the keys down, a cold blade plants itself on my neck.

Duane's heady scent fills my nose, full of dirt and earth and pure masculine energy. Danger flashes in my bloodstream. I bite my lip, then spot my purse on my arm.

All of this is on camera.

"What did I tell you about looking for trouble?" he asks. His tone is calm and deliberate, almost like he expected me to do this. Like he opened up that padlock for me so that I would find the finger.

"I was just—"

He slides the knife down my neck, the pressure sending chills down my spine, and pushes his body against me. But as I suck in a gasp, he digs the end of the blade deeper, enough to break skin. It stings like hell, and I cry out.

He's serious, isn't he? He will slit my throat if he wants to.

"Look at how you quake under the knife," he says to himself. "Such a fiend for danger, aren't you, Hitch? That's why you go looking for trouble in places you don't belong."

"Duane, listen. I was just—"

He shoves my neck into the crook of his arm, cutting off my ability to breathe. My vision blurs around me, darkness caving in as my senses disappear. *This* is how I die. In the arms of a man who could've killed me months ago. A man I could've killed myself.

He lets go of my neck and I crash to my knees, air swelling in my lungs. A smug smile paints Duane's lips, like he knows he's won.

But not without a fight.

He steps forward and I leap up, punching his chest as hard as I can, but then he flings me down, throwing me on my back, pinning me to the ground. I thrash as hard as I can, twisting out of his grasp.

"Let go of me!" I scream, but he puts a hand over my mouth, pinching my nose and mouth shut so hard that he forces me to look into his eyes.

"You want to breathe again?" he drawls. "You want some sweet air? Then tell me how much you love it. Tell me how wet you are for my cock right now."

I shake my head, but he holds me tighter, my nose and mouth completely cut off, his cock digging into me as I try desperately to escape. For a second,

I'm free, but then his hands are back on top of me so quick that I don't even get a full breath. As we fight on the floor, he leans into me, crushing me with his weight, and it's so hard to breathe. Panic expands in my chest.

"Tell me how much you fucking love it," he repeats.

I bob my head eagerly. I'll say anything right now. All I want is some air. He lets go.

"I love it," I say quickly, my eyes scanning for his knife. Did he drop it on the floor? I see it a few feet away and I nod quickly. "I love it so much—"

I grab the knife off of the floor and jab it at him, nicking his cheek, but he grabs my wrist, holding me with such clarity that I know it was stupid to even try.

Everything around me is fuzzy, like my body is seizing with poison. I can barely move. I should have run while I still could.

"You're a killer," I whisper. And the thought breaks through me, knowing that if *I* were him, I'd see me as a trespasser, and he'd have every right to kill me.

He pinches his fingers into my wrist so hard that I drop the knife and groan, a tear slipping down my cheek. Escape is pointless. Duane has me in the literal palm of his hand. The uncontrollable urge to sob takes hold of me. Duane dismembered a body. Fed it to his mushrooms. And I willingly sucked his dick and fucked him like he was some normal man.

His free hand rakes my body, skimming my breasts, down to the valley between my thighs, and he sucks in a sharp breath, taken aback. I fall to my knees.

"Goddamn, I love hearing you cry," he says. He grabs my chin. I'm so lightheaded, I start to slip, but he holds me up. Then he twists my face until I'm looking up at him. My vision is blurry, filled with tears, but I can see his twisted grin through it all, taking me in like prey. "Pretty. Utterly depraved. And fucking beautiful. You know that, Hitch?"

He gestures toward the knife on the floor.

"Now, I'm going to get up," he says. "And you're going to take that knife and you're going to cut yourself for me."

At that, he pushes himself up. The knife is at my knees. I could attack him if I wanted to.

But would that do anything?

I search for my purse and find it thrown to the side. How much of this is caught on camera? I can take evidence of *this* to the police too.

But that knowledge doesn't stop the sensation between my legs, or the tingling that starts at my scalp and runs all the way down to my toes. Because as messed up as this is, I don't want Duane to stop.

I came here by choice, knowing that I was running into the monster's lair. And I shouted, making my presence known, until I woke the beast and he caught me.

"I gave you an instruction, Hitch," Duane says.

I grab the knife. It's so much heavier than before, like I'm carrying a dumbbell and not a pocket knife. Duane adjusts his stance, his thumbs hanging off of his belt loops, and instinctively, I know I'm supposed to stay on my knees in front of him. Subservient. Like a plaything.

"Why are you making me do this?" I whisper, the fear sending a terrifying ache between my legs. None of it makes sense. I shouldn't want him to do this—making me hurt myself like this—but I do. "Is this a game? You want to see that you can make me hurt myself?"

"Do you really want to know?"

That response makes me tremble. Because we both know the answer, and the truth is far worse than what he's making me do right now. We're both fighting for control, and right now, he knows he has power over me.

"Cut yourself for me," he beckons.

Our eyes lock, and I bring the knife to my chest. I cut the top of my breast, right above where my tank top starts, letting a drop of blood trickle down my skin. Duane licks his lips, his eyes glossy as he fixates on the blood.

"Again," he says, tilting his head toward the other breast. I press the knife to my skin and the pain is sharp, shooting through me. "So pretty," he murmurs. "Hurting yourself. Bleeding for me. Being such a good little plaything."

Then he steps forward, putting a hand under my chin, forcing me to look up at him. His blue eyes are dark, full of terror and madness, and I know that he's exactly what I've always wanted. And at the same time, I know he's hiding a body on his mushroom farm. My corpse could be next.

He undresses me, his fingertips skimming across my bare skin, and he takes his time, as if he *wants* to torture me by teasing me into this new state of vulnerability. I don't even try to stop him. I even let him take the knife. I tell myself that I'm frozen with fear, but I know that's not what this is. It's raw desire, and the need to experience just how much he wants me too.

“Is it the fear, Reggie?” he asks, smirking down at my naked body. “Is the fact that you *know* I need this from you or I’ll fucking kill you?”

“Please don’t kill me,” I whisper. The tears build in my chest. He smacks my breast with his palm and I shriek.

“You can beg better than that,” he laughs.

He turns the knife flat so that the smooth surface rubs across my folds, dragging back and forth, teasing me with the sensation. His lips press against my breasts, licking up that red liquid, and desire boils me alive. It’s disgusting—or, it *should* be disgusting. Disturbing. *Wrong*. Anything other than what it is to see him lick my blood like that.

But seeing him taste my blood as he presses the knife’s flat surface to my pussy, confuses me. Desperate hunger and shame war in my mind, yet my pussy contracts, eager for more. Eager to swallow up the knife. To take his cock. For him to rip me apart in every possible way.

If he’s killed someone before—if I really did see a corpse in the back of his truck—then it confirms my fears. He’s a killer. He could kill *me*.

And god, how that drives me wild.

I rub myself along the knife, my lips quivering as he stares down into my soul, seeing the darkest parts of me. The emotional ugliness that wants to die right now, knowing how messed up this is, and the depravity that knows that he could make me come like this. Rubbing myself off on his knife. Seeing blood—*my blood*—paints the crevices of his lips.

“Tell me how much you love it,” he orders, his words vibrating against my skin.

“I—”

But I can’t finish the words. I’m too ashamed to say the words out loud.

“Loud and clear, slut. I want the world to know exactly the kind of filth you’re into.”

“I love it,” I murmur.

I shake my head, not able to say it while facing him, and he removes the knife. My hips, so used to grinding on that flat piece of metal, keep gyrating in the air for a few seconds before my body catches up and realizes that the sensation is gone. I gawk up at Duane, pleading for the friction. A grin tugs at his lips.

I grit my teeth, suddenly full of irritation. He’s playing with me, isn’t he?

“You’re an asshole,” I say.

“First, I’m a killer. Now, I’m an asshole? What? Because I took away

your chance at an orgasm?” he says. “Make up your mind, Hitch. I want to hear you.” He clutches his dick through his jeans. “It makes my dick hard, knowing how desperate you are to get off.”

Anger fills my chest with a dark heat, but no matter how much I try to switch the lust for hatred, it doesn't happen. He's a predator, completely in control of our surroundings, and I'm the prey that walked right into his trap. That *wanted* to be caught. Why did I tell him about my fantasies? Was I stupid for admitting that stuff? Is this my fault for making him think that I want to rub up on a knife and bleed for him?

Or did I do exactly what I wanted for once, even if I knew it was bad for me?

Before I can think twice, I scream at the top of my lungs: “I love it! I fucking love it! I love how you make me do such awful, depraved things and I want to kill you for it. So,” I grab for his hands and a chuckle escapes his chest, “fuck me before I—”

He pushes me down until I'm lying on the floor again. Then he presses the knife's handle to my slit, his hands clutched around the blade, carefully holding it so that it doesn't cut him too.

“Eyes on me,” he says. “I want you to know exactly who controls your pussy.”

The handle penetrates me and my eyes roll into the back of my head, pleasure overwhelming me. My hips thrust forward, begging for more, for his thickness, for his length, and he laughs at me.

“Not enough, is it, Hitch?” he says. “You want my big dick so far inside of you that I gut you from the inside out.”

I don't stop myself this time. I nod like a greedy little slut, hating myself for the words that come out next: “Yes, just please. Fuck me.”

He rips open his jeans, and his cock plunges inside of me. He spreads me wide, pressing the knife against my throat as he moves his hips. The tip of his dick hits my cervix, his skin riding against my clit, keeping me on the edge, but as soon as the blade digs slightly deeper into my throat and a drop of blood forms, the orgasm shoots through me, and my body convulses.

“So easy,” he says, his voice hoarse and full of lust. “So fucking easy. Goddamn. You're hotter than hell, Hitch.”

He pulls out, drenching my stomach and pussy in his come. The deranged expression on his face—twisted and animalistic—makes me ache all over again. I wipe his come from his cock, my stomach, and my pussy, then bring

it to my lips and lick off as much as I can. Like I'll never be satiated. Like *this* will never be enough.

A hunger fills his eyes as he watches me. Then, as we both breathe quietly, reality sits in.

While my words may have been filled with frustration, there was nothing but desire when I licked up his come. And we both know it.

I licked up the come of a killer.

He offers me a hand. I study his palm for a second, wondering if this is a mistake. Can I accept help, even a small offer like this, from a killer? Later, I'll see what I have on the hidden camera, and figure out what to do from there. I'm not conspiring with a killer if I turn him in, right? I'm just trying to survive.

I take his hand, and we both straighten ourselves, and he points to the attached master bathroom. I glance at the mirror—though the cuts on the top of my breasts are superficial, barely deep enough to bleed—the one on my neck is slightly deeper, and will probably leave a scar.

He didn't slit my throat, but he took me right to that edge and made me come. Keeping me safe in these fucked up fantasies. And it's so wrong, but deep down, I know that doing it with a potential killer makes it even better.

And I hate myself for it. Who has these kinds of desires? There has to be something *wrong* with me.

But I calm myself with the justification of it all. It's for a good cause. I'm *going* to turn him in to the police.

I use a clean white towel to rinse off the excess blood, then grab another, bringing it to Duane. He bows his head in thanks. There isn't much blood or come on him, and what's there has already dried, but he wipes it up anyway.

We stand there in silence. I pick up my purse, careful not to cover the camera lens. If Duane *had* noticed it, he would've said something by now. I can take the footage to the police *right now*, and if they ask about the sex, I can lie and tell them that I did it to survive. That I was afraid that if I didn't do what he wanted, Duane would hurt me.

But I could never lie like that. Not when I know the truth. I wanted every second of it. I'm just as guilty as he is when it comes to our fucked up sex.

"Go on," Duane says, gesturing toward the stairs. "Get out of here." I open my mouth, but he cuts me off before I can say anything: "Get out of here before I change my mind."

I'm about to ask what he's talking about, but I don't want to know. My

fingers twitch, and instead, I say the unthinkable—

“When will I see you again?”

The vein in his jaw twitches, like those words are as unexpected for him as they are for me. I don’t know why I asked, but it’s like the desperation to be near him welled up inside of me, threatening to break loose, and I had to say something to confirm that we’re okay, even if I’m recording his crimes.

“Soon. I promise,” he says.

Relief floods my veins. I stare a moment longer, trying to figure out why I’m glad that I’ll get to see him soon.

But I’ll never understand my answer. So I go to the stairs and finally find a way out of his house.

CHAPTER 12

DUANE

I STAND IN THE DIVIDED WINDOW AS SHE DRIVES DOWN THAT DARK ROAD back to the main highway.

I want to be used, she had said.

I lick the handle of the knife, her succulent scent still lingering on the surface. She tastes like paradise, and goddamn, there's something about that woman that makes me yearn to conquer more of her soul.

That look in her dark brown eyes. The hunger, need, and greed mixed into one fucked up vision of lust. Knowing that she has to give in to her desires. That she wants me, even if she knows she shouldn't.

Once her car disappears, I go to my desk and flick through the crumpled napkins, comparing the different inked notes. It's not quite her handwriting—the curves are similar, but there are extra dots, like the pen was bleeding too much ink—and with how I've been carrying them in my wallet, the words are beginning to fade.

My little blackmailer was here, trying to find herself some more evidence. But I was waiting for her.

I should've killed her, but I didn't. It would've been the smart thing to do.

So why didn't I?

I rub my hand over the crotch of my jeans. My dick is sore and raw. There hasn't been a day that's gone by since I first fucked her mouth in the glory hole that I haven't come with her on my mind. That was back when I didn't know her name. She was just Hitch. *My Hitch*. My motherfucking problem.

I head down to the spore houses. The flow hood hums in the air. Typically, this is Braden's work, but he's out of town, so it's up to me to take

care of it. I get to work, putting on my gloves and checking the petri dishes to see how the mycelium is growing.

Eventually, I check the substrate bags, harvesting one of the flushes, but no matter how much I focus on work—on business, on power, on what truly fucking matters to me—her voice trickles into my mind like an annoying country song that you can't get rid of.

Sometimes, I imagine two men fucking me at once. That I'm nothing more than their plaything, you know?

And then I see it: a finger sticking out of one of the plastic bags, like it's a treasure for someone to find. Who put it there?

Braden is too much of a chicken shit to deal with dead bodies; at least, it's been that way since his little crush got herself into trouble. Todd has no reason to be back here. He stays in the dehydration rooms, and on top of that, he's a businessman. He wouldn't want his product to be contaminated with rotting human flesh.

Which leaves my Hitch.

Reggie.

It would explain why she was here. Why she was trespassing. Why she had that look of death on her face when I first cornered her with the knife.

She's just another fucking problem.

For the rest of the night, I carry on like usual. I bring the blue-bruised mushrooms over to the dehydrators, but my mind keeps wandering to Reggie lying on her back, letting me fuck her as I cut her throat.

I was an inch away from slitting her throat, and she spread her legs wider, letting me take more of her. Trusting me with her life. Giving me that power over her.

Even if she is planning on framing me for murder or something similar with that finger, she hadn't said anything yet. In fact, all she did was admit that she wanted me to fuck her again.

When will I see you again? she had asked.

I shake my head, then go back to the mushrooms lying flat on the trays. Then I slide them into the dehydration machines.

Reggie is up my ass with framing and blackmail, and all I can think about is fucking her exactly how she wants.

It makes me crazy thinking of another man having his hands on her, but damn it, it's like a need too. A need to see her get exactly what she wants, even if I have to kill the man afterward.

Once the machines are on, I rip off my gloves and storm out of the building. The night air is cool, but I'm still unsettled. I have to do this, whether I like it or not.

I dial Todd before I can think twice about it.

The phone rings, and I calm myself with the thought that she can't fuck me over after this. Not when I've done this much for her.

"Yeah?" Todd answers.

"Is Reggie on the schedule for tomorrow?" I ask.

"You know her schedule. Why are you really calling?"

I exhale slowly, then grab my knife, carving a divot into the wooden fence, separating us from the cornfields.

"Are you working tomorrow?" I ask.

I don't like the idea of *anyone* touching my woman, but if there's a man that knows when business is business, it's Todd. I can respect him for that.

"What's up?" he asks.

And I explain my situation. How my girl wants her slutty self stuffed full of cock. How I don't trust anyone, but if I had to pick, Todd may as well be it.

If he touches her, I'll *want* to kill him. I'll *need* him dead.

But he's too entrenched in our business. I have more reasons to keep him alive than I do to kill him.

"Do I get five thousand for the hour too?" he laughs. With every passing second, my hatred for Todd grows, but I keep it all in, breathing harshly into the microphone. When I don't laugh, Todd clears his throat. "All right. I get it. Happy to help make her dream come true."

I hang up the phone, then glower down at the fence. The top bar is cut in half. I just made more work for myself, because I let myself get distracted by her again. It's something I'll have to put off until Braden comes back.

I ball my fists, telling myself that the only reason I'm going to let Todd fuck her is because I need a wake up call. I need to see that she's a body, just like any woman I've had before. Hell, she's no different from Braden's crush. And once I can see straight again, I'm going to force her to admit to all the shit she's done to me.

But inside, in a dark place I don't like shining any light, I know Reggie's got me by the balls. I may be stronger, but she's got the power here, and I despise it.

But once I get that confession out of her, I'll kill her, showing her just

how little effect she has on me. I'll prove to myself that she has no control in this situation. I've always been ahead.

I can share Reggie and not give a damn about the outcome.

Soon, I'll have my power back.

Soon can't come quick enough.

CHAPTER 13

REGGIE

I STEP ONTO THE STAGE, DRESSED IN A BLUE LINGERIE SET WITH FRILLS ON the straps and immediately see Duane sitting at the tip rail. Adrenaline surges in my chest like bees crawling in a hive. I've been unconsciously searching for him, but now that he's here, the shock still gets me.

I was just at the farm last night. When he promised I would see him soon, he meant it.

Another man sits next to him, but it takes me an extra second to realize it's Todd. Instead of his typical red vest, he's dressed in a plain white button-up shirt. He never comes to the stage; he doesn't want to play favorites with the strippers. So why is he here too?

"All right," I say nervously as I near the pole. "Looks like trouble found me today."

Todd snickers, but there's anger in Duane's eyes, like he knows he has to be here, and it makes him furious. My limbs twitch with nerves.

I haven't gone through the footage yet. I've been too scared to. Doing so would mean I *have* to make a decision, and I'm not ready for that yet.

Does Duane know that I found that finger?

"Didn't expect to see you two," I say.

Duane puts a stack of hundreds on the edge of the stage. Todd whistles, but before anyone else can see how much he put there, I grab it. Once I'm on my knees, Duane stands up.

"Come find us in the VIP room," he says in a low voice.

Us?

But before I can ask any questions, he leaves with Todd, heading back to the bar. Todd motions to the corset-clad bartender, and she fixes them a

round of shots. I finish my two songs on stage while Duane keeps his back to me, ignoring my performance, like I've done something to piss him off that I don't even know about. In retaliation, I eye-fuck the random customer sitting in a bucket seat on the main floor, though I find myself continually staring at the back of Duane's head.

Us.

What does that mean?

Back in the dressing room, I freshen up, my body sensitive as I try to imagine what this could mean. My movements are flighty with nervous energy coursing through me. Once I'm out, the bartender sends me to the VIP room, but I don't see anyone by the podium.

Which means they're already in one of the private rooms, waiting for me.

I open up the curtains to my favorite room. Duane sits on the sectional, his arms against the back of the couch like a king at ease, and Todd sits beside him. The two of them chat it up, as if this is nothing out of the ordinary right now.

Is it just a dance, or a business discussion?

Todd flirts, but he's never made any moves on me.

And Duane *definitely* doesn't strike me as someone who likes to share.

"All right," I say, and the two of them chuckle as they focus on me. "What's going on?"

"What's it look like?" Duane asks, his tone nurturing, like he's talking to a scared animal, but there's a hint of violence in his eyes, and I'm not sure what I'm supposed to assume.

"A double dance?" I ask.

Todd nods. Duane, on the other hand, grits his teeth.

"Right," I say. "But—" I turn to Duane. "I didn't think you liked sharing."

He cocks a brow at me. "That would imply that I own your body. But I don't, do I?"

His eyes gleam, daring me to disagree, but I don't. It's like I'm carefully treading over water, barely able to keep my head above the surface, and yet, Duane could do anything to me and I'd spread my legs for him. His gun shines under the red lights, and I know he could kill all three of us right now.

But I straddle Duane. I'm being paid for a double, but knowing what Duane is capable of, I'm not willing to risk Todd's life for it. And besides, Todd knows what it's like back here. Todd isn't a customer; he's the owner

of the club.

This is about Duane.

I drag my tits along Duane's face, letting the bra rub against his cheeks, and his jaw ticks, his nostrils flaring.

What have I done wrong now?

"What?" I ask.

He fists my hair, yanking me off of him. I struggle to find my footing, but he brings me down in front of him and forces me to my knees.

"Show me how you want to be used," he growls.

Then it's clear. My fantasy of being used by multiple men at once. I told him about it in the glory hole, and now, despite his need to make me surrender completely, he's sharing me. Like a toy. His plaything to use.

My stomach spins, knowing how bad this is. Tempting fate with a man who likes playing with guns during sex, who cut my neck only yesterday for the hell of it. A man who stuffs severed fingers inside of illegal mushroom farms.

And now, I'm teasing the jealous monster inside of him.

"Look at you," Duane says in a low voice. "I bet your cunt is sopping already."

Duane's bulge twitches in his jeans, and Todd smirks, rubbing himself through his pants.

"So shy," Todd says. "Come on, Secret. We know what you do back here."

My cheeks redden at those words. "What do you mean?" I ask.

"Don't lie," Todd says, raising his shoulders. "I've known you let the Mortician get some extras. Duane does too."

I flick my eyes between the two of them. I broke the strip club rules, and my boss knew the entire time?

