

I'M STALKING HER FOR HER OWN GOOD

I WILL SAVE YOU



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MELI RAINÉ

I WILL SAVE YOU

BLOODLINE

BOOK 2

MELI RAINÉ

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I WILL SAVE YOU

I killed her bodyguards to save her. Kidnapped her. Made her flee everything she knows. Told her that her entire life is a lie.

And now she hates me. Fears me. Loathes me.

Good.

I'll do anything for her. *Anything*. Even if she doesn't understand.

An unknown stakeholder sent a ruthless, infamous torturer to get to her before I did, which means she isn't just a product to be auctioned off to the highest billionaire bidder.

She's worth more dead than alive to someone. A rogue element. An agent of chaos.

And I have to save her from forces of evil she cannot comprehend.

When orders come through to bring her into the belly of the beast, deliver her to the auction, hand her off untouched and unscathed, I have no choice.

I have to save her by hurting her.

But most of all, I have to save her from *me*.

I Will Save You is the second book in *USA Today* bestselling author Meli Raine's new Bloodline romantic suspense series, a woman-in-peril psychological thriller story with an unreliable

narrator, double-crosses galore, questionable bodyguards, a very public auction, scheming billionaires, shadow government agencies, a hero with a secret goal, and a heroine who is stronger than she thinks.

Featuring a world of corrupt networks where money talks and the dead tell no lies, the new Bloodline series will keep you in taut suspense on the edge of your seat.

But most of all, every twist and turn leaves you wondering who to trust.

Full disclosure: *I Will Save You* ends on a cliffhanger. Don't hate the author. She's just doing her job. ;)

Read all three books in this trilogy:

I Will Find You (Bloodline series, Book 1)

I Will Save You (Bloodline series, Book 2)

I Will Earn You (Bloodline series, Book 3)

CHAPTER ONE

PAIGELYNN

My eyes slowly follow the thickening line of blood flowing from Jason's prone body.

This isn't happening.

This isn't real.

None of this is my life.

No.

Just... *no*.

Cam didn't just show us the crown tattoo, the symbol of authority, the divine sign of being king, then murder my bodyguards in cold blood.

Impossible.

This is all a dream. A nightmare. My *worst* nightmare. It can't be real because if this is reality, I would rather be dead.

Shaking, I look at the ground, my knees aching from pressing into the tile, trying to remember to move my lungs, trying to take it all in.

Trying to disappear.

The only sound I hear is my ragged breath. It goes in and out of my lungs, a wheezing sound of panic. Winnie's collar jingles and my hand, independent of my brain, reaches for her.

Don't shoot my dog, I think to myself.

Then I look up.

Up into eyes that blaze for me.

Because I see three eyes. Cam's intense orbs, and the eye of steel.

I can feel the gun's heat.

But Cam's is even hotter.

"Don't even think about it, Princess," he snaps.

I hold Winnie, who begins to whine, but if I let her go he'll kill her. Then he'll kill me.

What have I done?

What have I done?

It's my fault that Jason and Malcolm are dead, their bodies slumped against each other, legs at crooked angles so unnatural the pain would be unbearable if they were alive. They are so still.

Too still.

How can they be dead?

It's all because of me.

Me. This is all my fault.

They died protecting me from... my king?

The scent of hot blood fills my nose, and I stare at Cam, blinking, pushing the scent away.

"Where is it?" he asks, this time with less confidence.

I cannot speak.

How can I say a word? All of who I am is focused on taking in a breath.

Letting one out.

Doing it again.

With the gun still pointed straight at my forehead, Cam crouches, forcing eye contact again. "Where is your weapon?"

Your little act won't work," he says, but he tilts my head as he does it, then reaches to touch my knee.

I'm pathetic.

I am sick.

I am going to hell.

Because I just lured him into my house and enabled him to kill the people closest to me, but when he touches me, my body lights up. Need rushes through me when our skin connects.

I am so depraved.

And yet I cannot help myself.

"Act?" I finally choke out, hating the fire that races through my blood, despising how his proximity makes me tingle everywhere.

"You have a weapon?" he asks.

"Why would I have a weapon?" I reply, unable to think about how to answer his strange questions.

"To kill me."

That answer makes no sense.

"Why did you – who *are* you?" I choke out, turning away from the dead men, my heart screaming, *Jason! He killed Jason!*

"You know who I am, Princess." He taps his tattoo area with his free hand. The movement forces my eyes to the spot just below his waist.

He is hard. Very hard, the erection outline so stark. My blood rushes faster, a spot between my legs pulsing, a shameful feeling that fills me with unexpected glee.

I am a crime against humanity.

"You cannot be my king. You just killed your subjects," I say, my breath coming back to me, wits slowly filling my head. Saliva in my throat feels like poison as I swallow. "A good king would never do that."

“I killed people who betrayed you.”

“Jason would never betray me!”

“He was about to hand you off to that monster in the van.”

“How do I know *you’re* not the monster!?”

Slowly, aching slowly, he smiles, the skin at the corner of his mouth rising like a wave. My blood pounds through my body like it wants to hurt me. My ears ring with the sound of the gunshots that ended my bodyguards’ lives. I’m at his mercy, my life in his hands, and he’s smiling at me.

Smiling like *that*.

Like he’s as sick as I am.

And Goddess help me, I want to smile back.

“If I were the monster, Paigelynn,” he says in a low register, dropping his voice, leaning closer to me as if he were about to give me a kiss on the mouth.

And not a bullet to the head.

“If I were the monster,” he repeats, “you’d be dead by now.”

“Then kill me.”

The flinch surprises me.

His eyes narrow. “Why would *I* kill *you*? Unless you plan to try to kill *me*.”

“Why would I try to kill you? You say you’re my husband and my king, but you’re treating me like an enemy!”

“No.”

I look at him, so confused.

“I am *evaluating* you to see if you’re an enemy. If I were treating you like an enemy, your blood would be pooling on the floor with theirs.”

“You killed those men in the van!”

“I killed *one* of those men in the van. The big one. He was the one they sent to torture you. The Basher plays with his

food.”

“What does food have to do with anything?”

The laugh is unexpected. It’s genuine and loose, like I’ve said something so surprising he can’t continue to be harsh. Dark waves fall over his brow, and he looks so casual, so amused.

So incredibly attractive.

“Oh, you sweet summer child. They kept you so naive, didn’t they?”

“I am not naive! I am your *queen!*”

Because he’s talking to and not shooting at me, my body starts to relax slightly, heart returning to its place in my chest, leaving my throat, resting somewhere under my collarbone.

“You think you’re a queen,” he says softly. “Right.”

“I *am* a queen! And you — unless that tattoo is a fake — you really are my husband and king.”

He goes still.

I’ve said something wrong. Deeply wrong. But *what?*

“Stand up.”

I do as told, holding Winnie in my arms.

“Put her down.”

“No!”

“Put. Her. Down,” he says forcefully.

Bitter, acrid tears fill my throat. “Don’t kill her.”

“Why would I kill a dog?”

“You killed Jason and Malcolm!”

“They were a threat to you. Winnie is a source of love. I would never take away a source of love and joy for you, Paigelynn.” Tenderness fills his voice, sudden and strange.

I want more of it. What do I need to say to get more of that tone from Cam?

“Jason was a father to me.”

“Jason was *paid* to be *like* a father to you. Don’t you dare forget it.”

“Paid? Yes, of course. In the real world, our members must have money to survive. But he was a believer!”

“He was. And now he’s dead because those beliefs were about to lead to you being handed off to The Basher.”

“Who is this Basher? You could be lying to me.”

“Everyone lies to you except *me*, Princess.” Gently, he reaches for Winnie, putting her on the ground. Then he touches my waist.

I step back. My heart is playing drums on my ribs. My stomach tightens.

My thighs tingle.

“Arms out.”

“What?”

He raises his own arms, turning his body into a T. “Arms out. Like this.”

“Why?”

“I need to search you.”

“Search me? For what?”

“Weapons.”

“Weapons? I told you I don’t have weapons!”

“We’ll see about that.”

And then his hands, those big, strong, flat palms, are on my ribs, fingertips grazing my breasts, and I gasp.

Need rises up in me, more of that sickening need, as he touches me, those warm hands sliding down to my waist, back up to my armpits, sliding along the skin of my arms like he’s smoothing out all my imperfections. When he glides down my back, he pats my ass, fingers roaming, enjoying himself.

“Finding what you’re looking for?”

He chuckles.

As I tingle all over, wet heat forming between my legs, I turn away from the corpses right there, wondering how I can be aroused by Cam after what he's done. Is he right? Did Jason and Malcolm betray me? If so, I should be deeply grateful to Cam for finding me and saving me.

But who do I trust? Jason, the man who was so paternal for so long? So many years?

Or Cam, my king. My savior. My –

Future executioner?

“Did you really have to kill Jason?” I ask, my throat going tight as Winnie wanders into the living room, studiously avoiding the pool of blood.

“Do you know what The Basher does to women he's told to target?”

“I don't even know who The Basher is.”

Cam sighs, his hot breath tickling the back of my neck as he runs his fingers through my hair, tips digging into my hairline, making nerves ripple along my scalp. Under any other circumstance, this would be divine.

Right now, though, it's becoming impossible for me to control my body as my legs begin shaking, mind screaming, a black curtain coming into the outer edges of my vision, sliding slowly toward my nose.

“The Basher is – ”

My legs buckle.

CHAPTER TWO

Cam

Catching her is easy.

Making sure she's not faking me out to get the advantage is hard.

Treating her like this would be so much easier if I weren't so fucking attracted to her. If I didn't want her to be truly innocent. If they haven't trained her to eliminate me.

When your entire life is one of double- and triple-crosses, you really can't know.

Ever.

But I don't think she's faking. Fainting like this looks damn real as she melts into my arms. Her face goes slack, eyelids fluttering, muscles loose, and bones liquid. That flaxen hair spreads across her cheekbones like a sheer fan.

She's dead weight.

A breeze blasts the sheer window curtains on the other side of the foyer, gently lifting a stray lock of hair on her cheek. Winnie whines again and comes over to her, nose nudging Paigelynn's foot.

This could go either way.

She could be skillfully trained and buying time to get her hands on a gun and kill me, or she could be so naive and brainwashed that she truly thinks Jason and Malcolm gave a shit about her. The fact that they didn't blink when I pretended

to be Simon makes me realize how close we were to Paigelynn being kidnapped.

Tortured.

Devoured.

The Basher had plenty of Hannibal Lecter in him.

The thought makes my stomach turn.

Men like her bodyguards have strict protocols for checking in, which means I have a limited amount of time to get her the hell out of here before I trade one mess for another.

I set her down gently on the floor rug and search the bodyguards, finding two additional weapons, tucking them in my waistband. They know what my car looks like and probably called me in already to some higher-up, so for as much as I don't want to do it, I need to take the van.

The van with two dead bodies in it.

Carrying Paigelynn outside will only arouse suspicion.

Gently, I stroke her cheek until she jolts, shudders, and her eyes open, clouded with confusion.

“Cam?” The second her confusion clears, she skitters away from me, on her knees, hands up.

I stand.

She looks great on her knees. My dick twitches in my pants.

But I could do without the screaming.

“Shhhh,” I say, forcing my heart to be a cold, dead rock in my chest. “Stop it.”

A whimper comes out of her instead, her hands moving to secure Winnie, who calms instantly as Paigelynn caresses her.

“P-p-please, Cam, what are you doing?”

“Show me your gun.”

“You searched me!”

“Doesn’t mean you won’t go for a weapon the second I relax. Tell me the truth.”

“I am! If I had one, I’d have told you. Oh my God, you killed Jason. *Jason!* Jason,” she babbles, her lower lip quivering, her head swiveling as she looks at the dead men, then away, looks again, then away.

“They were about to hand you off to that guy in the van.”

“You keep saying that, but how can I trust you?”

“You don’t have a choice, Paigelynn.”

“The Mother was right. She was *right*. All men except for my future husband are sick with need and will corrupt me. Ruin me. Defile me. I should never have trusted you. Please. Go ahead,” she says, looking up at me suddenly.

“Go ahead and what?”

In a stunningly, achingly beautiful display of grace, Paigelynn spreads her arms, arching her back as she rests on her knees in submissive style. Her pert breasts beg to be touched. She shoos Winnie to run away. The little Chihuahua stops at Jason’s dead hand and begins licking it, whimpering.

Paigelynn’s gaze narrows, eyes full of steel will.

“Kill me. Kill me now.”

My heart starts banging on my ribs like it’s screaming at me to stop.

“I already told you. I don’t want to kill you. I will if you try to kill me.”

“Why would *I* try to kill *you*?”

“Because as you said, you are the queen. The Prophecy above all, my queen. Right?”

“How can you say that while killing my followers?”

“They were never, *ever* your true followers. They were like Rudy.”

She stiffens at the mention of his name. Aha. Finally.

I’ve hit a nerve.

“Rudy betrayed the Prophecy,” she says in a small voice, the bridge of her nose scrunching up.

“So did Jason and Malcolm.”

Uncertain, she looks at them, then away.

“Paigelynn,” I say, voice rough on purpose, in her face and confrontational. “You’re going to end up dead if you don’t come with me.”

“I’m afraid I’ll be dead if I do.”

“Then pick, damn it.” I grab her arm, forcing her to her feet. “You have three seconds.”

“I can’t! You — you pick for me!”

“Why didn’t you say so in the first place?” Bending, I grab Winnie and steer Paigelynn to the main door, looking out the narrow windows on either side. “Here’s the deal. We need to get to the van.”

A phone on one of the men starts buzzing. Taking a chance, I release her arm, shove Winnie into her hands, and search Jason, finding the phone. Pocketing it, I hope it comes in handy later.

Then I realize they can track location with it. Fuck.

The preview on the locked screen says: Twenty-three minutes ETA...

Jason’s hand is close, and a fingerprint lock is on the screen. I shove the phone down to his unbloodied hand and use it to unlock.

Someone named Josepha.

Twenty-three minutes ETA. Do not engage. Repeat: he’s a special case. Do not engage.

Too late, motherfuckers.

If I take the phone with me, they can use it to find us. The only workaround is to cut Jason’s finger off and bring it with us to unlock the device, but then I remember you need an

electrical circuit for it to work. I got lucky — Jason's freshly dead, so there's still enough electricity in him.

But it's too risky to bring the phone with us.

Scrolling, I look through his messages to see what else I might glean. Nothing's in here that I can't hack my way into with the right equipment. Going minimalist is key because I need to hide Paigelynn far away from prying eyes. This rescue went sideways, but I can redeem it.

Redeem myself.

I will save her.

I will save her if it's the last thing I do.

I toss the phone over the bodies and let it skitter into the wall.

This entire time, she's stood there, watching me, transfixed. My worry that she's a flight risk, or worse — a trained operative — diminishes with every second. In fact, a particular kind of rage begins to rise in me.

The rage of a man watching a completely helpless creature be unable to defend herself because others chose to keep her helpless.

My God.

They could have trained her to be so much more. Smart, blessed with a strong body, and sharp in her own way, Paigelynn has so much potential. Instead, they turned her into a handmaid, exactly the way they wanted her. Nothing but a piece of meat.

Pretty meat, for sure. Supple and divine, she is as gorgeous as a breath of fresh air, with a body that makes me long to do unspeakable things with her, to make her cry out with joy and hunger, to conquer and share.

But that was so... little.

The powers that be do not impress me. Disappointed, I find myself yet again shaking my head at their incompetence. Such small thinkers. So limited in their understanding of how

complex people can be. How they treat Paigelynn is a reflection of their small minds.

Why choose to have so little when they could have extracted so much more value from this creature?

I won't make that mistake.

"Nineteen minutes," I mutter, walking to her. "Here's what we're doing next," I add as I reach for her arm. She's trembling, eyes focused on me, her earlier shock washed away. Now the woman staring at me is looking for orders. Direction. Purpose.

To know what is coming.

"We're leaving," I say. "In the van."

"But the dead—"

"I know. Basher and the dog trainer are in there. Can't help it. We'll ditch the van as soon as possible."

"I—"

Reaching into my pocket, I pull out my pen knife.

"But first, we have to take care of the microchip."

"The micro—"

I feel along her arm, just above the elbow.

"Wrong arm," she says in a tone of sick wonder.

Correcting course, I palpate. "Tell me where so I cut as little as possible."

"You're serious? You're going to cut my microchip out?"

"Of course."

"I—"

"Is that the only one? Did they insert others into you?"

"I don't know." She starts to tremble involuntarily.

"We'll get rid of this one and hope for the best." I feel a tiny bump, the kind of small imperfection you'd normally

dismiss as a scar, but when I poke her skin with the tip of the knife, blood pools and the edge emerges easily.

“Ngg,” she says through gritted teeth, but I give her credit. She’s not fighting me.

I extract the chip and leave it on Jason’s shoulder. Paigelynn presses her finger against the small cut, applying pressure, then looks at me with contempt.

I fold the knife and slip it in my back pocket. “Good. Now we can leave.”

“Where are we going?”

“Far away.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“I don’t owe you one, Princess.”

And with that, I open the front door, guiding her out quickly, shutting the past behind us with the click of the lock.

Fresh air never smelled so good.

“Breathe in fast while you can,” I tell her in a low voice as we walk toward the murdermobile. “It’s going to stink for a while.”

Her sound of disgust makes me respect her more.

Fortunately, the van is unlocked, bodies in the back so the front and passenger seats are clear as we climb in. Winnie immediately turns her head toward the bodies, canine nose heading her off. The keys aren’t in the ignition, so I have to squeeze into the back and find poor Simon, my hand sliding under slabs of meat that are turning cold before finding the right lump of metal.

The second I turn the key in the ignition, I unroll the windows, Winnie sticking her nose out to grab clean air.

“You and me both, doggo,” I say as Paigelynn frowns. “You and me both.”

With a jerk, the van lurches forward as I hit the accelerator. The movement forces Paigelynn to turn in her seat toward me,

her neck twisted back.

“Oh!” she gasps. “I can’t – I can’t do this!”

“We’re doing it, Princess.”

“Swear to me. Swear to me, Cam,” she says fiercely. “Swear you’re really my king.”

“I am really your king.”

“That’s what a bad man would say.”

“That’s right.”

“You are not helping!”

“I’m rescuing you, Paigelynn. I put my life on the line for you. I killed three people who were prepared to hurt you or let you be hurt. I’m on the run, under an assumed identity, and I have no idea how to get out of this mess the people behind your training have created.”

“My training?”

“Yes.”

“You’re my king.”

A sharp right makes the van lean a bit, the thump of bodies against the van sides making a sickening sound. Slick and viscous, blood provides a morbid lubricant.

“I am your king. But the people who have kept you captive and taught you for all these years weren’t always honest.”

She inhales with a shocked sound. “Like Rudy?”

“Yes.”

“You mean there are others?”

“Of course.”

“This – this Basher man?”

“He’s just a hired goon.”

“Goon?”

“Bad man.”

“Oh.” As the conversation continues, Paigelynn shifts in her seat, body language changing as she becomes more immersed in the topic. “How do I know who is bad and who is good?”

“That is a question we all ask ourselves.”

“Surely you know the answer if you are our king!”

I want to tell her to cut the crap. No one is this naive.

And yet she is.

My God, she really is.

“Paigelynn, do you remember the exact moment you realized Rudy was breaking the rules?”

She tenses. “Yes.”

“How did you feel?”

“Tingly and terrified.”

That’s not what I meant, but now I’m even more intrigued.

“Were you worried? Angry? Did you feel betrayed?”

“No.” She bites her lower lip and thinks.

We reach a stoplight, and I take a moment to tap out a request on my phone, knowing whatever I say will be done.

It better be.

The person on the other end will die if he doesn’t do it.

“Then what?”

“I felt sad for him.”

The light changes and I turn right, headed for an old state route that will take us east. Avoiding major highways will be critical for this trip.

Trip.

I’m taking her on a long journey, one she cannot fathom.

“Sad? Why would you feel sad for a man who betrayed you?”

“You say he betrayed me, Cam, but he betrayed the cause. Betrayed the prophecy. Betrayed humankind. He did not betray me because I am not just one person. I am the embodiment of all that is meant to be.”

The brainwashing really worked, huh?

“Of course,” I say, shining her on as we reach another long stretch of small ranch houses, then mini-malls. Sunbaked and beige as can be, the difference between the concrete and the dead-grass front yards is hard to spot. Overhead, a large jet takes off, but we’re not going to the airport.

Not this one, at least.

And no planes for a while.

My plan takes form, even as I pivot. The Basher was never part of my expectations, but nothing about this operation has gone according to any schematic I could have drawn up. Who sent The Basher? Why would anyone want her dead? And how did Jason and Malcolm not see this coming?

Someone’s gone rogue.

And the only way to out-rogue an agent of chaos is to cause even more mayhem.

A little shriek comes from her as I take a corner too hard.

“Where are we going?”

“Somewhere safe.”

“I – I left with nothing! Just Winnie.”

“I’ll take care of everything. Where we’re going, you’ll have everything you need.”

“You – you wear the tattoo. The mark. You speak of the prophecy. You tell me you’re my husband, and yet you seem so callous. So negative.”

“I am.”

“Why? We – we are meant to be together. You said so. The Mother said so. My training has been all about, well.. you.”

Those big, beautiful, trusting eyes look at me. I focus on the road, mind racing.

“I am but a few days away from fulfilling my destiny. Once we are together, everything changes.”

“Everything changed already, Princess.”

“What do you mean? I am so confused. No one prepared me for what just happened back there.”

“You and me both.”

“That does not help!” she says sharply. “Your sarcasm!”

“You’re *tone policing* me?”

“What does that mean?”

“You’re trying to tell me not to use a specific tone of voice.”

“I am trying to get you to tell me the truth!”

Laughter, bitter and caustic, pours out of me, the opposite of what she’s asking for. That’s because Paigelynn is driving a hard bargain, one I can’t negotiate or fulfill. Her truth isn’t my truth.

And my truth isn’t up for negotiation.

Every word out of my mouth has to be a lie because the lie is all I know.

It’s all she knows, too, but we’re living with very, very different lies, two worlds competing for one reality.

And only one of them will win.

CHAPTER THREE

PAIGELYNN

I have no choice.

He is my destiny, after all. Perhaps this is simply part of the Prophecy. The Mother warned me about the bad men who would try to ruin me. It's hard to imagine Jason and Malcom fall into that category, but Cam is telling me they do. That they failed to protect me from this Basher man.

Which makes them failures at their jobs.

Jobs that were missions for them.

My king, my husband, my savior is beside me, taking me to the next stage of my life.

The best part.

“The Mother,” I begin, but Cam interrupts.

“The Mother lied to you.”

