

*Injustice*

AND

# ABSOLUTION

ROYAL BASTARDS MC



# MURPHY WALLACE

# **INJUSTICE AND ABSOLUTION**

THE ROYAL BASTARDS MC

GETTYSBURG, PA

BOOK 1

**MURPHY WALLACE**

***Injustice and Absolution***

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# CONTENTS

[Royal Bastards Code](#)

[Royal Bastards MC Series](#)

[JOIN THE RBMC](#)

[Blurb](#)

[Warning](#)

[Playlist](#)

[Part One](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Part Two](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)  
[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)  
[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)  
[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)  
[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)  
[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)  
[Chapter Thirty](#)  
[Chapter Thirty-One](#)  
[Chapter Thirty-Two](#)  
[Chapter Thirty-Three](#)  
[Chapter Thirty-Four](#)  
[Chapter Thirty-Five](#)  
[Chapter Thirty-Six](#)  
[Chapter Thirty-Seven](#)  
[Chapter Thirty-Eight](#)  
[Chapter Thirty-Nine](#)  
[Chapter Forty](#)

[Part Three](#)

[Chapter Forty-One](#)  
[Chapter Forty-Two](#)  
[Chapter Forty-Three](#)  
[Chapter Forty-Four](#)  
[Chapter Forty-Five](#)  
[Chapter Forty-Six](#)  
[Chapter Forty-Seven](#)  
[Chapter Forty-Eight](#)  
[Chapter Forty-Nine](#)  
[Chapter Fifty](#)  
[Chapter Fifty-One](#)  
[Chapter Fifty-Two](#)  
[Epilogue](#)

[Want more?](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Also by Murphy Wallace](#)

[About Murphy Wallace](#)

# ROYAL BASTARDS CODE

**PROTECT:** The club and your brothers come before anything else, and must be protected at all costs. **CLUB** is **FAMILY**.

**RESPECT:** Earn it & Give it. Respect club law. Respect the patch. Respect your brothers. Disrespect a member and there will be hell to pay.

**HONOR:** Being patched in is an honor, not a right. Your colors are sacred, not to be left alone, and **NEVER** let them touch the ground.

**OL' LADIES:** Never disrespect a member's or brother's Ol'Lady. **PERIOD.**

**CHURCH** is **MANDATORY.**

**LOYALTY:** Takes precedence over all, including well-being.

**HONESTY:** Never **LIE**, **CHEAT**, or **STEAL** from another member or the club.

**TERRITORY:** You are to respect your brother's property and follow their Chapter's club rules.

**TRUST:** Years to earn it...seconds to lose it.

**NEVER RIDE OFF:** Brothers do not abandon their family.



# **ROYAL BASTARDS MC SERIES**

## FIFTH RUN

Kristine Dugger : Ride it, My Pony  
Lucian W Bane : Butterfly and Kult  
Morgan Jane Mitchell : Royal Pain  
Crimson Syn : Coerced into Submission  
Claire Shaw : REIGN  
Daphne Loveling : Cold Fury  
Liberty Parker : Waking the Dragon  
B.B. Blaque :  
Kristine Allen : FACET  
Erin M Trejo : Cross The Line  
KL Ramsey : LEGEND  
Darlene Tallman : Banshee's Lament  
M Merin : THROTTLE  
Chelle C. Craze & Eli Abbott : SLEEPER  
Nicole James : Enforcing the Rules  
Nikki Landis : Jigsaw's Blayde  
J. Lynn Lombard : Aftermath's Exposure  
Kris Anne Dean : No Way Out  
Katie Latronico : Wherever I May Roam  
India R. Adams : Praying For Lightning

Kathleen Kelly : REAPER

Dani René : REBEL

Amy Davies : Kink's Redemption

Murphy Wallace : Injustice and Absolution

Jessica Ames : Out of the Storm

Jax Hart : Desert Sky

Sapphire Knight : Dirty Boy

Elle Boon : Royally Destroyed

J.A. CollardAuthor : In Too Deep

Verlene Landon : Bitten by Zombie

J.L. Leslie : Worth the Fight

# JOIN THE RBMC

[Royal Bastards MC Facebook Group](#)

[Website](#)

# BLURB

All I've ever dreamed of is revenge. It's how I survived the darkest parts of my childhood. The parts I've confessed to only one man. Then, I find out he's the one who slayed my real-life bogeyman. Now all I dream of is him.

*My best friend's father. Forbidden. Nefarious.*

A fact that fails to stifle my desire for him. But, when I attempt to breach his impenetrable heart, he unknowingly pushes me into the clutches of an evil I was unprepared for.

—

She's untouchable, even for me. The girl has dealt with enough in her life without me adding to it. Once her demon-slayer, she's now demanding more from me. As much as I ache to give in to her delicious touch, I can't. No matter how loud the inferno inside me roars for her.

*My daughter's best friend. Illicit. Taboo.*

It's not enough to keep my needy stare from her body when she's near. Then, I make the mistake of shutting her out. Now, I must help her claw her way out of the hell I threw her into.

This book contains multiple triggers including but not limited to:

Alcohol use | Assault | Blackmail | Blood | Control | Death |  
Depictions of Childhood Sexual Assault (off-page) |  
Discussions of Childhood Sexual Assault | Dubious Consent |  
Extortion | Grooming | Human Trafficking | Manipulation |  
Narcissism | Profanity | Rape | Sexual Abuse | Sexual Assault |  
Sexually Explicit Scenes | Smoking | Torture | Underage  
Drinking | Violence

If you're bothered by any of these triggers, please do not read  
this book.

*This book is for you, hummingbird.  
May you find clarity to see through the manipulation,  
Resilience to keep your chin up,  
And everlasting peace knowing you're strong enough to  
overcome it all.*

# PLAYLIST

Listen here: <https://spoti.fi/44WpTFD>

#1 Crush – Mike’s Dead

Alone – I Prevail

Another Life – Motionless In White

Bad Decisions – Gyth Rigdon feat. Chelsie Love

bad decisions – Bad Omens

Bad Romance – Halestorm

Breathe – Villain of the Story

Bulletproof – Godsmack

Burning House – Cam

Cold – Crossfade

Coma – Taylor Acorn feat. Cassadee Pope

Come to Poppa – Bob Seger & The Silver Bullet Band

Daddy Issues (Remix) – The Neighbourhood

DARkSide – Bring Me The Horizon

Dear Agony – Breaking Benjamin

Devil – Lowborn

DIE FOR YOU – STARSET

Easy On Me – Adele

Empty – Letdown.



Eternally Yours: Motion Picture Collection – Motionless In  
White feat. Crystal Joilena

Every Time You Leave – I Prevail

everything i wanted – Billie Eilish

Fall Apart – Casey James

Go To War – Nothing More

A Grave Mistake – Ice Nine Kills

I Get Off – Halestorm

I'm In Here (Piano/Vocal Version) – Sia

If You Love Me, Leave Me – Through Fire

In the Air Tonight – Jon Howard

Infinity – Jaymes Young

Iris – DIAMANTE feat. Breaking Benjamin

Just Pretend – Bad Omens

Let It Go – Chandler Leighton feat. Lø Spirit

Let me be Sad (Acoustic) – Christina Rotondo

Let Me Be Sad – I Prevail

Lifetime – Three Days Grace

Masterpiece – Motionless In White

Mind Games – BANKS

Mind of Mine – Lø Spirit

Monster – Fight The Fade

Nobody Praying For Me – Seether

She Used To Be Mine – Sara Bareilles

Someone Else – Loveless

Someone To Talk To – Three Days Grace

Supermassive Black Hole – Muse

Take Me First – Bad Omens

This Maniac's in Love with You – Alice Cooper  
The Unknown – 10 Years  
Unlovable – DIAMANTE  
wait in the truck – HARDY feat. Lainey Wilson  
When Did I Lose It All – Pale Waves  
Without Your – My Darkest Days  
Would Anyone Care – Citizen Soldier  
YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT LOVE MEANS – Nothing  
More  
Youth - Daughter

# PART ONE

# PROLOGUE

## DELILAH

Seven Years Ago | Age: 13

**D**addy is here.

*Rubbing his hand over my bare shoulder, tucking my loose hair behind my ear.*

*He's using his calm voice. The one I've learned to fear more than his anger. It's always followed by the touch I've learned to fear more than his backhand.*

*He's got the same look in his eyes I remember seeing in them the first night he came to me. I was seven, and it had been two weeks since my mother overdosed, leaving me alone and unprotected...*

*With him.*

*"My lovely Lilah..." he coos.*

I lunge up from the sweat-soaked mattress with a gasp. My chest heaves as I try to suck air into my lungs. Nausea that's normally coupled with my recurring nightmares rockets through my stomach at an alarming rate. Twisting my body, I lean over the side of the bed and have just enough sense to aim for the trash can I don't remember being there before I went to sleep last night.

Between dry heaves, I feel a soft, warm hand rubbing circles on my back. The touch startles me until I remember I'm not in my bedroom. I'm not even in my trailer. And my father isn't the one in bed next to me.

Maggie is.

I want to tell her to get off, that it reminds me of *him*, but I don't. She's just trying to help, and as my only friend, I don't want to push her away.

"Are you okay?" she questions, her tone thick with concern.

I look up at the wall I'm facing and catch sight of Maggie's dresser. The clock on top of it shines brightly.

1:23 A.M.

Once my stomach no longer feels like hurling itself out of my body by way of my esophagus, I take a breath and fall back onto the bed.

"Yeah," I answer, running my hand across my mouth. "Did you put the trash can there?"

I finally meet her stare, noticing the sheepish look on her face.

"You get sick in the middle of the night a lot," she picks at her blanket. "It's happened the past three times you've slept over."

The way she says it isn't accusatory. It's not littered with disgust. The care and concern in her voice is almost too much for me to bear. I know she wants to ask why I get sick, but mercifully, she doesn't. I'm sure she's going to want to know the reason for my frequent night sickness one day, but I don't know if I'll ever have the guts to tell her.

"Thanks," I look away from her. "I'm gonna go to the bathroom."

It's been six years since my father first started coming to me at night. In the beginning, he insisted it was because he heard me whimpering in my sleep. He would rub my back, massaging away worries I never remembered having. The more it happened, the more his touch drifted to other parts of my body.

As it began to occur more frequently, even my young mind was able to piece together that what he was doing wasn't right.

I used to lay very still and quiet, pretending to be asleep when I heard his footsteps creeping softly down the hallway. This was always followed by silent prayers for him to enter his own bedroom instead of mine.

Rarely were they answered.

And pretending to sleep didn't keep him away for long.

So I started to hide at bedtime. Sometimes in my closet. Other times I'd slither beneath the crawlspace under the hallway of our trailer. Not only would he get mad that he had to search for me, but our time together would be much worse once he finally found me.

Soon after, he began threatening punishment if I wasn't in my room at night. Now I no longer hide. I don't pretend to sleep. I've learned that the sooner I do as I'm told, the quicker it will be over and with less proof of his violent touch.

Opening the door to the bathroom, I turn on the overhead light and take a good look at myself in the mirror. My eyes are bloodshot. My tear-stained skin is flush from the exertion of getting sick.

The yellowing bruise on my cheek is almost completely gone—another run-in with the front porch railing of the trailer where my father and I live. At least that's what he decided we're telling everyone this time around.

*What a klutz I am.* I scoff at the reflection I hardly recognize anymore.

The young face of a thirteen-year-old girl is hidden behind horrors that someone my age should never have to endure.

I splash cool water on my cheeks before catching some in my cupped hands to take a sip. It cools my raw throat, so I drink some more. When I'm finished and reenter Maggie's bedroom, I'm instantly hit with the smell of sickness. I tie the handles of the small trash bag tightly then exit her room so I can throw it away in the outside trash. I don't need to stink up any more of the place.

Maggie's house is about ten times the size of mine. Probably more than that. Her father owns a limestone quarry.

His company is the top-selling stone retailer and distributor to the Gettysburg area, but they deliver stone all over the country. He's also the president of the Gettysburg chapter of the Royal Bastards Motorcycle Club.

A fact which scares the living daylights out of me, but Maggie swears he's all bark and no bite.

Whether it's because my father has taught me to fear all men or if it's because I've never seen Mr. Taylor with a smile on his face, I'm inclined to believe he's just as evil as my own father. And someone to steer clear of at all costs.

As I grip the banister at the top of the main staircase, I hear voices coming from below. I debate going downstairs as I tend to try to stay out of sight when I'm here, but the smell of vomit wafting from behind the plastic of this bag urges me on. The last thing I want is to get either me or Maggie in trouble for leaving it around for someone else to find.

Tiptoeing down the steps, the voices grow louder. I can hear laughter filtering in through the living room windows from the crowd of adults partying in the backyard.

I quickly race down the hallway and into the garage, tossing the bag into the large trash bin next to the open bay door. When I return to the house, I close the door behind me and make my way back to the staircase. As my foot hits the first step, a voice stops me.

*"...never been that enraged. I've seen him get revenge before, but it wasn't like that."*

*"What did you think The Judge would do when he got his hands on him? That dumbass did a fucking number on Shelly. There was no way he was gettin' off easy. You don't disrespect a woman like that, but especially not one linked to this club," another voice explains.*

*"He's lucky all he got was his hand chopped off," someone else chimes in.*

*"Bastard is lucky he's still walking this earth, if you ask me. Someone touches my ol' lady like that and it'll be the last thing he ever does."*



The thought of Maggie's father—or anyone for that matter—thinking of or even being capable of carrying out something so violent should be more shocking to my adolescent ears.

But it's not. Even at my young age, I've already been through so much shit, I'd believe anything at this point.

As I continue back to Maggie's room, I begin to wonder how I would get revenge on my own father, if I ever had the chance.

Would I be able to do to him what Mr. Taylor did to whoever it was who hurt Shelly? Could I do worse than that if pushed too far?

As much shame as my father has forced upon me, as filthy and worthless as his touch makes me feel, what I wouldn't give for someone to find out what I go through almost every day and come to my rescue, putting an end to his reign of terror.

But I'm filled with too much fear to tell anyone. To spill our secret...

What if no one believes me?

What if they do but they don't care?

What if I'm not worth saving?

Maggie has fallen back to sleep by the time I crawl between the covers again. I know her relationship with her father isn't perfect. He barely acknowledges her, but at least her mom is still around.

Her parents don't get along, but they try to give Maggie as normal a childhood as possible. As much as Mr. Taylor keeps his distance from the two of them, they both seem to have Maggie's best interests at heart.

As I close my eyes, trying to fall back to sleep, jealousy rears its ugly head and leaves me wishing my situation were more like hers. No matter how he acts toward Maggie, I know her father would kill anyone who dares to touch her.

As sleep pulls me under, I can't help but picture Mr. Taylor's strong arms wrapping themselves around my father,

like a boa constrictor, squeezing him until his body shatters  
into oblivion.

And he can't hurt me anymore.

# CHAPTER ONE

## ROYCE

Five Years Ago | Age: 35

The sound of multiple pairs of feet roaring down the staircase outside of my home office pulls my attention from the financial records I'm trying to review in peace.

I look up from my computer to see Maggie chasing that boy, Fernando, down the hallway and into the kitchen.

*These fucking kids.*

Fury pulls me from my seat and into the foyer.

“Knock it off, and take that shit outside, goddamn it!” I holler as they disappear around the corner.

I shake my head before retreating back into my office, but the sound of wood creaking from somewhere above stops me. I quickly turn my head, ready to take a bite out of whoever else is around to continue bothering me. When my aggravated sneer catches the alarmed look on the face of Maggie's friend, Delilah, still in the shadows near the top of the steps, my features soften a bit. Should've known it was her.

“I'm...” She can't work past her fear of me enough to finish her sentence.

She and Maggie have been friends for a couple years, and she's been around enough for me to notice that she's different from the other kids Maggie hangs around with. Long enough that she should feel more comfortable here than she does, even around a grouch like me.

“Why do you cower like a scared, little kitten every time you’re around me?” I joke, but she remains still as a statue.

She’s skittish as fuck. Quiet as a mouse. She’s a klutzy little thing, too... Always got some sort of bump, scrape, or bruise on her.

*It happens a little too often, if you ask me.*

“It’s fine,” I assure her, relaxing my stance before nodding in the direction the other two went. “You go on outside.”

She nods swiftly then continues her descent, but once she appears in the stream of sunlight warming the lower half of the stairs, I notice a shadow on her face.

“Stop,” I command, my tone serious as an uneasy dread slithers up my spine.

Her body visibly begins to shake as I climb the steps to meet her. Gripping her chin between my fingers, I gently guide her face to the left, to get a better look at her most recent injury.

The outer edge of her right eye is swollen through the temple and surrounded by a dull purple and blue bruise. A fresh black eye. Couldn’t be older than a day or two.

The oddly shaped bruise is accompanied by two long, lighter bruises along the top of her cheekbone, leading to her ear. No doubt belonging to fingers as she was either slapped or backhanded by whoever did this to her. Most likely the latter.

“What happened?”

A pair of frightened, cocoa-brown eyes tick-tock their way back and forth between mine as her shaking continues. But she doesn’t answer me.

“I asked you a question.” My tone isn’t threatening, but I want a damn answer.

She takes a steadying breath before defiantly pulling her chin from my grip.

“I fell.”

*She* may only be fifteen, but *I've* been around long enough to identify a blatant lie when I hear one. And I'm smart enough to know the difference between lying to keep yourself out of trouble and lying to cover up a dark secret you don't want anyone to find out.

This lie falls right in the middle of both.

"No, you didn't."

Her eyes shoot in every direction but straight into mine, so I reclaim her chin in a firm hold, commanding her attention back to me.

"Who gave you the black eye?"

I already know I'm not going to like her answer, regardless of whether or not it's the truth.

"I was playing softball, and the ball missed my glove," she finally explains.

I watch as her fear begins to morph into anger at my curiosity, and I wonder if I'm the first person to question her like this. The softball excuse is a good one, and had it been the first lie she attempted to feed me, I might have believed her. But it still wouldn't explain the finger-like bruises.

"Why didn't you say that the first time, then?" I test her.

"I was embarrassed," she falsely admits, this time with a little more confidence in her words now that she thinks I may believe her.

Narrowing my eyes, I debate whether to keep peppering her with questions until she has no choice but to divulge the truth. But I decide to try another tactic instead.

"Come with me," I command then stomp back down the few steps to the foyer.

She needs ice and maybe some Ibuprofen for the swelling. And I need to get to the bottom of what happened because when I find out who gave her that shiner, they're going to wish they hadn't. Surprisingly, she follows me before I'm forced to command her again.

I *hate* giving an order twice.

“Have a seat at the table,” I tell her when we make it to the kitchen.

I search the cabinets for medicine before pouring her a glass of water. After that, I fish around in our freezer for an ice pack with no luck. Opening the fridge, my eyes lock on the rib eye I was planning to cook for dinner tonight. With a deep sigh, I grab it from the fridge then sit two chairs away from her at the table.

She takes the medicine when I give it to her and swallows it down with a few gulps of water. By the time she’s done, I’ve ripped the plastic wrap off the steak. I meet a confused stare when I hold it out to her.

“For your eye,” I explain, but she still doesn’t move to take it from me. “Like an ice pack. Here, tilt your head to the side a little.”

When she does, I place the cold cut of meat over the swollen area around her eye and temple. She hisses from the pain or the cold, or both, as I nod for her to hold the steak in place. I turn my chair to face hers then lean forward with my elbows on my knees.

“Delilah, I’m going to be perfectly honest with you, and I need you to do the same, okay?”

She’s silent a moment before nodding her head.

“I only know a little bit about softball ... baseball. I was never on a team when I was younger, but my friends and I would play for fun sometimes. However, I happen to know quite a bit about fighting and throwing punches. Are you with me?”

Her brows furrow. No doubt she’s curious to know what the hell my point is.

“I’ve seen bruises left behind by baseballs. They can appear similar to bruises that a fist would make, I suppose. Though sometimes, you’d also see the unmistakable pattern of the stitching on the skin, depending on which part of the ball hit you.”

When her gaze shifts in and out of focus and she places the steak down on the table, I run my hand down my face and silently curse Maggie's mother—for the thousandth time—for leaving in the dead of night two years ago.

We didn't get along, but we had an agreement. And part of that agreement was she would handle shit like this. I'm not built for it. I wasn't born with the emotional capacity to deal with others, let alone children. Specifically one who has clearly been abused.

“What I'm saying is, no ball or fist would leave two finger-shaped bruises behind like the ones you've got there.” She winces and turns away when I lift my hand to her. An act that solidifies my suspicion of abuse.

“So I'm only going to ask you one more time before I get angry. Who hurt you?”

The threat of anger was made to scare her and no, I don't feel bad about it. Because it's what finally gets her talking. But what she tells me turns that threat into a fact. Something I fight desperately to keep at bay as she recalls horrific details of the life she's been forced to endure at her father's hand for the last eight years.

By the time she's finished, I know she can easily see the intent to act written across my face.

“Please don't tell him—don't tell anyone I told you,” she sobs, begging for my silence. Falling to her knees before me, she grips my shirt tightly in her fists, pleading with me to keep her secret. “He'll kill me!”

I don't doubt he'll be the one to end her life. If not now, because she confided in me, then eventually, sometime down the line.

Because that's where abuse leads.

It often starts out small.

A touch here.

A slap there.



Maybe an empty apology in the beginning. An excuse for why it happened. A false promise to change. It's a vicious cycle that has nothing to do with the victim and everything to do with the degenerate committing the abuse.

Soon enough, an addiction forms.

They grow confident that their victim either can't or won't fight back. They're empowered by their invincibility, and the addiction grows into a sickness spreading through them like a festering infection. Whether it's a show of power or a form of eroticism, they get off on it either way because they gain control.

Control is an abuser's ultimate weapon.

And I'm going to take it away from him.

# CHAPTER TWO

## ROYCE

I wanted to go to that fucker's house immediately after Delilah told me her story. But I've reacted to certain situations in the heat of the moment before, and it always gets messy.

Failure to prepare is preparation for failure or some shit like that.

So now I'm straddling my bike, hiding behind a mountain of old cars and car parts in the middle of a junkyard that backs up to where Delilah and her father live. As I scope out the layout of the trailer park, I take note of any person or thing that could derail my mission.

His trailer is situated at the back of the development, so I should be able to slip in and out easily when I come back for him. And since Maggie informed me Delilah will be spending the night at our house tonight, I'll have the perfect opportunity to carry out my mission without worrying about her playing witness to it.

As she was relaying her horrific history to me, Delilah mentioned a crawl space beneath the trailer with an entrance via the hallway. She said the latch was broken, allowing her to come and go easily. That's my best way in, I think.

She was finally starting to calm down as I washed the rib eye juice from my hands when Maggie re-entered the kitchen—without that shadow of hers, Fernando, trailing behind her for once.

She looked at me like I was the one who gave her friend the black eye because there was no way to hide how swollen and red Delilah's eyes were from crying the way she was. And Maggie has never shied away from her dislike or distaste of me.

I wasn't quick enough to come up with a cover story, but Delilah didn't hesitate to respond to the question on Maggie's face. No doubt she has experience quickly creating excuses for her injuries.

*"I accidentally ran into the railing as I was chasing after you and Fernando. Your dad heard me crying and got me some ... steak."*

*She awkwardly points to the meat still laying on the table.*

*"Don't call him that," Maggie corrects her. She hasn't called me 'dad' since she was four.*

*Maggie looks at the raw steak on the table and rolls her eyes.*

*"That's disgusting. And it's an infection waiting to happen. I'll take it from here."*

Maggie and I have always had a strained relationship. A one-night stand with her mother when we were nineteen turned me into a disgruntled father and *baby daddy*. But as bad a parent and partner as I am, I tried to do right by them both as well as I could.

I was just starting out in the stone business, and I took Penny in while she was pregnant. I told her I would be there for her and the kid financially, make sure they were protected, but that's all I could give them.

I was a prospect in the club at the time with barely a cent to my name. I was working as hard as I could to establish myself in both the stone industry as well as the club.

In the last fifteen years, my company has grown into an enterprise, and I went from prospect to president quicker than most go from member to officer.

I brought the Gettysburg Bastards into my business to assist with the growing demand. I would feed 10 percent of my earnings back into the club, and I'd get promoted every few months. When our previous president came to me with a new idea—to use my trucks to transport *other* items—I couldn't say no. Even if I didn't agree with entangling my business further into my outlaw lifestyle.

So we started shipping guns to some of our other chapters as well as high-profile customers.

When the Rojas Cartel—of which Fernando's family is extensively entwined—infiltrated one of our shipments, they were intrigued and wanted to forge a partnership.

*And you can't exactly say no to the cartel.*

Now, begrudgingly, we transport their cocaine all over the country for them. It's not the most desirable business arrangement, and not something I necessarily agree with, but success isn't free.

And it's most often shadowed by the devil you sold your soul to in order to achieve it.

But no amount of success could have prepared me to raise a *daughter* on my own. I've tried looking for Penny everywhere so I can bring her back here. I've asked the other Royal Bastards chapters to be on the lookout for her, but all we've gotten is crickets for the past two years. Regardless of my feelings for her, Maggie needs a mother in her life.

I can't fill that void for her.

Movement in front of the trailer brings my attention back to the matter at hand. I lock eyes on him through my binoculars as he steps out onto the front porch of the trailer, and my anger flares.

There's a young woman located at the trailer across from his. He calls out to her, and she joins him for a cigarette. A

second later, a little girl runs over and grabs the woman around her waist. She can't be older than seven or eight.

*The same age Delilah was when he started abusing her.*

When he tickles a finger under her chin, letting it linger a little too long, it takes every ounce of energy I have to stay put.

*And not to take this vile, disgusting, no good, excuse of a man out this moment.*

No. I'll come back tonight and deal with him properly.

I'm certainly no father-of-the-year, but I'm a fucking saint compared to that piece of shit.



“Unless anyone has any other business, we’ll adjourn for the evening.” I look around the table at my brothers...

Atticus, our sergeant at arms. Nicknamed after the masked poet because he’s into shit like that.

Zephyr, our road captain. Every time we ride, he looks like a dog with its head out the window, enjoying the breeze with a big goofy grin on his face.

Toga, our treasurer. As part of his initiation hazing, we made him wear a toga for a week, and it just stuck.

Chubbs, our secretary. That’s the name you get when you’re dared to take a Viagra, and it leaves you with the biggest chubby of your life for the next seventy-two hours.

Crew, our tail-gunner. When he was in the army, he was responsible for an entire crew of tank assault men, so it was only fitting.

Saxon, our enforcer. He hails from England. We’re still unclear how or why he ended up in the States, but we’ve

adopted him, so he's our problem now.

Ronin, the prospect who will be the fucking death of me. He's the son of our former club president who was killed by a member of a rival club a few years ago and the biggest thorn in my side.

And finally, Draven, my VP. This motherfucker is the spitting image of Eric from the movie *The Crow*. He's also the closest friend I have. I swear, he has psychic abilities; he can read my mind like no one else and knows what I'm thinking sometimes even before I do.

In addition to the brothers currently around my table, we also have several nomads who come and go as they please. We call upon them from time to time such as when we need to vote on something, or when we're in need of more manpower for a fight.

When no one speaks, I bring my fist down on the hard surface of the table, adjourning tonight's session of Church.

"You're all free to go except Draven. I need to talk to you." His eyes catch mine when I call his name, and he nods.

It takes a few minutes for the room to clear out. Ronin is the last to leave, shutting the door behind him.

"I need your help," I begin, turning my attention back to my VP. "Maggie's friend, Delilah, was here today, and I found out some information regarding her dirtbag father. I'd like you to come with me while I handle it."

"What's going on?"

I go through a basic summarization of what Delilah told me earlier. No need to divulge all the sordid details. Draven is ride-or-die. He won't require much information before agreeing to help me, and he also doesn't need to know specifics.

Plus, the thought of others knowing what I know about her ignites a sense of proprietorship that I don't quite understand.

"When do we leave?" he asks, his fury matching mine when I finish explaining the situation.

I purse my lips, thinking carefully.

“I think this would be a job better taken care of late and under the cover of darkness. Be ready to leave in three hours.”

“You’ve got it,” he promises.

Standing from the table, he cracks his knuckles, already itching for a fight.

As usual, I knew I could count on him.



# CHAPTER THREE

## ROYCE

**D**raven and I have been scoping out the trailer for the last hour.

The community has been quiet since we got here. Unsuspecting. It's the seemingly perfect backdrop to carry out what should be a flawless plan.

Though Draven and I both know from experience how well laid plans can sometimes go.

Hopefully for us, every resident of the Little Round Top Trailer Park is in bed for the night and not looking to stick their noses into business that doesn't concern them.

As quietly as we can, we hop the rusty chain-link fence behind Delilah's trailer. Once we're both clear of the tetanus trap, I motion for Draven to quietly peer around the corner to make sure there's no one out front before I climb underneath the trailer. We could only see so far around the structure from our perch in the junkyard.

When he gives me the all-clear, I crawl beneath the trailer and locate the panel to crawl through. Draven keeps watch at the rear window, looking for any signs of life inside as I go.

I lift the broken panel then lay it down next to the opening before I lift myself up and inside. Sitting with my legs through the floor, I look around and listen for any signs of movement.

When I don't see anything, and the only thing I hear is the rhythmic breathing of someone deep into the REM phase of the sleep cycle coming from the room next to me, I text Draven to tell him the coast is clear.

Standing up, I wait for my VP to join me before I put the panel back into place. Wasting no more time, we step into the bedroom next to us.

Without hesitation, I grip the thin material of this motherfucker's wife beater tightly in my fists and push him up against the flimsy wood paneling lining the walls.

"*Wh—what the fuck?*" He wakes up quickly, but it takes a minute for his eyes to focus.

I let go of his shirt and latch onto his hair. Gripping it hard in my fist, I hold him still before winding up and backhanding him across the face like the little bitch he is.

"Wake the fuck up," I demand.

Draven joins in with a punch to his gut that knocks the wind out of him. He lifts his knee, trying to protect his stomach from another attack, but Draven shoves the top half of his body upright, back against the wall so we're eye-to-eye again.

"I heard through the grapevine that you like to fuck little girls." My voice is bitter from the taste of acid on my tongue.

Just as he catches his breath, I follow Draven's punch with one of my own, hitting him directly in the notch beneath his sternum, between his ribs. This time, he falls to the ground, and I let him, but I don't let go of the grip I have on his hair. Several strands of it rip clean off his scalp, then I wiggle my fingers, letting them free fall to the floor.

Struggling to catch his breath, he props himself up on all fours and tries to crawl around us. I lay an unforgiving kick to his ribs, launching him into the end of his bed. Then with the toe of my boot, I flip him onto his back. Before he's able to roll over again, I grab him by the balls and squeeze ... *hard*.

The guttural noise that escapes him is one I've only heard a few times in my life. Each time, it causes my hair to stand on end. I don't get off on torturing people, but that doesn't mean I won't deliver proper retribution when it's owed.

Draven presses down on this motherfucker's chest with his foot, forcing the rest of the air from his lungs.

“Now, the way I see it is you have two options here,” I speak in a moderately level tone. “Number one ... stop being a despicable human being. Don’t lay one more fucking finger on your daughter—or anyone else—and we won’t have an issue. Or number two ... I can kill you right now to keep the behavior from continuing.”

I look down at the pathetic excuse for a man and wonder how anyone could do the things Delilah described to me earlier. What the fuck wires got crossed in his DNA to make him so vicious? So disgusting a person?

The thought reactivates my fury from earlier, and as he tries to speak, I twist his nut sac, causing his eyes to roll back in excruciating pain.

“I’d make sure you pick the right answer, motherfucker, because the way I’m feeling right now, I have no qualms going with option number two.”

Draven cracks his knuckles above us, highlighting the severity of my threat.

“I’m s-I’m s-s-sorry...” he finally squeaks out.

“You’re sorry?” I repeat. “What are you sorry for?”

Before he can attempt to speak again, I let his balls go. The thin material of his boxers is wrinkled from my death grip mixed with his ball sweat.

Or maybe it’s piss. Fuck, I don’t know.

He roars in pain as the feeling in his balls comes back, but it’s a short reprieve before I latch onto them again.

“What the fuck are you sorry for, dickhead?”

As tears begin to leak from his eyes, I roll mine and scoff in disgust.

“Oh, I’m sorry... Am I hurting you? Do you want me to stop?” I goad him. “When your daughter cried because of what you did to her, did *you* fucking stop? Or did you keep going because it made you hard?”

The way he looks at me, like I've pinpointed his greatest turn-on, sends a wave of red raining through my vision. Letting go of him again, I stand and kick him over and over.

In his junk. His ribs. One money shot right to his face with my steel toe.

His eye swells immediately, but thankfully, I didn't break the skin. I don't like where this is headed, and the last thing I need to do is leave a trail of blood behind.

When he goes quiet—no doubt in shock from the pain—I stomp as hard as I can, right between his legs. Before either one of us can stop me, I grip both sides of his head and lift him from the ground. Wrapping his neck in a chokehold, I whisper in his ear, “So long as I live, you'll *never* touch her again.”

Unbottling the last of my rage, I quickly rotate my upper body until his neck breaks, and he falls limp at my feet.

We stand over him for a few minutes as my breathing begins to return to a normal, non-ragey pace. Draven is the first to break the silence.

“Well... That escalated quickly,” he states without looking at me.

I take a few more calming breaths.

“Can you blame me?” I ask.

“Fuck no,” he answers without missing a beat.



I helped Draven drag the body out through the panel in the floor and back to the junkyard so we could secure him in my awaiting truck. Then I came back to the trailer to search for any personal items one might take when they skip town.

Penny would be the expert on this subject, but it's not like I can fucking call her to ask what she packed to take with her

before abandoning our daughter.

Starting in the bedroom, I empty his drawers of what little clothing they contain then place them into a few grocery bags I found lying around. I'm careful not to leave my prints behind. Then I move into the bathroom and collect some toiletry items before locating his wallet and keys in the kitchen.

To my knowledge, he doesn't own a car. I overheard Maggie talking on the phone to Delilah a few weeks ago, and it sounded as though her father's car was recently repossessed.

*That's one less thing to worry about.*

I do one final check for anything else someone wouldn't want to be without before tossing everything through the panel's opening and onto the ground.

Positioning the panel back into place, I wipe it for prints, grab the bags, then crawl out from underneath the trailer. I take one final look around before throwing everything over the fence and jogging the short distance back to my truck.

After tossing his belongings through the open back window, I hop into the cab. Then I start up my truck, throw it into drive, and get us the fuck out of dodge.

"We take care of him tonight," I order.

Draven nods his head in agreement beside me before adding, "Acetylene torch?"

I nod. "We'll do it where we're dropping the limestone tomorrow after we crush it. Once everything is burned off of him, we'll throw his skeleton into the crusher and break it up with the stone."

Draven looks at me before responding. "A twenty-ton pile of crushed rock and bone is a good way to cover up a murder."

He's not wrong.

# CHAPTER FOUR

## DELILAH

One Year Ago | Age: 19

This place was always a solace for me.

An escape from the hell in which I used to live.

For the past four years, I've been lucky enough to call it home.

Maggie and I live in the main house, with Royce, much to the dismay of them both. But our dwelling is just one of the many buildings situated on the massive grounds of this compound.

Maggie has begged Royce, several times, to let us fix up the small shack on the property's east end and move into it. It's where he grew up, back before he purchased the rest of the land he now owns. But he refused her plea every time.

The acreage is bathed in beautiful shades of gold at one of my favorite times of the day. A glint of light coming from the south pulls my attention toward the quarry as the setting sun's glimmer reflects off the towering conveyor system in the distance.

Tall shadows from those who are busy setting up for tonight's bonfire dance around me as they work. People who quickly became my new family after my father disappeared without a trace.

*On the very night I told Royce my secret.*



My gut tells me he orchestrated my father's sudden departure, but I'm too afraid to confront him about it. For starters, I'm not part of the club. Despite that, I've learned enough to know there are some questions better forgotten than asked.

But I need proof. I need details. I need to know—for absolute fact—that my father is never coming back for me. Maybe then my nightmares will end. Maybe I'll no longer feel like someone is tracking my every step.

If I do ever summon the courage to ask him, I'm more afraid of him lying to me about it than getting angry or threatening me because I questioned it. Although deep down I know Royce wouldn't hurt me. He may barely speak to me or even acknowledge me, but I see it in his eyes.

His sharp stare softens for no one but me. Not even for his own daughter, though Maggie wouldn't appreciate it if it did. It's sad that their relationship is as strained as it is. I would give anything to be able to fix it. Family isn't something to take for granted.

They may not be the Brady Bunch, but things could be a lot worse.

"This is going to be the biggest bonfire you've ever seen, Delilah," Crew calls out, pulling me from my thoughts as he exits the barracks.

That's what the club calls the building where the rest of the guys live. Though from what Fernando explained, it's nothing like the actual barracks you'd find on a military base.

It's more of an apartment building, comprised of large, separate units. There are enough for everyone to have their own so no one has to share with anyone else.

Crew flashes me a smile before joining Ronin, helping him add more logs and kindling to the growing pile. I smile in appreciation. The club has gone out of their way to make sure today is special for me.

*My nineteenth birthday.*

I told them I wanted to keep it small and quiet—due in part to the constant feeling like I don't deserve good things—but Maggie insisted on throwing me a “rager,” as she called it. The Bastards invited a bunch of friends and acquaintances of the club. Apparently, we're expecting close to two hundred people.

Wooden benches and hay bales have been placed in a large circle around the bonfire. There are multiple coolers placed around the backyard full of ice and a variety of alcoholic beverages.

Royce has set very few rules for us over the years. One of them is that he doesn't care if we drink so long as we don't leave the house. Maggie scoffs at his rules, but at least it shows he cares. They aren't hard to follow, and honestly, I like abiding by them.

They're reasonable.

They keep me safe.

They're the complete opposite of the rules my father had in place when I was growing up...

*You must be in your bedroom waiting for me every night by seven o'clock.*

*You can't tell anyone what we do or else they'll send you to children's jail for being a bad girl.*

*Make it feel good, or Daddy will show you what real pain feels like.*

No matter how hard I tried, nothing I ever did was good enough for him.

Taking a deep, shaky breath, I quickly push away the unwanted thoughts of my father. I don't want to share this day with him. Or any day, for that matter, for the rest of my life.

“What can I do to help?” I call out to Crew and Ronin. “I feel bad just standing around.”

I've always worried I'm not pulling my weight around the house and stone yard. No one has ever made me feel that way; constantly being told I'm not good enough when I was

growing up took its toll on me. It's not something that goes away either. I'm always trying to please others and make sure they're happy with me.

"Not a damn thing," Ronin winks, and a playful smile curls on his face.

"We've got this," Crew adds. "Why don't you go on inside and relax a little? Get ready for a late night."

"Sleep is a waste of time." *As if I could sleep even if I wanted to.* "But if you insist there's nothing I can do to help, I'll leave you to it."

I turn around and walk toward the house so I can find Maggie and beg her to give me something to do. I find her sweeping the deck at the back of the house.

"Here, let me do that." I wrap my fist around the broom handle and attempt to take it from her, but she doesn't let go.

"Hell no... I'm not letting you help set up for your own party. Besides, you can help clean up tomorrow when your birthday is over," she laughs, sticking her tongue out at me. "Plus, Ronin looks so sad that you left. You should go back and talk to him. Maybe you'll end up getting lucky tonight, and he'll take your virginity for your birthday."

I about choke on my saliva.

"*Maggie!*" I shriek, looking around to make sure no one heard. I hear her giggling, and when I focus my attention on her again, my eyes roll all the way to the back of my head.

"I'm sorry," she apologizes but continues to laugh. "I was just kidding."

"You're hilarious." I toss her a sarcasm-laced compliment.

Maggie likes to playfully poke fun at the fact that I'm still a virgin.

*Even though I'm not.*

She believes I'm still the proud owner of my *V* card, and I've never told her otherwise. She makes jokes, and I laugh

along with her through my pain because it's easier than exposing my truth.

She and Fernando are inseparable and madly in love for two people who are still so young. Maggie turned nineteen a couple months ago, and Fernando is a year older than us. They've been sexually active for the past few years.

I began asking her questions when my curiosity got the best of me. I wanted to know what it was like, being with someone you're in love with. Someone who cares about you and wants the best for you.

Does it feel good?

Do you feel safe in their arms?

Do you trust them with your life?

She says it's not like anything she's ever experienced before, in the best way possible.

I want that. I want someone to love me as much as Fernando loves her.

But what if I'm unlovable?

What if that's the reason my father was so cruel to me? Because he was incapable of loving someone unworthy of love.

"Anyway," I clear my throat and my head before I tumble too far down that depressing hill. "Ronin is sweet, but he's not really my type."

*He's the complete opposite, in fact.*

"Oh yeah? And what's your type?"

A thick head of silver and black hair.

Soft, dark-brown eyes.

A maturity that can only come with life experience and hard work.

The only man who has stirred any desire in me is the one I can never have.

"I don't really know..." I brush off her question.

“Well, maybe we’ll figure out what it is tonight. There will be lots of guys to choose from.”

“Can’t wait,” I lie. “I’ll be inside if you need me.”

I walk toward the rear entrance of the house, but before I can put one foot inside, someone steps into my path. I look up into the very eyes I was just picturing and begin to tremble. The soft velvet gaze that once brought me comfort has been replaced with a fire-like intensity.

Lust swirls deep inside me. My heart rate increases, sending blood rushing to my core before I even realize what’s happening.

Instantly, I duck my head to avoid his stare. It’s too much to take in.

“Sorry,” I mutter and step out of his way.

Only, he tries to stand aside for me to pass too, and we end up in an awkward dance in the open doorframe. Finally, he places his hands on my shoulders and moves me to the other side of the wide doorway, allowing each of us to finally pass through it.

A sudden, ravenous craving consumes me.

We lock eyes again, and the burst of electricity that blazes within his can’t be missed. It’s as though my desire lit the spark that traveled through me and into him. My lips part, unable to control my lust.

The air around us evaporates, and the wooden boards beneath my feet feel as though they’re being swallowed by the earth and taking me with them.

The way his heart rate quickens, the thick, bulging vein in his neck pulsating so violently I can see it beating even in the shadow of his chin, tells me he notices the shift too.

*What the hell?*

This look is vastly different from any other I’ve seen from him before. And my reaction to his touch is a stark contrast to the last time he touched me—four years ago when he gripped

my chin on the stairs and demanded I tell him my darkest secret.

What the hell has changed since then?

*A lot, clearly.*

Before I have another moment to overthink exactly what is happening, he tears his gaze from me and shouts at Maggie. Walking out onto the deck, he suddenly appears completely unfazed by our connection.

“Isn’t there anything else you can be doing? I’m sure you can find something more important than sweeping leaves off the deck.”

Not wanting to get caught in the crossfire, I scurry into the house, and I don’t stop moving until I get to my bedroom. Dropping down onto my bed, I stare at the ceiling.

Did I imagine the look he gave me? The sensation of my heart plummeting into my stomach? The desire erupting from every nerve ending in my body?

*Holy hell, what was that?*

And why do I have to feel like this toward *any* man, let alone Royce? If Maggie ever found out...

*No.*

This is ridiculous.

The only logical explanation for it is that Royce has given me what I’ve always dreamed of. He got my father out of my life, and this is how my fucked-up, daddy-issue riddled brain is choosing to react to that.

I’ve never had someone like him in my life before. Knowing—or at least thinking I know—what he did for me has forced my mind to place him in the role of my protector. The kind of person who I should have always had in my life but never did.

My gratitude toward him is being misconstrued as want.

*Need.*

I do want and need someone like Royce in my life. By my side. Someone to protect me and always have my best interests at heart. But I can't let myself make him out to be anything more than exactly what he is.

*My best friend's father.*

Whether from the shock of what I thought I felt or from fighting with my mind to sort through my ridiculous notions, I lose all track of time. Before I know it, I hear Maggie calling my name from the bottom of the stairs.

*"Delilah, if you don't get down here, you're going to miss your own damn party!"*

Sitting up in bed, I call down to her, "Be right there."

I quickly change into the new shirt she bought me for my birthday. It's not exactly my style, but it's very pretty. Black with patches of thinner material that you can see my bra and stomach through here and there.

And it's a little lower cut than I'm used to. I've never been eager to show off my body. Being forced to do so, coupled with my father's brutal scrutinization, has kept my wardrobe on the more conservative side. But I can't help but feel a mix of danger and allure when I look in the mirror.

It makes me want to be a different person than the one I've been up until today. I don't want to be the scared girl I've always been. The one who sinks into the shadows of everyone around her.