How did Duane know too?

Duane unbuckles his belt, sliding the leather through the loops. He folds it in half, then links it around my neck, pulling me closer. Instinctively, I open my mouth. He jerks out his cock, red and veiny, thicker than an arm, and glares back at me. I stick out my tongue.

"That's it," he growls. Need pools between my legs and my cheeks flush. "That's my good little slut. Suck my dick, now."

I push my head down, forcing the head of his cock down my throat. I gag, choking on him, but he holds my head, not letting me up. A set of hands

touches me from behind, and Todd pulls down my underwear, letting it grip my upper thighs. His cologne swims around me, and I can't help it—I spread my legs wider, willing him to take me too. His long fingers play with my slit.

“She’s already soaked,” Todd says to Duane, ignoring me in the middle of them. Like it doesn’t matter if I’m embarrassed, as long as they get what they want. “You weren’t kidding, were you?”

Duane glances at him, but turns his attention back to me. He pulls me off of his dick and forces me to look him in the eyes.

“I want to watch him fuck you like a dirty whore. Taking it from both ends,” Duane says. “Goddamn. That’s not enough for you, is it, slut? You need a cock in each hand. A cock in your pussy and in your ass. Hell—” Duane points toward the curtain. “Maybe I should invite all the customers in here too.”

My body shudders with anticipation, and Duane licks his lips, then grabs the back of my head and shoves me down his length. I gag, my body convulsing with the need to vomit, but he keeps me down.

“Eyes on me,” he orders.

And I keep my eyes locked on his, even as he pushes his cock further down my throat, forcing me to suck all of him. My eyes water; I can barely breathe. Todd teases his cock in my wet slit, then he penetrates an inch and my body is covered with sweat.

It’s happening. I’m being fucked from both ends. Like a little cock whore.

“God,” Todd groans. “She’s drenched.”

“Shut the fuck up or I’ll cut out your tongue,” Duane growls. My muscles clench, and even Todd stops his movements for a second.

But Todd doesn’t question it. He stays silent. Duane puts a hand under my chin and angles my head so that I’m gazing up at him with his cock stuffing my mouth.

“How does it feel, Hitch?” Duane says. He palms my breasts, pulling me out of my bra, letting my tits hang down as he pinches my thick nipples. “Tell me, how does it feel to have two holes used at once?”

Todd drills me from behind, and I grunt, falling into Duane’s lap. Duane smacks my cheek lightly, then forces me back down on his cock.

“This is rich, ain’t it?” Duane murmurs. “I’m paying you to fulfill my darkest fantasies, but look at you! This is all about you and your greedy little pussy. You just can’t help yourself.”

Every ounce of flesh on my body jiggles as Todd pounds into me, and

Duane fills my mouth. He forces his thickness down my throat until my nostrils are flat against his lower stomach.

“God, I love watching you take it from both ends,” Duane says. “Is this what you wanted, Hitch? To be used like a fuck toy and not given a choice about how you take it?”

The words are so filthy that my eyes roll into the back of my head as I moan, and Duane shoves my hands down.

“Play with your pussy,” he demands.

I rub my clit with one hand, barely able to keep myself upright with the other as I lean on the couch, while Todd and Duane fuck me from both ends, using my holes at different rhythms, filling me up. Losing control over a plaything like me. A woman who’s always been so powerless, but can make two grown men go feral over her holes. Who can make a killer want her so badly, he’ll even fulfill her darkest fantasies. He’ll even share her if he has to.

“Come for me,” Duane growls. “Show me how much of a cock whore you are.”

And I come undone at the seams, splitting apart like I’m not meant for this world. My eyes lift to Duane, and he pulls out, coming on my face. And for a brief second, I notice Todd’s come shooting onto my back too, but then I forget all about that. All I see is Duane and his mark on me, as if he’s the only one here. The only one truly using me.

He made my fantasy a reality.

And I have footage that can put him in jail.

CHAPTER 14

DUANE

THERE ARE THINGS YOU DO TO PROVE TO YOURSELF THAT YOU DON'T HAVE any attachment to a woman, like fucking her at the same time as your business partner. And I can *almost* get past it, as long as I've got her happy little face in my mind.

But then my phone rings, and I'm reminded that it's not just the two of us at this moment. Still, I ignore it. Nothing could be important enough to interrupt this moment for Reggie.

But then Todd's phone rings too, and I know it has to do with the mushrooms.

Todd grabs his phone, using a cocktail napkin to wipe the come off of the tip of his cock. "All right," he says into the device. "Shit." Then he hangs up. "We gotta go," he says to me.

"Braden?" I ask. Todd nods. Braden got home earlier today, which means something bad happened. Did my girl leave another finger? Or is the blackmailer leaving more threats behind?

But still, if Reggie's on her knees, come-hungry before me, the business can wait. I'm not finished with her yet.

I look Reggie dead in the eyes. "Lick me clean."

Her tongue, lazy and wet, drags over the head of my dick, teasing the crown, then going back down the underside until she's licking my balls where there's definitely no come. A raw hunger controls her right now, and my cock swells all over again. I growl, and she shivers in response. There's come on her face and tits, and makeup runs down her cheeks in long gray streaks. Her lingerie is still clothing her body, but it's in complete disarray. She's utterly destroyed.

“Duane?” Todd asks.

I jerk my eyes away from her, my vision going red as I see Todd. The fucking prick. Rage burns inside of me as I try to figure out what to do. I want to tell Reggie she owes me. That I did this for her. That I used Todd so that she could get what she wanted.

But I don’t say a word. Instead, I tell myself that I shared her to prove that I don’t give a shit about her. Because if I did, I’d kill Todd.

And Todd is still here.

I want to ask what she’s planning on doing now, but all I do is throw a couple of towels on the couch next to her as she closes her eyes. After all, I *don’t* care about her. She’s nothing to me.

Just a pretty little plaything to use.

“She can sleep here,” I say to Todd, an order, not a request. But Todd, the good man that he is, nods to me, then discusses the situation with his staff.

In no time at all, we’re off, caravanning back to the farm. Once we park, I glower at Todd, knowing that he’s felt my woman’s pussy. Knowing that any man who has a taste of something *that* sweet is liable to want another. I finger my gun, imagining putting a bullet into him right now. But jealousy means insecurity, and I know my worth. I’m not a jealous man. Reggie wouldn’t betray me. Hell, there’s nothing *to* betray.

Still, I want to put him in the fucking ground.

The front door of the house slams open.

“What took you so long?” Braden scolds. But before we answer, he gets on with it: “Cops came. Said that an anonymous tip had been sent in. I didn’t let them see shit, but they said they’re going to get a warrant.”

“A warrant?” Todd asks.

“It was only supposed to be the three of us,” Braden says. “*Three* of us. No one else. I don’t care how big this operation is. We need to get rid of everyone else, including that fucking girl.”

My blood runs cold. That fucking girl?

My fucking girl.

I narrow my eyes at Braden. “What did you say?”

“Are you suggesting murder?” Todd asks, cocking his head to the side. “Man, we don’t have to do that. We just got to—”

“Fuck, Todd. We both know how much Duane likes to fix problems. Let him dig himself an even deeper grave, and hell, we’ll have him dig one for us too while he’s at it! Damn it!” Braden shouts. “It was never supposed to be

like this.”

“And I told you that if you didn’t want any part of this, you could go back to fucking Florida,” I bellow. “The mushrooms would’ve failed if you hadn’t obsessed over them, but *you’re* the one who needed to see them grow. You’re the one who’s obsessed with fungus and getting high, but pretends like none of this is your problem.”

The truth of the matter is that out of the three of us, Braden is the only one who’s actually tested the product. It’s not like he’s completely above the law. He’s forged paperwork. Grown illegal mushrooms. Hell, he’s the one who introduced me to Todd, a man anyone can guess is a criminal.

And now, Braden’s threatening to get rid of our other sellers by any means necessary. He’s not the good person he thinks he is.

“Relax, guys. Come on,” Todd says, patting both of our shoulders. My muscles tense. He thinks he can touch me like that? Like we’re friends, after he touched my girl? I curl my fingers, the desire to shove him into the ground growing like a goddamn earthquake inside of me. “We can agree that there are too many people in this situation,” Todd says. He turns to me. “We’ve got three sellers left, right? I can bring them back here. Say we’re doing more training, or something like that. Then you can take care of them.”

That’s my job—making sure everything keeps running as usual. The muscle and the main investor of the operation.

“Plus the girl,” Braden adds.

My knuckles are white as I ball my fists. My boots thud closer to Braden, and his eyes widen.

But Todd steps between us.

“We’ll figure out Reggie later,” Todd says calmly. “No one’s after her, all right? I gotta head back to the club, but for now, let’s work on the people who are actually selling for us. The ones who are most likely to be the leaks.”

Braden and I nod in agreement, then Todd heads back to the strip club. Braden storms off back to the labs, while I get back in my truck.

I know our sellers’ names; I should hunt those men down right now. But all I can think about is Reggie. How I can’t stand the thought of letting anyone else touch her.

I drive aimlessly, not sure where the hell I’m going, but hours pass, and then it’s night. Tension consumes me until I know I *need* blood.

I should kill Reggie. She’s got too much sway over me, and that never helps anyone.

But instead, I check my GPS app. My woman is home at her apartment, and I'm glad for it. But my mind isn't on her, exactly. It's on something far more sinister.

It's on killing Todd for touching her. *My girl.*

He ought to know better.

I park across the street from the strip club at the bowling alley. I wait there until it's past closing time for the bowling alley and the strip club, but that doesn't mean Todd is done yet. He has to wait until the private time is done, and sometimes, high rollers like to pay the staff to stay on call, simply because they can. I cross the street to the club and hide in the shadows behind the building with a cigarette in my lips, pretending like I'm a random smoker. Someone to pay no mind.

But my mind is on Todd.

I take out my knife, letting the switchblade click into place, the sound calming me as I wait at that back door. Todd should be coming out any minute now. Another truck slows down on the road, passing me and parking to the side, but I keep my eyes focused on the door.

"Duane?" Braden asks. I snap around, barely missing his face with the knife, and he jumps back. "Jesus christ. What the hell are you doing? Are you trying to kill me?"

I bare my teeth at him. "What do you want?"

"What are you doing here?"

I look down at the knife, then back to him, my vision red and blurry. I drop my hands to my sides, keeping the knife's handle clutched in my palm.

"You're not going to kill her *here*, are you?" Braden asks.

I blink at him. He thinks I'm here to kill Reggie. He has no idea that I want to kill Todd for fucking my woman.

My woman.

"Think about what you're doing," Braden says. "We need to get rid of her, sure, but if you kill her *here*, there won't be any future for us. Once they get you for her murder, they'll come after me for the mushrooms. We'll rot in jail."

My mind spins with images of Todd's corpse in the parking lot. Blood gushing on the pavement, mixing with his brown hair. His vacant eyes. The solace it'll bring me, knowing that he's dead.

But I turn to Braden and try to keep my vision straight. Braden is right. If I kill Todd here, I'm more likely to get caught. Then I won't get to see

Reggie.

Why does it always come back to her?

“You gotta put the business first,” Braden says. “Think carefully, all right? What’s best for the business? If we fuck up and lose it all, it’ll be for nothing, and I can’t have her death end like that.”

I shake my head in disgust. Braden’s so damn guilt-ridden over his crush’s death, that now, he must think he has to make the business work to give her murder meaning.

But me? I’m in over my head because I can’t keep my thoughts in order when it comes to Reggie. It’s like she’s put a collar around my neck and shortened the leash until I’m following her like a sick little pup.

But Braden’s right. Business comes first. And that means letting Todd live. He’s part of our business.

Hell, I can let him live until he doesn’t have value to me anymore. After all, Reggie isn’t supposed to mean shit to me. She’s just a pussy to use. Some ass and tits. A little ant I can squish with my fingertips.

But as much as I tell myself that, I know it’s not true. She’s more than that, and it drives me crazy.

Braden tilts his head. “You all right, man?”

“Business,” I say.

He pats my shoulder. Unlike Todd, where I wanted to crush his skull for being friendly and touching me like that, it’s not the same with Braden. His paranoia is irritating, but I know he does it for the business. He may hate me from murdering his crush, but he knows I did what’s best for us.

“Business,” Braden says.

The two of us head to our trucks. Braden heads back on the highway toward Grainswept Fields. But me?

I head toward the other side of town, where Reggie is bound to be sleeping.

CHAPTER 15

DUANE

BY THE TIME I GET TO HER APARTMENT, IT'S BEEN A LONG ASS NIGHT, BUT MY dick keeps twitching with the idea of claiming her. *Really fucking claiming her*. Showing her there's no place left on her body that I haven't taken yet.

But I can't claim her when I have to kill her. Business comes first. It's why I came to California in the first place. Why I sought Reggie out. Stalked her for months.

She's coming between me and business yet again.

Maybe killing her is another way to claim her. No other motherfucker can take her death away from me.

Around three a.m., when I'm sure she's asleep, I unlock her apartment door with a copy of her key. Poor thing is probably bone tired after what we put her through in the VIP room today, but I don't care. She's a heavy sleeper, and that's always worked in my favor.

I pull back the gun's hammer. I ought to make it quick and simple. Efficient so that I can't second guess it. Let it be. Life always *ends*.

But as I stand over her body, holding the gun an inch from her temple, I almost wish she'd wake the fuck up and make this harder for me. My dick pulses as I picture her blood on the pillow, her brains dotting the fabric, that zebra print splattered with red and gray.

I *need* to kill her. It's what's best. She's got one hell of an addictive pussy, but she's a nuisance. Something I need to get rid of. A *hitch* in my plans.

But as those thoughts leave my head, I see Todd's hands on her hips. His nails digging into her flesh. His pale, skinny dick shoving deep inside her pussy.

Fuck that.

I refuse to let Todd be the last dick she takes down there. And I know, right then and there, that I'm not going to kill her. Maybe she'll fuck me over in the future, and I'll finish this once and for all. But right now?

She's mine.

I remove the comforter with delicate precision until she's completely exposed—my girl likes to sleep naked—then I kneel at the foot of the bed, giving myself a perfect view of the heaven between her legs. Naked when she sleeps, her amber skin against the sheets. Her furry pussy calls to my fingers, but for now, I just observe her slick heat, those pussy lips pressed together, tight and snug, waiting for my tongue. Her ass cheeks are bunched together, soft and squishy, hiding that dark hole I love teasing so much. My mouth gets wet and heavy, thinking of her taste, so I squeeze the head of my dick through my jeans.

If Todd gets to fuck her pussy tonight, then I'm going to claim her ass. She may have had plenty of dicks in her cunt, but as far as I know, *no one* has had that precious ass.

Moving carefully, I pry back her legs, spreading her ass wide. I stick out my tongue, licking those perfect ridges, and goddamn—her sweet taste will be the death of me. I take my time, letting my tongue tickle her ridges, the curves of her flesh, the salt on her skin, and she bucks her hips toward me, a sleepy moan coming from her lips, still deep in her dreams. But my woman knows what she likes. I tongue-fuck her ass, sticking my fat, wet muscle inside of her hole, but she's so fucking tight, it barely gets in. She was with that sugar daddy for a long time, and as far as I know, the neglectful bastard never went near her ass. And I doubt she had much time to play around before that anyway.

She grinds on my face, her ass cheeks rubbing against my nose as I lick her dark hole, and I moan so deep that I can't stop myself; I grab her legs, digging my fingers into her thick thighs, tasting her all the way from her ass to her clit, swirling my tongue before going back down to that tight hole again.

"What the fuck!" she shouts. "Shit—"

Before she can finish her sentence, I rip my gun from the holster again, shoving it against her neck, right where the knife wound is healing. *My mark.* At this point, it's like mandatory foreplay between us. We ought to consider a gun or a knife our third partner.

Fuck Todd's participation anyway.

"The hell are you doing, Duane?" she whispers, but my woman's eyes are already glazed like the queen of filth that she is. A sharp breath sneaks between her lips as I dig the gun's muzzle into the scab, pricking the dried edge until another drop of blood comes leaking down.

"I'm claiming your ass," I say in a low voice, "and you're going to fucking like it."

Her nostrils flare, and the little bitch knees me in the chin. Pain shoots in my skull, and I holster my gun before something stupid happens. She starts to make a run for it, but I lunge for her. She elbows me in the ribs, but I punch her in the stomach, right in the solar plexus, knocking the wind out of her.

She chokes on nothing, gasping for air, and I rearrange her, grabbing her wrists in my palm. I pull a length of rope out of my pocket, hitching one of her wrists to her first bed post.

"You're going to fucking like it when I take your ass," I growl, "or I'll slit your throat."

Using my body weight, I spread her out, tying the other wrist to the opposite bed post. Luckily, she's already naked, and in this position, her breasts hang down to the sides of her like delectable bells. I lick her neck, down to those tits, and suction my mouth on her brown nipples, biting and pulling until she twists underneath me.

"Oh god!" she cries.

I bite again, and again, down her stomach, trailing all the way to her cunt. Her knees bend, and she thrusts her pussy closer to my face. As much as her cries protest, her body *knows* what she craves. And I'm the only one who can give her everything she secretly wants.

"No," she cries. "Please. Stop—"

But even as she says those words, those strong legs wrap around my head, pulling me deeper into her cunt and ass. I ravish her, devouring every piece of flesh I can get my mouth on. Forcing my tongue into each delicious crevice. Tasting her. Salty and sweet. All fucking perfection.

I want to make her come all over me, but I force myself to stop and finish my plan. If my little Hitch wants to fight me, to pretend like she doesn't want this, then I've got an alternative solution. I hitch each of her ankles, just like her wrists, down to the bottom bedposts, but this time, I give her ankles plenty of slack, so that I can move her in all the right ways. After that, she's spread like a dandelion, tears already running down her cheeks, streaking her

skin gray with leftover makeup. Her stomach is marked in red nibbles from my teeth. And she's a goddamn masterpiece.

I pull out my dick, letting my jeans hang on my hips. I tear off my flannel shirt, and her eyes widen as she takes me in. Shirtless. Muscle and brawn. Tattoos covering my neck, chest, and arms. My dick in my palm. I stroke myself, my gaze locked on hers, and her eyes look like they're made of the most elegant red oak wood I've ever seen. She's perfection, and that perfection is spread out for me.

"Please," she cries. "Stop. I don't want this. I don't—"

"That's not what your body was telling me in your sleep," I growl. Still fisting my dick with one hand, I drag my other hand between her legs, her sopping cunt drenching my fingertips. She shudders in shame and lust, and I rub her juices all over her face. "Tell me what this is, Hitch. Is it a mistake? Did you piss yourself, or are you wet because you know how much you want me to take that pretty little ass of yours?"

She whimpers, and the blood that's left in my brain goes straight to my dick. I don't know what it is about this woman; I've always liked rough sex, but with Reggie, it's like a demon has taken hold of my soul and has shifted me into an ungodly spirit. Like I'm an evil creature from out of this world.

"I just—" she stammers. "I can't—"

A tint of red spreads across her amber skin, coating her in a dark pink glow. And I know what this is: she's embarrassed. It's her ass. It's not normal to have anal sex. It's shameful. A damn perversion. And as much as her body knows what it wants, my woman's brain is blocking her from that enjoyment.

But I don't care.

I could destroy her. Fuck her raw. Make her ass bleed for days, so that she can't sit or shit right without thinking of me. The idea has its appeal.

But what I want—what I *really* want—is for her to beg me to come.

"I'm going to be honest with you right now, Hitch," I say. "You're nothing but a set of holes for me to use."

But goddamn, I'm going to use every fucking inch of her.

She whimpers again, and I lay down between her legs, then praise that pretty cunt and ass with my tongue, worshiping every layer like the goddess that she is. Despite all of her rejection and protesting, she moans, and I shove my hand underneath me, humping my palm as I lick and taste her, bringing my mouth down to her dark hole. My free hand slides up to her clit, rubbing that bundle of nerves in lazy circles as I tease her sharp, dark ridges with my

tongue. Her hips twitch forward, rubbing her slit on my face. She's so fucking delicate and sweet, I can barely contain myself, but taking it slow is worth it.

I take my finger down, slowly penetrating her ass. This time, she opens up for me, swallowing my finger up. She's smooth, and my dick hardens, so damn uncomfortable with my entire body weight straining against it, but I can't help myself. I get two fingers in her ass, then three, and I know she's ready for me.

I put a pillow under her hips to lift her up for me, then move her knees so she's right where I want her. Then, I kneel between her thighs and thrust once inside of her pussy, getting my dick lubed up with her wetness. For a few seconds, I hold my cock in my palms. Her cheeks are red, her eyes glazed, and she looks about two thrusts away from coming like a geyser.

But this isn't about her orgasm. *It's about claiming her.* About showing her that I may share her, but she's *mine*.

All fucking mine.

I put the head of my dick into her dark, tight opening, and she tenses up, clenching around the crown like it's a life preserver and she's about to drown. I hold my expression steady and emotionless, but inside, I'm reeling. It's hard not to fuck her into oblivion, so instead, I tease her back and forth, rubbing the crown of my dick against those soft ridges.

"Tell me how it feels," I demand, barely keeping myself in check.

Her eyes latch onto me. "More," she says.

Greedy little thing.

I push in another inch, waiting for her to adjust. It's torture, but I hold back, observing each little flinch on her face. She shifts around me, her smooth walls crushing my dick, and I press in another inch, and then another, bending slightly to flick my fingertip across her clit.

"More," she begs again.

This time, it's all I can take. I shove straight to the hilt, impaling her ass and holding her there. She moans, blinking up with tears in her eyes, desire pushed to the brim, and it's so fucking beautiful that I can barely handle it. Her hips gyrate around me as her body demands more.