“She – ” My brain hiccups, the image of her freezing in my mind. “You say that, but – how?”

“I will explain it all in good time.”

A buzz, the sound of a text, rips through the van, over and over. As I breathe in, the acrid scent of blood, like sour copper, makes my stomach twist. Hurrying, I crack the window.

“Can we, um – those men in the back?”

“We're only in this van for another hour or so.”

“An hour! Where are we going?”

“To a safe house for the night. Then we drive across the country.”

“Across the country! All the way?”

“Some of it.”

“Please tell me your plan.”

“It’s simple: keep us both alive.”

“Who is trying to kill us?”

“If I knew that, I’d put a stop to it.”

“So we just have to run?”

“Basically.”

“You are my husband. We fulfill the most important prophecy in the history of mankind, and you are on the run from people who think they are powerful enough to derail us? No! No, Cam, no!”

He laughs. The sound is mocking, instantly filling me with a burst of shame I despise.

“Good God, Paigelynn. I cannot believe the shit they filled your brain with.”

“Shit?”

“Loads of it. Truckloads.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’ve been brainwashed. For years. Since you were twelve.”

“Brainwashed?”

“Convinced to believe lies.”

“What lies?”

“Everything. Everything you believe is a lie. It’s not your fault. It just is.”

“You keep saying that, but you do not explain it!”

As I search his face, trying to understand, we stop at a light, a large mall to the right of us. There, I see a familiar face on a large billboard.

Makiah Rooney.

One of us.

One who protects me.

Many years ago, he performed an important ritual with my protectors, hands on us, the men brought into the fold. The Mother tells me often that Makiah is a pure man, with a heart and soul made for destiny. His belief in the Prophecy is unshakeable.

I trust him with my life.

Something on the dashboard lets out a *ding!* and Cam looks.

“Gas. Damn it.”

Meanwhile, his phone buzzes again.

“And you laugh whenever I talk about the Prophecy, as if you are mocking it. Mocking me.”

“Because it’s a lie.”

“How can it be a lie if you wear the mark? And you say you are my king?”

“I – Paigelynn, please,” he says, pulling over into a gas station. On rare occasions, I have been to one, but only with Rudy. The pungent scent of gasoline assaults my nose as he stops the van.

He leans over the console and stares at me, hard.

“Don’t get any ideas.”

“What ideas?” Heat radiates off him, hard and intense, and I want a kiss.

I also want to slap him.

How can I want both at the same time?

In my arms, Winnie begins to whine. I look out the window to see Cam at the pump, grumbling. His phone buzzes again and I reach for it, unable to unlock it but the preview of a text from someone named Debbie says:

I know you stole her.

Stole.

Stole.

Who is this Debbie and what does she mean, *stole*?

Is Cam a bad man? Is this Debbie trying to help me? Why would my own husband, my king, need to steal me?

A muffled buzz from the back of the van forces me to look at the bodies.

I need to know.

I need to know now whether Cam is lying to me.

A television screen above the gas pump comes to life, the video one of Makiah Rooney, smiling and graceful. His words flow about being redeemed and how the holiness of belief is far better than any experience on Earth. The Mother warned me that his church is truly about our prophecy, but that he uses the mainstream God to gain people's trust. They believe in a god who is far less powerful than the one we will usher in soon.

Rooney is a bridge. A liaison.

A powerful man of belief.

I look toward the gas station mini-mart and see Rooney's church behind it. If anyone knows about Cam's real motive, it is Rooney.

And yet Cam says The Mother lies to me. If she lies to me, then is Rooney part of the lie, too?

Liars lie, right? If Cam is a liar, then he would lie about the truth-tellers. Convincing me not to trust Jason, Malcolm, The Mother – that would be exactly what a bad man would do.

“I’m so confused, Winnie. Help me. Help me decide what to do.”

All she does is lick my nose.

Winnie is not a well-trained operative.

In an instant, a plan forms. Normally, my plans are tiny. Convince Rudy to let me get a candy bar. Ask Jason for permission to buy a new shirt.

Today my need to plan has changed radically. Planning involves my very survival. I cannot get this wrong.

Humanity needs me to survive.

My eye catches two white metal doors on the side of the gas station, one marked MEN, the other WOMEN. I could ask Cam for permission to use the bathroom. There must be a small window in there I can climb out of. Cam is smart. He would watch me too carefully. If he knows I am trying to escape, he might hurt me.

Or worse – I might hurt his feelings.

No, it won’t work to use the bathroom as an escape. Going inside the small gas station store and making a scene will only do more bad than good. There are bad men out here in the world. Someone will call the police if I ask for help.

And The Mother warned me that the police are the baddest men of all.

Tears fill my eyes as I look at Cam, who is staring at traffic with a bored look, eyes unfocused, face slack. Even when he looks like this, impenetrable and cold, I want him. Desperation tugs at my chest and the shame I feel, the rot I hate that destroys me from within, feels different this time.

I can choose differently.

I can shape my own fate.

A clicking sound at the pump makes me look at the display, the numbers underneath the video of Makiah Rooney slowing down. An impulse rips through me, as unable to resist as Cam.

Growling, Winnie's attention is focused on a small squirrel, the little beast next to the dumpster to the side of the mini-mart.

Just like that, I have a plan.

I hug Winnie. My lips go to her ear, and I whisper, "Sorry, girl. I'm *so* sorry. But I must do it this way. You understand."

Cam is bent over the pump, clicking the nozzle into place, his head dipped low enough that I barely see the top of his hair. I know from watching Rudy that you slip a credit card into a slot and enter some numbers on a keypad before filling the gas tank, but I don't know more than that.

All I do know is that my chance is now.

Carefully, hating myself, I set Winnie down. The second my hands release her body, she races across the parking lot toward the squirrel.

"NO! WINNIE!" I shriek, Cam's head popping up, giving me a look that tears me in two.

"What's wrong?"

"WINNIE!" I scream, racing after her, people looking at me as I run. My little doggie practically reads my mind as she goes straight for the dumpster, headed in the same direction I need to go.

To escape.

I'm using Winnie as a diversion so I can run. Relying on Cam's goodness as a dog owner not to hurt her after I'm gone is all I can do now.

I hear footsteps behind me, hard breathing, and I turn back to see Cam is on my heels. The squirrel runs off to the left, around the dumpster, Winnie barking and following. I pretend to lose my footing, and Cam runs past me, three men and a young teenage girl right behind him.

Go, my mind screams. *RUN!*

I pivot on my foot and leap up, racing as fast as I can around the back of the gas station, my chest as big as the

Grand Canyon, my mind a blur of running water. I am nothing but white water rapids, pushed by a force I cannot name as I run between cars, the parking lot as big as the ocean, a large picture of Makiah Rooney guiding me to him.

To his sanctuary.

To his peaceful presence.

Of all the people in the world, he will know what to do. He will tell me the truth. He will discern reality from trickery.

Honest men like him are so rare.

Devoted to the Prophecy, he serves me. Serves humanity. Serves *decency*.

Cam is indecent.

So am I.

If anyone can help me atone, it is Makiah Rooney.

I need to find a way to rid myself of all this impurity. He will know the way. He will help me find the light again.

He and he alone.

Blood pumps hard against my ears, my own breath a hushed sound in my head, my legs beginning to ache, lungs on fire, but I cannot stop running, moving between lines of cars. Cannot hesitate – not even for a second.

In the last hour, I lost two bodyguards. My dog. My faith in Cam.

My faith in myself.

So much of my training has been about preparing me to fight off dark forces that want me to transgress.

I have failed.

Jason and Malcolm are dead because of me. My body betrays me as I fight the urge to give in to Cam. The tattoo shows the true mark and he says all the right words, but how can he be my king? My husband? My destiny, when he tells me everyone I know and love is a liar?

A car honks, tires screeching, and far behind me, I hear a man's shout. Daring not to stop, I race through the rows of cars in the big parking lot, finally reaching concrete, the church doors large and scary.

Imposing.

I am unworthy.

I reach for the handle and ricochet back, shocked to find it locked.

Panic surges through me as I look back over my shoulder. Cam is at the edge of the gas station's lot, holding Winnie, surrounded by five people talking to him.

I hide behind a pillar, hoping he didn't see me.

And then I see the buzzer.

Moving carefully, I press it, the button glowing red as I do. My body fills with a tingly relief as I realize one of our symbols, an ancient rune, is sketched onto the button.

I am home.

I am safe.

I am free.

"Yes?" says a disembodied voice from a speaker above me.

"I – I am here to see Makiah Rooney."

"Pastor Rooney is a very busy man," the woman says back in a cold, tight voice. "He only meets people by appointment."

"This is an emergency," I say in a rush. Cam is gone from his spot, and I have minutes – if I'm lucky. My mind scrambles to find the right words. "Could – could you please tell him... tell him... tell him his vow. He vowed to protect me."

"Is this some kind of sick joke?"

"Not a joke. My name is Paigelynn. Just – just tell him Paigelynn is here."

Silence.

“Hello? Hello?” I plead.

Suddenly, the door clicks twice.

“Come in,” says a voice I know well, low and male, smooth like silk and velvet, sweet caramel and salvation. “Paigelynn.”

Fumbling for the handle, I enter, careful to look back as I turn. No sign of Cam. Makiah is part of the prophecy, for that is part of our power. The Mother explained to me long, long ago that in the mainstream world, Makiah offers us protection. People are drawn to him, and he has a spiritual connection with the higher power of all creation.

The entryway is ice-cold. So cold, I shiver, though I’m hot and sweaty from running so fast. My hands fly to my upper arms, and I hug myself as a door in the distance flies open, a man with long legs and an intense stare covering the distance as if he rolls on air.

“Please,” he says, waving me forward, “come into my private offices. Immediately. We need discretion.” For as commanding as his voice is, the words are spoken in a quiet, shrouded tone, one that is both soothing and menacing. Intuitively, he understands the gravity of the moment.

I follow him, grateful to be rescued.

Yet terrified I’ve made the wrong choice.

Now that I’m here, doubt fills my pores, every cell screaming, *What if Cam was right?*

Unable to help myself, I gawk at the richness of the space we’re in, the entryway rising up three stories, the ceiling half skylight, panes of glass cut and colored to depict something The Mother told me people call Heaven.

“Paigelynn,” Makiah says firmly, angry eyes pummeling me with questions. His hair is swept back off his face, and his Nordic jaw is like a blade. With high cheekbones and a prominent brow, he is the epitome of perfection, according to The Mother.

Something in me wavers. Wobbles a bit.

But I walk into the room.

He closes – then locks – the door.

“I want you to feel safe here,” he begins.

“Thank you.” Preparing myself to tell him everything that’s just happened, I feel my mind start to splinter. In regular life, I’m rarely asked to tell stories or sequences of events. Most of my spoken words are playacting with neighbors or reciting lessons and truths.

“First, I must know you are truly the princess.”

I halt, halfway toward a chair, my thoughts interrupted by this unexpected turn of events. “Know?”

“Your mark.”

My hand goes to the spot below my hipbone. “Ah. I see.” Instantly nervous, I look around. “But I can only show this when in the presence of two or more trusted men.”

“The Prophecy above all, Princess.”

“The Prophecy above all,” I reply, healed already by the familiar words.

His gaze narrows. “I have taken a vow to protect you, and the prophecy. I am the light. You are the light. We cannot succumb to darkness. My hand was ordained by your husband – your king – to put that very mark on you. You do not need to quote policy to me, Princess. I helped to write it.”

“Yes.” Our eyes lock, his filled with a zeal I welcome.

But then it turns to something more. Something carnal. Something that makes me freeze.

I have made a terrible mistake.

The words rip through me like a knife through flesh as he closes the distance between us, looking down with menace.

“Disrobe, Princess. Prove your identity to me.”

And then he takes two steps back, crosses his arms over his broad chest, and waits.

Unblinking.

CHAPTER FOUR

Cam

Damn it.

She's smarter than I thought.

Or I'm stupider than I should be.

Both are likely true.

"Is the dog okay?"

"What happened?"

"Where's the blonde woman who had the dog?"

"Did she get hit?"

I'm surrounded by kind, caring people who are getting on my last nerve. Paigelynn played me for a fool, running behind the mini-mart before I could get a trace on her, and now I'm holding a shivering little yappy dog, the chattering crowd demanding my attention, and all I can think is that Paigelynn's about to get caught by someone worse than The Basher.

And then there's me.

With her, I have limited protection because there are more people who want her alive than dead, and if I have possession of her, I won't be killed off as quickly, either.

But without her? I'm just a fucking target. Might as well paint a bull's-eye on the back of my head and stand in a shooting gallery offering potshots.

“Thank you, everyone. Little Winnie here is fine. I think my wife just had to go to the bathroom and the dog slipped out of the car. We’re good!”

Everyone peels off, giving Winnie a wave, but one older woman is insistent. She’s wearing a t-shirt with a politician’s name on it and glares at me under a baseball cap.

“You need to have a proper car carrier for that dog, you know. Can’t have her loose in someone’s lap!”

“Good advice. We’ll get one as soon as possible.”

“Not good enough!”

“Excuse me?”

“You wouldn’t drive around with a child without a car seat, right? Dogs are the same.”

“You want me to buy a car seat for my…dog?”

“A secured carrier!”

Eyes combing the area, I fight to pattern-match. The more I let this old bat yammer on, the less of a scene we’ll make. If I argue, that just escalates and draws attention.

I need as little attention as possible right now. Be boring. Not memorable.

Fade into the woodwork.

Where the fuck is Paigelynn?

How did she disappear into thin air? The space around us doesn’t give me many options, but if I pick wrong, I’ll never find her. No way she went into the big grocery store. None of the tiny stores around it – a hair salon, a liquor store, two banks, a dentist – make any sense.

She doesn’t have Uber, or money, or credit cards.

And she’s not going to go to the police. Brainwashing might make her believe incredibly outlandish things, but she’s been taught since day one that the police are “the bad men,” so I know that’s not an option.

Or a worry.

A billboard in the distance turns from still image to video, and then I realize what the church in the distance is.

Holy fuck.

With an emphasis on the last word.

She *didn't*.

There's no way she's that reckless, is there? That naive? That –

What am I thinking?

Of course she is.

A horn blast forces me to turn away from the lecture I'm getting from the nosy lady, both of us jolting.

“Hey, bud. Move your car from the pump if you're done!” says a dude in a Ford F-150 so rusted out it looks like it's being held together by sheer will alone.

“Bye,” I say to the woman, hopping in the car with Winnie as she screams:

“I'm taking your license plate number!” She comes around the passenger side, and I roll the window up fast, realizing if she gets close enough, she'll peer into the back and see the bodies.

The goddamned bodies.

If I don't find Paigelynn in the next hour or so, I —

Ring!

A cold chill runs through me as I gun the engine and maneuver to the parking lot, headed for Rooney's church. Winnie doesn't have a phone, Paigelynn left hers at the house, and I've got two. Basher and Simon likely have two on them. I should have pitched those long, long ago, but I'm not on my game.

I can't march into Rooney's church right now. I've got to safeguard this mission first.

Prioritizing in a crisis is a kind of triage that makes the end result matter. It's the difference between surviving and

becoming Basher meat.

Cutting the wheel, I change course, turning onto a main road that intersects with residential developments, the kind that always have a park nearby. As I scan the area, I will myself to think clearly.

Puzzle pieces click into place as a plan forms.

Step One: get rid of all tracking devices in this van.

Step Two: get a new vehicle.

Step Three: ditch the bodies.

The sound of heavy panting makes me look on the floor of the passenger seat. Winnie's down there looking up at me, tongue out.

Step Four: get the damn dog some water.

Steps Two and Three might need to be reversed. That depends on what I encounter next.

Next to her, I see my phone, half under the dog's ass. Just then, success:

A park.

And not the kind with a playground structure. A trailhead, with a kiosk board filled with announcements, makes me smile. One other car in the small parking lot, a beat-up Subaru with a ski rack on top, a dull gray and blue that blends in anywhere.

Scrubby bushes create a perfect bit of cover.

Bending down, I grab my phone, a notification on the screen.

A text from Debbie.

I unlock it, grateful for the anti-tracking software I installed on it.

I know you stole her. Get back here immediately.

The sigh that pours out of me makes me realize why Paigelynn fled. She must have seen the first part of that text and decided I wasn't so trustworthy after all.

And she's right.

Debbie and Newman were deeper into Paigelynn's true location than I realized. What else do they know? Debbie's next text says:

The Basher is after her.

I grin. Good. At least I haven't alienated her completely. Newman's a buffoon, but he's a useful one, and Debbie's like me: working multiple angles on this case.

We both know it. She figured me out long ago but never said a word.

Too bad she's late, though. Head's up on The Basher would have been useful an hour and a half ago.

Took care of Basher, I type back, knowing I need to give her just enough to keep her on as an ally, but not so much that she decides to ruin my entire plan.

Asset secured?

The words mock me. Time to ignore her.

No leash for the dog, and besides, now is not the time to walk her. As I get out of the van, my first breath is a reminder that the bodies are starting to ripen. Soon, the dog trainer's coworkers will start to wonder, and even sooner, the lack of communication from The Basher and whoever hired him will lead to more people on my ass.

Acting innocently, I walk to the kiosk and read. A forty-two-mile trail, huh? Let's hope the owner of this Subaru is taking a nice, long hike.

Picking the lock is a breeze, and soon I have the car started. It runs smooth and soft, and the owner was kind enough to leave half a box of protein bars and a full large thermos with two liters of water. The only thing missing is a welcome mat.

I go back to the van, remove Winnie and anything else personal, then search in the back – aha.

Windshield reflector.

I set it up, all the windows now obscured. This buys me time. I lock it. The keys come with me.

Then I realize I can buy myself more time. I unlock the van and climb in the back, searching for a small toolbox, hitting paydirt right next to The Basher's calf. Four bolts unscrewed later, and I swap the plates for the van with the ones for the Subaru. No, it's not perfect because soon both plates will have APBs on them, but this creates just enough confusion.

I'll swap cars again soon.

We get the fuck out of there before Mr. or Ms. Subaru comes back.

Debbie's texting me as I reverse course and head back to the plaza next to Rooney's church, taking a back way so I wind up behind the building, again finding a cluster of trees to hide in. Somehow, I need to get in that church, find Paigelynn, and get her back out to the Subaru, then escape before the cops show up.

I pull up a contact and type a text.

No reply.

The walk to the back entrance of Rooney's church is a breeze. No sirens in the distance. Winnie's fine in the car – I cracked the windows – and as I reach for the buzzer on the door, I place my thumbprint just so.

Click.

I'm in.

CHAPTER FIVE

PAIGELYNN

“Disrobe?” I gasp, my body nothing but a flush of numbness.

“Others have pretended to be the princess. Show me.”

“But – but you were the one who marked me!”

“We live in a world of unfathomable deception,” he says, face so hard it’s impossible to remember a time when he was kind.

I tug at my waistband and show him the mark, the rune perfect along my groin. “See?”

“Anyone can create a counterfeit mark.”

“Call The Mother! Please, Makiah. Please! I’m here because I need your help. You’re the only person I can think of who can help me.”

He just stares at me. Hard.

He’s serious.

I look at the door, the lock clicked in place. No one knows I am here. Jason and Malcolm are dead. Rudy is dead. I ran away from Cam. I have no tracking device on me. No phone.

I can feel my heartbeat in every cell of my skin. Makiah watches me with clear eyes. As each second ticks on by, I remain frozen. My hands don’t know what to do. I am on the run but without a clear destination.

I thought Rooney would make me safe.

Instead, I'm in even more danger.

“Do not make me undress you, Princess.” Though his words sound filled with a tone of regret I don't understand, his eyes light up with something I have seen before. I have seen it in men who covet me.

Of all the men in the world who should not have that look, Makiah is one of them.

“I have shown you my mark,” I explain, hoping there's an easy explanation to clear all of this up.

“There are dark forces in this world, Paigelynn,” he says, looking toward the door. “How do I know you're not lying?”

This is the second time today that a man has accused me of lying. It is the second time today that outrage has filled me, my fists clenching. I am less than a week away from turning twenty-five and fulfilling my destiny.

Why this? Why now?

In anger, I reach for my leggings and pull them down, kicking off my shoes at the heel, peeling out of the pants at the ankle. Removing my shirt is much easier, and soon I'm standing before him in bra, panties, and socks.

The room is as cold as a freezer.

“Now are you satisfied?” My voice holds a challenge in it that makes him jolt.

“I do this for the cause,” he insists, eyes combing over me. “I take no pleasure in verifying your identity.”

But his eyes say otherwise.

Crossing the distance between us, Makiah reaches for my shoulder. The second his skin touches mine, I realize I've made a terrible mistake. He feels like Rudy.

He looks like Rudy. On some level, he even smells like Rudy. The Mother never warned me that men with appetites have a scent, but suddenly, I know.

Makiah Rooney may be a spiritual man, and a man connected to the divine, but he's still a man. A man with base

desires.

“Stay back!” I insist, moving so that the chair is between us, my clothes in a pool on the floor. “I want you to call The Mother immediately.”

One eyebrow lifts, his smile mocking. “Now you’re ordering me around?”

“I am asking you as one who is devoted to the Prophecy, call The Mother. Let her know that I am safe.”

He leans against the back of his desk, arm still folded over his chest. It is clear that he has no intention of doing anything I ask.

“How did you get here? Before I reach out to important people in a cause that you may be undermining, I have questions of my own.” His eyes roam over my body. “Demands, too.”

“Someone tried to kill me. My bodyguards are dead.” I don’t trust him. Not one bit. Giving him as little information as possible is going to be crucial. Many years ago, The Mother trained me on how to handle being away from my bodyguards. This was one of her pieces of advice: Say as little as possible. Do everything you can to get yourself into a position where you are safe again.

“Dead?” Shock fills his features. “Who? How?”

“Jason and Malcolm. They are dead back at my safe house.”

For the first time, his facade cracks, genuine panic filling his features. His eyes dart from thing to thing in the room as if he’s trying to organize his thoughts.

“Who killed them?”

The lie comes easily. “I do not know.”

“How did you get here?”

“I was kidnapped. I escaped my attacker. Your church was right here, and I ran through the woods and a parking lot to get here.”

“Is this a setup?” Changing his tone entirely, he becomes sharp with me. Long gone is any sexual threat. Now he’s threatening, period.

“What do you mean, setup?”

Rooney rolls his eyes. “You’re telling me that two of the best bodyguards in this entire group are dead. You were kidnapped by some unknown person. And then you managed to escape them and find your way to this church? Of all places, your kidnapper let you go so close to my headquarters? Of course this is a setup. What game are you playing?”

“Game?”