I don't want to shy away from my reflection when I look in the mirror; I want it to empower me. I want the sight of my breasts, jutting out over the neckline of this shirt, to make me feel bold and sexy.

I don't want to miss out on the things I desperately want but feel I'm not worthy of. I'm still scared, but this feeling has been morphing into something ... *different* ... since the day I was rescued.

What once was a crippling fear of my father has more recently been turned into a fear of living. As though I'm afraid

to be happy. Like I'll get a taste of a better life before it gets taken away from me again.

I've had four years to put the past behind me, and I don't want to dwell on it any longer. I know I can't just snap my fingers and forget all the pain and trauma I've been through. But if I never try to move forward, I'll be stuck in the past forever.

So I'm turning the page and beginning a new chapter...

Starting tonight.



# CHAPTER FIVE

## DELILAH

There's something to be said about liquid courage.

At least that's what I'm attributing my good time to, because as gung-ho as I was about being a new version of myself a few hours ago, it doesn't happen this quickly.

While I usually tend to stay in the background due to my rampant social anxiety, among other debilitating mental illnesses, tonight I've instead chosen to partake in several different obligatory party games and conversations.

I'm far from drunk—because I don't enjoy the feeling of losing control—but the few beers I've had have helped me let loose and have more fun than I normally would at one of these events.

Unfortunately, my good mood is fading as quickly as my *friends* continue to consume more than their fair share of alcohol. Maggie is like me and has never been a big drinker, and the same goes for Fernando. Usually, I hang around with them when everyone begins to teeter on the edge of losing control.

However, they left me alone about an hour ago and took one of the four-wheelers to have sex somewhere more private. There's no telling when they'll be back either. Maggie is very open with me about the lively sexual side to her relationship with Fernando.

To my greatest chagrin.

Apparently, he takes his time making sure every inch of her body is satisfied—multiple times—before he gets his. A

detail I could have lived my entire life without knowing. And one that fills me with a bitter sadness.

Which brings the gauge of my emotional gas tank swinging toward other things alcohol is known for...

Inciting depression.

Rousing self-loathing.

Reminding you that others have exactly what you crave and will likely never have for yourself.

“Never have I ever...” Jennah thinks of something to make everyone drink to as Mickey nuzzles her neck. “Actually ... you’ll have to come back to me.”

She giggles as Mickey lifts her, and she wraps her legs around his waist. I watch with both disgust and another unhealthy dose of jealousy as he carries her into the darkness behind the shed.

“Okay, then,” Ronin chimes in next to me. But I don’t hear what he says after that. Instead, my eyes scan the group of people on the other side of the large bonfire.

*The adults.*

I haven’t seen Royce for a while and wonder where he went. He’s been very standoffish since I saw him earlier today. Is he mad that all these people have taken over his backyard to celebrate me? I’ve often wondered if he resents taking me in.

The morning after I confessed my secret to him, I went home to an empty trailer. At first, I didn’t think much of it, I just thought my dad was out.

When the time came for me to be in my room that night and he still wasn’t home, I knew something wasn’t right, but I didn’t call anyone for help.

Who did I have to tell anyway?

I didn’t know what to do. If I went to look for him and he came back while I was gone, he would be angry I wasn’t waiting in my room for him as I should have been. If I told

someone he wasn't home, would he have been angry that I tattled on him?

I wondered what would have happened if he never came home. I hated him, but the thought of becoming a ward of the state scared me more. At least with my father, I knew what to expect.

Then I started panicking.

I thought he was testing me to see what I would do. Like a new, cruel game he wanted to play with me. I laid in my bed in the fetal position for three days. I didn't get up to answer the phone. I stayed still through each painful hunger cramp and even when my bladder was stretched so tight it felt like it would burst.

I waited for him to come home or jump out from wherever he was hiding like he did sometimes when he wanted to scare me.

On the third day, someone began pounding on our front door. When I didn't answer, the sound of the door getting kicked in echoed throughout the tiny dwelling. That's when I heard him.

*Royce.*

He called my name as he walked the short distance from the front of the trailer to my bedroom. When he found me, I can't remember what he said or how he looked at me, but I do remember him carrying me out of there, enveloped in his arms and comforted by his scent.

I passed out before he even got me into his truck. And I didn't wake up for weeks. When I did, Maggie told me someone went back and packed up all of my clothing and belongings, and that I'd be living with them from now on.

I didn't understand how Royce knew my father left. Why he thought he'd never come back for me. They're just a few of the questions that have been eating away at me ever since that day. And the only one who can give me any of the answers I seek is also the one person I'll never be able to have. It's the

true reason for my jealousy as I picture what Mickey could be doing to Jennah behind the shed.

“Yo, birthday girl! I’m pretty sure you have to drink to that one,” Becka teases playfully, calling me out. I have no idea what was said, nor do I ask them to repeat it.

Fuck this game, and fuck not having answers. I down the rest of my beer then toss the empty bottle back into the cooler.

With liquid courage flowing once again, it overpowers all my negative thoughts. It propels me from the hay bale I’m sitting on and marches me toward the house. I can hear Becka calling out from behind me, telling me that she was just joking around, but I don’t acknowledge her.

I’m on a mission, and I’m not backing down until I get what I want.



With significantly less gusto than I had before I climbed the steps to the second floor, I turn away from my and Maggie’s adjoining bedrooms.

At the opposite end of the hallway is the house’s primary bedroom.

*Royce’s bedroom.*

I wasn’t sure if he was up here when I began my quest, but when I see the light from his room glowing through the sliver of space between the door and the floor, I know he’s in there.

*Keep going, Delilah. Don’t wuss out.*

Taking a deep breath, I push any fear aside and slowly walk toward the door. As I get closer, I breathe in his scent as it hangs in the air around me. It seeps into my veins and settles deep within me. It’s soothing, and I appreciate its crisp spice

mixed with a hint of something else that can only be described as strong masculine virility.

It's both my weakness and my strength.

I want to blanket myself in the comfort it still brings me after all this time. I let it hypnotize me through the last few steps I take until I reach his closed door.

Without hesitation, I knock on the heavy wood. Echoes like cannon blasts boom down the hallway behind me. Before I lose the resolve I've dug out from somewhere deep inside, I call out to him.

"Royce?"

With no immediate answer, I inhale, ready to call out his name again. Before I can utter another sound, however, the floor beneath me vibrates as feet on the other side of the door stomp quickly toward it. A lump forms in my throat, suffocating the newly found confidence I had a moment ago.

When the door opens, I want to melt into the imperfections of the wood I'm standing on and disappear forever.

The intensity in his expression matches what I saw earlier on the deck. But the electric spark that lit up his eyes is gone. He's irritated. On edge. And I know I'm the cause of it.

At one time, I would've run and never looked back. But this time, be it from the beer or growing a sudden backbone, I won't do it. I lick my lips and clear the lump from my throat.

"I-I wa-" I swallow nervously and begin again. "I want to know what happened to my father."

He doesn't move, his features barely shift.

In a silent battle of wills, he stands stock straight, waiting for me to cower and forget all about anything I want to know. Yet I stand firm—though less straight and shakier than him—refusing to back down.

When he folds his arms across his chest and narrows his eyes at me, I consider the small movement a huge victory.

He was the first to break.

“No,” he spits, denying my request.

I mirror his stance and deliver my rebuttal.

“Why not?” I inquire.

“I don’t know anything about it, that’s why.”

“You’re lying.” I wait for him to deny my accusation, but surprisingly, he doesn’t. “I’m not stupid, you know. I tell you ... what I told you ... and my father just happens to skip town that very night?”

He shrugs. “Guess so...?”

As the formation of tears prick at my eyes, I close them and take a calming breath. The last thing I need to do is become a hysterical mess right now.

But my deep breath only helps so much. Now that I’m this close to finding out if my father is really gone, I need to know the truth more than I’ve needed anything since getting away from him.

When I open my eyes, I catch a glimmer of empathy from Royce, but it’s gone in a flash. Though his expression remains softer than it was when he first opened the door.

“Royce, you don’t understand.” I manage to keep the tears at bay, but my breathing increases as the panic of never finding out sinks in. “I need to know if I can finally stop looking over my shoulder... That I no longer have to worry he’s going to climb through my window and under my covers... I—”

“You don’t.”

“But how do you know that? I need reassurance. I wasn’t born yesterday, Royce. I know some of the things you’ve done in the past. I know what you’re capable of.”

It’s not a criticism, and the indifference in his stare tells me he wouldn’t care even if it was. Or maybe he’s that good at masking his true emotion, which I wouldn’t doubt.

I said it more as an appreciation of the degree to which he will fight to protect those close to him. I don’t begin to

presume I truly belong in that category of people. Maybe he did it because I'm close to Maggie. Whatever the reason, I need the guarantee of the violent vigilante I first heard about when I was thirteen.

“Because I'm telling you, you don't.”

“The words.”

My chest grows tight, and I wring my hands together. Taking a step toward him, I fight not to grab onto his T-shirt to keep my weak knees from lowering me to the ground at his feet. Impatiently, I wait for verbal confirmation that he got rid of my father in the permanent sense.

When his tongue traces the outline of his lower lip, I know I've got him. I don't know how I know, but the next moment he exhales before gripping my chin between his thumb and forefinger.

Memories of the day in question come back, and I'm reminded of how I begged him not to tell my father I spilled our secret. All while desperately wishing my nightmare would finally come to an end.

And then it did, at the hands of the man in front of me.

“I took care of him, kitten,” he finally admits. The way my body burns with lust at the nickname he's given me makes it hard to concentrate. “He will *never* touch you again.”

His spoken promise is followed by a silent one, unless my emotional state is causing me to read him incorrectly. Between pants of desire and relief, I register a finality to his statement. An oath that *no other man* will *ever* touch me again.

The admission—whether real or imaginary—stirs the craving I've had for Royce for longer than is appropriate.

*Fuck, it will never be appropriate.*

But I don't care. Right now, the only thing that matters is feeling his lips on mine. With one final rush of need and confidence, I balance myself on my tiptoes and throw my arms around his neck.

Then finally, I press my lips to his.



# CHAPTER SIX

## ROYCE

### Earlier That Evening

I hear the sweet, innocent voice of an angel before I see her. When I look up through the open set of French doors, my eyes land on her and Maggie on the back deck.

She reaches for the broom in Maggie's hand, but Maggie pulls it away.

"Hell no," Maggie begins. "I'm not letting you help set up for your own party. Besides, you can help clean up tomorrow when your birthday is over."

No longer interested in their conversation, I give my attention back to the newspaper in my hands.

Until I hear...

*"Plus, Ronin looks so sad that you left. You should go back and talk to him. Maybe you'll end up getting lucky tonight, and he'll take your virginity for your birthday."*

I look around to make sure I'm alone before standing and stalking slowly toward the French doors. When I reach them, I stand with my back against the wall, just inside the entrance.

I have no right to, but Delilah's sex life interests me a great deal. The fact that there hasn't been evidence she has one since coming to live here brings me immense satisfaction.

*"Maggie!"* Delilah hisses.

She's never engaged in the more sexual conversations that go on in this house. If she's ever around when it comes up, she quickly excuses herself for one reason or another. I can't blame her. I don't tend to stick around myself.

Shit that should never be said between club members and the younger generation are thrown back and forth as though we're nothing but degenerate heathens.

I've overheard plenty of conversations between Delilah and Maggie in the past four years. Between Draven and I, we had to make sure she wasn't asking certain questions that pertained to the disappearance of her father.

To make sure we weren't overlooking any secret interest she may have, I bugged both her and Maggie's rooms—a decision I regretted the second I overheard Fernando taking my daughter's virginity.

After that, we purchased a transcription software so we don't have to listen to the live feeds if we don't want to. Now a simple search of keywords will tell us what we need to know.

Neither one of us ever caught wind that she was curious. If she is, she keeps her interest to herself.

When Delilah first came here, she was in a state of shock for some time. She didn't speak for weeks. Harleigh, one of our harlots, suggested getting her in to see a therapist. That being above my emotional capacity, I tasked her with the duty of taking it on and seeing to it Delilah got whatever she needed, and I would foot the bill.

The good doc eventually got her out of her shell, but Delilah refused to continue her sessions after a couple months. I worried she would retreat back into solitude, but she didn't. However, she didn't exactly branch out and get into trouble the way Maggie did.

The way any normal teenage girl would.

*"I'm sorry,"* Maggie apologizes but continues to laugh. *"I was just kidding."*

*"You're hilarious."* Delilah pronounces in a sardonic tone.

I'd give anything to see the look on her face right now.

*"Anyway," she continues, "Ronin is sweet, but he's not really my type."*

My cock twitches in a way that only happens when she's near. I chastise myself and disregard my fucked-up feelings like I always do.

I've done horrible things in my lifetime. Acts you get a one-way ticket to hell for even thinking about. But nothing as terrible as the constant, agonizing, impure thoughts I've had toward her.

*My daughter's best friend.*

*"Oh yeah? And what's your type?"*

I may be a fool, but I'd be lying if I said I didn't wish I could be her type. The thought makes me angry. It's not an opinion I should dare to have.

*"I don't really know..."*

*"Well, maybe we'll figure out what it is tonight. There will be lots of guys to choose from."*

There have been plenty of things to come from my daughter's mouth over the years that cause my anger to flare, but this may be the most rage she's ever set off in me. I'm angry at her for the suggestion, but I'm enraged with myself for not being strong enough to fight the depraved bastard within me who wants Delilah for himself.

The moment she turned eighteen, it was like a switch flipped inside of me, bringing to life a demon who craves nothing more than to lick away every last hurt and scar she's ever endured.

I've seen the way she looks at me. Before these unwanted urges of mine surfaced, I took her gazes as curious or even fearful.

Now, however? I see them for what they are... The two of us swinging like pendulums in a vast realm of perversion.

Did I do this to her? Was I somehow unable to keep the searching eyes of my demon hidden from her? Did he latch onto her pain and insecurity and permeate and sicken her innocent soul?

I don't want these feelings. I shouldn't think of her as anything other than the young girl I've always known. The endangered kitten in need of saving. Instead, she's become a siren I can't ignore no matter how hard I try.

I would do anything to change the way I view her, but nothing I've done has eliminated this immoral hunger.

I've taken to punishing myself by way of denial, thinking eventually, my mentality would shift in favor of release for someone less forbidden.

*It's only gotten worse.*

I feel my anger snap as Delilah answers, "*Can't wait...*"

Rage causes me to miss anything else that's said after that. Intent to punish the reason for the hellfire in my veins, I pivot my body, stepping into the doorway.

Wrath melts into hunger as I come face-to-face with Delilah. Not for the first time, I witness the growing need within her.

*Take her.* My demon taunts me.

But it's not always a sexual craving glimmering in her stare. Sometimes it's emotional. Other times I think she's fighting a desperate battle within herself to make sense of the life she's had.

Before I can determine its cause this time, she drops her gaze and attempts to go around me.

*Show her what it's like to be fucked by a real man.*

"Sorry," she whispers in a rush.

Like a force drawn to her, my body moves with hers, stopping her from getting away.

*Get it together, Royce.*

Somehow, my conscience breaks through the devious chanting, quieting my demon.

Putting a swift end to our encounter, I grip her firmly by her shoulders—an act I immediately regret as touching her refuels my need—to move her to the other side of the door’s opening.

This time, her need is crystal clear. As darkness swirls around me, daylight is swallowed in its wake until she is the only thing I see.

The siren in her soul sings out, seeking the demon in me.

My cock presses painfully against the zipper of my pants. I begin to lose my senses as my hunger begs me to fold. To take a bite of her. To drink her in.

*Get a grip. Stop this now.*

It takes every ounce of strength I have to dowse my lust, leaving anger in its wake. Anger that I have no problem turning on Maggie, who conjured it in the first place.

Quickly, I tear my eyes and hands from Delilah and zero in on my daughter.

“Isn’t there anything else you can be doing? I’m sure you can find something more important than sweeping leaves off the deck.”

I feel Delilah’s presence leave me as she runs into the house.

“What the fuck, Royce? Why are you always such a goddamn dickhead?” Maggie shouts at me, tossing the broom at my feet before stomping down the few steps that lead into the backyard.

I deserve that ... and more. But I’m angry. And I’m even more enraged for being angry in the first place.

*Fuck.*

Picking up the broom, I take over Maggie’s sweeping and vow to pull myself together before this party starts.

If I can’t, I’ll need to stay far away from it.

And even farther away from Delilah.

# CHAPTER SEVEN



## ROYCE

**D**elilah is a different person tonight.

I tried my damndest to be present during the party, considering the majority of the attendees are club members and friends of the club, but she's captivated me more than ever.

More than by lust or my insatiable hunger for her.

She was smiling. She appeared happier and more engaged tonight than I've ever seen her before.

It makes me crave her more than I already do, if that's even possible.

Her abnormal choice of clothing surely isn't helping my situation. Getting a closer glimpse of her tits leaves me irritated because everyone else can see what I see. But fuck if it doesn't make both my mouth and my cock drool with hunger.

Which is why I excused myself early and spent the last hour in my office, trying to distract myself.

And failing miserably. The only thing that may help is the self-induced torture that has become increasingly more a part of my everyday routine. Exiting my office, I climb the stairs and walk straight to my bedroom.

After I lock my door behind me, I strip out of my clothing and enter the bathroom, turning the cold water on full blast.

My cock aches beyond belief and is in desperate need of relief. But as always, all I'll allow for is solitary confinement

and ice-cold reprieve.

Sometimes, I choose an ice bath. Other times, I'll torture my dick by wrapping it in the confines of a soft ice pack—which Maggie bought plenty of after she witnessed the rib eye substitute I gave Delilah on that day long ago.

Stepping under the freezing stream, my body barely registers the water's unpleasant temperature. I've become more desensitized to the cold with each round of punishment I've inflicted on myself.

I've never been driven by desire before. Prior to my unyielding infatuation with Delilah, I would have relations with a club whore or a one-night stand here and there when I needed to get my dick wet.

But in the past year, instead of finding random pussy to cure my aching cock, I've tortured myself in this way for not being strong enough to put an end to my sinful cravings.

After ten minutes of my rigid dick failing to become even the slightest bit flaccid, I resolve to go to bed and try to ignore the pulse of my swollen, purple appendage. Turning off the cold water, I grab a towel and wrap myself in it to dry off. The normally soft material feels like sandpaper scratching the sensitive skin of my cock.

I groan in pain as I put on deodorant and spray myself with cologne. Then I search my drawer for a pair of pajama pants, deciding to forego boxers altogether. Throwing a shirt over my head next, I angrily slump down onto my mattress and try to control my breathing.

Irritation slithers across my skin and sinks into my veins. I'm pouting like a child who didn't get their way.

As I close my eyes and inhale deeply, all I can picture is Delilah. The way her long raven hair falls over her shoulders, framing her perfect tits.

Tonight isn't the first time the cold treatment couldn't alleviate my aching cock. Recently, its effectiveness has been declining at a rapid pace.

Perhaps I've been going about this all wrong? What if, all this time, I've been making matters worse? If I take care of myself, maybe then she wouldn't consume me like she does now.

*Give in to your hunger.*

My demon feeds on my deterioration...

And I let him.

Reaching beneath the elastic waist of my pants, I grip my eager, awaiting cock. As I allow her likeness to creep back into the forefront of my imagination, I work my fist up and down my throbbing shaft. The memory of warm amber wafts into my nostrils as I let her permeate each sense within my imagination.

A sound I don't recognize vibrates along the walls of my bedroom as waves of pleasure push me out into an unforgiving sea.

*Delilah.*

Her name floats through my mind, not allowing myself to say it out loud.

Grinding skin against skin, I pick up the tempo of my fist as the beginnings of electricity shine in my vision. I knew it wouldn't take much, considering how long it's been since I've allowed myself this pleasure.

The moment before arriving at the crest of my orgasm, a squeak in the floorboards outside of my room alerts me to someone's presence.

*You've got to be fucking kidding me.*

With a firm hold still on my cock, I lay frozen in my bed, silently barking at whoever it is to go away. Maybe someone has come looking for an extra bathroom? They'll be gone soon, and I can get back to the task at hand...

Literally, in my hand.

But then the last voice I expect to hear sings to me from the other side of my door.

*“Royce?”*

*Delilah.*

Is this a sign? It feels more like a punishment from God himself for giving in to my demon. I pull my hand from my cock, my waistband snapping against it. I keep in my cry of pain as I place my feet on the floor next to my bed.

What the fuck is she doing here? Crazy with my most painful unshed orgasm yet, I stomp to the door and throw it open, scaring her.

Fear is written on her face, but there’s something else along with it that I’ve never seen there before.

Determination.

I’m eager to find out what drives it, but my pained cock bellows from beneath my waistband, which is thankfully—blessedly—hidden beneath my long T-shirt.

I watch as she fights to summon the courage to explain her arrival, and part of me wants to root her on. To encourage her bravery. To coax it out of her.

“I-I wa-” she begins before steadying herself. “I want to know what happened to my father.”

This is not what I expected her to say, but I remain still, face rigid. I can’t let her know I have the answers she desires.

In a silent battle of wills, neither of us moves. Waiting for the other person to give in. I would have won that fight had it not been for a painful twinge from my pleading cock to fucking finish the job already.

A slight shift of my legs causes the fabric of my pants to lightly tickle my shaft as I fold my arms across my chest. It’s the only concession I’ll give her tonight.

“No,” I answer emphatically.

She folds her arms in irritation at my denial.

“Why not?”

“I don’t know anything about it, that’s why.”

“You’re lying.” She’s right. But even if I wanted to tell her everything, I can’t. For her own safety. “I’m not stupid, you know. I tell you ... what I told you ... and my dad just happens to move out that very night?”

I shrug. “Guess so...?”

I notice the pain my aloofness inflicts just before she closes her eyes, shutting me out of her misery. The last thing I wish to cause her is hurt. On the contrary. Knowing all she’s been through and now adding to that causes my chest to tighten with sadness. With compassion for the woman in front of me. When her eyes shoot open again, I shift my expression back toward indifference, but I don’t think I get very far.

“Royce, you don’t understand. I need to know if I can stop looking over my shoulder... That I no longer have to worry he’s going to climb through my window and under my covers... I—”

I can’t let her finish that sentence. So I say the only thing I can think of that may pacify her but keep her safe from knowing her father’s true fate.

“You don’t.”

“But how do you know that? I need reassurance. I wasn’t born yesterday, Royce. I know some of the things you’ve done in the past. I know what you’re capable of.”

*Goddamn it, woman. Would you take what I’ve given you and be satisfied already?*

“Because I’m telling you, you don’t.”

“The words.”

The agony of her needing closure is more than I can take. As she wrings her hands together, I remember what it felt like when mine were around her father’s neck. How good it felt to put a stop to his terror-filled reign over her.

She steps toward me with fight in her eyes. Not directed at me but within herself to keep it together. To stand her ground and pry the answers she so desperately needs from me.

*Shit.*

I'm losing the battle between keeping her safe from the truth and wanting to give her peace of mind. The moment I lick my lips, preparing to speak the truth after years of keeping it hidden from her, she braces herself.

Taking her chin in a firm hold, I relent.

"I took care of him, kitten." The nickname I never meant to utter aloud flows smoothly from my tongue as though I've said it a million times before. As though it's already been imprinted on both of our souls. "He will *never* touch you again."

*No man will ever touch you again.*

I know the moment she catches my unspoken declaration because her breathing increases as she pants with relief. Relief that quickens with lust until it turns into a manic energy that is a danger to us both. Something each of us hungers for but neither of us should ever taste.

My eyes drift to her cleavage as her luscious tits rise and fall with each sharp breath she takes, and my tongue traces my bottom lip. After admiring her from afar all evening, my fingers itch with the desire to caress them. To feel their heavy weight in my palms.

I'm tired of denying myself.

Just as I'm about to give in, she reaches up, her arms encircling my neck. It throws me off guard, but not as much as when she places her lips to mine.

Opening her mouth, she licks my bottom lip, coating the same area my own tongue just touched. Surrendering, I open my mouth to accept the gift of her taste.

It's pure heaven. Only a sampling of what I've craved most in my entire life, but it's more powerful than anything I've ever felt before.

Almost more than I can take when my cock is already as close to blowing as it was before she interrupted.

Just thinking about how close I was to orgasm exacerbates the pulsating, and I know if I don't put a stop to this, I'll blow

my load right here and now.

Like a fucking teenager getting his first glimpse at sex.

But I'm not a teenager. I'm a grown ass motherfucker who can control his urges better than this. Who can treat women the way they deserve to be treated.

Releasing her lips, I grip her forearms and pull her hold from around my neck. As surprise mixes with hurt in her eyes, I gently push her back to the other side of the threshold.

“Stop,” I insist. “This... This is a mistake.”

I meant it as a lie to get her to leave before I lose it, but as I say the words, I know them to be true.

Embarrassment shadows her gorgeous face, and I want more than anything to reassure her that she's not alone. That she's not the only one suffering this unyielding need.

But I can't.

She deserves a normal life after what she's had to endure. And normal isn't fucking your best friend's father. She deserves better than that.

She deserves someone much better than me.

“Go,” I command before closing the door on her pain and locking it again.

After all that... The taste of her, the feel of her hands on my body... It was the sight of her filled with hurt that finally tore the pain from my cock.

And forced it into my chest.

I lay down on my bed once again, my dick now flaccid with the knowledge that I'm even more of a son-of-a-bitch than I originally knew.

These feelings for Delilah must come to an end.

*Now.*

Before they cause even more damage than they already have.

# CHAPTER EIGHT



## DELILAH

Present Day | Age: 20

It's hard to believe that the massacre that occurred on this battlefield so many years ago hasn't tainted its beauty.

Perhaps if the outcome of the battle of Gettysburg was different, if the wrong side won and it didn't serve as the turning point of the Civil War, this place wouldn't hold as much peace for me as it does.

It's why I choose to come here when I need to escape. When I require silence from day-to-day life that sometimes feels like it's too much to bear.

Like today.

It was an ordinary day for most. The showroom at the quarry was a flurry of customers, each with varying stone needs. Home improvement projects, landscape design... Someone even came in asking if we make custom tombstones. In the two years I've worked here, that's the first time I've heard that specific inquiry.

Draven and Chubbs manned the sales floor while the rest of the guys were running around the quarry fulfilling orders.

When Draven called the quarry office to request additional assistance, I was the only one around. So I joined them in the sales room. I didn't want to, but there's no way I was going to tell them no.

That's not a word I'm used to saying ... still.

I spent today trying to keep myself from a panic attack that hummed loudly just under the surface, threatening to suffocate me. There were too many new people. Even being outside felt almost too confining to bear.

I don't handle being around unfamiliar faces very well. It took me the entire first year I lived here to warm up to the members of the club. Before that, I'd hide in solitude in my room or in Maggie's with her until she left to go somewhere. Then I'd follow her around until I felt like a needy, life-sucking pest and return to my room again.

Taking a deep breath of the cool night air, I lay back on the surface of the boulders at Devil's Den and let myself get lost in the sea of stars a million miles above me. So vivid, their brilliance isn't hindered even in the bright glow of tonight's full moon.

As beautiful and majestic as they are, sometimes I'm jealous of them. Of the fact that they exist within such a turbulent atmosphere yet their shine perseveres. Jealous they don't have the typical problems we humans do. Jealous they'll never experience what jealousy even is.

*Jealous* because that's precisely the reason I find myself here tonight.

Fernando—who moved in with us after his mother passed away a few years ago—is on leave from the army, and he and Maggie have been *busy* for the past couple days. When I couldn't take watching them make out any longer, I left. Got in my car, and on auto drive, ended up here.

Alone, except for the nagging girl who lives rent-free in my head. The one who lays out all the ways in which I've failed in my lifetime. She's also the one who reminds me that I'm tainted, unworthy, unlovable.

She's a little quieter than normal this evening, though. Which makes way for the man who holds my thoughts hostage nearly every waking moment. The man I still crave, despite how much I disgust him.

It's been a little over a year since the kiss between Royce and I happened. The *mistake*, as he referred to it, has been like a comet circling my mind, its tail littered with insecurity and self-loathing. I was supposed to leave that room confident and relieved by the knowledge that my father would never hurt me again, but his brutal rejection is all that I felt.

Since then, Royce has returned to mostly ignoring me, and I've tried, unsuccessfully, to force the memory of that night from my mind.

Even going so far as using sex to do so, begrudgingly.

After my third sexual encounter failed to elicit even a fraction of the desire our kiss fueled within me, I gave up. It's not fair for me to sleep with someone, making them think I'm capable of developing feelings for them like a normal girl may.

I'm pretty sure I'm broken. Like my father screwed me up so bad, I'll never be able to lose myself beneath the tender touch of a lover.

Except for—

*Stop.*

I close my eyes and will away the fantasies I get lost in more nights than not. The ones that share my bed while my soul leaves my body and floats down the hall to be with him.

Dipping the tips of my fingers beneath my waistband, I know I've already lost my internal struggle. I'll ride my hand tonight, like I do every night I think of—

“What are you doing here?” The irritated voice of the same man I was getting ready to finger-fuck myself into oblivion over startles me.

Quickly, I sit up straight, praying he didn't catch me with my hand down my shorts. I don't look at him as I fight to still my breath.

What a surprise ... he's not happy to see me.

But I was here first. I'm the one who should be annoyed, though that will never happen. Like the true fucked-up girl I was raised to be, I'd never dream of getting angry at Royce.

How did I not hear his bike approaching? Even if he was in his truck, his engine is loud enough to hear clear across his property. My fantasies must have pulled me deeper under their spell than I realized.

Silently—because my makeup doesn't allow me to talk back to anyone, even when they're at fault—I turn in his direction.

“I...” I begin to apologize but stop myself. I may not want to be confrontational toward his blatant resentment, but that doesn't mean I'm sorry for something that isn't my fault. “It's a free country.”

The words leave me before I can stop them. My eyes widening, I wait for the fallout that comes along with speaking to *The Judge* that way.

Heart racing, I'm rooted to the spot, awaiting whatever reprimand I'll receive for it. So when the corner of his mouth tips up in amusement coupled with a quick exhale of air through his nose ... it confuses me.

“That it is.”

Realizing I'm waiting for anger that isn't coming, I take advantage of the moment and continue.

“What are *you* doing here?” I inquire boldly.

Royce's eyes pulsate with hunger as he scans my body from head to toe. He doesn't look away as he inhales a deep breath through his nose before exhaling through a barely parted mouth.

The way my body lights up at the slight movement of his lips shakes me to my core. My senses heighten at once.

Royce is like an aphrodisiac, causing my synapses to fire at each other rapidly with an unlimited supply of ammo.

“I come here to think sometimes.”

Panting but trying to control my breathing, I answer, “Same.”

At last, he tears his intense stare from me, and I'm finally able to steady my racing heart. I need to get out of here.

"I'll get out of your way."

When I move to stand, Royce puts his hand out, halting me. I watch as he walks to the edge of the boulder and takes a seat. His body mimics mine, with his legs hanging over the edge.

"I didn't mean anything. I was just surprised to see you since there aren't any cars parked in the lot."

Royce doesn't offer an explanation for anything he does. Why he's giving me one is a mystery.

"I parked farther down the road. I wanted to walk through the battlefield a little." I pause, looking behind us at the parking lot.

It's then I see his bike. "I didn't hear you pull up."

"You should pay more attention to your surroundings, kitten. Especially in the middle of nowhere at this time of night," he warns with a concerned expression.

Even after a year, hearing my nickname again riles up the same amount of longing within me. But I can't allow it to build. The havoc his rejection caused is too painful to subject myself to again.

"Don't call me that. And I was deep in thought. Didn't hear you."

Ignoring my response, he changes the subject. "You know, there are grown men who can't hack it out here at night. Lots of people have claimed to hear strange noises... Claimed to have witnessed ghost sightings."

I scoff at his presumption that I'd be too scared to come here at night by myself.

"Ghosts can't hurt me," I shrug, my voice dripping with vitriol. "Not like living, breathing people can."

Flicking a small piece of gravel from between my parted legs, I take a shot at him and my father. Both of whom have

caused me immense pain, though for drastically different reasons. But I feel horrible as soon as the words leave my mouth.

Royce should never be lumped in with the likes of people like my father. But that doesn't tame the sting of his rejection.

"I figured you'd be hanging out with Maggie and Fernando, now that he's back in town."

He hates Fernando, so for Royce to bring him up, he must really be hurting for something to talk about. Why force conversation with me when he wouldn't do it for anyone else?

"They're ... preoccupied with their reunion. They probably don't even know I left."

I watch his head bob slightly out of the corner of my eye.

"I suppose they have some catching up to do."

His awkwardness and choice of subject matter infuriates me.

"Is this *really* what you want to talk about, Royce? Your daughter and her boyfriend—two people you regularly voice your dislike for—having reunion sex?"

"Hey now, Fernando can disappear into the ether for all I care, but I don't dislike Maggie."

I peg him with a sardonic grin.

"I don't," he insists, his hand flying to his chest. "We don't see eye-to-eye, but she's my daughter, and I care about her wellbeing."

I don't deny his statement, but all he's getting from me in response is another eye roll.

"What do you want to talk about, then?" he asks.

It's uncanny to me that he has no idea how to continue our conversation, yet if he wasn't interested in talking with me, he would have let me leave when he got here.

He wants to know what I want to talk about? I have a chance to use this situation to my full advantage, and I'm

taking it.

“Oh, I don’t know...” I can’t stop my petulance, but in my mind it’s completely warranted. “Why don’t we talk about the fact that you called me a mistake.”

I thought I was going to catch him off-guard. Throw him off. Make him sweat.

*I was wrong. He was ready for this fight.*

“Don’t twist my fucking words, Delilah.” He turns toward me, rooting himself to the rock below. “I said our *kiss* was a mistake.”

“But it wasn’t—” I protest before he cuts me off.

*“It was. You’re a child. Christ, you’re Maggie’s best friend. I never should have allowed myself to lose control the way I did with you. I’m no degenerate, but that’s pushing the envelope, especially after all you’ve been through.”*

I turn my body so it mirrors his. Our faces, both pained with emotion, alarmingly close to each other’s. A simmering heat begins to boil as fury like I’ve never felt before rolls through my body.

*“I’m not a child, Royce. I haven’t been since I was seven years old. Since the first time my father touched me the way adults touch one another.”*

Angry tears wet my eyes. I swipe away at them immediately, cursing the weakness their shine casts on me.

“And that’s something that never should have happened. You’ll never know how fucking sorry I am that it did, but I’m even sorrier I didn’t give that motherfucker the death he deserved.”

His words paralyze me. I don’t care that my father is dead, but I don’t think I can stand to listen to the details surrounding it or what Royce would rather have done had he gotten the chance.

He leans his body farther into mine with each hate filled breath he takes, and his magnetism pulls me toward him. “It

was too swift, Delilah. Too merciful. If I had the chance to do it all over, I would..."

His eyes relax as I watch the aggression fade from his features. Still breathing heavily, he places his hands on the boulder and pushes himself backward, away from me.

"He deserved more," he adds, finally tearing his attention away and freeing me from his transfixing hold. "*You* deserved more."

Hearing him admit that sends my emotions and hormones raging like the thirsty, validation-seeking girl I've become.

*How I've longed for someone to make me feel like I'm worthy.*

"I want you, Royce," I suddenly blurt out .

I can't keep it in any longer. I *am* an adult, and I'll prove it to him by going after what I want instead of beating around the bush or waiting for it to fall into my lap. I lean back into him, allowing my words to hypnotize him in the same way his lured me in a moment ago.

"And I know I don't know shit about you, but I *do* know you want me, too. I've seen your need swimming in your eyes. The way your Adam's apple bobs up and down every time we're in the same room together because you have to swallow the lust that swirls inside of you before anyone else notices it. The way your fists ball with unshed desire as you force yourself from my presence.

"Make love to me, Royce. Right here. Right now. You can't change the way you killed my father, but you can have something even better. *Me. His girl.* The only difference is, I'm offering myself to you, freely, which is a gift I never gave him."

Silence shrouds us for what feels like an eternity before he leans into me, chest heaving with unshed lust. Taking my cheeks gently between his palms, his lips crush into mine.

Blasts of light twinkle beneath my closed lids. As though the stars I was admiring earlier have come alive, reflecting off the night sky and cascading over us.



A light show. A celebratory dance just for us. A prize for our self-control this past year.

Pulling my dangling legs up onto the boulder, I push myself backward, still lip-locked, so we don't lose control and fall over the side.

Royce follows me, laying his body over mine in the center of the rock. His weight blankets me, grounding me and providing the only sense of security I've ever felt in my entire life.

A muffled moan sounds deep in his throat as he licks and sucks a path across my lips. Following over my chin, he stops when he gets to the column of my neck. Raking his teeth gently over my delicate skin, he summons a burning force straight to my core.

My clit pulsates at the sensation, and moisture pools between my thighs.

"Delilah..." His breathless pants are followed by a heated stare as he aligns his needy gaze with mine again.

I whimper, answering the unspoken question within his eyes to keep going. That I *do* want this. That I *need* this.

When he lifts his body off of me, I think he's changed his mind. Reaching out for him, I fist his worn, black T-shirt in a death grip.

We're so close, and I won't allow him to deny me again.

# CHAPTER NINE

## DELILAH

He runs his heated touch across my fist.

Continuing his path, he reaches over his shoulder and grabs his T-shirt, pulling it over his head. Not until he's shirtless do I loosen my hold on the fabric.

Letting it fall next to my head, I run my hands over his chest. Admiring his hard, toned physique, I sit up and kiss a trail from the center of his pecs down to the dark hair nestled between the *V* at his lower abdomen.

With both hands, I feverishly work his jeans open. The more of him I see, the less I need lovemaking.

I need ownership. Possession. I want Royce to take me, mark me as his, and keep me forever.

He stands once I've unzipped his jeans and gently grabs one of my hands, helping me up. His lips tickle the back of it before letting go.

His eyes stay locked on mine as he reaches for the hem of my shirt and swiftly pulls it over my head. I thank the underwear gods for suggesting I wear my good bra today rather than the ratty sports bra I almost put on.

Standing before him, my rounded breasts rise and fall at the pace of my accelerated breathing. Reaching behind me, he unclasps my bra then pulls it down my arms, discarding it on top of his shirt. Palming my breasts, he massages each mound masterfully, with a look of awe twinkling in his stare.

“I’ve tried, painfully, to fight my urges, kitten.” Another zing to my core, and he’s reduced me to animalistic purring.

“To not think about you in any way other than as a guardian,” he admits, not taking his eyes from my chest. “I’ve imagined what it would feel like to do this countless times. How incredible it would be to gaze upon you. To memorize your body with my hands. To taste you from head to toe.”

*Who knew big, bad Royce had such an eloquent way with words?*

He reaches out with his tongue and licks one of my hardened nipples, ripping a gasp from my throat.

“I’ve barely scratched the surface, but it’s more than I ever dreamed...”

“More what?” I inquire, needy for his depiction of me.

“More fire... More breathtaking... More ... everything...”

With that admission, he wraps his arms around me and sucks my nipple into his mouth. One hand splayed across the small of my back, arching my body into his. The other between my shoulder blades to hold me tightly against him.

Each nibble, every flick of his tongue, wreaks renewed havoc over my trembling body. He switches to my other nipple, his slurping becoming more dire with each pull.

“Shorts off. Now.” He barks out his order through his teeth as they gently grind over my pebbled bud.

He has me pressed so tightly against him, I can’t get my hands between our bodies to unfasten my denim shorts. But I’m also weak from the pleasure he’s doling out. Whether he senses my struggle or he’s had his fill, he removes his lips from my chest, loosening his hold on me.

When he lets go, he drops to one knee in front of me, fumbling with the laces of his boot. Dazed from his delicious, torturous worship of my nipples, I’m not moving at the same feverish pace that he is.

“Quickly, kitten. Otherwise, I’ll fucking rip them from your body, and you won’t have any shorts to drive home in.”

He winks when my eyes land on him, though the promise in his eye confirms he's not joking.

He gets his boots off by the time I work my legs out of my shorts, then he kicks his jeans over to our growing pile of shed clothing.

I hook my thumbs in the elastic of my thong, ready to remove it, when I hear a soft roar rumbling from deep in his chest.

“Leave it.” The order comes as he closes the distance between us.

His fingers flirt with the thin strip of material low on my hips before they dip between my legs. He runs his fingernail over the thin, slick fabric barely covering my core, causing my body to quake.

*Holy hell.*

One more touch like that and I'll come undone.

He eases my legs open with his knee then reaches farther between them. Running his finger between the crack of my ass, my eyes widen in anticipation of his next move.

Continuing his path back toward the front of my body, he wedges the fabric of my thong into my soaking wet slit.

Bringing his thumb and forefinger to his nose, he inhales deeply, his eyes rolling into the back of his head before landing on me once again. Parting his lips, his tongue darts out, then he licks over the pad of his thumb before sucking on the tip.

Watching him experience me in this way takes me on a journey like none that I've ever traveled before. The pure eroticism of it enhances the delicious, heavy throbbing deep in my stomach... The goose bumps that cover every inch of my skin... My erratic heart rate, thumping loudly in my ears.

Yet I crave more. I yearn to be pushed further, to feel more than I've ever felt.

*I would do anything for this man, simply for the promise of feeling like this again.*

Once more, he reaches for my core, rescuing the drowning fabric from between my legs. But it's a quick reprieve for my thong as he rips it from my body, causing complete annihilation to the undergarment. Bringing the soaked material to his nose, he inhales my scent deeply with an open mouth, increasing the aroma for his senses.

An embarrassed flush sends heat to my cheeks when presented with the evidence of my arousal. If that wasn't bad enough, his eyes latch onto mine as he sticks his tongue out, lapping up the thick layer of moisture I expelled onto the material.

"You taste divine, kitten," Royce pants, and I revel in the way his hot breath whispers over my naked skin. The way his pupils pulsate with pleasure.

I watch the ruined fabric drop to the rock beneath our feet, catching sight of the pointed bulge in his boxer briefs. I salivate with the need to see him. To taste him in the same way he's tasted me. My eyes catch his again as I run my fingers through his waistband, seeking his approval to continue.

I crave his acceptance and guidance almost as much as his touch. With the slightest nod and a catch of his breath, I remove them and cast my first glance upon his cock. He's large. Bigger than the three guys I've been with in the past year.

Far bigger than...

I cut my thought off before I can finish it. I refuse to include my father in this. He has no place here.

Bringing my attention back to Royce, I trace my fingers over his thick veins, bulging and throbbing along the length of him. My tongue darts out, licking over my bottom lip.

Royce brings his hand to my chin and forces me to look at him.

"You don't have to do anything you don't want to do, Delilah. You know that, right?"

"I know. But there's nothing I don't want to do with you, Royce."

With that declaration, I kneel in front of him, eye to eye with the pre-cum glistened head of his cock. My eyes snap to his again as I reach my tongue out, tracing his opening with the tip of it.

A guttural groan releases from deep in his throat as I take him inside of me, running my lips as far down his shaft as I can until he hits the back of my throat. Slowly I pull back, licking the underside of him as I go, coating him in my thickening saliva.

He fists the hair at the crown of my head as his eyes roll back into his skull. My clit throbs at the sound of his moan, knowing I've got such a strong and powerful man under my spell.

Taking him in again, he applies pressure to my head, holding me at the base of his cock for a second before easing up. I continue my movements, sucking and licking him, worshiping this man, until he stops me.

Panting, he looks into my eyes, a man on the brink of losing all control. Dropping to his knees in front of me, he nudges me backward, my elbows resting on the rock beneath us.

With a crazed gleam in his eye, he curls his arms around my hips and dives between my legs tongue first, impaling me repeatedly. Then he latches onto my clit, maniacally sucking away as though he can't get enough. In seconds flat, I'm screaming through the most powerful orgasm I've ever had.

And the first I've ever received from someone else that wasn't forcefully taken.

Lost for thought, my body like putty, I lie motionless except for the rapid rise and fall of my heaving chest. Royce looks at me from between my legs, his mouth and chin slick and shiny with my arousal.

A prideful, smug grin on his face.

And a playful gleam in his eye.

"I'm far from done with you, kitten. Give me more."

He pushes his fingers inside of me, twirling them around. My subsiding orgasm is already roaring back to life. Just before it crests once again, he removes his fingers and rapidly rubs my arousal over my clit.

In one motion, he rises to his knees between my legs, one hand still focused on my clit as the other slams into my pussy, launching an internal assault on my hungry body.

In no time, I'm writhing in pleasure, moaning through another orgasm. Swiftly, Royce grabs me around my hips, lining his cock up with my entrance and pushing into me, extending my orgasm before it has a chance to wane again.