"Tell me how much you hate it," I growl. "Lie to me, Reggie. Tell me you hate every second of it."

"I—" she trembles, but the words don't come out. I study the movement of her hips, then I follow suit, fucking her ass just like she likes it.

“God, this feels so good,” she mumbles, and I howl like a man possessed, throwing my head back as I try to keep myself in check. Her legs twitch around me, hugging me closer, and her back arches, nearing that peak. I dig my nails into her waist, and then—

I hold still. Her hips keep thrusting against me, but I keep her in place, refusing to let her move anymore. Refusing her that gratifying friction.

“What the fuck?” she asks.

“Tell me what you want, Hitch,” I demand.

She rolls her eyes, huffing to the side. “Just fuck me already.”

I lick my lips as I study her. “Tell. Me. What. You. Want.”

She furrows her brows at me. “I want you to fuck me.”

I don’t say a word, and the frustration blooms across her skin.

“Fuck,” she murmurs. “I want you to fuck me! I want you to fuck my ass!”

“Not enough, plaything.”

“I want you to fuck my ass like I’m your dirty little whore,” she says. “Make me come, Duane. I want to come with your dick so far in my ass that I can’t breathe.”

I smirk. “Is that right?”

“Fuck me. Just fuck—”

And I pick up the rhythm, faster this time, exactly where she likes it. Her eyes roll into the back of her head and her body dances for me, the pleasure coming back stronger this time. I flick her beady little clit, bringing her close to that edge, and she jumps into that abyss, her body convulsing harder than I’ve seen before, and the sight alone pushes me closer to that edge too. She’s sensitive right now, coming down from that high, but I don’t care. I want to come.

I *need* to claim her body for my own.

“No one touches you here,” I say as I thrust my hips. “This ass is mine. Other men may use this mouth,” I bend down, slapping her face, “or this pussy.” I shove a finger in her cunt, but with my cock stretching her ass, I can barely push my digit through. My finger is smashed in her cunt, riding against her pelvic bone. “But your ass is *mine*.”

“Please,” she begs. “Please. I—”

“Please what?” I howl.

“Please make me come again!”

I growl, the primal response reverberating through the room.

“Such a greedy little cunt,” I murmur.

Then I flick her clit again, but slowly this time. I can’t resist another orgasm from my woman, but I do have some rules.

“Every time you come from now on, I want you to say my name,” I order, locking eyes with her. Her eyelids flutter, nearing that final peak, and I slap her face, making sure she keeps her attention focused on me and my words. “Do you hear me, Hitch? Even if another man’s dick is in your pussy. Even if another man is fucking your throat. Even if you’ve got two different dicks in each hand—you *know* who gives you this. Who makes sure you come.” I smack her inner thighs and her tight hole cinches around my dick. “So fucking help me, Hitch, I will make sure you remember that I own you.” I slam as far and as deep into her ass as I can. “So tell me, Hitch, who owns you?”

“You!”

“And what’s my name?”

“Duane!”

And then she convulses around me. As soon as she stops, I pull out, squeezing my dick so hard that my come streaks her belly and breasts like a cannon, marking her with my seed. My body jerks with the weight of pleasure, but it surges out of me, and I know she’s a pair of goddamn handcuffs that’ll never set me free.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, vibrating against my thighs. Reggie’s eyes are closed, and it fills me with satisfaction seeing her like that. Her legs are still spread, and from where I am, I can see that her ass is loose, gaping wide from my big dick.

I check the message. *Sed will be at the farm tomorrow at one*, Todd sends. A second message from him dings: *Thinks he’s getting a lesson on harvesting the flushes*.

I send a quick confirmation message, then admire my woman. She’s destroyed, sweaty, tired, and thoroughly fucked. Two men in one day, plus taking her anal virginity? She’s got to be exhausted, and it fills me with warmth knowing that it’s because of me.

Using a wet towel, I clean her gently. It’s not sentimental or sensitive of me; if she gets an infection, I can’t use her holes like I want. And I don’t like anyone or anything getting in between me and my Hitch.

After I untie her limbs, I straighten, staring down at her sleeping form. Tousled black hair stretches across her pillow like strands of fresh rope. Her

wrists have indentations from the bindings, and I rub my thumb across the divots in her skin, knowing that she's mine.

I could tuck her in, make sure she's got that zebra comforter up to her neck like she always likes it, but I don't. She's a grown woman, and she likes proving that she can take care of herself.

But I do lean down, pushing the hair out of her eyes. She probably needs to cool down anyway.

I head toward the front door, locking myself out. It's been a long day, and tomorrow is bound to be another, especially if I've got to take care of a seller.

Still, staying up like this is worth it.

As I start up my truck, I glance up at her apartment window, dark now. I exhale, knowing that she's sound asleep.

I'll never kill Reggie. Not over blackmail. Not over trying to frame me. I'm too impressed by her to give a shit about that. It's probably a mistake, but right now, I don't mind it at all.

I head toward the farm and keep the radio off, just like I did that first night I picked her up. Even now, when she's not here, she invades my every thought. It's like she's underneath my skin, living there like a parasite. An addictive little one at that.

Maybe I am attached, but I don't care.

As long as she knows who owns her.

CHAPTER 16

REGGIE

THE ENTRANCE TO THE DOUBLE TAKE OPENS, AND A TALL FIGURE COMES INTO the light. It's still early in the shift—barely two o'clock—but I close my eyes, shifting my body away from the entrance. Last night, I experienced one of the best orgasms of my life, and it's whiplash to come back to work and see who decided to show up today.

Today is *not* the day to see my ex-sugar daddy.

"There's the little thief," Michael says. His hand lands on my shoulder. "Hi Reggie."

My stomach sinks. Pins and needles charge my skin where he's touching me. I shift my shoulder out of his grip. His gray hair is styled just enough to still look carefree, but from experience, I know he spends half an hour with styling wax to get it *just* right regularly. On the outside, he's a sexy older man, but god, if you only knew how terrible he was in bed.

"Hi Michael," I say.

Another figure joins him—the new sugar baby. Her black hair billows across her shoulders, her blue eyes vibrant.

"Where'd you put his money?" she asks.

Todd shifts behind the DJ booth, eyeing Michael and the sugar baby. Todd stands up, sneering at them. I didn't know what to expect after a threesome with my boss, but Todd's been acting like nothing happened. I guess that's the best thing for morale, and I'm glad for it.

Todd and I make eye contact, and he silently asks if I need help. I subtly shake my head and turn back to Michael. Michael likes to talk, but it never means anything.

"Do these customers know you steal?" Michael asks, raising his voice.

His sugar baby curls next to him, putting her arm around his back. “That was ten grand!”

I cross my arms over my chest, gawking at him. I have no idea what he’s talking about, and it’s irritating that he’d get worked up over an amount like that when he’s worth a hundred times more than that.

“You’re worried about ten grand?” I ask. “It’s not like you don’t make that in a day!”

“It’s the principle of it,” he says, gritting his teeth.

“Why would I steal from you?”

“Why would you steal from anyone?”

“We were together for five years, and I always *asked* if I needed money.” I jut my chin toward his new sugar baby. “Did you ever stop to think that she took it?”

“What did you say?” the sugar baby hisses.

I ignore her and continue on: “Maybe she doesn’t know that all she has to do is ask for help and you’ll—”

“Don’t you dare say anything about her,” Michael leers. “You don’t know her.”

“And apparently, you don’t either,” I snap.

The sugar baby steps closer, cracking her knuckles. “You want to say that again?”

Todd steps up, his mouth pinched. “Can I help you two?”

“It’s fine,” I say. “They were just leaving.”

“No, Reggie,” Michael barks. “We paid the fucking cover charge for this disgusting bar. We’re *not* leaving.”

“Her name is Secret, and you need to respect my girls,” Todd says, correcting Michael. Michael scoffs, but Todd straightens his shoulders, making his size advantage abundantly clear. “So, you’re staying, right? You gonna go do some pole tricks for us?” Todd gestures at the stage where one of my coworkers is making her ass clap. “Maybe you can make your girl get a job so she can earn back that ten grand you’re missing.”

I snort in laughter, and Michael bares his teeth at me.

“You think this is funny?” he asks. “Should I tell them *why* you were at my house?”

I lift my shoulders. I was there to get hidden cameras for a purse that I keep in my locker during work. A detail like that doesn’t matter here.

“I don’t care what you do,” I say.

“I know it was you, Regina. You’re a fucking thief.”

Todd pulls Michael and his sugar baby aside, giving them a stern talking. After that, Michael and his sugar baby give me some space, but they’re always a seat or two away from me.

A little while later, Michael slams down his empty glass.

“Don’t let her fool you,” he says, interrupting my conversation with a new customer. “She’ll make you think you’re helping her, but then she’ll suck the money from your soul like a fucking leech.”

The customer swivels between us, not sure whether to believe Michael or me.

“Don’t worry about him,” I say, brushing it off. “He’s just jealous that I like you better.”

“Don’t believe her lies,” the sugar baby squeals. “Or she’ll rob you too!”

The customer apologizes and gets up from the bar, finding another stripper to sit with. I glare at Michael and the sugar baby. I don’t have beef with Michael’s new paid-girlfriend. I get it; she’s protective over her income. But it’s still irritating that she’s most likely the one who took Michael’s money, and she probably did it *just* to frame me so that Michael will never be tempted to help me again. Hell, I wouldn’t be surprised if the money magically reappears as soon as she’s confident that Michael has written me off for good.

And honestly, I can understand that. Sometimes, you have to do some crazy things to survive. But no one wants drama like that when they come to a strip club, and by causing a scene like that, they’re cutting into *my* current income. I wish the sugar baby understood that I don’t want anything to do with Michael, but even if I say something to her, it’ll be a lost cause.

I briefly consider going home early, but once you lock yourself into a shift, you’re supposed to stay for the full five hours or you risk hefty fines, and staying in the dressing room is against the rules.

So, I’m stuck here. With an ex-sugar daddy and his new sugar baby.

I text Duane: *I’ve got a favor to ask.*

The text is sent off before I realize how strange it is. Duane snuck into my house, forced me into anal sex, made me come so hard that I couldn’t comprehend what my body was doing, *and* he has dismembered fingers—and who knows what else—decomposing in his mushroom farm. And yet, I still feel safer, asking *him* for help, than I do asking anyone else.

Yeah? he responds quickly.

*Take me to the VIP room until my shift ends, I send. I'll pay you back.
Be there in five, he sends.*

My stomach drops.

He didn't even hesitate.

In less than five minutes, Duane enters the club, his shoulders stiff, his thumbs tucked in his belt loops like always. He's calm, almost as if he was waiting for me to text him. Michael spins around, his jaw dropping when he sees Duane; Michael is above average height, but Duane is huge in comparison. Even the new sugar baby sizes Duane up, gauging how much he's worth.

Duane angles his head toward the VIP room without saying a word. I stand, but Michael and the sugar baby saddle up next to Duane.

"Let me give you a warning, good man," Michael says, touching Duane's shoulder. "This stripper will steal—"

Duane shoves him into the wall, and the drywall cracks from the force of Michael's body. The sugar baby stumbles over her heels, holding herself up against the wall next to him.

"What the hell? You asshole!" the sugar baby says.

"Fuck, man," Michael mutters. "You want to mess with me like that? Do you know who I am?"

Duane glowers down at the two of them as if he's imagining their agonizing deaths, and an instinct inside of me kicks in, wanting to usher Duane away before something bad happens to Michael and his sugar baby.

I put a hand on Duane's back, and we go to the VIP room. He shifts me in front of him, protecting me from Michael. Michael shouts at us, but we ignore him.

The customers' voices fade as we settle into the back rooms. The music is quieter than usual, almost like it's meant to help lull someone to sleep rather than turn someone on, and my heart beats in anticipation of being alone with Duane after what we did yesterday. A cocktail waitress brings a beer for Duane and a glass of wine for me.

Duane's paying for my time again, but he's here doing a favor for me. I asked for help, and he came. I'm not used to it. People don't usually show up when you ask like this.

But maybe that's my fault. This is the first time I've felt comfortable asking for help. And what does that say about my feelings toward Duane?

The answer to that question sends nerves spiking through my skin, so I

remind myself that this isn't free. It's still a transaction. I open up my broken clutch.

"I've got three hundred," I say, "but the rest—"

Duane puts up a hand. "No need."

"No need? It costs hundreds of dollars to be back here. You can take it out of our next session."

His eyes blink as he glares at me. "There's no need for that," he says slowly, his words challenging me to say differently. But it's obvious Duane is *not* going to let me pay for the VIP room, even if it's a favor to me.

I perch on the sectional, and Duane takes a seat next to me.

Duane dips his head toward the curtains leading to the main floor.

"Who is he?" he asks.

I stare down at my hands, linking my fingers together. Duane is so different from Michael—Duane is harsh, where Michael is pretty, Duane is bulky, where Michael is sinewy, Duane is rough, where Michael is uptight.

I don't want Duane to think that Michael is the kind of man I want. He was just the man who was there when I needed to give my mom a break.

"He used to be my sugar daddy," I whisper. "He paid me to be his girlfriend."

"Name?" Duane asks.

"Michael Bellford."

"How long?"

I look down at the floor. Are we really having this conversation right now?

"Five years?" I say.

Duane doesn't say anything for a while, and that makes me nervous. What does he think about my relationship, my only real long-term boyfriend? Can I even consider Michael a boyfriend when he was paying me, or was he more of a boss?

An emptiness drops to the pit of my stomach.

"There wasn't much choice in Oakdale," I explain. "I guess I thought he could help me and my mom."

"Did you have sex with him?"

Duane's question catches me off guard, but considering our circumstances, I guess I should expect it from Duane. He's never been one to dance around the subject.

"Sometimes," I say.

“Sometimes?”

“Michael liked to use a vibrator on me when he was high, but he never touched me with his hands or mouth.”

A flash of annoyance bubbles under Duane’s expression, and though it takes me aback, I know it’s not meant for me. It’s meant for Michael. If anything, Duane is irritated that I would date someone who wouldn’t fuck me like I wanted, like it’s a personal insult to him.

“Why not?” he grunts.

“I don’t know,” I say. My skin prickles with self-conscious nerves. “One time, he said it was because he *knew* how to make women feel good. That if I trusted him, he’d make me come instantly.” The frustration and self-loathing come rushing back, and I turn away, not able to meet Duane’s eyes with tears in mine. “I knew he was paying me, that I shouldn’t care what he wanted to do. It was a job, not love. But I swear he *knew* I faked it, and he didn’t care. He didn’t listen to what I wanted. And then I felt hopeless because I had to stay with him for my mom. And so, it just made me feel like I would never be enough—”

My nostrils flare uncontrollably as I try to keep the emotions in. Duane pulls me toward him. My body tenses, but he holds my shoulders, giving me the space to explain everything that happened.

“He told me he didn’t *want* to have sex with me,” I whisper, running my hands over my body. “He said it would make him lose control and ejaculate too soon, or something like that, and no matter how much I said I *wanted* that—that it would be kind of hot if he came too soon, like he couldn’t resist me—he refused.” I dig my nails into my palms until the pain shoots to my jaw, then I straighten my fingers. “He said he was paying me, and that I needed to do what *he* wanted. And he didn’t want to touch me or lick me. I was only providing a service. I wasn’t a person.”

The contradictory nature of it all isn’t lost on me. My fantasies are about being used like a plaything, but what Michael did had nothing to do with me. It was like I was wallpaper to him. A photocopy devoid of any personality. It wasn’t *me* he wanted; it was the idea of being able to pay someone *like* me, and to have the power to dictate our sex life. He clearly had his own intimacy problems, but no matter how much I tried to talk to him about it, it never changed anything. He had to have the power. After all, wasn’t that what he was paying me for?

On the other hand, as power-hungry as Duane is, he wants *me*. And that

desire makes him lose control. Makes *me* feel wanted and *needed*.

His need returns the power back to me.

Duane shifts, and I try to read his face, but it's blank, like he's holding back the emotions building inside of him too.

"I guess everyone has their preferences, but it made me feel—" I pause, trying to find the words. "It made me feel like I was useless, inside and out. Like I was powerless. Like I didn't deserve anything. Like there was nothing I could do that could make him want me. And it didn't make sense, because he was paying me, right? He obviously wanted me. And besides, he was just a paycheck, but still, I couldn't shake the thought that there was something *wrong* with me." I laugh nervously through the tears. "I know it's stupid. *I'm stupid*. But—"

"You're not stupid," Duane says.

His blue eyes cast down on me like a shadow on the bottom of the ocean floor. There's no warmth inside of him, but I've got this feeling like he wants to protect me from those dark thoughts about myself.

"I'm paying you too, Reggie," he says.

He's right, but it's different with him. He chased me through a cornfield. Held a gun to my head multiple times. Cut my throat enough to make me bleed. Snuck into my house to take my ass.

And somehow, I still think Duane respects me more than Michael ever did. Like there's something *more* to our relationship than client and sex worker, or even drug maker and seller.

Duane sees me as his equal, not just someone to fulfill a service.

"I don't care if she's paid or not. A man who doesn't worship his woman is a sorry excuse for a person," Duane says, his words deliberate. "I've got no sympathy for someone like him."

"Worship?" I ask. It's a funny word to use, given the context.

"That's right."

I tilt my head to the side. "It's not like you're on your knees in front of me."

"Worship doesn't always come in the form of submission," he says, his voice low and erotic. "Sometimes, it's listening to what your woman wants, even when she won't say it out loud. Even if she only says it with her body."

A dull buzzing sensation wraps its way around my stomach. I study Duane, trying to come to terms with what he's saying.

Worship doesn't always come in the form of submission.

Does that mean that forcing his dominance over me is another way to pay tribute to me?

And I'm back on that first night, sitting in the truck with him, humming with tension, knowing that he could kill me. Knowing that he may have been the man I just sucked off in the glory hole. How I wanted him to chase me and fuck me before I even started running. Before I saw the corpse in the back of his truck. After years of feeling useless and undesirable, how I just wanted to feel *wanted* for once.

Could Duane see straight down into my soul, even then?

"Are you implying that chasing me down and fucking me, even when I say 'no,' is a form of worship?" I ask, amusement in my tone.

"I'm saying it's a form of deep-seated adoration."

His words come out with such a severe weight that I swallow a dry gulp, knowing that Duane is completely and utterly serious right now. What does it mean to be here with Duane, in this VIP room, talking about these things? Admitting my past to him? Opening up, when I've never trusted anyone before?

What I know is that even if he doesn't want to, Duane *listens*. It's almost like he knows instinctively what I want to. Like he doesn't just open up his ears—he listens with every part of his body. Knowing me better than I know myself.

To gain the affections of a man like Duane scares me. I know damn well what he's capable of.

And yet, I know how much it means to be someone he wants to worship in his own messed up way.

"What was he upset about?" Duane asks, interrupting my thoughts. "Did you steal from him?"

"No, but I did visit him recently. I thought he'd be a good investment, so I gave him some of the mushrooms for free. I figured he'd become a bigger client later." I hunch my shoulders, knowing it was all for nothing. "I guess that's off the table now."

Duane nods deeply. "I trust you."

My stomach flurries with heat, and I know it's true. Duane *does* trust me.

"Anyway," I say quickly, "I didn't take his money. If I wanted to steal from him, wouldn't I have done it during the five years we were together?"

"Would you steal from me?" Duane asks.

I eye his holster. "If I thought I had to in order to survive, yes."

“That’s right. You stole my pistol that first night,” he says. “And what about killing, Hitch?” He leans in. “You pointed the gun at me too. Would you kill me?”

My throat constricts as his breath brushes across my collarbone. He’s giving me that same look he did the first night, when I held the gun to his head—awe and intoxication mixed into one. A knot churns in my stomach as I steel myself.

“If I thought you were going to kill me, then yes,” I whisper.

His jaw ticks, and his tongue slithers over his lips. “So you’d kill to survive.”

“You’re a good fuck, but you’re not special.”

He reaches for my neck, his fingertips massaging my skin, just tight enough to show me that he has the power to hurt me if he wanted to, but that he’s not going to. I melt into his grasp, and when his fingertips skim the scar on my neck, he digs in his nail into the tender flesh, and a jolt of pain curls through me. A smile blooms over Duane’s lips.

“That’s my girl,” he says.

My stomach erupts with butterflies at that possessive phrase. It feels good knowing that he thinks of me as *his*. Like he wants the whole world to know it, but especially me.

Duane stands, then motions toward the curtains. “Go on. Get along home now,” he says.

I cautiously glance at the hallway leading to the main floor.

“Why?” I ask.

“I’ll pay Todd for your time. You can end your shift early. Ain’t no reason for you to deal with your dumb ex sugar daddy.”

Relief reddens my cheeks, but I purse my lips together in question. “What about you? I’m working for this, right?”

He cocks a brow at me, reading my expression. “We’ve got a deal, don’t we, Hitch?” he says. “You’re mine, and I take care of what’s mine.”

That tension in my lower stomach grows, rolling between my legs.

“Are you staying here?” I ask.

“I got some business to discuss with Todd.”

A dull ache swims inside of me. I’ve got a feeling his business has nothing to do with Todd. Is Michael still here with his new sugar baby? Would Duane hurt him for disrespecting me?

Would Duane *kill* Michael for me?

But Michael isn't a threat, and besides, Todd owns the Double Take and runs drugs for Duane. Maybe Duane really does have something to discuss with Todd.

"All right," I say. "As long as I get to repay the favor later."

"Don't worry," Duane says, squeezing my shoulder as he guides me to the dressing room. "I'll never be finished with you."