His words are so similar to Cam’s. I am so confused. Why do they all think I’m playing a game? Why are they so suspicious of me? How can these men who are so powerful, who have promised to protect me, treat me like this? I’ve done nothing wrong. I’ve lost my protectors, my dog, and now my faith in Rooney and Cam.

Everything and everyone who’s important to me is gone. All that I have left is my mission.

Cracks in the facade of my understanding of how the world works make me turn back to Cam’s words. Is everything I know a lie? And if so, why?

Huffing through his nose, he makes a sound of disgust. I know what that sound means because I’ve heard it from The Mother.

“You really are this naive.” As he closes his eyes, I take the chance to bend down and pluck my shirt from the floor, clutching it to my breasts.

“I am your princess, in need of rescue.”

Laughter, sharp and hard, fills the room until it touches my skin like a sickening caress.

“You are a very valuable woman, I’ll give you that.”

Finally. Finally, he is beginning to understand the situation. Perhaps he was just stunned by my sudden appearance. Giving him the benefit of the doubt may be my best approach here.

“Thank you.”

“That wasn’t a compliment.” Beginning to pace, he looks at me frequently, then stares at his phone. When he licks his lips, he reminds me of a wolf.

“I need to be safe again. You are a man of honor. Please help me. I need to be with my husband. We need to fulfill the prophecy. Time is running out.”

“The Prophecy above all,” he intones, except the way he says the words makes my spine tingle and the hair on my neck stand up. Savage and brutal, his tone crosses the line from mocking into something destructive.

“The Prophecy above all,” I repeat, chin jutting up, defiant. If this is a test of my resolve toward my destiny, then I will not give him the satisfaction of seeing me weaken.

“Drop the shirt.”

I don’t even ask him why. I just do it.

Makiah walks over to me, reaching down to a spot above both knees, plucking at the fabric of his trousers to lift the tight spots, then drops to one knee, his breath hot against my bare hip. I shudder when his fingertip makes contact with my mark.

“Your scar is so delicate.”

“The pain is worth seeing the prophecy fulfilled.”

His head dips slightly at my words. Good. He needs to feel awe more.

Power less.

“Indeed.” He looks up at me, the fingers on my scar moving lightly down my outer thigh, my skin turning to gooseflesh at his caress. Eyes locked on mine, he’s asking questions without saying a word.

I feel nothing but revulsion.

No – I also feel something more.

A deep yearning for Cam.

Cam would never let Makiah touch me like this. He would never have let me be disrespected, disrobed, defiled. If we had any witnesses, Makiah would be seconds away from a bullet to the head, one of my bodyguards taking him out with a—

I gasp at the thought.

My bodyguards are dead.

No one protects me.

If Makiah is one of the bad men, I am vulnerable. Completely at his mercy. My heart races so fast I feel the room spin, my breath caught in my lungs, throat unable to open.

Soon, white spots form as Makiah rises, his hand on my hip, still perched on the border between transgression and tranquility.

“What do you know of your future, Princess?” he whispers softly, hand moving off me. This is a test, I know.

A test I must pass.

He’s just barely passed his own.

“I know that the true path for the next era of humanity rests in my bones, my blood, my DNA, and that of my future children with my king. We save humanity through our joining.”

“How?”

“How – excuse me?”

“How do you save humanity?”

“By joining.”

“Joining... how?”

Without asking, I bend to get my shirt, but he stops me, hand on my shoulder. I straighten.

“How, Paigelynn? How does joining with a man make you and you alone the only person who can save an entire planet?”

“Not me alone! Me and my husband.”

“Yes. You and your... king. How does fornication save the world?”

“Forni – ”

“Fucking someone.”

“That is a vulgar term for something so sacred!”

“Forgive me.”

He is smiling, though, the smirk self-satisfied and increasingly terrifying. He asked earlier if this was a game, as if I were the one toying with him, but it's clear that the truth is the opposite.

Now I'm even more convinced of it.

A game with rules that I do not understand, and I suspect they are unwritten and ever-changing.

“You know the prophecy. Generations of natural selection and mutation produced me. My husband, too. We are bound by destiny to join and produce the perfect human. Our progeny will usher in a new era.”

Reaching for my face, his palm cradles my jaw as he looks at my breasts. “You are certainly as close to perfect as any woman I have ever seen.”

I do not know what to say. Thanking him for the compliment feels dangerous.

Like I'd be giving him permission to do something I don't want.

“Your husband. Your king. Is he close to perfection as well?”

An image of Cam rushes into my mind.

“The prophecy says so.”

“That is a very different answer, Paigelynn, than a simple yes.”

“How can I know when I have never met him?”

I realize my mistake before the final word is out.

Makiah's eyebrows skyrocket. "Your hubris is unparalleled."

"Hubris?"

"Pride."

"I am not being proud! I am stating a fact."

"You believe it is a fact that your future king and the fulfiller of the prophecy is not perfect?"

"I never said – you're putting words in my mouth."

"Your mouth deserves to have something better than words in it," he murmurs.

I freeze.

"Has The Mother explained to you what to expect on your wedding night?"

"You mean sex? Yes."

"And she has verified your virginity?"

"I – I assume so."

"Do you know how one verifies virginity?"

"By keeping me protected and safe at all times?" *Unlike now*, I want to add but do not.

"Yes, that is one way." His hand goes to my hip again, voice going rough and low. "There is another. You need an exam."

"Exam?"

"Of the hymen."

"What is a hymen?"

"Oh, they really have kept you delightfully pure, have they not?"

"If I am pure, why do I need an exam?"

"You've been kidnapped. Your attacker could have defiled you."

"He did not!"

“All truths must be verified, Paigelynn.” He points to his desk, the wide expanse of glass open and clear. “You need to lie on that.”

“What?”

“I’ll perform the examination myself.”

“What – where is this hymen?”

“I’ll show you.”

Loud ringing in my ears, so hard I can feel my blood bang against my vessel walls, makes it hard to think. I’m shrinking, turning inward, growing smaller and smaller because I just want to disappear. Make the world go away.

Make it all stop.

Bang bang bang

I scream, unable to help it, as Makiah’s hand jerks and smacks against my bottom, the tap light but his fingertip digs in between my legs, making me arch away from it.

A click at the door, then it opens, and in walks Cam.

CAM.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing to her?” he hisses as he slams the door behind him, takes three long steps across the room, and barrels down on Makiah.

The shock of Cam’s fist against Makiah’s jaw is explosive, his arm a jackhammer, Makiah a beam of steel. It’s all fits and starts, images and stills, a series of moments in time frozen in my mind. Not a reel of film that plays out fluidly, instead I see their fight as a sequence of photos.

Cam’s fist against Makiah’s lip.

Blood spurting from his mouth.

Makiah tucking his head under Cam’s armpit.

The bruise of a blow from Makiah against Cam’s kidney.

I shriek and roll away from them, shoving my arms into my shirt, searching the floor for my pants. I find them,

splattered with exactly five dots of Makiah's blood, all of them clustered at the back of the waistband.

"You fucking dog," Cam bellows as Makiah looks around him, eyes fixating on a spot to the right of his desk. I have one leg in my pants, foot wiggling to find the hole and pull the pant leg up, but I hop over to where he's looking.

A red button, small and inconspicuous, is under the desk's lip.

He sees me find it and dives toward me, belly sliding on the glass of the desktop, until he jerks back suddenly.

Because Cam has him by the feet.

"What did you think you were going to do, Makiah? Fuck her? Slip her some of your hot God juice? Take her innocence and enjoy it? Hope a quick cum was worth it because you didn't get get off. You put a target on your head with three ruthless families coming after you until you're nothing but a twitching pile of foreskin and corneas? Because that's what you're doing here, you stupid idiot."

Makiah tries to twist on his back, but I grab a fistful of his hair, yanking hard.

"Paigelynn, did he hurt you?"

"No."

"Lay a finger on you?"

I hesitate just long enough for Cam to explode as he slides his hand under mine and grabs the back of Makiah's head and slams his face into the glass top.

A vicious scream, suddenly wet and weird, comes from Makiah as he fumbles for the red button I'm protecting. I slap his hand and he kicks Cam, hard enough to get a little freedom. Makiah rolls to the side, his head hitting my hip, blood from his nose smearing down my leg as Cam races around the desk to insert himself between me and Makiah.

"You broke my fucking nose," he growls as I try to breathe, hands on Cam's waist, his body a wall that protects me. Any thought of not trusting him falls away, my life in his

hands now, my allegiance to him and only him. Somehow, he broke into this church and found me, against all odds. What are the chances he could do that? It must have taken all his grit, all his resolve, every bit of cleverness and hard work to figure out where I escaped to.

How could he possibly know I'd be here?

And yet he must. He knows Makiah is part of our world. Somehow, he figured it out.

Which means he is my true husband and king.

I'll never, ever doubt him again.

"You're lucky I didn't break your dick. Paigelynn," Cam says over his shoulder. "Did he rape you?"

"No."

"Touch you sexually in any way?"

"He – he told me I had to disrobe, To show him my mark. To prove I was the princess."

Cam snorts as Makiah seethes across the desk, using his shirt cuff to press against his broken nose, blood blooming on the fine cotton. It wicks, spreading up, as if Cam cut off his hand.

"You fucking know who she is. She never had to prove anything to you. You get your jollies off? Got your dick nice and hard? Was it worth it, Makiah? Other men have been shot dead on sight for touching her like you just did."

"I'm not other men. Neither are you."

"That's right. Why risk it all so you can get your dick wet?"

"I never did anything to defile her."

"No, you just wanted to toy with her. Play a little. Let me guess, Paigelynn – he was going for under the panties?"

How does Cam know these things?

"Yes."

Makiah's mouth goes flat. "But I didn't."

“Only because I interrupted you! Stopped you!”

“You’re the one who let her escape.”

I stare at them both, the reality of the situation seeping in. Makiah and Cam know each other. Of course they do. Two of the most powerful men in the world hold my fate in their hands.

But how did Makiah know it was Cam who took me away?

CHAPTER SIX

Cam

Her warm little hands are on my waist, and I can hear her panting back there, terrified.

Walking into this room to find her in a bra, panties, and socks, being touched by that sleazy bastard was like blinking and finding yourself in a hellscape.

Of course she ran straight for Rooney's church. The damn powers that be loved to parade around how important Rooney is in the eyes of "the gods." Paigelynn had been branded by him, for fuck's sake, so when I stopped for gas she must have seen the billboard with his pompous mug on it and decided to sacrifice Winnie for the sake of freedom.

Freedom from *me*.

I give her credit. She's good. I never would have thought she had it in her to use her dog as a decoy to escape. Paigelynn is so attached to that little furball.

But she did it.

Which means she's smarter than I realized.

If she were truly trained, she never would have gotten into this mess with Rooney, so her little stunt gives me a chance to calibrate what, exactly, the masters have been training her for. That's the thing about cults: they silo everything.

People are taught to stay in their lane.

People are taught that there are no other lanes.

People like Paigelynn aren't just on a "need to know" basis. They are treated as if they don't need to know anything that isn't information that can be used to manipulate them.

No one has taught this woman how to fight. To hide. To disguise herself.

To use sex as a weapon.

At that last thought, bile rises in my throat, a rush of anger so extreme I want to take it out on Rooney. The guy's in front of me, bleeding and swelling up, looking like an abstract kids' book version of a human-bull hybrid. Underneath all that perfect hair, big white teeth, and god crap, he's just a scared coward, like the rest of them.

Like the rest of the people who are taking women like Paigelynn and turning them into meat.

Roughing him up gives him the tiniest taste of what he's helping the three families put these women through. And yet...

I can't go too far.

Because he knows *waaaaay* too much about who I really am.

"You know they're going to be pissed when they realize she got away from you," Rooney says to me, his snuffle interrupted by the massive level of puffiness making his nose turn into a pink marshmallow.

"How does anyone know that? No one put out the call." I cross my arms over my chest and glare at him. We go back a long way. I'm ten years younger, and he's a thousand times less moral.

Plus, he was my "Unit Concierge" in the Gaia cult.

This is a grudge match.

"Paigelynn told me that Jason and Malcolm are dead. Is that true?"

She's watching us both as she finishes dressing, shrinking back from us, her stomach curled in and shoulders hunched in

a terror stance.

A frozen terror stance.

“Yes.”

“You killed them?”

“Did you send The Basher?”

Genuine shock fills his eyes, replaced instantly by stark fear. “The Basher? Hell, no. Who sent – someone sent The Basher for her?” His voice lifts at the end, like an adolescent going through puberty.

Crack.

“Yes.”

“He doesn’t do rescues.” Rescue is a cute term for kidnapping.

“No, he doesn’t.”

“Who would want her dead?”

Paigelynn’s neck cranes forward at the question.

“No one should want her dead,” I explain. “For obvious reasons.”

“Because then the prophecy could never come true!” she whispers.

Rooney catches my eye. We both hold back our disdain. He knows damn well how valuable she is. Three different powerful families with screwed up genes all want a piece of her.

Literally.

Paigelynn isn’t just worth more alive than dead. Her very body will save three or more lives. For someone to want to snuff her out means there’s a rogue player in the game, suddenly.

Chaos has been introduced.

“Yes,” Rooney says absentmindedly. “We couldn’t possibly let anyone stop you and your future husband from

fulfilling centuries of nature crafting the perfect new era.”

She doesn't catch the sarcasm in his tone.

“But someone out there does want to stop it! It's the evil in the world! The bad men!” She touches my shoulder. “We cannot let them come between us!”

Rooney's head jerks sharply. “Us?”

Ahh. There it is. We just entered uncharted territory.

Cults aren't the only places where information is siloed.

“I made a mistake, Makiah. I should never have come here,” she whispers. “Dark forces are at work to convince me not to trust Cam.”

An uncertain look passes between them both as I hurry to find a way to fix this.

“And how did Cam come to be involved in your service, Princess?”

Rooney has no idea. That's becoming abundantly clear. Who I am, to him, is different than who I am to Paigelynn. To Debbie. To The Basher. Each group of people I infiltrate gets a slice of me you only see through one lens.

There is no whole. Only your individual perspective.

“I learned of a conspiracy to harm our princess,” I tell him as he touches his nose, pain clearly clouding his thinking. For a split second, I consider killing him. The massacre on his face is bad enough, but Paigelynn has compromised me now. Rooney knows I'm here. I'm with her. I took her away. He knows about Jason and Malcolm, and The Basher, too.

I need to pin him down. Make him shut up. Get some kind of security that he won't sing to the wrong people.

“Conspiracy?”

I close the distance between us and call back over my shoulder, “Paigelynn? Please go into the bathroom over there.” I nod toward a door near the window. “I need to speak to Makiah privately.”

“How do you know where his bathroom is?” she asks in a suspicious voice.

Silence dominates until she sighs, then does as told.

“Listen,” I hiss, holding his elbow. “You fuck this mission up and not only will you be dead, your entire family dies, and all your daughters end up at the Luisi auction.”

“Fuck you. Threats won’t work with me. Besides, my daughters don’t have the required genetics.”

He would absolutely have sold them off if they had.

To the highest bidder.

“No, but there’s plenty of demand for fresh meat of all kinds.”

“Don’t even joke.”

“I never joke when it comes to business. You say a word about Paigelynn and what’s going on, and I make sure the masters learn about how you touched her. You’ll get the Rudy treatment.”

“Try again. Not scared.”

“I’ll hack into the Luisi trust and have ten million transferred into your church financial records and make it look like you did it.”

“You can’t.”

“Watch me.”

“What’s your endpoint here? She isn’t yours. You don’t automatically get her because you stole her.”

“Not here for chitchat, Rooney. Keep your mouth shut or else.”

“I’m not the only person who knows you took her. Messages are coming in.”

“People know she’s missing. They don’t know *I* took her.”

“You blew your cover coming in here.”

“Did anyone see Paigelynn come in?”

“The cameras certainly did.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

“A receptionist did.”

“Someone you can handle?”

“Easily.”

Paigelynn gasps. “You can’t kill someone just because she talked to me!”

“Get back in the bathroom,” I snap at her.

“No!”

“Who said anything about kill?” Rooney grunts. “I said handle. Easy to smooth talk her.”

“How did you get into the building?” she asks me, nostrils flaring.

Great. More defiance. While it’s cute on her, now is *not* the time.

“I’ll explain all of that later.”

The hard look Rooney shoots me isn’t easy to ignore, but I can do hard things.

“I can’t cover for you very long. You know how it is. And I won’t sacrifice myself for you.”

Paigelynn’s expression turns to ice as she stares him down. “How dare you say that to your future king and queen? It is your *job* to sacrifice yourself!”

Rooney gives me a look that says, *Can you believe this shit?*

Yes. Yes, I can.

Because when I was young, Makiah Rooney was the person who taught me this shit. Different cult, different shit, same scent.

But bullshitters cannot help themselves, so Rooney drops to one knee and looks up at her, one hand pinching the bridge

of his nose to stem the flow of blood, and says, “The Prophecy above all.”

Paigelynn and I intone after him:

“The Prophecy above all.”

“Fuuuuck,” he whispers under his breath. “You broke it in multiple places.”

“You’re lucky all you have is a broken nose.”

“The word lucky doesn’t fit into my day.”

“If you want more bad luck, keep talking. In fact, shutting your mouth overall is a fine strategy for better luck.”

“You won’t get away with this.”

“I’m taking my queen to a safer place. It is clear the people sworn to protect her aren’t doing their job.” I lean in closer. “And you lay a finger on her again, I re-animate The Basher’s corpse and give him all his tools to play with your still-breathing flesh. Or better yet, I find his cousin. I hear the guy has the same particular set of tastes, except he *looooooves* men.”

“Get out of here. Now.”

“No problem.”

Paigelynn comes to my side, and we leave the room, the entrance I came in to the right. We slip outside, and I direct her to the stolen Subaru, where Winnie pops up from the front seat and starts barking.

Paigelynn bursts into tears.

“You saved her!”

“Yes. Her mean old owner threw her into traffic.”

“I did no such thing!”

“You practically threw me into traffic.”

“And what – what is this car?”

“Our new ride,” I tell her, the long explanation too much to try to roll out.

As we pull away from the church, I make a series of turns to get away, using a maze technique designed to figure out if I'm being followed. After seventeen turns and pulling over once to pretend my GPS needs a reboot, I don't see signs of being tailed.

Rooney and I have a mutually-assured destruction thing going on. The people we're both intertwined with don't know how deep our experiences with each other really are. Yes, they know we were both part of Gaia. For Rooney, that's a plus: the families who created this project wanted someone with cult experience, charisma, and a big, highly public smokescreen.

They got one in Makiah Rooney.

What they wanted from me, well... that's for a different day.

The dirt I have on him isn't just what he did – or tried to do – to Paigelynn. Our grudge match goes way deeper.

So deep it's buried in a coffin.

“Where – where are we going?”

“To a safe house.”

“And then?”

“I'm not quite sure.”

“I'm so sorry, Cam!” She's stroking Winnie's fur and kissing the top of her little head over and over and over. “I shouldn't have done that to you. I was afraid you were lying to me.”

“Running to Rooney was an interesting choice.”

“I had no reason to think he would do – do that to me! The Makiah Rooney I know is a man of faith. Of spiritual journeys. One who walks with us on our road to the prophecy. He gave me my mark in my ceremony that elevated me! He is supposed to be a good man. The Mother always taught me to trust him. So – so when I saw his face on that sign, I – I - ”

“Shhh. It's ok. I forgive you.”

“You do?”

“I do. You didn’t know who to trust. Now you do.”

“I will never, ever make that mistake again! I’ll never run away from you, Cam. Never leave you. I will always be by your side as we rule in the new era. I promise. I swear to you. I will take as many lashings as you deem necessary to atone for my behavior.”

The thought of her naked, on her knees in a submissive pose, being lashed makes my mouth water.

“Just... don’t run away again. No lashings needed.”

“You must! How else will I learn not to make bad choices? I must be punished!”

I reach for her knee and pat it, leaving my hand on her hot thigh muscle.

“I am sure we can find a way to take care of you.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

PAIGELYNN

Cam is so nice. So benevolent. So confident and sure of himself that he does not need to make me feel lesser so that he has more power.

Is that not the very definition of strength?

I have transgressed against my future husband and king. My violation is worthy of ex-communication, imprisonment, or possibly death. The Mother told me many stories of virgins who violated their rules and experienced the most severe of consequences.

I deserve it all.

Every last painful drop.

Cam's phone buzzes and he looks at a text, eyebrows going up. His dark hair is sweaty around his forehead, the curls turning up at the end, boyish and sweet.

"Zee zee why zee ex," he mutters, then opens a map app on his phone, entering something. Instantly, the route is determined, and he peers at the screen.

"Two hours. We'll need a car change, though."

"Car change? What's wrong with this one? It's an upgrade from the van." His eyes are sharp and cunning, but I can see exhaustion bearing down on his face. Cam has gone through so much in just a few short hours, all for me.

“What, you didn’t like the corpses? I thought they made great car air fresheners.”

My body tightens with fear.

“I—”

“I stole this. We’ll be on the cops’ radar soon.”

“Radar?”

“When a car is stolen, the person who owns it calls the cops. Then they put out an alert for other cops to search for the car and license plate.”

“*Oooohhhh.*” I look out the window nervously.

“Exactly. We’re two hours away from our destination.”

“Where is it?”

“It’s better for you not to know.”

“Why?”

“Because if we’re stopped and they kill me, they could take you there and blow other people’s cover.”

“Cover?”

“Undercover. You know what that is?”

“Yes. I see. You’re undercover? You’re some kind of spy?”

“Something like that.”

“How can a man who is destined to rule the world be a spy?”

Cam chuckles and looks at me with love and amusement. “When you think about it, Princess, shouldn’t being a spy be a requirement for a man who is about to take over the world?”

We laugh together, his strong and firm, mine anxious and confused.

I guess he is right.

“What if the police find us in this car and pull us over? They’ll arrest us and put us in jail.”

“That’s why we need a new car.”

“How do you get one?”

“Like I got this one. I stole it.”

“You know how to steal cars? Who taught you to do that?”

“You really want to know?”

“Of course I do. I just asked you!”

“Makiah Fucking Rooney was the first person who showed me how to pick a lock and later moved on to hot-wiring cars.”

“Makiah?”

“Yes.” He glances at me. “You’re bright red. Don’t let that pretty little head of yours explode.”

“How would Makiah teach you... that?”

“We go back a long, long way.”

“How long?”

“Deprogramming her is an essential part of my long-term plan. Might as well start now,” he mutters to himself, then casts me a sidelong glance.

“What is deprogramming, and who is her?”

“You. You are her. And deprogramming means to help someone unlearn wrong information.”

“Wrong information?”

“Makiah and I were in a group together. He was my teacher.”

“Your teacher?”

“Yes.”

“Like The Mother is my teacher?”