Then he fucks me like he owns me. Like he knows that when this is over, his cock will be the only one imprinted in my memory, for eternity. Like he's exorcizing not just my body of my past experiences, but my entire goddamn soul.

And I welcome it. I want him to be the only man I know. The only one I remember.

My demon-slayer.

My savior.

*My everything.*

I watch him above me, his face contorted in painful bliss, and I know he's close to coming.

"Come, Royce. I want all of you."

I reach up, cupping his cheek, ready to comfort him through his release. Waiting to feel his warmth spread deep within my core.

Removing his eyes from mine, he severs our connection with a swift, icy blade. Grunting, he pulls out of me. Fisting his cock violently, he releases his seed onto my stomach. He remains there, his eyes not meeting mine until his balls are completely empty. His ample load swiftly grows cold on my skin. A dense cloud of unease surrounds me as Royce comes to rest on his back next to me.

We lie there, silent except for our quaking breath, waiting for our heart rates to return to a normal pace. Turning my



head, I look at Royce, suddenly afraid my heart will never beat normally again.

His eyes remain trained on the sky above.

*Look at me. Please.*

For an eternity, I watch him until he finally moves. Still, he doesn't look at me. Standing, he grabs his boxer briefs and pulls them on. He plucks his shirt off the rock next and tosses it to me.

“Clean yourself off,” he orders coldly.

But I don't move. I'm frozen, locked in a state of self-preservation I've perfected over the years. When he notices I haven't budged, he approaches me. Crouching at my side, he picks up his shirt and cleans all remnants of his cum from my stomach.

But not with a lover's touch.

It's cold. Detached.

Completely devoid of feeling.

*Fuck this.*

I latch onto his wrist, halting his movement.

“Royce.”

Glaring at him, he refuses to look at me.

I toss his arm from my grip as though I'm throwing away a piece of trash. Sitting up, I bookend his face between my hands, forcing him to look at me.

“Royce...”

The skin between his eyes furrows—but barely as he fights to keep his emotions hidden—the moment my eyes soften.

“Come back to me.”

He pulls his face out of my grip and puts distance between us again. Then he reaches down and picks up my clothing, bringing it to me.

“Get dressed.”

And I do, but not because he told me to. As I dress, I try to think of something else to say to him to snap him out of the sudden mood he's settled into.

"This won't happen again."

My head snaps up, and I abandon my shorts, which are on but not yet buttoned.

"Stop it. You don't mean that."

But I know he does. We've been here before, even if the last time it was only a kiss.

"I do."

"You want me, and you want me for more than a one-night stand. I can see it in your eyes, Royce." I approach him, placing my hand on his chest. "I can feel it in your heart."

He nods slightly, and I think he's about to come back to me. But then he speaks.

"Yeah, I want you, Delilah. But ours is a story written under two different skies. I've lived my life. I've made mistakes and had to deal with the consequences of my actions. Enough to know I don't want to make any more."

There's that word again.

*He needs a fucking thesaurus.*

"Your life is only just beginning. There are so many incredible experiences ahead of you. Find someone your own age to enjoy them with, kitten. Someone who is worthy of you. Not some grumpy old fart like me who won't bring any value to your life."

Hot tears stream down my face, leaving salty streaks in their wake. I can't believe this is happening.

With a final, sorrowful glance from Royce, he leans down and kisses me on the forehead. My mind is screaming, telling me to hold onto him, to yell at him, to fight for what I want, to tell him he's being a big idiot.

But I can't.

My muscles don't work. My mouth can't form words. My mind paralyzes my body so I can't move. So my heart won't crumble into pieces at his feet.

So I can't feel pain worse than any I've felt in my life before tonight.

"Be careful out here by yourself."

His concern stabs me in the open wound he just inflicted.

As I watch him walk away from me, the feeling of being completely alone settles in my soul.

I don't move for a long time after that, but eventually, my tears halt, their streaks dry, and I remain in the quiet stillness of the night.

Alone.

# PART TWO

# CHAPTER TEN

## DELILAH

### Present day

I t's been several weeks since Royce's second—and *final* if I have any sense of self-preservation—rejection of me.

As I sat on that rock, watching the soft glow of early morning light brighten the sky over me, it was like removing a blindfold from my eyes.

I decided then and there that I needed to look for a new job and save up for a cheap apartment. I should have done both a while ago, maybe as soon as I turned eighteen, but I felt anchored to the stone yard and house by Royce.

Like a child in desperate need of attention, I was forcing myself to remain in his presence. I wanted him to see me. I yearned for him to desire me.

Now all I want from him is distance.

When I left Devil's Den that morning, I began my job search. I filled out applications everywhere I could—from gas stations to restaurants to retail stores.

Gettysburg is surprisingly large for a small town, and luckily for me, several places were hiring. I was offered a position on the spot at the gas station, but the owner spoke to my chest the entire time and not my face. Thankfully, a week into my search, I was also offered the position I ended up taking at a clothing store at the outlet center called Mathieu.

This was a better choice for me too because it's a women's boutique. Therefore, my trepidation when it comes to being around unfamiliar men won't come into play as much as it would somewhere else.

Though I don't splurge on myself or spend a lot of money on my clothing, I love the style of clothes they sell here. Despite the fancy, French name, their clothing is affordable, plus I get an added discount as an employee.

There is a large contrast in my day-to-day duties between here and the quarry, obviously.

Between standing all day, folding and rehangng clothing, and walking in and out of the back storeroom to check on additional sizes for our customers, I actually get more of a workout here than I did in the office at the quarry.

And it's a little weird referring to Sienna as my supervisor since she's only a year older than I am. I'm used to the Bastards who are all at least ten years older than me—except for Ronin.

But different is what I was looking for, and it's definitely what I got.

Laughter coming from the front counter of the store breaks my concentration and pulls my attention from the stack of shirts I'm folding. I look up to find Sienna talking to a guy I've never seen before.

She's never mentioned a boyfriend, but from the way they're flirting it's obvious she and the man like one another.

*How nice for them.*

Chasing away the bitterness beginning to settle into my psyche, I refocus my attention back on the pile of shirts only to find I'm on the last one. There's another stack waiting for me at the front counter, but the last thing I want to do is invade their conversation.

Or be further witness to their obnoxious attraction to one another.

*Barf.*

But the best thing I can do right now is stay busy. I've put in a ton of overtime here already because I'll do anything to keep myself far away from the clubhouse.

*Far away from Royce.*

I do miss Maggie, though. The day after my encounter with Royce, Fernando went back to Fort Bellevue. And until I got this job, Maggie and I were spending all our free time together again.

Keeping my head trained on my feet, I walk to the front of the store. When I grab the pile of shirts and pivot away from them, however, the guy turns his attention to me.

"And who's this?" he inquires. His deep voice roots me to the spot, but I keep my attention on the stack of shirts in my arms.

"Drew, Delilah. Delilah, Drew."

A clearly vexed Sienna introduces us, and my eyes shift to her, but she's already refocused on the older man, seeking his undivided attention again.

Still avoiding his stare, I'm caught off guard when his hand enters my field of vision. My eyes catch his awaiting palm, but I don't move, left standing there like an idiot staring at it.

He clears his throat, finally pulling my attention to his face.

Even I can't deny how handsome he is. His eyes captivate me. There's a gleam in his cobalt stare that shines like a beacon for any lost soul who may be in need of light. For a moment I want to follow it... To see where it leads me.

As he begins to pull his hand back, I finally snap out of it and remember what it means to be a functional human being. My hand barely hovers over his before he closes his fingers around mine with a firm squeeze.

"Very nice to meet you, Delilah." My name is like smooth satin on his lips. I don't want to like it. Pulling my hand away



as though his palm was coated in acid, I nod and pick up the shirts again.

“I was just telling Sienna a friend of mine is having a field party this weekend. Way back in the field off Wellover Road. You should come.”

Immediately, I want to accept. An overwhelming feeling that he would be upset if I were to decline his invitation settles over me, but I stay quiet. My eyes shift to Sienna, noticing her discontent. We’ve gotten along just fine these past three weeks, but I don’t miss the narrowing of her eyes as I consider the invitation.

I should decline. Absolutely. It’s the right thing to do. I don’t know this guy, and I surely don’t owe him anything. Plus, I’m really not a party person anyway. I open my mouth to tell Drew I’m busy, but what comes out instead is, “Can I bring a friend?”

I shake my head, slight enough so neither Drew nor Sienna pick up on my confusion. What the hell? It’s like I’ve momentarily lost control of my mind and body.

“The more the merrier,” Drew answers, light dancing in his eyes. As if they’re saying more than his lips.

Desperate to break free of the interaction, I nod to him before grabbing the shirts and retreating to the table at the rear of the store. I’m certain I said what I did to steer clear of my fear of upsetting others.

*Even complete strangers, apparently.*

There’s no way I’m going to that party, though. And if I’m not there to witness any baseless disappointment my subconscious is conjuring up, then it will be as though it didn’t happen at all.



*Why am I even here?*

Oh, right. Maggie all but forced me to come, that's why.

I never should have told her about the party and especially not about Drew. But she has an uncanny ability to pull information from me that I'm not always necessarily willing to give.

Although she still doesn't know about what my father put me through, I think she's intuitive enough to piece together that I didn't have a stellar childhood.

She also realizes when she shouldn't pry just as much as she knows when to push me to spill my guts.

But this time, I didn't even have any guts to spill. At least I didn't think I did. I wasn't attracted to Drew when we met at the store a few days ago, but the smile I couldn't keep from my face as Maggie made me relay the entire interaction we had in the store would say otherwise. Before my mind forces me to reevaluate the entire scene, I spot the very boy I'm thinking of.

"There he is." I link my arm with Maggie's and nod toward him. He's in a circle of people, laughing, on the other side of the large bonfire. "In the gray T-shirt with the sideburns, next to Sienna."

Sienna who can't take her lovesick eyes off of him. A snarl forms on my face before I pull my lip between my teeth to force it away again.

"Woah, he's a lot older than I was picturing. But he's cute!" Maggie screeches, too loud for my taste.

A few heads of people near us turn at the sound.

"Shut up, would you? Jesus, we don't need everyone to hear you. Especially not Sienna. After Drew left the store the other day she tried so hard to sway me from coming. I don't need her giving me even more shit during our shifts together."

"Oh, please... You don't even need that job, and you know it. You always have a place at the quarry."

When I first told Maggie I was looking for a new job, she rolled her eyes. I don't think she took me seriously until I told her I was hired on the spot at Mathieu and had already told Draven I quit.

The right thing would have been to tell Royce, but I can still barely look him in the eye. There's no way I could handle the disapproval on his face the way I can with Maggie or even Draven.

"Yes. But like I told you, it's time that I tried to stand on my own two feet. Don't you ever want to get out from under Royce's thumb?" I try to appeal to her hatred of him rather than shine a light on why I can't and won't go back there. "As long as you work for him and live in his house, he can control what you do."

"Delilah, what on earth are you talking about? Royce doesn't pay any damn attention to what I do, you know this. He hasn't for years. And I work there because the money is good, the guys are fun to hang out with, and Royce leaves all of us the hell alone... Mostly."

This is going south fast.

"Let's just change the subject, okay? No more work talk." My only defense, as usual, is to falter and conclude that the reasoning behind my feelings isn't as important as my opponent's.

"Fine by me," Maggie answers, annoyed at my sudden amnesia regarding Royce's disconnection from his daughter's life.

I'm an idiot and a bad friend for going there just to try to keep the topic off my own hidden truths. It was a dick move, and I feel terrible about it.

"I'm sorry, I don't know why I said that." I should have just let it drop like I wanted, but the need to keep Maggie close and happy with my friendship has always been of the utmost importance to me.

I can't stand the thought of her getting tired of me or no longer wanting me in her life. Royce or no Royce, I don't

know where I'd be without her.

"It's okay." She passes a sympathetic glance my way. "Let's just drop it like you said."

When she squeezes my hand reassuringly, it brings me more comfort than she could ever know. She's not stupid. I know she realizes my insecurities, and I know she sometimes overcompensates to make sure I'm getting the comfort I need.

And I fucking love her for it.

"Delilah." Drew's voice startles me, pulling me from my thoughts. He's separated himself from the group of people he was with a moment ago and is walking toward us. "You made it."

I clear my throat so I can speak without sounding like a fool.

"Hey. Thanks again for the invite. This is my friend, Maggie."

He nods in Maggie's direction without taking his eyes off mine. It's not lost on me that he gave me his full attention and shook my hand when we first met.

He stopped his conversation with Sienna just to find out who I was. I thought he was being polite, but when he doesn't give Maggie the same warm greeting and sense of interest, I realize why.

He's not as interested in Sienna as I originally thought. I curl my hair behind my ears like I do when I'm uncomfortable as his gaze continues to linger. Finally, I look away when I'm unable to take the intensity in his eyes any longer.

And meet a seething stare from Sienna, standing several yards behind Drew. I swallow, attempting to calm my nerves, but it's no use. It seems dramatic, but Sienna, apparently, drew a line in the sand, and she believes I just crossed it.

I should probably start looking for a new job now.

"Well, the keg is full, the music is decent, and the company is ... mixed. All the makings of a good time. Can I get you—"

“Oh, there’s Mickey and Jennah,” Maggie interrupts Drew. “I didn’t know they were going to be here.”

*Bless your horrible, abrupt timing, Maggie.*

“We’re okay for right now,” I answer Drew’s unfinished question. “Thank you, though. I’ll see you around.”

Maggie takes off toward her cousin, and I follow behind, grateful to have a reason to end my conversation with Drew. I need to stay far away from him tonight and every other night after this. Not only so I can try to maintain a civil work environment for myself but because of the way he looks at me.

His eyes aren’t full of lust, like I’ve seen in Royce’s before.

They’re not littered with impure and violent notions, like I frequently saw in my father’s gaze.

He looks at me like I’m the most beautiful person he’s ever seen.

And that downright terrifies me.

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

## ROYCE

I can't enjoy the open road the way I used to.

What once brought me clarity and peace has been tainted by the haunting, thickheaded actions I took with Delilah that night.

It's been over a month, and I'm still consumed with unbridled lust and overwhelming guilt.

She makes me weak.

The moment she leaned into me, begging me to take her, I lost the feeble control I've had over my demon for the past year.

He lashed out, greedy to touch and taste every part of her he could get his hands on, silencing my screaming conscience who was fighting desperately to tell me how wrong it was.

Knowing I would ruin her.

Knowing if my demon slipped out, it might be the only chance he had to get what he's been after for so long.

There's a part of me that knew exactly what I was doing and didn't care. There was another part of me that wanted to turn around, fuck her all over again, and tell her I was never going to let her go.

But what kind of life would she have with me? I can't give any woman the emotional support she needs and deserves, let alone one with the history that Delilah has endured. I can't drag her into the life I've created for myself.

*Look at what I'm doing right now.*

I'm off to deliver guns to a fucking Colombian cartel only to pick up pounds upon pounds of cocaine to take back to their Pennsylvania HQ for dissemination to all their dealers in the Northeast region.

I've kept Maggie at arm's length her entire life because I didn't want her getting mixed up in this part of mine. But her *chance* meeting with Fernando went and fucked that up.

Now they're in love, and she's in deeper than she'll hopefully ever know.

He seems like a good enough guy, wanting to stay out of the family business and all. But I have a hard time believing the cartel didn't plant him in the club's path to try to find an in with us.

If I had my way, my club would sever all ties with the cartel and stay as far away from them as possible. Maggie's safety is already in jeopardy, I can't drag Delilah into all this as well.

The sullen look on her face since that night has been more than I can bear. With one stupid slip up, I single-handedly deflated every ounce of strength I've watched her build these past few years, completely crushing her spirit.

Unable to take the sight of her any longer—of what I did to her—I had to get away from home.

I haven't been on a delivery in years. In fact, I haven't demanded a truck delivery this far since we formed our partnership with Clayton over at the Port of Pittsburgh. I hate interacting with anyone from the Rojas Cartel, especially in person, but even that seemed more appealing than having to face Delilah right now.

So I decided we'd hoof this shipment to Memphis on our own and then spend some time with our brothers from the local chapter down here. That will keep me away from the clubhouse for the better part of a week anyway.

*Even though she's already gone and found a new job, keeping her away from home most of the time.*



My conscience gripes at me. Another sign of how much she's pulling away, and it's like a knife in my chest no matter how much I try to remind myself she's better off away from me.

But back to the goddamn cartel...

Because I was adamant about tagging along with this delivery, it made Andres, the cartel's cell director for this region, a little suspicious. Therefore, he's having us meet his men here, at one of the many drop zones they've built over the course of time we've been *doing business* with them—as if I had a choice in the matter—rather than at their main port.

Making a left-hand turn, I lead Draven as well as Zephyr and Saxon—who are in the truck behind us—down the long and winding, tree-covered, dirt road. I know this trail is being meticulously monitored by the cartel, even if there's no evidence of it that I can see.

Atticus, Toga, Crew, and Chubbs stayed home to ensure both the stone yard and the club run smoothly while I'm gone. They'll also keep an eye on the clubhouse as well as Ronin, the harlots, and Maggie and Delilah, too.

About three-hundred yards down, we catch our first glimpse of the cartel. Three heavily armed men stand guard in front of an innocuous, wooden barrier, separating us from their small, makeshift port on the bank of the Mississippi River.

Knowing who we are, they radio their higher-up on the other side to let them know we're here. I watch the one on the left lower his ear to the speaker on his shoulder, listening for his next command.

Once he's got it, his arm juts out, and he rattles off orders in Spanish to the other two men who stand with him. They flank our small caravan, walking slowly and looking out for any sign that this atypical delivery is somehow a coup or a danger to the cartel in any way.

When they're satisfied that we aren't trying to overtake or disarm them, the main guy gets back on the radio to give the all-clear.

A few seconds pass before they lift the barrier and wave us through. About another hundred yards down a slight embankment are more cartel members. Some are situated on the dock, others on the bank of the river.

I only recognize one of them, but it's not Andres, who I assumed I'd be meeting with. I thought having to be in the same room as Delilah was unappealing, but that's nothing compared to coming face-to-face with Diego Rojas.

Fernando's older brother.

Ten years younger than I am, but as I look at him now, gone is the kid with barely-there muscles and a youthful glimmer in his stare. The one who used to roll his eyes at his younger brother's relentless attempts to get Maggie to notice him.

He left Pennsylvania years ago to live with their Uncle Victor in Colombia and become more involved in the family business. Fernando stayed in Gettysburg with their mother. At that point, he and Maggie were already inseparable.

She passed away a few years later, at which time Diego returned to the States. With a bit more muscle and a hell of a lot more apathy than when he first left. His time with the cartel showing in the tense set of his shoulders and written in the scars marring his skin.

When it came time for him to return to Colombia, he was to take his brother back with him. Maggie begged me to let Fernando stay with us as he didn't have any interest in the family business, and they were in love.

It turned into a huge argument between the two of us. One in which I, stupidly, uttered terrible things to her. The kinds of things a father should never say to his daughter.

Diego overheard the argument and ordered me to take Fernando in on behalf of the cartel. And in return, once he worked his way up in the ranks, he'd come back for Maggie and "take her off my hands."

When I told him I wouldn't allow him anywhere near her, he made some threat that I gave no credence to at the time.

And having not heard from him since, I thought any such ideas he had or dealings he thought we made were dead.

Seeing him now, however... I don't scare easily, but it's not hard to tell that *this* Diego is *not* the boy he once was.

"Well, well, well..." he begins. "Royce Taylor. Long time, no see."

I remove my helmet and sunglasses after cutting the engine on my bike. I'm not one for pleasantries, especially in such a patronizing tone, and I sure as hell don't like surprises.

Diego being here is a big fucking surprise.

"Diego," I respond, dismounting my bike and placing my helmet to rest on the seat before walking over to him. "Where's Andres? I thought I'd be meeting with him."

"He had ... business I'm not at liberty to discuss ... to attend to. And as this region's new cell head, he left me in charge while he's gone." When he holds out a hand to me, I narrow my eyes before taking it.

A cell head? I don't pretend to know the inner workings of a cartel or its organizational structure, but I know enough to understand that he's not a small fish any longer.

Diego acknowledges Draven who stayed back by our bikes rather than approach him with me. Wanting to get out of here as soon as possible with as little conversation as necessary, I get right down to business.

"I see," I utter, trying not to let my surprise show.

"I trust you have the entire shipment with you," he states.

It would be a huge mistake if I didn't.

"Yes." I nod to the truck behind me.

"Good. I was curious about the reason behind your presence here today. Thought maybe you couldn't come up with the full shipment, and therefore, wanted to show up in person to smooth things over."

"Nothing to smooth over. Just felt like getting away."

I regret my words the second they leave my mouth, and I watch as he can't stop the smug smile from forming on his lips.

“That daughter of yours still getting under your skin? How is Maggie, by the way?”

I see red, but I'm not stupid enough to punch this motherfucker in the face like I want to.

“Maggie is none of your fucking business. I'm here for one thing and one thing only. Now how about you order your men to start unloading the truck like a good little cell head. Can't have you making Andres look bad, now can we?”

I've heard rumblings of people claiming I'm evil. Saying I'm not to be crossed and that my fierce punishments are things of legend. But I'm a fair judge of the wicked. I only deliver consequences to those deserving of them.

But Diego Rojas?

The evil glimmer that flashes in his furious stare is like peeking into the soul of the devil himself.

“You better watch it, Royce. Unless you want your daughter to disappear in the dead of night like your ol' lady did.”

The subtle lifting of his brow and cocky twist of his lips hits me like a punch to the gut. The air leaves my lungs, and I fight to keep myself from staggering.

Not once in the past seven years have I thought Penny was taken by force. There was a note, written in her own handwriting. All her most prized possessions were missing as sure as she was.

*Didn't you pay the same attention to detail when you killed Delilah's father?*

But I didn't leave a goodbye note. It didn't feel like something her father would have done. Penny wrote a page-long apology to Maggie when she left—front and back. That's not usually something you have time to do when you're being forced to leave.

*Unless they made her...*

“What did you do? *Where is she?*” I demand, shaking and seconds away from losing control of myself.

“It’s too late for her,” Diego smirks, “but not for Maggie. So if I were you, I’d control yourself before you sign her death warrant. And before I order my men to get you under control.”

The cocking of several guns echoes off the still river water, and it’s just what I need to check myself before I pull my own gun from its holster beneath my cut and fire a shot right between Diego’s motherfucking eyeballs.

Suddenly, I feel Draven’s hand on my arm, tugging me backward. I narrow my eyes at Diego before turning around and letting Draven drag me away.

# CHAPTER TWELVE

## DELILAH

If there's one thing this club knows how to do, it's throwing a party. It's pretty much *all* we do around here.

But when you live in a rural area like we do, you're not left with much in the way of nightlife. There are some bars in town and some late-night restaurants, but that's not really our scene. And why go out when you can throw a raging bonfire in the comfort of your own backyard?

*Especially when Royce is out of town, and you don't have to risk exposure to his harsh cold shoulder.*

For weeks he appeared in control, his face aloof as though that night never happened—the only change being that he went from mostly ignoring me to completely ignoring me.

I know the only reason he would choose to go on a delivery is to get away. And I also know I'm the reason he left. As if he couldn't stand to be near me any longer.

Does he blame me for what happened?

Does he hate me because of what we did?

Does he regret his suggestion that I stay that night, when I tried to leave initially?

These, and many others, are the fears that plague me incessantly. But even more so since I found out he left a few days ago.

I've grown angrier toward his behavior the more time that's passed since we had sex. It's like going through stages of grief. Only, it's my own common sense I'm grieving.

*Although can you truly grieve something you're not sure you had in the first place?*

Tilting back my third beer of the evening, I let the last of the now warm bubbles slide down my throat. I've been drinking more than I ever have lately. I'm well on my way to becoming a full-fledged alcoholic unless something drastic changes.

How could I have been so stupid to believe Royce would want to have a future with me? Apparently, I've lost all sense of reality. And what about Maggie? It would fucking kill her to know I've even *thought* about Royce in that way, let alone that I've actually gone and slept with him.

I grab another beer from the cooler and shake my head in anger at my selfish stupidity.

"Wow," I hear a familiar voice to my left. "I sure am glad I'm not them."

I turn to find Drew looming, unsure about whether to approach me or not.

*What is he doing here?*

"What?" I question, irritation clear in my tone. "Who?"

"Whoever the hell you're mad at." He throws his hands up in surrender, liquid from his half-drunk beer sloshing against the inside of the bottle.

Before I can bark at him any further, his expression relaxes, easing my frustration with a warm smile.

"Oh."

"May I?" He gestures to the empty spot on the bench next to me, and I nod my approval.

I take in his appearance for a little longer than I'd like. His dark T-shirt fitted tight over a muscular frame, showing off his fit body. Dark, bootcut jeans hanging low on his hips, baggy over his boots at the ankle.

His dark hair and long sideburns glowing in the flickering fire. The glimmer in his eyes I've seen both times we've



spoken before shining brighter than ever.

He's different from Royce... But I suppose that's a good thing.

Silence falls between us for a few minutes. Though I'm quiet by nature, I usually feel immense pressure to fill the awkward void with some type of conversation. Whether it be the beer tempering that anxiety of mine or if Drew's presence somehow calms me, I'm grateful for the reprieve.

"You want to talk about it?" He finally breaks the silence.

"No."

"That was a quick answer," he laughs, not taking his eyes off me. Out of the corner of my eye, I watch him study me, and it makes my head swim. Though that's probably from the beer.

"Yeah, well... I feel strongly about it." I pierce him with a narrowed gaze.

"I can see that." He raises his eyebrows before taking another sip of his drink.

"What are you doing here anyway?" I bark, angry he can read me like a book.

"I came with my boy, Sam."

I try to place Sam... Visualize who Drew is talking about, and I think I remember Mickey introducing me to a friend of his named Sam a long time ago, but I can't be sure. Though these parties are often attended by loads of people I don't know, so I don't waste too much time on it.

With another awkward silence upon us, I can feel my thoughts turning a dark corner. As jealousy rears its ugly head, I wonder if he and Sienna are together. He hasn't been back to the store since I saw him last, and she hasn't said more than a few words to me since then either.

If they are together, him being here is a problem.

"Where's Sienna?" I blurt out before I can stop myself, irritated at my question for multiple reasons.

For starters, I really don't care where she is *or* if they're together.

*Liar.*

My chest clenches as the thought of them as a couple rattles through my brain.

Second, I'm angry as though I'm jealous of her. And I suppose I am, but it's only because she has someone who actually likes her.

*Careful not to choke on your self-deprecation, Delilah.*

My subconscious scolds me, shooting me an eye roll for added flair. She's usually not this prickly. I suppose she's as sick of me as I am.

Third, I know for a fact Sienna is closing the store tonight. And I'm sure Drew is smart enough to put together that, as I work with her, I'm more than aware of her schedule.

Let's not even mention the fact that bringing her or their possible relationship up could lead to a conversation about feelings. And *that* is not a conversation I need to be having with *anyone* right now. Especially not some guy I don't know.

"Beats me, why? Isn't she *your* friend?"

I look at him like he's crazy, in an effort to save face.

"Um, *no*. She's my supervisor. I thought you two were an item or something? The way you were flirting with one another in the store a couple weeks ago—"

"Oh, that wasn't flirting," he corrects.

When I roll my eyes at him, he laughs. "I'm serious."

"It looked and sounded an awful lot like flirting. And if it walks like a duck and talks like a duck, Drew..." Oh my god, if I needed any more proof that I should put this drink down immediately, that was it.

But my embarrassment has me taking another long swig instead before continuing. "I practically gagged on the charm from all the way in the back of the store."

His tongue darts out over his lower lip, and his top teeth follow, sucking the plump skin underneath them. A flash of Royce doing the same thing weeks ago causes a stir in my lower stomach.

“Why? Were you jealous?” he questions suggestively, all humor gone from his expression as he cocks his head to the side.

The movement almost gives me pause. I remember the way he looked at me the last time we saw one another. It was intense, and the idea that he had some sort of attraction to me was too much for me to handle or process.

But tonight, for some reason, it takes the stir from my memory of Royce and amplifies it.

“N-no,” I give him a half-truth, shaking my head slightly.

At the time I *was* jealous, but not because Drew was speaking to Sienna. It was because Royce had just torn my heart from my chest. And if I’m being perfectly honest, watching them interact ... the innocent flirting people do at the early stages of a romance seemed like something I would never get to experience.

But right now, the way Drew is staring at me makes me feel like I could possibly have a—dare I say—*normal* relationship with someone.

Royce’s words from that night come back to me.

*“...your life is only just beginning. There are so many incredible experiences ahead of you. Find someone your own age to enjoy them with, kitten. Someone who is worthy of you...”*

Could Drew be that person? He’s not exactly my own age, but he’s closer in age to me than Royce.

“Darn,” Drew’s smile droops just before I notice a playful shine in his stare. “I was hoping you’d be as into me as I am you.”

I swallow nervously at his words then chug down the rest of my beer instead of replying.

He feigns hurt when I'm finished, clutching his hands to his chest. I look at him, unable to stifle the amused smile forcing its way out.

"You wound me, madame. I can't tell if you don't want to admit that you don't like me," he drops his hands from his chest, and his face turns serious again, "or if you're afraid to tell me you do."

I can feel my eyes widen at his candor, and as much as I try to control my facial expression, even the large quantity of alcohol I just forced into my system can't keep his answer from my face.

"Mm-hmm..." A smug grin tugs at the corner of his mouth at the same time as satisfaction glows in his stare. "That's what I thought..."

"I don't know what you're talking about..." I begin, reaching into the cooler for another beer, knowing it's the wrong way to handle this situation. As I lean down, I look around for Maggie, desperate to grab her attention and lure her over to save me.

But she's nowhere to be found. *Fucking great.* I consider pulling out my phone and texting her our secret SOS code we came up with at sixteen when we started going out to bars and other places we certainly didn't belong at that age.

The emoji of the two girls holding hands.

Like best friends. Like sisters.

We'd use it any time we felt like we were in danger or uncomfortable and wanted to leave.

This doesn't warrant worrying her like that, however. I'm not in danger, I'm just uncomfortable with the attention he's giving me. But how the hell can I ever have a normal relationship if I can't get over this feeling? I need to let it go.

*Easier said than done.*

And if I'm being honest, I don't want to admit I may find him mildly attractive. As ridiculous as this sounds, I feel like I'm not being true to Royce.

*God, I'm so fucked-up.*

“This is literally the last conversation I need to be having right now... With *you* of all people.” I unleash the anger I feel toward myself for being so weak for Royce onto Drew.

As I twist the bottle cap to loosen it, the moisture from the ice bath I just pulled it from causes it to slip from my grasp, dowsing me in beer.

*“Shit.”*

I stand, bringing the bottle to my lips even as I curse my irresponsible behavior. I walk toward the garage to clean up, and with another sip I reassure myself that this is what kids my age do sometimes.

“Hey,” Drew catches up to me, worry creasing his brow. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to upset you.”

Taking an overexaggerated breath as I continue drunk stomping across the lawn, I look at him.

“You didn’t,” I say finally. “It’s ... complicated...”

When we reach the garage, Drew grabs the doorknob before I can get to it and opens the door for me. I expect him to have a cheesy grin on his face to coincide with his helpfulness, but instead, I get a worried, pinched smile.

He still thinks I’m angry at him, and I feel terrible because it was my own dumb words that roused my temper.

“Thank you,” I offer as I walk through the open door.

“Look, again...” he follows me into the garage, closing the door behind us. “I’m sorry if I was over the line.”

Grabbing the paper towels from the workbench along the back wall, I take a few and dab at my legs to dry them.

“You weren’t. I promise. I’m just ... having a hard time getting over someone, I guess.”

*Why the hell did I say that? Fucking beer...* This is why I don’t drink. I hate not being in control of myself.

Moving my attention from my legs to my soaked shirt, I attempt to pat it dry, eternally thankful it's not white.

“Oh. I'm really sorry to hear that.”

I let the usual, patronizing statement people give when they don't know what else to say to someone go in one ear and out the other as I continue drying myself. But what I can't ignore is the next thing out of his mouth.

“But if I may ask, who would be stupid enough to let *you* go?”

My head snaps up, eyes locking with his as he leans against the refrigerator a few feet away.

“You don't even know me...” I reply, narrowing my eyes and refusing to allow his come-on to penetrate my fragile psyche.

“But I'd like to. If it wasn't clear by my horrible attempts at flirting out there...” His playful smile is back.

Picking up my beer from the counter, I take another gulp... Or two. He's bold. And I'm not. Not usually anyway. The one time I tried to be, it backfired worse than I ever thought possible.

“I know you're beautiful.” A hint of arrogance laces his smirk, thinking the compliment will cause me to soften toward him. Or is it because he truly believes I am?

They always say one door closes and another one opens.

*They also say in order to get over someone, you should get under someone else...*

If he doesn't stop complimenting me, I may just do it. No, that's the beer talking... My subconscious is as drunk as I am. Get yourself together, Delilah.

I swallow the bundle of nerves lodged in my throat. I should tell him to fuck off. No, no... That's too harsh. Also, I don't want to.

“Let me take you out. Just one date, and if you still don't like me after that, I'll leave you alone forever. Scouts honor.”

He holds three fingers up next to his head.

“Who said I didn’t like you?” This time, I let the beer take control.

Again, his tongue darts out over his bottom lip. He’s pleased with my response, and it causes a frenzy inside of me.

“So that’s a yes, then?” He steps closer to me, within arm’s reach.

A yes to what? Wait, I’m missing something. Fucking beer. I shouldn’t be around him without a clear head.

*Oh! A date.*

God no. I’m too awkward for a date.

Do something. Distract him.

He takes the paper towels from me, and moving in so close our bodies are nearly touching, he dabs at a wet spot I missed on my chest.

Stoking the growing fire within me.

Before I know what’s happening, my head lifts in an attempt to kiss him.

A foolish attempt because Drew pulls away from me.

*What the fuck?*

Placing his arms on my shoulders, he takes a step back and looks at me.

“Delilah—”

I cut him off, pulling myself from his grasp, turning away from him and holding on to the edge of the workbench with all my might. I can feel the tears forming, but the last thing I want to do is cry like a weak, rejected little girl in front of him.

Unfortunately, all the alcohol I irresponsibly consumed tonight has other plans. And it pisses me off.

My entire body vibrates with the force of my unwanted sob before my piss-poor self-confidence rears her ugly head and takes possession of what remaining control I have over myself.

“I don’t understand why no one wants me.” The fear that’s been poking at my subconscious for weeks is finally vocalized.

I’m not even saying it to Drew, but to the universe.

“Delilah, I never said I don’t want you. Because, *fuck*, I do. You’re gorgeous, for one. The way your body moves makes me feel things I’ve never felt before. But you’ve been drinking, and I refuse to try anything that you may regret in the morning.”

He’s right. He asked me out on a goddamn date before I freaked out and tried kissing him. That should have been enough to tell me he wants me at least in some way.

“I’m... I’m sorry, Drew. *God*, I’m such an idiot.” I run my hands down my face in frustration.

“You’re not—”

“I never drink... Not like this.” I turn to him, finally, swaying as my state of inebriation heightens.

“Hey, don’t beat yourself up. It happens to everyone from time to time.”

Cupping my face in his hands, he wipes my tears away with the pads of his thumbs. He raises his eyebrows as if to ask me if I’m okay.

“Okay,” I nod, trying hard to stifle my tears.

“Okay.”

“I should probably get to bed,” I admit, my head now swimming with the effects of alcohol as well as a near mental breakdown.

“You should,” Drew agrees.

I walk to the bottom step leading from the garage to the house, but my foot completely misses when I try to climb them.

“Uh...” I look back at Drew who uncomfortably rubs the back of his neck. “Do you want some help getting situated?”



It suddenly feels like my entire face pulls down with sorrow.

“Probably...” I whimper.

Drew smiles, unable to hide the slightest bit of amusement. When he reaches me, he guides me up the few steps into the house with his hand on the small of my back. He doesn't let go until we're up in my room.

When we get there, he locates my robe hanging from my bedpost and holds it out to me. He turns like a gentleman, granting me privacy as I undress and wrap it around my naked body.

The last thing I remember after I climb into bed is him pressing a gentle kiss to my forehead and whispering, “Good night,” in my ear.

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

## DELILAH

**M**y eyes squint against the morning sun, glaring through my windows, as it rises higher in the sky.

I have no idea what time it is; all I know is it's too early to be awake. My head is pounding as though I smashed it into the wall over and over again.

*What the fuck happened last night?*

My eyes fly open when a memory of me throwing myself at Drew enters my brain, trips, and takes a few painful rolls down the hill before nose-diving straight into the land of unfortunate mistakes.

“Oh god...” I cover my face, trying to hide from the crushing embarrassment and judgment of my empty room.

*It is empty, right?*

Slowly, I remove my hands from my face and look around, praying I didn't convince Drew to stay overnight. Thankfully, no one is here.

Quickly, I lift my covers and notice I'm no longer dressed but in my robe. That's when I remember Drew had me change so I wouldn't go to bed in my beer-soaked clothing.

Breathing a sigh of relief, I roll over onto my side and spot a bottle of water on my nightstand. I don't remember putting it there, but my cotton mouth turns into an arid desert at the sight of it.

When I reach for the bottle, I see a few more things littering the furniture's surface.

Two round, orange tablets and a note.

Forgetting all about the water, I grab the note and delight in the flutter of butterflies flitting through my stomach as soon as I read it.

**DREW - 717-555-2108**

**CALL ME IN THE EVENT YOU STILL  
WANT TO KISS ME IN THE MORNING.**

With the paper in my hands, I lay back on my pillow, wrestling with feelings of both irritation and thrill.

I'm surprised at myself, but I find I definitely still want to kiss him.

But then there's Royce...

*What about Royce?*

I'm still not over him...

*He's not interested. He told you to find someone else.*

I'm nothing if not a people pleaser.

*No, fuck Royce. Don't do this for him.*

*Rip off the Band-Aid.*

*Say goodbye to any future you mistakenly imagined you could have with him, and give yourself a chance to be truly happy.*

*For once.*

I think it's safe to assume my subconscious is *over* Royce. Before I can talk myself out of it, I unplug my phone from its charger—also something I'm certain Drew did—and pull up my messaging app.

I type in his number, but then I freeze. What the hell do I say? “It’s Delilah. I still want to kiss you?”

*Hello is usually a good start.*

Another point for my subconscious.

I shake my head, hoping to clear my own stupidity from it in the process, then type out a message.

Hello

I continue staring at the phone, hoping a response comes through. While I wait, I save his name and number to my contacts. After two minutes, I realize he probably has no idea who sent the message since he doesn’t have my phone number yet.

As I begin typing another message to let him know who I am, his response pops up.

Good morning, Delilah.

How the hell did he know it was me? I suppose he could have guessed, seeing how he told me to text him in the morning. I wonder if he’s been anxiously awaiting a message from me. Could he have been waiting up all night for me to see his note? No, that’s ridiculous.

But even if that’s not the case, simply the idea of it has me feeling a little playful. With the butterflies back in flight, I type my reply.

Who’s Delilah?

I laugh to myself, wondering if this is what I’ve been missing in my life. Is this how Maggie felt the first time she met Fernando? Does she still feel this way when she sees him and talks to him?

A pretty girl I met recently.

I suck my lips between my teeth to keep the enormous smile his message elicits off my face, but it’s no use. And who

is here that I need to hide it from anyway? I can't remember the last time I smiled as genuinely as this, and for once, I want to stop questioning everything and let myself enjoy the moment.

I want to say something to him that will make him smile too. But after a few minutes, I still can't think of anything meaningful.

She must have been lucky to cross paths with you.

Oh my god. Lame...

Ew, that was terrible. I hate myself right now.

Before I have a chance to throw my phone out the window, he responds.

I'm the lucky one.

I roll my eyes, but they conflict with the nauseatingly goofy smile forming on my lips.

That's equally as cringey as my message to you was.

Another quick response comes in.

So we're meant for one another, then.

My grin stretches wider.

Have you taken the Motrin I left for you yet?

Yes.

Quickly grabbing the tablets from the table, I toss them back and finally open the water, chasing the pills with it. The cool liquid feels incredible on my throat, and before I know it, I've downed half the bottle.

Good girl.

In two words, he's reduced me to a fucking puddle.

They're the words I've ached to hear from someone—especially from either of the domineering male figures who have held prominent roles in my life—for as long as I can remember.

How are you feeling? Do you think you can stomach some food?

Not really, but I don't want to miss an opportunity to see him again, even if just to redeem myself for last night.

Sure

Excellent. I'll pick you up in an hour.

Excitement roars through me.

See you then.

Dropping my phone on my bed, I finish chugging the rest of the water before hopping into the shower.



The moment Drew pulled up in front of the house, I wanted to run back inside and hide under the covers. As I was getting dressed for breakfast, some of my excitement got eaten away by a fresh feeling of anxiety.

What will we talk about?

What if we don't have anything in common?

What if the more he gets to know me, the less he likes?

But he led me to his car with his hand at the small of my back, like he did last night, and opened my door for me like a

gentleman. The car ride to the Dover House Restaurant was a bit quiet, despite his efforts to get me talking.

Then we were seated at a round booth, forced to sit next to one another. I was hoping for a table between us to allow myself a little space. But by the time we were through ordering our food, I started to loosen up a little.

What started out as a discussion about the best breakfast meat—I said scrapple, but Drew prefers bacon—turned into a lengthy conversation about likes and dislikes.

Drew seriously dislikes scrapple.

“Do you folks need any boxes today?” The waitress takes stock of what we still have left on our plates.

I shake my head no at the same time as Drew answers, “Just the check, please.”

The waitress nods and begins to clear our dishes from the table.

“I’d like to treat you to breakfast as a thank you for last night,” I tell Drew.

This restaurant is a little more expensive than what I’d choose for myself, but I’d like to show him my gratitude for refusing my drunken advances as well as ensuring I was tucked into bed safely.

“No way. I invited you, it’s my treat. Plus, you don’t have anything to thank me for,” he insists.

“Please? You were right to hold me off last night. I felt pretty rough this morning, but I know it would have been worse if you hadn’t.”

I realize my words came out harsher than I meant them, and I try to backtrack, “I mean, not that I don’t want to kiss you in the light of day or when I’m sober. I just mean that it’s good we didn’t sleep together.”

*Who said anything about sleeping together?*

This is turning into a trainwreck with a side of dumpster fire.



Drew places his arm over the back of the booth's seat, turning his body toward mine with a cocked eyebrow and an amused smirk.

*Ugh.*

Open mouth. Insert foot.

“I mean, not that *that's* where it would have headed. You obviously seem like a gentleman, so I'm not assuming anything like that. I just—”

But before I can ramble on like it's my first time speaking to another human being, Drew cradles my head in his hands, pulling me toward him as he presses his lips to mine.

Effectively both shutting me up and awakening the delicious ache within me.

Tilting his head to the side, he deepens the kiss by running his tongue along my lips, waiting for permission to enter. I open for him and am hit with the comforting taste of coffee mixed with a sweetness that can only come from Drew, as he doesn't take sugar in his coffee.

It's another one of his dislikes.

With an urge to reach out and touch him, my hand moves to his chest, which is hard and strong beneath his T-shirt. A soft growl vibrates beneath my palm as he shares his appreciation of my touch.

The kiss doesn't feel weird or unwanted like the few I've had with other guys in the past—Royce excluded. On the contrary, his lips offer care and affection, as much as his touch boasts strength and security. As though he already knows every one of my fears and he's vowing to protect me from all of them.

In addition, his actions promise a thorough ravaging of my body as soon as he's given the chance.

His hands tighten a fraction, a sign of his self-control slipping. I respond by gripping the fabric of his T-shirt in my fist, letting him know he's not the only one with a growing need.

Too soon, the waitress returns, her bubbly tone finally pulling us away from one another. When our eyes open, I see a dangerous desire within his. Like if we hadn't been interrupted, he would have laid me down on the booth and taken me here and now. I watch his chest rise and fall, nearly as breathless as I am from our connection.

That thought sobers me up enough to move away from him slightly. It serves as a reminder not to move too quickly. Look what happened the last time I couldn't control my urges. Licking my lips, I busy myself by pretending to look for something in my purse as Drew takes his credit card out of his wallet and hands it to the waitress.

Neither of us says anything, but Drew places his hand over mine, calming my still rapid breathing while we wait for her to bring his card back.

He signs the receipt before we leave the restaurant hand-in-hand, and I find I don't hate it. I expect him to take me home but am surprised when, instead, he asks, "What's next?"

When I turn to him, the desire in his eyes is gone, but they still have the playful warmth I remember from last night.