CHAPTER 17

DUANE

ONCE REGGIE DRIVES OUT OF THE PARKING LOT, I STROLL BACK INTO THE Double Take. The little idiot sugar daddy and his new girl are nowhere to be seen; they must've finally gotten the hint when I shoved the sugar daddy's ass into the wall.

Todd sits behind the DJ booth, eating a hamburger from a styrofoam box, his eyes glossing over the computer screen as he switches playlists. Strip club owner, trailer park investor, drug dealer, and now, DJ. The man does it all. But my mind is reeling, seeing him there, sitting like he doesn't have a goddamn care in the world.

He touched my girl.

With my permission.

Why the fuck did I share her in the first place?

"She get home all right?" Todd asks.

Of course his mind is on Reggie. She works for him. Just like she works for me.

I clench my fists.

God fucking damn it. I know better than to let a woman like her mess with my head.

But Reggie had a fantasy. It's what *she* wanted.

Damn it. Why do I care what *she* wants?

"Her ex was here," I say, my voice fraught with the anger and frustration I've been keeping in for hours. "And you didn't tell me a goddamn thing."

"So?"

I grit my teeth. That's all he's got to say? It's a blatant move of disrespect. As a kid, I was beaten until I understood what respect meant. And

I'm not going to let anyone, especially not Todd, disrespect me.

"You ought to tell me everything about her," I order.

"Didn't know I had to report on her daily life."

I scowl at him, the weight of my gun shifting in my holster. "If you can't respect me and what's mine, then our business is done."

A grin twitches at the corner of Todd's lips, and in response, an uneasiness settles on my shoulders. He doesn't seem to give a damn that I'm threatening to take away our business dealings. It's like he thinks he has one on me, just because he fucked my girl.

I'm going to kill him one day.

"If I didn't know any better, I'd say you have feelings for her," he says.

Feelings? Why the hell is he talking about feelings?

"If you don't respect me, then *that's* where we have a problem," I say.

"And what about Reggie?"

"I don't care if she ends up at the bottom of the delta."

"You want to prove that?"

"You'll end up there before she does."

At that, Todd finally shoves his styrofoam box to the side of the computer. He stands up, leveling with me.

"You say this is about respecting you and what's yours. But 'yours,' Duane?" Todd asks, and the weight of my own words blazes through me. "*Yours?* You want to claim a stripper? A sex worker?"

"You got something against sex workers?" I growl, moving the subject off of me and back onto him. "They're your club's bread and butter, you ungrateful bastard."

Todd tilts his head, studying me a bit harder, like he can see something I don't. Irritation swells inside of me.

"She really has fucked with your head, hasn't she?" he asks.

I bare my teeth. "The hell are you talking about?"

"You were supposed to be meeting with the Sed today, weren't you?"

My mind jumps back to earlier that afternoon, canceling my meeting with Sed. I was supposed to kill him out in the fields, but I rescheduled just so that I could come here and see her.

"You dropped everything to save your girl when you and I both know that Reggie can take care of herself. Her ex coming here doesn't mean shit."

My jaw ticks as I glare at Todd, scrutinizing every detail of his face, but he's right. I'm supposed to be protecting my business—the *only* thing that

matters—and yet I’m here, arguing about a woman with my business partner, because I’ve got an itch to make sure everyone, even Todd, respects my woman.

My woman.

There it is again.

Fuck.

“Business comes first,” Todd says. He walks around the DJ booth, meeting me around the side. “You can’t think of her as yours.” He puts a hand on my shoulder. “You’ve got to think of the bigger picture.”

Pressure builds under my skin where his fingers are, and I consider shoving him into the wall just like I did to Reggie’s sugar daddy. But I don’t. Todd, as much as I hate it, is speaking the truth. I moved to California to prove that I could make more money on my own than my father did. That his legacy, his name, didn’t mean shit. That I could do better.

It’s not enough to kill my father. I’ve got to prove that I can be greater than he ever was. And if I think straight for a couple of seconds, I know Reggie’s getting in my way. She’s wormed her way into my head like a goddamn disease.

“So I’m going to ask you again,” Todd says. “Do you have feelings for her?”

I think about Reggie. How I walked her out to her car. How I watched her for months. How she told me she would kill me, and how she may even be blackmailing me. How I admire her for all of that. I even want to see how far she’ll take it, if she’ll fuck me over like she’s threatening to do. If she’ll go as far as to turn me in to the cops.

If I’ll let her.

In the end, I know what it is. It’s respect. I respect Reggie far too much. Respect her more than I respect my own livelihood.

And that’s the problem.

“I don’t,” I lie.

“Good,” Todd says. “Then *focus*. I’ll work on selling. Braden will work on the product. And you? *You* make sure that our loose ends are cleared up, all right?”

I nod, though in my mind, something isn’t settling right with me. Todd is acting like he’s running the entire business, when he’s not the owner of the operation. *I am*. Hell, Braden doesn’t even own shit.

It’s *my* fucking business.

“Handle your shit this time,” I say. “Don’t hire any more fucking rats.”

Todd snickers. “You owe me for the wall.”

I ignore him, venturing back out into the afternoon sun. I text Sed again, confirming our rescheduled meeting, where I’m supposed to ‘teach him how to harvest and dehydrate.’ An hour later, I send him a text, *I’m out in the cornfield. Come meet me out here.*

If he knows anything about mushroom growing, he’ll know that the cornfield isn’t where we need to be for our lesson. But an order is an order, and this is his last one.

I’m digging a ditch between the crops when his shadow falls over me. He’s a scrawny one, late twenties, all bones and muscle. Acne spread across his nose. He passes for a nerdy delivery man; no one suspects he’s moving drugs for us.

The thing about Todd’s hires is that they’re all without family, lonesome men out in the world, people no one’s going to miss. Men who keep to themselves. We learned the hard way after I killed Braden’s crush. Her family came looking for her and it was a mess for a while. Braden never forgave me for it. But we agreed: you don’t hire a talker in our line of work. You hire someone who keeps to themselves. Someone who won’t be missed.

If I had any empathy inside of me, guilt would consume me for what I’m about to do, but I’ve been doing this my whole life. I killed for the first time as a teenager, hunting someone who disrespected my father, a pathetic attempt to prove my value to the ranch. But even then, I knew the truth about the world. Life always ends. My time will come, and so will Reggie’s.

She’s a loose end, one I ought to take care of.

“What’s up?” Sed asks, breaking into my thoughts. “Todd said—”

I swing the shovel across his head, knocking him down to the ground. The metal cuts into his forehead, and the blood cakes up, all muddy at the gash. He’s out cold, but before I can test that theory, I take the metal end of the shovel, using it to bash his head in until it’s flattened like a corn cake. There’s no way a man can survive something like that.

Blood mixes with the dirt and loose leaves from the fields. I kick his body into the ditch.

His corpse crumples at the bottom like a sack of potatoes. I’ll head to the butcher’s shop soon. Get some offal and bones to bury above his body. Throw off the scent should any sniffing dogs come around these parts.

One down, two to go.

I wait for the stillness to overwhelm me. Killing has always given order and clarity to the world, like death gave life meaning.

But right now, nothing calms me. All I see is Todd touching my woman. *My fucking woman.*

But Todd's right. Business comes first. That rule alone will save his life... for now.

But then another image flashes across my mind. *Michael*. Her old sugar daddy.

I flick through the history of Reggie's GPS coordinates for the last month. She visited someone in Oakdale recently, which must've been when she visited him. After I take care of the ditch, it's nightfall, and I drive my pickup down to Oakdale, taking my time. Reggie texts me a selfie with her tits hanging out—her areolas puffy and begging for my mouth, a sexy little smile on her face. She's so fucking gorgeous—how could she date this fucker for five years, and put up with his disrespectful behavior?

She was paid, sure. It was her job.

But goddamn, I hate the thought of anyone, even a client, disrespecting my girl.

Are you posting this one? I text her back in response.

For your eyes only, she responds, adding a winking emoji.

It's like that now. My girl doesn't need to prove herself to the rest of the world anymore, because she knows who she is, and part of that is finding someone who actually understands her and gives her what she needs.

I'm not one for praise, but I do like hearing that she's mine.

Good girl, I respond. *Your body belongs to me.*

Those three little gray dots come up, showing that she's texting something back, but in the end, they disappear without another word.

I made my girl speechless.

Michael Bellford lives in a nice big house on the edge of Oakdale. There's a sense of class in his property's design, like he knows he's one of the wealthiest people in the county, and shit, he probably is. It makes sense why Reggie would waste five years on someone like him. He must've paid for everything, giving her everything she thought she wanted.

I put on my gloves, then pick the lock and let myself inside. What's funny is that Michael owns a video security company, and yet, beyond a few surveillance cameras, the fucker doesn't care enough to put up any more defenses. Like he thinks, just because he's a big name in that world, that no

one would dare mess with him. He's too proud to consider his own vulnerabilities.

When I come through the house, around to the master bedroom, he's standing above the bed with a vibrator in his hand, bent over his naked paid-girlfriend while she writhes like he's casting a spell on her.

"Oh, please, Daddy," she says. "Give it to me—"

I pull him in a chokehold, yanking him back. The woman screams, holding the bedsheet around her, but she's not my concern right now. I concentrate on Michael. He struggles against me, thrashing like a wild creature in a cage, and I have to give him credit; he puts up a good fight. But I'm stronger, and I put more pressure on his throat, ready to break his neck. But I want this to hurt. I want him to endure every ounce of anger I have for the way he treated my girl.

But then the woman stumbles forward with a pistol in her hands, a gunshot barely missing my head. She pulls back the hammer again, her gait uneven as she tries to fix her aim this time. I drop Michael and grab my own pistol. When it comes to the paid-girlfriend, there's no reason to draw it out. She's just caught in the middle of this. But I can't let her live.

I shoot her in the head.

She falls back, the red dot in her forehead spilling with blood.

"Fuck, fuck, *fuck*," Michael chokes, tears spilling down his cheeks. "Is this all for Reggie?"

I put my boot on his skull, shoving him back down to the ground.

"You ought to learn to respect someone as special as her," I growl. I aim my gun at his forehead, pulling back the hammer once again, ready to make the little bitch beg for mercy.

"S-she's playing you, man!" he says.

My world goes still, his words caught in my ears. He's trembling, full of fear, like he should be, and it takes me a second to really imagine him as Reggie's sugar daddy. She's so fearless compared to him. He's already crying and I've barely even touched him.

"Y-you're the one she's spying on, right?" he stutters. "W-when she stole from me, s-she had me call my employees to set up hidden cameras on her purse." A vein in his forehead throbs in panic. "I don't know if she's stealing from you too, but she's not as good as she seems. She's not the victim here."

I clench my jaw. That's damn right.

As much as Reggie likes to *run*, she's never been a victim. My woman

always knows exactly how much she can get away with.

I steady myself, shifting my weight to my boot, crushing him against the floor. I wanted to draw this out, to make him experience every second of it, but I won't tolerate another word. Not if he's talking poorly about my girl.

"No," I say. "She's not the victim. But neither are you."

I pull the trigger, shooting him in the neck. He wheezes, his eyelids flapping like baby bird wings, and as the blood spills out, painting his skin like a fresh beet, his eyes go still, and that fog finally settles me.

Sed's death didn't do anything for me, but Michael's will do just fine for now.

A puddle of blood mucks the floor. I find bleach and a rag under the sink. Unfortunately, Michael is the kind of person who *will* be missed. I have to be careful about this.

After cleaning up the bodies, I move onto the surveillance cameras. It takes a while, but I finally figure out how to erase the footage from the last forty-eight hours and make it seem like the cameras have been having problems for a few days now. Then I pack a suitcase, throwing in a bunch of miscellaneous clothes for the both of them. In the paid-girlfriend's lingerie dresser, there's ten grand bundled up and tucked away, like she's saving it for a rainy day. I chuckle. She blamed my girl for stealing from her sugar daddy when she was the one who was stealing all along.

Once the suitcases are packed up, I use Michael's computer to buy two plane tickets to Europe. As far as the police are concerned, they eloped. Or maybe they got caught up with some bad people over there. Reggie mentioned the sugar daddy liked drugs. Drugs can lead you to unsavory types, like myself.

But as I pull the tarp over the back of the truck bed, Michael's words come back to me: *She's playing you!*

It was a last-minute attempt to live, something he said to save himself. But something about it sticks out to me.

Did Michael say that for my benefit? To save me? A man like him, victim to her games?

I don't doubt he's right. Reggie is just the type of person to spy—to *blackmail me*. It's part of why I respect her. The girl knows to look out for herself. She even said she'd kill me if she had to. It's why I've got this fixation with making things right for her. The woman deserves it.

But even as I drive away, cleaning my hands of Michael and his paid-

girlfriend's murder, his words keep repeating in my mind.

I have to confront her about this.

If I stop giving her money, then there's no reason for her to keep me in this blackmail limbo. We'll have to part ways, and she'll have to make her final decision to turn me in, or cut me open and get more money.

And I'll be forced to decide if I really ought to kill her.

CHAPTER 18

REGGIE

I CLASP THE FLASH DRIVE IN MY HAND, HOLDING IT LIKE A GRENADE. THERE'S not much footage, but there's enough to make it the final blow that destroys Grainswept Fields. I kept avoiding it, but when I called Michael to check in and make sure Duane didn't kill him, he didn't answer the phone, and a knot grew in the pit of my stomach.

Duane has probably killed a lot of people. And Michael may be another person added to his list.

Turning Duane in is the right thing to do. Especially on my mother's birthday. I've always done the right thing for her, and she would never be able to forgive me if she found out that I was sleeping with a killer.

But even as I stand outside of the police station, I can't bring myself to go inside. Instead, I pull out my phone, wondering if I should call Duane.

But he's a killer.

And one day, he'll kill me too.

I shake my head and gaze up at the sky, trying to figure out what I'm supposed to do. At that exact moment, my phone vibrates, and I drop it. Luckily, it doesn't crack. It's a refurbished phone, but it's still new, and I need to be more careful with it.

As I pick up the device, a woman with a low bun glances at me as she enters the police station. I turn away from the door.

Duane flashes on the phone's screen. I answer it.

"Speak of the devil," I say.

"Ain't I talking to her?" he asks. A huff out my nose playfully. It's probably wrong to flirt when I was seconds away from turning him in to the police, but I don't know what else to do. "Where are you?" he asks.

I scan the area. “At the burger place across from the police station,” I lie. It’s close enough that it’s *almost* the truth. And besides, I didn’t turn him in. Yet.

“Police?” he chuckles. “They finally catch you up to no good?”

“The only one they’re going to be catching up to no good, is *you*,” I snark, pretending to tease him. But I clutch the flash drive, and my abdomen tightens.

It’s so close, I can taste it.

But I can’t bring myself to finish that threat. No matter how much I know it’s the right thing to do, Duane has been good to me. Listened to me. Protected me when Michael was harassing me. Gave me power for once. Treated me like I deserve his respect.

Can I turn Duane in for something I’m not even sure he’s responsible for?

“Is that right?” Duane asks, his voice full of tension, like he knows exactly what I’m hinting at. My stomach quakes slightly, but I don’t let the fear come to the surface. I’m not doing anything wrong.

“Tasty Burgers?” he asks.

“That’s the one,” I confirm.

“I’ll meet you there in a few minutes.”

“But—”

The line goes silent, and before I process what I’m doing, I’m in my car, re-parking across the street before Duane finds me. I sit on the hood of my car, watching the entrance to the police station as different people go in and out. People doing the right thing.

I could be there. I could turn Duane in. Then, this nightmare would be over.

But I don’t want it to be over.

His familiar pickup truck comes into view, and those thoughts float away like clouds. The mere sight of him brings me peace.

“Where’s your burger?” he asks.

I lift my shoulders. “Already ate it,” I lie.

He cracks his neck, a rigidity cycling through his muscles as he readies himself.

“Let’s be real, Reggie. Why were you at the police station just now?”

Frost blooms in my chest. How the hell did he know I was there? Is he *always* watching me?

“How do you know I was there?” I whisper.

“Why were you there?” he asks again. “You going to snitch on me?”

I clutch the flash drive in my palm, but the urge to tell him the truth takes over.

“I saw a finger in your mushroom farm,” I say quickly, the words spilling out. “I didn’t know what it was. But after the body in the back of your truck —”

“Prop.”

“Right,” I say hesitantly, “*and* a finger, I knew I had to do something. But I—”

Our eyes meet, and I hold my breath, expecting Duane to grab my throat and kill me right there. But there’s something else smoldering in his eyes.

Is it pride? Affection? Warmth?

How can a man this cold be warm for me?

“What was it?” I whisper. “Who put it there?”

He wipes his forehead with his palm, then starts rolling up the sleeves of his flannel shirt, adjusting them to a higher height. The ends of his tattoos poke past the edges of the fabric, and I bite my bottom lip.

“Honestly, I don’t know who put it there,” he says. “Someone up to no good. But I’ve taken care of all the suspects.” He hooks his thumbs back into his belt loops. “Part of the business, I’m afraid.”

I press my lips into a thin line, unsure of what to say. It’s not like his explanation makes anything better. He’s not the person who put the finger there, but ‘taken care of all the suspects’ sounds like a euphemism for murdering his enemies.

“Listen, Reggie. I’m calling our arrangement done.” He tips his head toward me. “You owe me a lot of money.”

I blink at him. “For the mushrooms I gave to Michael?”

“I should’ve asked you for it the other day at the Double Take.” He rubs a hand over his forehead. “But here’s the thing. With all the sex work you’ve been doing for me, we’ll consider it even. No one owes anyone anything, all right?”

I furrow my brows together. Why is he bringing this up now?

“Are we done?” I ask.

“I’ve been doing some thinking. I can’t have extra people running around my business.”

My gut sinks. “You don’t trust me?”

His eyelids lower, but then his expression straightens again, tucking those

emotions away.

"It's a solo business," he finally says. "Dangerous for someone like you."
Someone like me.

That could mean that he doesn't trust me to handle it, but a hint of a smile pulls at my lips at the *other* possible meaning. Duane may not admit it, but maybe he doesn't want to see me get hurt. Maybe he wants to protect me.

"No more sex work," he says. "No more drugs. You're out of this."

"But why the sex work too?" I ask.

"Because, *Hitch*," he says, with a dose of irritation in his tone, "you seem to get a lot out of it. In fact, why should I pay for something when you're benefiting just as much as I am?"

The two of us scrutinize each other, as if we can find the words we aren't saying underneath it all. I laugh out of nervousness, but when I see Duane's stoic expression, I stop.

There's got to be something else going on here. He wants to keep having sex, but he wants me to do it out of lust. Not money.

I can understand that.

"What if I don't want to stop?" I ask. He leans forward, waiting for me to finish my thoughts. "You're right. I like it a lot. And I don't care if you don't pay me. I don't want to stop." I lick my teeth in faux annoyance. "You're going to have to force me to stop."

He stares at me for a hard minute. "You're giving up a lot of money."

"It's not about the money."

The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them, and it's like a world has been lifted from my shoulders. I've put money and survival above everything else for so long—it's why I stayed with a sugar daddy, knowing that he could make life easier—but now, even when I've got a drug kingpin lusting after me, a man I could drain of every cent or lock up in jail for life, I don't want to be like that anymore. I want to do this for myself.

"I want *you*, Duane," I say. "You always say that I'm yours, but here's the thing." I try to give him a serious look, but he cracks a grin, and I know that my attempt has failed. "You're mine too, and I'm not going to let you get away just because you're getting cheap all of the sudden."

He chuckles, but then he grabs my throat, pulling me in for a kiss, and it feels different from before. Like something's changed between us. And I'm not sure that I hate it.

In fact, I sort of like it.

“What the hell are you doing to me?” Duane murmurs, and my stomach hardens. He’s looking at me like he’s shocked at the power I have over him, but god, he owns so much of me too. He doesn’t know half of it.

“There are better burger joints,” he says, changing the subject. He gestures to the fast-food restaurant behind us.

My eyes linger on the station across the street as two police cars pull out of the parking lot.

“Had to get a bite to eat before I go to Oakdale,” I say.

“Oakdale?”

“It’s my mom’s birthday. I bought her a car. It should be there in an hour or two.”

He closes his eyes, taking a deep breath before he opens them again. When his eyes rest on me, I’m not sure what it is, but I get this feeling like he’s reaching out to my soul. Like he sees another part of me.

And for some reason, I don’t want him to leave him here.

“You could come with me,” I say.

He tilts his head. “Yeah?”

“Why not?” I say. “You like cake, right?”

He pats his stomach. “Do I look like someone who would refuse cake?”

Duane is muscular, but he’s bulky too. And though I doubt he diets, that hard labor out in the fields must keep him in shape.

“So, is that a yes?” I ask.

“Get your ass in my truck. I’ll drive.”

A giddiness sweeps over me as I get into the passenger side of his car, once again getting into a vehicle with a man I know is a criminal. A killer. A man willing to shove my ex-sugar daddy into a wall. A man selling drugs. A man who technically came into my apartment without my consent. A man who has taken so much from me, and yet, he’s given me so much more confidence and power than I thought was possible.

Because with Duane, I’m always enough.

On the drive over, Duane and I take turns, switching from a country radio station to a rock station. I like country, but rock is my jam, and both genres have overlapping influences, kind of like the two of us. We’re both from such different backgrounds, and yet, we connect in this primal way that shifts those differences. And I don’t want it to stop.

Right inside of Oakdale, we stop at a family-owned bakery. I search through the pre-made cakes and find a chocolate cake with vanilla frosting.

The baker writes *Happy Birthday!* on the top with black icing, then rings it up at the cash register.

Duane pulls out his wallet. I wrinkle my nose at him.