“Not quite – hmmm.” He pauses, frowning. “A little bit.”

“He taught you what you needed to know to be king? Like I learned how to be queen?”

A mocking laugh greets my question. “Rooney would love it if you described it that way.”

“How old were you when he taught you?”

“It started at eight. Ended at twelve.”

“So young!”

“Yes.”

“Why did he teach you?”

“Why?”

“Yes.”

Cam sighs, reaching up with his left hand to wipe his eye, rubbing it. The gesture makes him seem tired. Four hours ago, I was at my home, waiting for a dog trainer.

Now I am on the run in a stolen car with my future husband, who is telling me how Makiah Rooney taught him to be a thief.

Instead of answering, he reaches for his phone and says to me, “Hold the wheel.”

“The wheel?”

“You can drive?”

“I – no.”

“No one ever taught you how to drive?”

I shake my head.

His sigh this time is heavier. “Just hold it steady while I type.”

I do as told, the steering wheel light as a feather and easy to keep on track. He writes a text, then holds the wheel again. When a new text comes in, he reads it, nodding.

“We might not need the car change.” His stomach growls, and he looks down on the ground, where Winnie now rests between my feet. “Can you grab that water jug?”

My own stomach pangs with hunger.

“There are protein bars in the console,” he says, reading my mind.

“You thought of everything,” I joke, but he gives me a wry smile as I find the bars and we each eat one, my hunger rising up strong and pure.

Fifteen minutes later we’re done, I’ve had water, and Cam mumbles something about needing caffeine.

“Are you stopping at a gas station?” I ask, earning a glare.

“With you? No.”

“But—”

“Fool me once, shame on me, Princess. Fool me twice, we both end up dead.”

“That’s not how the rhyme goes.”

“It is now.”

His phone pings and he looks at it, grinning.

“Whew. We’re safe. Let’s go for broke.”

“Go for broke?”

“Drive straight on through.”

“Oh.”

As the food quells my hunger and the water quenches my thirst, the immediacy of danger begins to recede. My mind is on a racing loop, playing images of the day over and over, yet none of them is coherent. I cannot remember what Cam said before pretending to be a trainer at the house this morning. I cannot sequence how he convinced Jason and Malcolm to bow before him. It’s all a jumble of emotion and fear and pictures of pieces of a scene.

I feel my pulse in every pore.

I feel like I need a three-day nap.

I feel like I ran a marathon barefoot.

I feel like the biggest mistake in the world.

I start crying, my stomach curling in, belly so tight I can’t breathe. Crying when you can’t inhale is paralyzing, and as each second passes, I feel worse.

Nothing in my body works.

Nothing in my mind, either.

Gasping, I start to grunt, panic setting in as Winnie licks my face, letting out a small bark.

“Paigelynn?” Cam looks at me, slowing the car down slightly. “What’s wrong?”

I want to tell him. I want to be strong. I want to be one of those women I’ve seen in some of my training videos, the fearless warriors for our cause, those who endure adversity but come out triumphant.

I’m not those women.

I’m not.

“Can’t. Breathe,” I squeak out, hunching over as Winnie yelps. A hand goes to my back, between my shoulder blades, and he rubs slowly.

“Just try,” he says, voice filled with concern. “You’ll either faint or breathe. One or the other will happen.”

He doesn’t slow down or stop.

White dots fill the space behind my eyelids. I’m dizzy, my nose desperate for air, mouth open but throat closed. It’s my stomach, tight as a knot, full with a ball of lead. Nothing I do makes a difference, until suddenly, my knees lift and the back of my nose opens up. I gag on the air, retching, though nothing comes up.

“There you go,” Cam soothes, still rubbing my back. “Just let it happen.”

I don’t have words for what my body is doing, but it feels like everything leaving me all at once. Falling apart like this is not how a queen behaves. If I am so weak that I tremble and panic after what just happened, how can I lead the world by my husband’s side?

“I’m – sorry,” I stutter, air suddenly, painfully exploding inside lungs that fill and fill and fill until I fear they’ll pop. I

let it all out in a big whoosh, then inhale again, my muscles jerky and twitching.

“It takes time. You’ll regulate. Let it all happen. It’s harder if you fight it,” he says. My head is still down so I can’t see his face, but his voice is so kind. Sweet, even.

This is the Cam I love. The Cam I want to know better. The Cam who drew me to him.

Not the cold killer who murdered Jason and Malcolm. Not the man who drove me around with two dead bodies in the van. Not the man who smashed Rooney’s face into a glass desk and taunted him afterward.

This is the real Cam. The man gently caressing my back, calming me down.

“Ev – everything is a fight.”

He chuckles. “It is now. Always has been.”

“For-for you?”

His sigh is so strong I feel warm breath on my neck. “I guess so. I don’t really have many memories before life turned into one big fight.”

“Tell me,” I gasp, my abdomen aching as my breathing steadies. The tops of my knees are wet with tears. “Tell me more.”

“More about what?”

“Before. What do you mean, before?”

“Before my parents joined Gaia.”

“Gaia?”

He hesitates, then says, “It’s a cult.”

“Cult?”

“Yes.”

“*You* were in a cult?”

“Yes.”

“But – but back at the house, when we were walking outside, before you – before Jason found us – you said *I* was in a cult.”

“That’s true, too.”

“I am the light. I am the truth. I am here to serve others,” I whisper to myself.

“Slogans. Phrases they drill into your head and repeat until they are meaningless but make you think they have deep meaning.”

“I – I feel good when I say them. When I find a fellow believer.”

“When was the last time you were allowed to go out into society and run into a believer, Paigelynn?”

“I – I’m not allowed because I need to be protected.”

“From ‘The Men’?”

“Y – yes.” A wave of nausea passes through my skin. “You told me you’re not my husband. When we were walking. When you pretended to be the dog trainer. But then you showed us your mark, and that mark means you are my husband.”

“Easy to fake a tattoo.”

“You faked it? But it looks exactly right.” My own mark feels like it’s on fire, resting below my hipbone, lower along my groin.

“People can fake anything, Paigelynn. Even a prophecy.”

The nausea increases.

“Tell me about your cult. What was it?”

“Gaia.”

“What is Gaia?”

“It’s a real word. It’s the name of the ancestral mother in Greek mythology.”

“I know who she is. Of course I’ve been taught that. I am to become a version of her when the prophecy is fulfilled.”

“Sure, Princess,” he says with a funny laugh. “In some ways, you’re part of Gaia.”

“But you were in a cult named Gaia?”

“Yes.”

“As a child?” Memories of my parents going to Rooney’s church flood my mind, sudden and intense, the scent of coffee and donuts, the feel of people singing, the power of my father’s smile.

“I was eight when my parents joined Gaia. You were twelve when your parents brought you into Rooney’s church.”

“How do you know so much about me?”

“It’s my job to know everything about you, Paigelynn.”

“Because you are a spy?”

“Something like that.”

When he talks about me and my parents, my prophecy, my – my world, I nearly throw up.

“Tell me what it was like. Gaia.” I sit up and stare at the road, dizzy for a moment as my eyes shift. Then I lean back against the seat and close my eyes, inhaling through my nose.

“Gaia was all about how the world is one big organism. We were just pieces of a whole. Every person, every object, every element was all part of a unified spirit.”

“That sounds beautiful.”

“It was. Until it wasn’t.”

“Tell me about the good parts.”

“Why only the good parts?”

“I didn’t say *only*. I want to understand, Cam. Understand why you were in a cult and you say I am in a cult and why you’re killing people I love and smashing Makiah’s face in while making threats, and we’re speeding on the highway in a stolen car toward a safe house I know nothing about. I need to understand. I need something that makes sense.”

“Right.” He goes silent for so long that I finally open my eyes and look at him.

“Cam?”

“Gaia was beautiful. Warm and loving. My parents learned about the movement at an Earth Day festival. My older sister and I loved going to it every year. Ice cream, games, the whole bit. We biked there from our house. Dad and Mom were into being more environmentally responsible, so this was part of their shift. They wanted to teach us to be better stewards of the Earth.”

“That sounds lovely.”

He grunts. “They started taking us to programs at the Gaia center. HQ was about four hours from our home. You could tent camp on-site, for free. Loads of other families were there, too. We had a lot of fun, running around outside, swimming, hiking, canoeing – you name it – while the grownups were in these long, boring lectures.”

A memory of my own parents taking me camping makes me pair up what he’s describing with my own experience. I smell pine in my nose, taste burnt marshmallow, feel my cold feet and hot face by a campfire.

“And then one day, Mom and Dad sat us down, all excited, to tell us we were moving. Moving to live at Gaia.”

“How exciting!”

“It was. We were. Mira had made a really good friend there.”

“Mira?”

“My sister.”

“You have a sister!”

“I – I had a sister.”

“She’s ...”

“Dead.”

“Oh! I am so sorry.”

He just nods.

“I am – was – an only child.”

“Why do you say was?”

“Because my parents are no longer my parents. I use that word still to describe them, but I am the world’s. Not theirs.”

“Right.”

“Did you enjoy living at Gaia?”

“I did. When you’re eight years old, you just do what your parents say because you don’t know any different and because you don’t have any say. No control over your life. You just go with the flow, and they told me and Mira we were going to be living a very different life because we were going to make a difference in the world. That the rest of society was going in the wrong direction, and we needed to be agents of change.”

“That sounds admirable.”

He gives me an odd look.

“It is admirable if that’s what you’re really trying to do. Purely and authentically.”

“Why wouldn’t they be pure and authentic?”

“Because people lie, Paigelynn. They lie and manipulate.”

“Why?”

“To gain power. Control. Authority. Money.”

“And you are saying that Gaia was a cult run by people trying to do that while lying to those who actually believed?”

His head reels back and he looks at me, staring so long I fear he will run off the road.

“Yes. You understand all that? Can put it together and see how it synthesizes?”

“I didn’t say I *agree* with you. I am trying to restate what you’re explaining to me.”

“How can you assemble all that in your head and not see that you’re being manipulated yourself?”

“By you?”

“NO!” His shout scares Winnie, who begins to shake in my lap. “By the people who have imprisoned you!”

“You keep saying that, but so far, you are the only person who has kidnapped me!”

The car screeches to a halt so fast, I nearly slam into the dashboard, my body curling around Winnie instinctively to shield her. We’re in the middle of the road, on a quiet stretch of a numbered state route now, bare land around us.

“If you don’t want to be here, Princess, then be my guest.” The words come out like a growl, a grunt, a fiery, furious sound, and something in the vibration of his voice makes me angrier than I’ve ever been in my life.

“You could have killed Winnie, you useless fool!”

The word useless makes him recoil.

“Get out.”

“I will not! You don’t get to steal me away and then discard me at your pleasure!”

He snorts. “There is no pleasure with you, Paigelynn. You’re nothing but torture.”

“Oh, really? I tortured you when you kissed me on that walk we took before Jason found us?”

He’s breathing so hard his chest rises and falls, over and over, muscled and strong. We’re facing each other, his breath mingling with mine over the console, and I hate him.

Hate him for making me want him.

Hate him for killing Jason.

Hate him for stealing me away.

Hate him for hurting Rooney.

But most of all I hate him for being *right*.

“You tormented me then. You torture me now. You’re so fucking naive that you don’t know you’re naive!”

“That makes no sense. The very definition of naive is to not know something. To be innocent. Guileless. To—”

He cuts me off by reaching behind my head, fingers threading deep through my hair, forcing me closer, to look into eyes that seem half-mad.

“I am doing everything I can to save your life. Everything, including sacrificing mine. I am in so deep I might as well dig all the way through to the other side of the Earth.”

“That is not my fault! I never asked you to do any of this for me!”

“You’re not a queen. You’re not a princess. The only real thing about your life is your name. Your parents named you Paige Lynn, not Paigelynn. You were twelve years old when they gave you up to a fake cult.”

“*Fake* cult? Now you’re saying it’s fake? I – ”

The blast of a truck horn makes me spin in my seat as Cam lets go and guns the engine, tires peeling, the car starting so fast I have to clutch Winnie again before she turns into a projectile.

A string of profanity so foul it makes me flinch comes pouring out of Cam, but he gets the car moving again as I roll my window down an inch, needing to breathe.

“We almost became a pile of recycled steel back there,” he grouses.

“You choose to stop the car in the middle of the road!”

“And I didn’t see you rushing to get out, so stop griping about being kidnapped.”

Tears fill my throat again.

It’s going to be a long drive to... wherever we’re going.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Cam

The safe house is ready. A week's worth of food, purified water, proper lighting, and enough security to hold back an army.

All I have to do is get her there in one piece.

My temper isn't making that easy.

And neither is she.

My right knuckles hurt from giving Rooney a lesson. My legs are screaming from wrestling with The Basher. My hands burn from a hot gun, and my stomach doesn't like that shitty vegan protein bar the owner of this Subaru volunteered for us. How much fiber was in that thing?

Add into all that the fact that I have no idea if I can trust Rooney, who may have ratted me out after all, and there could be a helicopter or a drone on our ass in minutes, and I'm done with any whining.

Dog or human.

For thirty blissful minutes, Paigelynn rests her head against the cracked window, staring out into space. The silence is a relief.

Then she shuffles a bit in her seat and turns to me.

“You said my real name is Paige Lynn? Do you know my last name?”

“Hoya.”

She blinks, just once. “Yes, that’s right. Paige Lynn Hoya. Just Paige. I was told by The Mother to forget I ever had a last name. That it’s unnecessary in the new age that is coming. Forget that my parents were my parents and to consider them good people who were honored to bring me into the world, led by fate to find Makiah Rooney and to offer me to the world.”

Something in her voice makes a piece of me break inside. She sounds so sad.

Not angry. Not fearful. Not indignant. Long gone is that insufferable talk of being the princess, the queen, the embodiment. This is a woman seeking answers about herself, answers that have been stripped away from her systematically by cowards who use and abuse people for their own benefit.

She’s a victim, not a role.

She’s a human being, not an organ production vessel.

She’s a soul, not a target.

A rush of tingling shoots across my skin as she watches me, cautious and seeking.

“What else do you know about me?”

“We’ve been searching for you for nearly two years.”

“We?”

“A team of elite hackers using computer databases to find women like you.”

“Like me? There are no other women like me. I am the only one.”

I stay quiet. Let it sink in for a few beats. When I look at her, tears fill her lower lids.

“Oh,” she says softly. “Oh.”

“This is a lot for anyone to understand, Paigelynn. I can’t explain it all to you in one conversation.”

“I’m beginning to see that.”

“I promise you this: no matter how long it takes, no matter how many questions you have, no matter how painful or confusing it all is, I’m here. I am here for you. I am here to walk this journey with you. You will come out on the other end of it healthier and whole.”

Her eyelids flutter as she fights to maintain eye contact. “You make this sound like torture.”

“I get it.”

“Do you? Were you, too, once brought into the fold of a group who taught you that you are nearly a deity? That only by being perfect could you save the world once you submitted to your husband and true king?”

“No. Not quite like that. But I was once under the powerful brainwashing of an environmental cult that taught us not composting was a sin, all gas-powered travel was the equivalent of murder, people who ate meat were intellectually inferior, all developmental disorders were caused by mothers who drank nut milks during pregnancy, disability was a sign that the Earth found you undesirable, and that private property was an artificial construct.”

“But it is.”

I just look at her.

“Oh.”

I get the sense I’m going to hear that from her a lot.

Oh.

“How did you find out your cult wasn’t – that what you’d been taught was – how? How did you find out?”

“When the leaders killed my sister, and the police came to take my parents off to prison.”

“WHAT?”

It feels so cold and clinical to tell the story. Devoid of emotion, it comes out like I’m reciting a storyline from a television show. I haven’t relayed it in years, but now is as good a time as any to explain it all to someone fresh.

Someone who needs to hear it.

“I spent four years in Gaia. We moved in with them. My parents sold our house and gave all their money to Gaia. Dad found a way to work remotely, and his paychecks went to Gaia. He and Mom gave up all their retirement money. Sold my grandmother’s little cottage on a lake in northeast Ohio, where we’re from.”

“They told you all of this?”

“No. I researched it after the fact. I was a kid. All I knew was we moved into Gaia and got a tiny little falling apart cabin to live in. I didn’t have to go to school anymore. My sister was eleven. We were so excited. Freedom, we thought.” I have to bite my lip to avoid saying that word again in a very different way.

Freedom.

“You said she died. How?”

“They starved her to death.” If I keep my eyes on the road and push the accelerator, maintaining a steady 75 miles per hour, we’ll arrive in just thirty-seven minutes. No choppers are in the sky. My phone hasn’t lit up with a notification. Telling my ghost stories doesn’t haunt anyone but me, and I can take it.

“Starved? Why? Was the cult that poor?”

A rush of sugar, the taste of home-baked oatmeal-raisin cookies, makes my mouth water. “They had plenty. I had plenty. When they closed down the cult, most of the kids were average weight. Lots of adults were, too. The leaders were overweight. Not fat. Just... a little extra.”

“Why would anyone starve a child?”

“Why would anyone take a twelve-year-old girl away from her parents and lie to them, saying she’s the embodiment of a centuries-old prophecy?”

“But – but...” Her voice trails off, brow low with thought.

“They did what they did to Mira because they wanted to control everyone. Everything. Mira was the type to ask

questions. Be curious. Notice patterns. Pay attention to when something didn't add up. She was insanely smart and so stubborn. Not in an argumentative way. In an open, deeply beautiful way. She was the person who asked why the windows had to be shut during mandatory lessons. Why we couldn't ride our bikes off the compound. Why Grandma and Grandpa cried at the gate and weren't allowed to come in and see us. And over time, they tried to punish her persistence out of her."

"That's horrible."

"Yeah. It is. But they won. Dead girls can't poke holes in your mythology anymore."

At the word *mythology*, she gives a little shiver, blinking rapidly.

"Why didn't your parents stop them?"

"Because they believed everything the leaders told them. They were told that Mira was out of sync with the synergy of oneness that is Gaia. She had too much energy. It needed to be drained from her to find her true essence."

"How does that connect to food?"

"It doesn't. They used food to weaken her."

"You were just a boy."

Chills run down my spine at her words.

"They hid her from us all. Made her work the fields. Put her on solitary in small shacks in the fields."

"Fields?"

"We grew all our own food."

"They made her do labor like that while starving her?"

I didn't know I had a limit until now, a wave of angry exhaustion making me instantly irritable.

"They did."

"What happened when she died?"

"They tried to hide it."

“Hide her body?”

“All of it. What they did to her. To some of the other children. Some of the adults, too.”

“How did anyone outside of Gaia find out?”

Dread fills me. As much as I want to be open, I also have to be careful. Paigelynn is starting to crack open a bit. Telling her about my experience in a cult is going to be key to deprogramming her.

If I explain that Debbie was the one to bring down Gaia, then I have to tell her who Debbie is.

And on the surface, she’s my boss.

Nothing about the surface is real, though.

“One of the adults in the cult,” I lie. “Someone told a family member. The family member used a drone to capture footage of the burial.”

“Oh, Cam.”

“And that person went to the authorities. Then the police arrived. They took my parents away. Gaia twisted everything to make it seem like my parents were the ones who made Mira starve.”

“How old were you when that happened?”

“Fourteen.”

“So young. Who took you in? Your grandparents?”

Now we’re really in dangerous territory.

“I was fine. Raised better than I had been in Gaia.”

“Good. I’m glad you found people to love and nurture you.”

“My parents did love us. Did nurture us,” I snap, hating how desperately I still need to believe that. “They were just taken in by powers stronger than their own judgment.”

“How old are you?”

“Thirty-one.”

“And Gaia is dismantled?”

“It is now, yes.”

“You have so much hatred toward cults.”

“Of course I do. Enough to do time.”

“Time?”

“Prison.”

“You were in prison?”

“Yes.”

“For what?”

“Breaking into Gaia’s offices and hacking their computer network.”

“I thought you said Gaia was taken down?”

“It was after I did that. But I was arrested. Tried. Convicted. Served two years.”

“Served?”

“Prison time.”

“You were punished for doing the right thing.”

Laughter comes out of me, tasting like the bitter past. “I like the way you think.”

“It’s true!”

“I wish more people lived in your reality.”

“They will when we fulfill the prophe...” She inhales sharply and goes quiet.

I let her.

I need a little peace.

The desert rolls on by, some trucks passing here and there, but otherwise we’re in a fairly isolated area, headed to a small compound on the edge of a huge chunk of federal land. It’s the kind of place no one goes unless they have to, but billionaires discovered it a while ago.

And there is nothing more ambitious than a billionaire who does something big *first*.

Soon, the road hypnotizes me, Paigelynn's breathing becoming more steady, her eyes closed as she rests her head against the seat. Winnie is a puffball in her lap, and I set the car on cruise control, looking at my phone.

A message from Debbie.

Van found.

The clock tells me we're twenty-two minutes away from my target, so I kick the speed up to 77 mph and hope we beat the people who are on our scent. Killing The Basher means I'll pay a heavy price if the wrong people find me first, but there's an advantage to what I've done as well.

When word gets out that someone like me took out someone that destructive, that huge, that predatory, it'll make folks think twice about taking me on.

People aren't stupid. Anyone with half a brain can piece together The Basher's death, Rooney's hamburger face, Paigelynn's disappearance, and the shooting of her bodyguards. They'll trace it all back to me, and when that happens, war will erupt.

The first real smile of the day spreads across my face as I take in a deep breath and revel in it.

Good, I think, as I watch Paigelynn sleep.

Fucking *good*.

CHAPTER NINE

PAIGELYNN

It's dark. Too dark.

Completely dark and cold.

“Wha?” I gasp, sitting up quickly. I can't see my hand in front of my face, but I can hear Winnie breathing in my lap. Another breath fills the air. “Cam?”

A hand goes to my knee. “Right here.”

“Where are we?”

“In a car underground.”

A pneumatic whirl, then a jolt followed by a squeal, like steel on steel, makes my stomach turn.

“Underground?”

“We're on a lift.”

“A lift?”

“An elevator for a car.”

“Where is it – ”

Before I can finish my question, we're descending, tiny little lights turning on in a row as we descend down a long shaft.

“What is this place?” I whisper.

“Our home for the next few weeks.”

“I mean, what is this place?”

“An underground bunker.”

“Bunker? Like where you hide during a war?”

“Yeah, Princess,” he says with a chuckle. “Exactly like a war.”

The car is hot, turning stifling with every breath. Sweat and musk fill the air as I feel my skin heat up. Claustrophobia isn't a problem for me, but I can feel a small panic starting in my gut, and I do not like this one little bit.

Not that I have a choice.

My heart is in my throat, and Winnie stands in my lap, circling a bit, clearing agitated. I only see her in flickers as the lights pass.