"Oh, um..." I squint my eyes, looking up and down the already bustling road on which the restaurant sits.

In this area of town, touristy and close to the center, there are a bunch of shops and restaurants. But it's also a great place to take a leisurely stroll and enjoy some of the area's history.

I'd love to go to the battlefield, but I don't know if we should chance getting back into his car yet. Being in such close quarters doesn't seem like a smart choice so soon after the intense kiss we shared.

"I should probably walk off breakfast *and* what's left of my hangover. Is that okay with you?"

"Anything that lengthens the amount of time I get to spend with you today the better."

I want to scoff at the sickeningly sweet statement and roll my eyes like I usually would do. But out of nowhere, a quote that my old therapist once recited to me pops into my head.

*You either get bitter or you get better.*

I don't want to be bitter and jaded. Look what transpired last night, all because I wanted to feel sorry for myself. Neither I nor Drew deserved that behavior. If that and everything that happened between Royce and I is any indication, I've been making all the wrong choices lately.

I need to break the cycle. I need to choose to be better.

If for no reason other than to make the scared little girl who still lives inside of me proud.

So I respond to Drew with a smile, even though it feels awkward to do so. It's tough, but oftentimes the first step is the hardest to take. If I can keep going, hopefully, one day soon, it won't feel wrong to want to be happy.

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

## ROYCE

**O**n any given night, there could be as many as twenty mouths to feed in this house, and tonight our table is full. The room is loud with chatter from club members, harlots, Maggie, and Delilah.

But I tune them all out. My only focus is on Delilah, sitting three chairs down from my spot at the head of the table. Watching her smile as she receives yet another text message should make me happy.

But, since returning from our most recent delivery, I've heard murmurs between her and Maggie about a boy she likes, and I'm finding it hard to remain indifferent about the news. Even though her confidence appears to be the strongest it's ever been.

If I were a better man, it might make me happy. Instead, I'm aggravated that I'm the person who shattered it in the first place rather than the one who helped bolster it.

*Clearly*, I'm not that guy, especially since I'm the one who told her to go out and find someone else in the first place. And ever since our trip to Memphis, I've been even more of a miserable prick to everyone around me.

Draven tried to warn me against making the trip, but in my desperate need to distance myself from Delilah, his words fell on deaf ears.

After he pulled me away from Diego—and out of danger of getting us all killed—he demanded I let him in on why it

was so fucking important to me to make our delivery in person.

Draven has always been my ride-or-die. My no questions asked, get the job done guy. So I took him questioning my intentions seriously.

*Or maybe even Royce “The Judge” Taylor needs to get shit off his chest from time to time.*

So I led him out of earshot of Zephyr and Saxon then laid it out for him.

*Resting my elbows on the top rail of the wooden barrier we first stopped at when we got here, I keep my attention on my linked hands and take a deep breath.*

*“I had sex with Delilah.” I don’t look at him as I make my confession, but when he doesn’t respond, I’m forced to meet his stare.*

*His hand stopped halfway to his mouth, his lit cigarette begging to be smoked. He’s looking at me with the utmost amusement, like I just told him the funniest thing he ever heard.*

*Before I tell him to fuck off with his judgement, he starts cackling like an excited hen.*

*I turn away from him, dramatically huffing an exasperated breath to share my displeasure toward his reaction. I catch sight of Zephyr several yards away. His attention is on us, but his brow is furrowed with confusion. I’m sure after the tension between Diego and me, the last thing he’d expect from either of us is laughter.*

*“Would you fucking pull it together?” I bark at Draven.*

*“I’m sorry.” He finally takes a puff of his cigarette. “Look, I knew you were hard up for her, but I never, in a million years, would have thought you’d act on it.”*

*Now I’m the one staring in disbelief. If he knew, who else knows?*

*“Don’t worry, I don’t think anyone else pays as close attention to you as I do. It’s my job to be up your ass all the*

*time.”*

*That only makes me feel a little bit better. I don't like the idea that anyone else knows how she makes me feel. It's a weakness neither her nor I can afford. But I suppose I'm stupid for thinking no one has caught on by now.*

*“So—stupidly—you fucked her, and then I'm certain you fucked up in some other way where she's concerned, and that's the reason you blew off every warning I gave you about making this delivery in person? Because you needed time away from your fuck up?”*

*I don't like him referring to her as a fuck up, but I roll my eyes at his accuracy and prepare to eat crow.*

*“Basically.”*

*He takes another, longer, drag of his cigarette to mentally prepare for the second half of the conversation.*

*“Okay, next issue,” he nods. “What the fuck was that with Diego?”*

*Squeezing the bridge of my nose, I seethe all over again at the bomb Diego just dropped.*

*“He's responsible for Penny's disappearance.”*

*This time, the shock on Draven's face comes without a trace of amusement. Folding his arms, he comes closer then digs the heels of his boots into the ground.*

*“What the fuck? What do you mean?”*

*“I-I don't know. I never questioned what happened to her. There was no sign of struggle. She left a note behind for Maggie, detailing how sorry she was but that she had to leave.”*

*Thinking over the words I barely remember, it's possible Penny could have been telling us what happened to her without actually spelling it out.*

*Fuck, I need to reread that letter when I get home.*

*“Did he tell you he took her?”*

*“All he said is she’s long gone. I don’t know if he’s responsible himself or if it was the cartel.”*

*“Long gone as in dead?”*

*“Yeah...” I answer, shocked at the sadness in my tone, even after all this time. You don’t have to love someone to be sad they’re gone.*

*“But more importantly, he threatened to do the same with Maggie,” I explain.*

*“Maggie?” Draven’s confusion over Penny shifts to concern once he knows Maggie could be in danger.*

*“When Maggie first met Fernando, before I had any idea they were connected to the cartel, Diego would sometimes come over to the house with him to ride four-wheelers. I thought it was weird at the time, given he’s almost ten years older than Fernando, but figured he was just keeping an eye on him. Since then, I think it actually had more to do with surveillance than anything else, considering how entangled both the stone yard and the club have gotten with them.”*

*Draven nods his head, agreeing with my suspicions.*

*“Anyway, I would catch Diego watching Maggie, scowling when Fernando got her attention instead of him. She was maybe thirteen or fourteen at the time, and it made me uneasy. Why would someone so much older show that much interest in her at that age?”*

*Draven purses his lips, reminding me that I just told him what happened between me and Delilah.*

*“Fuck you. On her life, I never had one ounce of desire for her until after she turned eighteen.” Before he can school me with the math that, regardless of her age, I’m still twenty years older than her, I continue. “Don’t forget what we did for her. I didn’t pull her out of that hellhole only so I could subject her to the same torture.”*

*“Okay, fair enough.” He nods for me to continue.*

I recounted the story from there for Draven, his face contorting into various states of shock from the details of



Diego's proposed deal to come back and take Maggie off my hands.

I wanted to barrel through the eighteen-hour drive home after the swap was made, just to ride off some of my aggression. But Draven convinced me to stay overnight at the clubhouse of our Memphis chapter as we originally planned. It was the right thing to do since the chapter's president, Reign, planned a huge party, knowing we would be there.

Even two weeks later, I'm still reeling from the entire interaction, but especially over the additional details I received regarding Penny's disappearance.

I tried locating the letter she left behind to see if I could read between the lines, but I couldn't find it. Maggie used to have it hidden in her room, but maybe she finally threw it away after all these years.

Giggling breaks my concentration again. I look up to see Delilah furiously typing away on her phone. The joy on her face is something I've longed to see for some time now.

*You could have been the cause of it if you weren't such an unbalanced maniac.*

My eyes shoot to Maggie who is sitting across from her. She's also looking at Delilah, but she doesn't seem happy for her either. I'm surprised to see she's not engaged in conversation about the cause of Delilah's unusual, good mood.

Looking back at my plate, I poke at my steak and potatoes until the sound of a chair scraping along the floor causes me to look up again.

"I'm all finished," Delilah says to the table.

She tucks her phone into the back pocket of her jeans before grabbing her plate and disappearing into the kitchen. Several minutes go by before I hear the front door open, and I wonder where she's going.

I look to Maggie to see if there is any sign she knows what Delilah is up to. But she too is enamored with her phone.

*Fucking kids.*

That should have been my reaction toward Delilah as well. Rather than my unwavering interest at her every move. I scoff and shake my head.

I never hear the door close, but I look down the hallway in time to see Delilah crossing the foyer with someone in tow. The boy she's been giddy over, no doubt.

But when he looks up, I realize he's no boy.

*He's a grown fucking adult.*

I told her to go find someone her own age. What the fuck is she thinking?

As though she can sense my anger from all the way down the hall, her head lifts toward me, meeting my eyes. For a moment so brief only she and I notice it, she stares at me.

Then, without missing a step, she leads him up the stairs to her bedroom.

# CHAPTER FIFTEEN

## ROYCE

I count to ten as I try to stomp out the irrational anger overtaking me. But it's a feeble attempt.

"Maggie!" She jumps in her seat due to my abrupt shouting.

"What?" Her reply is laced with attitude.

"Who the fuck is that guy Delilah just let in my house?"

"Probably Drew. Why the fuck are you screaming at me?"

She gets up with an enraged huff then takes her food into the other room. I feel Draven's stare on me from the other end of the table. My eyes shoot to his quickly before I look at the other faces surrounding me.

"Do any of you know who the fuck this guy is?" I query everyone still seated.

"Not personally," Chubbs chimes in. "I think he's an acquaintance of Robby's kid."

"My brother, Robby? Mickey knows him?"

"Yeah, I think so," Chubbs answers, shrugging his shoulders.

"So how did Delilah meet him?"

"A party we threw." This time it's Ronin who speaks up, his tone just about as irritated as mine. He's had a crush on Delilah for a long time.

“What party?” I don’t ever remember seeing this guy before. “When?”

“While you were in Memphis.”

Fucking Memphis. Here’s yet another reason why I never should have gone.

Letting my anger get the best of me, I stand and head into my office for some peace and quiet. I sit at my desk for a while, trying to calm down. When nothing helps, I turn on my computer and decide that checking work emails may be a necessary distraction.

Once I’m logged in, my mouse hovers over the icon that will bring up my internet browser. But before I click it, my eyes are pulled to the icon next to that one.

To the audio program Draven and I have been using the past several years to make sure Delilah wasn’t getting curious and asking questions about the disappearance of her father.

What kind of person would it make me if I listen in? It’s nothing I haven’t done before, but never when she’s had someone over. Although she’s never had a guy over, at least not that I’m aware of.

Who *is* this guy, though?

Does she even know him that well?

I let the weak rationalization that I need to make sure she’s safe drown out any semblance of privacy she’s entitled to.

*As well as annihilate the last possible ounce of decency I have.*

Throwing on my headphones, I open the program. As it loads, I tap my fingers on the surface of my desk impatiently—still questioning my sanity. Once it’s open, I pull up the feed from her room. Instantly, the sound of her voice fills my ear.

*“...glad you were able to get away from the club tonight, but are you sure you don’t want to go see the movie?” she asks.*

*“Well, it’s not hard to do when you own the place...”*

Delilah giggles like what he said was actually funny.

*“...but I’m sure. I’m kind of worn out. It’s been one thing after another there this week, so I’d rather just chill here with you, if that’s all right?”*

No, it’s not all right.

*“Of course. I just feel bad that you drove all this way for nothing.”*

*“Not for nothing, pretty girl. I have you in my arms, don’t I?”*

Wow, what a charmer. I roll my eyes and shake my head at his obvious attempt at flattery. Delilah will never fall for it.

*“You’re so sweet to me.”*

Or maybe she will. I roll my eyes again at her foolishness.

*Or is it jealousy? You wanted her to be this happy, and now she is. But you aren’t the reason for it, you dumbass.*

The sound of kissing is almost enough to make me turn it off, but I can’t bring myself to end the feed. When I hear Delilah’s desperate whimpers, I almost break. It brings me back to Devil’s Den when I had my tongue between her legs, driving her closer to orgasm.

Could this be a new level of hell for me? One where gluttony and lust converge and my punishment is being forced to endure the sounds of Delilah’s pleasure being orchestrated by someone other than myself?

*I’d fucking deserve it.*

*“Do you want me to touch you, pretty girl?”* The seductive edge to Drew’s voice grates away at my soul.

Delilah doesn’t answer.

*“Tell me what you want, Delilah. Don’t be afraid of your desire. Own it. Let me hear you tell me what you want.”*

*“I want you to touch me.”*

*“Be specific, pretty girl.”*

More kissing leads to heavy breathing, causing a rattling vibration against my eardrums.

*“I want your fingers between my legs.”*

I can barely hear her shy whisper, but my own fingers heat as I remember the soft, slick feel of her pussy.

Before I realize what I’m doing, my hand finds its way to my hardened cock, but I force it back to my leg. There’s no way I’d be able to get myself off listening to her with someone else.

They grow quiet again, the only sounds are of rushed kisses and Delilah’s sweet, angelic moans. If I close my eyes, I can almost picture myself as the one in bed with her.

Until Drew opens his fucking mouth again.

*“You’re soaking wet for me, and I can smell your sweet pussy from here, pretty girl. No, don’t hide your face. You should feel proud, not embarrassed. Here,”* he pauses. *“Look what a good girl you are.”*

Not for the first time do I wish I had installed an actual camera in her room. The urge to see what is going on in there eats away at me.

*What the fuck is wrong with me?*

*“And do you feel this? This is what your arousal does to me. What you’ve been doing to me since the first moment we met. I’ve been wanting a taste of you for a while, but I didn’t want to push you if you weren’t ready.”*

What a fucking gentleman he is. They grow quiet again, but not for long.

*“Mmmm... More delicious than I’d imagined. Have you ever tasted yourself?”*

*“What? No.”*

A sharp intake of breath from Delilah vibrates in my ear.

*“Open wide, pretty girl.”*

*“This seriously turns you on?”* Delilah questions.

Yes the fuck it does, kitten. I bury my head in my hands, ashamed and questioning why I'm still listening to this.

*Because you still want her, and you'll fucking take her any way you can get her.*

*"Let me in, Delilah, and see just how much it turns me on."*

I don't have to wait long to find out whether or not she fulfills his request.

*"Good girl... Oh, Delilah... That's it... Lick my fingers clean. You like this, pretty girl, don't you?"*

I swallow as my cock twitches again, expectantly awaiting her answer.

*"It's okay if you do, and it's okay if you don't. I'm not looking for a specific answer from you as long as it's the truth. Honesty is the only way our relationship will grow. Okay? Now tell me... Did you enjoy tasting yourself?"*

"Yes," she barely whispers in a heated exhale.

*"Good girl."*

A squeak in the springs of her mattress alludes to more movement on the bed.

*"What else do you want me to do? Use your words, pretty girl. Remember, own your desire."*

*"Lick me..."*

*"Where?"* He feigns ignorance to get her talking.

Though I loathe him, and it would be easy for me to believe he's making her do this to sate his own depraved fantasies—which could still be the case—he's trying to build her confidence.

That's something anyone could see she desperately needs help with.

*"In between—"*

*"Uh-uh,"* Drew interrupts her. *"Where, Delilah?"*

*"I want you to lick my pussy, Drew."*



*“That’s my girl. Fuck, I’m so proud of you...”*

I hear Delilah gasp as the memory of her taste floods my tongue. Her hungry murmurs grow louder the closer she gets to an orgasm.

I wait for her pleasure-filled cry to sound in my headphones, but I barely hear anything.

*She’s probably screaming into a pillow.*

To keep quiet.

So no one in the house can hear her.

For privacy, to engage in one of the most intimate acts known to man.

*And here I am, defiling it.*

The thought sobers me enough to turn my growing need to know what she’s doing into shame for continuing to listen. And from shame quickly into anger.

She shouldn’t be doing this... Not with him.

*Fuck... I shouldn’t fucking be doing this.*

Before I cut the feed, I hear the unmistakable sound of shoes getting kicked off and thumping onto the floor. In my headphones as well as from the ceiling above me.

*Where her room is located.*

*“Delilah... Beautiful Delilah...”*

The next thing I hear is fabric rustling—either clothing or the bedsheets—being moved, taken off, or tossed aside.

When the moaning recommences, hers soft and meek once again, his deep and almost possessive, I scream at myself to cut the feed, go up there, and throw his ass out of my house. Before I do just that, she speaks again.

*“Drew, wait.”*

Yes, Delilah. Good girl. Stop him so I don’t have to.

She doesn’t deserve that level of embarrassment. Not from me. Not again.

*“What’s the matter?”* he asks her gently.

*“Nothing... Never mind.”*

A few seconds pass with no sound, and I check to make sure the feed didn’t drop.

*“Hey, where is your head at? Are you okay?”*

That’s ... decent ... of him, but—still—I refuse to admit he may actually be a good guy. Even though that’s what she deserves.

*“Mm-hmm”*

*“Honesty, Delilah. What are you keeping from me, pretty girl?”*

*“It’s just, the last time I had sex...”*

Fuck... This is about her and me. What the fuck is she about to tell him?

*“Well, remember the night of the bonfire I told you I was having a hard time getting over someone.”*

*“You mean the night you got drunk and tried to make out with me?”*

I don’t like what I’m hearing, and I despise the apparent smile in his tone.

*“Stop,”* Delilah giggles. *“My behavior that night will never be funny to me.”*

He may think she’s joking, but I know she isn’t. She rarely drinks, and she never randomly tries to kiss anyone.

*Except me.*

And she’s that way because of her piece of shit father, which I’m sure this douchebag knows nothing about.

*“Okay, I’m sorry. Go on.”*

*“I was trying to get over the last person I had sex with. And the reason I was trying to get over him was because after we were finished, he told me it was a mistake. And I haven’t really spoken to him since.”*

*“I’m glad to hear you haven’t. I’m sorry to hear that happened to you, though. He sounds like an asshole. A real piece of work who doesn’t deserve you.”*

My blood rages through me like lava, this time toward Delilah. For talking about our experience together. For discussing how poorly I treated her—as if I needed the reminder. I reach a boiling point as a new wave of anger spreads through me.

*“If I may ask, how long ago was it?”*

*“Two months ago,”* Delilah admits. *“Not too long before I met you.”*

It still feels like yesterday to me, and I wonder if she’s thinking the same.

*“Pretty recent...”* he responds.

Another brief pause causes me to check the feed again, but it’s still live.

*“Listen, Delilah. I really, really like you. But the last thing I want to do is screw this up. So again, you tell me what you want me to do.”*

*“What do you mean?”*

*“I mean...”* He pauses, and I hear him kiss her through the speaker.

*“Do you want me to continue?”* Another kiss. *“Or do you want me to stop?”*

I wait with bated breath for her answer.

*“No. Don’t stop, Drew,”* she finally whispers.

*“Good answer, pretty girl.”*

Drew’s praise is followed by a moan that I would recognize anywhere. This time, it’s loud and raw instead of controlled and muffled.

It’s the same unrestrained moan of ecstasy she sang the moment I was finally able to thrust my cock deep inside of her for the first time.

It's exactly what I need to finally end the feed. Ripping my headphones off, I toss them across the office then stomp to the door. Throwing it open, I come face-to-face with Draven.

"Not now," I growl at him as I head to the garage, mount my bike, and speed off into the dark night.

# CHAPTER SIXTEEN

## DELILAH

It's slower than usual at the store today.

Thankfully, Sienna isn't here as Drew came by to keep me company for a little while. I'm more than happy to have him here to help the time go by.

In fact, I've been more than happy about all the time we've spent together in the past month. It's allowed us to get to know one another a little more intimately.

I've learned that he's originally from the West Coast. He and his mother moved to Pittsburgh when he was in middle school after she found out his dad had an *entire* other family. He ended up moving to Harrisburg when he got out of high school. His favorite food is tacos, and he's ten years older than I am.

*Apparently, I have a type.*

He's also genuinely sweet, fiercely romantic, and hell-bent on teaching me how to empower myself and improve my confidence.

*And don't get me started on the man he turns into in bed.*

I knew he was direct since the first time I met him. I think it's part of the reason I was drawn to him here in the store, but also the reason I tried to keep my distance from him at the party he invited me to.

*I both crave and fear his bold tenacity.*

But that was just the tip of the iceberg. I had no idea I could like the way that translates into who he is in the

bedroom. As commanding as he can get, he always makes sure I don't feel pressured to do anything.

I appreciate that more than he will ever know, and it makes me want to open up and explore more with him.

I've been sleeping over at his place more often. And every time I do, I wake up to a fresh pot of coffee and a hot breakfast made by him. When I don't sleep over at his place, like clockwork, I wake up to a waiting text from him that says, "Good morning, pretty girl."

He sends them to me when he gets out of work, which is always in the early hours of the morning.

Speaking of work, Drew is a successful business owner. On our walk around town after breakfast that first morning, he told me he owned a nightclub. But after getting to know me more, he admitted that his club is of the variety that features topless and otherwise scantily dressed women.

Initially, my stomach dropped at his admission, but he explained that he was scared that if he told me the kind of club he owns off the bat, I wouldn't have given him the time of day.

I told him he was right, but that I'd be lying if I said I wasn't grateful for his initial omission.

*"I promise, Delilah. I only have eyes for you."*

I remember his words as my face fell after he initially told me.

Knowing he detests cheating—thanks to his father, not to mention the fact that he can't keep his hands off me—made me feel better about him being around a bunch of half-naked girls every night.

Other than work, he doesn't talk about himself or his family much. Not even when I inquire about them. While sharing what happened to him and his mother gave me an idea of what his childhood might have looked like, I'd like to know more about where he comes from. But I don't pressure him.

Everyone has a past, and I, of all people, know some pasts are better left buried.

“Tell me again what he said.” Drew rolls his eyes as he relaxes his stance against the store’s front counter.

I’ve just asked him, for the eightieth time, when he’ll be available to come over to the house to meet Royce.

My shoulders slouch, and I groan at the possibility of a confrontation between the two of them. But it’s been two weeks since Royce requested—to put it mildly—an introduction with him. And one doesn’t ignore the desires of The Judge.

*Not even those of us who have stupidly slept with him.*

I tend to play the role of peacekeeper between anyone who may not care for one another, no matter how much anxiety it causes me. I hate confrontation even more.

“He said he wants to meet you,” I answer.

I kind of understand where Royce is coming from. Drew is an outsider, and the RBMC doesn’t trust outsiders. There is too much at stake, and if they come sniffing around the clubhouse, more than just their lives would be in danger.

But I also find Royce’s timing to be a little *convenient*.

I’m sure I’m reading into things, but I’m not convinced Royce doesn’t know *exactly* what happened in my room the night before he demanded this meeting.

*I did get a little louder than I wanted to.*

I want to say that sex with Drew was better than being with Royce, but I can’t.

*It was ... different. Not worse, but not better.*

But there were a bazillion people in the house at the time. There’s no way I was louder than the rowdy crowd surrounding the dinner table that night.

Was he there, outside my door, listening to us? I wouldn’t put it past his intrusive nature to do so, but I can’t picture him



standing in the darkened hallway with his ear pressed to the door.

Or is it the strange sixth sense he's always had where I'm concerned? This isn't the first time he's known things that have occurred without being told.

Like the time Maggie dragged me along when she stole Royce's truck to go joyriding. After that night, Royce never let his keys out of his sight, keeping them in his room overnight.

Regardless, I don't like thinking that he was privy to my first time with Drew. There were so many emotions shared between the two of us that evening. None of which Royce should have had access to.

It was sweet and tender. Passionate and raw.

And it felt ... right.

Drew was domineering but patient. The way he culled my wants and desires from me... Dirty acts I've longed to experience in the past but never dreamed I'd be able to voice aloud. My lust increased with every demand he made of me.

After being with Royce—and thinking I felt the same thing with him before it all went to shit—I worried that nothing else would make me feel like I was where I was supposed to be.

All of my worries about Drew leaving me as soon as he got what he wanted went out the window when he showed up at the store with a bouquet of flowers the next day.

I was so stunned and enamored with him that Sienna's seething gaze barely affected me like it once would have.

When I got home that evening, however, my good mood quickly shifted to shame and worry when I was met at the door by an incensed Royce.

A storm raged in his eyes, more deadly than I've seen in them before, and he practically snarled at the flowers in my hand. He led me into his office where Maggie was already waiting, before laying into us both.

"I'm pretty sure you told me he said, 'I need to meet *that* boy if you expect me to *allow* you to keep seeing him.' "

I don't confirm or deny the direct quote from Royce that I never anticipated Drew remembering word-for-word. Instead, I finish hanging the last shirt on the rack in front of me without meeting his stare.

That night, Royce *also* said Maggie and I aren't allowed to throw any parties when he's not home anymore, and no more boys in our rooms. Which *shockingly* prompted yet another argument between him and Maggie.

I kept my mouth shut and my eyes down, not allowing Royce to read me like he always does. If I did, I was sure he would have seen everything I knew he already had mysterious knowledge of written all over it.

"Why would an independent twenty-year-old such as yourself need approval from someone who isn't even their father?"

"I don't need his approval," I insist as I straighten the stack of jeans in front of me. "And he is *like* a father to me."

Though he's never felt like one, I offer the statement to Drew to help my cause. But the sudden correlation between Royce and my own father—and what I've done with both of them—hits me hard enough to almost knock me over.

"Uh ... but," I try to recover by shoving that fact so far to the back of my mind, I'll never stumble upon it again. "It's more because he's the president of the Gettysburg Bastards, and he needs to make sure you're not a threat to the club. That's all."

Forgetting the jeans I'm using to distract myself, I move to the front of the store and situate my body between Drew's parted legs. Placing my hands on his hips, I keep my head bowed.

Until he places a finger beneath my chin, raising my face to him.

"Well, it sounds more like he's trying to control you."

"It's not like that." I honestly believe what I'm telling him.

“Oh yeah? So does he require the same meet and greet of every other guy who happens to come into the life of a club-affiliated girl? Does he demand the same from his *actual* daughter?”

At least I believed what I said until he asks me *that*.

My brows furrow as I think back over the years. Fernando and Maggie were so young when they first met. This never would have applied to them.

I try to recall hearing about anyone else he demanded to meet. I have no recollection of hearing it from any of the harlots. Although I think they only sleep with club members.

He never asked to meet the other guys I slept with. Though I don't know if he knew about them. For starters, we didn't have sex at the house like Drew and I did. But those were also one and done. A relationship never formed with them like it has with Drew.

“Not that I know of...” I frown, now questioning Royce's intentions myself.

“Exactly. Listen, I'll meet the guy if it will make you happy. But to be perfectly honest with you, as someone with an outsider's perspective on the situation, I don't like how he's treating you.”

I don't know how to respond because my feelings are confusing me. And not for the first time, I feel a little guilty that Drew doesn't know it was Royce I was referring to when I told him I was struggling to get over someone.

But Drew omitted a lie that could have hurt me when we first met too. It's the same thing.

*Though I'll never be able to come clean to Drew about this.*

“I've seen, firsthand, what controlling someone looks like, Delilah.” Pain flashes in his stare as he offers me a bit more of his past than he has before. Does it have to do with his parents? “And I hate the thought of it happening to you.”

I start to tell him that's not what's happening, but I stop myself and think again of everything that's unfolded between Royce and me.

Him fucking me. Discarding me. Ignoring me until he *somehow* figured out I'd slept with Drew. Now demanding something of me he's never demanded from anyone else associated with the club before.

Is Royce trying to control me or punish me for moving on? For doing exactly what *he* told me to do? Before I go further down that rabbit hole, Drew speaks again.

“When you and I first met, you mentioned you'd been looking for an apartment. Is that still the case?”

I haven't actively looked for one since meeting Drew. Spending time with him quickly took up all the available free time in my schedule. But maybe it's time to continue looking.

Then I wouldn't have to worry about Royce meeting Drew *or* his new dumb rules for Maggie and me. Thinking back to the conversation in his office that evening and to a moment ago when Drew asked if Royce treated Maggie like this... Something now doesn't seem quite right about it.

It doesn't make sense to implement the “no boys in your room” rule for Maggie who has been with Fernando for years. The two of them have been having sex for a long time, and Royce has never once voiced an issue with it.

Actually, there was one time he yelled at her about it. But he wasn't mad they were having sex, only that he *heard* it happening.

He also never expressed an issue with them sharing a bed, especially after Fernando moved in with us. And now that he's in the army, he's rarely at home anyway.

So, clearly—and quite unfairly—that rule was made for me, and me alone. Maggie was just an unwilling decoy to make it seem like he wasn't singling me out.

And for the first time since he left me on that rock in the middle of the night, I realize I'm angry with him.

*Looks like I've finally reached stage two of grief.* I thought it was my common sense I was grieving, but boy was I wrong. And I let Royce make me think that night was all my fault.

“Yes, I’m still looking,” I finally answer Drew. “And I think it’s time I get serious about my search.”

“Well, what if I told you I know of a place that’s available for you to move in immediately?”

His question causes me to pause. Has *he* been looking for an apartment for me?

“Move in with me, pretty girl.”

Wow, that’s not what I was expecting. My surprise is met with a hopeful smile. I step out of his hold and tuck my hair behind my ears.

“Drew, I...”

But I don’t know what to say. The idea of living with him *is* exciting, but it’s too much too soon. I want to be honest with him, but I also don’t want to hurt his feelings.

Thankfully, another reason I shouldn’t move in with him yet comes to mind.

“I’m flattered, and I think I can picture us there at some point. But first, it’s important for me to prove to myself that I can stand on my own two feet.”

He reaches out, taking my hands in his and pulling me back against his body. I can see the disappointment in his eyes, but he remains silent and offers me a weak smile. I decide to share a sliver of my own family history with him to help explain my reasoning.

“My mom passed away when I was young. But before she did, I remember her telling me to find my own way in life. Not to rely on anyone who can use my needs or weaknesses against me.”

*Like I let Royce do.*

Fuck, why is this only occurring to me now?

I choose to leave out the part where she passed out, high as a kite, right after telling me this. She was referring to my father, of course. She wasn't quite an addict when they met, but he used her penchant for recreational drugs to control her. Every time she threatened to take me and leave, he would get her high. Eventually, it turned her into the addict she was when she died.

"I would never do that, Delilah." He looks offended like I'm accusing him of something.

"I know you wouldn't." I place my hands on either side of his face, making sure I have his full attention. "I didn't tell you that because I thought it was something you'd do. But her words helped me realize that I've been letting others do it to me. And I need to break that habit now, before it gets out of control."

When he purses his lips playfully, I know he understands what I've told him.

"Well, I suppose I can't be upset by your incredibly mature decision. Especially since I'll be allowed to come and go from your new apartment free of scrutiny from big bad Royce."

I smile at his silliness, but he's right.

So I'll continue my search for an apartment starting tomorrow, and I won't stop until I find one.

Then I can finally break free from the grip Royce has had around my heart for far too long and start living my life for me.

# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

## ROYCE

**D**elilah hasn't collected many belongings in the five years she's lived here.

When she first moved in, I bought her a bedroom set which was comprised of a bed, a nightstand, and a dresser. At fifteen, she only had enough clothing to fully fill two drawers. The other drawers, as well as her closet, remained bare for a long time before Maggie started purchasing some new clothes on her behalf.

She refused to accept money from me and never asked for any the way Maggie would. The way any teenager would.

Once she began working in the office at the stone yard and making her own money, her worldly possessions began to increase, but she maintained her minimalist personality.

Which is why it doesn't take her and ... *that boy* ... more than an hour to pack up his truck.

*Drew.*

I roll my eyes inwardly as I watch him finish tying down her furniture so it won't fly out of the bed while they're driving. I have no idea where they're headed—Delilah has yet to offer up the location of her new residence—and I fight to keep my anger over the situation at bay.

She took me by surprise a few nights ago at dinner when she told me she signed a lease for a new apartment. I didn't realize she'd been looking.



I did my best to appear unaffected by the news. My eyes caught Draven's periodically, his narrowed stare reminding me that I'm the one who fucked up—not her—and to keep my cool.

I think the only one more surprised than me was Maggie. It's not usual for Delilah to keep Maggie in the dark like that. It's a fact that I find worrisome.

I guess I should have expected something like this to happen, though, considering how I blew up at the girls a couple weeks ago. Well, how I blew up at Delilah. Maggie was more an innocent bystander who I needed to suck into my wrath to make my new rules seem legit.

But I would have expected a drastic move like this from Maggie more than Delilah. Or at least for them to band together. I'm shocked the girls aren't *both* moving out today.

But Delilah went and did exactly what I suggested she do. I meant every word of it when I said it, not realizing how much it would hurt—and how much I would regret it—when it actually happened.

I don't know... Maybe I thought it would *never* happen. Maybe, in my stupid, pompous brain, I thought she'd never want for more than what she had here.

Did I actually expect her to follow me around, forever, like the lost kitten I viewed her as all those years ago?

Did I expect myself to allow her to linger in my world while I ignored her indefinitely?

Did I want to keep her here and not enable and equip her with everything she needs to go out and find the life she deserves?

Stupidly, I think I did.

And then, unable to get my rage under control that night, I made a further mistake of trying to punish her. Of ruling her life with an iron fist, the way some parents try to do with their kids.

I acted the way I probably should have acted toward Maggie when she was growing up. Maybe not so harsh, but I should have cared more about what she was up to and with whom.

I guess I should just be happy she didn't follow in her parents' footsteps, ending up pregnant at nineteen.

*She and Delilah both.*

"She's making a mistake." Maggie pulls me from my thoughts, and I tear my eyes from the truck. "You need to do something."

We both made ourselves scarce when Drew first got here. A silent protest to Delilah's departure and one of the first times Maggie and I have ever held the same viewpoint about something.

"If she wants to move, I can't stop her," I lie.

I know exactly what to say to get her to stay, but it's not fair to continue toying with Delilah's emotions like she's a goddamn yo-yo.

And what the fuck would Maggie think of me then? If she ever found out what happened between me and Delilah, she'd be the next one to leave.

Whether it be from Diego's threat or the fact that—in my own way—I do care for Maggie, my chest grows tight at the thought of her abandoning me too.

With Delilah leaving, the only thing keeping Maggie here is Fernando. They're saving all their money for their wedding and to buy a house of their own.

Once everything is secured in the back of the truck, Delilah and Drew walk toward the house to say their goodbyes.

"Royce, I presume?" Drew focuses his attention on me.

Climbing the steps up to the porch, he holds out his hand.

"That's me." I offer him a firm shake.

Finally face-to-face, I can see a glimmer of delighted defiance in his stare. It makes me dislike him even more than I already did.

Before today, I wasn't sure whether Delilah chose to ignore my request for a meeting or if Drew refused. But now I know. It didn't matter how hard Delilah pushed him to come here. He was never going to give in.

"Drew Sullivan. I've heard a lot about you," he informs me.

"Wish I could say the same."

But before either of them can respond, Maggie cuts in.

"We need to talk before you leave." Delilah looks at her with confusion. "Drew, you can stay here. Family meeting. You understand."

Not waiting for an answer, Maggie marches back into the house and into my office.

*This ought to be good.*

Delilah follows her, and I bring up the rear. No sooner than I close the door behind me, Maggie speaks again.

"You're being an idiot," she accuses Delilah, who looks as though she's just been slapped. "Royce, tell her she's making a mistake."

Shocked that Maggie's anger and strong opinions aren't directed at me for once, it takes me a second to form words. When I catch Delilah's face, it almost feels like she's waiting for me to tell her I think it's a mistake too.

But, as God as my witness, I'll never utter that word to her again.

"Royce." Maggie urges me on.

Delilah's eyes are still glued to mine as a thousand fucking words and emotions pass silently between us. My chest clenches as the same hurt I saw in her eyes the night we were together again threatens to pierce my fragile armor.

I try to make her see how sorry I am for what happened. To beg her not to go. To let her know how much I don't like Drew, although I can't give her one legitimate reason why.

She's looking at me, pleading for me to give her a reason to stay.

But... I don't. I can't.

Maggie scoffs next to me.

"Delilah, you've *never* mentioned anything to me about wanting to move out. Why now? Did Drew talk you into this?"

Finally, Delilah breaks the connection between us to look at Maggie.

"Of course not. Why would you think that?"

"Because I don't trust him." Maggie explains. "Because he's some *old guy* who hangs around with a younger crowd. What do you even *know* about him anyway?"

I remain silent but add this interesting fact to the mental file I've created on Drew since I first laid eyes on him.

"I know enough. And he knows a *lot* of different people, Mags. He doesn't just hang out with college-aged kids."

"He's a fucking weirdo," Maggie hurls, completely ignoring Delilah.

"And I did mention moving out to you once before. You shut the idea down like you do with me all the time. You know, Maggie, I've *always* been supportive of you and everything going on in your life. Even if I didn't agree with it. If it made you happy, that was good enough for me."

Maggie looks like Delilah just punched her in the stomach.

"It hurts to know you can't do the same. That you're not confident in the decisions I make regarding my life. Every choice I've ever made has been to ensure my survival. It's all I've done to make sure I've gotten to where I am now. It's all I know."

Delilah's face freezes as though she's said something she shouldn't have. I wonder why until Maggie answers her.

"What are you talking about?"

Maggie's tone isn't accusatory but genuinely confused. And it's then I realize that Delilah has never told Maggie about her past.

*Why?*

I would have assumed Maggie knew every single detail of Delilah's life by now. From the best of friends when they were younger to the sisters they practically are today, I thought they told each other everything.

"It's... It's not important. All that matters is that I know what I'm doing. Whether you choose to believe in me or not, that fact remains."

When Maggie doesn't offer up anything further, Delilah turns back to me. This time, resolve shines brightly in her eyes. She's no longer waiting for me to stop her. Only for me to release her, with my blessing. I clear my throat and beg myself not to fuck things up any more than I already have.

"If you need anything, call. Day or night." I nod, hoping she picks up on the severity of what I'm saying.

I need her to understand that I will always be here for her, no matter what. And none of my feelings toward her leaving or what happened between us in the past will ever change that.

When she returns my nod, I swallow the emotion that's threatening to surface and exit my office. I don't know how Maggie and Delilah leave things, but as close as they are, I have no doubt they will find their way back to the sisterhood they once had.

As for *my* relationship with Delilah?

I don't think there is enough time left in this life to heal the wounds I've inflicted upon her.

# CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

## DELILAH

The past week has been a whirlwind.

I'd hoped I would have heard from Maggie by now or that she would have made time to come see my new apartment. But she's still hurting from how we left things, and far be it from me to speed up anyone's healing process.

As much as her words stung the day I moved out, I suppose I can understand where she's coming from. I did spring it on her.

When we were younger, we used to dream of moving out together one day. Maggie would talk about the type of décor she'd want and about all the fun parties we could throw.

But then Fernando became the center of her life, and that talk quickly faded. But I never got upset, outwardly, with her for abandoning our dreams when he came along.

The one time I suggested she and I finally move into our own place, she said she couldn't do that and save money for her future with Fernando at the same time.

I understood. Like I always do.

Despite what I told Maggie the day I left, about all the carefully executed plans I've made for my survival, I never expected to have a place of my own at twenty.

And I was scared.

The first night, Drew asked me if I wanted him to stay over. In truth, I did ... desperately. But there was also a strong

pull to spend that night on my own. To get to know my new space by myself.

And it was agony. I shared my bed with a crushing sense of dread and the echoes of the word *mistake* ringing in my ears.

A word I fear will haunt my every decision for the rest of my life.

I picked up my phone to call and message both Drew and Maggie a hundred times but never hit send on any of them.

I didn't want to admit to anyone, myself included, that I might not have made the best choice. Eventually, I was able to get myself to believe that I don't handle change well and that I will settle into a new routine in no time.

Drew stayed over the next night, and it was great. Except for the fact that he pointed out each and every flaw in the four walls surrounding us.

*The paint is chipping over there. There is a leak in the unit above you—see the wet spot over the sink in the kitchen? It's a shame this place doesn't have its own washer and dryer.*

He's stated time and time again that I deserve better than this *level of squalor*, as he puts it. But what I'm having a hard time explaining to him is that this is all I can afford. And being on my own is an important rite of passage for me.

*I missed out on so many when I was younger, I don't want to miss any more.*

He apologized but said it's hard for him not to want the best for me. He also admitted the nitpicking is due, in part, to his desire for me to move in with him.

*“Can I truly be faulted for wanting you to warm my bed every evening? To worship your body whenever I want and wake up to your adorable bed head every morning?”*

Thinking back to his sweet words brings a smile to my face as I lock the doors to Mathieu. It's my night to close. Sienna, who hasn't spoken to me since finding out Drew and I are together, left about an hour ago. The store was slammed



tonight, and I've been running around, trying to get everything straightened up as best I can so I'm not stuck here for hours after closing.

While being alone increases the chances that my intrusive thoughts will creep back into my brain, I try to appreciate the fact that I am finally providing for myself. I'm in charge of my own life, my own destiny. And it's an incredible feeling.

As I walk to the front counter to cash out the register, I take out my phone and see I missed a text from Drew that he sent about twenty minutes ago.

Leaving my house now. Can't wait to see you.

He has the night off. He dropped me off earlier today before going back to his place. He said he had a few things to take care of at the club, but that he'd be back to pick me up since we're staying at my place tonight.

The forty-five-minute drive from Harrisburg to Gettysburg is a bit of a haul for as often as he makes it. I told him I felt bad that he's driving back and forth so much, but he said it's a small price he'll happily pay if it means he gets to see me. Plus, my old piece of junk car isn't likely to make the trip as often.

I'd been trying to save for a new one when I moved out, but my measly savings went to my first and last month's rent plus a security deposit.

Can't wait either. See you soon.

Sending my response, I place my phone on the counter and run tonight's closing report to find out how much money I need to deposit at the bank. As it prints, I'm startled by a crash in the storeroom. One that's loud enough to echo through the empty store.

Frozen in place, I listen to the hair-raising sound of footsteps coming closer to me. Before I have a chance to move, I see two masked figures emerge from the back.

One of them is enormous in size, both tall and wide, and he's wielding a large knife. The other is tall and lanky. Those are the only details I can gather before they flick the switch on the wall next to them, blanketing the store in darkness.

Through my paralyzing terror, I'm somehow able to get my feet moving. I run toward the store's locked front door as I hear a deep voice growl, "Grab her."

When the door is just out of reach, I'm stopped by a painful tug of my hair. I try to scream, but my voice gets lodged in my throat. The larger of the two intruders circles my neck with his solid forearm, dragging me behind the counter and onto the floor as I try to fight my way out of his grasp.

"You enjoy your prize," the other intruder instructs. "I'll get the money."

I watch as an evil smile spreads across my silent attacker's face, matching the wicked gleam in his eye. With a twitch of his head, his neck cracks loudly, echoing through the store like gunfire. A tear breaks free while I continue to struggle beneath him as feelings of helplessness that used to plague my past converge with this reality.

Suddenly, I'm back in my bedroom in the trailer. My attacker's face morphs into my father's, and I can feel the fight leave my body.

"No..." I cry out weakly as he brandishes the knife in front of my face.

I thought I'd become a much stronger person in the past five years. Someone who's built their worth up from nothing. A woman hell-bent on making something of myself.

Right now, I have no idea where that person is.

Did I imagine her?

Did I delude myself into thinking I could be anyone other than the weak little girl I've always been?

The one who attracts nothing but crushing pain, paralyzing fear, and gut-wrenching heartache.

With his knife, the man cuts my shirt in half, exposing my heaving chest to him. Menacingly, he runs the blade across the lace of my bra before slicing through each strap, causing the cups to sag.

Placing the knife beside my head, he tugs the material of my bra down, exposing my chest to him. My eyes leave his, unable to face his scrutinizing stare. I focus on the other intruder who has emptied the first cash register and moved to the next.

My phone is up there. So close yet so far away from me. If I could just reach it, I could call Drew...

*Or Royce...*

But what good would that do? It's not like either of them would get here in time.

I close my eyes while my attacker pinches one of my nipples roughly between his fingers as he sucks the other into his mouth. His free hand dives between my legs, haphazardly rubbing me over my jeans.

The second my eyes shift to the forgotten weapon, the other man slams the register closed, startling me.

When he looks down and realizes my intent to reach for the knife, he kicks it away from me and steps on my hand.

"Not so fast, you little whore." Crouching down, he spits on me, his vile wetness landing on my breast just above my attacker's hand.

I cry out, due more to how dirty and worthless he just made me feel by spitting on me than because of the pressure of his shoe on my hand. But my sob is strangled when the one with my nipple in his mouth clamps down with his teeth before letting it go again.

Then he focuses his attention on unbuttoning my jeans before ripping the tight denim down my legs, taking my underwear with them. As the other guy stands, walking around the counter and out of sight, I brace myself for what comes next. My body readies itself for an unwanted intrusion,

something it hasn't had to do in five years. It's a lesson in survival most people never learn.