"I can get it," I grumble. "If I can get my mom a car, I can get her a cake too. Trust me."

"Just shut your mouth and let me pay," he says, handing over a wad of cash to the baker. "It's a sign of respect. Intruding on your mother's birthday? Showing up unannounced? Buying a cake is the least I can do."

His eyes linger on me, and my entire body flutters with nerves. I don't know what it is with him, but I know I won't win this argument. Still, he's sweet in his own way. Who buys a cake for a woman he's never even met, just because it's the respectful thing to do?

Duane.

When we get to her apartment, the car dealer waves to me, waiting with my mom's brand new car. It's not the exact make and model I wanted, but it's one I knew my mom would accept. Any more expensive than this, and she'd straight up refuse.

With her new keys in hand, I lead the way while Duane carries the cake.

"You ready for this?" I ask. Duane nods toward the door.

"Go on," he says. "Get on with it."

Nothing scares him. Not even meeting my mother.

I bang on the door. It opens.

"Happy Birthday!" I shout.

"Regina?" My mom bends forward. "Who did you bring with you?"

Duane steps forward. "My name is Duane, ma'am. Duane Patrick."

"And he's not all I brought," I say excitedly.

I take the cake from Duane, setting on the kitchen counter, while Duane and my mom shake hands.

"Wow," she says. "You're certainly tall." She looks up at him. "Duane Patrick. You aren't the one who bought Grainswept Fields, are you?"

"Yes, ma'am," he says.

Mom tilts her head. "Interesting," she says. "I guess you made new friends in Stockton."

"I guess?" I bounce on my tiptoes. "Let me show you your present!"

After I show my mom the car and give her the keys, she gawks, completely speechless. The car dealer offers the paperwork to my mom, but she doesn't take it.

“Regina,” she finally says with hesitation in her voice. “You didn’t have to do this. It’s your money. You need to spend it on yourself.”

I shrug my shoulders. I knew she would protest.

“You’re right,” I say. “It is my money. And this is how I am choosing to spend it.” I pull her hand into mine. “Please. Let me do this for you.”

Her eyes dart back and forth between mine, searching for the answers.

“It’d be disrespectful to refuse a gift like this, ma’am,” Duane adds.

At his words, my mom sighs. “All right,” she concedes. “Thank you, sweetheart.”

After she signs the paperwork and we send the dealer off, the three of us sit at the round table in the kitchen and light candles. I sing *Happy Birthday* to my mom, and though Duane doesn’t sing along, he beams at me through the candlelight. It’s strange, but I realize I don’t know anything about his family. I know he left Florida, but that’s it. I don’t know if he’s close with his parents, or if he doesn’t speak to them at all.

As I serve cake slices, Duane chats with my mom about farm politics.

“Joanne—you know, the secretary from school? She just got married to this man that owns one of the almond farms up in the valley,” she says. “It’s so fascinating.”

Duane cuts in: “You’re not talking about Leonard Cliff, are you?”

“That’s the one!” Mom says. “What a small world. But of course you’d know him.”

“He helped us find one of the contractors for our new facilities,” he says. And I make the connection quickly—the facilities must mean the mushroom farm buildings.

My mom takes a bite of cake, and she smiles so big, it’s like she’s eating a literal slice of heaven. It fills me with joy seeing her like that. We don’t do much for birthdays, but we *always* make time to get each other a cake. And this time, with a car on top of that? It makes her smile even better.

When we’re done, I pick up the plates and my mom rips them from my hands. Duane stands up with me.

“We’ll take care of those dishes for you, ma’am,” he says.

“Nope. Nope. Nope,” Mom says, shooing us into the living room. “I need to put on a pot of coffee anyway. Regina can give you a tour of our embarrassing family photos while I take care of the kitchen. My apartment, my job. You understand.”

“Family photos?” Duane asks. He glances over at me. “I can’t resist

seeing embarrassing pictures of this little thing.”

My skin flushes red. “Thanks, Mom,” I mumble.

She laughs, and Duane doesn’t hesitate. Almost instantly, he finds a picture of me in seventh grade hanging on the wall. In it, my hair is still black, but in frizzy waves on my school uniform. Added to that, I’ve also got braces and an acne scar on my cheek.

Amusement swims over Duane’s lips, and though I can tell he wants to tease me about those years, he doesn’t say anything yet.

But I don’t stop myself from asking him about his life. I want to know everything about him.

“What about your family?” I ask. “Where are they?”

The joy drains from his expression. He checks me out, as if to make sure that I’m seriously asking.

“Dead,” he says. “My mother died when I was young. And my father, that was more recent.”

I hold my throat, wondering if that’s why he moved to California.

“I’m sorry,” I say.

“Don’t be. He was an angry son of a bitch.” He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. “I’m surprised the rage didn’t kill him sooner.”

“The rage?” I ask. “Was he abusive?”

“I suppose he was. But I was talking about *my* rage.”

I blink rapidly, trying to comprehend the meaning behind his words, but deep down, I know what he really means: Duane killed his own father.

“Did he hit you?” I whisper.

Duane cocks his chin toward me. “Is that the excuse you want to give me for what I did to that bastard?”

I stare blankly at the picture of me in seventh grade again, trying to figure out what to say. Duane *is* a killer, and yet, for some reason, I don’t think he’s a bad person.

Yes, he’s been dealt a bad hand. And yes, he has murdered people. Even his own father.

But he’s loyal too. Loyal to me.

“Sure. He beat me,” Duane says in a quiet voice. “It’s not uncommon in my family. But that’s not why I killed him. I killed him because he disrespected me for the last time.”

Apologize for disrespecting her, Duane had told the Mortician, as if disrespecting me was an insult to *him*.

So much of Duane's outlook is about respect. It's threaded into every action that he takes.

My mom bustles out of the kitchen with two coffee cups. She hands them to each of us.

"So how do you know each other?" she asks. "Give me the details. What are you two, anyway?"

Duane looks in my direction, leaving the answer to me. I suck in a breath. My mom must expect me to say that Duane is my boyfriend, but it's never been like that with us. And even without our paid sexual arrangement, I doubt it will be now. Whatever *this* is, it's strange, but I like it. For once, it's like I'm with someone who actually sees me. Like we're in this together.

"He's my partner," I say.

CHAPTER 19

DUANE

WE SETTLE INTO A ROUTINE AFTER THAT: I CALL HER OVER, SHE COMES TO the farm, and wherever we end up, I chase her until she's out of breath, then we both go at it until we pass out. But today's different. She's getting dressed next to me, thoroughly fucked, but it's there as plain as day—the camera lens stares at me from her purse, blending in like an eyelet. It's so damn obvious now, I can't believe I didn't see it until now.

Was this part of her plan? Get my defenses down so that she can find the real story, and use it to betray me?

Why is she still recording me?

Once she's dressed, she stretches her arms above her head, her black hair dancing down her back. That beautiful curve of her tits makes my mouth salivate. She travels across the room to get something out of her purse, and I realize her purse is positioned perfectly, so she can get the entire room on film.

I come up behind her, my hands skimming her hips. She stiffens, a chill running down her back, like she knows she's been caught. I bring my mouth to the crook of her neck.

"Why are you filming this?" I ask, my voice full of accusation. Immediately, she spins around, gaping at me.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

I grab her purse. We'll see about that.

"Hey!" she shouts, jumping after it, but I'm a big boy and I hold it up out of her reach. I dig my nails underneath the miniature lens, then pull it out until the chips in the back are exposed. I throw it on the floor between us.

"Not recording, huh?" I say.

Her cheeks flame red. She grits her teeth.

“Fine,” she says. And I brace myself for the words that are sure to come out—the confession that cements her future to die on this farm, just like I always knew she would. “You scared me, okay? So I thought that maybe if I had a camera on me at all times, I would find something. And then, I’d go to the police.” She crosses her arms. “But I didn’t, okay? I had a flash drive, but I never took it to the police.”

I already knew she was there that day, contemplating turning me in. But this, being scared of me? Does she not realize how much I’m protecting her from?

I almost *prefer* the blackmail angle.

But maybe this shows her loyalty. Maybe it proves that she’s a good woman. Better than I deserve.

She leans against my bicep, trying to soothe me, but I whip her around until she’s facing me. Her nipples pebble through her tank top, and saliva gathers on my tongue, imagining those brown nipples in my mouth. I pull her tank top, letting those round breasts come into view. They practically spill out of her bra, and my hands reach down into those cups, grabbing those pert nipples and twisting them until she squeals.

“Stop it,” she cries, full of anger. “Not now, Duane. Not like this. We’re talking!”

“You afraid of me, Hitch?” I growl. “You want to give the cops a show?” I grab that mini camera lens off of the floor and hold it up to her face. “Let’s give them a show.”

I push her back down on the bed and she gasps, kicking at my chest, but I use my weight to keep her compliant.

“Spread your legs,” I order, and the little devil does, her thighs so juicy, I lick my lips. I press my palm against the seam of her leggings, and her heat soaks through the fabric.

“No,” she says. “Stop it, Duane. This is—”

“You want this just as much as I do,” I say. I shove my hands down the front of her leggings, cupping her wet pussy. I growl, throwing my head back, and her eyes fill with lust. “Go on. Pretend like you’re afraid. Like you don’t want this. But we both know it’s a damn lie.”

I hold her neck until her cheeks purple like an eggplant. Then I let go, letting her choke in front of me. I grab my phone, switching it over to my own recording app, then position it toward her as I set it on the dresser. I pull

down her leggings as she fights me, digging her nails into my forearms, but I clutch her hands in one palm, then undress her with the other. Her ass is bare, her leggings tangled around her upper thighs, but her pussy is so wet, it's glistening. I sniff in the sweet smell of her cunt as deep as I can take it, then I grab a fist full of her hair, yanking her head until she's looking at my phone.

"Tell the camera how much you like it," I say.

"Fuck you," she snarls.

My belt slides through the loops, the leather swishing so loud, my girl's back arches like a cat. She glimpses over her shoulder, the pang of fear in her eyes. Before she can do anything, I pull the belt around her neck, treating it like a leash. She trembles, her mouth gaping as I pull down my own pants, bending to thrust inside of her.

"You're so wet for me," I say. "You know how much it turns me on, knowing that you crave the fight? That you like resisting just as much as you like giving?" I growl in her ear. "Before I showed my face in the club, I rubbed my cock raw every night, just thinking about you, Hitch. And now I want you to tell me how much you love when I take everything from you."

I pull the belt around her neck slightly, and she arches her back more. Then I fuck her good and hard, her tits and ass jiggling with each thrust. Power swells inside of me as I squeeze the belt, taking away her precious air. Knowing that this way, *I'm* the one who's in control. I'm the one who has all the power. I'm the one who can end her life.

I give her some slack, and her chest expands with air, gasping. The power I have right then fills me with a hunger so deep, *I need more*.

I need to know that she needs this too.

"Right now, Hitch," I demand. "Tell me you love it!"

"I love it," she cries. "I love the way you talk to me. The way you chase me. The way you need my pussy."

"Not just your pussy," I correct, my tone gritty and raw. "Your mouth. Your ass. Your tits." I grab her big breasts from behind, twisting her nipples in my grasp until she whimpers like a wounded animal. "Your brain." I slap the side of her face, then slam into her again. "Your fucked up mind. Your soul. I want all of you, Hitch. I want your very last breath."

She moans, signaling she's about to come. I grab my phone, replaying the video in front of her so that she's forced to watch her confession on repeat. I pull the belt leash, cinching it around her neck at the exact right moment.

"Duane," she moans, burning a hole right through me. My good little

plaything remembers exactly what I ordered her to do.

“Come from me, slut,” I say. “That’s it. Take it for me. Such a good little whore.”

Once she comes, I pull out, spinning her around to face me, then force her down to her knees as I unleash my come, marking her in long stripes of white. It paints her cheeks, her tongue, her forehead. It even gets in her black hair. She sticks out her tongue, licking the last drop off of the crown of my dick.

A knock bangs on the door and she jolts.

“We need to talk *now!*” Braden shouts.

I grit my teeth as Reggie grabs her purse, leaving the broken lens on the floor.

“I should get going anyway,” she says. She dresses quickly as Braden continues his racket on the door. Once she’s ready, I hold the door for her and Braden stands in the way. He glares at her, his teeth bared like he thinks he could actually do something to her, when we both know that would *never* happen.

I won’t let it happen.

“Bye,” Reggie says over her shoulder to me, and I walk behind her, making sure she gets to her car. Braden follows us like a shadow. Once her car turns on, he flips toward me, yapping his damn mouth. Todd joins us, and that’s when the rage comes firing back into my body.

I want to cut off Todd’s hands. His dick. Everything that touched her. Todd needs to die. It’s disrespectful to *myself* to let him live.

“Where is your head?” Braden asks. “Did you hear anything I just said?”

I slowly look at Braden.

“We’re talking business, Duane,” he grumbles.

Business has to come first. Before me. *Before Reggie.*

Doesn’t it?

“What was Reggie doing here?” Todd asks.

I don’t bother answering. She’s not selling for me now, anyway. Why are we even having this meeting?

Braden doesn’t take long to spill the news. He holds up a new napkin.

“I found this pinned to the door of the spore house,” he says. “It’s gotta be her, Duane. Who else would it be?”

SELL THE BUSINESS OR THE POLICE ARE NEXT.

I stare at the note. It’s the same jagged handwriting, but the more I think

about it, the more masculine the letters look—too harsh to be my woman.

But Reggie is a smart one, and putting that sort of angle on a note like that would be just the sort of thing she would do.

After all, she's still trying to record us.

"We need to move the mushrooms," I say, changing the subject.

Braden shakes his head. "No," he says. "That'll mess with their growth. Do you know how hard I've worked to get them like this?"

I turn to Todd without acknowledging Braden. "You got any places we can use?"

"I've got a warehouse at the edge of Stockton," Todd says. "We can use some of the rooms there."

I nod. That'll work for now.

"Okay, fine. That's only half of the problem though," Braden says. "We need to get rid of the blackmailer *before* they go to the cops." He throws up his hands. "Damn it, Duane. Get rid of *her*!"

"It's not her," I say confidently. "It's a man."

"How the hell do you know?"

I tap the side of my head. "Instinct."

"You're not thinking with your head. She's got you drowning in her lies, because of what? Her tight pussy? Because she lets you skull-fuck her?"

My jaw ticks. Did he just say what I think he said?

"You need to think real hard before you say anything else," I warn.

"All right," Braden says, for once being smart and backing down. "I just don't trust her, Duane. Neither does Todd. And neither should you."

Todd lifts his shoulders. "You remember that ex of hers? The sugar daddy? He said she was stealing." He cracks his neck. "Maybe this is just another way to get money out of us."

Something's fishy here. It's way too easy for the two of them to pin it on her, and I don't like it one bit. I imagine cracking their heads together to knock some sense into them.

What if it's been the two of them all along?

"What if it's you?" I say, pointing to Todd. Shock spreads across his face, but then it dissolves as he laughs it off. He must think I'm joking. I straighten and turn toward Braden. "Maybe it's you," I say. "You haven't wanted to do this job in a long time, bitching over some woman who *deserved* to die. Come to think of it, *you're* the one always finding the notes."

Braden swallows, his Adam's apple bobbing like a buoy in the ocean.

Braden's the one who found Todd, who helped forge my father's will, who took the job I offered when I moved out to California. I vowed to Braden that I didn't need my father's name to be successful. That I could make it without him. And Braden stood by me.

"Not true," he says. "You found the first one."

He's right, but maybe he put it there for me to find.

Because since I killed his little crush, he's been different. His loyal-to-a-fault mentality has been replaced with something else. Something that's not quite right. First, it was like he was too paranoid to do something illegal again, but *now*? It's like the murder and the drugs don't mean shit. He'll do anything, as long as he doesn't get caught. Almost like he knows he can get away with it, if he just waits a little while longer. If he pins it on me.

"It's you, ain't it?" I say to Braden. "You're the blackmailer."

"You're not making sense," Braden says, glaring at me. "Don't let everything we've worked for disappear just because you're in love with her."

Love?

"I'm not in love with *anyone*," I scoff.

He grits his teeth, then gestures toward the road. "I ain't going to jail for this. Neither is Todd, and neither are you." He clears his throat, his fists balled at his sides. "And if you don't take care of her, *then I will*."

The threat lingers on his tongue. Is he really threatening to kill Reggie right now?

Braden's too much of a pussy. He wouldn't kill anyone.

But I wouldn't put it past him to try.

And hell, that's all I need: *to see him try*. And I'll put him in the fucking ground, just like I did with my father. I won't let Braden disrespect me too.

"Don't make a threat unless you can follow through with it," I warn.

He narrows his eyes at me. "You watch yourself, Duane. She's not who you think she is."

He walks off, and Todd shifts awkwardly beside me. I hold my pistol, the weight calming me down. I could kill Braden *and* Todd right now, and it'd be done.

But in a way, Braden is right. Reggie could take us all to jail right now if she wanted. She said so herself.

And that's just it. How far will I let her take this?

CHAPTER 20

REGGIE

MID-WEEK DAY SHIFTS AT THE DOUBLE TAKE CAN BE UNBEARABLY SLOW, SO I sit at the bar eating chicken wings, the buffalo sauce sticky on my fingers. We—our one customer and five strippers alike—all ordered takeout from the bowling alley across the street. It's *that* kind of day shift.

A tall redhead comes around the bar, his eyes instantly landing on me.

"Regina Flores," he says.

It takes a second, but eventually, I realize it's Braden: Duane's housemate, the one who works on the corn and mushroom farm with him.

In the corner, Todd sits at the DJ booth, flinching in confusion. Did Todd tell Braden my full name? Or did Duane?

I grab a cocktail napkin and wipe my fingers.

"Braden," I say flatly. "I go by Secret here. It's rude to call a stripper by her legal name in front of—"

"I didn't come here to discuss stripper politics with you," he says. I cross my arms, but he steps closer, invading my personal space. "I'm here to tell you to stay the fuck away from my farm."

I laugh in his face. Todd eyes the computer screen, pretending like he doesn't hear our argument unfolding.

"*Your* farm?" I say, incredulous. "You just live there. You don't own it. Duane does."

"I know who you are," Braden whispers harshly. He jabs a finger in my face. "I know what you've been doing to Duane. Mixing his head up with all of these ideas, when really, you're blackmailing us."

My teeth grind. *Blackmailing them?* What in the actual fuck? I don't even know what he's talking about, and he's acting like I'm the main suspect!

“Blackmail?” I ask harshly. “Who’s blackmailing you?”

“Acting like you’re a good girl,” Braden sneers. “You think I’m stupid?”

“Why the hell would I blackmail you?”

“Money? Drugs? I don’t know. Just leave Duane alone, stop blackmailing us, and I won’t tell the cops about that little arrangement you had with Duane.”

At that, I scoff in complete annoyance.

“So now you’re blackmailing *me* for sex work? How fucking original,” I snap. “Why don’t I go to the police with *that*?”

“Leave us alone, whore, and you won’t have to worry about a goddamn thing,” he growls.

“Hate to break it to you, but Duane and I fucked for free.” Which is partly true, at least recently. “So you don’t have shit on me.”

Todd whistles from the DJ booth, grabbing Braden’s attention. The two of them talk over there, and the whole time, Braden glares at me, like he truly thinks I’m his enemy.

But why would I blackmail them? I may be stupid enough to fuck a drug lord, but I’m not stupid enough to threaten one too.

Braden grabs a cocktail napkin from the square holder and waves it like it’s a sign. Todd meets my eyes, his expression full of embarrassment, as if he wants to apologize for Braden’s behavior.

Todd better have a damn good explanation for this.

Braden leaves the booth, then growls in my face.

“I know who you are,” he warns. “Stay away from our farm.”

I roll my eyes. “Fuck off.”

I devour the rest of the chicken wings like I’m angry, and hell, I *am*. I don’t like being accused of something I haven’t done. I can understand it coming from Duane, because yeah, he found a video camera attached to my purse. But it’s like Braden thinks that there are no other suspects out there that are capable of doing something like that, except for me.

So they’re being blackmailed, then? How often does something like that happen in the drug world?

And *who* is doing the blackmailing?

Todd plops down beside me, stealing a soggy french fry and dipping the droopy end in the buffalo sauce, coating it in orange. I snatch it from his hand and pop it into my mouth.

“Hey!” he says.

“Those are *my* fries,” I say.

“You weren’t eating them.”

I inch my styrofoam container away from his hands.

“You realize I told Braden to leave you alone, right?” Todd asks.

Hope finally catches fire in my chest. I need *someone* to be on my side. Thankfully, I have Todd. At least he isn’t accusing me of anything.

“What’s going on?” I ask. “Why was he here? Does he really think I’m blackmailing you guys?”

Todd wets his lips, anguish straining his eyes.

“You know what they do on the side, right?” he asks. I nod, and he rubs his forehead as he stares up at the television above the bar. A customer—our only one since two o’clock—shouts at the soccer game on the screen.

“Do you know anything else about the blackmail?” he asks hesitantly, almost like he’s afraid of the answer.

“No,” I snark, the irritation leaking into my voice. “I have nothing to do with that. Why would I know anything?”

“I don’t know. Have you seen anything weird? Talked to anyone strange?” I shake my head, and he continues: “Have you done anything lately that could make them think you’re against them?”

I blink my eyes slowly, leaning in closer to Todd. His eyes are calm and glossy now, as if he’s trying to figure this out too, just like I am.

He thinks I have something to do with the blackmail situation too, doesn’t he?

Why isn’t anyone on my side?

“Why would I ever go against someone like Duane?” I whisper, pleading for him to believe me.

Todd shakes his head. Then he turns away, unable to face me.