“How far down does this go?” I ask, Cam looking straight ahead. His hand comforts me, the touch soothing on my knee.

“About two hundred feet.”

Every inch of pressure weighs down on my head suddenly.

“And this is where we're going? What if someone follows us?”

“There's a small army of security guards who will turn them into fishing lures if they try.”

“You said you were taking me to a safe house. You weren't joking.”

“I would never joke about protecting you, Paigelynn.”

The way he squeezes my knee makes me flush, a warm feeling blooming in my blood, racing across my skin.

The elevator starts to slow down, the scent of gasoline instantly strong as pieces click into place and we halt with a suddenness that makes my heart try to escape my body out of my ear.

“Jesus,” he mutters.

A shaft of light cuts the darkness on the other side of the windshield and the door splits in two, revealing a parking

garage.

“I am guessing you don’t need to search long for a spot.”

“We’re it, Paigelynn. Just us,” he says as he drives the car forward, pulling into one of about twelve parking spots. The rest are empty.

Overhead lights, surprisingly warm, don’t look like the ones I’ve seen in parking garages before. These remind me more of sunlight, and I stare as he urges me to climb out of the car, my legs a bit numb from the ride. Winnie happily scampers off, away from us, where she finds a corner and promptly pees on the concrete.

I should care, but I don’t.

“Why does it feel like we’re in sunlight?” I ask him, looking up at the concrete ceiling.

“Lighting. Everything here is carefully calibrated to simulate sunlight.”

“It’s surreal.”

“When you get used to it, it’s not.”

“Who lives here long enough to get used to it?”

“You’d be surprised.”

“People really do live here? Right now?”

“Not now. It’s just us. This is an emergency bunker, designed for serious weather events or nuclear war.”

“Is there something you’re not telling me?”

“No, Princess, we’re not hiding out because of a nuclear attack. We’re here because too many people want you or me dead.”

The casual way he says that fills me with a bleakness that makes it hard to breathe.

“Why do they want me dead? Because of the prophecy?”

He puts his hands on my shoulders, kind eyes looking down at me as I raise my chin to meet his gaze.

“People want you dead for reasons of their own. It has nothing to do with you. I don’t understand it either, but I won’t let you feel shame for something that’s out of your control.”

“I don’t feel shame. Bewilderment. Confusion. Horror. But not shame.”

“Good.” Seconds tick by and he smiles down at me, our look deepening, my breath coming in slower and slower, body calming.

A clicking sound behind me makes me look.

A red button next to a large door begins to blink. Cam lets go of my shoulders and pulls out his phone, then laughs.

“Useless brick.”

As if he’s been here before, he strides to the door, pressing the pad of his finger against a small spot next to the blinking red light. The door opens, and I smell...

Coconut?

Winnie wiggles in my arms, but we’re in a hallway now, one that turns to carpet after a handful of steps. A breeze surprises me, the walls blank but warm, the ceiling turned to wood the color of honey.

Suddenly exhausted, I force my legs to move forward until we turn a corner to find a beautiful living room.

With an enormous picture window on one wall, but it’s blank.

Cam presses his finger against a different pad.

Suddenly, the glass shows a waterfall, big and powerful, the sound of it jarring. Another breeze makes me feel like the fine mist of the water’s spray is tickling my nose.

“What is this?”

“This,” he says, “is a very exclusive bunker.”

“You said that, but – what is this? I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Can I give you the tour and the explanation after I shower, Paigelynn? I’m still covered in grime from the day, and I think there’s blood in my cuticles.” Cam sniffs his armpit and makes a face. “I’m ripe.”

The giggle escapes me before I can stop it, wondering how I smell right now, too.

“Of course. I’d love a shower, too.” Then it hits me. “I have no clothes. Nothing.”

He walks me to a door on the left. The room we’re in is enormous, with a cathedral ceiling that goes up another story, twin ceiling fans spinning lazily above us. The arched ceiling is warm wood, the lights lending a cozy glow. The waterfall scene, I now understand, is fake.

All light must be down here.

At the door, he turns the knob and shows me a beautiful bedroom, half the size of the living room, with a big soaker tub off to one corner. White tile surrounds it, the bedroom carpet a lovely sea-blue, the duvet covered in white with blue seashells. Sea glass in various odd shapes dots a sequence of shelves next to a white fireplace, and when I inhale, the salty scent of the ocean makes me smile.

“They really have thought of everything.”

I’m not sure who they are, but when Cam says that, I just nod and smile.

“There are clothes in your size. Everything is casual, unless you want something more formal. I can order that,” he says, pointing to a door that I assume is a closet.

“Order?”

“We have staff.”

“Staff?”

“People who can get us whatever we want.”

I want you.

The thought slams through me, hard and visceral, turning my cheeks pink in seconds as hot blood races through me.

Making eye contact with him is impossible, so I turn toward the bathroom and hope I don't stagger from the enormity of my lust.

“Wonderful. I think I'll be fine,” I choke out.

“Give her to me,” Cam says, arms reaching out for Winnie. “We have a doggie area for her. Obviously, we can't take her for walks, so we'll have to train her.”

“Train her – oh!”

“There's a simulated grass area for her.”

“They really did think of everything.”

“Even billionaires want their favorite pets when they're hiding from nuclear fallout.”

“Who wouldn't?” I walk into the bathroom and slowly close the door, staring at the six-head shower before me, encased in glass. As I press my back against the door, I let out an enormous breath and slide down to the cold tile floor, mind racing.

It feels like half a life ago I was just talking to Jason, but he's dead now. Cam rescued me from death. Someone in this world sent that beast, The Basher, to kill me. Jason and Malcolm were about to hand me off to him.

On orders from my masters.

If my masters are all part of a fake cult designed to convince people like my parents to hand over children like me to be controlled, as Cam says, then why? Why would anyone do such a thing to a child, the child I was thirteen years ago? What possible benefit do they find in imprisoning someone like me?

Thank goodness for Cam. He's telling me all these truths, sharing his own story with me to help me understand all the layers of reality versus lies.

Without Winnie in my arms, I can fall apart, my body trembling, neck going tight, a pain forming between my eyes. Throbbing harder and harder, the ache deepens. A hot shower will help.

If nothing else, I need to cleanse the day from my skin.

I force myself to stand, stomach hollow. I'm hungry but sick. Tired but unable to rest. Angry but resigned. Nothing about this day makes any sense, but I stand and open the shower, reaching for what looks like the dial, hot spray pouring out like rainfall. Steam rises quickly, and soon I remove my clothes, noticing dirt, dark rust stains that must be blood, and something sticky I don't recognize.

As I remove my shirt, my elbow hurts, the skin around it tender.

The mirror shows me a face I barely recognize, shock turning my eyes empty.

"Who am I?" I ask the mirror, as if it will answer.

As if it will tell me.

As if it will release the secret.

The hot water hurts my feet, my body gingerly stepping back. On the tiled wall, there is a bank of dispensers, each neatly labeled with script font. Shampoo. Body Wash. Conditioner. Moisturizer. Ignoring them, I slowly immerse myself in the downpour and let the steam envelop me, the offer of warm comfort from the water a welcome relief.

Tears don't come, and that is a surprise.

Instead, I'm filled with an unbearable grief, mind struggling to comprehend what is real. Cam could be lying to me, but why would he? He rescued me from The Basher, caught me before Jason and Malcolm betrayed me, interrupted Makiah before he hurt me, and now – Cam brought me here.

If it's true I've been living in an imprisoned state all these years in a fake cult designed to do something I don't understand, then he is my liberator.

But how can his words be true? Since I was twelve, I've spent every day in training. Been given countless manuals, webinars, and courses. Carefully nurtured by a fleet of bodyguards. Lived in beautiful homes, my body treated with utter reverence. Centuries of prophecy cannot be invented by

someone for the sake of power, can they? Perhaps Cam is the one who has been brainwashed.

Misled.

Or he is misinterpreting.

“I am the light,” I whisper to myself, “I am the prophecy.”

Closing my eyes, I let the water wash away the fear, the terror, the confusion, the madness.

I’m fifteen stories underground, surrounded by luxury.

My eyes fly open. Panic shoots through me.

Fifteen stories underground.

Cell phones do not work.

No one knows where I am.

I hope I made the right choice.

I really do.

Because what if – what if – I’ve just traded one prison for another?

CHAPTER TEN

Cam

“You are out of your fucking mind,” Debbie growls at me over the secured phone line. “I can’t protect you.”

Paigelynn’s asleep in the other room, her head resting delicately against the satin pillowcase, hair arranged around her face like an angel. I have visual on her at all times, courtesy of the camera room I’m in right now.

“I’m doing fine on my own.”

“Who’s helping you?”

“None of your business.”

“It’s all my damn business, Cam. You know that. I know you work for more than one master, but I’m one of them, too!”

“Fine, mistress,” I snap back. “You couldn’t cut it. Dropped the ball. Didn’t give me the tools I needed. So I found someone else who has the right tools.”

“And you turned me into one!”

“We’re on the same side,” I assure her, though we both know that’s partially a lie. “Paigelynn is safe. I stopped The Basher before he got her.”

“Good save, but what the hell? Why would any of those crazy billionaires want her dead?”

“That’s the part that makes no sense.”

“Is it as simple as ‘if I can’t have her, no one can’?”

“Maybe.”

“You sound skeptical.”

“I am.”

“Is it possible her tissue matches to only one family? And one wants to kill her just to prevent the other from getting her organs?”

I’ve underestimated Debbie’s intelligence. Fuck. That never occurred to me. And Debbie has no idea there’s a third family vying for Paigelynn, which makes her hypothesis even more possible.

My hesitation makes her groan.

“I don’t think that would do it,” I answer slowly, struggling to think it all through without tipping my hand too much. Paigelynn stirs on camera, and a small censor on the screen turns yellow. It’s hour seventeen of slumber for her, and the bio scans the system does on her indicate she’s deep in REM sleep, on a new cycle.

I managed thirteen hours of deep sleep before my body started screaming for caffeine.

Then Debbie started screaming for a call. The staff here at the bunker patched her through.

“Then what? Why send The Basher?” she muses.

“Maybe he went rogue?”

“Guys like that don’t *fart* without a paycheck, Cam. He doesn’t just kill a woman like her for funsies. Someone paid him a lot to do what he did.”

“What’s the word on the street about him? Have people figured out he’s dead?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Is my name attached to it?”

“Not yet. And the other two virgins have gone on lockdown now that words gotten out about Paigelynn.”

“You zeroed in on their locations already?”

For a moment, time wobbles. I rewind in my mind. Only three days ago, I was sitting next to Newman at a terminal bank, trying not to smell his sweaty stink, brushing off potato chip crumbs from keyboards.

Time really does warp.

“Not location, but there’s buzz out there. We’re hoping this little stunt of yours smokes them out. Newman’s working overtime with your algorithm to find exact names and locations.”

“I could do so much better.”

“Well, you’re not here, are you?” she responds with a bitter tone. “Plus, we interviewed Makiah Rooney, and he said nothing. You turned his face into an abstract watercolor, though.”

“The pleasure was all mine.”

“I’ll bet. After what he did to you at Gaia...”

“Yeah.”

“Stock price for Synergy900 Holdings is all over the place right now, too.”

“Really? That means Rooney said something.”

“Or the person who sent The Basher has an agenda tied into the whole DNA database.”

I don’t want to say too much to Debbie, but I have to say something to someone. Being a lone wolf has its pluses, but sometimes you need a team.

Even if it’s a team you’ll double-cross in a heartbeat.

That’s why working with Debbie is possible. We both know we’ll screw each other in a second if it’s the most expedient thing to do for our goals.

And that means we respect each other.

“How so?” I ask, purposefully being vague.

“Synergy900 Holdings is a shell corporation. A front. A bullshit operation created to look like a consumer product but

it's really all about weeding these Viking Virgins out from the general population so the billionaires can play Build-a-Kidney with them," she says in a tight voice. "Why would their stock price fluctuate after Paigelynn's been taken from the people controlling her?"

"Or from The Basher's death."

"Or," she adds, "from a variable we're not considering."

Me?

I wonder if *I'm* the variable.

"These people do what they need to do to survive. They're cockroaches. Rich cockroaches. Wealthy beyond fathomability," I say, looking around the thousand-square-foot open-concept living room I'm in, with the kitchen a wall of sparkling stainless steel. A press of a button changes the waterfall to the ocean, the lapping sound of waves on sand and the color tone of light so good a simulation I can feel sand in my ass crack.

"Yeah. And they don't like losing. Ever. Not money, not companies, not trophy wives, and certainly not incubators and organ donors. You're currently hiding a billion-dollar virgin."

"Thanks for lowering the stakes, Debbie." I've already had a cup of coffee, but the conversation tires me, so I find the espresso machine, recessed into the wall, inside a cabinet, and press a button.

Grinding commences. Water heats, then pours from a valve pressed hard against the coffee grounds. Someone, years ago, got paid an exorbitant sum by a billionaire, signed an NDA to never discuss this location, all to set up a water filtration and delivery system that would go two hundred feet underground so I can make push-button espresso and caffeinate.

God bless America.

"Wherever you are, I hope you have a good team defending you."

So do I, I think but don't say. When you spend most of your adult life finding ways to play people against each other,

you never really trust anyone.

Least of all, yourself.

“We’re good. She’s sleeping now. Yesterday was a lot.”

“The last thirteen years of her life have been a lot. It’s a miracle you got to her before they did.”

“God had no hand in this. All human effort.”

“You’re a piece of shit for not telling me what you knew.”

“If I told you, the information could have been leaked.”

“I would never do that to you.”

“I know you wouldn’t. It’s the other people in TINSAs who would.”

“You think Newman’s a leaker? Or Lauren?”

“No. It’s not about people leaking. It’s about information. Hackers. You can be drum tight and still get fucked over by people halfway around the world. You know that.”

“You still owe me an explanation for how you knew about The Basher.”

“I didn’t know.” That’s technically the truth, but as I sip my coffee and burn my tongue, I can’t help but feel that I deserve the pain a bit. I’m lying. I didn’t know it would be The Basher, but I knew something horrible was about to go down.

“You are impossible to understand.”

“Thanks for the compliment.”

On the monitor, I see Paigelynn rustle, rolling over, her chest rising and falling as she breathes. We’re here for as long as it takes, or until we’re compromised, which I think is about a week.

Given that we’re two hundred feet underground and there’s only one way in or out, we need to make sure there are no close calls.

“What’s your end game?” Debbie asks. “I can get her into the witness protection program.”

I bark out a laugh. “You mean set her up to be murdered in three days after she starts.”

“It’s not that bad.”

“Don’t even think about it.”

“We can find deep cover for her. Give her a life again. The poor kid knows nothing but that brainwashing bullshit. Her parents are still convinced. True believers.”

“You checked in on them?”

“Surveillance. Sure.”

“Do they know Paigelynn’s missing?”

“Not yet. That’s why we were watching. To see who visits them. Gives us some idea of who the stakeholders are.”

“They’re pawns.”

“Yes. Normal people caught in Rooney’s bullshit, then convinced to have the whole family get DNA testing. Rooney hit the jackpot with Paigelynn. She’s the only one his ministry has brought in who was a solid hit, and he knows it.”

“He tried to fuck her,” I blurt out, regretting the words instantly.

“He what?”

“She got away from me. Ran to Rooney’s. I beat his face in because he was forcing her to get naked.”

She snorts. “That piece of shit.”

“Are you actually surprised?”

“No. But yes. She has a billion-dollar hymen, Cam. Even Rooney isn’t bold enough to break *that*.”

All I can do is grunt.

Debbie continues ranting. “If they ever caught him fucking her, they wouldn’t just kill him. Someone like The Basher would start by removing his nuts while Rooney squealed and go from there.”

“Thanks for the imagery.”

“Why would he even try with her?”

Her question sends rage through my blood. It’s a good point, one I haven’t considered before. Between The Basher and Rooney’s advances on her, Jason and Malcolm’s odd behavior, and what I know behind the scenes but will never tell Debbie, the ground beneath my feet is shifting fast.

Like a new fault line is emerging.

“Because he has a cock.”

“For the record, you said it. Not me.”

“I have never claimed that men are anything but depraved creatures in search of warm holes.” My coffee has cooled down enough to take a sip without destroying my taste buds.

“Again, you said it, not me.”

“But you agree.”

“Hell yes. What’s the end game here? You’re rejecting witness protection. You’re not planning to actually deliver her to that auction, are you?”

“They’ll hunt her down no matter what.”

“That’s not a no.”

“No, Debbie, I don’t plan to deliver her to the auction. But the masters want their money. They’ve got a multi-billion-dollar business going, and as you’ve pointed out repeatedly, I’m holding some of their product outside the warehouse.”

“Stolen goods,” she hisses into the phone.

“I’m sure there’s no insurance policy that covers this.”

“Then what? What are you going to do? You think you can just keep hiding and live out some happily-ever-after fantasy with Paigelynn?”

“That’s not what this is about.”

“You’re a man, Cam. You just told me you’re all depraved creatures in search of warm holes.”

I hold back from telling her I found one. We’re in it, two hundred feet underground, and it has excellent espresso in it.

“I didn’t steal her so I can fuck her. I rescued her so I can save her.”

“Save her for what?”

“So she gets to have an actual life. Control over her own body. Autonomy. You know, the shit everyone except Viking Virgins takes for granted.”

“How entrenched is she in her beliefs?”

“She tried to turn to fucking Makiah Rooney to save her from me, Debbie. How deeply brainwashed do you think she is?”

“You start telling her any truths yet?”

“Yeah. A lot.”

“Don’t overwhelm her.”

“I’m trying. I’m no expert, though.”

“You got a lot of help after Gaia was busted.”

She’s right, yet she’s also very wrong. Debbie has no idea how wrong, though. She thinks I was adopted by a nice family in New Jersey who raised me in a comfortable, caring home, with summers spent in Italy with my adoptive parents’ extended family. That I was sent to the best day schools in New York and had a team of psychologists to help me through recovery from all those years in Gaia and the trauma of my sister’s death. My parents’ imprisonment.

How Mom testified against Dad.

How Dad hung himself in his cell.

How Mom got out on early release when I was nineteen.

Debbie thinks the stunt I pulled by breaking into Gaia’s HQ when I was nineteen was rooted in psychological trauma from my mother trying to re-establish contact then, and she’s not wrong. What she doesn’t know is that my mother moved from one cult to another, seamless and sure, to take another position in the Viking Virgins, nurturing young women.

As The Mother.

But I'm not going to think about all that now.

"Let's focus on her. You're right – we need an end game," I say, playing along with the concept. "Witness protection is useless. The Luisi family and the Donegals aren't going to just let her slip away."

Plus, there's a third family Debbie doesn't know about.

"She's young. We can change her appearance."

"Can't change her DNA."

"No, but the average person isn't getting scraped and karotyped."

"She isn't the average person. You know damn well anyone with that rare kidney disorder is going to be all over her kidneys. And then there's a liver..."

"You make her sound like a side of beef."

"I'm the one keeping her alive, Debbie."

"*We're* keeping her alive. Don't you try to lone wolf it again."

I look up at the ceiling, neck straining as the arched cavern makes me smile. The waves on the fake ocean are so real, I feel my blood starting to match the rhythm, which is nothing more than an algorithm connected to a visual recording. It's soothing, so realistic it makes me long for a dip in the water.

I'm sure there's a saltwater pool somewhere down here.

"I did what I had to do."

"And you ditched your dog on us. That's cold, Cam."

"How is Butter doing?"

"Fine. Lauren's taking him in. We told her you got assigned to a new, emergency project."

"That's true."

"That's not true. You ran off on me, hid vital information, and triangulated."

“Tell Lauren he really, really likes Velveeta chunks. He’s a good boy who will obey any command for a piece of plastic cheese.”

“You’re such an asshole.”

“Yes, but I’m an effective asshole. If we play this right, the ring of organ trafficking billionaires falls apart forever. Consumer DNA database companies won’t be able to play these sick games. It’s not just the Viking Virgins bullshit, and you know it. They’re doing way more gray hat crap that flies under the radar.”

“I know. All the blackmail going on. We’re getting more and more reports of people who find out they have seventeen half siblings and heyo – the fertility doctor Mom and Dad visited in 1995 turned out to be pumping his hot loads straight into Mom.”

“And all the Vietnam vets who left a little piece of love behind.”

“Those are sad ones,” she says with a sigh. “Sometimes the American dads take them and their kids in. Sometimes the dad died before meeting them.”

“I’ve seen the documentaries. No one’s making award-winning movies about the Luisi family creating a cult to deprive parents of their daughters and turning them into meat puppets.”

“Not yet,” she says with disgust.

“But there are plenty of other ways those consumer DNA databases create sickening messes people use to prey on unsuspecting folks.”

“Or reveal secrets people want hidden forever,” she says. “Nothing like getting a call out of the blue when you’re eighty-five from your seventy-one-year-old kid you gave up for adoption because your father raped you.”

“Ooof.”

“Yeah. That’s a new one. The kid has seven half-siblings. Turns out Grandpa raped every single daughter he had and

they all were forced to go to ‘unwed mother’ homes and give up their babies.”

“Jesus, Debbie.”

“Jesus had nothing to do with what that man did. We see nothing but crazy shit in this job. Guy like that would be trafficking girls these days. Only the lack of technology held him back. Seventy years ago, all he had were his own daughters and probably a few neighbor girls to target. Now he would catfish on the internet, use burner phones, and get his hands on the right sedatives.”

“You make Luddism look good.”

“I don’t do anything, Cam. I just try to get these women and girls into safer situations. We can’t stop evil from doing what it does. We can just halt it from doing more of it when we uncover the truth.”

The fact that she can even say something so idealistic makes me nearly laugh out loud.

And at the same time, her words shore up my own need for revenge. Stopping what the masters are doing is paramount. It’s my mission. Saving Paigelynn is almost an afterthought.

Almost.

“Then again,” Debbie says with a chuckle, “I am not sure I even know what the truth is in this mess. Whose truth are you following?”

I laugh with her.

But don’t take the bait.

“Wherever you are, as long as you’re safe and she’s safe, I won’t pry. We’re working on locating the other women. We have it narrowed down to 100-mile zones. Let me work on an end game plan. Talk to Paigelynn about it, too.”

“Right.”

“She needs agency, Cam. The whole point of this operation is to give these women a real life again.”

The whole point is to make them pay.

Debbie doesn't know that, so it's easier to shine her on.

"Right. I am easing into that. She's still hung up on the whole princess, queen, king thing."

"True believer?"

"Not quite. The cracks are definitely in the facade. It's a lot to tell someone."

"It's like taking a starving person and shoving a buffet in front of them. They'll die if they eat too fast. Don't overwhelm her."