When his fingers breach my entrance, I feel like I'm going to be sick. I notice the surprise in his eye when he realizes that I'm wet. He's probably assuming I'm some fucked-up girl who gets off on the pain and terror.

He'd be right about the fucked-up part.

I try to squeeze my legs together, to push his fingers out from inside of me, but his giant body between my legs prevents me from doing so. Black spots dot my vision, consciousness fading in and out over ... however long it is.

I lose track as I lie here, letting the inevitable play out, knowing nothing I do will put an end to it.

He remains silent, other than his heavy breathing and a groan when he pulls himself from his pants and fists his cock over me.

He moves his body to line himself up at my entrance when suddenly, our attention snaps toward the front door, the sound of broken glass shattering and falling to the floor.

*Another attacker? What fresh hell is my life shoving me into this time?*

"*Delilah!*" I hear a strangled voice shout my name, but my shock inhibits me from identifying who it's from.

"Shit! We gotta go!" the other man shouts, causing my attacker to abandon me. Standing, he tucks himself into his pants, anger marring his stare. It's clear even through the ski mask he's wearing.

I hear a sudden roar come from the other side of the counter as the two men disappear through the back room as quickly as they came.

Another set of feet chases them as I remain on the floor in a shivering heap. Pushing up, I cover myself the best I can with my ruined shirt and spot the knife still laying on the ground a short distance away.

I grab it then back myself against the wall. Holding the knife firmly in my shaky grasp, I listen for any additional noises from the back.

Nothing recognizable. Nothing at all.

I stay there for a few minutes before I hear footsteps again, coming back toward the store. I muster all of the bravery I can but can't bring myself to move. To get away.

Terrified, tears leak down my face as a figure steps out from the shadows and approaches me swiftly.

I watch as a bloody hand reaches for me, gently gripping the knife and pulling it free from my grasp.

I finally look up to see him standing over me.

*Drew.*

“Shh... Delilah. I'm here. It's okay, pretty girl. You're safe now.”

He lifts my quaking body into his strong arms and holds me tightly against him as he carries me around to the front of the counter. Sitting down, he rests his back against it, still cradling me to him as he does his best to pull my pants into place with one hand.

I look at him again, if only to confirm he's really here with me, and only then do I breathe a minuscule sigh of relief.

His eyes are on mine as he runs his knuckles gently up and down my spine. I catch a cut on his other hand when he pushes my tangled hair out of my face.

“You're bleeding,” I say to him, taking his hand in mine as a twinge of guilt hits me.

With a sad smile, he responds, “It's only a scratch.”

My eyes fall to the shattered door, and I see a black T-shirt crumpled on the floor just inside of it. Looking back at Drew, I realize he's in only an undershirt.

“I wrapped my hand in my shirt so I could break the glass easier,” he explains, realizing I'm trying to piece together the

details. “But after what you just went through, *you’re* worried about *me*? Delilah...”

His voice hitches, laced with emotion.

“I’m okay,” I try to assure him. “They didn’t get very far. You stopped them.”

I’m still rattled, but I remind myself how much worse it could have been. How much worse I’ve endured before this.

“How can you say you’re okay?” he asks, and I know I’m going to have to explain it to him. “You were attacked. He... He was *on* you, Delilah. God, if I hadn’t been here...”

The concern in his eyes makes me want to let him in. To reassure him that I’ve been through worse. But that conversation will have to wait. Instead, I choose to focus on what needs to happen next to distract me from all of the thoughts threatening to drag me into a downward spiral.

First things first, we have to report the break-in.

“I need to call Élise, the owner. Will you call 911 for me?”

Drew looks at me questioningly, but I push myself off of him and climb to my feet, holding the ripped fabric of my shirt closed. After properly buttoning my pants, my legs threaten to give out on me as my body still shakes from the shock of everything that happened and how quickly it took place.

Drew’s panic about him not being here invades my brain. I try not to think about what could have happened if he was working tonight. All the other ‘what-ifs’ plague me as I fight, desperately, to quiet them.

“Delilah...” he implores, trying to get me to talk to him.

“*I can’t think about what happened right now!*” I snap, though I don’t know if it’s at him or my own intrusive thoughts.

I’m on edge way more than I’m allowing myself to admit. I clutch the ripped fabric of my shirt over my chest to give me something to hold onto. My pleading eyes find his, requesting a moment of forgiveness while I go through the motions of what needs to happen next.

“I’m sorry, Drew,” I take his uninjured hand in mine as a tear slides down my cheek. “I promise, we can talk about it later. But for now, all I can do is go through what needs to happen next in regard to the store.”

He nods to me as he pulls his phone from his pocket. While he dials the authorities, I find my phone exactly where I left it on the counter, as though my world hadn’t been tipped on its axis since laying it down. Picking it up with shaky hands, I scroll through it until I find Élise’s contact info and make the call.

# CHAPTER NINETEEN



## DELILAH

The drive to Drew's house in Harrisburg's Shipoke neighborhood has been a quiet one so far, leaving me plenty of time to relive the events of the evening.

As we were giving our statements, Drew explained to the cops how he got his injury and that he chased the assailants away but couldn't catch them. As much as I would have liked them to be caught, I'm glad Drew wasn't able to get his hands on them. A two-on-one fight could have ended in disaster. Thank God they left the knife behind. I'm certain they would have turned it on Drew to fight him off if given the chance.

Though the cops told us, while petty criminals will use weapons to deter their victims from fighting back, rarely do they bring them along with the intent to use them. I'm hoping the cops are at least able to get a fingerprint off of it.

Both Drew and I declined medical assistance. Drew's cut is very minor, thankfully, and I hadn't been harmed physically. One of the officers gave us his card and said they'd be in touch as they investigate the incident further.

Élise gave me the rest of the week off and swore, moving forward, she will always have two people on the schedule at all times.

Drew squeezes my leg, bringing me back to the present, and I realize we're sitting in front of his townhouse already.

"Hey," he whispers.

I turn my attention to him, the pained smile on his face causing my chest to constrict. Lifting his hand to my cheek, he

wipes away a tear I didn't realize had formed.

"Let's get you inside," he suggests.

I nod my head before my eyes take him in. He's shirtless now. Before we left, he escorted me into the fitting room at the store. The care he took to help me out of my ruined shirt and bra and into his undershirt almost ended my resolve then and there.

I feel another tear fall as I reach for my door handle and exit the car. Once inside, I crumble to pieces at his feet. He scoops me into his arms before carrying me upstairs and into his bathroom.

Placing me on the edge of the tub, he gets the water running while I try to calm down. I tell myself I'm acting silly. That I've been through much worse and didn't fall apart like this.

But nothing helps.

Drew slowly undresses me before lowering me into the tub and climbing in behind me. I twist my body, curling into his so my cheek is resting on his chest. We lay like that for a while. Countless thoughts run frantically through my mind, moving so quickly they swirl together, keeping me from being able to see where one ends and the next begins. Until finally, I push them all away and focus instead on Drew's knuckles as they trace soothing circles along my back the way he did at the store.

Finally feeling safe in the warmth of both the water and his arms, I open up to him like I've done with only one other person.

"This wasn't the first time I've been assaulted like that."

Drew's hand stops moving. It's the only indication that my confession has affected him.

"My father abused me between the ages of seven to fifteen."

"Abused... How?" Drew's question is barely a whisper, as though he's afraid to know the answer.

“You name it...” I admit.

And then, having already opened the gaping wound, I relay all the sordid details from my fucked-up childhood to him, not stopping until the water around us is as chilling as my words.

Drew is silent the entire time, giving me the space and security I need to let my demons out.

“...until I was fifteen and Royce took me in.”

He remains quiet for a while, and I finally strike up the courage to look at him. Placing my hand on his chest, I push off of him slowly then lean back against the other end of the bathtub.

He takes one of my feet in his hands and begins to massage it absentmindedly as he mulls over what he’s just learned about me. When his eyes meet mine, I don’t miss the question in them.

“Ask me,” I help him out. “I’ll tell you whatever you want to know.”

He blinks and swallows nervously before speaking.

“What happened to your father?”

“He died.” The words leave my mouth before I can stop them. The smart answer would have been the story everyone else believes to be true—that he left. I blame the slip up on my heightened emotional state. It’s messing with my ability to think straight. “Uh ... but I don’t really want to talk about him.”

Drew nods, thankfully, but his brow furrows as well. There is a recognition in his eyes that tells me he knows there’s more to the story. I’m grateful that he, respectfully, doesn’t push any further. When the chill of the water causes me to shiver, he removes the stopper from the tub before getting out.

He grabs a towel from the rack by the wall then holds it open for me. Taking his lead, I step out of the water, and he wraps me in the soft terry cloth, warming me once again.

He leans down, pressing his lips to mine, and I enjoy the taste of him. I didn’t realize I was craving his kiss until right

now.

“Let’s get you into bed,” he suggests.

Even after everything that happened tonight, including recounting the horrific events of my past, I can’t imagine anything I’d rather do more than curl my body against his and stay in his arms, warm and safe, all night long.



As I sip my coffee, I fight the urge to message Maggie to tell her what happened last night.

But she will only tell Royce, and I don’t want him to know. Plus, we still haven’t spoken since the day I moved out. And I’m not trying to use my attack as an icebreaker to get us to talk again.

“Listen,” Drew speaks from the seat across from me. “Last night got me thinking... I want you to rethink moving in here with me.”

Had the events of last night never occurred, I think I’d be irritated. But with everything that happened, I don’t know how much I’m looking forward to going back to my apartment alone.

*Jesus, it’s only been one week.*

Do I not have what it takes to make it on my own?

The thought makes me angry, and Drew believes it’s directed at him.

“I know you told me not to bring it up again.” He moves around the table and turns my chair to face him. Crouching down in front of me, he continues. “But I can’t stand the thought of something else happening to you when I’m not around.”

I think about his words for a moment before I speak.

“But that doesn’t help when I’m at work. What are you going to do, hire me a bodyguard?”

When he doesn’t rebuff my suggestion, I know he was thinking of something just like that, or worse.

“Drew...” I begin to protest.

“No, I was actually thinking maybe you don’t go back to the store. Find a new job. Come work at the club.”

My eyes go wide at the mere suggestion of becoming a stripper, and for a moment, I’m not sure I know the man sitting in front of me as well as I originally thought. Not that there is any shame in stripping, it’s just not something I would ever feel comfortable doing myself.

“As a *waitress*... Jesus, Delilah. I would *never* allow you to strip.”

I don’t miss Drew’s use of the word *allow*. I don’t particularly care for it, but I understand his meaning. I wouldn’t want him getting naked in front of a gaggle of rowdy women.

“I don’t know, Drew. I’m not sure I’m ready to leave my life in Gettysburg behind completely. I haven’t had a chance to be on my *own* yet. It’s only been a week. How pathetic... Plus, I can’t afford to break my lease.”

“It’s *not* pathetic, and I’ll speak to your landlord. There are enough code violations in that place to cause the city to condemn it. I’m confident I’ll be able to convince him to let you break it without penalty.”

His eyes glow with playfulness, but it’s gone quickly. Replaced by a shadow of dread.

“But after what happened last night... Delilah, I’ve never been more scared in my entire life. When I saw you lying on the floor like that, the first thought that crossed my mind was I’ve lost the only girl I ever truly loved.”

All my life, no one has ever spoken that word to me. Not genuinely in the way Drew just did. I wait to feel

uncomfortable about it, unworthy of it. I wait for it to feel inauthentic, the way it did every time my father said it to me.

But Drew wraps it in a beautiful package and ties it up with a warm, yearning gaze. For the briefest of seconds, I see his own fear and insecurity slip through, and that is what finally sells it for me. Butterflies, strong like the ones I felt the morning I woke up to his note, flutter furiously within me. Just as I'm about to fall into his arms, he speaks again.

"It sounds crazy, I know. We've only been together a short while. But I've been in some terrible relationships before. Each one taught me hard lessons regarding what I want and don't want in a partner. But the way I feel about you is different from any other woman I've been with."

Unable to hold back any longer, I throw my arms around his neck and press my lips to his. He deepens the kiss, tracing my lips with his tongue as he stands up. Pulling me with him, he lifts me onto the kitchen table. Tilting me backward until I'm flat on its surface, he lays his body over mine. Wrapping my legs around his waist, I mold my body to his, never wanting to let go.

"I love you, too," I declare.

And I do.

I fear his feelings may always be stronger than mine, but I'm not certain I have the ability to love as deeply as he can.

And though Royce is out of my life, I can't deny he will always own a piece of my heart.

"I'll consider your proposition..." I tell him, reluctantly pulling my lips from his. "Both of them. But I'm not quite ready to make my decision yet."

"I understand, pretty girl. If you *do* choose to move in, I promise you won't be a kept woman. And if you come to work for me, you'll be bringing in significantly more money than you do at Mathieu. So keep those facts in mind while you make your decision."

I smile at his tenacity.

“And how do you know how much I make at the store?”

“I don’t,” he says, matter-of-factly as he straightens his body, “but my bartenders and waitresses generally bring home a couple hundred bucks a night. More on Fridays and Saturdays. If I was a betting man, I’d bet one weekend shift would far exceed your weekly paycheck at the store.”

As I sit up, letting my feet dangle over the edge of the table, I understand what he’s trying to do. I appreciate the fact that he wants me to be successful, but I can’t help but feel like he’s yet another person who doesn’t think the decisions I’ve made for myself are good enough.

*Or are those my own insecurities that continuously eat away at me?*

“Listen, you’re *my* girl. And as such, I have a right and an unyielding need to protect what’s *mine*. I’ll never let anyone hurt you ever again. But it’s a lot harder to do that if you’re all the way in Gettysburg.”

His promise wraps me in a coat of armor and makes me want to give into his every desire. His alpha personality reminds me of the way Royce has protected me in the past. I think I gravitate toward Drew more because of it.

“Just think about it. That’s all I ask.” He wraps his arms around me again. “And come with me to meet the fam this week. I think you’re really going to fit in with them.”

“The *fam*, huh?” Drew’s referral to his employees as family shows me, even more, how compassionate he is toward those he cares about. I push my negative thoughts away and offer him a playful smile.

“We *are* a family. Blood or not, we chose one another. Just like I chose you.”

The RBMC was supposed to be my family. But Royce pushing me away and Maggie failing to be supportive sure doesn’t feel like something family would do.

*What the hell do you know about family anyway?*

“Okay, fine. I’ll meet them.”

Maybe I'll finally find my rightful place in this world.



# CHAPTER TWENTY

## DELILAH

**S**potlight is located in a stand-alone building, a little off the beaten path, east of Midtown.

Drew described the neighborhood where it resides as safe but not somewhere he'd let me walk alone at night. I don't know if it's because the crime rate is higher at that time or if it's because of his protective nature.

Though Harrisburg is mini compared to some of the larger cities in the United States, this is still the largest city I've ever been to. My upbringing was void of travel and family vacations, so this setting is vastly different than what I am used to.

And I feel exhilarated by the change.

"Ready?" He offers me his arm, and I take it, allowing him to lead me into the club.

At seven o'clock on a Monday evening, the music is already thumping against the walls, its catchy beat enticing even me to move to it.

I wasn't sure if there would be anyone here yet, but I see a couple patrons have started their evening early. Each of them is already enchanted by the topless girl, shaking her assets in their faces as she crawls the length of the stage.

She smiles at them enthusiastically as if to let each one know she only has eyes for him. In return, they happily pay more for the individual attention she gives them.

Drew wanted to wait to come here until tonight, knowing it wouldn't be as busy, giving him a better chance to pay close attention to me. Which I'm extremely thankful for. As always, he's attentive to my needs without me having to voice my fears to him.

On Friday, after relaxing my entire body with a massage followed by hours of lovemaking, he finally convinced me to move into his place. I told him he could get me to agree to anything if he turns me into a wet noodle beforehand.

On Saturday morning, I was awoken to the sound of Drew unloading all my belongings into his living room. I stood there in shock as I took in the scene before me. When I told him he was crazy, he was unfazed.

Then he handed me a wad of cash. Responding to my confusion, he explained that not only did my landlord agree to let me break my lease but he gave me my security deposit back when Drew threatened to report him to the city due to the building's poor condition.

I wasn't sure I believed Drew's entire story. I thought perhaps the money came from him directly to make me feel better about my decision. When I questioned him about it, he distracted me with orgasms until I let it go.

The excitement I felt over moving in with Drew was overshadowed slightly by the fact that I didn't feel comfortable sharing my joy with Maggie. If she wasn't supportive of me moving out on my own, there's no way she'd be excited about me moving in with him.

And until we can move past the argument we had when I left, I can't see myself being able to share any news of my life with her.

But I miss my best friend, dearly. Whether it be from guilt or a need to reconcile, I make a vow to message her this week to try to settle our issues.

"Ethan," Drew calls to the man sitting just inside the doorway. He's got a large build with dark hair and eyes. My initial reaction to him is weary. His face screams of malice

until he realizes Drew is the one speaking to him. “I’d like to introduce you to Delilah. Delilah, this is Ethan, my most trusted bouncer and head of security.”

Ethan reaches his hand out to me, and I take it reluctantly. There’s something about him that makes me uneasy. But I chalk it up to my normal distrust of new, strange men.

“Delilah, nice to meet you,” he greets, and I wonder if he knows who I am. I know nothing of the people Drew works with other than catching a name or two from time to time.

“Likewise,” I respond with a slight nod.

“Didn’t know you were coming in tonight, boss.” Ethan turns his attention back to Drew.

“I wasn’t planning on it, but I thought it was a good time to show Delilah around. Let her see what goes on and try to convince her to join the team.”

I roll my eyes playfully at his determination. Ethan’s eyes light up with an excitement that helps calm my nerves a little. His face is now the complete opposite of the hard, threatening mask he wore a moment ago. “You’d have a lot of fun here, that’s for sure.”

I look around at the layout and décor of the place. The atmosphere *is* nice. It’s a little cozier than any other bar I’ve seen, not that I’ve been to many. Just one, actually. But this place isn’t too far off from The Screaming Frog in downtown Gettysburg.

It’s not at all like what I pictured.

I’ve always thought of strip clubs as a place where dangerous men with dark predilections come to get their rocks off by watching girls with little to no self-esteem shake their ass for a dollar.

But as I take another look at the men around the stage, I realize they look like normal, contributing members of society.

*Though those could be the masks they wear.*

I offer Ethan a smile before turning my attention back to Drew.

Drew, who I know for a fact to be a good guy. Who happens to *own* the whole damn club. If someone as good as him is entangled in this line of work, it can't be all that bad.

I watch him as he looks around as though searching for someone.

“Where's... Ah, there she is.”

My eyes follow his as they land on one of the most gorgeous women I've ever seen. She's older than Drew, and her body is in excellent shape.

Her large breasts are swathed in a tight, white, spandex midriff top with the club's logo on it. The black lights shining on her from above accentuate the neon-pink pasties covering her nipples beneath it.

Her ass is barely covered by the black spandex that sits low on her hips. They look more like Brazilian cut underwear than shorts. The neon-pink lace of her thong, which perfectly matches her pasties, juts out of her waistband and follows the path of her hip bones before disappearing behind her back.

“Come. I want you to meet Josie.” He squeezes my hand as he leads me over to her. “She's the resident mama hen around here. She looks after all of the girls like they're her little sisters. You're really going to like her.”

Josie's face lights up the second she spots Drew and me. Quickly dropping a stack of napkins onto the bar, she rushes over to us and pulls me in for a hug.

“Oh, you must be Delilah,” she squeals, her long, wavy brown hair tickling my arm.

My eyes go wide, and I look to Drew for help. He offers his silent apologies at the onslaught but doesn't help me out of her tight grasp.

“I've heard so much about you.” Finally letting me go, she steps back to get a better look at me. “Drew said you were beautiful, but my goodness...”

What the fuck do I say to that? Luckily, she doesn't wait for a response from me.

"It's about time you let me meet her."

She playfully swats Drew's chest before bringing him in for a hug next.

"Yeah, yeah..." Drew replies.

I have to remind myself that Drew sees her as part of his family, and the irritation I feel as they wind their arms around one another fades.

"He talks about you so much I feel like I already know you."

"I've been meaning to bring her in sooner, but my pretty girl has been busy with work."

I grow bashful at the mention of my nickname in front of someone else. To me, it's a very personal, private detail.

"Now that she has the week off, I thought it's as good a time as any."

*Yeah, so you can coerce me into a career change.*

I stare pointedly at Drew, communicating my inner thoughts to him.

"That and I'm trying like hell to talk her into waiting tables here."

"It's all he's talked about for the last two days," I add. "Is your plan to get everyone on your side so you can all gang up on me?"

"Oh, we'd love to have you. And what an addition you'd make..." Josie beams, folding her arms and tapping one of her fingers against her chin.

"What?" I smile awkwardly, staring between her and Drew. Suddenly I feel out of place and uncomfortable.

"I'm just thinking about how wild you're going to drive our customers with that body of yours. Especially in the uniforms our girls wear."

At that moment, one of their current waitresses comes out of the back of the club, showcasing to me exactly what I'd have to wear should I decide to work here.

It's less *clothing* than I'd ever be caught dead in—and in *public* no less.

For all intents and purposes, the top is a smooth, black halter-style bra. There is a cutout down the middle of the fabric so the eyes are drawn beyond it to the girl's breasts, especially with the metal stud embellished, cleavage-enhancing straps added to the design.

The bottoms match the ones Josie has on, but this girl also dons a garter belt and thigh-high stockings. Her black tennis shoes look out of place, but they're much safer in the bar area than stilettos.

"Yeah, I don't know if I want you working here anymore," Drew mutters next to me before shooting me a playful wink and sexy smile.

I've been told that I have a nice body by several people throughout my lifetime, whether it was an appropriate opinion for them to have or not.

But because of my past, I've always felt like I wasn't as desired or valued as someone who was purer than I am.

Not a virgin but someone who'd never been defiled the way I had.

Since meeting Drew, I'll admit my confidence has begun to blossom. But I still go through periods of heavy self-doubt. And taking in the sight of this beautiful girl with luscious, soft curves, I have a hard time picturing myself looking as good as she does in that uniform.

"I'd never be able to pull it off... I mean, look at *her*."

"Stop that," Drew's reaction turns serious as he pulls me aside, out of earshot of Josie. "You're gorgeous, and your body is a thousand fucking times hotter than Maia's."

My eyes meet his but without the same amount of conviction in them as he has. Exhaling a breath, he shakes his

head at me.

“You’re never going to see it unless I prove it to you. Come with me.”

*Oh, shit. What am I in for?*

Drew takes me by the hand and leads me to a door at the back of the club. I didn’t realize Josie was following us until I feel her presence behind me as we walk through the doorway into a dressing area.

There are a few girls sitting at vanity tables, applying makeup and laughing over something that was said before we entered.

“Hello, ladies. How is everyone tonight?” Drew greets them, his voice smooth like butter as he pulls me behind him to another door. Josie backs off and drops into an available seat.

A chorus of several returned greetings follows us as Drew pulls me into a smaller room—a large closet, really. He lets go of my hand then shuts the door before going in search of something within a mound of black fabric on one of the shelves. When he finally turns around, I look at what he’s holding and shake my head emphatically.

“No, absolutely not.”

There’s no way I’m putting on that uniform. But Drew looks down at me with the same intensity in his eyes as he has when he’s inside of me.

And I know I won’t be able to deny him.



# CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

## DELILAH

Drew takes my hands in his.

“Delilah, I’m not asking that you parade yourself around out on the floor. All I want is for you to try it on, look at yourself in this mirror, and understand what I see when I look at you.”

Swallowing, I’m both irritated and curious. Still staring at Drew, I blink a few times as I try to work up the courage to do as he says.

Why is this so hard? He’s seen me naked a dozen times. After the initial awkwardness the first time, it’s been easy letting him see my body.

It makes no sense that I’m more afraid to be dressed in some type of clothing ... lingerie ... in front of him than I am to be fully nude.

And as the silliness of that statement hits me, I grasp the hem of my T-shirt in my hands and pull it over my head. I make quick work of my bra after that, and once it’s off, my eyes meet Drew’s again. In them, I’m met with a different level of desire than I ever remember seeing in them before...

If that’s even possible.

He’s looking at me as though my obedience is threatening to eat away at every ounce of restraint he has in him, keeping him from taking me right here and now.

My core burns, witnessing his struggle.

After Royce, I never thought someone would look at me with such craving.

Drew hands me the uniform top before either of our control breaks. I pull it over my head, turning to allow him to clip it in place at my back. When he's done securing it, I adjust my breasts within the fabric, fitting them more comfortably into the cups of the garment and accentuating my cleavage.

I stand close to the mirror so neither Drew nor I can get a full, good look at me yet. Next, I unbutton my pants and pull them off swiftly. Then comes my panties, and my eyes shift to Drew's reflection in the mirror once they're off.

Again, his orbs burn into me with a neediness to them. He holds his restraint the best he can, but if I make one wrong move... If I give him the smallest inclination that I'm as hot and ready as he is, he'll pounce.

Reaching behind me, I silently ask for the bottoms, but instead, Drew drops onto his knees. He places a kiss beneath each curve of my ass, on my right leg and then my left.

My mouth opens, hunger for him causing a sharp intake of breath. I wait for him to continue. To touch me. To lick me. As moisture pools between my legs, suddenly I can't wait to get the bottoms on.

I want to make him proud.

I want to see myself through his eyes.

I want him to ease my negative thoughts and reward me for "owning my desire," as he puts it.

He's been working on this with me. My mind turns quiet when I'm with him. Any worry I have about how he views me, how badly he wants me, how shameful I feel regarding my sexual cravings...

They all disappear when we're together. He assures me my feelings are normal. He encourages me to accept myself for who I am rather than feel ashamed. Even before he ever knew about my past.

His fingers gently tap my right leg, and I lift my foot so he can position the bottoms in place. We repeat with the left side, and I'm awarded another kiss as he slowly, seductively drags the fabric up my legs.

It's not lost on me that he holds the same amount of desire dressing me as he does undressing me.

*I may need to get some lingerie.*

"Let me see you," he whispers in my ear, standing tall behind me again. His voice thick with lust.

Instead of scrutinizing my own reflection, I turn around and show myself to Drew. His opinion is the only one that matters to me. He rakes his eyes over my body as I watch him carefully temper the fight in them.

He wants me, and when he gets like this, there isn't much either of us can do or say to stop him. He runs the back of his hand down my arm as he sucks his bottom lip between his teeth.

I think he's going to go in for the kill when he says, "Now turn around, and tell me you don't see the most beautiful, sexy woman looking back at you in that mirror."

Following his command, I turn, finally gazing upon the figure in the reflection. For a moment, I don't recognize her. But it's my hair, my hands, my feet I see. Only, instead of the normal dysmorphic thoughts I feel about the more intimate areas of my body, there is love.

An admiration for my complete form. From head to toe.

My wild eyes, heavy with lust for the man who is single-handedly changing the way I view myself. My ample breasts, full and round and perfectly sized for his hands. My waist, hips, and ass just the right shape to fit against his body every night.

"Every inch of you is Delilah. Your body isn't the same as Maia's or Haven's or any of the other Spotlight girls. It's not the same as any girl outside of Spotlight either. Because it's *yours*. And it's perfect."

He runs his hands under my arms, hugging me around my bare stomach and tugging me against him.

“And it’s mine...” His declaration causes me to tremble beneath his touch.

“Drew, I need you,” I whisper, barely able to speak.

I turn my head, and his lips meet mine, our kiss deepening quickly before he pulls away.

“And I promise you, as soon as we get home, I’ll give you everything you need. But I don’t want to cheapen you by allowing the girls to hear me ravaging you in the back of the club. We both know how loud my pretty girl can be.”

My breath leaves me at his denial, but once he’s across the small closet and I’m back in the clothes I wore here, I realize how thankful I am to him. I would have died if anyone heard us, and I’d never be able to show my face here again.

“What are you doing?” I ask Drew as he rifles through the uniforms on the shelf again.

“We’ll be taking several uniforms home with us this evening.” He pierces me with a devious smile. “Whether or not you decide to work here, tonight isn’t the last night I’m going to demand you put this uniform on for me.”

I giggle at his words and realize I’m excited to put it on again when we get home.

“Let’s get back out there before these girls begin to think I’m doing scandalous things to you in here.”

Drew winks at me with the promise of actual, deliciously obscene behavior as soon as we get home, and I find myself hoping we’re headed there now.

Opening the door, we’re hit with more laughter before Josie speaks up.

“I don’t even want to know what you did to her in there to convince her to join the team, but I’m glad it worked.”

Josie eyes the uniforms in Drew’s hand with a smile.

“Would you cut it out?” Drew laughs her off. “I just had her try it on so she can see what it looks like.”

“Who’s this?” A petite redhead with bright green eyes acknowledges my presence before awaiting Drew’s answer. Her tone and stance give nothing away regarding her thoughts toward me, but I suddenly get nervous.

Is she angry I’m here?

Does she think I’m invading their space?

Does she view me as the outsider I am?

If I *do* come to work here, would I be welcomed?

“Ladies, this is Delilah. My girlfriend.” He beams at me proudly. “This is Cherish, Jade, and Haven.”

Cherish is the girl who inquired about me, and as soon as Drew finishes his introduction, she calms my fears about meeting her immediately.

“Hiya!” she squeals. “Nice to meet you.”

“You’re going to be working here?” Haven pipes up next but doesn’t let me answer her. “Good, we need some new meat.”

She turns back to her vanity and begins to style her long blond hair into an intricate braid I’d never be able to do myself.

“She’ll do,” Jade, a striking girl with caramel skin and a full head of gorgeous black curls, stands and offers me her hand.

I swallow uncomfortably as her bare breasts sway with the movement of her body. Having rushed through the room so quickly, I didn’t realize she was topless before now.

After our handshake, she stands there with her arms folded ready to continue the conversation as though this is completely normal for her.

Though for her and these other girls, I suppose it *is* normal.

“Well, she hasn’t said yes... *Yet*. But I’m trying to wear her down.” Drew pulls my attention back. He’s standing next to me, casually, completely unbothered by a pair of tits in his face.

Bearing witness, it’s not until this moment that I understand the enormity of Drew’s passion and love for me. Here are three—four counting Josie—unquestionably beautiful women standing in front of us, partially nude or with barely a stitch of clothing on their bodies, and Drew looks right through them.

*He only has eyes for me.*

He said it when I first found out about Spotlight. I believed him then, but believing and seeing are two totally different things.

And if there was any doubt in my mind before tonight, this moment eviscerates it.

There wasn’t one ounce of need or lust in his eyes until he turned away from Jade and back to me. Then it flared in his cobalt stare like it always does when he sees me.

“Hungry?”

*Am I...*

“I’ll go get Chris to make us some dinner,” he suggests.

Oh. *Food*.

“Sounds good,” I smile, hoping he didn’t catch the hunger I thought he meant in my stare before the realization hit me.

But when he leans in close to me, I know I’ve been caught.

“You’re absolutely insatiable, *dirty* girl,” he whispers only loud enough for me to hear. “I can’t wait to get you home.”

My clit throbs at the sudden change to my nickname. Before I can suggest we leave and grab food later, Drew wishes the girls a successful evening, and we exit the dressing room.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



## DELILAH

I tried returning to work the following week. But I wasn't even five minutes into my shift before the trauma of the attack rendered me useless.

I began pacing the store, mumbling like an idiot, and scaring our customers before a full-blown panic attack set in. Sienna called Drew to let him know, and he came to get me right away.

She was nicer to me than she'd been before the incident, sitting in the back room and trying to comfort me in between helping customers. For that I was grateful.

But even being back in her good graces and feeling like I had an ally at the store, I couldn't bring myself to face the reminder of what happened there.

Anxious to move on and needing something easy to slide into, I felt like my best option was to take Drew up on his offer and become a waitress at Spotlight. He joked around and told me I need to start listening to him more often. That, so far, all of his ideas have worked out to my benefit.

And after three weeks as Spotlight's newest waitress, I'd have to agree with him. I've already made more money in tips here than I made in the two months I worked at Mathieu.

If that wasn't a good enough reason to feel like I made the right decision, the fact that I've already grown to feel accepted by the family Drew spoke so highly of is. That's something I didn't anticipate happening in such a short amount of time.

Everyone has welcomed me with open arms. I suspect it's partly because Drew and I are together, but that's a detail I keep to myself. Drew has been so proud of the way I've navigated this change and worked through my initial discomfort of working in this type of establishment—and wearing barely any clothing in public.

But both the other girls as well as Spotlight's clientele have helped me get over those worries almost as much as Drew has. They've encouraged me with their complimentary words as well as their generous tips.

But my life still isn't complete. And while Maggie and I have been talking a little more frequently lately, I've found myself withholding the truth of my new life from her.

I thought it was going to be hard for me to tell her that I moved in with Drew, but now to try to explain how I ended up working at *Spotlight*?

Impossible.

Regardless of the attack or my position here, she'd never understand or accept that I came to work at a strip club. She'd surely blame it on Drew like she blamed my wanting to move out on him.

Plus, Royce can *never* know. Especially not about the attack. He'd go apeshit.

So when I read Maggie's latest text message, I groan, knowing I'll have to feed her another lie.

Let's do lunch tomorrow. I miss you. It's been too long since we've hung out.

Seeing as I'm working a double shift tomorrow, I won't be able to make it. Surprisingly, we get quite a few early birds in right around eleven, when we open.

I can't tomorrow, we have inventory at the store, and I won't be able to get away for lunch.

Before I'm able to offer another suggestion, I'm startled suddenly by a light touch on my back and a low growl in my

ear.

“No phones on the floor, naughty girl,” Drew’s voice is thick with lust as he traces his finger along the waistband of my bottoms. As always happens when he’s in this kind of mood, my blood begins to thrum with a hunger only he can satisfy. “I should take you in my office and give you a spanking.”

I look around to make sure we aren’t being watched or overheard, but everyone in the vicinity is either focused on the stage or the company they came with.

“Don’t make threats you don’t intend to follow through on,” I tempt him brazenly.

His face grows serious, a promising gleam in his stare. And if Ginger, another waitress, hadn’t come out from the kitchen at that exact moment, severing our connection, I have no doubt he would have me bent over his desk in his office right now.

“Aw, get a damn room already, lovebirds,” she scoffs playfully as she passes.

Drew’s face relaxes as she walks by, bringing us both back from the edge.

“Who are you texting anyway?”

My shoulders sag, and I know he knows it’s Maggie without me having to say her name.

“You know, one of these days you’re going to have to tell me why you two stopped speaking. I may be able to help.”

“You can’t.” I duck my head and roll my eyes so he can’t see me.

“Try me,” he presses, and my frustration over my ongoing lies to Maggie comes out, directed at the last person who deserves it.

“Because you are the reason.” I regret my words the moment they leave my mouth.

“Me? What did I do?”

“Nothing... You didn’t do anything wrong. And you didn’t deserve me yelling at you like that. I’m sorry.”

“I’ll forgive you if you tell me what’s going on.” He winks, knowing he’s cornered me. I can’t stand anyone being upset with me, and he knows it.

“She doesn’t trust you and doesn’t think I should either. She blames my moving out on you. I told her my decision didn’t have anything to do with you, but she doesn’t believe me.”

“Why does she care that you moved out? She’s your friend. She should be supportive.” If Drew gets it, why can’t Maggie?

“That’s exactly what I told her when I left. And now that we’re living together *and* I left my job... I just can’t tell her. She won’t understand, and it will only turn into a bigger argument. I can’t stand her being mad at me.”

“Hey, you didn’t do anything wrong, so if she’s looking for someone to be mad at, she should be mad at herself.”

I know he’s right, but twenty years of crushing insecurity and worrying you’ve upset someone doesn’t go away overnight.

Pulling me farther down the back hallway and out of view of the patrons, Drew tucks my flyaways behind my ears then taps his finger under my chin.

“Have I ever given you a reason not to trust me, Delilah?”

“No,” I respond almost breathlessly at his closeness.

“Exactly, and I never will.”

He steals a kiss quickly, before any of the staff finds us.

“If you ask me, I think she’s jealous,” he states, backing away from me.

“Jealous? Yeah right...” Maggie hasn’t been jealous of me a day in her life. It’s always been the opposite, actually.

“Think about it... Her fiancé is gone all the time. She only gets to talk to him on the phone or over text. She’s jealous of

what you have with me. Maybe she's not as good of a friend as you think. If she was, she'd be happy for you no matter what. That's all. Try not to let it get to you, pretty girl." He winks.

"I'll try," I promise.

"Good girl," he touts. "I love you."

"I love you, too." I smile proudly.



"What a night," I sigh from my seat at a nearby table while Drew locks the front doors.

We closed over an hour ago, and the other girls and I finished our side work while Drew sat with Harry. He's one of our regulars who comes in often, drinks too much, and stays too late.

Drew called him a cab—and paid for it, as he does every time this happens—and it just pulled away with Harry safely inside. Now that everyone is gone, I expect we'll finally be able to do the same.

But when Drew turns around and hits me with the same glossy-eyed stare he had in the back hallway earlier, I know we won't be leaving anytime soon.

"Drew...?" I pant, my body finely tuned to his moods, even though his intensity is making me nervous.

"I've been fantasizing about something for a couple weeks now. Something I want you to do for me."

He stalks toward me, his eyes lighting up with anticipation as he closes the space between us.

I swallow, trying to push past the unease I feel. Regardless of what comes out of his mouth, I trust Drew. And it's only me and him here, no different than if we were alone at home.

He walks around the booth where I'm seated then takes my hand, lifting me from the seat.

"Strip for me, Delilah," he requests.

"*What?*" I gasp.

"I want my own private strip show. What better place to do it than here...?" He waves a hand toward the stage with an excited grin.

"There's no way..." My hand flattens over my chest which grows tight with nerves.

"Why? No one else is here," he reminds me.

"I know, but... It's..."

"It's nothing. Just dancing... Taking off your clothes to the beat of the music. For me..."

"But the cameras..."

Squeezing my hand reassuringly, Drew leads me into his office, and I watch as he logs into the program that controls the security footage.

But still, I'm hesitant. I don't mind being at home and engaging in a fantasy with Drew. God knows he's touched me everywhere I've begged him to before. He may have had to pull it out of me, but at least I felt like myself.

Up on stage, I would feel like an imposter. Someone who doesn't belong, someone other than me.

Once the cameras are off, he returns his attention to me, coming on strong and knowing exactly what will get me motivated to carry out this fantasy for him.

"Look at this body of yours, Delilah... Do you know how many times I've watched you walk around this place in that uniform of yours and pictured you in it, up on that stage, eyes on me and me alone?"

As his attention falls to my cleavage, I feel the heat of his stare lick along my exposed skin. The increasing temperature steals my breath as my chest rises and falls rapidly.

Cupping my breasts in his palms, his knee works my legs apart. Drew's tongue reaches out, licking along the line of my cleavage. My nipples harden as moisture builds between my legs.

"Can you blame me for wanting you so badly? I see the way our patrons look at you. You have them practically salivating every time you refill their drinks or bring them their food. The only reason their reactions don't drive me mad is because *I* get to have you and they don't."

Drew traces a path down my exposed stomach, slowly, toward my waistband. I think he's going to continue, digging his hand underneath it. I wish he would, if for no reason other than to distract himself from his request. When his touch leaves me again, I whimper.

"My pretty girl is so eager..." His whispered breath tickles my neck, just below my ear.

He traces my neck and chest lightly with both his lips and his nose. At the same time, he runs his hand over my bottoms, down between my legs.

"I can feel the heat billowing from your core. Are you wet for me, pretty girl?"

"Mm-hmm." I can scarcely choke out an answer through my staggered moan.

"Do you want me to touch your pussy and make you come?"

This time, I can only look at him. My eyes pleading, answering his question the only way that I'm able to.

"Tit-for-tat, Delilah," he answers, and I know I'll have to get on that stage for him before he gives me what I desperately crave.

But as worked up as I am, I don't know if there is much I *wouldn't* do for his touch at the moment.

So this time, I take him by the hand. Leading him back onto the floor, I guide him to a chair at the end of the stage. I

put pressure on his shoulders, silently telling him to sit before I walk backstage.

For a moment, my mind tries to fight my pleasure. But my body, not giving into such nonsense, blooms with renewed lust for the man I left in the other room. Kicking off my shoes, I walk up the steps and stand center stage, just behind the curtain.

But then I hesitate.

The deafening silence halts any momentum I was gaining to get my ass out on that stage and give Drew what he desperately wants. He rarely asks anything of me, always concerned more for my wants and needs.

*Come on, Delilah. You can do this... Just let yourself go.*

At that exact moment, I hear the unmistakable opening notes to Bob Seger's "Come to Poppa" start up over the sound system.

A smile awakens in the middle of my hesitation. Drew's ability to know everything I'm thinking and when I'm thinking it—even without him being witness to my struggle—continues to astound me.

I take a deep breath, letting his thoughtful gesture propel me forward through the curtains and into the spotlight.

I meet Drew's eyes immediately and catch his smug grin. He knows he just gave me the cherry on top to get me to do what he wants.

For the next couple of minutes, I use his drive to care for me as the fuel I need to dance my heart out for him. I twirl my body as best I can around the pole. I have no idea what I'm doing, but even my attempts at doing it well please him, if the several adjustments he made of himself in his pants are any indication.

When I finally make it to the end of the stage, I stop and slowly tease my clothing down my body. I sway slightly as I strip, watching as Drew holds his breath. His intense stare tracking my every moment until I'm completely naked for him.



Then I drop down onto all fours and crawl to him like a sex kitten in heat. He leans forward with his elbows on the stage, welcoming my arrival.

I kneel before him, legs spread, and his hungry gaze shoots between them. His eyes glisten just as sure as my core does. I can feel the moisture continue to pool the longer he stares.

Leaning forward, I wrap my arms around his neck and pull his face into my cleavage. I shimmy my upper body like I see the dancers do for our patrons. Drew's arms come around me, holding me in place as his lips catch my nipple between them.

As the song ends, the only noise to be heard is the sound of my moans as he sucks my pebbled bud into his mouth. His groan joins the symphony we're creating with every movement and touch.

With wild eyes and the patience of someone struck with overwhelming hunger, Drew hops up from the chair and strips out of his clothing quicker than I've ever seen him move. Then he pushes me backward before jumping onto the stage and covering my body with his.

"Fuck, Delilah..." He crushes his lips to mine as though he's lost all sense of control.

I wait for him to play my body the way he's done before. Soft and slowly, with the same precision as a concert pianist.

But this Drew is different from the one I've gotten used to up until now. He's greedy... Impatient and rushed.

I try to remind myself that tonight was about him. His fantasy. He's been thoroughly attentive to every one of my needs, so I keep quiet even when he pushes into me so roughly it hurts.

"I fucking love you, Delilah. You're mine," he barks through another harsh thrust. "And I'll fucking kill anyone who tries to touch what's mine ever again."

With a frenzied stare I've never seen before, he continues fucking me possessively. Claiming me in exactly the same way I wanted Royce to do not so long ago.

Royce who I've hardly dared to think of the past couple weeks but who is the one person I'm yearning for at this moment.

If the way Drew is taking me isn't enough to spook me, what he says next turns my cooling blood to ice.

*"You. Belong. To. Me,"* he growls each word in time with every thrust.

With his declaration spoken, he orgasms. Coming inside of me as though to deepen the meaning of his decree.

Finally, he appears to have lost a bit of the edge he just had, and the Drew I've come to know begins to resurface.

Until he speaks, a dangerous edge to his voice and a threat simmering behind his stare.

*"Forever, Delilah. I'll never let you go."*

# CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

## ROYCE

I've been going through the motions of daily life for the past month, but with Delilah gone and Maggie grumpier than normal, it hasn't been easy.

Maggie's worried voice chirps in my ear, the words she spoke the day Delilah left on a loop in my brain.

*She's making a mistake...*

I was hoping with time, the dread sitting in the pit of my stomach like a boulder would have lessened some. I've shut it down as best as I can, and even Draven told me I did Delilah a favor by letting her go. But it's only gotten worse.

I've had to stop myself from looking into where she lives a hundred times. It's a damn good thing I don't know or else I'm afraid I would have taken up residence outside of her apartment by now.

"Royce!" Maggie frantically calls from across the house.

I step out of my office to intercept her, alarmed at the panic in her tone.

"Delilah's in trouble," she tells me, and the boulder in my stomach lodges itself into my soul like a cannonball.

"What do you mean?" I question.