“Just be careful with them, Secret,” he says. I can’t tell if he’s saying that because he thinks I’m guilty, or because he’s scared for me, and either way, it frustrates me. “Duane is a good man, but you have to be smart. Look out for yourself. Don’t make a mistake like trusting a drug lord.”

Todd’s words hang in the air as I study him. He and the customer start discussing the game on the screen, and I blink at him.

Why do I get the feeling like there’s something missing in this picture?

The Mortician rounds the corner, his eyes lighting up as he sees me. And for a moment, I forget that the last time he was here, he called me names and Duane forced him to leave.

“My beautiful queen,” the Mortician says, opening his arms up for a hug. “It’s been too long.”

I give him a hug, but as his cologne swallows me up, dread fills my stomach.

I know what the Mortician expects, and I don’t need that from him anymore. I’ve got enough saved from working for Duane, and Duane has made me come so many times that my pussy is perpetually sore. Loyalty toward Duane seems more important than getting fingered for a couple hundred bucks.

Besides... Duane wouldn’t like it.

I pull back from the Mortician.

“How’ve you been?” I ask. He wraps his arms around my lower back. I suck in my stomach and drift away. The Mortician is putting another nail in his coffin, touching me like that. For his sake, I hope Duane isn’t watching.

“Missing you,” the Mortician says. He winks at me. “You got time to play or—” he scans the club, probably checking to make sure Duane isn’t in the building, “—are you too busy for an old friend?”

Hesitation locks in my chest. Is this a mistake?

“Let’s pause,” I say. I glance at the exit, then back to the Mortician. “I can’t today. Maybe next time.”

The Mortician’s lips pull into a thin line, his brow furrowing.

“I drove two hours to be here,” he says. “And you’re going to tell me I don’t even get a dance?”

I huff in annoyance. We both know that he wants more than just a dance.

“Come on,” I say. I point to the other strippers sitting in the bottle service booths. “Have you tried them? Maybe they can give you what you want—”

“Oh, fuck you, Secret,” he snaps. He punches the counter. “You find some bigger wallet and think you can forget about the customers who made you? *I* made you! And you’re suddenly better than me?” He bares his teeth. “Keep treating people like that and you’re going to end up in a fucking hole.”

I snap my teeth together, sneering at him, but I’m so shaken by his words that I can’t do anything else. It’s like he completely switched. I didn’t know that this side of him existed until now.

And it *scares* me.

“Get the fuck out,” I finally say, pointing at the exit.

“My pleasure,” he says, shoulder-checking me as he passes. The other strippers gape at us with wide-eyes.

From the DJ booth, Todd types something on his phone. I almost hope he's texting Duane, but at the same time, I don't want Duane to get involved. I know how Duane gets. And if he finds out that the Mortician even *touched* me, he'll kill him.

And yet, I still yearn for Duane's safety. Why is it that I feel safer with Duane than I do with the Mortician? The Mortician just handles dead bodies; there's no reason to be scared of him. But there are plenty of reasons to be scared of Duane. Duane has killed people.

But the shift in the Mortician's anger showed his true self. Like it didn't matter what I said. I didn't know he could get that violent.

With Duane, I've always known what he's capable of. He made it clear from the first night we met.

Normally, I don't ask the bouncers to escort me to my car, but today, once my shift is over, I ask one of them to walk me. But at the last second, Todd steps in, dismissing the bouncer.

"I've got this," Todd says. Ice spreads across my shoulders as Todd walks beside me. "Is everything all right?"

I shiver as I look up at him. First, it was Braden, accusing me of blackmailing him and Duane. And then, the Mortician told me I was going to end up dead in a hole. Even though Todd accused me too, he's still been the kindest to me, as if his questions were just his way of looking out for me. But even when I look at his soft eyes, I still don't know if I can trust him.

Can I trust anyone?

"Seeing the Mortician freaked me out, I guess," I say.

Todd nods, but he's pensive, like he can see things I can't.

"I worry about you, Secret," he says. "You need to be careful."

"Around the Mortician?"

"Not just the Mortician." We both turn toward my car. "With—"

Our jaws drop.

My car is there, but all four of the tires sit deflated on the pavement, completely slashed. It's personal. *A warning.*

The Mortician. It has to be him. He was pissed when he left the club.

But what if it wasn't the Mortician at all? What if it was Braden?

Across the street at the bowling alley, I see a beat up white truck. There's a figure in the front seat, but from this distance, I don't know if it's Duane.

What if Duane slashed my tires? Would he do that so that I have to rely on him?

Or was it the blackmailer?

Who is blackmailing who, and why would they come after me too?

What the hell is going on?

Todd's eyes fill with worry. "Who did this?" he asks.

I clench my fists together, trying to figure it out, but everything is blurry, and all I can focus on is Duane's pickup truck.

Since I started seeing Duane, nothing's been safe. And now, I don't know who to trust, or what to believe.

CHAPTER 21

DUANE

REGGIE'S SHOULDERS DEFLATE. PINS AND NEEDLES PRICKLE ACROSS MY SKIN as Todd comforts her, putting his hand on her shoulder. Reggie gazes up at him with a sorry expression in her eyes, and for a second, I wonder if they're working together.

But then she bends her knees slightly, dipping out of his grasp. Heat simmers under my fingertips as I clutch my truck's steering wheel, itching to kill him for touching my girl *without my fucking permission*.

But it's business.

Just business.

Todd is business. Reggie is business too.

But the product needs to come first. That's the only reason to keep Todd alive. Braden grows it. Todd moves it. And I handle the loose ends.

Goddamn, do I want Todd to be a loose end.

Reggie digs into her purse, pulling out her phone. I reach for my pocket, waiting for her call.

But my phone never rings.

An emptiness expands inside of me, creating a hollow nest where my lungs should be. My controlling heart burns. *Needs* to know that she needs *me* just as much as I—

Damn it. I don't need her. I could kill her right now if I wanted.

But she fucking controls me.

Without any incentive or request from her, I find myself driving toward the parking lot where she is. Reggie's eyes flicker over me, lighting up for a small second before she slumps down again, clutching her phone to her ear. I park beside her, then get out and post myself against the car next to her. The

car shifts with my weight. She angles herself into me the slightest amount, and that gives me a small taste of relief. Todd rests against the back of the building, giving us ample space. He knows that now that I'm here, he needs to keep his fucking distance.

At least he's smart enough for that.

"What happened?" I ask. The slashed tires on her car are obvious, and unfortunately, they were like that when I arrived. But I want to hear the details from her. She ignores me, clutching that phone like it's armor. Todd lights a cigarette, and the cherry blazes in the early evening light. I hold her shoulder, right where Todd did earlier. I tighten my grip, erasing his touch from her skin. "I can change your tires right now if you want."

Accusation grows behind her eyes. My chest tenses with the anger building inside of me too. Does she think I did it?

"I only have one spare," she says.

"Then I'll buy more."

She glares at me. "Just stop."

My world dissolves with that command, as if she's torn out my organs with her bare hands. Reggie is determined to keep me out of this. To handle this *by herself*. To refuse to let me help her with anything.

But that doesn't mean I'll *let* her.

"Spend the night at the farm," I say.

"Why?" she asks. "My tires were slashed. It's not like my apartment was burglarized."

The hint of spite in her tone unnerves me. Her apartment wasn't burglarized, huh? I can change that. I can make it look like someone is after her. Make her *need* my protection, when the real danger is sleeping right beside her.

"You act like you have a choice," I say.

"And I told you months ago that I am sick of men telling me what to do."

The tension is thick in the air. Todd blows a puff of smoke, but Reggie and I glare at each other, our bodies full of anger. I bare my teeth, my fists curling at my side, and Reggie's demeanor shifts in annoyance.

"Fine," she mutters. She turns to Todd. "I guess I'm off to the farm with Mr. Farm Boy here."

"You want me to take care of your car?" Todd asks. "I'll bring it to Grainswept Fields."

Reggie nods. "Let me know what I owe you."

I get into the driver's seat of my truck and Reggie slides in next to me. We're silent as we go back to the farm, but once we're there, I put my hand on her lower back as I escort her up to my room.

She sets her duffel bag down on my messy bed. The gray comforter is strewn halfway off of the mattress. I haven't been doing much sleeping lately.

My phone vibrates. *Braden* flashes on the screen. I check the message: *I found another blackmail note.*

God fucking damn it.

Reggie plops down into the rocking chair and it creaks underneath her. Her black hair rests on her shoulders, and I try to picture her writing those blackmail notes for the thousandth time. She's capable of anything; why wouldn't she blackmail us for more money and power?

But for some fucked up reason, I can't put it together. If she's doing it, it's not *her* idea. Maybe Todd put her up to it. Or maybe Braden is pretending to be a paranoid little shit, when really, he's the mastermind behind it. Who knows? Maybe it's the goddamn Mortician. That fucker has been way too close to Reggie for my liking. I wouldn't put it past him to get her to do something like that, especially if they both get paid.

But what if it is Reggie?

My head is a mess, and I can't pull apart who I should believe anymore. Hell—Braden is *right*. My dick has been thinking for me lately. And somehow, it's convinced my heart to follow suit.

It's goddamn irritating.

I pull out my pistol, the one Reggie stole from me and I took back. I stare at the engraving: *Life Always Ends*.

It seems fitting now. Someone's life ought to end. This mess has been getting out of hand for far too long. It's about time I handled it.

But even as I contemplate Reggie's death, the idea of putting the pistol in *her* hands again wells inside of me, like a red light getting brighter and brighter, until it's a blinding white all over. And I know, then, that I can't kill her.

Reggie stares at me quizzically.

I wish I could tell her why I'm doing this, but all I know is that I'm doing what I have to do.

"You never know when you might need it," I say, placing the pistol back in her palm. She holds the grip, then blinks at me.

“Are there bullets in it?” she asks.

I show her how to open the chamber, make sure the bullets are loaded, then I close it and place it back in her palms.

“You’re not staying here?” she asks.

There’s a touch of anxiety in her voice, like being here without me makes her nervous. The urge to wrap my arms around her and be her literal human shield flows through me, but the rage to throw her out into the fucking field wages against that urge too. She’s so determined to reject me. To *distrust* me. Shit, maybe she even disrespects me. Now she’s pretending like she wants me by her side?

“You can take care of yourself,” I say.

Before I can change my mind, I leave the bedroom, closing the door behind me.

Downstairs, Braden paces in the kitchen, running his hands over his face in exasperation. He shows me the note, but my mind is full of noise; I can barely read it. I killed the extra workers; the only people left who know about the mushrooms are me, Braden, Todd, and Reggie.

One of us is the blackmailer.

But Todd and Braden profit off of the business; they have no reason for me to sell.

Reggie, on the other hand? She knows too much, and it’s not good for any of us.

I envision myself going up the stairs. Opening the bedroom door. Ripping the pistol from Reggie’s hands. Putting the barrel of the gun up to her temple for the last time. Pulling back the hammer.

Letting the trigger click into place.

“I’ll take care of it,” I say to Braden, interrupting his rambling.

He wipes his nose. “What?”

My voice is firm, agitation growing with each word: “I’ll. Take. Care. Of. It.”

Braden falls quiet, no doubt concerned with what I’m about to do. And I want to tell him to keep his mouth shut, even though he hasn’t added a goddamn word.

I walk through the front door of the house. Get in my truck. Look up at the house and see the window to my room.

The curtains are open, and Reggie stands in the divided frame, haunting me like a ghost. I ought to *make* her a ghost.

But why can't I kill her?

Months ago, before Reggie knew I was still around, I took a tally of her regulars, and I followed each one of them.

I've always known where the Mortician lives.

It's a long drive; I won't be back until past midnight. But my mind can't see through the muck, and I need clarity right now. I *have* to kill someone, and I refuse to kill her. And if that's what I need to do—force Reggie to watch me kill someone—so that she *respects* me, so that she tells me the fucking truth, then I'll do it.

But I should be killing her instead.

CHAPTER 22

REGGIE

A BANG CRACKS THROUGH THE ROOM, WAKING ME UP. MY HEART RACES AS I sit up in Duane's bed.

The bedroom door slams shut behind Duane. He sways in front of me, his eyes bloodshot, the veins pumping in his neck like he's running on pure adrenaline. Which is not a good thing when the man is already made of domination and power already.

"Get up," he orders, the words brittle. I should expect that sort of coarse tone from him, but there's something off, like everything has been shifted out of place. A dryness whips through my mouth, my pulse throbbing in my chest with intense heat.

I have to follow my instincts right now. It's the only way to get through something like this.

I stand up and adjust the boxers on my hips. Even though I'm wearing Duane's baggy clothes, his blue eyes appraise me behind his rage. But there's something else in his stance. Another layer of promise.

He's not just hungry for sex. He's hungry for blood.

"Get your pistol," he says.

I don't question Duane. I grab the gun, but it's like I'm watching myself in the third person, walking through the motions, like I'm not in control of my body anymore. I swallow another gulp, my throat dryer than a desert.

Duane's lips pull into a dark smile.

It's not a good sign when a killer wants you to get your gun.

We walk outside, the grass crunching under our feet. The sky is dark and cloudy, without any stars. Duane stomps toward the barn, and my throat constricts like I'm having an allergic reaction. There's no reason for us to be

going into the barn in the dead of night. It's just a storage facility.

All of those red flags keep waving, but I still follow Duane into the darkness.

The barn doors slide open. Duane flips a switch, and the lights flicker on, a dim aura filling the space. In the middle of the equipment, a man sits bound in rope, crumpled on the straw covered floor. The familiar styled hair. The undershirt streaked with dirt. White briefs on his hips. Everything in my body stands on edge. I know this man. His eyes fall on me and widen.

The Mortician.

He cries through the gag, begging for help, but his words are muffled. His body twists, but he's bound so tightly that he barely moves.

"What have you done?" I whisper.

My vision spins like a kaleidoscope as I find Duane. He leans on the side of the building, his posture relaxed. As if this is just another day to him.

"He disrespected you," Duane says. His jaw ticks as he turns toward me, and my stomach cramps at the attention. I cover my abdomen, and Duane's eyes flicker at my body language. Anger ignites in his eyes. "Do you know how much I value what's mine, Reggie? I'm not going to let anyone do that to you."

I bite my bottom lip, my chest trembling.

"You captured him," I whisper.

"This surprises you?"

My hands quake at my sides. "He means nothing to me, Duane. Let him go."

"Funny thing is, I can't do that now." Duane steps forward, his boots thudding on the floor. "You see now, I've got a witness. I've already let one witness get away, and look where it got me." His eyes trail over me, and my body spikes with anxiety.

A witness who got away.

He's talking about me.

"We already talked about that night," I say cautiously. "I didn't see anything."

"And yet you started blackmailing me. Threatening my entire operation. Ain't that right, Hitch?"

My fingers twitch, but I close them in a fist. "I don't know anything about blackmail," I argue, but it comes out in a desperate whine.

"You think I believe you when you don't even respect me?"

Duane pulls out a switchblade, the metal clicking into place.

I don't have much time.

"I can take care of myself, Duane," I say. "I've already proved that."

"Then kill him."

The Mortician cries, his sobs soaking the rag in his mouth. The Mortician has been my regular customer for months now, but that's all he is—a customer. A way to make money. That's all Duane was supposed to be too.

And yet, I don't want to kill either one of them.

"I'm not going to kill him," I say. "Not for disrespecting me. Not for—"

"Then kill him *for me*," Duane howls. Adrenaline jolts through my body and I flinch. "I've already killed for you."

"What?"

"Think real hard, Hitch. It ain't a secret."

My equilibrium rocks as pain surges in the back of my neck. *Michael*. He's talking about my sugar daddy, Michael, isn't he? Michael is a jerk and I don't know why I was with him for so long, but it scares me to think that Duane is violent enough to kill him.

For me.

I blink rapidly at Duane, but not seeing anything but the violence he's capable of. He's not a human anymore; he's a blood-covered monster.

How could he do this?

I back away slightly. "You're fucking crazy," I say. The Mortician grunts to the side, and I hold my breath, searching for an exit. There's nowhere for us to run, and if I know Duane, there's no chance that the Mortician is getting out of this alive.

I may not even get out of this alive.

I search for something, anything to help me escape. There are cords. Hoses. Machines I don't know how to operate.

But in the back, hanging against the wall, is a metal rake.

It may be my only chance to knock him out.

Duane follows my eyes, then tsks off to the side.

"You got a gun," he says. "If you're going to kill me, then use that."

I shake my head slightly. I don't want to kill Duane or the Mortician. I just want to escape. To give us some space so I can figure out how to get through to Duane. To talk some sense into him.

"Goddamn, Hitch. You knew the kind of man I was that first night we met," he says, reading my mind. "Why are you acting like this is a big shock

to you?”

I wipe my sweaty hands on my clothes, an outfit I borrowed from Duane.
What do I do?

But I need to act *now*.

I race for the rake, darting around a tractor, and Duane doesn't even follow me. Instead, he draws closer to the Mortician.

Shit!

I hold up the rake like it's a sign of peace.

“I'm not going to kill anyone, Duane,” I say forcefully. “You need to think this through. He means nothing to me.”

“He fingered you,” Duane says. “You and I both know that you don't let just *anyone* finger you in the VIP room. He was *special*, wasn't he? One you hand-picked amongst the rest.”

A knot churns in my stomach. Did Todd tell him about that? Or has Duane somehow been watching me on the surveillance footage this entire time?

“And he had the nerve to disregard that privilege and threaten your life,” Duane continues. “I heard what he said about putting you in a hole. Todd texted me. You deserve more respect than that.”

In a practiced, deliberate movement, Duane presses the blade to the Mortician's throat, and everything switches to slow motion. The Mortician's eyes go white. A red fountain gushes from the cut on his neck. Blood covers Duane's hands. Everything is red, and needles of fear prick every inch of my body.

Duane is a fucking monster.

Duane's eyes impale me, monitoring my every move. I hold the rake in front of me like a shield, but it's a weak defense; Duane has the power to rip it from my hands.

I have to run. Right fucking now.

As soon as Duane's close enough, I swing the rake into his chest, then let it go and lunge around the tractor. I run through the barn, but trip, my knees cracking on the pavement. Fear charges through me, beads of sweat bubbling on every exposed part of my skin. I push myself up, but Duane's arms wrap around me, covering me in blood. My muscles knot together as a tremor passes through me.

“Please,” I beg. “Don't do this.”

I squeeze my eyes shut, waiting for the knife, but a hand comes under my

chin, forcing me to turn toward him. My eyes flutter open.

Duane's gaze is blue and soulless, like he's seeing past me, into the future.

"Get out of here," he says, his words a mix of a warning and an order. Chills run down my spine. I twist out of his hands, scrambling away from him.

And Duane lets me go.

I don't stop to think about what that means; I just keep running. Once I'm outside, I scurry along the side of the barn, hiding in the shadows, moving as fast as I can while staying quiet.

I look back at the barn to see if he's following me, and I smack into a hard, warm surface. I flinch as I face what or who it is.

Braden glowers down at me, his red hair flaming around his head like a bonfire. He cracks his neck, then grabs my arm. I scream, scrambling for my gun, but he grabs it out of my hands before I can take a shot.

"Spying again?" Braden says. "Should've known better than that."

"I haven't done anything," I say carefully.

"Bullshit," he says. "You're the only one who'd be dumb enough to blackmail us."

"I didn't do—"

He throws me to the ground, knocking the wind from my chest. I gasp, catching my breath as he binds duct tape around my wrists.

"Doesn't matter," he says reluctantly. "You ain't doing shit now."

Then he puts his arm around my throat and chokes me, the air squeezing from my lungs. My vision goes blurry, and I cross my fingers that I'll see Duane before I pass out. But I know how stupid that thought is. Duane isn't here to save me.

He's the reason I'm here.

CHAPTER 23

DUANE

THE NEXT HOURS PASS, LEADING INTO DAYTIME, AND SOON, IT'S PAST NOON. The Mortician's body is with the rest of them, underneath the animal scraps, buried so far deep in the ground that when the dogs come looking, they'll smell the animal flesh before they find the victims. It was how we did it back in Florida, and it's how I do it now. But none of that matters.

All I can think about is *her*.

Reggie's phone stays on my nightstand, and with her car parked out front, there's no way I can find her.

I take the truck, driving over to Stockton, scanning the side of the road for any hitchhikers. I even check the gloryhole. But there's no sign of her anywhere.

She's just gone.

Respect is something you earn, and the longer I studied Reggie, the less I started to see her like an object, and the more I started seeing her like an equal. I should've just killed her after I fucked her that first night. That was my first mistake.

But even now, I know I never would've killed her. It just wouldn't happen.

She's gone, but I can't shake the idea that it's not over. Not yet. Not until I know for sure—

What? That she's safe?

What the hell is wrong with me?

I clench my fists as I go to the front of the house, searching for answers. Her car is unlocked. Todd left the keys in the console, and though you'd expect the interior to smell like his cologne since he was the last one to drive

it, all I smell is *her*. Overly ripe. Like sex and vanilla. A blanket is tossed on the backseat, and there's a napkin for a fast-food restaurant on the cushion. A pair of clear stripper heels on the floor, dashed with dried up superglue, a half-assed job to keep the rubber sole intact.

Then I notice a black device.

I pick it up, twirling it between my hands. It's thin and sleek, probably a newer camera. I scrutinize it, imagining it in Reggie's hands.

I click the power button, then scroll through the gallery.

Pictures of the cornfields. A video of the breeze rustling through the stalks. A car driving on the road. A picture of my house. Then a closeup of my open window, with a partial image of me. A picture of the spore houses at night, with the locks on the doors.

A video of me coming out of the mycelium room, pacing toward the barn. Then an inside video of the mushrooms, the hum of the flow hoods muffling the speaker.