"I'm trying not to, but I'm not a trained psychologist. Not a cult expert like Steven Hassan."

"You want him? I can work some channels."

"No. Can't compromise location."

"Video call?"

"Paigelynn isn't in that kind of danger."

"No signs of psychosis?"

"Not a single one."

"Good. Watch out for it. When you break someone's reality, it can cause serious downstream effects."

A memory of Mira's dead body makes it hard to breathe, police lights flashing in the background, my father screaming my name.

"No shit."

"You're going to have to feed her the truth in small bites. One good thing: she was taken in when she was twelve. She has memories of normalcy."

"Yeah."

"Some of them were much, much younger."

Anger rushes through me as I finish my coffee. "We need to find them."

"It's harder. No trail. The ones who are older have records. Birth certificates. School attendance. Parents we can track.

The newer ones...”

“Designed from birth to just be the closest thing to a clone as you can get.”

“It’s disgusting.”

“It’s ingenious,” I say, awe at the complexity and arrogance it takes to turn babies into products you carve up like a butcher overpowering my own disgust.

“In a sick way, yes.”

“It’s all sick.”

“And we need to stop it.”

On the screen, Paigelynn moves again, the sheet sliding off her chest, one creamy breast round and high as she rolls onto her side and nestles in. I smile at the image, memories shoved away, back into the box where they belong.

“We are stopping it, Debbie,” I say, my phone interrupted by another text. “We are.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

PAIGELYNN

I am on a throne.

My crown is heavy, so much weight my neck hurts. I struggle to balance it, but I cannot let it fall. That will make the world lose its orbit around the sun.

A chill runs along my skin. I am completely nude, my hair swept up in braids that pile around the crown, woven into it so it holds the heavy gold in place. Cool metal rubs against my ass, my thighs, the outer edges of my vulva, uncomfortable but necessary.

I breathe slowly. Carefully. Controlled. Discomfort is of no consequence.

I learn to ignore it.

Pain is necessary. The burden of ruling the world comes with sacrifices.

I am alone, in a large ice cave, the ceiling endless, the floor nothing but thick ice with shapes trapped in it, the surface shiny and reflective. Light, cold and blue, fills the space. My platform is metal, forged with thick curling majesty.

Each breath I take suspends time.

Each second I think captures millennia.

My elbow aches with the weight of my staff, and as I let my eyes roam, the ice changes, warping, the rustle of movement to

my right making me turn. My neck screams with the effort, for the crown feels like concrete, but I persevere.

My king approaches.

Unlike me, he moves with confidence, head held high, his crown carried like a feather on his dark hair. Deep, intense eyes meet mine for but a second before I look away in deference.

I must always defer.

“Come here,” he orders as I watch him in my peripheral vision, his long, muscular, naked form approaching, one hand on his hip, the other waving me to him. I stand, my shoes tall, my knees wobbly.

I am not worthy.

I must do better.

A king like Cameron deserves a queen with more poise. More honor. More skill.

Just... more.

I am inadequate. I am insecure. I am untrained.

I am unworthy.

And now, I am walking toward him, down a long slope, each step I take melting the walls around us, water pooling at our feet. He ignores it, even as it rises to his calves, then to my knees, until I am wading through the cool water, balancing the crown on my head, trying desperately not to fall.

“You have failed me,” he says, except I was wrong. This is not Cam.

This is Makiah Rooney.

I scream and stagger back, falling into the water, my crown so heavy it drags my head under the deepening pool. Instantly, it all freezes, trapping me in place, body flat on the ground, palms pushing me up, breasts jutting out, mouth open in a scream.

I cannot breathe.

I cannot move.

I cannot rule.

I cannot serve.

Although I am encased and trapped, Rooney is not, and his hands melt the ice around me, his touch cruel and casual, calculated and invasive. I am paralyzed, stuck and cold, eternally damned to be an object he can do whatever he wishes to.

This is my fate.

This is all I am.

This is who I am.

And this is all I will ever be.

Suddenly, Makiah is gone, the ice melting like a thunderclap, my lungs seizing with effort as I choke and gasp, oxygen filling me as if it comes on the tips of knives. Each breath is a dagger to my ribs, but it feels so pleasurable at the same time, as if pain and ecstasy are one. My skin is so cold it feels like rubber and my crown pins me to the floor, but I breathe, belly rising and falling as I cough, gasping and flailing like a fish on the shore.

“My queen.” Warm, caring hands touch my shoulders, my breasts, my hips, and soon I’m scooped up, strong muscled arms under my shoulders and the backs of my knees, lifted from the floor, weak and limp as a noodle.

“My king. I am so sorry.” It’s Cam’s arms holding me, Cam’s thick thighs propelling us forward, Cam’s sweet breath against my face as I snuggle against him. He’s taking me someplace safe, where I can recover.

“You have nothing to apologize for. You have done your duty,” he whispers. “It is I who should apologize.”

Fear rips through me.

“No!”

“Yes. I failed you. The world failed you. You’ve been nothing but perfect. Obedient and true. Everyone has

disappointed you. Including me. Most of all, me.”

“You cannot say such things!” Wiggling in his arms, I muster the strength to look up.

His face is a black pit of nothingness.

I scream, but the words turn into silence, the vibration making my ears bleed. The black hole that is Cam, is no one, is Makiah, is The Mother, dips its nothingness head down to suck the life out of me, all that I am being consumed by this thing that holds me tight against it, until I cannot think, cannot breathe. My pulse disappears, and I wake up drenched in sweat, screaming.

Screaming and staring into Cam’s face.

Which is a face.

A real face.

“NOOOOOOOOO!” I shriek, clawing at his arms, tumbling off the bed to get away from him, my heart a hammer against my throat, my legs numb and unstable, bending like rubber.

“Paigelynn! You’re having a nightmare.” He stands, stepping back. “You were screaming in your sleep.”

“You – you! You are my king! And Makiah had me in ice, touching me everywhere, every part of me, with a sick fever. And then you picked me up, but your face became a hole, one that sucked me in and consumed me and then The Mother – ”

“The Mother what?” he asks sharply, his entire demeanor changing.

“She – I don’t know. The – it was a dream?”

“Only a dream. No one can hurt you now. Especially not The Mother.”

“I – I wore a crown. I was in an ice cave. We – we were king and queen. But the crown was so heavy. My shoes were hard to wear. And I was naked.”

“That’s a lot for the subconscious to process.”

“The what?”

Behind him, Winnie jogs in, up on her front legs, whining to be with me.

“Your mind. It’s using dreams to make sense of everything you’re learning.”

“Oh.” When I swallow, my throat tickles, forcing me to cough. My mouth is dry, so dry it hurts to lick my lips. “Is – is there water? Somewhere?”

“Right here, Princess.”

I look at him as he hands me a small glass. “Please don’t call me that.”

“I – sure. Of course not.”

“It feels weird now.”

“I can only imagine.”

We sit in silence, the room dark, a low glow along the floor the only light. The water tastes pure and true, and I finish the glass so fast.

“Please. I need more.”

Cam is holding Winnie now, who strains in his arms, trying to reach me.

“Can you stand?”

I realize I’m on the floor, cross-legged, my calves cold. The sheets are tangled around me, and my stomach feels like someone scooped it out.

“Yes,” I say, proving my words right, though I need to steady myself with a hand on the bed.

“There’s plenty more water in the kitchen, and food if you’re hungry.”

My stomach roars.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” he says with a laugh. Cam’s face is different now, lighter.

And much cleaner.

He's dressed in a casual blue polo shirt, jeans, and is barefoot. As we walk out of the room, I realize I'm wearing pajamas. After my shower, I found them in a drawer. They are modest, pink flannel pajamas with snowflakes on them.

I run one hand through my hair. "I went to sleep with it wet."

"You look fine."

"I'm not – not allowed to look like this."

"What do you mean?"

"I am expected to look perfect at all times. You need to – to leave me alone."

"Those rules don't apply here, Prin – Paigelynn."

His words make me pause.

"They don't?" I'm holding my breath. I seem only to inhale after speaking.

"They don't. You are free to do whatever you want here."

"Anything?"

"Anything except leave."

Overwhelming emotion makes me throw my arms around his neck and pull him to me for an embrace, the need for kind human contact so great that I transgress. This isn't about lust or attraction. I'm not asking him for a kiss or more.

I just need a hug.

I need someone to hold me and tell me it will all be okay.

I need to cry.

I need to breathe in someone's embrace.

Cam holds me and guides me gently to a large, overstuffed chair, where he sits down and pulls me onto his lap, where I curl into a ball, like a kitten, as he strokes my hair and whispers, "It's okay. You're going to be okay. We'll get through this. You're safe. You don't need to make your hair perfect. You don't need to suffer or make sacrifices. You can eat what you want and sleep when you're tired." The words

don't really matter, though the tone does. His meaning shines through in his gentle, tender handling of me.

I cry for my parents.

I cry for my past.

I cry for my present.

I cry for my dreams.

I cry for my lies.

I cry for my truths.

Most of all, I just cry because I have so much pain. Too much confusion. Too many questions and not enough answers. Cam thinks everything I've been taught is a lie, but he, too, was in a cult once.

Maybe he's being deceived.

What if the people helping him get me away from all that death and destruction are wrong? What if he's been told the masters are fake, and The Mother is telling me lies, and he's a victim just like me?

"Cam," I ask, sniffing, "you told me everything I know is a lie."

"Yes."

"You never explained the most important part."

"What's that?"

"Why am I treated this way? Why would someone spend the last thirteen years training me for a world that does not exist?"

His hand halts on the top of my head. "What do you mean?"

"What is the purpose of so many elaborate lies if what you say is true? Why me?"

His hand remains still. His whole body, even. I've been holding my breath on and off, as if my lungs cannot quite decide how to behave.

Now he is doing it, too.

“That is a big question.”

“It is the only important question.”

“Prin – Paigelynn?”

“Yes?”

“I am not certain how to answer that.”

“Because you do not know the answer?”

“Yes,” he says slowly, chin nodding, pressing against my ear. “That’s right. Because I do not know the answer.”

“If you do not know why someone would keep me imprisoned in a fake cult, then how do you know it is all fake?”

His slow inhale sounds like the ocean.

“You are so much smarter than anyone gives you credit for being.”

“How do you know?”

“Because you ask very insightful questions.”

My stomach makes a very boisterous sound.

“You need coffee and breakfast.”

I agree with him and uncurl myself, my legs sturdier, though I miss the contact of being in his lap.

But my stomach has demands, too.

“I cannot drink coffee!” I scoff as he walks into the kitchen, opens a cabinet, and presses some buttons, a grinding sound beginning.

“Why not?”

“It makes my body less pure. Caffeine causes many problems with hormones.”

“If you drink enough, though, it prevents diabetes.”

“I am not genetically prone to diabetes.”

“How do you know about your genetics?”

“My trainer and nutritionist talk about it with me.”

“Do they give you reports?”

“They do. Where is the food?”

He thumbs toward the refrigerator. “In there.”

I am not quite certain what to do next. In my safe houses, my bodyguards and staff served me. I was free to have specific snacks, always prepared in advance by a chef who delivered all portions. Eating anything outside the scope of my daily nutrition was, well...

Impossible.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“You’re hesitating.” Cam opens the right-side silver door, revealing an abundance of food. Small, pre-packaged containers, glass with white lids, fill one side of the fridge, while the crisper drawers are full of fruits and vegetables. “Eat whatever you want.”

“I had that protein bar before we arrived.”

“That was twenty hours ago, Paigelynn.”

“Twenty hours? How long have I been asleep?”

“Nineteen.”

“NINETEEN HOURS?”

“I slept for thirteen. We needed it.”

“No wonder I am so hungry.” As I look over the plums and grapes in the lower drawer, then see small wheels of cheese in red wax, an insatiable starving feeling overcomes me.

“Go on.” He waves at the food. “Eat.”

“I need help,” I confess.

“Help?”

“I have – have never – not since the Before Times – eaten anything that was not carefully measured and apportioned for me.”

He closes his eyes as if in pain. “So that part of my report was true?”

“Report?”

“I received information about how they treat you. You are on a carefully calibrated nutrition regimen. Vitamin shots, hormone balancing, careful nutrition for optimal health.”

“Yes. Bloodwork every three months. Maintaining control and restraint is key to being in prime shape for my destiny.”

His eyes narrow, and he turns away from me, reaching for a glass container. Cam opens it and looks at me. “You like lasagna?”

“Oh, no. No pasta. I can eat resistant starch carbohydrates, of course. Legume pasta is fine. I need a balance of nuts and –”

Smiling, he walks to a microwave and begins heating the glass container. Then he goes into the freezer and pulls out a small box, yellow cardboard with bright red letters on it.

“Egg rolls,” he says, opening a small door on an odd-looking countertop over, pulling out a silver cooking sheet. “I’m sure there’s some good soy sauce here, too.”

“Soy sauce! Too much sodium. Is – I can just eat a plum. Perhaps there is some quinoa?”

The look he gives me makes me think I’ve broken a rule I have not been told about.

As I watch Cam line up egg rolls on the cooking sheet, the microwave rotates the glass dish, the scent of Italian spices and cooked cheese filtering into the air. It smells so good I wish I had a spoon to eat the air.

With deft hands, Cam puts the egg rolls in the small oven and sets a timer. The heating element lights up, and the egg rolls begin to heat.

“Fuck your nutrition,” he says.

“Excuse me?”

“Fuck. Your. Nutrition. I told you there aren’t any rules here. Eat what you want. Drink what you want.” From the cabinet, he extracts an espresso in a clear little mug. “Have a coffee. Eat ice cream. Be human.”

“I am human!”

“Be as imperfect as you want, Paigelynn. You aren’t beholden to the masters anymore.”

“I am only three days away from turning twenty-five. Somewhere, there is a man who is my husband, waiting for me. You – you say you are not my husband, yet you wear his mark. Why?”

The microwave dings. He holds up one finger, finds a fork in a drawer, then goes to the microwave, poking around. Soon, Cam sets the timer for three more minutes and returns to our conversation.

I walk to the fridge and extract a plum from the crisper drawer, washing it in the sink, holding my head over the sink as I bite into it.

“How is it?” he asks.

“Perfect. Ripe and sweet, yet there’s a firmness to the flesh.”

His eyes roam over my body.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Cam

She's killing me.

Holding her in my lap like that made me want to keep her safe with me forever. Block out the world above us and just live here, happy and together. While her pain is enormous and I can't take it away, the conversation with Debbie haunts me.

Paigelynn and I are here in this safe place because of that third billionaire family. The one Debbie doesn't know about. The Luisis and the Donegals know about the Javics, but they don't know I'm aligned with them.

And now I'm wondering if Debbie's right.

What if one of the billionaire families learned that Paigelynn is useless to them genetically? And decided to add a spoiler to the whole auction by killing her off so no one gets her?

No one benefits?

It's a bold move. Deceptive. Sabotage at its finest because these families have spent nine figures on this entire scheme, and success is just starting.

Barely.

Paigelynn and the two others Debbie's zeroing in on aren't first pancakes, but they're part of the first few crops.

Here I am feeding one of their meat bags some lasagna and egg rolls, followed by ice cream bars. Hmmm.

Maybe wine next? Time to teach Paigelynn about the wonders of alcohol.

Truth be told, I'm not sure what the fuck I'm doing. We're here because of a non-player, someone with no direct stake in what "the masters" are doing with the Viking Virgins. Paul Saari has been my point man on this, giving me free rein here at his bunker, full availability of confidential staff, and protection.

Protection that relies on some favor he'll call in eventually. One that doesn't involve organ trafficking.

Well, not in the traditional sense.

I might have to serve my balls up on a platter at some point.

Can't tell any of that to Debbie.

When he first reached out to offer me a safe house, I asked him what was in it for him.

His answer made me smile.

"Watching those fuckers lose."

If there's anything a billionaire enjoys more than money, it's competition. And when it comes to competing, it can be as pleasurable to deny another person their victory as it is to be the winner.

Another thought, creepy and uncomfortable, filters into my stream of consciousness. As of now, we have three Viking Virgins. Paigelynn and one other are the only matches for an incurable kidney disease. Killing Paigelynn would cause a bidding war by the two families with that condition.

The auction is, in some ways, a formality. Everyone knows who wants what, why they want it, and how much they can afford to spend.

Removing an asset changes the balance of power.

Someone likes change.

"Cam? Mmmm," Paigelynn groans as she gobbles the plum like she's teabagging it. Keeping my cock in my pants is

going to be increasingly hard – like me – as time passes.

No Basher to kill. No bodyguards to outsmart. No cars to steal. We're in the ultimate luxury palace and have at least a few days to recover here.

Keeping my hands to myself will be a challenge.

She's sending me plenty of signals, and I'm not misreading them. Virginal Ms. Paigelynn has the hots for me – whether I'm her king or not – and while I know deprogramming her doesn't mean deflowering her, if she asks...

Is there really a difference?

“How's that plum?”

“It tastes like freedom.”

“Then you're going to orgasm when you have lasagna.”

Her eyes get huge as I say the word *orgasm*, cheeks turning pink.

DING!

Saved by the bell.

The glass container has two servings in it, so I grab two plates, another fork, and split it in half, sliding her serving across the counter.

“I'm too hungry to be formal,” I inform her, shoving my fork deep into the dish, hacking off a corner. It's hot but not enough to burn the roof of my mouth, and as I eat the first bite, I realize I'm starving, too.

While she slept, I had coffee and some toast. This – this is a meal.

Looking at the plate uncertainly, she takes the edge of her fork and cuts off the tiniest amount, giving me a furrowed-brow look.

“You – you're sure? The Mother won't yell at me for eating off my program?”

“Has she done that before?” Blind rage turns my vision nearly white.

“Oh, yes. It’s the only time I’ve ever been yelled at.”

“Really?” My heart wants to explode from my chest, find the woman, and strangle her with my left ventricle. Even Debbie doesn’t know the truth.

That The Mother is *my* mother.

How could she know? The Mother doesn’t exist outside of the world of the handful of women she brainwashes for the masters. Steeped in shadows, lurking below the surface, she’s seen only on video chat. Never in person.

Until the auction.

I haven’t seen her in fourteen years.

And I don’t plan to see her ever again.

Talking about her with Paigelynn, painful and sickening as it is, gives me useful information I can use against The Mother.

So I ask.

“Why would The Mother yell at you?”

Paigelynn eyes her bite seriously. “Because I stole.” Guilty eyes meet mine.

“Stole?”

She tears up. “I – I was hungry. One of my former bodyguards, Guido, had a stash of these little chocolate candies. They had peanut butter in them. They were more like protein bars. Like half-size. Very much similar to the one we ate in that stolen car.” Her eyes plead with me to forgive her. “They didn’t have any chemicals in them. Not a single one. I did not pollute my body.”

“Paigelynn.”

“I am sorry!” she gasps, her voice going high with anguish. “I just – I was fourteen. My body changed so much, so fast. Hunger gnawed at me, even after I ate all of my daily allotment. The Mother said I gained too much weight.”

I know her measurements.

I also know how The Mother thinks.

“You were a size zero.”

“Yes. Yes, but – but – my waist was a bit thick.”

“I doubt that.”

“Cam,” she sobs, pushing the lasagna away. “I shouldn’t - shouldn’t have done it, but I found the bars hidden in the bathroom, under a box of light bulbs. Guido must have put them there for his own reasons. I don’t know. I ate one once, and it was so good. I slept well that night.”

“Jesus.”

“I know! I should never have done it. I was bad. Very bad. So impure.”

I can’t stand hearing her talk like this.

It’s the kind of shit Mira was told. Shaming her for being hungry. For growing. For needing calories.

For being human.

“You did nothing wrong.” I reach for her hand and hold it in mine. It’s ice-cold, and her lower lip trembles as fat tears roll out from her lower lids. “Not one damn thing. Hunger is biological. We are organisms. Our bodies are systems designed to optimize. You were going through a growth spurt and needed more calories. Let me guess – you were tired all the time?”

“Yes.”

“Your period began.”

She blinked hard. “Yes. Right around that time.”

“And your brain raced?”

“Yes. So much.”

“You needed more to fuel your brain. Your bones. Your organs.”

“The Mother said I needed exactly enough and no more. Perfect balanced nutrition. If I exercised enough, I got one additional whey protein shake per week.”

My throat seizes, fury filling my bones. I remember Mira begging me for a cough drop. A fucking cough drop. She saw it in my backpack, and I gave it to her. She chewed it like it was a piece of filet mignon and searched my backpack for another one, weeping when she came up dry. I was thirteen then and too clueless to understand what Gaia was doing to her.

And definitely too innocent to understand our mother's complicity in it all.

Mira would go on long walks, all under the approval of our leaders, all to burn calories. Sometimes, she asked me to go with her. Toward the end, the months before she died, she would search out plants along the way, bending down, urging me to come next to her.

Only in her final month did I realize she was gleaning edible leaves. Stray purslane that grew in sidewalk cracks, a good natural source of Omega 3 fatty acids. Dandelion leaves, a source of vitamin K. Wood sorrel, plucked and eaten right in front of me as she handed me a piece and urged me to try it.

Once, we found something that made her weep with joy, a tall, leafy plant she pulled out by the thick, bulbous roots.

"It's called a sunchoke," she said, brushing the dirt off the roots, taking a bite from the choke in front of me, chewing and swallowing so fast I feared she would gag.

"What are you doing?" I asked, horrified.

"Look at me, Cam!" Her cheekbones stuck out like a shelf under sunken eyes. "They're starving me."

"Because Gaia calls for balance," I'd said.

So much like "The Prophecy above all."

The next day, I started sneaking her pieces of my food. Peanut butter smeared on a torn piece of paper, taken from a sandwich. As many cough drops as I could find in the public-facing reception area in the main building.

Greens she'd taught me to forage.

"Cam? I've upset you. I'm sorry."

“No!” I shake my head, shoving the memory in a box inside me. “You need to eat.” I push her hand toward the lasagna. “You will never be hungry again. We have no rules around food. Eat, drink, as much as you want.”

“I cannot pollute my body.”

“You’re not polluting it. You’re nourishing it.”

“How do I know the difference?”

“By never listening to another word out of The Mother’s mouth.”

Her eyes drift to the lasagna, then to my coffee. “You really eat whatever you want?”

“Yes. Within reason. If I gain weight, I eat less and exercise more. If I drink to excess, I take a few days off to recover.”

“Drink to excess? Water? Coffee?”

“No,” I say with a laugh.

“You mean alcohol?” Horror fills her face. “You pollute the king’s body with alcohol?”

“I’m no king, Prin – Paigelynn.”

“Right.” She blinks steadily, quickly. “You are not my king.”

“Eat.” Firmly, decisively, I order her. She complies, picking up the fork, but the damage runs deep.