"She's been upset with me since the day she moved out." She huffs, visibly upset and breathing heavily. "We've finally started talking again a little, but she kept dodging plans with me. When she told me she couldn't meet up for lunch today

because they're doing inventory at the store, I thought I'd grab lunch and bring it to her. Like an olive branch, you know?"

Still panting from rushing her speech and adrenaline, she bends over and places her hands on her knees, trying to catch her breath.

"Here, come in my office, and have a seat." I step out of the way so she can get by. Once she's seated, I hand her a bottle of water, and she chugs half of it down.

"Anyway, when I got to the store, Sienna told me she doesn't work there anymore. And hasn't for three weeks."

My eyebrows furrow with concern. This isn't like Delilah at all. Immediately, my concern turns to anger for letting her leave in the first place.

"She said there was some kind of incident at the store. Delilah was by herself when two people broke in, robbed the place, and attacked her."

"*What?*" I leap from my seat at Maggie's words, ready to storm Delilah's apartment and bring her home.

Why didn't she tell me? I would have been there in a heartbeat.

*She has someone else to protect her now.*

The thought stirs up the pungent anger I've been trying to move past.

"Where does she live? I'm going there now."

"Yeah... I tried that. I just got back from talking to her landlord. He said someone came and roughed him up about a week after she moved in—which, *coincidentally*, was right around the time of the attack. Told him if he didn't let her break her lease and refund her money he would kill him. Gave him a black eye and a broken nose, too."

The dread I felt before this moment was nothing compared to how monumental it is as I ask my next question.

"Did he say what this guy looked like?"

"Thirty-something. Built. Dark hair with sideburns..."

*Fuck.*

I lower myself back into my chair with the knowledge that, until I *find* her, there is nothing I can do to help her.

But does she truly *need* help? Drew may have been an asshole to the landlord, but that doesn't mean he treats Delilah like that. She knows she's always welcome to call. To come home. But maybe she's getting everything she needs from Drew.

*Another bitter pill to swallow.*

I can't begin to think about Drew fulfilling *any* of Delilah's needs.

"Delilah is an adult. She can make her own decisions. I told her to call if necessary, and I'm sure she will if the need arises," I dismiss Maggie, turning my attention back to the paperwork in my hands.

And staring straight through it.

"Yes, but my point is, what if she isn't allowed to reach out?"

My eyes snap back to Maggie's.

"I told you I didn't trust that motherfucker. I think he's keeping her from us. Isolating her. I wouldn't be surprised if he orchestrated the attack on her to scare her into moving in with him."

The same thought occurred to me just before she uttered the words.

"I'm worried, Royce. You need to do something."

Maggie looks at me in a way she hasn't since she was a very little girl and wanted me to buy her a baby doll. She threw the worst goddamn tantrum she's ever thrown in that store. Her eyes pleading, as though she'd die without it.

I see that same look in her eyes right now and can't deny it fucking kills me. Maggie never asks me for anything anymore. She wouldn't be now if it weren't serious.

She has no idea exactly how much I care for Delilah. My soul shares Maggie's worry, and I let go of every qualm and hesitation I've held where Delilah is concerned.

Maggie may never understand it, and selfishly, I run the risk of ruining any kind of relationship I could have had with my daughter. But I'm no stranger to her hostility. And right now, Delilah's safety is more important. I'm going to do whatever it takes to get her back where she belongs.

And she'll never leave again.

"Keep texting with her as normal. Don't let her know you know. If she's in danger, we can't run the risk that he's monitoring her phone."

It occurs to me that there's a chance *Drew* may be the one Maggie has been talking to the whole time.

"What do you know about the guy? Anything?"

"Only that he lives in Harrisburg." Maggie's face fills with shame before she continues. "Delilah was right, I'm a horrible friend. I didn't like Drew, so I made no attempt to ask her anything about him. I just expected her admiration would fade, and she'd lose interest. That's what's happened with all the other guys she ever took a liking to."

I hold back my cringe when the words "all the other guys" fall from her lips.

As tears build in Maggie's eyes, I try like hell to keep my discomfort from showing. Maggie knows I can't be any comfort to her, but that doesn't mean I don't want to be. I wish I were a better man. A better father.

"If I were a good friend, I would have tried to get to know him more. Maybe I could have stopped her from leaving... Or I-I could have gotten a small piece of information that could help us find her."

"Don't blame yourself, okay?" I leave out the fact that doing so isn't helpful to our cause. "We have his name. We know where he lives. That's enough to go on. We'll find her."

She swallows and swipes away at her tears before nodding.

“Let me know if she says anything to you out of the norm, but Maggie,” I make sure I have her undivided attention before I continue. “It’s imperative you don’t voice your concern. If he’s monitoring her and he gets spooked in any way...”

I want to finish my sentence, but I can’t bring myself to admit an error in Maggie’s judgment could result in death for Delilah.

But I don’t have to. As fear flashes in Maggie’s eyes, I know she understands what’s at risk.

I nod, dismissing her from my office before I pick up my cell phone. Typing out a message to Draven, I alert him to this development.

My cell rings almost immediately.

“What do you need me to do?” he questions as soon as the call connects.

“Do you have any connections in or around Harrisburg we can probe for information?”

“My cousin lives up that way. He’s been running around the city his whole life. I can ask him if he knows Drew.”

“Do that, and let me know as soon as you find out. I’ll start with a simple search online and see how much I can find out about him that way.”

“Will do,” he answers, cutting the call.

As I pull up my internet browser and type “Drew Sullivan Harrisburg” into the search engine, I question why I haven’t done this before today.

The two times that I’ve met him—one time, really—he never gave me pause to think he’d harm Delilah. He only rubbed me the wrong way because he had what I never will.

Regardless of whether or not I’d had a reason to look into him, I should have been more on my game.



I should have been a lot of things where Delilah is concerned, rather than the fucking dickhead I've been.

For the millionth time, I curse myself for screwing things up with her at every turn. But a little voice inside of me, the little voice who has tried to turn me away from her since the beginning, reminds me that I never should have put myself in a situation to screw things up in the first place.

*Fuck off.* I don't need to hear it right now.

I get two hits from my search. A White Pages listing and a link to the "About" page from a nightclub called Spotlight.

I click on that first.

Immediately, alarm slithers across my skin as I read the banner at the top of the web page.

*Harrisburg's Premiere Gentlemen's Club*

Scrolling down the page, I see a paragraph about the club's history. At the end of it, I read, "*For additional inquiries, email Spotlight's owner Drew Sullivan here,*" with "here" linked to an email address.

Wonderful. Delilah's gone and got herself entangled with the owner of a fucking strip club.

Don't get me wrong, there are plenty of safe clubs out there run by decent people. Shit, some of my Royal Bastard brethren own and operate strip clubs. Our chapters in Ankeny, Vegas, Central Texas, and more... They all run them. Nothing wrong with that.

But some choose to use their clubs for the purpose of laundering money they receive from *other* business ventures of theirs.

*Or for pimping out their girls under the guise of legal behavior.*

I have to go by the club. I need to put eyes on her, talk to her, make sure she's okay.

I know what I told Maggie. To play it cool and pretend like she still doesn't have knowledge of the changes in Delilah's

life, but I can't just sit around and hope she's safe.

I need to ensure it.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

## ROYCE

Sitting in front of the club as Draven and Saxon search inside for Delilah is one of the hardest things I've ever had to do.

It should be me going in there to check on her, but if Drew has her somewhere and he sees me poking around, it could be dangerous for her.

I even demanded they leave their cuts behind with me, something we *never* do, so Drew wouldn't recognize them and put two and two together before they have a chance to lock eyes on her.

My phone vibrates, and I open the message from Draven immediately.

She's here.

I don't know if I'm relieved to hear it or not. I'm thankful they have a visual, but *why* is she here? Is she stripping? If so, is she being forced to do so?

I'll lose my goddamn mind.

And if she's here of her own volition? If she thought this was her only option?

*I'll lose my goddamn mind.*

A minute later, Draven and Saxon walk out of the club, and I grab their cuts before exiting my truck.

As I meet them on the sidewalk, Draven noticeably avoids my gaze. I know he has information I'm not going to like.

"I motioned for her to come outside. She's on her way," he informs me as I hand their cuts over to them.

He and Saxon both put them on eagerly, almost as if they're soothed by the weight of the leather on their shoulders.

I can't blame them. It's like a second skin.

Before I'm able to inquire about Draven's withdrawn expression, I catch motion in my peripheral vision, and I have my answer as soon as I focus on the movement.

My jaw drops as Delilah steps into the orange glow of the streetlight out front. The way the yellow and purple lights from the club's sign highlight her exposed curves in the *outfit* she has on stuns me. This isn't the same girl I know.

Delilah, who would never wear a bikini.

Delilah, who was never comfortable showing her cleavage.

Delilah, who looks so much older than she did the last time I saw her.

Finally able to get my wits about me, I take advantage of her lack of clothing to search her body for any bruising or evidence of abuse.

Thankfully, there is none.

But that fact brings me shallow relief as my eyes roam her body once more.

The black bra and sorry excuse for shorts she has on cuts me, but not as much as the reticence on her face. Her uneven stride, the way she hugs her arms tightly around her stomach as she tries to hide herself from me.

That slices me straight through my heart.

"This is what you're doing now?" I nod toward her approaching form, my eyes sharp, wanting to cut her back.

“What are you doing here, Royce?” is her only response.

“You come out here, looking like *that*, and you have to wonder what I’m doing here?” I wave my hand up and down her body, accentuating my displeasure over finding her half-dressed and working in a strip club. “Is he making you do this?”

“What? N-no...” I don’t miss the shaky strain in her voice.

Is she lying?

Is she nervous?

I move in closer to her, and she backs up into the brick wall façade. I rest my arm against it and angle my body toward her.

“Kitten...” I start but halt when she squints at the nickname.

As though it wounds her.

“Are you in any kind of trouble? Any danger at all?”

“No, why would you think that?” she questions.

*Why would I think that?*

I want to scream at her. I just found her half-dressed, working in a strip club. Something that goes against everything I thought she believed in, the kind of person she was... And she wants to know why I think she’s in trouble?

I swallow the asshole response flirting with the tip of my tongue. I need to try to coax the truth from her. She responds better that way. Like when she was fifteen and I wanted to know who gave her the black eye.

A conversation that changed both of our lives forever.

Before tonight, I couldn’t understand how suddenly I’d developed a craving for her once she turned eighteen. But looking back and remembering our first real conversation—and everything that happened after it—I can see how concern led to action. Action fed into responsibility. Responsibility

triggered care. Care boasted pride. And pride provoked ...  
lust? And lust transformed into love?

Fuck, maybe I still don't understand it. Maybe I never will.  
But I do know one thing for certain.

That day at the dining room table, the raw details she  
shared with me...

That was the catalyst.

It lit the match that started the blaze that wafted the flames,  
that raged the inferno that finally burned my world to the  
ground the moment I realized I loved her.

And I'm determined to make sure she knows exactly how I  
feel.

"Maggie found out what happened at the store... I was  
concerned and felt the need to make sure you're all right. I  
thought you might be in some kind of trouble."

She lowers her head, shrinking further against the wall.  
When she looks at me again, I can see she's hurting, and I  
desperately need her to tell me why.

Does she suspect Drew had something to do with it?

Is that why she's here?

She's scared of him?

"You could have called or texted. You didn't have to come  
all the way out here."

"No," I argue. "I had to see you with my own eyes. I  
needed visual confirmation of your well-being."

The corners of her eyes crease with wonder as she takes in  
my emotion-laced confession, and it tightens my chest. It's  
like she doesn't believe me, but who can blame her after the  
way we left things? The way *I* left things.

"What happened?" I ask in an effort to show her how  
much I care.

"I..." she starts, her eyes unfocused, distant. As though  
she's walking through her memory of the attack. "It happened

so fast. I don't really even remember everything.”

I wonder if she's telling me the truth, but I know when she's lying. Just like I always have.

“Did they ... touch you?”

When she swallows and looks away, fury races through me, and I swear, I could punch a hole right through the bricks holding me up.

“Drew showed up and stopped them before they got very far.”

That's awfully suspicious, him showing up just in the nick of time.

“The whole time all I wanted was to call ... someone ... for help.”

I see red, knowing what she was going through. Being scared and wishing she could reach out to me to save her. Trying my damndest to temper my rage so I don't lose it in front of her, I refocus my attention on the silky chocolate of her eyes.

Placing my hand under her chin, I raise her face to mine and bask in the stare I didn't realize exactly how much I missed until this moment.

“Come home, kitten...”

She meets my gaze with quick, shaky breaths and longing in her stare. Cupping both of her cheeks in my palms and with all of the emotion my arid soul can muster, I try to show her how sorry I am. How much remorse I bear for the way I treated her.

I silently, solemnly swear an oath that if she comes home with me, I promise to cherish her mind, body, and soul, every day, for the rest of our lives.

There's something she wants to say, and I nod my head, begging her to tell me... Desperate to hear it.

Before she can speak, her attention is drawn away by another voice.



“Delilah?”

*Drew.*

My head snaps to the side with vitriol in my stare and a snarl on my lips.

“Everything okay out here?” His pace slows when I pierce him with a dagger-filled glare.

Delilah’s eyes widen in shock, and she moves away from me faster than I’ve ever seen her move before. She averts her gaze for a second but chances another look at me a moment later.

*Fear. Anxiety. Dread.*

What the fuck?

As quickly as it came, it’s gone again.

“I’m fine,” she assures Drew with a quick, pinched smile, looking from me to him.

Turning back to face me, she places her hand in his as if his touch gives her strength. At the sight of it, my demon clenches the bars of his cage—barking, raving mad. He rattles them almost to the point of breaking. Until she acknowledges my presence again, but this time with anger.

“You can’t just come around whenever you want because you had a *feeling*. This is why I didn’t say anything to Maggie.”

Her words slash at me, a gaping wound left in their wake, but they’re dripping with dishonesty and deceit.

She’s hiding something.

*Why?*

Is it for self-preservation or because she doesn’t want to hurt Drew by giving away her true feelings for me?

“Go home, Royce. I’m not your problem anymore. You made sure of that.” Her eyes narrow, and her nostrils flare as she spits her venom at me.

This time I'm leveled by her truth. Gashes I thought I felt before her final words were spoken were nothing compared to the fractures lining my heart now.

*I'm not your problem anymore. You made sure of that.*

My soul feels like it's dying as I'm reminded of what I did to her. It hurts as though she's done the same to me.

She turns to leave, dragging Drew behind her. I think that's the end of it until he turns his head at the last minute.

He holds his chin high as a smile tugs at the corners of his mouth. A knowing cock to his eyebrow.

The smug bastard.

He's satisfied with how the conversation ended.

He stares me down a moment more before Delilah pulls him back inside of the club.

I'm unable to move, still dumbfounded and crumbling from the exchange. Now more than ever, I worry for her. Maggie was right, he's not to be trusted. I feel someone's hand on my shoulder, and I pull myself out of their grip.

I steer all of my hurt into rage and take one step toward the entrance of the club.

Determined to make Delilah see Drew's true nature.

Determined to drag her out of there and show her that I know what's good for her. Not that motherfucker.

"Woah, woah," Draven takes hold of me, stopping my progress and turning me back toward my truck.

I lock eyes with him then Saxon. My chest heaves with unhinged hostility as they both look at me like I'm losing it.

And I fucking am.

"Do not go in there. You heard what she said, okay? She's fine."

"Yes," I answer him. "I heard what she said, but she lied. The look in her eyes when that fucker came outside. She was scared of him."

Draven sighs, offering me a tight half-smile. He thinks I'm acting irrational because of the feelings I'm harboring.

Saxon looks back and forth between the two of us, eyebrows furrowed like he's having a hard time keeping up.

He doesn't know my history with Delilah.

I'm going to need to tell him.

I'm going to need to tell everyone everything if I want their help with this. It's not enough for me to order them to do so because I'm their leader.

*I could do that easily.*

But I need them to understand that the fear I just saw in her eyes was the same fear I saw the day she told me about her father.

It was the same anxiety I saw in them the day I carried her out of that trailer.

The same dread I saw in them every time a man she didn't know entered the room after coming to live with us at the clubhouse.

And I need to tell them the truth, for Delilah. Because I owe her my honesty more than anything else. My lying and making excuses to push her away brought us here.

She may not be in immediate danger now, and I hope to God it stays that way until I can get her out of here. But I now know, without a shadow of a doubt, that Drew isn't the man she thinks he is.

She can hate me for what I did to her, for how horribly I treated her, all she wants. I'll gladly accept her contempt and bear the punishment for each and every one of my sins until the end of my days.

But I will figure out a way to make her see the truth about him, whether she wants to or not. I won't allow her to subject herself to another man who will only bring her harm.

*Like you did. You think you're her savior? You're the problem. The whole fucking reason she got caught in this*

*prick's net.*

I seethe at my conscience as my heart continues to pound wildly in my chest.

All the while knowing truer words have never been spoken.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

## DELILAH

**M**y heart thumps at the same pace of a jackhammer as I walk back into the club. I can feel Drew's presence behind me, but I don't turn around. I can't meet his stare until I can get control over my breathing.

The look on his face when he saw Royce with his hands on me was terrifying. The dangerous slant of his eyes and threatening curl of his lips was the same as the other night, when he fucked me on the stage after closing.

I haven't even had a moment to process the concern cemented in Royce's expression, let alone Drew's disapproving appraisal when he speaks.

"Delilah, can I see you in my office, please?"

I press my palm to my stomach and take a deep breath, trying to stifle my rapidly beating heart rate. But his voice triggers my fear receptors, and I know it's no use.

His tone is even, but his stare holds me captive as the lump in my throat threatens to choke me.

Swallowing as best as I can, I nod and give him my best attempt at a smile. I take a moment to check my tables, praying they're all in need of refills so I can waste as much time as I can before the impending confrontation.

But as my luck always seems to go, they're all content and don't need anything from me at this time. With no excuse to linger, and not wanting to make Drew more upset with me, I hurry into his office as quickly as I can while fighting the feeling of sinking deeper into quicksand.

I give him my best smile when I enter his office, trying desperately to convey the idea that nothing is amiss. But as soon as the door is closed and he locks his accusatory stare on me, my stomach plunges to my feet.

“What the fuck was that?” He hurls the question at me with fury.

This is another new side of Drew. He’s sharing more of himself. But a growing trend of intense, unhinged behavior lights a panic inside of me.

“It wasn’t... It was nothing,” I explain, choosing not to try to conceal my fear any longer in the hope that it will coax his protective nature out.

“That’s bullshit, Delilah!” he shouts, pounding a fist against the door behind him and making me jump. “He was touching you. Looking at you like he wanted to take a bite of what’s *mine*.”

My hand rubs along my collarbone as I swallow nervously. I don’t know what to say because I can’t deny what he saw. Royce pulled me in like he’s always been able to do.

*“Come home, kitten...”*

If Drew hadn’t come out, I know Royce would have gotten me to admit that I was scared. That I was beginning to doubt the choices I’ve made in the past couple months. He would have swept me away, then and there, and I could be on my way back to Gettysburg right now.

But ... is that what I truly want? To go back to a life where Royce and I don’t speak to one another? Where I have to hide my feelings even as I’m forced to confront them daily?

With Drew, at least I’ve been living. He wants me and never shies away from his desire. He doesn’t tell me I’m a mistake. He doesn’t turn away my hunger for him. He doesn’t ask much of me. Only to be honest, with both him and myself.

“Is there something going on between the two of you?”

“No,” I insist, and at least I’m not lying.

Drew considers my response as he assesses my body language. I fight to appear strong in my conviction even though it still feels as though I'm being dishonest. Call it omitting the truth, but I'd win this argument based on the technicality that he didn't ask me if there had ever been anything between us in the past.

It's flimsy at best, but I manage to stay strong.

“So you're telling me nothing ever happened between you guys? Because the way you two were eye-fucking the shit out of one another out there screams otherwise.”

*Shit.*

Swallowing, I wring my hands together in front of me. The truth pecks away at my brain, advising me that this is the part where I give him the honesty he deserves. After which we can take any necessary steps to smooth over our first argument.

Stupidly, I don't listen. I'm afraid of hurting him. Scared of what he'll think of me more than I am of lying to him. All of my shameful insecurities about being used up or impure raining down on me like hail hurling to the ground in a dangerous thunderstorm.

I shake my head softly as I peer into his eyes, begging him to believe me and drop it. “No.”

His eyes soften before he drops his head, and his hands move to his hips. He's quiet for a moment, and I want more than anything to reach out and touch him. To erase the last ten minutes and do whatever it takes to make him happy.

When he lifts his head to me again, I see his initial anger has waned in favor of hurt. He runs his hand down his face and neck before it comes to stop on his hard chest.

“I'm disappointed in you, Delilah.” His sullen tone causes my chest to ache.

He speaks the words I dread hearing most in the entire world. Immediately, I regret lying to Drew. The man who has done nothing but support me from day one.



The one who honorably turned down my advances and got me safely into bed when I was drunk.

Who saved me from further assault or injury in Mathieu the night of the attack.

Who took me in to keep me safe, who gave me a job and introduced me to a new family when I needed both.

“The only thing I’ve ever demanded from you is honesty.” As he’s always been able to do, Drew reads my thoughts like I’m an open book.

He’s right, though. He’s never made me feel like I owed him anything else.

Not my money. Not my love. Not my body.

Only my truth.

And as my lie continues to fester between us, I can feel his emotions retreating. The pain I’ve caused him carving a divide between us.

“I-I’m sorry, Drew.” I take one step toward him, needing to feel him beneath my touch.

But he backs away from me, further splitting the self-inflicted gouge in my heart. The painful prickling that occurs as tears form stabs a path across my eyes before pooling in my lids and tumbling down my cheeks.

“Your apology means nothing to me without the truth, Delilah.”

His words wrench a sob from my chest, and the agony propels the truth from my lips.

“We had sex. Once.”

Drew’s eyes shoot to mine. Lips pursed, his jaw flexing. His stare sharpens, once again, at the undesirable truth of my confession.

“When?”

I swallow nervously, knowing as soon as I tell him, he’ll realize Royce is the person I was referring to as the one I was

having trouble getting over.

“A couple months ago...” My voice is barely a whisper as I await the recognition in his stare.

“He’s the one.” It’s not a question, and my remorseful tears fall more rapidly than before. “The guy you were fucked-up over at the bonfire when you got drunk and threw yourself at me like a slut.”

I close my eyes at his harsh words, another tear leaking down my cheek. His anger bites harder than any pain I’ve felt before. And it’s all my fault. I can’t even allow myself to be mad at him because I caused this.

“So you mean to tell me...” One hand flies to his hip, and the other points at me with acid-laced accusation. “You award the guy who fucked you like a whore, and who threw you away like you’re nothing, the enamored gaze I just witnessed?”

I choke on another sob and clench my hands together in front of me. My restless fingers desperate to find something to ground myself to as I’m overtaken with anguish.

“A look I’ve *never* seen in your eyes before tonight. What a fool I’ve been... I’ve never treated you less than the fucking *goddess* I believed you to be, and I’ve never been blessed with such an enraptured gaze from you.”

“Drew,” I cry out, my voice strangled by another wail. “It’s not like that, I swear.”

“Is it because I’m not old enough to be your father? Is that it? You have a daddy kink because of your fucked-up childhood?”

His words suck the air from my lungs. I want to argue, to tell him how fucked-up it is for him to cast such harsh generalizations about me. But I’m paralyzed, forced to take a pause.

The idea that he may be right creeps up my neck, but I stop it before it permeates my brain. In my heart of hearts, I know it’s not true. I’m attracted to Royce for a number of reasons, none of which have to do with his age.

Explaining Drew's accusation away as hurt—again—I shake my head to clear it and focus on the man in front of me. The one who I hurt because of *my* own foolish actions.

I close the gap between us, my hands flying to his shirt as he backs up into the door. I wring the fabric between my fists, desperate for something to hold onto, but I'm fighting even harder to make him believe me.

As strong as my grip is, the rest of my body grows weary. I rest my head against him and bawl into his chest, soaking the fabric of his shirt with my flooding tears.

“There is nothing between Royce and me. It was one time. And a horrible mistake. I swear to you. Please... Please believe me. I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry...” I plead with him.

Even more than needing to be believed, I need him to hold me. To forgive me. To wrap me in his arms and tell me I'm still his pretty girl.

I know it's not fair for me to expect his comfort when it's me who should be consoling him. It's not fair for me to expect him to let it go or sweep it under the rug so casually. To release the anger and disappointment I've caused him without giving him the time he needs and deserves to heal from this pain.

But his rejection will debilitate me.

I recognize my selfishness in this situation, and the stinging bite of self-loathing cuts me deep.

When his hands cover mine, my lips part as my body tingles all over with palpable relief. I lift my head to meet his gaze and realize my reassurance is misplaced.

He's not reaching for me. He's not caressing my hands or trying to take them in his, offering me the pardon I don't deserve.

Tugging on them, he forcibly releases his shirt from my grip. The material is damp and tousled from my sweaty fists. He brings my wrists together and holds them tightly between our bodies, keeping me from reaching out for him again.

I chase his pained stare from one eye to the other and beg him to speak. To put me out of my misery because the anticipation of what happens next is like a vice grip crushing my throat.

His brows furrow, and he shakes his head weakly, taking in my appearance. I'm certain I look every bit like the pitiful drowned rat I feel like right now.

“Get yourself cleaned up. I'm sure your tables are looking for you.”

With that, he lets go of me, and my arms drop to my sides as sure as if I had weights tied to my wrists. I wish for the ground to open and swallow me whole.

He turns and leaves, slamming the door behind him. I catch my reflection in the mirror mounted to the back of it. The ruined face of my younger self looks back at me with red-rimmed eyes, flushed cheeks, and a hollow stare.

I'd recognize her anywhere.

I look identical to how I did in the aftermath of another night with my father. Except now, I'm in a nightmare of my own making.

And this time, I'm the villain.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

## DELILAH

**D**rew kept his distance from me the rest of the evening.

Everyone could sense the tension between us, and I couldn't deny anything was amiss as I fought to hold back my tears.

The drive home is equally strained, and I find myself struggling to say something to improve the situation I've so carelessly forced us into.

But it's as though I've forgotten how to piece words together to form an intelligible sentence. Everything I've come up with sounds more like the desperate cry of a child than a carefully thought-out apology.

As Drew puts his car into park along the curb in front of his townhouse, I frantically rack my brain for something, anything to say.

"I can't begin to explain how sorry I am, Drew." It's weak, but it's the truth. And the truth is what he wanted from me all along, so I let it guide me and beg it to finally set me free.

His hand stills on the door handle as he takes in my words. But too quickly, he throws his door open and exits the car. Usually, I wait for him to open my door because he enjoys the chivalry behind it. But I don't wait to be ignored as a result of his irritation. Instead, I open my door and climb out, following him up the front walk.

The moment we get into the house, my pleading from earlier resumes.

“Drew, please talk to me. I can’t take back the lie, but I regret it horribly. I only did it because I didn’t want to hurt you. Please, tell me what I can do to make things right.”

My words spill from me hastily, draining my breath as I don’t stop to inhale between them.

“How can this be made right, Delilah?” With one foot on the bottom step, Drew finally turns to me.

He stomps across the living room, charging toward me with an intensity that makes me jump. His ferocious strides back me into the sofa, causing my knees to buckle when they hit the cushion. Drew stands tall over me, his domineering stance rooting me to my seat.

“How can you get the image of him with his hands all over you out of my mind? How am I supposed to erase the thought of the two of you being together from my memory, Delilah?”

My body trembling, I can barely breathe let alone offer a suggestion to ease his troubles.

“I-I d-don’t know. I’ll do whatever you want. Whatever it takes to make this go away.”

The second the words leave my lips, I realize I’ve made yet another mistake this evening. Drew’s hands fly to his belt as he fumbles to unbuckle it. Pulling it swiftly from the loops of his pants, he discards the strap of leather, and the metal jingles as it hits the hard floor.

As my mind fights to keep panic from setting in, I remind myself that Drew has never given me a reason to fear him. He’s never given me a reason not to trust him.

*Until the other night...*

But the other night, he was propelled by an unrestrained desire that I fueled in him. And right now, the whole reason he’s angry is because of *my* actions.

I take a deep breath as his pants drop to the floor on top of his belt. As he pulls his rigid dick free from his boxers, he fists my hair. I only have a split second to register what’s

happening before my jaw goes lax, and he maneuvers my mouth around his girth.

Holding my head still, he fucks my face, thrusting his cock as far down my throat as it can go. It's been a long time since I've taken someone so forcefully, but my body's instincts react as if no time has passed.

I've given Drew a few blow jobs before, but I've always been in the driver's seat. And never did he fill my throat as completely or aggressively as he does now.

With my lips wrapped firmly around the base of his cock, he holds steady. As I begin to struggle for air, I look up at him as though to warn him. And I immediately regret it. Gone is the caring, compassionate man I've come to know. In his place is a cold, angry replacement hellbent on revenge and humiliation.

Because I humiliated him first.

I close my eyes, unable to withstand the shame I feel for setting these events in motion, and I accept my punishment.

As my lungs fight for air, I grip Drew's thighs and apply pressure as a sign of my struggle. In response, he tightens his grip on my hair and pinches my nose closed.

He finally pulls out of me just as spots begin to dot the corners of my vision. I gasp for air as my hand reaches for my throat. I'm awarded one shallow breath before he thrusts his cock through my lips once more.

Again, he holds himself in place with my nose plugged until my discomfort and panic reaches their peak. He repeats this degradation until a thick trail of saliva hangs from my lips, and my cheeks shine with newly shed tears.

"Drew—" I manage to scrape out between one lunge and the next.

"I can't—" I try pleading between another pair of thrusts.

*"Please!"* Culling whatever strength I can muster, I'm finally able to push him away from me long enough to scream my protest.



“I’m sorry...” Gasping for air, I rattle out another apology that I wasn’t strong enough to tolerate the rest of my punishment.

Deciding I’ve had enough, he grabs me behind my knees and pulls me until my ass is hanging off the edge of the sofa cushion. Labored breathing is my only reaction as I still work to force air into my lungs.

With the tips of my toes shakily skirting the floor, I fight to keep my body from falling off the edge of the couch. Silently, I will him to slow down. He’s overwhelming me with each rabid touch. But a pang of guilt reminds me to be sympathetic toward the man I hurt.

A wild drive still prevalent in his stare, Drew grips the waistband of my uniform bottoms then rips them down the seam. A show of his strength when the material tears with ease as though they were made of paper and not spandex.

Next comes my thong as he fists the material and rips it from my body. With nothing left between us, he encircles his cock with his fist and kneels down to line himself up with the entrance of my pussy.

I know I’m wet there, even though the idea of aggressive, angry sex doesn’t turn me on. But my body was conditioned from a young age to ready itself in defense of unwanted and unwelcome behavior.

Drew gathers some saliva in his mouth before directing it at my core. I feel it splatter against my clit, and it’s almost silly that this act is what causes the dam inside me to finally break.

Not the fact that he ignored me all night.

Not the way he dominated me.

Not the fear of suffocation.

But the reminder of getting spat on in the middle of the attack at Mathieu. Of how filthy and unimportant it caused me to feel.

Moisture pools in my eyes once more as he gathers his spit with the tip of his cock. Running it over my clit, he spreads it

down to my opening before slamming inside of me with so much force, the sofa skids backward into the wall.

My tears slide to the outer corners of my eyes before dripping down the sides of my face and disappearing in my hair. I try to stifle them, but with each grunt from Drew, another sob breaks free from my chest.

Sex lasts barely two minutes, and by his final thrust, my howls have overtaken me. Drew coldly pulls out and takes a seat next to me on the sofa. I slink to the floor as his body was the only thing keeping me from falling.

My ass hits the ground with a thud, and I hug my legs to my chest, hiding my face in my knees. I can feel the warm trail of his cum drooling out of me, and as it does, I realize I've never felt this hopeless before.

How could I have let this happen?

Why couldn't I have told Drew the truth when he first asked me.

Why did I even give Royce the time of day?

Old habits die hard, and this one just about killed me.

I wait for Drew to go upstairs and leave me here. I won't dare to enter the bedroom tonight in an effort to give him his space. But when he next speaks, my heart feels like it's breaking all over again.

"Delilah..." There is no anger in his voice now. No discontent in his tone. Only a wistful sadness that matches the turmoil in my soul. "I hate to see you like this."

As much as I want to, I can't look at him. Not until all traces of shame disappear from my conscience.

"Hey," he says, placing a gentle hand on my shoulder.

I feel his body settle onto the ground next to mine.

"I told you ... the idea of you with someone else... It drives me fucking crazy, Delilah."

When my only response is the hitch in my breath as I fight back another sob, he takes action.

“Hey, look at me.” He tugs my head from my knees then lifts my face so he can see me.

And I’m forced to see him. Anger gone as if the past twenty minutes never happened. Once again there is anguish in his stare.

“If you hadn’t hurt me tonight by letting him touch you, and by lying to me, you wouldn’t be so upset right now. Would you?”

Without hesitation, I shake my head, accepting responsibility for my actions.

“Come here,” he commands before lifting me onto his lap.

He positions me so I’m straddling him, the lips of my pussy draped over his cock like a blanket. I feel him harden beneath me, and I’m surprised he could be ready to go again so soon. I try to curl my body to his chest, begging silently for comfort, but he holds me in place so I’m forced to look at him head-on.

“Hold on. I need to see you to make sure you understand,” he explains.

The way he speaks to me is reminiscent of a parent—a *father*—requiring an explanation of bad behavior from their child. His tender touch and tone are all I ever wanted from my father. And one of the many things I never got.

I stop struggling against him.

“You let another man touch you in a way that only I should be allowed to. And see how you feel now?”

I nod, but he’s not satisfied with my response.

“Tell me, Delilah,” he urges. “How do you feel, knowing you crossed that line?”

“Disappointed,” I sniffle. When I realize he’s waiting for me to elaborate, I speak again. “Ashamed. Upset that I hurt you.”

He nods his approval at my expanded answer as he runs his knuckles over my back. It reminds me of the gentle way he

soothed me after my attack, and I want to melt into his touch.

“*And* you lied to me. That almost hurts worse than catching you in his grasp. What is the one thing I’ve always told you?”

“To be honest with you,” I answer.

“Yes, but also...?” I look around the room as I try to remember what else he’s said about it.

When it hits me, I close my eyes as another wave of regret threatens to drown me. Another lone tear escapes, just when I’d thought I was all cried out.

“That our relationship can’t work without it.”

When I open my eyes, I’m gifted with a weak smile on his face. Taking in the sight of it fills me with the hope that we’ll be able to move past this.

“That’s right.” He nods. “None of this had to happen tonight, pretty girl.”

I purr at the use of my nickname, relieved to hear him utter it after fearing I would never hear it fall from his lips again. He takes my chin gently between his thumb and forefinger.

“And... I wasn’t angry at you. Just deeply hurt. I opened myself up to you, and when I went outside and saw the two of you together it was like you were stomping on my heart. I lost it.”

The ache in my chest comes back with a vengeance as I watch a tear slip out from beneath his closed eyelid.

“Oh, Drew. I’m so sorry...” I cup his face in my hands and press my lips to his. Then I press them to his cheek where the moisture left its mark in an effort to erase the evidence of his pain. “I promise to make it up to you.”

I lean in and kiss him again, and this time he opens his lips and lets me in. Running his hands through my hair, he eases the tenderness left behind from where he fisted it earlier. Our bodies shift as our heads move, and my pussy strokes his dick with each unintentional rock of my hips.

“I know how you can start.” Drew breaks the kiss, and his cock rubs against my clit as it twitches to life. My eyes meet his and recognize his thirst. Eager to ease his sorrow, I await my instructions. “Slide your pussy against my cock, Delilah. Roll those hips, and tease your clit as you go.”

I wasn't in the mood until the second his directive was spoken, and as usual, my libido springs to life. I'm grateful the events of this evening didn't hinder it.

I do as I'm instructed and rub myself along his length. What's left of his cum mixes with my own building arousal as my fingers work my clit.

“There you go,” he coos. “Such a good girl.”

My eyes flare at the praise, and he spurs me on.

“That's it, Delilah, show me how sorry you are. Fuck your way back into my good graces.”

And I do.

For the rest of the night, and well into the next day, I show Drew how sorry I am.

In every position he demands, I fervently bend to him, trying like hell to prove it to us both.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

## ROYCE

I'm haunted by the smug look on that asshole's face, but I'm tortured even more by the words Delilah threw at me last night.

I'd never take back what she and I did, but this morning, more than ever, I wish I could take back my dumbass, bull-headed decision to push her away.

I'm certain it will always be my greatest regret.

On the way home last night, a plan to reveal the real Drew began to take shape. It would be one thing to take Delilah and force her to come back to me. But she needs to be the one to make the decision to leave on her own.

In order for her to make that call, she needs to know exactly who she's in a relationship with. I'm certain Drew isn't a good guy. I just need to get dirt on him to prove it to her. And I need help from the club to get it.

I take a sip of the coffee that's long since cooled before setting it back down on the table in front of me. Running my hand down my face, I meet the curious gazes of the men before me.

Curious except for Draven, to whom I divulged my every concern and feeling regarding Delilah last night after we got home. Of all my brothers, he's the only one I've ever opened up to like that.

It wasn't easy, but I let him glimpse the Delilah that I know—the woman she shows to no one else. In doing so, he

got a greater understanding of the love she's planted within me.

"The reason I've called you all here is because Delilah is in trouble."

Curiosity morphs into concern, and the space in my chest I thought my heart vacated years ago warms. Delilah is like a little sister to these guys, and I know they'll be eager to help her any way they can.

"Before I explain, there's something I need to confess. Details surrounding this situation that, until last night, I never accepted nor could I admit to. Even within myself."

I catch Draven's expression, and he nods for me to continue. Keeping my focus on my coffee mug, I lay my feelings out on the table.

"I'm in love with Delilah. I tried very hard to fight it. It felt wrong because she's been like a daughter to me. But I also didn't want to drag her further into this life. You all know the dangers that go along with being a part of this club. I'd die if she got hurt because of it."

Finally, I chance a look at them. There are varying degrees of understanding written in their expressions. Some shock. But none of them look at me with disgust. Not because of the taboo nature of my feelings or because I've opened up to them.

"But there are other evils and dangers out there that have nothing to do with being an outlaw. And after speaking with Delilah in person last night as well as witnessing a display of toxicity from her new boyfriend, I know she's unsafe."

The room begins to hum with a charged energy as determination bleeds into the stares of the men looking back at me.

"What are we going to do?" Ronin asks.

"First, we need to dig up any information on Drew that we can. Ronin, can you reach out to Mickey, and see what you can find out? I want to know the link between them. Maggie said Drew hangs around with a younger crowd sometimes..."



My train of thought is interrupted by this fact. One I just remembered, and another alarming red flag gets added to Drew's rapidly growing list of them. He probably shows up where he knows younger, impressionable girls will be.

Delilah has come a long way in the last several years, but it doesn't take a seasoned psychopath to recognize her lack of self-confidence. He sought her out and baited her. Now he's waiting to go in for the kill.

Armed with this new piece to the puzzle, I turn my attention back to Ronin.

"Keep your ear to the ground regarding any parties coming up, and make sure you're invited to them. Atticus, you go with him."

They both nod, accepting their orders.

"Chubbs, Zephyr... Ask Maggie for help buying a gift for Harleigh—her birthday is coming up. But do *not* let her know what's really going on. Go sniff around at the outlets, and check out Mathieu. Find a way to strike up a conversation with Maggie about Delilah while you're there, and see if any of the clerks chime in with something helpful. She used to work with them. You never know what information they may have about her or Drew."

"You got it," Chubbs responds for both him and Zephyr.

"I have a call into Cyber, the techie from our Memphis chapter. I got a chance to speak with him when we were there a few weeks ago. He's a master hacker, and I believe his help will be invaluable."

I look at Draven, ready to ask him for an update, but he's way ahead of me.

"I heard back from my cousin, JD, Unfortunately he doesn't know Drew. But there's a member of the Krymson Destroyers MC who JD has run around with since they were kids. Hound, their secretary. He said there's a good possibility they'd know Drew or at least be familiar with Spotlight."

This is good news that we can use to our advantage as long as the MC agrees to help us out. I'm not familiar with the club

myself but have noticed their presence at a couple of different charity rides we've been a part of. A good sign.

“Can you see if he can get us a meeting with them? They can pick the time and place.”

As I make my request, Draven is already on his phone, typing out a text to his cousin. I hope this avenue pans out. As well as whatever we can get from Cyber. I have a long list of requests for him alone.

Saying it out loud, my plan feels weak at best. But I need to have faith that we're on the right track to take Drew down and bring Delilah home safely.

At any cost.



I threw myself into work the moment I adjourned this morning's meeting. Since then, I've kept busy at the stone yard by stacking and restacking full pallets worth of stone. None of which needed it, but ensuring each piece is perfectly in place has helped quiet my racing mind.

Stepping back, I appreciate the mound of bluestone I've perfectly layered when I feel my phone vibrating in my back pocket.

I tug it loose, and I can't hit accept fast enough when I see who's calling.

“Cyber, hey. Thanks for getting back to me. Were you able to dig anything up?” Skipping the pleasantries, I get down to business.

“I just finished a preliminary dig into this Drew character. He doesn't have any criminal history, at least not on record.”

I'm as disappointed as I am relieved. A criminal past could have been enough to get Delilah to agree to leave on her own,

but it could also mean she's in more danger than I originally thought.

“But I can only trace his history back twelve years. There is no record of him existing prior to that.”

*Another red flag.*

“Twelve years ago, he would have been eighteen...” I mutter to myself, but Cyber thinks I'm talking to him.

“Right. Could be a WIT-PRO situation or something like that. I'm working to unearth any bit of information I can to paint a picture of who he was before then. Currently, I'm running his image through ... let's call it a database.”

When we spoke at his clubhouse, he mentioned some of his methods needed to remain secretive. However, he assured me there isn't anything he can't hack. His superior talents have garnered attention from many different powerful organizations—including the United States Federal Government—all with the desire of adding him to their payroll.

Knowing he's the best in the business, I have to be content with the fact that he's raised more questions than he's answered. I believe he can find the information I need.

“And the club?” I prompt Cyber to continue.

“No incidents cited. The only thing remotely interesting is the mysterious death of the club's previous owner five years ago.”

Could be anything, but what if Drew was involved in some way?

“I'm going to look into that further. The case has been sealed by the Dauphin County Sheriff's Office, so it will take a little more time to break into. Something feels off about it. I'll send you a link to the news article I found so you can see for yourself.”

“Yeah, I'd like to take a look at that. Thanks, Cyber. I appreciate your help.”

“No problem. I'll keep you posted,” he answers before the line goes dead.

Mysterious death, huh, Drew?

Could you have had a hand in it?

Is that how you became the owner at such a young age?

And what the hell were you up to before your eighteenth birthday?

What happened in your past that you're so desperate to hide from?

Before I drown in unanswered questions, my phone vibrates again. This time with a text notification from Draven.

JD said the Krymson Destroyers agreed to meet with us.

A wave of relief hits me at the news.

Great. When?

Tomorrow. 8 PM at the abandoned warehouse in the old part of the industrial section of Alcott. He sent me the address.

I want everyone there. All of the officers and a couple of lower-level members as well. Give the order.

Consider it done.

I lock my phone screen then shove it back into my pocket, once again assessing the pile of stone in front of me. Rolling my eyes and shaking my head, I let out an exaggerated sigh. I need to figure out something else to occupy my time until tomorrow night.

Pivoting, I walk toward our showroom which is bustling with customers. Pushing past them, I enter my office and shut the door.

I pull my phone from my pocket again, tossing it onto my desk, then I take a seat in my chair. Rubbing my eyes, I groan and find myself wondering what Delilah is doing right now.

How was the rest of her night?

The way her words cut through me... I knew they were filled with genuine emotion. But did Drew buy it? She's always been quick on her toes when it comes to covering up the truth or needing an excuse to keep her from getting into trouble.

*It's survival 101.*

I *had* her. I know if that bastard hadn't interrupted us, she'd be here with me right now, and this headache would be over.

*Right?*

Or did she use her survival instincts to finally sever her ties to me?

Am I the asshole?

I mean, I *know* I am one, but am I the Big Bad Wolf in her fairy tale?

My phone vibrates across my desk before I get a chance to free-fall further down that rabbit hole. Unlocking it, I see another text message, this time from Cyber.

Opening it, I click on the link he sent, and a newspaper article from five years ago opens.