I switch off the camera, clutching it in my hand. She had a hidden camera attached to her purse, but how did I miss that she had a regular camera too? And how did she get around to these parts without me finding out through the GPS tracker? Did she *walk*? Did she hitch all this way? Hell, I wouldn't put it past her.

The driveway stirs with tires. Two police SUVs come into focus. No lights on, but speeding a little faster than I'd like.

Braden barrels out the front door.

"We're fucked," he says, his voice panicked.

I put Reggie's phone in the driver's seat, then slam the door shut. I stand beside Braden as the cops park their cars. Four different uniformed officers step out; one with a mustache, one with a shaved head, one with a sunburn, and the last one with a baby face.

I suck in a breath. This isn't going to end well for us.

"Are you Duane Patrick and Braden Scott?" Mustache asks. "We have a warrant to search the premises."

Braden and I glance at each other. Braden had to deal with the cops last time. I nod Braden forward. I'm more of the aggressive type; it's better for him to handle the interactions like this.

"For what, exactly, officers?" Braden asks.

"For any suspicious activity."

Braden takes a step closer to them. "Officer, you see, we—"

“There’s been several reports of drug production on this property. You knew this was coming,” Babyface says.

Both of us step to the side.

“We’re going to need you to come with us,” Sunburn says. His hands glide over the handcuffs hanging on his belt, and I know we’re not getting out of it this time.

We lead them to the back of the house, where the barn and the spore houses are.

I should’ve listened to those blackmail notes. Sold the place. Gotten the fuck out while I still could. But I didn’t because she distracted me. *Because I let her get to me.*

At least Reggie isn’t here. She’ll be okay.

Damn it. Who cares if she’s okay?

Shaved Head tips his head toward the padlock hanging from the lab doors. “You got your key on you?”

We have no other option right now. I unlock the door, then step inside. The flow hood whirrs above us, and I bow my head, ready for the declaration that we’re under arrest.

One of the officers scoffs, and they shift closer toward me. I look up.

The room is empty. There’s not a single petri dish in view. Even when I check the next room, the mushroom bags are gone.

Just like her.

“What were you hiding in here?” Mustache asks.

“Just equipment, sir,” I say.

“What kind of equipment?”

“Agricultural,” Braden says.

The officer sniffs. The process repeats for the other building and the barn, and each time, relief swims through me.

Someone—probably Todd—must’ve moved the product.

After they’re finished with the buildings, two of them take an SUV to search the fields, while the other two keep a close eye on Braden and I. The whole process takes hours, but eventually, they’re satisfied.

“Sorry to waste your time,” Sunburn says. “We apologize for the inconvenience.”

“You still filing a report?” Braden asks.

Mustache narrows his eyes at Braden. “It’s our policy. But you’re not hiding anything, so you should be fine. Right, gentlemen?”

After that, Braden keeps his mouth shut and we're polite as they head out. The sun beats down on us as their SUVs disappear into the late afternoon light.

"Where did Todd move the mushrooms?" Braden asks.

Braden doesn't know the details?

I pull out my phone, dialing Todd. He answers on the first ring. "Yep?"

I put him on speaker. "Cops came by," I say.

"With a fucking warrant," Braden adds.

"Yeah?" Todd asks. He clears his throat. "*Shit*. How'd it go?"

"Where'd you move the mushrooms?" Braden asks.

"This warehouse on the south side. I told you about it."

Braden lets out a sigh.

"You saved our asses," I grunt.

Braden gets closer to the phone. "We gotta figure out this blackmailer shit. It's gotta be your girl," Braden says, nodding to me.

"Have you seen anything?" Todd asks. "Like a video? Pictures on her phone? Something like that?"

I think of the camera in the back of her car. The hidden lens on her purse. The time I found her in the spore house, holding up her phone as she took pictures and videos. There's so much proof that it's her, but my mind won't let go of the idea that it's *not* her. It can't be.

Reggie's cutthroat. She *would* blackmail someone.

But she wouldn't do that to me.

"It's not her," I say.

"Where is she, anyway?" Todd asks.

I shrug. "Don't know."

Braden lifts his chin. "It's her," he says. "We all know it. *You* know it. You just gotta think with your brain and not your dick for once."

Anger pours through me, bubbling under my skin.

"For all we know, it's one of you," I yell into the phone as I point at Braden. "Maybe *you* went to the cops."

"You'd say that about me?" Braden snaps. "I've been with you since we were kids. I helped you with your father. I—"

"You can't be serious," Todd says. "Come on, Duane. Be real."

"You just don't want to be wrong," Braden says. "You don't want to admit that you were wrong about her. But think about the bigger picture, Duane. We can still fix this."

For a few seconds, it's quiet. Braden shifts, and the gravel gargles under his feet. Todd breathes into the microphone.

The evidence leads to Reggie. I can logically see that.

But my chest tightens, unable to truly grasp it.

"Let's go talk to her now," Braden says.

My whole world sharpens. Air catches in my lungs.

"Where is she?" I ask, rage building in my fingertips.

"She's safe," he says with a gleam in his eye. "I told you. If you don't take care of this, then I will. And this is how we're dealing with her from now on." He tilts his head to the side. "Interrogation with the entire court. Let's get Todd here too."

"I'll be there soon," Todd says. "Don't do anything without—"

I hang up. I've got more important things on my mind.

Like my fucking girl.

"Show me," I growl.

Inside of the house, Braden leads me to an extra room off the ground floor. He pulls aside the coats, and on the carpet, boxes line up, hiding the bottom of a hidden door.

I remember this room from when I first bought the house, but we had so many secret rooms that I had forgotten about it. We pull aside the boxes, and then Braden opens the door.

Stairs lead down to a basement. Braden hits the switch on the wall, and the lights flicker on, illuminating a woman in loose, baggy men's clothes, duct tape covering her mouth, her hands taped behind her back. Her ankles bound. She's as fetal as she can get, her eyes stirring as she gets used to the lights. Dirt streaks her skin, makeup caked around her eyes.

Reggie.

Red paints my vision.

"You touched her," I say.

"She sold us to the fucking cops!" Braden shouts.

I punch him in the jaw, knocking him to the floor. Braden rubs his chin, glaring at me, but as soon as I step closer, he kicks out his leg, throwing me off balance. I kneel down, taking him with me, and I swing my fists. For a while, he fights back. Reggie screams behind the duct tape, but I don't stop. My knuckles crack on his skull, and his eyes puff together. His nose bleeds, and his fists fall to his sides. After a while, he doesn't even try to hide his face as I punch him again, and again, until his head is nothing but a bloody

pulp.

“Damn it, Duane. You know we *need* him, right?” a male voice says, interrupting my actions.

Todd stands in the doorway, scowling with irritation.

Now, Braden is just a mash of red blood and pink skin. Matted red hair. A pile of human flesh. He’s not a person I’ve known since I was a kid anymore. He’s a victim who betrayed me. Just like he tried to convince me that Reggie betrayed me too.

Maybe she did.

But that doesn’t matter now.

Reggie crouches in the corner, hiding herself as best as she can as she blinks at me. Terror floods her eyes, like I’m more monster than man, and maybe I am. Maybe I’m nothing more than a collection of primal instincts. Desire. Violence. Control. A hunger for dominance over *her*.

And yet, seeing her like that, an instinct twitches awake inside of me. There’s something else there, buried deep inside too. The need to protect. To watch over Reggie, even if she rejects me.

Reggie has too much power over me.

CHAPTER 24

DUANE

“I’LL TAKE CARE OF THIS,” TODD SAYS.

But I can’t stop staring at Reggie. The way she looks at me like I’m going to kill her. How I *should* kill her, but nothing in my mind will let me. It’s the most frustrating situation I’ve ever encountered.

“I’ll take care of her,” I say in a low voice.

Todd mumbles something, probably about taking care of Braden’s body, but all I care about is Reggie. I pull her into my arms, and she wiggles, trying to get out of my grip, but I tighten my grasp, and eventually, she stills like a baby deer. I carefully take her out of the basement, back to the living room. I set her down on the couch, making sure she’s balanced, then I take my knife and cut off the duct tape.

Once her hands are free, she rips off the rest of the silver adhesive, her teeth clenched together. Anger blooms in her eyes, her hatred aimed at me.

Rage boils in my chest too. After everything she’s seen, after everything she’s done, after she knows that I’m saving her—that I’m letting her go—she has the nerve to be mad at me?

“You’re a killer,” she hisses. “You’re danger in the flesh. You’re nothing but a—”

“You say that like you’re innocent,” I say gruffly. “But you’re not. You break the rules. Different ones than I do, but still, Reggie, you ain’t a saint. You break rules too. Braden was right, wasn’t he?”

“What the fuck do you mean?”

“You’re just a whore looking for a quick buck, using the blackmail to get one over on us.”

I don’t mean it, but I know I need to convince myself of its truth. Her fist

whacks into me, swinging my cheek to the side. The sting radiates on my skin, and I don't know who was more disrespectful: me, or her.

I rub my jaw, then slowly turn back to her. The words still burn in my chest, and I know I shouldn't have said them. I shouldn't have killed Braden for trying to protect our livelihoods. I shouldn't have done a lot of things.

I should have never picked up Reggie on the side of the road, *but I did*. And I can't take that back now.

Reggie's jawline strains. "You know what? I *should've* blackmailed you." She pulls out her phone, flipping through the screens until she finds a gallery of video files. I see the thumbnails—the outside of the labs, the mushrooms. All of it. "I took these with that camera on my purse because it made me feel safe. Like insurance, you asshole." Her voice strains, and my throat tightens in response. There's so much pain in her tone, that it defeats me. "But you know what, Duane? I didn't do anything. And I *should* have. I should have emailed all of this to the cops."

"I'm sure you would've turned in that digital camera in a day or two," I scoff. "Don't act like you're on my side."

She glares at me, crossing her arms. "What digital camera?"

My muscles pool with tension. "You know what I'm talking about," I growl.

"No, I don't. I don't know about any blackmailer, and I don't know about any camera," she shouts. "And you know what? No one had to die for this. No one had to die for your drugs. For your stupid business. For your—"

"I killed them for *you*," I howl. She falls still, and I grit my teeth, forcing the words out: "If I didn't kill them, then I would've had to kill you, and no matter what I do, I just can't kill you."

I stand up, and she flinches back. Her fear pounds into me like a knife.

I want her to respect me. To fear me. To know that I have control over her.

But not like this.

"You knew I was a killer from the first night we met," I say in a low voice. "So why did you agree to all of this?"

Silence fills the space between us, and I can't take it anymore. I pull out my knife and throw it at her feet. Then I remove my gun from the holster and set it on the couch beside her. I check my pockets, making sure all of my weapons are gone. I show her my empty palms.

She picks up the gun and aims it at my forehead. I drop to my knees and

gaze up at the barrel. We both know who wins this time. I won't even pretend to fight it.

"Money," she whispers, a tear running down her cheek.

My throat aches. Money. Money means business. Money means power. And a woman like Reggie is desperate for more of it. No wonder she'd be desperate enough to mess with my head.

I reach for my pocket, and she pulls back the hammer. I open my wallet and throw all the bills on the floor. They scatter like dried leaves in the autumn sunlight.

"There's your money," I say. "Now go."

Her fingers twitch as she eyes me. Anger clinches my throat.

"Get your money and fucking go!" I bellow.

She flinches, then grabs the money with shaking hands, and I look away. When her footsteps fade, I glance toward the front door, seeing her black hair flutter behind her.

On the ground, there's nothing. No gun. No knives. No money.

I'm empty and alone. Reggie has it all.

She made me weak.

CHAPTER 25

REGGIE

ON THE FRONT PORCH, RELIEF COURSES THROUGH ME. I SEE MY CAR. THE tires are brand new. The keys are in the console. The engine roars to life.

I flip the car around and drive. I don't look back.

As soon as I'm on the highway, something vibrates underneath me and I jump. I grab the phone—*my* phone—out from under me. *Todd* blinks on the screen. Did he put it there?

"You all right?" he asks.

There are so many things I could say. My eyes sting with tears, not because I'm sad, but because I don't know what the hell is going on. Not with the farm. Not with Duane. And not with my heart.

But I can't let myself cry. Now isn't the time for that. I just need to get away.

"I'm fine," I manage to say.

"Don't worry," Todd says. "I'll make sure he doesn't come after you."

"Okay," I barely mumble.

"Stay low for a while. Keep me in the loop."

"Thanks," I sigh. Then I hang up.

The sunset stretches over the sky in a wash of pink and orange, and it seems like a century has passed since I saw Duane kill the Mortician, and was immediately kidnapped by Braden. Even though I was unconscious for some of it, I don't think Braden touched me. Not like that. He just didn't trust me.

Honestly, I understand. If I was in his position, I wouldn't trust me either.

A young girl, maybe eighteen or nineteen, stands on the side of the road, her black roots showing past her yellow hair. Even though I'm looking at her, the image of Duane on his knees floods my vision. Ready to die for me.

Because of me.

Emotion stirs inside of me. Shock. Regret. Anger. Pain. Even empathy. The need to help this hitchhiker. To help *me*.

I pull over, then open the passenger door. She checks me out, knowing that the driver is what determines her safety, and her shoulders relax when our eyes meet.

“Where are you heading?” I ask, just like Duane asked me that first night. But the teenager doesn’t say a word, hiding behind the collar of her hoodie. Refusing to completely trust me.

I’m glad she’s being careful. I should’ve been more like her. I wish I would have.

But even as that thought passes through my mind, I know it’s not true. I don’t wish I could change anything.

I’m not sure what I want right now.

“I’m heading to Oakdale,” I say. “I won’t hurt you.” I point to the gun and knife in the passenger seat. “You can hold those if it makes you more comfortable.”

Her shoulders loosen a bit, then she slides into the passenger seat.

We drive, and I don’t bother with the radio. Again, it’s just like that first night, except this time, the sun is still technically out, and *I’m* in the driver’s seat. It’s strange to be on the other side, like I’m stepping into Duane’s shoes. My mind races with nerves and questions. Why the hell was Duane willing to give up his life, when he seemed so convinced that I was his blackmailer? Is it because he knew it was over? Because he thought I was going to turn him in?

But then a thought comes to me.

He killed the Mortician. Michael too. Even Braden. *For me*.

Was Duane willing to die for me too?

I ponder over that question, not coming to any conclusions, and soon, we’re outside of my mom’s apartment. The teenager shifts sheepishly beside me. I clear my throat.

“You hungry?” I ask. I motion for her to follow me. “I’ll call you a rideshare for wherever you’re going.”

We walk up the stairs to my mom’s apartment, then knock. Mom opens the door, and as soon as she sees me, her eyes flash with sadness, like she already knows that I’m helping a woman who would rather run away. Someone like me.

But it feels different now. When I ran away from Michael, he saw me as a woman he took care of in exchange for a service. Duane sees me as his equal.

I see that potential in myself too, now.

“Got any more cake?” I ask.

Mom shakes her head, a bittersweet smile on her face. “But I’ll heat you up some dinner. Come on in.”

We sit around the table while Mom reheats leftover takeout. The scent of refried beans, rice, and carnitas fills the air, and though it smells good, my appetite is shot. I can’t eat a thing.

It takes some encouragement and ordering a rideshare, but the hitchhiking teenager eventually eats two full plates, scarfing them down in a hurry. I can’t tell if she’s eating quickly because she’s starving, or if she just wants to get out of my mom’s apartment as soon as she can. But whatever the reason is, I’m glad for it. She’s being smarter than I ever was.

As the teenager goes to the door, I hand her the cash Duane threw at me. Her eyes blink rapidly.

“Take it,” I say. It’s better to give it to her, when I know she needs it.

“Thank you,” she says. They’re the only words she lets out.

She gets into the car and watches us through the window. The rideshare driver was a woman, someone with good reviews, so I’m okay with sending her off. A sense of longing fills me, knowing that the teenager is on her way.

And yet, I still can’t get my mind off of Duane. He *should’ve* killed me. He made it clear from the beginning that his business comes first.

So why didn’t he kill me?

My mom grades papers while I mull over the last few months, trying to figure out why everything happened the way it did. But everything is fuzzy, like the dust won’t settle into place.

My phone vibrates on the kitchen table, startling me. My mom glances up. I quickly answer it, hardly reading the screen.

“Hello?” I ask, hoping to hear that southern drawl.

“Where are you?” Todd asks.

My shoulders sink, and I take the phone into the next room so I don’t interrupt my mom’s work.

“Why?” I whisper into the phone. “What’s going on?”

“I just wanted to make sure you’re somewhere safe. Duane, he’s—” Todd lets out a breath, and I bite my lip. “Are you at your mom’s?”

“What’s going on with Duane?” I ask.

“He’s irrational. Too violent. You need to stay quiet. I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

I shake my head. “Duane wouldn’t hurt me. He’s—”

“You saw what he did,” Todd says, his tone irritated. “Do you need any more proof?”

Proof. The word sinks into my stomach.

Proof. Like a photo caught on a digital camera.

Proof. Like secrets kept locked in a hidden basement.

Find his weaknesses, Todd had said. *Everyone’s got secrets, right?*

“Listen, I’m just watching out for you,” Todd says. “We both want what’s best, right? And Duane’s not a good person.” The phone’s speaker scratches, and I swallow a dry gulp. Something isn’t right, but I don’t know *what*. “You gotta look out for yourself, Secret. And right now, you need to think about how to make it out alive *and* on top.”

My chest tightens and images of Duane flash in my mind. Holding a gun to my head. Chasing me through the cornfields. Fucking me through a hole in the wall as the bathroom stalls collapsed on top of me.

You’re nothing but a set of holes for me to use, he had said.

Then the memory of Duane on his knees, waiting to die, dominates the rest.

I’ve always believed that I couldn’t look out for anyone but myself, but now, it’s different. Like I need to look out for Duane. I’ve got this gut feeling that Todd is about to hurt Duane, and I can’t let that happen.

I won’t.

“Todd?” I ask cautiously. “What are you doing?”

“Don’t worry about me,” he says coolly. “Just stay quiet for now. I’ll make sure you’re safe.”

The phone call ends, and I swallow, my fingers nervously tapping my sides as I try to figure out what to do. I should stay quiet. I should wait until this blows over. I should be running away from everything related to Grainswept Fields right now. They’re bad people, and Duane is the worst of them all. But my heart pounds in my chest because I know it’s not that simple.

Duane was convinced that I was blackmailing him, and he *still* wouldn’t kill me. And now I know why.

Because Duane respects me.

Because he loves me.

And I can't let anything happen to him.

I dial Duane, but the call goes straight to voicemail. The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. I can't let this go; I have to do something now.

I grab my purse from the kitchen table, and my mom sits up in her seat.

"You just got here," she says. "Where are you going?"

"I—" I start, but I don't know how to explain it to my mom. If she knew who Duane really is, she'd tell me to run away. To stay away from everything. To protect myself. Just like Todd told me to stay quiet.

But I *can't*. Not when Duane needs me.

Love may be an emotion. It may not be real or tangible, but whatever it is, it matters right now, because I love Duane just as much as he loves me. And if I let him get hurt, I won't be able to forgive myself. Not when he's done so much to protect me.

"There's something I need to do," I say vaguely. Mom raises a brow, but I don't bother to explain. I get in my car and cross my fingers that it can take me all the way to the farm.

CHAPTER 26

DUANE

THE MOON IS FULL ABOVE US, BUT THE HEAT IS TRAPPED ALONG THE GROUND, swallowing us up like steam over a stew. Todd and I take turns shoveling the last bit of dirt over the scraps of meat and animal bone.

Sweat and grime lace our skin, and Todd's usual pristine button-up shirt is covered in dirt. He stabs his shovel into the ground and leans on the handle. His lips move, but I don't hear a word.

The sky is brighter over Stockton, as if a beacon of light is shining right out of the center of the city. I doubt Reggie is there, and it gives me comfort to know that she's smart. She's long gone by now. The woman likes looking for trouble, but she knows better than to stick around a place like this.

"Duane?" Todd asks.

I turn, but I gaze past Todd at the cornfield behind him. Regret fills my head with muddy water. The cornfield is just another place where I let her run away.

"What do you know about the process?" Todd asks. "Braden must've taught you a lot of it, right?"

I rub my forehead, then run the back of my shovel over the dirt, knowing Braden's body is buried underneath it all. I'll have to run the tractors over this spot to hide the evidence of us digging.

I always put business first. Above my father. Above Braden's whining about us doing something illegal. Above *everything*.

But I could never put it above her.

"Some of the mushroom batches are doing okay, but two of them? They're turning black," Todd says. "I can forget about them being lost, but I don't want that to happen to the rest of the bags, you know? That's a lot of

money.”

Money. It’s what Reggie always wanted. It’s what I thought meant power.

But life always ends. What you do with your time is up to you. And hell, I’m glad I let Reggie go. I’d do it again if I had the chance.

“You want to head to the warehouse now?” Todd asks. “We can figure out how to equip the facility better. Make a plan of action for the morning.”

My throat is dry, but I swallow anyway. I get back in the ATV. It’s not like there’s a reason to fight against doing what needs to be done.

Todd sits beside me with his hand thrust behind us, keeping the shovels from rattling in the back. I keep my eyes on the road, but my mind’s a mess. I need confirmation that Reggie is okay before I do anything else. I need to know that she took that money, got her mom, and *ran*. That she’s putting herself before everything she left behind. Before me.

I need to know she’s okay.

“If I’m housing it,” Todd says over the engine’s buzz, “we need to negotiate a bigger cut for me. It’s only fair. What were you paying Braden, anyway?”

I don’t care about the business right now. I care about Reggie.

“Have you heard from her?” I ask, changing the subject.