“I – after we eat, is there a gym?”

“A gym?”

“To bring my body back into balance.”

“You don’t have to track your calories, Paigelynn.”

“But—”

I pick up the fork and gently push it toward her mouth. “Open wide.”

Those beautiful, full lips do exactly what I ask, and as I slide the fork into her mouth, they close around the tines, my

body turning hard, blood rushing to my cock as I watch her take the forkful of food.

“Mmmm,” she moans, making my blood race, the urge to kiss her, hold her, touch her, strip her naked and fuck her until she cries out nothing but my name so strong, I have to drop the fork abruptly and walk over to the convection oven, where I pretend to be intensely involved with the egg rolls.

Out of the corner of my eye, as I adjust the wood in my pants, I see her pick up the fork and take another bite.

“What kind of cheese is this?” she asks, so much gusto in her voice that I can’t help but smile. Knowing how she’s been repressed, treated like a failure for wanting a small protein bar, likely shamed into the ground for something that’s perfectly normal makes me want to give her all the food. All the pleasure. All the freedom.

Everything.

I want to give her everything.

I want to be her everything.

Playing my cards right means giving us a fighting chance. But the deck is stacked against us, and the dealer cheats.

We’re fighting against powerful forces. I’m playing them against each other, some of them aware, some in the dark. That’s how I’ll prevail, though:

Using chaos as a weapon.

When you can’t out-power them, all you can do is harness the element of surprise.

Or be so batshit crazy they back off.

“Probably a mix of ricotta, parmesan, and mozzarella. I guess?”

“You know more than I do. Do you cook a lot? This is incredible!”

“I can’t take credit for that. The chef deserves your praise.”

“Chef?”

“There’s a private chef who handles all the food. If you have favorites, let me know. They’ll restock in three days.”

“Restock?”

“Yeah. Everything we need is here for now, but they’ll provide more fresh fruit and vegetables, prepared meals, that sort of thing.”

“You expect us to be here more than three days?”

“Maybe.”

“But – I turn twenty-five in three days.”

Time has escaped me, but clearly she’s keeping track.

“We can get you a birthday cake.”

“That’s not what I meant at all! Cam! The prophecy.”

“What about it?”

“The world! Mankind! I – if I don’t join with my husband, my king, then we let down the world.”

“That’s – remember what I’ve told you?”

“Yes. I know. But you cannot expect me to wash away half a life of learning just because you say so. What if you are wrong?”

“I’m not wrong.”

“That’s what The Mother said! And Jason. Rudy, Malcolm. The masters. The manuals. The rituals. The teachings. Makiah. My parents.”

“They’re all lying.”

“And they all told me that mainstream life is nothing but a lie. You expect me to believe you, and they expect me to believe them.” Her hand trembles as she sets her fork down. “You’re no different than they are.”

“I’m not any of them.”

And I’m sure as hell nothing like The Mother.

She swallows, looking so dejected I feel bad, though I refuse to back down.

“No. You’re not. But I’m so confused.”

“Confusion is a normal response to all this.”

She perks up. “Is it?”

“I think so.”

Paigelynn’s eyes go back to the food.

I grab my plate and take a mouthful. “Eat,” I urge her around my own gooey goodness. “We have to keep up our strength.”

“For what?”

I could answer that so many ways, some of them more fun than others.

“For our marathon Upwords tournament.”

“Upwords?”

“It’s a board game.”

“Like Monopoly?”

“More like Scrabble.”

“I love Scrabble!”

“What about chess?”

“I enjoy chess, too, though I’ve been taught always to let the man win.”

“Then you were taught wrong.”

“Men have fragile egos,” she says as if that’s a fact.

“Do they, now?”

“Oh, yes. They cannot emotionally handle losing to a woman. We must always defer.”

“You were taught this?”

“Of course. Submission is very important.”

“You were taught to submit to every man?”

“Goodness, no! Only to my husband. Everyone else is my subject.”

“I’m not your husband, Paigelynn. Does that make me your subject?” I drop to one knee and bow before her, unable to hold in my laughter.

“I,” she says pointedly, “am going to focus on my lasagna, Cam, while you mock me. At least the food does not judge.”

I stand and start eating again. “Much better use of our time,” I agree.

Companionship is underrated.

So is Paigelynn. For someone who has been so curated, she’s remarkably fresh and interesting. I’m not just deprogramming her.

I’m revealing her. Not only to me, but to herself.

The process is enjoyable.

If I’m not careful, a little too enjoyable.

My eyes dart to the upper corner of the room, the rising curve of the ceiling a sweeping display of beauty. But buried covertly within the wood, there are cameras.

The same kind used to watch Paigelynn while she sleeps are watching us now.

I can’t do anything untoward. Holding her in my lap was pushing it.

The person helping us knows our every move.

And while that person thinks they know me well and can trust me, I know better than anyone that just when you assume you can lean on someone, they disappoint you.

Trust no one, the saying goes.

Least of all, yourself.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

PAIGELYNN

The food is good.

Being with Cam like this is better.

Winnie found a little dog bed in the corner of the kitchen and is snoozing, her little snorting sounds making me smile every time I glance over at her. Cam and I finished our meal. I was careful not to eat too much. No one weighed or calculated the macronutrients, so I do not know if I ate to excess, but Cam says I am free from all of that now.

If I am no longer tied to those rules, why does that fill me with even more worry?

Anxiety gnaws at my stomach like a rat caught in a bucket. Rudy showed me a video once, a long time ago, about an ingenious trap for vermin. You place peanut butter on top of a flip door on a five-gallon bucket, then provide a ramp for the mice and rats to climb. They reach the top, smell the peanut butter, and bloop!

Fall in the bucket.

“If you put water in there, they die,” he said, smiling. “Even better, some anti-freeze.”

“What is anti-freeze?” I had asked.

“For cars. So the engine doesn’t lock up.”

“What does it do to the mice?”

“Pickles them.”

I turned away from the video.

The image of those poor, innocent creatures just following instinct, hunger driving them to something they thought was good, has stayed with me all these years.

“GOAT,” Cam says. I look at the board game we are playing. “I turned your MOAT into GOAT. Five points.”

The G is at the beginning of the word. I look down at my game letter tiles and reach for two of them.

“FLOAT,” I say, setting the L over the G and the F in front of it. “Seven – no, eight points!” I really enjoy this game Cam brought out from one of the cabinets. Scrabble is fun. Jason and I played endless hours of it over the years. Malcolm was more of a card player, teaching me Euchre and Rummy. Poker was strictly forbidden.

Rudy never liked games. He preferred to go on long drives and listen to music.

Cam’s mouth purses as he studies the board, then grins.

“GLOAT.” He counts his points. “Nine points.”

“You’re so much better at this than I am.”

“Practice. Just lots of practice.”

His phone buzzes.

“I didn’t know phones worked down here.”

“Special phone.” He stands abruptly, walking across the big living room, disappearing behind a door. I haven’t investigated this space yet, but I assume that’s his bedroom.

Bedroom.

I shiver with anticipation.

And then I yawn.

He returns suddenly, glaring at his phone.

“What time is it?” I ask, my eyelids heavy.

“Five p.m.”

“Time feels strange.”

“The lighting system is designed to give us a simulation of regular light patterns, but you’re tired because you’re still recovering from the trauma.”

I go numb and blank at the word *trauma*.

My breath stops.

My body is a piece of concrete.

The walls close in.

I imagine two hundred feet of earth pressing down on my head.

And then, I really cannot breathe.

Rotten blood fills my nose, the scent cloying and sick. Cam watches me, concern deepening in his eyes.

“Paigelynn?”

I cannot speak, the rolling film of horrors from yesterday, from before, stretching back half my life, all of it making me feel helpless, hopeless, worthless.

Just... less.

“Hey – hey,” he says, voice soft and kind. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have brought it all up.”

My mouth opens but nothing comes out.

“You don’t deserve any of the horrible things that have happened. None of this was ever your fault. People who have more power than sense have decided they can get away with anything they want to do, no matter how immoral.”

“Why?” I can finally speak.

“Why you?”

“No – why do they do this?”

“Because they can.”

I swallow, hating the bile that rises in my throat. Winnie senses my distress and stands in her dog bed, looking at me as

her collar jangles on her walk to me, her little face at my feet. I bend down in my chair and pick her up, instantly calmer.

Only a little but I will take what I can find.

“Who is really letting us stay here, Cam?”

His eyes flutter, looking up, then back to me.

“I can’t name names. Just someone who wants you safe.”

I have more questions, but my body starts to shut down, nerve pain shooting along my limbs, as if it’s all too much for my circuits, as if I’ll short out and die if I keep thinking about it all.

“Can – can we distract ourselves?”

Something flares in his eyes at my question.

“Like, how?”

“I have never been allowed to watch a fiction movie. Only documentaries. You – you said I am free now. No more rules?”

“Yes.”

“Can – can we watch a fiction movie? Like the ones I watched when I was – before?”

Something in his face breaks.

There is no other word to describe it. His shoulders drop, and he reaches for my hand.

“You haven’t been allowed to watch anything other than the training the masters required of you?”

“Of course. My mind needs to be pure.” I snatch it back, stung and embarrassed. “I am sorry.”

“For what?”

“For asking for something that is unnecessary.” Panic fills me. Each day I’m here, I’m closer to my twenty-fifth birthday, and if I don’t match with my husband, the prophecy will not unfold.

The Mother warned me that if I transgressed, the world would fall into ruin. Destruction would reign. War, pestilence,

climate disasters, pandemics – all would be my fault.

Asking for a fiction movie is disgusting.

I am disgusting.

I slap myself.

Hard.

Cam's fingers wrap around my wrist, and in an instant his arms are around me.

“Why the fuck did you do that?” he demands.

“Because I am transgressing. A fiction movie is so trivial compared to what the world needs.”

“The world?”

“What happens when I turn twenty-five, Cam, and I am not matched with my husband?” My voice shakes. “You have me trapped here in a bunker, feeding me food that is off-limits, forcing me to break every rule I've been taught by caring stewards of the light!”

I rip myself out of his arms and stand.

“This is a crime!” I screech, beginning to pace, Winnie on my heels. “You are a criminal! You have stolen me away from the people who have curated my existence to prepare me for the only path forward to save humanity. And – and if I am not where I need to be when I turn twenty-five, it will be my fault that the world ends!”

He is standing now, arms crossed over his chest, watching me intently.

“If the world ends, Princess, we're uniquely suited to survive it.”

“THAT IS NOT FUNNY!”

“I'm not joking.”

“AND I AM YOUR QUEEN!”

He drops to his knees, unwrapping his arms, holding his hands up in prayer, eyes mocking.

Cruel.

Cold.

“You really believe it. God, they warned me this would be hard, and I remember being hard to crack, too, Paigelynn. I thought my own experience being victimized by a cult would make me better at helping you, but now I’m questioning that. Maybe I’m the worst choice for this.” He presses his hands flat on the carpeted floor and moves to a cross-legged position, Winnie instantly jumping into his lap.

“You are the worst if you keep me from...from—” My chest feels like it’s being gnawed from the inside out.

“From something that sounds utterly ridiculous.”

“NOT TO ME!”

A dawning in his eyes makes him stand, walking to the kitchen counter, where he picks up a remote control and presses a button, turning on a wall.

Yes, a wall.

Like a television, the wall itself turns into an enormous screen. I have seen mainstream televisions before, out in public. Small squares of varying colors appear, each representing a different channel or service.

He opens YouTube.

“They told me not to do this yet.” He frowns at me, mouth turning into a flat line, one eyebrow twitching. “But you’re leaving me with no choice.” With a few clicks, he pulls up a screen.

The Mother is on it.

I gasp.

Then he presses Play.

“Today we’re doing a deep dive into the Gaia cult. Founded in 1981 as an environmental center, by the early 2000s, it was an insular...”

“What is this?”

“Not fiction,” he mutters. “Just watch. Shut up for a minute and *watch*.”

For the next fifteen minutes, I do as told, pictures and video of a much younger Mother showing on screen, with many other people listed as leaders. As the newscaster describes unspeakable horrors including starvations, rapes, forced births, forced abortions, and more, I feel my outrage draining.

It is the moments we see The Mother that are most emotional, generating an instant panic that floods my limbs and paralyzes me.

Police officers, district attorneys, and psychologists all talk about her capacity for evil.

And then: a picture of a young teenage boy with a fringe of dark curls, a baby face twisted in grief, being held back by a large, beefy man who is bald, wearing a dark jacket.

“That’s you!”

“Yes.”

“In spite of her daughter Mira’s death by starvation, Angelina Santinos continues to claim it was her husband, Mario, who was the mastermind...”

“Your last name is Santinos? Cameron Santinos?”

He sighs. “Keep watching.”

“Though just fourteen, Mario Junior testified against his parents, insisting that it was his mother and other members of the cult who forced his sister to undergo such barbaric treatment. In the end, his testimony was not enough to overcome...”

I am so confused. Mario Junior? Cam’s real name is Mario? None of this makes sense. He’s showing me a news documentary about The Mother, but Cam is in it, and the show says that his parents are –

“You testified against The Mother?”

“Yes.”

My entire being seizes.

“Wait. Wait. You – The Mother. The Mother is *your* mother?”

He cuts the television show and turns to me with the saddest eyes I have ever seen in my entire life.

“Was. She *was* my mother.”

Thirteen years of training from her pours through every strand of DNA in my body, every cell touched by her teachings, every piece of my soul infused with her perspective.

“*Was*? Is she dead?”

“Unfortunately, no.”

“What do you mean, *unfortunately*? Who would wish death upon their own mother?”

“A fourteen-year-old kid who watched that same woman kill his sister. A thirty-one-year-old man who is learning just how cruel she’s been to you.”

Restrained and fuming, he watches me carefully as I absorb his words.

“How do I know that video is not fake? The Mother warned me that The Men would use all sorts of trickery to convince me to transgress.”

As he closes his eyes and sighs through his nose, I feel shame.

Shame for falling for his ruse if he’s lying to me.

But shame for believing a woman who did such horrible things to her own daughter and son if he’s telling the truth.

I cannot find a way forward.

It is my fault either way.

There is no good choice.

What do you do when there is no good choice?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Cam

“What is the greatest transgression you could do, Paigelynn, to prevent the prophecy from ever happening?”

She just blinks.

“Eat too many calories? Gain weight? Run away?”

“No,” she whispers, head going down.

“Thinking impure thoughts?”

“I am lashed for that.”

“Of all the actions you – you *personally* – could take to stop the prophecy from becoming true, name them. What are they?”

“Running away and never joining with my husband and king.”

“Yes, that’s one. And you’re blaming me for that.”

“I – no. Not quite. I’m – I’m just confused, Cam!”

“Think. Think hard. What is the other? There is one thing you could do to destroy all hope of the prophecy ever coming true.”

Her eyes flare. Aha. Pay dirt.

“I – I could sleep with a man who is not my husband.”

“Exactly.”

“My purity is required for the prophecy to come true.”

“Yes. Which means I have no incentive to lie to you.”

“I do not understand.”

“If I’m lying, Paigelynn, and everything The Mother and the masters have taught you is true, what is the one thing I could have easily done that would destroy your reality? Your prophecy? Your destiny?”

Oh, that sharp inhale. The way her hand flutters to her neck. The pink blush of surprise – arousal? - that covers her face makes it very hard to hold back from touching her.

“You could have forced yourself on me.”

“I wouldn’t need to.”

The sharp look she gives me tells me what I already know. She wants me as much as I want her.

“You – you sense it?”

“I feel it. Since the moment I first laid eyes on you.”

“At the dog obedience class.”

“Yes.”

“Were you there as a spy? As part of your job?”

I can’t answer that truthfully.

I want to, but I can’t.

“I was very fortunate to find you there,” is all I say as she moves closer to me, breathing hard, eyes fixed on mine. Earlier, she changed out of the pink flannel pajamas into a simple dress, one that flows around her hips, the edges skimming her calves. It’s a pale heathered purple and makes her face look like the sun.

A sun I could kiss forever.

“If I were lying, I would have fucked you.”

She flinches at the vulgarity but stays quiet.

“I would have taken advantage and ruined you. Once you’re no longer a virgin, they don’t want you.”

“Who is they, then? If it’s all a lie, and you say the masters, The Mother – all of them – are part of a lie, what *for*?” She walks right up to me, finger in my face, standing on tiptoes, her anger justified and oh, how I want to tell her.

It will destroy her to know the truth.

It will destroy her not to know, too.

“Because you are one of the chosen ones.”

“What does that mean? First it’s all a lie, and now you say I’m one of the chosen ones? Not the chosen one?”

“Do you remember joining Rooney’s church when you were younger and spitting in a tube for a DNA test?”

She frowns. “Yes.”

“And after that, you were told about the prophecy? How you were special?”

“It was a genetic test. Something about finding out our ancestry.”

“You were being harvested.”

“Being what?”

“It’s all an elaborate, complicated scheme, Paigelynn. Wealthy billionaires with bad kidneys and livers are using churches like Rooney’s to rope unsuspecting families into them. Get them to spit in a tube. Find donor matches.”

“Donors? As in organ donors?”

“Yes.”

“What does that have to do with the prophecy?”

She’s smart. I don’t have to say another word. As blood drains out of her face and her eyes fill with a horror that makes me regret telling her, she connects the grotesque dots all on her own.

I may be killed for telling her – and there’s more than enough surveillance in here for people to know I told her, but I no longer care.

People deserve to know the truth about their bodies.

Their origins.

Their genes.

And how others use information against them.

We're in a new era, one where we have more knowledge than ever about the nanodetails of our bodies, but we also crave a connection to our humanity.

Humanity that others seek to strip from us.

One click at a time.

“Are you saying that someone wants my... body?”

“Yes.”

“And not for sex?”

“I'm sure they want that, too. On some level.”

“You just made it sound like – ”

“Like billionaires are competing with each other to use you for your organs? Yes.”

The flinch makes me feel bad.

“My organs.” Her hand goes to her liver.

“Or worse.”

“What's worse than that?”

“They might turn you into a breeder.”

“A breeder?”

“To produce babies who – ”

“NOOOOOOOO!” she screams, shoving her hands against my chest, pushing me away. “No!”

Finally.

Finally she gets it. Sees it. Understands it.

Processes it.

Maddening and disgusting, all rolled into one, what I'm telling her should be true. In some ways it can't be true. Denial is one hell of a drug.

If I hadn't seen someone like Paigelynn used by the Luisi family, I wouldn't believe it myself.

Paigelynn's situation is even more complicated because I'm holding back. There are even more layers to this fucked up shitshow, but I can't reveal more.

Not only would it lead to my death, it's too much for her.

"If – if what you're saying is true, the police should be involved! The FBI! The CIA! And Makiah – my God, Makiah is part of this? I ran away from you to him!"

"Not your finest moment."

"I didn't know! How would I know?"

"That's right, sweetie. You didn't know. You've been trained not to know. Your parents don't know, either. The whole ruse is all about making people think it's fun to check out their ancestry. See who has pee that smells like asparagus. Who is more likely to have neanderthal genes. Find your seventh cousin twice removed in Nunavit. And oh, right, find a young girl you can kidnap and treat like veal so that one day, you get to extend your life by taking her kidney."

"STOP!" She's sobbing now.

I went too far.

Paigelynn rushes at me, her mouth on mine before I can blink, my hands on her waist, salty tears tickling my lips. My tongue slips into a game with hers, where we tease and play, but there's a ferocity to her touch, a desperate anger that rises up in me, too.

You can tell too many truths at a time. It leaves you raw and gasping.

"Fuck me," she groans against my ear. "Ruin me, Cam. Make it so they don't want me."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

PAIGELYNN

I didn't know I could lose every fiber of my soul and enjoy it.

Every ticking second of it as time consumes me.

Cam's words don't make sense and yet the picture he's painting does. Rudy tried to take liberties with me. Makiah stripped me bare. The Mother's constant warning that men are incapable of self-control and that it is my job to be modest so they do not degrade me is true of everyone but Cam.

He has the opportunity.

And yet he has done nothing but kiss me.

Lesser men would have tried something more, but he is above them.

And of all the men in the world I would give my innocence to, I want him.

And only him.

Because being spoiled could save my life.

He tastes so good as I press against him, my hand on his waist, his in my hair, along the curve of my backside, fingertips gliding along my skin like they're made of fire. I have no idea what I'm doing, but I reach between us and fumble for his erection. That's when he pulls back and stops.

We're breathing hard, panting like dogs in heat, eyes locked.

“Did you just ask me to fuck you?”

“Yes.”

“You want me to take your virginity?”

“Yes.”

“Because you think if I do, you’ll be spoiled goods and no one will want you after this?”

“I’m being kept pure for a reason, aren’t I?”

He takes a few deep breaths, watching me, eyes blinking rapidly as if he’s assessing my every move.

Finally, he says, “Yes.”

“And if I’ve been ‘spoiled,’ I’m of no value.”

He winces. “In a sense, yes. Not in reality, but in their delusional world – yes.”

I press myself against him again. This time, his hands don’t wrap around me, but instead go up, as if I’m holding him at gunpoint.

“Then sleep with me.” I kiss his neck, wondering if I’m doing it right. My hand has no idea what to do, but I try rubbing it between his legs. “If you sleep with me, they’ll leave me alone.”

“You really know how to make a guy feel attractive.”

I think he’s trying to make a joke, but I don’t know why that would be funny.

“You don’t want to have sex with me?”

“Are you kidding me?”

“I don’t know what you mean by that.”

“Of course I want to sleep with you. Make love to you. Not fuck you, by the way.”

“What is the difference?”

“In a different situation, I’d spend an entire weekend showing you, Paigelynn.”

“We are two hundred feet underground, alone in a billionaire’s bunker, Cam. You have all the time in the world.” I stand on tiptoes and aim for his mouth, my need for a kiss a full-blown tornado inside me.

“Hold on there,” he says kindly, hands on my shoulders. “That’s not how this works.”

“Something isn’t working?”

He closes his eyes and frowns. “Oh, everything’s working just fine. No problem with the equipment.”

“Equipment?”

“A bad joke.”

“I want to understand the bad joke! All the jokes! I need you to teach me everything about life. And good food. And sex. And the world out there.”

“But mostly sex,” he mutters.

“Yes,” I whisper, instantly aflame, eager but feeling uncoordinated. Stupid. I pull him closer for a kiss.

“Paigelynn,” he says softly. “This isn’t how it works.”

“How what doesn’t work?”

“Sex.”

“I know I don’t know, Cam. That’s why I need you to show me. I’ll disrobe.” I step back and reach for the hem of my skirt, pulling it up. His forearms, tight as bands of steel, connect with my elbows and I cry out at the pain.

“Leave your clothes on.”