### ***Case Closed in the Death of Nightclub Owner***

*The case of the 53-year-old Harrisburg man, who was found dead in the basement of a local night club earlier this month, has been closed.*

*Paul Miller, owner of Spotlight Gentlemen's Club, sustained a broken neck and other injuries as a result of an apparent fall down the staircase that leads to the club's basement storeroom.*

I skim the rest of the article, looking for any detail that stands out.

*Alone after the club closed.*

*Perfect example of an open-and-shut case.*

*No suspects. No enemies. No evidence of foul play.*

If this case was so open-and-shut, why did it take the police a month to close it?

My eyes fall to the last few lines of the article.

*“He was like the father I never had. One of the best people I’ve ever known.” A teary-eyed Drew Sullivan, Assistant Manager of Spotlight Gentleman’s Club, recounted fond memories of the deceased.*

*A man who is sure to be missed by all who knew him.*

His words could hold some truth to them, but I can’t see Drew crying. Not for real.

The triumph and challenge in his evil stare from last night is seared into my memory.

*I’m not the Big Bad Wolf. He is.*

I’ve met his type before, too many times.

People like Drew don’t get sad.

They get even.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

## ROYCE

**D**raven made arrangements for us to meet up with his cousin at his apartment in the Allison Hill District of Harrisburg before we're due at the warehouse. As grateful as I am that the Krymson Destroyers agreed to meet with us, I'm irritated it's come to this.

I'm beyond annoyed that I don't have control over this situation. Or my sudden raging emotions.

Not for the first time since the other night have I wished I would have forced her into my truck and back home with me. I've never shied away from going after what I want. Not in business, not within the club.

But I have every step of the way where she's concerned.

I've never wanted someone this much. Never wanted someone *at all*. And it's that fact that makes me question everything I thought I knew, even just yesterday.

What if I was wrong about what I saw the other night outside of Spotlight?

What if I saw what I wanted to see because I've always been a selfish asshole when it comes to her?

If that's the case, it wouldn't be fair to her. More than my need to possess Delilah, to satisfy my own cravings and to be content, I want her to be happy.

To be satisfied with the life she chooses no matter where it is or who it's with.



But that's why I need to look into Drew. Not just for myself but if for no other reason than to ensure her safety and happiness for the rest of her days.

As we pull into the parking lot of JD's apartment building, I take note of the number of people loitering in this unfamiliar neighborhood. When you're an outlaw, you constantly have to be on your toes, ready for anything. To be aware of your surroundings at all times in the event you've just walked into an ambush.

But the people scattered around don't appear to be a danger to us. A man in gym clothes walking to his car. A woman pushing a stroller toward the city park across the street. A couple with their arms wound around one another, lips locked and no idea what's happening in the world outside of their bubble.

Which is saying something, because when we roll up somewhere with this many members in tow, we tend to turn some heads.

We've got all of our officers with us as well as Ronin and Rocco—one of our nomads and the only one close enough to make it here in time for tonight's meeting.

Strength in numbers and all that shit.

The sound of Draven shouting across the parking lot draws my attention to the entrance of the building we're parked in front of.

"JD!"

Their hands lock between their bodies as they pull each other close in greeting.

"Hey, man. How've you been?" Draven asks first.

"Good, brother, good," JD answers him before adding, "How's your mom?"

When Draven's gaze cuts to us for a second, almost so quickly I don't see it, JD scratches at his face awkwardly. As though he said something he shouldn't have but didn't realize it until it was too late.

“She’s doing all right, thanks,” Draven answers as JD nods.

I make a note to ask Draven what that’s all about later. The men in this club are my family. Which means *their* families are, by de facto, *my* family.

If something is wrong, I want to know about it.

“This here’s The Judge,” Draven introduces me. “Judge, this is my cousin, JD.”

I nod to him as I extend my hand in greeting. He offers me a firm shake in return.

“These are the rest of the guys,” Draven waves his hand toward our other members before getting right down to business. “So what’s the deal with the Destroyers? They good guys or what?”

“Yeah, man. They’re probably going to be leery, at least at first. But I know you guys, and I know them. Neither of you have anything to worry about.”

I understand JD’s meaning. It’s in our nature to approach situations like this with caution. Some clubs can be trusted, some can’t. And sometimes, you don’t realize that until it’s too late. It’s expected the Destroyers feel no differently about us.

“Can you and Draven head over to the warehouse now?” I request. “Have a look around to make sure nothing is amiss?”

“Yeah, I can do that,” JD responds, nodding his head toward the back of the parking lot. “My car is there. You can follow me over. It’s not too far.”

“Sounds good. You got the address I sent you?” Draven turns his attention to me.

“Yeah, text me once you get a read on the meeting place. We’ll come when we get the word.”

They each tip their heads to me, and I see the family resemblance. It’s slight, but they have the same point to their nose and squared chin in addition to their dark hair and eyes.

“Be safe. Both of you.”



Draven's "all clear" text came thirty minutes later, and we left immediately. He said two of the Krymson Destroyers were already there when they arrived. Hound, who is the member JD is closest to, and Cobra.

Presumably doing their own pre-meeting safety check.

We pull into the gravel lot the warehouse sits on then drive around to the back to keep cover. The moment we turn the corner, I spot Draven and JD leaning up against his car. They're laughing, engaged in conversation with some of the Destroyers.

Behind them, I see a larger group of men. Some are meandering around while others remain seated on their bikes. But as they notice our arrival, every man stands to their full height, as though immediately on alert.

The two speaking with JD and Draven join the others, and they form a line, eight men wide, staring us down as we come to a stop by JD's car.

Our engines cut, and I and the rest of the men I brought with me line up across from them, with me in the middle and Draven to my right.

JD is the first to speak.

"I'll make the introductions before I leave you all to handle your business."

He points to the man in the middle of the Destroyer's line. Even if he didn't have a patch on his cut that says, "President" I would know it to be true. Just by the air of confidence that surrounds him.

"This here is Chainz, President of the Krymson Destroyers. Chainz, this is The Judge," JD points his other

hand my way. “President of the Gettysburg chapter of the Royal Bastards.”

As we lock eyes, a recognition of respect passes between us. Each of us nods our greeting, and JD takes that as his cue to leave.

He and Draven say their goodbyes before JD speeds off in his car. The moment he’s gone, I turn back to Chainz.

“Thanks for agreeing to meet with us tonight,” I begin. “This is my VP, Draven.”

Chainz nods. “Yes, we met a few minutes ago. This is Tank, my VP. Over here we’ve got Fuel, Cobra, and Crusher.” He waves his hand to his right before naming the men on his left. “Hound, Freedom, and Reaper.”

I nod to the men on each side of him before introducing the rest of my men.

“Atticus, Toga, Chubbs, Zephyr, Saxon, Ronin, Crew, Rocco.”

Chainz offers them the same curt nod before speaking.

“So I heard you’re looking for some information about a local business owner?”

“Drew Sullivan. He owns a strip club in Midtown called Spotlight. You familiar with it?”

“Yeah. I’ve never been myself, but the times I’ve driven by at night business always appears to be booming. What’s your beef with him?”

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out. He recently acquired a new employee, and... Well, it’s in her best interest that I make sure her new boss isn’t the scumbag I believe him to be.”

“Let me guess... She’s either your daughter or your ex?” Chainz laughs, and I wonder if he has someone special in his life that he’d kill for the way I will for Delilah.

The way I’ve already done, long before I ever knew what she would truly mean to me.

“Neither.” And I thank God for it. “But she’s very important to our club... To me.”

My earnest tone wipes the smile from Chainz’s face, and he nods in recognition. Turning to his brothers, he speaks to them.

“Anyone have any information they can share with the Bastards?”

“I don’t know if this is helpful or not, but it has to do with the murder of Spotlight’s previous owner,” the man Chainz referred to as Hound speaks, and I recognize him as one of the men Draven was speaking to when we pulled up.

My ears perk up at the mention of the case I found so intriguing. What’s even more interesting is the fact that he also believes it was a murder.

“Yes, that case drew my attention as well. But murder? I thought it was an accidental death?” I give Hound my full attention but don’t offer him my opinion. I want to hear what he has to say without suggesting any of my own theories.

“I found it suspicious that the camera along the rear of the building was reported broken during the time the death took place. When I pulled up the street footage...” he grins deviously, interrupting himself, “It’s a little hobby of mine—I noticed it had been tampered with.”

My stomach drops. There was no information regarding camera footage in the article Cyber sent me. “Tampered with how?”

“Someone went in and removed a person from the video, but their shadow was never touched.”

“I’m not following,” I admit, lost without the knowledge he obviously possesses.

“Unless it was a ghost that entered and exited through the rear door of the club that night, someone went in and edited it. The figure of the person was removed from the shot, but their shadow wasn’t. It was caught in the streetlight at the corner of the building and again in the light that glows above the rear service door. Police speculated that it was the age of the

camera and that the dark movement they saw was some sort of feedback due to it being out-of-date technology.”

“Wouldn’t the camera have captured the rear door opening and closing, even with the culprit edited out of the feed?”

“Yeah, but whoever fucked with it removed two chunks of time. One three-second bit, and another one that was two-seconds long. Just enough time for someone to slip in and out.”

“How can you tell?”

“It’s part of my hobby.” Hound smiles and winks.

This isn’t good news. It means whoever was responsible for the death of the previous owner has friends in low places. Or high ones, which is even worse in this case.

“If what you saw is correct—”

“It is. You can guarantee that,” Hound explains.

“Hound is ex-military,” Chainz chimes in. “He worked as a cyber security network operator while he was in the Marines. He knows his shit.”

Color me impressed. We need guys like him and Cyber in our club, desperately.

“Okay, so based on your observation, that means whoever the killer was either works for or has a connection to someone in city office.”

“Pretty much,” Hound agrees.

“Fuck,” I exhale.

“You’re thinking this Drew may have something to do with the previous owner’s death?” Tank enters the conversation.

“I don’t want to think it, but yeah. I do. The details I had even before learning about this footage were enough to make me suspicious of him.”

With my apprehension roused, I think of another scenario that seemed a little questionable where he was concerned.

“You think you can look into some other footage for me? It has to do with the girl I mentioned...” I ask Hound.

“I’m happy to help,” he shrugs, and I’m grateful for his eagerness.

It’s because of this I decide to give them more details about why we’re here in the first place.

“The girl I’m worried about, Delilah, she’s Drew’s girlfriend. She was attacked at her former place of business weeks ago. Drew allegedly scared the intruders away. I’d be interested in seeing footage from the surrounding cameras from that night. His presence seemed a little too convenient to me.”

“How so?” Chainz asks.

“A week prior to the attack, Delilah moved into a new apartment. She was very excited and proud to have a place of her own. But immediately following the attack, she moved in with Drew. And her landlord said someone matching Drew’s description came by and roughed him up in order to let her break her lease with no penalty.”

Chainz puckers his lips thoughtfully as though he’s thinking the same thing I am.

“I think Drew orchestrated the attack to make himself look like a hero in her eyes. But also, maybe to force her to leave her job and to move in with him. To keep her close and isolate her from those she loves. And from those who love her.”

With my admission, I get knowing and sympathetic glances from several of the Destroyers. They threaten to make me squirm, but instead, I choose to honor Delilah by taking pride in my feelings for her. My choice gives me the strength to maintain eye contact with these men.

“I’m sure you can agree, in this lifestyle we meet our fair share of unsavory people. And Delilah is as sweet as she is unassuming. It’s not so hard to believe someone would recognize that quality and choose to use it against her.”

I watch as several of the Destroyers’ heads bob in agreement. Anger rolls through me. Not just at Drew but at

myself for not taking better care of Delilah. For not teaching her how to spot darkness in those who wish her harm.

“I’m also worried Spotlight is a front for a different business. Something darker that I don’t want Delilah anywhere near.”

The thought of her being in any more pain like what she had to endure growing up causes my chest to constrict. I rub my hand along my sternum. The pressure is almost too much to bear, as though an elephant suddenly materialized on top of me.

“And I take it Drew knows who you are and probably doesn’t like or trust you, so you can’t go in undercover and check the club out?”

“Yeah,” I confirm. “There’s already been one incident there. And Delilah wasn’t too happy with me by the end of it either. And as she knows all of my members, I can’t risk sending any of my men in. It would only cause alarm.”

Chainz turns to Tank, and the two of them communicate silently with one another. A series of cocked eyebrows, smirking, and head tilts ensues before they turn their attention back to me.

“I have an idea of how we can scope the place out for you from the inside.”

“I’m listening.”

“We’ll go in with our ol’ ladies, do a little recon. Tank and I know what the warning signs are, and Raven and Angel can be quite resourceful as well.”

The extra step they’re taking to help us—me—is effort that will not go without repayment. No matter if they gather helpful information or not.

However, if I find out Drew has any hand in something nefarious like prostitution or trafficking, I’ll fucking kill him.

And this time, it won’t be quick, like what happened with Delilah’s father.



I'll take my time and savor every sliver of pain I cause him  
until he's begging for mercy.

And I'll grant him none.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

## DELILAH

A long week has passed since the aftermath of the incident with Royce.

Things are mostly back to normal with Drew and I, but an awkwardness still lingers between us. He's told me several times he's forgiven me, but every now and then I catch him staring at me when I'm at a table.

The hurt I still see in his eyes kills me.

What's worse is when he watches me, I feel as though he's assessing how I interact with the patrons. Like he's making sure I'm not overly flirtatious more than I need to be in order to guarantee a hefty tip.

I've wondered more than once this week if I should find a new job. One where I'm not half naked around other men so often. But I haven't mentioned anything to Drew. I don't like to admit it, but I'm scared he'll think I'm trying to get away from him *or* his watchful gaze.

"Here you go!" I shout over the music when I reach my table. Situated in the back corner of the club, they have a view of all the action from here.

Setting down four waters, I take in the sight of the two couples sitting in the half circle booth. There is something almost familiar about them, and I wonder if I've seen them in here before.

But the longer I look, the more I realize they remind me of the MC family that I've ultimately lost. Between their steely demeanor, black leather, and tattoos, they look like almost

every member of the Royal Bastards I've ever met. Sure, when you get to know them you realize they aren't as fierce as they look.

*Unless they have to be.*

I allow my heart to weep for the briefest of moments before locking my emotions back down, deep within the pits of my soul. Even though the man with the lethal face reminds me of Royce so much, I can't continue to dwell on what I never had.

I'm with Drew now, and he makes me feel wanted and desired.

Focusing on the man's dark hair, I realize the way he carries himself pairs well with his full-sleeve tattoo—featuring guns, knives, and thorn-covered roses—and the interesting chains he wears around his neck. They're certainly not something you see every day.

The other guy doesn't appear quite as hard when you first look at him. Maybe it's due to his blond hair or the fact that his eyes are lighter. But once you catch a glimpse of the tribal tattoos running up both of his arms, it causes you to pause.

And the women who are with them are gorgeous.

One of them has short black curls that frame her face perfectly. She's absentmindedly fingering the gold bracelet she wears. She was doing the same when I came over to greet them earlier too. When it catches the light, I notice the name "Paige" engraved on it.

The other girl has longer, dirty blonde hair and tattoos up and down her arms like the man she's holding onto. One of them stands out to me more than the others: the letter with angel wings and a tipped halo inked on her inner forearm. It's a beautiful tribute.

"Is there anything else I can get for you right now?" I question, desperately wanting to put some space between me and them.

"This will be fine for now. Thanks, Delilah." The deadly man with the dark hair speaks as though he knows me. It's

almost off-putting, but his genuine smile calms my uneasiness before it grows.

I offer them a smile before I walk back to the server's station next to the bar.

"Hey Delilah," Maia grabs my attention a minute later. "The guy at table thirty-three is looking around like he needs something."

"Yeah, probably to try to cop another feel. I just brought him a beer a couple minutes ago." I roll my eyes, and she giggles.

"Don't let him get away with it. Tell Drew or Ethan. He'll never be able to set foot in here again.

"Oh, it wasn't that serious. He's just had one too many, I think."

What I don't tell her is even though the light brush against my ass when I turned around earlier *did* bother me, I don't want to tell Drew for fear of how he would react.

Would he grow angry and possessive like he did last week?

Would he punch the guy? I wouldn't want him to get into any trouble.

Would it result in another round of angry sex where I'd need to prove to him that he's the only man I want in my life? He *is* the only one I want, but the shame and emptiness that arduous night left behind still resides within me.

"Okay," Maia doesn't look convinced, but thankfully, she drops it. "Just know you can go to either of them about anything. They'll squash it, no questions asked."

"Who will?" Jacqui joins us at the service station at that moment, and I cringe at the thought of anyone else knowing my customer groped me.

I never should have said anything. The more talk surrounding it, the better chance Drew has of hearing about it. And I'm certain he'd be furious if he didn't hear it from me.

“One of Delilah’s customers got a little handsy with her, and I told her to tell Drew or Ethan. That they’ll put an end to it.”

“It really wasn’t that—” I begin, but Jacqui interrupts me.

“Hell yeah, they will. Remember what happened when that guy grabbed Jade after she got off stage last year?” Jacqui and Maia exchange glances, exhaling with wide eyes as they recall the mysterious incident.

“What happened?” I can’t keep my curiosity in check.

Maia looks around as if making sure no one can hear her before speaking.

“We were sworn to secrecy after it all went down, so you didn’t hear this from me.....” she begins.

“And I was never here...” Jacqui adds, looking guilty about taking part in the taboo conversation, and now I’m not certain I want to know any longer.

“But after Ethan dragged the guy out back,” Again, Maia looks around. “He and Drew beat him so bad, he ended up in the hospital.”

“Oh my god,” I gasp. Instinctively, my hand covers my mouth. I’ve never seen a violent side to Drew.

*Except for when he fucked your throat raw and almost suffocated you with his dick.*

I remind my conscience he was hurting due to my own dumb weakness where Royce is concerned.

“Yeah, we’re lucky to have them around to keep us safe,” Jacqui adds, almost as if doing so will assuage her guilt for being party to this forbidden conversation.

I nod, not wanting to appear as sick as I feel.

“Well,” I swallow, looking between them both, “I better make my rounds.”

I offer them a tight smile before walking back onto the floor. As I meander between my tables, I’m left with an odd

sense of foreboding. Maggie's words from weeks ago cross my mind for the first time.

*"What do you even know about him anyway?"*

But as soon as they fill my head, I push them away again. Drew has never given me reason to believe he's anyone other than the thoughtful, caring guy I've known since the day we met.

Everyone gets angry. Everyone lashes out as a result of their pain or fear.

And as far as him beating that guy? Well, he was protecting Jade. I mean, Christ, look at what Royce has done for those he cares about. Me included. And I'm sure what I know he's done is only the tip of the iceberg.

This is no different.

As though he can sense me thinking about him, I feel Drew's eyes on me again. When I look across the room, I see him watching me. I feel his magnetism luring me to him.

My core swirls with pride and lust for the man who has given me so much. A home, a job, a family.

This time, I don't ignore his stare and get back to work. Instead, I walk over to the man who will do anything to protect those he cares about.

Guilt at thinking so poorly of him eats away at me with each step. The fact that he doesn't know about my brief lack of faith in him doesn't matter. But I find the only way to move past my feelings is to atone for them.

I meet him where he stands just outside of the employee hallway. Locking eyes on him, I see fire in his stare. Taking his hand in mine, I lead him down the hall and into his office.

Once inside, I turn around and wrap my arms around his neck, bringing my lips to his. The moment he accepts my kiss, I feel my guilt, as well as the awkwardness that still hovers over us, melt away.

"Woah," he says, breaking the kiss too soon. "What was that for, pretty girl?"

I relish the love that encircles my heart when my nickname slides off his tongue.

“I don’t know, I just had to,” I shake my head, truly perplexed at my need to please him in that moment.

It goes beyond guilt or anything else I felt just prior to bringing him in here. “I felt ... hypnotized, almost. Compelled to come kiss you. I couldn’t fight my urge... And I didn’t want to.”

The delight on his face is exactly what I’ve been craving all week. I didn’t realize how much until this very moment.

“You amaze me, you know that?” he admits, taking my breath away. “I love you.”

I can’t stop the goofy smile that spreads across my face. I feel like an idiot, beaming at him, but I don’t care. It’s the first time he’s said he loves me since before shit went south last week. The butterflies I felt after we first met have returned, and I know I would do anything to keep this feeling alive.

Anything to keep Drew *this* happy.

And so utterly pleased with me.



# CHAPTER THIRTY

## DELILAH

“When you’re finished can I have a word with you in my office?” Drew creeps up behind me, and I feel his hand glide across my ass.

Before I’m able to back up into it, he walks around to the other side of my table and hits me with a stare I’ve seen many times before.

He’s turned on. And my pussy throbs at the thought of what he’ll do to me once we’re behind closed doors again.

“Of course. Be there in a minute,” I reply with a coy smile. Though it’s no secret to anyone here that we’re together, we do try to save our salacious banter for when we’re in private.

“Jacqui, are you almost done?” he inquires before leaving the floor.

“Yup, just about. Ethan said he’ll walk me to my car when I’m ready.”

After all this time, there’s still something about Ethan that doesn’t sit right with me, but I can’t place my finger on what it is. It’s more than being uncomfortable around him because he’s a guy, but I’m trying my hardest to eliminate this feeling.

He’s given me no reason to believe he’s not to be trusted, especially knowing how well he looks after the girls who work here.

“Excellent, have a good night you two.” Drew nods to both Jacqui and Ethan before strolling off.

I finish wiping down my tables and tucking the chairs under as quickly as I can before all but running to his office.

When I enter, he's sitting behind his desk shuffling through a few pieces of paper. The moment he sees me, he places them in a pile to the side and focuses his rapt attention on me.

I close and lock the door before rounding his desk. When he turns his chair to receive me, I straddle his lap and lace my arms behind his head. My pussy is already throbbing as it awaits his touch.

Barely able to hold myself back, I go in for a kiss. But Drew pulls away from me.

"Eager girl..." he teases, rubbing his nose along mine.

"Eager for *you*," I exhale, reaching between us to rub his cock over his pants.

"You have no idea how badly I want you, pretty girl," he admits. "But there's something else I want first."

I lean back so I can see his face, grabbing my lip between my teeth. With an impatient, needy energy, I grip him tighter in my hand as I wait for him to tell me what he desires.

"I've been thinking about a fantasy of mine for a while, but I've been hesitant to say anything. Scared to admit it to you."

Suddenly nervous, I stop rubbing him. His last fantasy ended with him taking me with savage possession on the stage of the club. While it wasn't angry, it left me feeling uneasy. My hesitation makes me feel terrible because he's never made me feel dirty or ashamed of any of my own fantasies...

Though mine are like child's play compared to his. I've asked him to spank me, to work me up without letting me come. There was the time I asked him to bind my arms to his bed. Small things like that.

But I want him to be as comfortable being open with me as he's helped me to be with him. And I suppose the strip tease he asked for previously is an average fantasy among men.

“Hey,” I place my palm on his cheek, reassuringly. “You’ve always made me feel safe enough to open up to you. I want to be your safe space too. You can tell me.”

He captures my lips again before standing and placing me on my back across his desk. Deepening the kiss, he rubs his hardened cock against my aching clit, fire licking at my tender flesh.

Too soon, he breaks our connection again.

“One of our best clients is in the champagne room. I asked him for a favor...” His stare heats, eyes hooded and thick with lust. But my body stills beneath him, fear replacing my prior need. “I want to watch you give him a lap dance.”

He licks his bottom lip and runs his cock along my core as he awaits my response.

But I have no idea what to say... What to think.

“I-I don’t understand...”

How can he angry fuck the thought of Royce with his hands cupping my cheeks out of his system but he’s almost gotten himself off on the idea of me writhing on top of another man’s lap?

“The thought of it... Of you rubbing yourself against him like this... It turns me into a crazed lunatic.”

Exactly. I don’t need him to explain it to me. I’ve seen it, and I’m in no mood for a repeat. But I can’t imagine how he could possibly fantasize over something that would make him raging mad.

Drew reaches in between us, rubbing his hand over the fabric at my center. There’s no doubt he can feel the moisture that coated the spandex a moment ago. Before he dropped this bomb on me. He reaches under the fabric’s opening at my leg then traces his way to the top of my slit.

“You’re *mine*, Delilah... Say it.” His tongue dips down, caressing the hollow beneath my ear. His lips roam my neck, his teeth nip at my skin.

“Yes, Drew. Yours. I’m all yours. Which is why I can’t do this.”

But he’s not listening. I know what he’s doing, and I won’t allow him to use pleasure to make me do this. Like he’s done in the past when he wants me to bend to his will. I have to draw the line somewhere.

But as he toys with my clit, I can feel my arousal thickening before more of it expels past my parted lips. It drips down my slit, all the way to my ass. With his thumb still on my sensitive nerves, he reaches a finger down low and smears the moisture over my tight puckered hole.

I jerk beneath him, the light pressure to both areas working with one another to cast decadent pleasure through me.

“For me, Delilah? Please?” he begs. “I want to watch you from the cameras—like a voyeur—while you grind yourself against his leg and leave this pussy juice all over it.”

I immediately stop writhing beneath him.

“Wh-what?” I gasp, confused beyond measure. Is this a test? He can’t mean it.

“You heard me,” he says with nonchalance, as though he asked me to give the guy a tissue.

“Drew, stop. That’s not funny,” I warn him. Surely this is a bad joke.

But his fingers dip inside of me and whip around, easily drawing more moisture as my desire has barely faded from a moment ago.

I throw my head back as a moan forces its way through my lips.

“Look at you. You can’t tell me the idea of giving me what I want doesn’t turn you on...”

The moment I feel the unmistakable buzz of a forming orgasm, Drew stills his fingers and withdraws them from me. Inserting them into his mouth, he sucks my arousal from them.

“I’ll give you what you need after you fulfill this fantasy for me, naughty girl.”

I shake my head, but I don’t know what to say. I’m flabbergasted and can’t believe he’s even suggesting this after what happened last week.

“Drew,” I pant, my ruined orgasm plaguing me. “I don’t understand how this is any different from seeing me with Royce. If anything, it’s worse. You were so furious with me last time. I don’t want to make you angry again.” I plead with him to see reason, to not make me do this.

Drew’s face goes lax, and all motion stops for the slightest beat. Then he bares his teeth to me with cold eyes before growling and moving away from me. He crosses his office, stopping before he gets to the door.

I quickly sit up and scoot off the desk. Facing him, my breath quickens, and my heart nearly beats out of my chest. He turns, and the rage in his eyes could burn my skin.

“You dare to bring him up to me? To remind me of the look I saw in your eyes as he touched you? As he cradled your head in his hands?” Lips snarled and fists clenched, Drew looks more like a savage beast than a man.

“I’m sorry, I’m just trying to understand. Please, I didn’t mean to bring it up again.” I hold my shaky hands out in front of me as I try to explain my reasoning to him.

He closes his eyes as though trying to contain his anger.

“It’s different, Delilah, because this is just *fantasy*. What happened between you and *Royce*,” he shouts his name, punctuating his anger further, “was real.”

“Okay,” I nod, letting him know I understand. But in fact, I don’t understand. I will never understand.

“Fuck this,” he spits. “You told me I could open up to you, but you lied to me, again—”

“No, Drew I—” I interject, but he keeps going.

“You take my most intimate desires and use them to make me feel ashamed.”

“I would never do that on purpose.” I quickly close the gap between us, a knife in my heart, knowing I hurt him like this again. “I’m so sorry, Drew.”

I reach for him, but he pulls away and shields his face from me. The biting sting of rejection burns my heart from the inside out. But do I even have a right to feel this way when I was the one who stung him first?

“Please, let me make it right,” I offer. “I’ll do what you want. I’ll act out your fantasy.”

Finally, he looks at me, and my chest aches at the hurt on his face. I don’t know what to do to pull him out of it other than the only thing I can think of. It’s an act of desperation that I’ve used in my life several times. It’s degrading, but it’s effective.

And I’m desperate.

“Please...” I soften my eyes and jut my lower lip out slightly. Running my finger down his chest, I lower myself to the ground before him, my hands finding the button of his pants. “Let me do this for you, Drew.”

As I get his zipper down, but before I pull his dick out, he reaches for my hands and tugs me to my feet. Anguish pooling deep in his eyes.

“I would never question one of your fantasies, Delilah.” He stares at his hand as it caresses my forearm instead of looking at me as he speaks. But at least he’s talking.

“I’m sorry,” I hold his face between my hands and turn his attention to me.

“I’m not really in the mood anymore. I’ll tell him he can go, and then we’ll get out of here.

“No, Drew...” I force a pant as I lower my eyelids in a desperate attempt to appear turned on.

I should have let it go, but I can’t stand the thought of Drew being mad at me for another whole week... Or even a day. I just want things to go back to the way they used to be.

“Thinking about doing this for you ... knowing you’ll be in here watching, rock hard and ready to fuck me... It makes me hot...”

I take his hand and run it between my legs.

“Do you feel that?”

The smile he offers me is weak, but it’s a start. Grabbing his shoulders, I pull him in front of the monitor that looks into the champagne room. I catch sight of a man sitting alone, waiting, and I feel like I could hurl right then and there.

I fish his chair out from behind his desk and bring it to him so he can relax as he watches. Giving him a playful push, I tell him to sit.

But he doesn’t sit. He moves quickly, startling me. Gripping my wrist painfully, his cold eyes are back, penetrating my soul.

“You belong to *me*, Delilah,” he growls.

His nostrils flare, and his eyes narrow as he grips the waistband of my bottoms in his other hand. Tearing them clean off me, he leaves me in only my top and my thong. My lips tremble, and my body quakes with fear as the same anger I saw in him last week resurfaces.

Suddenly, I feel like a mouse caught between two traps, with nowhere to go. On one end, anger at my refusal. The other, anger at my participation.

I’m more confused and scared than ever.

“He is not permitted to touch what’s mine, and you’re to leave your bra and underwear on at all times. Is that clear?”

How can he expect me to talk right now, let alone give him the answer he’s demanding? I wouldn’t speak even if I could, afraid he wouldn’t like my answer no matter what it is.

“I’ll be watching to make sure my rules are being followed. By *both* of you.” His insinuation that I would want or allow a complete stranger to put his hands or anything else on me is revolting.



He nods, dismissing me. Stepping back, he waits for me to move. When I don't, he huffs his annoyance and takes my hand roughly in his. He tugs me along behind him until we get to the entrance of the champagne room. The entire time, the voice inside of my head is screaming at me to snap out of my terrified trance and run.

But I can't. The fear Drew instilled in me last week is back, and all I can think about is appeasing his anger again. Getting him back to the proud state he was in earlier.

Why did I have to open my mouth and bring Royce up again?

Why did I have to question what he wanted? He's never questioned me.

With Drew's hard body at my back, I lock eyes with the lone man, slouched low in the wide, tufted chair with his legs spread. He pats his knee gently as the taste of bile rises in my throat.

"Make me proud, pretty girl," Drew whispers before nudging me through the doorway.

# CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

## DELILAH

They say money is dirty, but what can be said about those who bathe themselves in filth to obtain it?

With more cash than I've ever held in my hand before—and shame burning through every cell in my body—I sit on the arm of the chair the man just vacated.

I forced myself to tap into a place I haven't visited in over five years. The place my mind fled to when I was with my father and he was forcing me to do things I hated doing. I didn't want to go there, but it was the only thing that allowed me to continue moving my body against the stranger's.

I somehow managed to leak enough of my "*succulent nectar*"—as the client referred to it while he spurred me on—onto his pant leg.

Repeating the phrase causes sweat to lick the back of my neck before a cold, icy breeze covers it in goose bumps.

No doubt my performance was as much for the client as it was for Drew. How could it not be, no matter if it was Drew's fantasy or otherwise?

When he felt I'd fulfilled it well enough, Drew pushed through the door, halting my tormented gyrating and putting an end to my misery.

He thanked the nameless client for his time then requested I remain here while he escorts him out. I fear what's in store for me when he returns. I'm still not convinced he won't be angry, but the bawdy carnality on his face when he left has to be better than perilous threat.

My eyes refocus on the cash in my hand.

I fully understand that a lot of money can be made by dancing here. I've seen cash pour from the pockets of men who both can and can't afford to part with it.

Yet I still find it inconceivable how thirty minutes of shaking my ass made me more money than a few nights of waitressing.

*Sex. Fucking. Sells.*

It's despicable. I want to be excited about it. Who wouldn't get a charge out of making \$500 in minutes?

While my willingness to do this for Drew is arguable, it's a fight with myself I'll never win.

My attention is pulled from the money by the crescendo of footsteps getting closer in the hallway. My back straightens, and my knees begin to wobble at Drew's imminent reappearance.

He steps through the doorway slowly as his eyes find mine. Stalking toward me, his lips lift at the corners of his mouth, greeting me with a pleased smile. His hard dick presses against his pants, jutting out toward me like a compass.

And I'm its destination.

"Delilah, you were amazing. My precious, pretty girl."

My nickname doesn't swell my pride or cause my love to soar like it normally would. I should be glad he's not as angry as I thought he'd be, but there is something else behind his delighted expression. Something that borders on maniacal.

His feet don't stop moving until they hit the base of the chair. Before I know what's happening, Drew pulls me onto the seat where the client sat, tugs my ass to the edge, and rips my thong off.

*What is with this man's uncontrollable urge to ruin every pair of panties I own?*

The force of Drew's pull causes me to lose my hold on the wad of money, and the bills fly into the air like a game of 52-

card pickup. Drew pays the floating money no mind as he wrenches my legs farther apart, opening me wide for him. His focus is on one thing and one thing only.

“I fucking love you so much, Delilah,” he declares before refocusing his stare. “Look at that perfect glisten...”

Licking his lips, his voice trails off with rabid hunger shining in his eyes.

Diving between my legs, he laps away at every inch of my pussy and upper inner thighs, gathering any moisture left behind from the lap dance.

He impales me with his tongue and desperately pulls at my opening in hopes of slurping anything else he might have missed.

I fight between feeling dirty about how I got this wet in the first place and getting mildly turned on at the idea of him cleaning up the mess I've made.

“Did you think of me the whole time?” Drew's lips tickle mine as he remains between my legs, but my face now holds his attention.

“Of course, I did,” I insist.

He doesn't need to know I fled to my happy place while my body stayed behind and reacted on instinct to maintain my survival.

Exactly as it's been trained to do. I thought after all this time it would have deprogrammed itself. But after all of the events that have occurred over the last month, I suppose I'm grateful it hasn't.

He traces his fingers along my stomach until they reach my bra. Digging through the opening that showcases my cleavage, Drew grips the fabric then tears it apart. My breasts sway the moment they're freed, and he latches onto my nipples as he closes his mouth over my clit.

With the same rate of speed and intensity, both his fingers and his tongue work my two sensitive areas, causing my body to quake with uncontrolled desire.

I hate that he can work me over like this when all I want to do is drown in my sorrow.

But as my first orgasm rockets through my body, it's like the last forty-five minutes never happened. We're back in Drew's office, and he has me laid out over his desk.

And I give in.

This is what I've wanted all night.

Right here.

*"Oh, fuck... Drew... God, yes."* I hold his mouth tightly to my core as I ride his tongue through the waves of my climax.

I may not understand his fantasy, but it's not mine to understand. I was wrong to fear it, to fear him or his anger by accepting it.

And if this is the sweet reward I'll receive for acting on it, it's something I'll gladly do for him again and again.

"Fuck, Delilah," Drew moans when I finally let his head go. "You taste so fucking good."

Going in for more, he fucks me with his tongue while wildly rubbing his fingers over my clit. He catches me in his mouth again, but this time he doesn't drink it down. Standing, he runs his soaked fingers along my bottom lip then tugs my jaw open wider than it already is.

Positioning himself over me, he lets the liquid slowly slither out of his mouth and into mine. The taste of me mixed with his saliva drives me wild, and I eagerly take more of what he offers.

Moving his head around, he dribbles my cum over my exposed tits and down my heaving chest and stomach. Stopping only to coat my clit with the remainder.

"Do you like the way you taste, you dirty, dirty girl?" He grips my face with one hand and squeezes my cheeks together, forcing my mouth to stay open.

"Yes," I reply as best I can with him in control of my jaw.

Without warning, he spits into my mouth, chilling the heat that roars through me.

Before I know what's happening, I'm back on the sofa last week while Drew thrusts into me with unrelenting fury as I cry through the shame.

I'm back on the floor of Mathieu, struggling beneath the large, silent beast of a man, stabbing through my pussy with his girthy fingers.

The sudden recollection causes my legs to close, and my hands instinctively cover my breasts.

Drew doesn't notice the change in my demeanor. Either that or he doesn't care as he works his shirt off. His pants follow before his hand grips mine, and he pulls me out of my chair.

Turning my body so my back is to his chest, he wraps his arms around me. One hand kneads my breast, the other dives between my legs.

But the lust I felt for him a moment ago has completely evaporated, and it won't be returning tonight.

"Do you know how hard, and hot, it was, watching you in here with him? Knowing it wasn't me your ass was grinding on?"

I don't answer as he kisses the side of my neck all the way up to my ear. I wait for the urge to move away from his touch to come, but it doesn't.

I feel nothing.

"Feel that?" He nudges his cock between my ass cheeks, but the best I can offer him is a noncommittal grunt.

The sound appeases him, and I realize he probably thinks my inability to speak is due to being overcome with desire. I don't care to tell him otherwise. Emotionless, I let his mouth and hands peruse my body.

Finally having his fill of touching me, he grips his cock then runs it up and down over my back entrance, and I brace

myself for what could be next. I feel his mouth at my ear as his tip settles against the tight muscled ring nestled there.

“Shall we explore some unfamiliar territory tonight, naughty girl?”

As I remain silent, he pushes himself against me, his indecision causing torment within me that he knows nothing about.

“Nah...” he whispers, finally putting me out of my misery. “Maybe next time.”

He painfully pulls my earlobe between his teeth, before letting go and pushing me over the arm of the chair. The sudden movement forces a startled gasp from my chest that he confuses with pleasure.

“Oh, you liked that, dirty girl? You want it rough tonight?”

My cheek is greeted by a soft yet cold and wet cushion. I recognize the fact that my cum dribbled over my body earlier and into its upholstery.

*I wonder how many other people's bodily fluids it's joining.*

With one arm trapped beneath my body, Drew takes my other arm and twists it behind my back. Holding me in place, he lines himself up with my opening then pushes through with a forceful thrust. Before my body has time to recover from the pain, his other hand crushes my head into the cushion.

“You’re mine, Delilah. Mine to use however and whenever I want. Say it,” he demands with a biting slap to my ass as he fucks me mercilessly.

But I’m utterly speechless. With shame. With pain.

His constant need to hear me say I’m his doesn’t go unnoticed. I tuck what may be his only insecurity—losing me—into my head to define at a later time.

When I don’t answer him, I feel another sharp sting across my other ass cheek.



“Does my naughty girl like being spanked? Is that it?” Drew plays what he believes is a game, but he doesn’t realize I’m not participating.

“I’m yours,” I manage to squeak the words out through painful breaths as my tears join my cum, disappearing into the soft fabric of the chair.

“Fuck yeah, you are,” Drew agrees.

A few minutes more, and finally, he spurts his hot release inside of me. With slow movements, he pulls out and pushes back in, spreading his seed deep in my pussy.

I thank God I had enough sense to go on birth control three years ago.

When he’s done, he doesn’t pull out. Instead, I feel him lean over me, then I hear the rustling of money being collected.

“Look at what you did tonight, pretty girl.”

When I chance a glance at him, I watch as he crushes a pile of cash in his fist above me. Slowly moving his fingers, the bills begin to fall... To rain.

Once they’ve all floated back down, he finally removes himself and squats down in front of the chair so he can look at me.

Running a hand through my hair, his gentle touch crushes me. It makes me miss the Drew who used to make love to me more than he fucked me.

Helping to lift me upright, he offers me one of his killer smiles—the kind I fell in love with that reaches all the way to his beautiful eyes. As I settle into the seat once again, he speaks.

“You should be proud of yourself tonight, Delilah.” He curls my hair behind my ear, prolonging his eye contact and gifting me the shine of his admiration. His warmth allows the thick layer of ice around my chest to begin to defrost. “I know I am. Very, very proud of my pretty girl.”

A sweet caress to my cheek quickens the rapidly melting ice. But his deep consuming kiss is like a blowtorch to the center of my being.

And once again, I'm putty in his hands.

# CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

## DELILAH

When Drew and I finally got home last night, he washed me in the bath like he did the night I was attacked at Mathieu.

Then he made love to me with as much care and longing as he did the first time we were together.

It broke a dam I didn't realize I'd been fighting to keep from collapsing. With the emotional roller coaster ride I've been on the past week, I guess it was only a matter of time before I crashed.

When it was over, he cradled my quivering body and asked what was wrong. I told him I was grateful for him. For knowing what I needed. I didn't mention what happened at the club, just that everything he'd done for me since we got home made me realize how much I love him.

How much I need him.

I know Drew cares about me and wants the best for me, but some days it's harder to feel than others. It's like a long, drawn-out game of Russian roulette.

Only he holds the gun *and* the answer to my salvation.

I'm worried that the more I learn about Drew—and his fantasies and desires—I may not be able to give him what he wants, and that makes me feel terrible.

I want to be able to do it for him. To give him everything he's ever wanted because he's given me everything I thought I was never worthy of having.

And if I don't do it, I'm terrified he will get angry with me or lose interest and reject me like Royce did. I'm afraid I'm falling back into old habits... Letting my insecurities plague me. Pleasing someone to a fault, to my own detriment, simply because I'm scared of the consequences.

*"Come home, kitten..."*

I fear Royce's words will forever ring in my ears. I've been fighting to rid my memory of them since I last saw him with no luck.

The desire to run back to him, to what is familiar, is strong, even with my feelings for Drew. But he's burned me twice before.

Do I truly wish to return to his inferno?

To run the risk of being swallowed in his flames and incinerated beyond repair?

Or do I alter my being to fit better into my new life with Drew?

"Earth to Delilah..." Josie's voice pulls me from my impossible decision.

"Hmm?" I look at her, still half in my head.

"I said congratulations on your impressive tip last night. In all the time I've worked here, I don't remember anyone getting a tip as large as that."

My eyes shoot open when it finally hits me what she's referring to. I glance around the room, catching approving nods from Jade, Haven, Cherish, and Maia. Heat flushes my face as embarrassment threatens to swallow me where I stand. I look at the ground and tuck my hair behind my ears.

At that moment, Drew comes into the dressing area, and I pull him aside.

"You told Josie about last night?" I question as quietly as I can so no one else will hear while also trying to make my discontent known.

“I told *everyone* about it,” his voice booms. Then he adds, “I had to brag about my pretty girl.”

My head snaps to the room as a congratulatory round of whoops and shouts bounce off the walls, and I can feel my face heat again.

“I told them they all need to take notes,” Drew adds, throwing an arm around my shoulder and turning me to face the others.

“Girl, you’ve got *moves*. You really ought to try the main stage one night,” Josie suggests, and I could kill her for it. “Imagine the tips you’d get up there.”

How would she know I have moves...? Unless she watched me?

The thought of someone—anyone—watching what went on in that room last night, knowing what I had to force myself to do in order to get through it all, infuriates me. Taking Drew by the hand, I lead him out the door and across the hall into his office.

This is a perfect example of what I *wish* I could see in myself. The confidence that Drew and Josie and the other girls think I ought to have. The fearlessness I’d need to take life by the balls and go for one hell of a ride. I want both of those things, but right now, all I can see is red.

From embarrassment.

From fury.

“Did you show Josie the tape from last night?” I don’t hide my anger. I’m not sure I could if I tried.

“Of course, I did. I told you I wanted to brag.”

“When we got home last night, you promised me you were going to delete it,” I remind him.

“And I did, right after showing Josie,” Drew admits easily, as though there’s nothing wrong with his actions. Like it’s just another day at the strip club.

*For them it is...*

“Exactly how much did you show her?” I fold my arms across my chest though I’m terrified to know his answer.

“I didn’t show her what happened after that, if that’s what you’re referring to. I would never do that,” he promises, cupping my cheek in his hand.

When I force my gaze to his feet, he taps two fingers on the bottom of my chin, pulling my eyes back to his.

“What is it, pretty girl?”

I can’t tell him I’m upset he showed Josie *again*. It will fall on deaf ears. But I can try to stand my ground elsewhere. If I want to squash my insecurities—or run headfirst into them—I need to start putting my foot down.

Taking a deep breath, I lick my lips before running my teeth along my bottom one, gearing up for what I need to say.

“You told the girls they should take notes. In order for that to happen, since you deleted the video, I’d have to give someone else a lap dance. I did it for you last night, even though I didn’t want to. But, Drew, it’s not something I can ever do again.”