Todd wrinkles his forehead. “You’re still thinking about Reggie?”

My hands clasp the wheel tighter. It’s stupid, but I can’t stop my brain from what it’s doing, and damn it, I’m done fighting it.

“Call her,” I say. Though my tone is softer than I’d like, I keep going: “Check in on her. Make sure she’s okay.”

I sound pathetic and I know it, but I don’t care. Once I know she’s okay, the rest will fall into place.

I park the ATV and the engine shudders to silence. Todd doesn’t move.

“Can I be real with you?” he asks.

I stare at him, waiting for him to continue.

“Reggie was using you. That’s what strippers do,” he says, putting a hand on my shoulder. “And trust me, they’re good at it. But if we don’t figure out what to do with her, she’s going to go to the cops, and then we’ll be fucked.” He squeezes my shoulder. “She’s a loose end, Duane.”

A loose end. A hole. A hitch in my plans.

Why doesn’t that bother me anymore?

We both get out of the ATV, then walk around the house to the front,

where Todd's SUV is parked. The house casts a shadow over us, blanketing us in the blue night.

"She won't do anything," I say, keeping my eyes on the distant glow of the city. "If she was going to, she would've done it already."

"But we need insurance," Todd says. "That's part of the business. You said she has video footage, right? Even a digital camera." Pain shatters his expression, like he desperately wants me to believe his words that she's too good to be true. "I know you've got feelings for her, but we need to think about this logically. She's going to fuck us over. We need to make a decision about what to do with her before it's too late."

I acknowledge him, but there's a conniving thread in his words that makes me question him with new clarity. I've always known he was greedy, but this is more than that.

He might've overheard me and Reggie talking before she left. I can't say for sure. But I *know* I never told him about the digital camera, and he was the last one in Reggie's car when I found it.

"You're the blackmailer," I say.

A hint of amusement flickers over Todd's lips, but it disappears as soon as I spot it.

"What are you saying?" he asks. "Why would I do that? We're working together, Duane. We're partners."

I try to piece it together, but my mind is stretched thin, so focused on Reggie. The woman I thought was my blackmailer. *My Hitch*.

But Todd was the one fucking with me this entire time.

Energy floods through me. I pummel forward, grabbing his neck, and he reaches for his gun. I grab his arm, holding it down while he sets off gunshot after gunshot. He shoves me off of him but I run forward, nailing us both to the ground. He hits the back of his elbow into my nose and it burns like hell, blood gushing down my face.

We swing at each other, each of us connecting hits, then another gunshot rounds off, hitting my ear. My ears ring and Todd laughs, his teeth like fangs, but I don't hear anything. I *need* to kill him. I need to stop him before he hurts Reggie.

"Took you long enough," Todd says as my ears finally clear up. He pulls back the hammer again but I smack the gun from his grip. "Cut out the middleman. Run the business myself," he laughs. "Blame the blackmail on Reggie. The finger was hard to find, but not impossible with the Dark Web."

And the rest was so easy. Cutting her tires. Planting the digital camera. Once I got you to kill her, the cops would've caught you for her murder. They would've thought they caught the real criminal," he chuckles, but then his face contorts with irritation. "But then you had to kill Braden before he taught me how to grow the mushrooms. You fucking idiot."

I grapple forward, and we roll on the ground. Todd gets on top of me, holding my neck as I hold his, both of us trying to crush each other's windpipes. But I'm on the ground, so he's got the advantage. All I can hope is to outlast him. That I can survive a little while longer and kill him before he kills me. That if I die, Reggie will know that it was Todd. That she'll stay away from him before he fucks her over too.

Todd's teeth peel back as he squeezes harder. Blood puffs in my cheeks, and Todd's face purples too.

"It's over," he wheezes out.

And I know it's true.

But then a gunshot echoes through the fields, and the side of Todd's head disappears, brain splattering over my face. His body collapses on top of me, and I knock him off, barreling my fists, ready to fight whatever just killed him.

But then I see who it is. I drop my defenses.

Reggie stands across from me, holding my gun. A plume of smoke rises from the barrel. Shock and relief simmer in her eyes, her mouth open in a wide circle.

CHAPTER 27

REGGIE

A DRUM BEATS IN MY CHEST, MY HEART OUT OF CONTROL AS THE GUN SHAKES in my hand. I squeeze the weapon tighter. Duane's eyes widen.

"Reggie," he says, his voice soft, as if he's surprised that I'm here.

"Duane," I whisper back, my voice full of tears. He comes forward and I hand him the gun and he holsters it quickly, then wraps his arms around me like a blanket. The tears come rushing down, and I don't know why I'm crying. But I can't make it stop.

Duane holds me close, and for a while, we stand in the darkness, neither of us saying a word. Relief floods through me, heavy like chains. I shouldn't be relieved. I shouldn't be grateful that Duane is alive.

But I am.

Duane puts a finger under my chin, lifting my eyes to meet his.

"Why did you come back?" he asks. His voice is so different from before. It's like he's not quite sure how to process everything that's happened, and to be honest, I don't either.

"Because you're mine," I say. It's the only thing that comes to my head. "Because I knew something wasn't right. Because I had to make sure you were okay."

"All that matters is you," he says, anger and defeat warring under the surface.

I reach up, cupping his chin. Blood crusts his lips, purple in the moonlight, and his stubble is caked with blood too. A gentle tug pulls at my heart. Duane may not say it aloud, but I know he didn't want me to come back, because that means I risked my life for him.

But it's worth it.

“I know we both agreed that love is stupid. That sex is the only things we’re supposed to want, but I—” I shake my head, my lips quaking again. “But I can’t help it. I want to be with you. I want to hold you. I want to do everything with you—”

His lips smash against mine, our teeth crashing in a harsh collision, and my chest seizes with a bolt of heat. I close my eyes, losing myself in his touch. With him, it’s like everything inside of me is chaotic and unleashed, the danger and the instinct to run twisting inside of me. But now, I realize *why* I want to run. I want to run *with* him. I want to run away *together*. To find our own world where our love, as fucked up as it may be, makes sense. And if that place doesn’t exist, then I don’t care. I just want to be with Duane.

He pulls back from our kiss and glares down at me with a distant look in his eyes.

“I should beat your ass for risking your life like that,” he says.

I roll my eyes. “You find any excuse to do that—”

“Thank you,” he says.

My jaw drops. Duane is thanking me?

“I don’t deserve you,” he says quietly. “Not for a million years.”

My eyes fill up with tears again and I shove him in the chest.

“Shut up,” I whisper. “You’re just saying that.”

“I love you more than anything in this world,” he says.

When I look into his blue eyes, I know he means it. We should’ve killed each other so many times, but with us, love wins over logic. Love is worth more than any amount of mushrooms. It’s worth more than a chase through the cornfields. It’s worth more than breaking the walls of a glory hole.

“I love you,” I say. Then I laugh, because for once, it’s simple. We’re here. We’re choosing each other over money. Over drugs. Over everything.

And that gets a smile out of Duane too.

“What do we do now?” I ask. I huff through my nose. “People will notice Todd is gone. He owns a strip club, and who the hell knows how many other places. And with Braden—”

“We’ll take care of it,” Duane says.

Those words stop me. It’s not him, or me, but *we* this time, and it makes all the difference. Problems and all, we’re in this together.

And I wouldn’t change a thing.

“So, what do we do first?” I ask.

“Take care of the loose ends,” Duane says, gesturing at Todd’s corpse.

It takes a few hours—concealing the body in the barn for now, then cleaning the front yard, making sure Todd’s flesh is cleaned up. But eventually, we finish, and Duane suggests burying the body in the fields with the others, but I think of the Mortician.

“Do you know where he worked?” I ask. Duane nods. Luckily, he still had the Mortician’s belongings, so we take Todd’s body to the cremation chamber, using the Mortician’s keys for access. After that, we head back to the farm.

Morning comes. Soreness wracks my body like I’ve danced a triple shift. I sit in the passenger seat of Duane’s truck while he holds my knee, a reminder that he owns me. A sign that he doesn’t want to let me go.

I put my head on his shoulder. The yellow lines on the road disappear under the truck.

“It wasn’t a Halloween prop, was it?” I ask.

“Not even close,” he says bluntly.

I pretend to glare at him. “You *lied* to me.”

“That’s why you’re mad? Not the dead body?” he laughs. Then he adjusts his grip on the steering wheel. “Here’s your honest answer, Hitch. I’m a killer, and you can’t take the bloodlust out of a killer without murdering him. So if you want me to stop, you know what to do.”

The gravity of his honesty settles on my chest, but it doesn’t scare me anymore. Instead, it comforts me, knowing that Duane always keeps me safe.

And now, I’m okay with the murder, I guess, because I know I’ll always keep him safe too.

“We can’t stay in California,” I say. “Someone will figure it out.”

“Then we’ll sell,” Duane says, keeping his eyes on the road. “Make a pretty penny. Buy your mom a place somewhere real quiet. Find a place nearby.” He shrugs. “You’re the real estate agent. You make it happen.”

My heart swells with warmth. “I haven’t even taken the courses or the exam,” I mutter, bumping my shoulder into his.

“Then take it, Hitch,” he says. “Take it all. The world is yours now.”

I place my hand on top of his and squeeze his fingers.

“Ours,” I say.

EPILOGUE

DUANE

a year and some months later

AND THERE SHE IS, ON THE SIDE OF THE ROAD AGAIN. LIKE AN INSECT buzzing in the early evening light. A sexy little thing that could make any man drop dead in their tracks. A woman who killed for me.

Now, that woman makes more money than I do lately, and yet she refuses to get a new car. Swears by her trusty little thing, even when it breaks down each week like it's barely hanging on.

But it's not an accident. I know how to arrange a situation like this to my advantage. Anything to give me a good excuse to pick up the little hitchhiker.

"Where you heading?" I ask.

She gives me a sideways glance, rolling her eyes in a way that makes me want to bend her over the truck's hood and fuck her until she can't see straight.

"Courthouse," she answers.

"You going up for trial?" I tease. "Must be locking you up. A woman like you is always looking for trouble in the wrong places."

"The only way I'll ever be locked up is with you," she smirks. And I can't help it then; I grin like a damn fool. We're on the way to the courthouse to make it official. Us, getting married, like some stupid couple in love.

These days, we don't live in California. We live in a small town in Iowa, where Reggie found a plot of land for a steal of a price. We bought it right away, as well as a house down the road for her mother, and though her mother wasn't too keen on moving until the school year was over, she eventually did, seeing as she couldn't bear to be that far away from her only

daughter.

The two of them have taught me something. Sometimes, family sticks with each other. I respect them both, for that especially. And hell, I'm a lucky bastard. They're my family now.

Reggie's got her real estate license and sells for all the local folk. In a small town like this, everyone knows everyone, and it didn't take long for Reggie's name to get out there. She's in the spotlight these days, which is why the clerk agreed to stay open late for us, so that we could get officially married on the same exact day that I picked Reggie up for the first time on the side of the road.

Love isn't real, sure. But we're getting married anyway.

In the meantime, I run a small soybean farm. It's enough to make a living and keep me occupied. Maybe one day I'll get back to the mushrooms, but for now, I'm good with where we are. The itch for blood comes over me every now and then, and I find ways to curb the craving. Just like in Florida and California, if you bury the bodies underneath the crops, with enough animal flesh to cover up the scent, no one looks twice. There's no reason to. Especially when you're more careful about choosing your victims.

In the passenger seat, Reggie's wearing a white tank top and white cut-off jeans, and she's so damn cute like that, my sexy little bride. I'm in flannel, but with black jeans this time, and it's about dressed up as we care to get.

"You look good," she says to me. I chuckle, because we both know she looks better. Always has, and always will. A game I'm happy to lose.

It's a legal ceremony, and we didn't even invite her mother—it's just a regular witness, the clerk, and us. There's no confession of love or anything like that. We both know we've killed for each other, and we'd do it again. Which isn't something you can say in front of a government official.

Still, I beam at my wife. She blushes back at me, and I ache for her all over again.

"All right. Sign here," the clerk says. And we both do. "You are officially married. Congratulations! You may kiss the bride!"

I pick my woman up in my arms and the world is a bit lighter than it was before. It's all legal jargon anyway, but it means something to Reggie, and if it means something to her, then it means something to me too.

I kiss her slow and deep, and I don't stop until the clerk clears her throat. As I pull back and break the kiss, there's a twinkle in Reggie's eyes that makes my head spin.

“How are you two celebrating?” the clerk asks.

“I don’t know,” Reggie says. “Duane’s surprising me.”

“It’s a secret,” I say, winking at the clerk.

The clerk walks us to the door, locking us out of the courthouse, and Reggie taps my arm.

“When are you going to tell me?” she asks.

“You never did learn patience, did you, Hitch?” I ask.

Then we drive back down the dark road together as husband and wife. A few weeks ago, Reggie hinted at wanting to be used by two men again, and I’ve got an out-of-town acquaintance meeting us at the farm, a man who will help me use Reggie just the way she likes. Reggie likes to reassure me that she doesn’t need another dick, and I make sure to keep her pussy sore and raw from all the fucking we do. But still, I want my girl to get everything she desires. And if she wants to be shared, then I’ll share her.

Sooner or later, once Reggie’s lost her interest in the bastard, I’ll put his ass in the ground. She gets used by multiple men, and I get to see that pretty little smile on her face, knowing that she’s satisfied.

It’s how we both get our needs met, and I don’t mind it one bit.

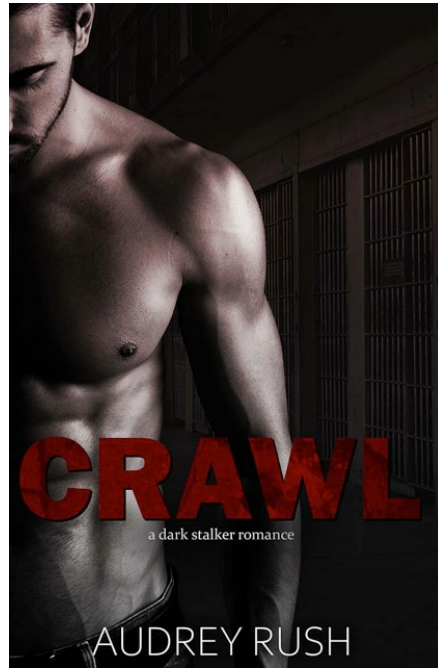
THE END

Thank you for reading *Hitch*. I hope you enjoyed it! Please consider sending your feedback straight to me at audreyrushbooks@gmail.com or leaving an honest review online. I love hearing from you!

If you enjoy Facebook groups, check out mine at bit.ly/rushreaders for the latest news, cover model polls, and fun discussions. I also post on [TikTok](#) daily. Let's be reading buddies!

For now, check out my other books!

If you've got a craving for a psychopathic serial killer who obsesses over a vicious antiheroine, then check out *Crawl: A Dark Stalker Romance*.



There is no right or wrong, *only her*.

When I first see Remedy, I know she's mine. I stalk her for months, learning her desires and secrets, until I know exactly what she craves.

She needs pleasure ripped from her soul like it doesn't belong to her anymore.

The only way to get my mind off of her is to take another life, and yet I know she's taking my life, one breath at a time.

But I don't care.

I'm going to give Remedy exactly what she needs, and I'll kill anyone who gets in my way.

One day, Remedy will crawl, offering everything to me, even her life.

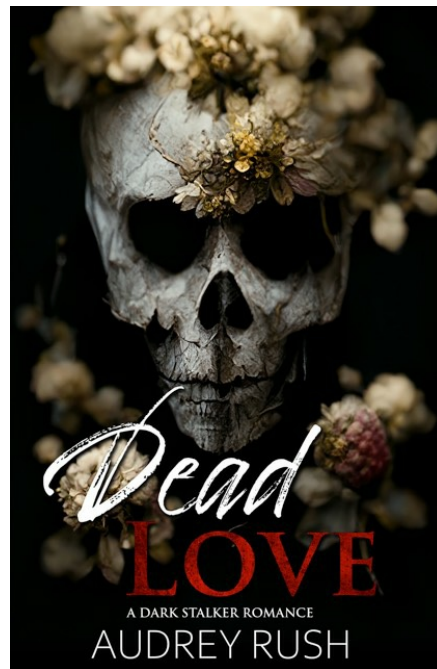
But my biggest mistake will be offering her my love.

Because if this is love, it will kill us.

Author's Note: *Crawl* is a dark romance. It contains disturbing content and irredeemable characters. Reader discretion is advised.

[Click here to learn more now!](#)

If you like captivity romances with sadistic antiheroes, innocent heroines, and spooky vibes, then check out *Dead Love*, a standalone dark stalker romance.



She embodied perfection.

Innocent. Sheltered. Untouched.

Even as she stared out from her protective cage, my little flower secretly begged to be conquered.

But the only way to conquer an object *that* sacred, is to ruin every part of it.

So I ripped her from her stem. Plucked off every petal.

Destroyed her home and plunged her deep into mine.

And when her mother begged for her daughter back,

I took her daughter's innocence instead.

Author's Note: This book was previously titled *The Art of Ruin Duet* and contains both books; *Cruelty & Fire* and *Innocence & Ashes*. Furthermore, this book follows the romance between a gravedigging stalker and an innocent heroine. It contains disturbing content. Reader discretion is advised.

[Click here to learn more now!](#)

Craving more of those farm vibes? If you like broken antiheroes who like to physically and sexually torture their heroines, then check out the first book in *The Feldman Brothers Duet, His Brutal Game*. (Don't worry; ranching isn't his *only* job...)



A bride sold to a brutal husband.

The arrangement was simple:

Marry Wilder Feldman. In return, I'll escape my nightmare.

Wilder is one of the heirs to a wealthy and secretive family business.

But he's cold. Rough. Ruthless. And now, he's drowning me in his darkness.

I'm trapped in his game, destined to lose.

But I don't play by his rules. Discovering his family's secrets will give me the upper hand, and eventually, my freedom.

Yet the deeper I go, the harder it is to find the light. I should run away; my

life depends on it. But I find myself craving his callous desires, his brutal affection.

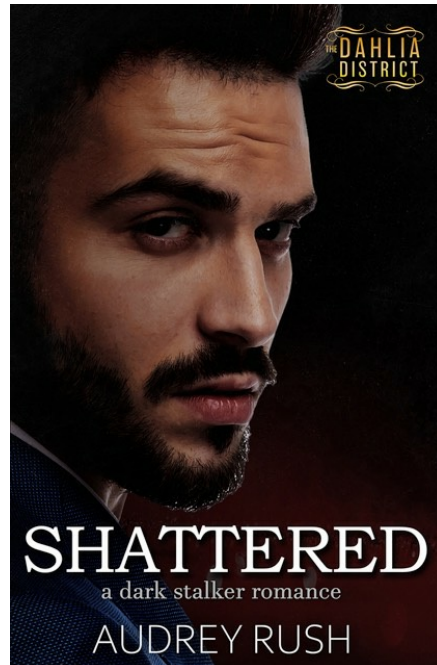
There's no mistaking it: my husband is a monster.

But maybe I am too.

Author's Note: *His Brutal Game* is the first standalone novel in *The Feldman Brothers Duet*. It contains extremely dark and violent content.

[Click here to learn more now!](#)

If you enjoy emotionless serial killers, angry heroines, and boundary-pushing breath play scenes, check out the second standalone novel in The Dahlia District Series, *Shattered: A Dark Stalker Romance*.



My little lamb knows she's being hunted.

I've been analyzing Melissa. Studying her. Obsessing over her every move.
She framed me for a murder that, for once, I didn't commit; *she did*.
Melissa was simply defending her friend, but that doesn't matter.
I hunt abusive monsters, those who think they're untouchable.
Who would I be if I don't teach Melissa exactly why I punish?
I'll return the favor, pinning all of my murders on her, or I'll kill her.

But she is such a curious little creature.
She stares into my mask, but she doesn't see danger: she sees freedom.
We both understand primal lust for what it truly is.

But my love is brutal. I control. I take. I'll force her into submission.
Melissa will learn that desire wins over life every time.

Author's Note: *Shattered* is a full-length standalone book in the dark romance series, *The Dahlia District*. It is a dominant villain and submissive anti-heroine romance, and contains dark and edgy content. Reader discretion is advised.

[Click here to learn more now!](#)

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BY AUDREY RUSH

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Standalone

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[*Violent Truth*](#) (November 2022)

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Ravaged

Devoured

The Afterglow Series

His Toy

His Pet

His Pain

Billionaire

The Dreams of Glass Trilogy

Yield to Me

Surrender to Me

Love Me

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to my husband, Kai, for being the inspiration for this story. Your cuddles and dirty talk are a dream come true. Seriously, man. I am one lucky chunka-poop. And on top of that, you designed this gorgeous cover? I'm so freaking lucky!

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Thank you to my ARC readers for your honest reviews; you have no idea how much you help a book launch. All of your feedback, insight, and social media posts mean so much to me! I love getting to know you, and always learn from you. And a special thanks to Aria Kayy, Brittany, Brooke, Crazy Book Lover, Dominique Barker, Elizabeth Slamick, Erin, Jackie Moore Kranz, Jacqueline Davis, Kate Johnson, Katelin, Kelani, Meagan, Nicky, Olivia Rose, Taylor Sims, and Victoria Lynch for catching typos and suggesting edits! Your keen eyes are amazing!

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But most of all, thank you to my readers. You are the reason I love to turn my daydreams into stories. I would love to hear from you! Feel free to email me directly at audreyrushbooks@gmail.com with your feedback.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Audrey Rush writes dark and kinky romances featuring brutal antiheroes and badass heroines. She currently lives in Florida with her husband and daughter. She writes during preschool.

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