“I thought you had to take them off for sex. That’s what The Mother told me.”

He stiffens. “Do *not* bring her up right now.”

“But—”

“I understand what you’re trying to do. You think that if I ‘ruin’ you by taking your virginity, the bastards won’t want you for your genetics. It’s not that simple.”

“You mean they *do* want me, even if I’m not pure?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Then why did they constantly teach me about making certain to stay a virgin?”

“It’s complicated.”

“You’re hiding more from me!”

A door behind us clicks open.

Winnie begins to bark, and Cam walks quickly, stiffly, toward the commotion. I see a man in a black suit, bald head poking in, waving Cam to follow him.

“I thought we were alone!” I cry out, but Cam ignores me, leaving the room, the door snapping shut like a tomb.

Shock covers my skin like a blanket of movement, sands pushed by wind, oceans pulled by tides. Kissing him like that, grinding up against him was not borne of thought, but impulse, the need to do something, touch something, claim something so I could rid myself of the horror of these new truths so powerful I could not stop myself.

Asking him to fuck me.

I cannot believe I said that.

Did that.

Begged him to defile me.

And when I asked for it, it felt so good. So right. So wrong.

So delicious.

Yet he rejected me. Why? I’m so confused. So ashamed. So hurt. Am I not good enough? Have I become impure by transgressing? Perhaps that is the real reason why Cam won’t sleep with me.

I am no longer worthy of him.

I really am depraved. The Mother said that there was always a tale in the mythology of a princess who turned bad. A

woman who was a false princess, like an antichrist. She sinned without conscience, luring good men to turn bad.

A chord of fear turns my spine into a stake I wish to drive straight through my heart.

What if I am not a princess, as Cam says.

Or, instead, what if I am the *false* princess?

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Cam

“Don’t you dare fuck her,” Paul grunts into the phone as this piece of concrete pretending to be a bodyguard stares me down like he can’t wait to shove a firecracker up my ass and toss me down the elevator shaft.

“I’m not. Swear.”

“If you do, you’re both dead.”

Paul is the reason we’re here. It’s his place, and I have to do whatever he wants.

“I don’t plan to sleep with her.”

His snort begs to differ.

“I mean it, Paul. But she’s asking me. Not the other way around.”

“Because she wants to lose her cherry. That can’t happen.”

“It’s not like we’re bringing her to auction.”

“About that. Change of plans. Helicopter’s on the way. She turns twenty-five, and there’s no changing fate.”

My head starts ringing. That firecracker’s looking good suddenly.

“WHAT?”

“You heard me. Deliver the goods.”

“We didn’t go to all this trouble just to hand her off to those bastards.”

“If you don’t, you’re both dead anyhow. If you bring her, we have a fighting chance of doing some damage.”

“To her.”

“To all of them. If she’s collateral, oh well.”

“For a guy who gave us safe haven and put himself in a shitpot of danger, you’re pretty cavalier about her life.”

“Says the guy trying to dip his wick in a little princess wax.”

“This is not about my dick.”

“You’re a dude, Cam. Everything’s about your dick.”

Echoes of Debbie make my head spin.

“That’s the plan, then? Deliver her to the auction and let them turn her into a junkyard car being sold off for the working pieces?”

“No. I never said that.”

“Then what?”

For the next five minutes, I hear him detail, meticulously, the greatest plan ever to destroy one of the richest cartels in the world. It’s a plan that gives me my revenge, ruins people who deserve to have everything they value stripped from them, and leaves Paigelynn alive as well.

“What are the odds we succeed?”

“The odds I succeed are 100 percent because you are keeping me out of this.”

“Then what are the odds I succeed?”

“Only you know that.”

“What’s to stop me from just disappearing with her?”

“Two hundred feet of earth on top of you and a private military force of four hundred guys stationed all over the bunker.”

“I’ve beaten better odds.”

“In your fap fantasies, Cam. Come on. You know what you have to do. You’ve got fifteen minutes. Be at the surface for the helicopter.”

“What kind of cover story do I give her?”

“Whatever it takes to get her on that chopper.”

“She won’t go to an auction willingly.”

“They never do.”

“Can’t you help me leave? She’s of no use to you. You know there’s no match for your family. You’re only in this to destroy the Donegals and the Luisi family.”

“Which is why we need to go through the whole thing from start to finish.”

“She’s sweet. Nice.”

“You’re falling for her. What the hell happened to you? You want revenge as much as I do.”

Not if I lose her.

“You’ll give me every tool to extract her if we go through with this?”

“Everything. You have my word.”

I would fucking laugh my ass off if I could, but I need Paul. Need him more than I want to. That old saying the enemy of my enemy is my friend was never more true. He’s going to help me take down my mother and stop her from ever killing another young woman again.

And if I die trying, that’s fine. But I refuse to just die.

“Helicopter? She’ll want to bring the dog.”

“We can take care of the dog after she’s out.”

“Out?”

“We’ll drug the virgin. You know how it works. The only time we put anything in their bodies is so the auction platform can be as drama-free as possible.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. This will be my third auction. I know what to expect. Lying about it all and maintaining my composure around Paigelynn, though.

That'll take some serious compartmentalization.

“Fine. We'll be there.”

“Keep her intact. I saw you kissing her. None of that shit.”

“She kissed me.”

“Your tongue wasn't exactly running away from hers.”

“Not my fault we're biologically wired to respond.”

“You want your dick cut off by a Donegal? Because you're damn close to that if you keep going.”

“I want every last fucker who ruined my life and killed my sister to pay. I want Paigelynn to be free to go out in the world and have a life again. Everything else is secondary.”

“You have such simple pleasures.”

We have a chuckle before we hang up.

Slipping back into the beautiful bunker, a pang of sadness washes over me, too nostalgic for my own good.

I never got to take her swimming.

We've been here long enough to shower, sleep, eat, and fight.

Lots of fighting.

“What was that?”

“A change of plans.” Making eye contact should be harder than it is, but I go into robot mode.

“Change?”

“We need to leave.”

“Did someone find us?”

“They will if we stay.”

“I thought you said – ”

“Paigelynn. Do you trust me?”

“With all my heart.”

A heart that might beat in someone else’s chest soon.

The thought comes into my mind so fluidly, so simply. Acculturated to this world, I’m turning into my own version of depraved.

“Grab Winnie. What you’re wearing is fine.”

“Will they have clothes for me? Where we’re going?”

Oh, they’ll have something for you, alright.

“Yes.”

“But – ”

“The helicopter is going to be here any minute.”

“Cam.” She reaches for my hand, threading her fingers in mine, pulling it up to her mouth for a kiss. “Talk to me.”

“I am.”

“You’re very... businesslike.”

“I’m worried.”

Right thing to say.

“You are?”

“I want to keep you safe. We need to move to keep you safe,” I grind out, hating the lie.

But is it a lie? I can’t tell whether I’m lying to her or telling the truth.

Paul’s right.

I hate that he’s right.

Delivering her to the auction is going to solve more problems than keeping her away creates.

“You’re so caring. Always thinking about me,” she says with a grin, coquettish, trusting eyes catching mine. In a different world, a different time, we’d enjoy each other’s company.

In this timeline, though, I have to bring her to a billionaire flesh auction.

I hate this timeline.

For the next three minutes, we gather our meager things, Winnie tucked under Paigelynn's arm as she throws some plums into the pockets of the cardigan she's now wearing.

"Helicopter snack," she jokes, and of all the things that put a crack in my facade, it's this that makes me nearly fall apart.

A fucking plum.

The walk to the elevator is quiet. Somber, even as she clings to me, holding my hand. We walk onto the elevator like it's Death Row, and as we ascend I wonder if this is how great leaders feel, condemning battalions to death in risky maneuvers.

You have to try, like it or not, because the longshot can save so many lives.

Yet the chances are strong you're turning people into cannon fodder for no good reason.

Evil prevails far more than it should. The world is not fair.

And right now, neither am I.

When we reach the surface, the sun is starting to set, the chopper there, the pilot turning on the blade. We board, Paigelynn familiar with the complicated seatbelts, a testimony to the scattered skills she possesses. Someone's brought a dog carrier, and I place Winnie in it, securing it.

Before we lift off, the pilot turns around, introduces himself, and hands us each a small candy.

It's the same peanut butter chocolate protein bar Paigelynn told me about. The kind she stole from Guido, her bodyguard. Paul's surveillance team listens to everything.

"Oh!" she looks at me. "You found them! The same kind I used to steal!" Peeling the wrapper off eagerly, she devours the small little bar, chewing with a bliss that makes me dead inside.

I don't eat mine.

I know better.

Because within ten minutes, as we're spirited across the desert, her head lolls slightly, then Paigelynn is asleep.

Passed out.

Knocked out.

Drugged.

The helicopter takes us on a fast track to hell.

Because hell is our best option right now.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

PAIGELYNN

Dry.

So dry.

Wheeze.

Air.

Cold.

Bright.

Sand fills the edges of my eyelids. Dry ice pounds the back of my throat. Metal bangs against my canine teeth.

I itch all over.

My hands are in my lap. Feet feel like rubber. Nose smells fine perfume and cologne. Ears ring.

Music. Soft jazz. Clarinet.

“So creamy,” says a man’s voice.

I try to breathe in through my nose, but air makes me cough. When I cough, my teeth rattle against metal. I gag, eyes filling with tears.

“Shhh,” someone says behind me. “Don’t you dare throw up.”

Their tone of voice spikes my blood with terror.

I try to open my eyes but my lids are heavy, so heavy, like fishing weights the size of boulders.

A muffled sound, like whimpering, comes from a person next to me, but I cannot open my eyes.

Dry.

The corners of my lips ache, but I cannot move my tongue to lick them. Instead, I gag again.

I try to sit up, but my hands are in my lap.

I try to open my eyes, but the lids are anvils.

A blur of words goes by, and I hear my name uttered, followed by soft clapping. Numbers go by—triglycerides, genetics, something about “perfect red blood cells,” and a declaration of natural 20/20 vision. My breath feels like a train inside my ears, and as I breathe in through my nose, I smell steak.

Then sage.

Then I gag again. The back of my throat is so sticky, one tonsil dry as a bone. I need to open my eyes and ask Cam for water.

This must be another bad dream.

“The sedatives hurt the liver,” someone says, and I want to see who, but my eyes are filled with grit.

“Only for a few hours. She is a fast acetylator. See?”

One eye opens and for a brief flash, I see two blonde women huddled together over a small folder, pointing.

“Oh! Good with caffeine, too.”

“Those creatine levels are to die for.”

I don’t know what creatine is, but they make it sound good.

As the anvils over my lids begin to lighten, I open my eyes again, seeing tables, like a cabaret. People are at round, large banquet-sized circles, spread out in the room, six or eight to a

table. Perhaps eighty people are in the formation, with waiters in white coats everywhere.

What a bizarre dream.

Then again, I was naked in an ice cave in my last one. Perhaps this isn't so –

“Mmmph!” Someone kicks my foot. I try to move it but can't. It's numb and tingly, the ankle at an odd angle. As I breathe out, I gag again and clench my teeth.

Except I can't.

I'm gagging because there is something big in my mouth. Big and metal.

“NNNNNNGGGGG,” says someone next to me as the two ladies at the table in front of me look up, their faces filled with annoyance. I'm kicked again in the foot and before I can react, someone is next to me. He smells like wool and faint body odor. He has something shiny in his hand.

A needle.

My pulse is steady and hard, as if someone is beating the walls of my circulatory system with a sledgehammer. I see the needle go into an arm but feel nothing. Suddenly, the thing kicking my foot stops. A long sigh turns into a groan. I turn my head and see a young woman in an upholstered chair next to me, wearing a crown on her head.

A head that tips to the left, then forward, her chin impossibly resting right on her collarbone. She chokes and her head bobs up, then back.

A leather strap, studded by shiny sequins – no, diamonds – crosses her cheeks, a silver metal ball in her mouth.

It glitters.

I reach up to touch the thing in my mouth, but my hands are bound together, my legs strapped to my own chair, and the heaviness on my head makes me think I, too, wear a crown.

“Follicle stimulating hormone count is nice and low,” says a man's booming voice.

“Of course it is, Charles,” cackles an older woman.
“They’re only twenty-five!”

“I didn’t say I was surprised, Janine. Just impressed.”

“You’ll have to pay a pretty penny for it,” the woman says,
and I open my eyes again, wondering what they’re talking
about.

“The one on the left has the HIV resistant gene,” someone
mutters.

“Those eyes, Those beautiful 20/20s.”

“Hey – I call shotgun on the endothelial cells,” a man
hisses, leading to laughter among a group somewhere.

I blink.

I blink again.

An announcer taps a microphone, and I hear him say,
“Finish your research and your dinners, everyone. Staff will
fill drinks, and we’ll get started. Dessert after. Let us save the
sweets for our sweet victories.”

“And to help mollify the losers!” a man calls out. Raucous
laughter follows.

“All examinations have been done. Medical files released.
Now it’s all over except the bidding,” the announcer declares
as my spine, from the crack of my backside up to the crown of
my head, turns to a single electric current instantly.

Medical files.

Eyes.

Kidneys.

Bidding.

“Mmmph,” I moan, trying to sit up, fighting a wave of
nausea. If I move too much, I’ll vomit, and if I vomit, I’ll
choke to death.

Though I don’t think these people will let that happen.

And not out of a sense of altruism.

These are the billionaires Cam talked about. My masters. The ones who invented a fake prophecy to convince parents to turn their daughters over to the cause.

Stretching my eyes wide, I work hard to focus. Each breath gets me closer to clarity. Rising panic does not help me, so I push it down, down, down.

“Dialysis three times a day, Janine,” a woman says in a complaining voice. “We have the home clinic, of course, and a nurse comes on the jet, but it’s all so tiresome.”

“I cannot believe the donation lists are merit-based,” her friend says with a sneer. “They give kidneys to just anyone.”

“It’s not our fault, is it? They gave us no options. I’m so grateful to Gaia for creating this. It’s a public service, isn’t it?”

Gaia.

Cam.

Gaia.

CAM!

Where is he?

The more I open my eyes, the more I take in. To my right is the woman who was just injected. To my left I make eye contact with a terrified woman who looks like she could be my sister, the blonde hair the same length, her body taller, longer, leaner. Scared eyes plead with me to help her, but how?

We are, all three of us, here for a reason.

Cam told me the reason.

I didn’t want to believe him.

What happened? We got on the helicopter so he could keep us moving and save me, and now – now I’m here. His worst fear has come true. He failed.

I am unprotected.

I am in the hands of the sick billionaires.

I am a pawn.

Not a princess. No queen. No prophecy. It was all a lie, carefully crafted so that my body can be used at will, dismantled and carved.

“Let the bidding begin. We start at \$10 million.”

“A paltry sum for number two! How can you bid so low for immortality?”

“We performed a lottery and start with her, as you know, Donegal,” the announcer says in a joking, chiding tone, as if this is all a game, as if they are auctioning off a boat or a car, and not human beings.

“Ten!”

“Paddle?”

“Number three!”

For the next few minutes I hear numbers, laughter, jokes, the room filled with the scent of cigarettes and cigars. It feels like a party.

Not my funeral.

“Uhhhn,” says the girl to my left, her hand moving to my leg, the contact something. Anything. She’s human, I’m human, and that small brush of skin against skin says we’re still human.

Still whole.

Still alive.

Still us.

“Eighty million!” a woman calls out, lifting a paddle with the number 7 on it.

“Come on, Janine. One hundred,” sneers a man at a table behind her. I squint, the woman next to him laughing. She sees me and locks my gaze.

I nearly throw up.

It is The Mother.

The way her lips move, the corners of her mouth rising, the evil smile so smug. So self-satisfying. She winks at me, and I

turn murderous, wishing for superhuman strength, wanting nothing more than to die trying to kill her.

And yet, I can barely breathe.

“One twenty,” she calls out, holding up her paddle. “I can finally get my Alpha-1 antitrypsin relief.”

“You need a heart transplant more, Angelina.”

“She’ll finally have one if she gets number 2’s!” one of the women upfront jokes, leading to braying laughter everywhere.

This is all a joke to them.

I really am just meat.

Meat you buy. Meat you bring home. Meat you slaughter. Meat you store to consume later.

Meat someone else grows and prepares for you.

Just... meat.

“One fifty!”

“One seventy!”

“Two hundred!”

The Mother looks angry, bidding higher than everyone else, over and over, until the numbers reach over three hundred million.

For... me?

Light cracks through the back of the room, a man striding in, confident and sure, arrogant in the way his shoulders sway. He wears a tuxedo, like the other men in attendance, but his fits him like he wears it daily. His hair is dark, cut close, and his eyes are so –

Oh, no.

So familiar. Too familiar. Though his haircut is new and the tuxedo unlike anything I’ve ever seen on him, I would recognize Cam anywhere.

He is here.

And now I will be safe.

The Mother looks over at him, her eyes wide, her back going straight as can be, her hands moving in an agitated manner. Cam sits down in a seat right next to her, holding a champagne flute.

He holds it aloft next to her, says something I cannot hear, and drinks half the glass.

Some old man with a rheumy cough shouts out, “Three forty!”

“Three fifty!” The cries are all men now, The Mother whispering furiously with a man to her right, who I now recognize.

It is Makiah Rooney.

Who shakes his head *no*.

Cam, I want to scream. *CAM!*

As if he hears me, he makes eye contact.

Then he grins.

He looks exactly like The Mother.

Cam lifts his paddle and stands, holding the champagne glass like he is giving a toast. All eyes are suddenly on him, chair legs making muffled sounds as people pivot, the room all one organism, Cam at the center. I squeeze my eyes shut hard, then open them, struggling for clarity.

Striving to see that the scene before me is truly real.

Horror fills every pore of my body, each cell vibrating with fear of an unknown fate that I have no control over. Tied down, gagged, and on a stage where people examine me as if I am an object.

Where Cam looks at me with that evil grin.

Mind scrambling to find a reason, a pathway, a strategy that makes sense, I pray Cam has a plan. That this is all part of a complicated double-cross. Triple-cross? That he’s playing a game and I have to trust him, even when he’s here, handsome and polished, looking like one of them.

Them.

The people who want to cut me into parts.

Or worse. What word did he use before?

Breeder.

A shiver runs through me. He senses it, the smile going wider as he turns to The Mother and gives her a nod. Her face falters, eyes narrowing in confusion, but she nods back.

Then says something to Rooney that makes him become angry.

He slides his paddle to The Mother, who raises it and says, “Three sixty.”

“Four hundred!” cries the fat man in the back, the one who licks his lips when he looks at me.

I close my eyes and swallow, fighting for air. My eyes open, as if some piece of me needs to see this truth.

This visceral, unchangeable truth.

Murmurs fills the room, eyes on Cam again as he slowly lifts his paddle and says in a firm voice:

“One billion dollars.”

Gasps and groans abound, but I hear nothing, see nothing, *am* nothing but that grin, that gaze.

For he takes a sip, then, still looking at my soul, announces:

“I am the truth.”

Darkness fills the edges of my vision, mingling with lightning strikes that flutter in the periphery, as if my brain is on overload, electricity and blood fighting to find balance.

The crowd erupts, but he sips his drink, then holds up one hand, setting the paddle down.

“Going once,” cries the announcer, as The Mother glares at Rooney.

“Going twice!” he shouts as the fat man’s mouth purses in disgust, hand reaching for a bottle of amber liquor.

“SOLD!”

I am sold. Sold to Cam.

His words from... yesterday? Time has no meaning. I don’t know where I am.

Or even *when* I am.

But his words ring through my pain-filled head:

“I promise you this: no matter how long it takes, no matter how many questions you have, no matter how painful or confusing it all is, I’m here. I am here for you. I am here to walk this journey with you. You will come out on the other end of it healthier and whole.”

He said that to me, and he meant it.

Right?

I have to believe he’s buying me to save me. This is the only explanation.

It can be the only reason he would deliver me here.

“Mother,” he calls out, walking next to her, hand reaching to take hers as he approaches her left side. She is unsteady, but rises, as he holds up his half-full glass, dropping her hand once she is standing. The crowd goes silent, so quiet you could hear a church mouse squeak.

Handing her his paddle, he smiles. A foot taller than her, with the same dark coloring, he’s so regal, cutting a fine figure, with a commanding presence fit for a king.

One who rules.

One who dominates.

One who is ruthless.

“Allow me to give you a present,” he says to her, The Mother’s head turning sharply to look at me, then back at him. “Consider it an olive branch.”

“Mario!” she gasps.

Mario. Cam's real name.

She reaches for him and they embrace, every person in the room instantly standing, clapping uproariously, my body going numb and rippling with nerve pain at the same time. Minutes pass and it feels like a millennia, but when the clapping is done, Cam looks at me, quelling the group, as they follow his gaze and look at me.

"She is the light," he announces.

"She is the light," the group intones, chilling my bones.

"She is the truth," Cam leads, eyes blazing.

"She is the truth," they repeat, like being in Rooney's church.

"She will save many!" The Mother interrupts, taking over, co-opting Cam.

"She will save many," everyone repeats, except this time, mocking laughter interrupts, so cruel, so surreal.

Every word they say meant something different just a few days ago.

And now? Now it means my death.

"Thank you, Princess!" Cam shouts to me. "The Prophecy above all."

And as I black out, those are the words I hear before going unconscious.

He is right.

They got their prophecy.

I am The Prophecy after all.

I WILL EARN YOU IS NEXT!

Who is Cam/Mario working for?

Did he really lie to Paigelynn the entire time, then *buy* Paigelynn and give her to a woman (his mother!) who plans to use Paigelynn's HEART? And liver? And...

How did Cam get \$1 billion? Is he one of the wealthy billionaires... or is there more to this than anyone could fathom?

Sign up for my newsletter to learn when book 3 comes out. Go to <https://meliraine.com/newsletter/>!

;))

ALSO BY MELI RAINE

Suggested Reading Order

The Breaking Away Series (Chase and Allie)

Finding Allie

Chasing Allie

Keeping Allie

The Coming Home Series (Mark and Carrie)

Return

Revenge

Reunion

The Harmless Series (Drew and Lindsay)

A Harmless Little Game

A Harmless Little Ruse

A Harmless Little Plan

The Shameless Series (Silas and Jane)

A Shameless Little Con

A Shameless Little Lie

A Shameless Little Bet

The False Series (Duff and Lily)

False Memory

False Hope

False Start

The Stateless Series (Callum and Kina)

Stateless

Traceless

Fateless

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA Today bestselling author Meli Raine writes romantic suspense with hot bikers, intense undercover DEA agents, bad boys turned good, and Special Ops heroes — and the women who love them.

Meli rode her first motorcycle when she was five years old, but she played in the ocean long before that. She lives in New England with her family.

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