The pride I feel from standing up for myself mixes with my fear of Drew’s reaction, and the flurry of dueling emotions leaves me dizzy. My eyes stay glued to him as I wait for the fallout of my statement.

“Babe,” he begins, throwing me off with a pet name he’s never used before. “I didn’t realize you didn’t want to. You should have said something.”

*Is he joking?*

I don’t know what to say to that.

I quickly shuffle through the events of last night, and no, while he didn’t exactly *pressure me* into it, there’s no question I felt like I only had one option.

But what if this situation is a lesson in getting to know one another better? This relationship, at its heart, is still new. Maybe he really didn’t mean to make me feel that way. And

since he didn't blow up when I delivered my truth a minute ago, I decide to try it again.

“Well, if I'm being honest, I didn't feel as though I had a choice. When I questioned you about it, you got angry. I felt like the only way to make it better was to give you what you wanted.”

Drew's chest falls, and his hands find his hips. Shaking his head in disbelief, he focuses on a spot on the floor of his office.

The longer he takes to respond, the more my anxiety is fueled. The more I wish I could take back what I said, rewind back to the dressing room, and learn to love garnering attention the way the other girls do.

I wring my hands, waiting for his response. I don't even care if he's going to yell and scream at me; anything is better than the silence of the unknown.

Finally, he looks at me, and I brace myself for what comes next. But when I see the hurt in his eyes, it guts me.

“And maybe it's my fault...” I step toward him, ready to take all the blame and ease his pain until he speaks.

“Delilah, I would never force you to do something you don't want to do. I'm no monster. I'm not your father.” His words are like icy knives cutting deep into my soul, and I freeze with my hand halfway to his cheek. “I can't believe you'd compare me to someone as horrible as him.”

I can't move. Can't speak. I'm caught between fury that he'd say such a thing and confusion, wondering how he could possibly think I'd be vicious enough to equate him to someone like my father.

“I never said you were like him, I would *never* do that,” I deny, anger winning my internal battle. I'm pissed he would have the audacity to think I could ever be so cruel.

“You didn't have to say the words, Delilah. I can feel the hatred coming from you.”



“I don’t hate you, I’m just angry,” I admit, tears of outrage pool in my eyes, threatening to fall at any moment. “My father was the absolute worst person I’ve ever known. For you to even *think* I could possibly believe you’re anything like him... What the hell kind of person do you take me for?”

“I don’t know, but what do you expect me to think, Delilah? You’re telling me you felt forced into doing what you did. How do you think that makes me feel? And why the sudden change? You were fine last night. Both here and when we went home.”

I think back to our conversation from the previous night. The one we had when I was curled up in Drew’s arms.

“I bawled my eyes out in your arms, all night,” I remind him. “What did you *think* I was crying about?”

“You told me you were grateful to me for letting you in and sharing my fantasy with you. For giving you exactly what you needed. Word-for-word, that’s what you said.”

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. He completely misunderstood my meaning. It’s my fault for choosing to ignore the bad and dissolve into the good.

“I was referring to the bath and for being so gentle with me. It’s been a while since you’ve made love to me, and more than anything else, I needed your tenderness after what happened. You can’t possibly think I meant I *needed* to give someone else a lap dance? That I was grateful to you for making me gyrate on someone else while you filmed it? To be forced to...”

*Oh my god.*

I freeze, snapping my mouth closed before any more words can fly negligently from it. I almost told him I was forced to go to my happy place. How is that *not* the same as comparing him to my father?

“Forced to what?” Drew provokes me, resentful of my outburst. His lip is curled and his eyes narrowed. Like he knows exactly what I was getting ready to say.

He steps in close to me, tightly gripping my biceps with his large fists. His eyes spew lava at me, the severity in his gaze extracting the words from my mouth.

“Go to my happy place...” I whisper.

Backing me up into the wall, he lets go of me then places his forearms next to my head, effectively boxing me in.

“Let’s get one thing straight, Delilah,” he spits through gritted teeth, his face dangerously close to mine. “The question isn’t will I force you to do something against your will. It’s will I continue to put up with your blatant, baseless accusations that call to question my morals and my honor.”

His eyes can no longer hide the soul I’ve mangled with my unintended allegation. Before I can summon an ounce of an apology, his next words steal my breath and leave me speechless.

“I’ve never had someone hurt me as much as you just did.” With a tightness in his stare and a sneer on his lips, he’s angry in a way that scares me more than I’ve been in a long time. “Go home. I can’t even fucking look at you.”

Slowly, he backs away from me, not tearing his eyes from mine. I yell at myself to move, to say something, to signal to him somehow, offering him a silent apology. But my entire body feels like it’s shutting down.

As he leaves the room, I’m left to crumble, alone. Sinking to the floor, my chest finally moves but only to try to suck in the air Drew stole from the room when he left. As my lungs work overtime, my head spins, and I feel like I’m going to be sick.

Crawling to the trash can under his desk, I make it milliseconds before emptying my lunch into its depths. My tears and my drool both fall carelessly into the darkened pit below, and I wish it was large enough to swallow me too.

When I no longer feel like I’m going to retch, I run the back of my shaky hand across my mouth and sit against the wall.

I've been here before... Several times... Even as recently as just a week ago. I recognize the parallels between that situation and this one.

Could old behaviors be to blame? Am I sabotaging my—and Drew's—happiness because I don't feel worthy enough to receive it?

To receive his love?

Am I succumbing to someone else's desires simply to keep them happy?

*To keep myself safe?*

This is something I thought I'd long since worked past after coming to live with Royce. But my soul surges, screaming to give in to Drew. To keep him content by any means possible. And I realize the progress I believed I'd made over the years—over these past few months even—was bullshit.

I've never truly healed from that part of my life.

All the negative traits and behaviors I exhibited in the name of survival have been lying just beneath the surface, waiting to exploit my weaknesses and set themselves free.

As I linger in Drew's office, unable to face him or anyone else on my way out, I question everything I thought I knew about my new life.

And where I went wrong.

# CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

## ROYCE

For the hundredth fucking time today, I talk myself out of making a trip back to Harrisburg and waiting outside of Spotlight for a glimpse of her.

To check if she's okay.

To make sure she's happy.

To see if that asshole can put a genuine smile on her face.

Chainz contacted me after our meeting to let me know they wouldn't be making it to the strip club until the weekend due to some other business they had going on. I finally got his report yesterday, and he said he didn't notice anything out of the ordinary while they were there.

He also said Delilah was their server, and she appeared quiet but happy. He saw her and Drew together a few times, and it was all smiles between the two of them.

I thanked him and left it alone, but I still don't believe it. I'm desperate for the footage from the cameras outside of Mathieu.

Hound has reached out to me a few times to let me know he hasn't had a chance to check it out yet but that he hasn't forgotten about me.

I want to be angry about the delays, but I've learned a time or two not to look a gift horse in the mouth.

My phone lies still on the surface of my desk, but I check it anyway, giving in to a compulsion I've never had before. When, still, there is no word from Hound, I toss it back on my

desk at the same moment I see Draven breeze by my open door.

“Draven,” I call to him, stopping his forward motion. “Come in a minute.”

“What’s going on?” he asks.

“Nothing, shut the door and have a seat,” I instruct him.

When he’s seated in front of me, I scan his face. At thirty-six, he’s not much younger than I am. But right now, he appears years older. I’m upset I’ve missed the signs that he’s had something going on in his life, having been so preoccupied with my own bullshit.

“Your mother... What’s going on with her?” I jump right to it. No sense in tiptoeing around. That’s never been my style anyhow.

“Nah, man, everything’s good.”

“Lying doesn’t look good on you, brother.”

His face droops as he exhales deeply, and he runs his hand over the back of his neck.

“I’ve been trying hard not to worry too much about it, but I can’t make any more excuses for her. She’s been forgetting things lately and getting confused a lot. Like showing up for doctor’s appointments when she doesn’t have one scheduled. And she drove up to JD’s place in a panic while we were in Memphis because she couldn’t get a hold of me.”

Well, shit. That’s not good.

“Has she seen a doctor or anything?”

Draven looks at me but doesn’t speak for a few minutes. He looks like he could break at any moment, but he’s clawing at himself to keep it together.

“He said it looks like early onset dementia. He prescribed her some meds to help with memory and concentration, but they’re not a cure. They only delay the inevitable.”

I nod my head because what the fuck else can I do? What do you say to someone—maybe the closest friend you have—

who just told you their mother's brain is deteriorating, and there's nothing that can be done to stop it?

"I'm really sorry to hear that. Please keep me posted, and let me know if there is anything I or the club can do to help."

Draven inclines his head slightly, acknowledging my offer and sympathies, when we're interrupted by my phone buzzing across my desk.

Picking it up, I see Hound's name on the screen and accept the call, putting it on speakerphone for Draven to hear.

"Judge," I answer.

"Hey, man. It's Hound. I found what you were looking for."

"Draven is here too. You're on speaker. What have you got for us?"

"It's not looking good," he starts, and my heart drops. I've sent him on a wild goose chase, like I did with Chainz and Tank. "I combed through the footage around the time of the attack on the night in question. The assailants parked in a back lot, walked straight to the rear door of the boutique and nowhere else."

"So it wasn't random," I chime in, hating this fact but hopeful it will give me something to help prove my case against Drew.

"I mean... Are there other stores they could have hit with more money and better shit to steal? Yeah. But this... It's still not enough to prove it was your guy."

He's right. I fucking hate it, but that's not enough to implicate Drew in this break in.

"Speaking of, I have footage of him parking in the main lot and walking straight to the boutique. When he gets there, it shows him about to knock before cupping his hands against the window and peering in, like he was trying to see what was going on."

"Maybe he was trying to make sure the attack was in progress already?" I grasp at straws.

My eyes shoot to Draven's for support, and he nods.

"Could be, but nothing in his body language screams guilt. He takes his shirt off and wraps his hand in it before punching through the door and letting himself in. The footage from the rear of the building a minute later shows the two attackers running out the back of the store followed by the third guy. Looks like he realized they were too far ahead, and he turns back and reenters the boutique."

I squeeze the bridge of my nose to try to ward off an impending headache.

"Okay. Are you able to forward the footage to me so I can take a closer look?"

"Sure can."

"Thanks, man. I appreciate you looking into it."

"Any time."

"That's a good sign, right?" Draven pipes up, and I look at him. I don't miss the hopeful nature of his tone. He's thinking this news, coupled with the news from Chainz, will help me to drop my *fascination* with Drew.

My eyes shoot from his back to my phone when I hear the ping notification letting me know I received an email. Wanting a larger screen to view it on, I switch to my computer before pulling up my inbox and opening the email.

Clicking on the link, a video pops up. I nod for Draven to come behind my desk so he can get a look at it too. We watch as the figures move on the screen exactly how Hound described it to us. Taking a deep breath, I get ready to exit out of the video when Draven breaks the silence.

"Huh," he grunts.

"What is it?"

"Well, it may be nothing, but..." I look at him as he considers his thoughts.

"Spit it out," I command, ready for him to put me out of my misery.



“Well, it’s just that this guy here,” Draven points to the larger of the two assailants as they’re running away from the store. “He’s got the same build as the bouncer who was at Spotlight when Saxon and I were in there looking for Delilah.”

*Please tell me this is the break I was looking for.*

“Play it again from the beginning?” he requests.

I restart the clip, and this time I watch Draven as he watches the video, looking for any sign of recognition in his eyes.

“That.” His finger flies to the screen, and I follow it. “The little limp in his step? Right there?”

“Yeah, I see it,” I confirm.

“I watched that same bouncer walk from his post inside the door, to the bar for a glass of water, then back. He had a limp *just* like that one.”

“Motherfucker,” I exhale a breath I didn’t realize I was holding onto. “You finally believe me?”

“Mm-hmm,” Draven agrees, at last.

Now that I’ve found what I’m looking for, I almost wish I hadn’t. It confirms every fear I’ve ever had.

Drew is dangerous.

Delilah is in trouble.

And I’m the asshole who put her there.

I pushed her away.

I told her to go find someone else, knowing she’d listen because she’s too damn concerned with pleasing others.

Staring at the video, my eyes focus on Drew as he walks to the door, and I pause it.

I’m no fucking better than this asshole...

She deserves so much more than two motherfuckers like us.

But since I'm the one who got her into this mess, I'll find a way to get her out of it.

And if by the grace of God she still wants me when all is said and done... Fuck, even if she doesn't want me—she can hate me all she wants, but she'll do it under my goddamn roof, where she belongs—I'll spend the rest of my days making sure she feels loved and safe...

Cared for and secure...

Wanted and desired...

More than she ever has before.

# CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

## DELILAH

Last night was one of the hardest of my life.

When I finally pulled myself together enough to leave Drew's office, Ethan was waiting to drive me home.

I didn't ask if he knew about our fight.

I didn't ask if he knew why he was driving me home.

I didn't say anything, and thankfully, Ethan didn't try to strike up a conversation either.

When I got home, I sat on the sofa and didn't move one inch as the uncomfortable quiet of the townhouse rang loudly in my ears. Drew wasn't due to close, so I expected him home around midnight.

Waiting for him was like riding a slingshot into my past. I felt desperate and hopeless, full of fear of the unknown every second, just like I did waiting for my father to return in the days following his disappearance.

Drew didn't step foot in the house until four o'clock in the morning—later than we usually get home when we close together.

I met him at the door with eyes full of sorrow and hope burning in my chest that we could reconcile what happened.

He refused to talk to me.

He wouldn't even look at me.

He went straight upstairs to shower while I stood outside the bathroom door, waiting for him to finish. When he was

done, I patiently awaited his acknowledgement.

I needed some type of communication from him.

Words. Whether loud or soft.

Touch. Whether painful or delicate.

But again, he pushed past me before locking himself in the guest room.

The weight of his silence—of his disregard—crushed me until I couldn't breathe. Until I thought I was dying. It brought me to my knees, and there I stayed.

On the cold, hard floor.

For the rest of the night.

I drifted in and out of sleep, quietly murmuring promises to the universe that I'd make up for the wrong choices I've made recently, if only for Drew to utter even one word to me when he woke up.

Which he did, at eleven o'clock this morning when he hauled the door open and just missed stepping on me as he exited the guest room.

*"Hurry up, we're late."*

It's not the resolution I was looking for, but I wasn't particular with my request from the universe, so I chose to view it as a gift.

Since arriving at work, I've been trying to go the extra mile by helping to restock the bar, ensuring all tables are thoroughly wiped, and helping Maia and Ginger bus their tables when needed.

All while maintaining a smile that causes me physical pain to keep on my face. But Drew still won't look at me. His aloofness is fueling my frailty.

"Goddamn it," I hear Josie curse behind me before slamming the phone down onto the bar.

Concerned, I turn around and cradle the wet rag I'm holding in both my hands.

“What’s wrong?” I inquire, genuinely wanting to know.

It’s not usual to see Josie without a bright smile on her face, and again I worry I have something to do with it. Even though my fight was with Drew, when I upset one person, my conscience likes to play games with me, making me think everyone else is mad at me too.

She rubs her fingers across her forehead, as though trying to ease a headache, and takes a deep breath.

“That was Cherish. Neither she nor Jade will be in tonight. They went to some diner after work last night and both ended up with food poisoning.”

“Oh no...” I offer while cringing inside.

I’m horrible when it comes to comforting others. I can never think of anything meaningful to say, and my sympathies always sound shallow and forced.

“I know there isn’t really anything I can do to help, but...” I regret speaking up the moment Josie’s eyes catch mine.

“Actually, there is *something*.”

I feel my eyes turn into saucers as I fear the next words out of her mouth.

“Delilah, I’ve seen your moves... I stand by what I said yesterday, you belong up on that stage. We need more than just Racquelle, Haven, and Lyric up there tonight.”

*Absolutely not.*

“Can’t you call Pandora, and see if she can come in?” I suggest, but as soon as the words leave me, I remember she’s away for the week.

“She’s on vacation,” Josie confirms.

“I’m sure the other girls wouldn’t mind making more tips tonight,” I insist. “Besides the fact that I don’t have the guts to do it, Drew would kill me.”

*Not to mention he’s already furious with me to begin with. I don’t need to add to it.*

Satisfied this final statement will keep Josie from pressuring me further, I turn back to the bar and swipe the rag over the counter again.

“Actually,” she continues, standing next to me and demanding my attention, “I think this situation could benefit us both.”

What on earth is she talking about? I turn my body so I’m facing her and cock my eyebrow questioningly.

“After you left yesterday, Drew was beyond distraught. I was curious what happened, but he locked himself in his office all night and wouldn’t talk to anyone.”

Hearing Josie describe Drew’s demeanor and actions after I left causes the plastic smile I’ve been wearing since I walked through the door to crack and fall from my face.

The sharp pain I felt as I laid on the floor overnight is back, and I rub at my chest, trying to ease it.

“As you know, it was my night to close. So when Drew told me he would do it and I could leave, I cornered him and begged him to tell me what happened between the two of you. I felt ... responsible after my comments yesterday.”

*Fuck.*

Not only do I not want Josie to know what we fought about, I also don’t want her to think she was the cause of it.

“Josie, it didn’t have anything to do with what you said, I promise.”

“I know.” She nods her head matter-of-factly, in a way that makes my stomach turn. Her eyes cast a disapproving shadow over me. “He told me everything that’s happened between the two of you over the past couple days. And honestly, I’m a little shocked to hear what you said to him. Drew works his ass off to ensure everyone feels safe when they’re here. So to hear him admit that he’s felt both shamed and attacked by you two nights in a row...”

Saliva floods into my mouth as the familiar feeling of nausea sets in. As calmly as I can, I swallow it down and

mentally beg the acid in my empty stomach to stay put.

“Josie, I... It was all a big misunderstanding. And I never meant to make him feel that way. At all. The last thing I want to do is hurt him. I tried to talk to him last night, to smooth things over, but he wouldn’t even acknowledge my presence.”

“Can you blame him?” Her words cut through my aching chest like a knife.

Fighting back bile, and now tears, I shake my head.

“I think if you do this for him, it will show him how much you care. How sorry you are...”

“If I get up on that stage and get naked, he’ll go apeshit. I’m trying to make him forgive me, not piss him off further.”

“You only have to take your top off, not get fully nude. You know that,” Josie explains as though it makes all the difference in the world. When I don’t relent, she continues, “Listen... Above all else, Drew is a businessman. If Spotlight has a bad night, he has a bad night. I will make sure he doesn’t get angry at you. *You* make sure he has a good night. In the end, you both win.”

I can feel the uneasiness growing on my face.

“I really don’t think he’s going to react like you’re imagining he will. But if so, I promise I will make him see that you only did it to make him happy,” Josie assures me, using just the right words that will force me into action.

I want to make Drew happy.

I want him to know how sorry I am.

I want him to be proud of me again.





Taking one of the deepest breaths of my life, I lock eyes with my reflection in the mirror of the vanity I'm sitting in front of. Josie has been keeping Drew busy while Haven styles my hair into two long French braids and helps me "elevate my makeup," as she called it.

She's also been giving me some tips while she works. Ways to make my body wiggle like I never knew it could in order to drive the men wild. The women too, apparently. Haven said a lot of times, the men come for their women more than for themselves.

She also gave me a brief beginner's introduction to pole work. How to latch onto it just so, so I won't fall off and land on my ass. As much as she's tried to prepare me, I don't feel ready. I don't know if I ever will be.

"Okay, I think that just about does it." I watch as Haven secures the final bobby pin in place. "Let's have a look at you in the full-length."

I follow her to the closet where Drew had me try on the Spotlight uniform which now feels like ages ago. When she opens the door and I lock eyes on my full reflection, I almost stagger with shock.

Haven straightens and fusses with both my hair and the sliver of material I'm draped in as I take in the sight before me. I barely recognize the girl I see. She's everything I wish I was.

Beautiful.

Confident.

She appears carefree, even amidst the turmoil storming through me like a squall on the open ocean.

I think my adrenaline is working like a mind-altering drug. Either that or it's the 2 shots of Casamigos Haven and Josie forced down my throat earlier.

I don't feel as though I'm in the present; it's more like I'm floating through a dreamscape where my fear swirls together with hope for a good outcome so quickly, I don't have time to be scared before excitement and anticipation barrel through it.

My eyes wander from my makeup covered face down to my chest where my boobs are wrapped in an iridescent, green bikini-type bra that ties in the back for easy removal. Over it is a sheer black, long-sleeved crop top shirt and matching sarong that doesn't hide anything. It just gives the illusion that I'm covered up.

But it's one more layer of clothing I have to take off. Which, at this point, I'd like to put five more of them on to minimize the amount of time I'll have to be topless on stage.

My bra is matched with one of the smallest thongs I've ever seen in my life. One wrong move and everyone in the room will get a glimpse of something I have no intention of showing them. Thank God I'd just shaved down there.

Tying the whole outfit together are the quintessential six-inch tall, black and clear, platform stripper shoes with sharp stiletto heels Haven forced on my feet at the beginning of this nightmare. They're certain to cause the most embarrassing and painful death the moment I try to shake my ass or swing on the pole.

I just hope I don't impale anyone with them.

"Okay, you're gorgeous," Haven admires, having finished her final inspection of me.

I smile at her weakly as I swallow the ball of nerves stuck in my throat. She closes the door then places a hand at the small of my back, leading me down the hall and backstage.

Stopping at the stage's steps, she grabs my hand and squeezes it reassuringly. My eyes desperately find hers.

"You're going to be amazing!" she screams over the music. "Even if you don't climb the pole, just dance, sway back and forth, anything. You are beautiful, Delilah. Your looks alone will sell what your dancing skills can't."

Her words don't exactly inspire the confidence needed for me to get up on that stage, but it does help knowing I don't need to bend over backwards to do my best up there.

It gives me the smallest boost I need as the music ends, and I hear the DJ announce my name.

# CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

## DELILAH

*“All right, everyone... We’ve got an extra special treat for you tonight. Making her Spotlight debut, please welcome to the stage the lovely, the delicious Deeeeeeliiiiilaaaah!”*

My heart thumps wildly in my chest, its beat stronger than the bass of Muse’s “Supermassive Black Hole” bumping through the sound system. At least it’s a song I know so I can get the beat right.

With one final breath, I climb the two steps up onto the stage. I picture Drew’s smiling face the night of the bonfire at the clubhouse. The fire in his eyes as he stared into my soul the first time we made love.

I miss that. I miss him.

*That is why I’m doing this.*

Finally stepping out from behind the curtain, I let the bright lights blind me so I don’t have to see anyone. I get into a groove, shaking my ass and rotating my hips just like Haven showed me.

I silently congratulate myself for not falling over as I go.

Halfway across the stage, I take off the sarong around my waist and let it drop.

One step down.

Gripping the pole next to me, I twirl myself around it, paying close attention to my feet so they don’t get tangled in each other. Falling to my knees, I crawl to the figure closest to me, keeping my eyes unfocused.

If I can't see them, maybe they won't see me. I give them a little shimmy then tug on the elastic thong around my hips. They glide their money down my ribs, and I quickly snap the elastic back in place, holding the cash tightly to my body before moving to the next person.

And the next.

And the next.

Somewhere along the way, I strip out of the sheer top. Standing again, I do another twirl around the pole before tugging on the string at the center of my back. I hold the fabric to my chest as long as I can, unsure if I'll let it go or run off the stage.

Suddenly, I feel his eyes on me.

*Drew.*

I look up and find him through the near-blinding lights. He's center with the stage, standing along the back wall in the crevasse of the server's station. His eyes are glued to mine, flames of desire flickering so brightly I can see them from here.

I watch as he rubs his cock over his jeans, a salacious smile spread wide on his face. When he bites his lower lip and gives me a slight nod, I feel the decadent swirl of desire I wasn't sure I'd ever feel again ignite in my core. As moisture pools between my legs, I let go.

The fabric falls to the floor.

Lightened by the elation I feel knowing not only that is Drew not angry but he's also fucking turned on, I'm able to breathe normally again. Pant with the desire I feel for him once again.

I grab onto the pole above my head then shimmy my body down onto the stage. The entire time, our gazes are locked tighter than they've been in a long time.

Then he nods to the group of men sitting to my right. Biting my lip the way he is, I crawl over to them. Sitting back on my heels, I hug the closest man to my chest like I've seen

some of the other girls do, then I bobble my boobs against his face before pushing him away again.

He reaches forward with a crisp twenty-dollar bill in his hand, and I grab it between my boobs before adding it to the growing collection tightly stuffed in the elastic of my thong.

I treat his companions to the same show, and they pay their thanks accordingly before I move on to the next group of people.

And so on.

Every few seconds, I look back at Drew, hoping the lustful longing I saw the first time wasn't a figment of my imagination.

When my second song ends, I search for Drew again, but he's gone. With him, he took all the desire and elation I just felt, causing me to question everything I thought I saw.

As trepidation sinks in, stealing away the last of the high I was just riding, I barely remember where I am and what I'm doing.

*Focus, Delilah.*

Quickly gathering the strewn money and clothing from the surface of the stage. I run as quickly as these shoes will allow me to, back through the curtain, clutching all of it to my chest.

It's a very hard feat considering the number of bills that were left behind. I have no idea how much is here, but it's the last thing on my mind as I shuffle down the hall and into the dressing area. When I get there, I practically run into Lyric who is waiting for me with a hug.

"You were amazing!" She squeezes me tightly.

Before I have a chance to thank her—or to even think—the door to the dressing room bursts open, and Drew enters.

His face is impassive. I can't tell if he's mad. If he is, is it with fury or lust?

He grabs Haven's robe off the back of her chair then drapes it around me. He ties it at the waist, leaving my arms to clutch my chest as he gathers the empty sleeves in one fist. Tugging me along behind him, he escorts me out of the room and into his office across the hall.

My spine stiffens as we enter, going back to the same emotional state I was in the last time I was in this room, less than twenty-four hours ago. It's crazy how four walls can hold such explosive passion like we've felt when he's fucked me on his desk. And at the same time, such pain and heartbreak like what we both experienced last night.

I continue into the room and hear the door close behind me. Drew engages the lock, and I turn to face him. I'm terrified but desperate to know what he's thinking.

My breathing quickens as anticipation eats away at me. Finally, Drew faces me, and something inside me snaps. I begin sobbing as thick tears gush from my eyes. I know I've made another mistake, even without him telling me. No longer able to wait for him to speak, I begin blubbering my apologies.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I thought it would make you happy since we were short two dancers."

I can't bring myself to throw Josie under the bus. And I'll need her on my side when Drew is through chastising me.

It takes him one step before he's in front of me, cupping my face, pulling me into him, and once again holding my body as it trembles.

"What on earth are you apologizing for, pretty girl?"

I feel his voice vibrating in his chest, and I wonder if I heard wrong. Were his words garbled since my ear was pressed against him, and I only thought I heard him correctly?

I push away from him so I can see his face and make sure I didn't imagine it. When I notice his smile and the light in his eyes, I breathe a little easier.

"You're not angry?" My sobbing slows.

“Why on earth would I be angry? I love you for doing what you did... Doing it for me.”

My first genuine smile in days tugs on the corners of my lips.

“And you were incredible. So incredible, in fact...” He doesn’t finish with words. Instead, he grabs himself over his pants, and his eyes darken with lust, just like they did out on the floor.

“I was so nervous, I couldn’t possibly have been as good as you’re insinuating,” I gripe, wiping away the tears from my cheeks.

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

Drew rips open the robe, and it falls to the ground. Then he forces my arms open, away from my chest. Money rains to the floor surrounding my stripper shoes along with the bra top and two sheer pieces of *clothing* I had on.

“Do you know how much money must be here?”

Drew picks some of it up off the floor. In just one handful, I see countless twenties, two fifties, and a lone hundred-dollar bill. There’s at least three times that’s still stuck in the elastic of my thong and on the floor.

“Come here,” Drew commands, dropping the money to the floor and grabbing my hand.

He leads me to his wall of monitors above the horizontal file cabinet before sitting behind his computer. I know what he’s doing, and I don’t want any part of it.

“Drew...” I turn to him, covering myself with my arms. “Please just delete it...”

He looks at me with a serious stare.

“First of all, never hide yourself from me.” When his eyes shift to my hands, cupping my breasts, I slowly remove them.

“Good girl,” he winks, and the twinge of desire returns to my lower belly.



He turns back to the computer screen, and I hear him tap out a few keystrokes followed by a click of the mouse as he continues speaking. “Second, I’m fucking dying to watch your performance again. There’s no way I’m deleting this clip. Ever.”

He walks back over to me then turns me to face the screen. He stands with his chest to my back, and I feel him tug at the elastic band of my thong before I hear the sound of fabric ripping. The band loosens as both it and the money that was tucked into it floats to the ground.

“This is Haven’s outfit, Drew.”

“I’ll make sure she’s reimbursed for it. Plus, I never want anyone else wearing it ever again. I want to remember how *you* looked in it and you alone.”

His words strengthen the building fire within me, and my desire vibrates back to life. His chin rests on my shoulder as he whispers in my ear, “I want to play while we enjoy the show together.”

The moment I hear the DJ announcing me on the screen, Drew pushes his knee through my legs, opening them wider. Snaking his arms around my body, one hand lands on my breast as the other slithers between my slit.

“Mmm,” he moans, feeling the wetness settled there. “Were you wet for me on stage, pretty girl?”

“Yes,” I pant, my breath hitching.

As the music begins, his fingers tweak my nipple at the same moment as his other fingers tickle my clit. A zing of electricity runs haywire through my body, shocking me and sending pins and needles all the way to my hands and feet. I can’t hold back the moan that escapes me.

“Look at those men, Delilah... See their expressions?” His movements pick up as he speaks. My breathing increases, but Drew mistakes the source of my lust. “Look at that... Your chest heaves stronger as you watch them with their eyes glued to you.”

“No, I...” I protest, weakly. I do see the men on the screen, but I don’t care about them. I only care about how one man views me, and that’s Drew.

“You can’t deny it, Delilah. You can’t tell me these men aren’t infatuated with you... With *my* girl...”

I abandon my previous challenge and relax into his hold. It’s hard with these clodhoppers on my feet, but I choose to focus on Drew’s fingers anyway.

As we continue watching, I feel Drew’s cock digging into my ass, even from beneath his jeans. He rubs against me, moaning as the friction builds more pleasure within him.

He removes his hand from my nipple briefly, then I feel his knuckles on my ass. I hear his belt coming loose before he unzips his pants, then I feel them slide down the backs of my legs as they drop.

Drew’s breathing increases, and when I look behind me, I see his fist closed tightly around his cock as he rubs it vigorously up and down his shaft.

He removes his hand from between my legs, and I hear him laugh softly when I whine.

“Just a minute, sexy girl,” he pants, as he removes his shirt and falls to his knees behind me. “Bend over for me, Delilah. Put your hands on the file cabinet to hold yourself up.”

Fueled by both lust and curiosity, I do as he says. He runs his hands over my hips and ass as though he’s exploring my body for the first time all over again. I can only see so much of him through my spread legs, but I can see his cock.

Fisting it again, he leans forward, and a second later, I feel his tongue on me.

“Oh god... Drew,” I moan loudly, my eyes closing with the weight of my lust.

I only open them when I feel Drew’s hands at my feet. Tugging the shoes off me, finally, he tosses them to the side. With his tongue still sliding in and out of my pussy, he brings

his hands to my ass cheeks, spreading me wide so he can explore what's between them.

He licks up, climbing until he reaches my tight ring of nerves. Pushing his tongue inside of it feels incredible. It's not something I've experienced before. It's not something I thought I'd ever want to experience, but right now, with *this* Drew, and as worked up as I am...

It's fucking heaven.

Drew takes his time back there, relaxing me, working me further into a frenzy before lifting one of my legs and spinning around so his back is against the file cabinet, and my pussy is perfectly in line with his mouth.

"Come here, tasty girl..." His lips latch onto my clit at the same time as one of his fingers enters my pussy. Twirling it around, he makes sure his finger is thickly coated with moisture before placing it on my asshole.

Slowly, agonizingly so, he slips it in at the same time as his thumb enters my pussy. Sparks fly at the intense pressure and delicious friction coupled with the flicking of his tongue against my clit.

"Oh, Drew!" I cry out, already on the verge of an orgasm. "I'm go—"

But it's too late. Before I can get the words out, I explode onto his tongue. Looking down, I capture the scene through the dots lining my vision as my body threatens to collapse.

I watch as liquid flows out of the corners of Drew's mouth, over his chin and down his chest. His feral moans of pleasure have him tugging on my clit so strongly, his fingers still working vigorously in and out, that I come again before my initial orgasm is spent.

This time, he removes his mouth from me, and I gush all over his dick, the floor, the money strewn about. He rubs my clit intensely with his free hand, forcing more moisture from me.

"Fuck, Delilah..." he growls my name.

When my orgasm finally tapers off, Drew removes his fingers and stands.

“Open up, dirty girl,” he commands, eyes hooded, a dangerous level of lust painted on his face.

My jaw immediately goes lax, powerless to deny him. He slides both index fingers along my tongue, and I taste all parts of myself as my mouth closes on its own.

Wanting to tease him, desperate to show him how much I want this, want him, I suck his fingers as though they are his cock. I grip his wrists with strong hands, pushing and pulling his fingers through my lips endlessly, until he looks ready to snap.

Suddenly, he pulls his hands from my grip and spins my body around before I have time to register what’s happening. Bending me over, his cock finds my entrance, then he pounds into me fiercely. If he didn’t have such a strong hold on me, he would have bucked me clear across the room.

My arms shoot forward toward a bar stool he keeps in here. But it’s just out of reach for me to steady myself. Somehow through his lust, he sees my struggle and walks me forward until my entire body is bent over the padded seat.

Then it’s game on.

He fucks me harder than I’ve ever been fucked before.

He fucks his anger from the past two days out.

He fucks every apology I could have ever uttered from my lips.

He fucks me stupid.

It’s raw.

Emotional.

Necessary.

Healing.

When he’s finished, I can’t speak.

I can’t stand.

I can't feel.

I can't comprehend what he's saying.

I don't know how much time passes.

I don't know where I am.

I don't know who I am.

The last thing I remember is him covering me with a blanket and whispering the sweetest words I've ever heard in my ear.

*I love you.*

# CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

## DELILAH

My eyes sluggishly flutter open, heavier than I ever remember them being, when I finally come to. It's dark in the room, and I briefly wonder where I am when I catch the faint scent of Drew's cologne in the air.

I try to stretch for my phone to check the time, but Drew's arms are wound tight around me. My movement causes him to stir.

"Uh-uh," Drew growls, "Not letting you go."

Powerless, my body goes lax, and I snuggle back into his chest.

"What happened?" I inquire, curious why I don't remember anything after going into his office at the club.

With a laugh, Drew answers me. "I fucked you senseless, and you passed out on the couch in my office. Brought you home shortly after."

His bedroom voice beckons my desire, and it slowly begins to churn within the pits of my stomach.

"God, I needed it..." he admits, running his hands over my hips and down between my legs.

"Same," I whisper as I rock my hips and rub my ass against his rigid cock. "I need more, Drew."

Without another word, he answers my plea by rolling me onto my back and pushing through me. It hurts, but he takes his time until I get comfortable.

“I love you,” I whisper, trepidation in my tone.

I’ve never said it to him first, always waiting to hear it from him.

I’ve been too scared to initiate it out of fear that my sentiment won’t be returned.

That my fear of being unlovable will be proven true.

I can’t see his face, but he halts, still deep inside me before speaking.

“I love my pretty girl, my good girl, so damn much.”

His lips claim mine. With a desperate whimper, his tongue pushes through them as though he’ll die without a taste. I open for him as his hips begin to move once more.

And he pleasures me until I shatter all over again.



This time when my eyes open, the room is filled with sunlight, and the thick scent of sex hangs in the air.

Grabbing my phone, I check the time and panic when I realize it’s three in the afternoon. Fuck, I was supposed to be at work two hours ago.

Why didn’t my alarm go off?

With one foot on the floor, ready to hop in the shower, Drew enters with a tray of food. The rich scent of coffee dances into my nostrils. Between that and Drew’s jovial smile, I relax a little.

“Good morning. Don’t get up. I brought you some breakfast.”

“I was supposed to be at work at one,” I protest, worried even though he appears unfazed.



“After you passed out last night, I moved a few things around on the schedule. Don’t worry, you don’t need to be there until six now.”

Filled with relief, I fall back onto the bed as Drew’s chuckle echoes throughout the room. When he begins to lower the tray over my legs, I tuck the sheet under my arms and sit up with my back resting against the pillow.

“This is so sweet of you, thank you so much. You always know exactly what I need.” I place a hand over Drew’s cheek then pull him in for a kiss before he backs away again.

“I’m really happy to hear you say that,” he says with a smile.

He’s dressed in a fitted white T-shirt and gray sweatpants. Both his pecs and his cock jut out, causing my saliva to thicken and my stomach to rumble.

“My girl is hungry, huh? You worked up quite an appetite from all the strenuous exercise you got last night... And again early this morning.” He winks, and I blush, recalling the fuzzy details. “Not to mention your epic performance on stage.” He rearranges himself with his last sentence.

“The money!” I gasp, suddenly remembering it on the ground in Drew’s office.

“Is drying out in the basement of the club.”

*Talk about filthy money.*

I recall how it got wet in the first place, and like clockwork, moisture drips from between my legs onto the sheets beneath me.

“As soon as it is, I’ll deposit it for you. I don’t want you walking around with that kind of cash in your pocket.”

“You think it’s safe in the basement? Won’t someone steal it if they find it there?” I worry.

“Nah, the basement door is locked, and I’m the only one with the key,” Drew explains, making me feel better.

“How much was there?” I pick up my coffee and take a sip.

No amount will ever get me back up on that stage, but that doesn't mean I'm not curious.

“Twelve seventy-three.” A proud gleam shines from Drew's eye and bathes me in warmth. The shock of how much I made hits me.

“Twelve hundred dollars?” I choke, and carefully put my coffee cup back on the tray.

“Twelve hundred and seventy-three dollars,” Drew repeats. “I've never seen anything like it. At least not at Spotlight. There are girls who used to work for me who moved to some of the larger clubs. They make double that on a busy night.”

“Holy shit...” I breathe.

“I'm not surprised.” He winks, pulling his cell phone from his pocket. “It's Keith. I need to take this.”

He answers, entering the hallway and closing the bedroom door behind him. Keith is Drew's tech guru. They've been discussing a website overhaul, and when I hear Drew explain that he uploaded something this morning, I'm assuming that's what the call is about.

After a brief discussion, Drew enters the bedroom again, kisses me on the top of my head, then walks into the bathroom, leaving me to eat my breakfast in peace.



Walking into the club tonight feels different. Part of me feels empowered that I worked through my fear and got up on that stage last night. Doing it for Drew, and in a way, for myself.

And everyone loved me.

But there is also a sense of shame for what I did. Part of me feels like I cheapened myself by allowing everyone to see me like that. That I allowed them to glimpse the part of me that I promised not to give away freely anymore.

*It wasn't free... Or cheap... You made \$1,200.*

But when I'm hit with encouraging smiles from Josie, a high-five from Ethan, and a round of applause from a couple of regulars who were here last night, I can't help but smile. I feel like a damn celebrity.

And I wasn't *forced* into doing it. I did it because I wanted to please Drew.

*I made that decision. No one else.*

Josie may have helped me realize it, but without that push, Drew probably still wouldn't be talking to me. Pride wouldn't beam from his eyes the way it has all day, and we wouldn't have had such earth-shattering sex in the early hours of the morning.

If nothing else, that's all I need to prove to myself it was the right thing to do.

"Hey, ladies," I greet Jade and Cherish who appear to be back to full health. "Feeling better?"

"Yes, but it was touch and go for a bit," Jade laughs, and Cherish nods in agreement next to her. "We heard you made a surprise appearance last night."

"Yes, it was *certainly* a surprise." Wanting to end the conversation there, I add, "Well, I'm glad you're back."

I smile as I put my bag down and fish out my server's uniform.

"Why are you putting that on?" Jade nods to the black spandex in my hand, confusing me.

"What do you mean?" I hold up the top to make sure I have the correct one, and my brows furrow in confusion when I confirm it's the right shirt.

“Um, you’re on the schedule as a dancer tonight,” Jade points her thumb to the clipboard on the wall behind her.

There must be some mistake. I walk to the wall and check today’s schedule of events. Sure enough, I’m on it.

“This ... can’t be right,” I say to no one.

Shuffling through the pages behind it, I check the schedule for the next week. I’m on as a dancer every day but one, only because I’m off that day.

With the clipboard in hand, I walk out of the dressing room and across the hall into Drew’s office. Josie is in there with him. The office smells like disinfectant, and there is a high-powered fan sitting on the floor, drying the carpet.

My cheeks heat, knowing what caused the mess, and I swallow down my embarrassment.

Holding up the clipboard, I speak.

“Sorry to interrupt,” I look from Josie to Drew. “Can I talk to you for a minute?”

“Sure,” Drew answers, and Josie excuses herself, closing the door behind her. “What’s up, pretty girl?”

Scared to rile things up between us when they’ve taken such a positive turn in the last day, I proceed with caution.

“I’m a little confused, and I’m hoping you can explain something.” I show him the clipboard, thinking it will speak for itself.

“Of course, what is it?” Taking it from me, he places it down on his desk, maintaining his eye contact.

I groan inwardly, realizing he’s going to make me spell it out for him. I want to demand he remove me from the schedule and tell me why he thinks he has the right to change my job title without consulting me first.

But I don’t.

Remaining calm, I simply say, “Well, um... I’m on the schedule as a dancer the rest of the week. Not as a server. I’m just not sure why.”

Drew smiles at me in a way that I've seen before, though it's never been directed at me until now. It's the smile he reserves for people who should already know the answer to their question. People who are wasting his time by even asking it in the first place.

"Yeah, I told you earlier, I moved a few things around on the schedule," he explains, mildly irritated. "You didn't have an issue with it then, what's the problem now?"

I shift my weight from one foot to the other as an uncomfortable chill skitters up my spine. I swallow, recognizing the warning signs that I've missed—or didn't want to see—in the past.

"I'm so sorry, Drew," I put the blame on me, trying to diffuse the situation before it blows up. "I didn't realize you meant you moved me from server to dancer."

"Delilah, you're the hottest fucking girl in this club. And I'm not just saying that because I'm biased. The numbers don't lie. You pulled in the most money in a single night than I've seen in a very long time. Both in your own personal tips as well as in beer and liquor sales."

His previously cheery demeanor is slipping. I don't know what to say. How to tell him it was a one-night only performance. He's the first to break the silence.

"It would be a stupid business decision to *not* change your role."

Likening me to a business decision stings. And it causes my calm to crumble, even at the risk of losing the warm, compassionate Drew from last night. From this morning.

But he told me once that I have the power to say no. Look at what I've already done for him. And I love making him happy, but not in the way he's been suggesting recently. And his happiness is so short-lived before he quickly comes up with something else to ask of me.

It's a toxic cycle that I didn't realize I was tumbling through until this very moment.

Comfort.

Request.

Denial.

Argument.

Punishment.

Pleading.

Reconciliation.

Repeat.

I can't believe it's taken me this long to identify his pattern of behavior. I was lost in the whirlwind he swept me up in from the night we first met. But it's time I put my foot down and stand up for myself, my morals, and my values.

"Did it occur to you to at least run it by me first? To give me the option?" I assert my displeasure toward his bold employment maneuver.

But I know before I finish speaking that I've gone too far, and it suddenly feels like I've put my foot down on a landmine.

So much for standing up for myself.

His amicable expression falls, replaced with anger and annoyance. Standing, he stalks toward me, and I regret coming in here.

"No, *Delilah*. It didn't occur to me because this is *my* business. *My* fucking club."

I shuffle backward as his speed increases, and one of his hands finds my neck as he backs me up into the door. With his other hand, he roughly fists the hair at the nape of my neck, pulling my head back so I'm looking up at him. Directly into his eyes.

"I own *it*, just like I own *you*. So if I tell you to dance, you're going to fucking dance. Got it?"

His lip snarls, baring his teeth, and I tremble against the wooden door behind me. But something inside me snaps. This is different than consenting to dance to make him happy. Last I

checked, *no one* owns me. I may work for him, live with him, fuck him... But I'm my own person, and I decide what I do with my body.

*Where the fuck has this girl been all my fucking life? Or at least for the past couple weeks?*

"No." My voice shakes, but my stance is clear.

"Excuse me?" he growls but with less of a bite than a second ago. He's probably baffled by my rejection.

"No," I repeat, shuddering. "After the lap dance, you told me I could say no. That you would never force me to do something I didn't want to do. And I don't want to do this."

I don't know how I was able to get each and every word out without losing my nerve, my voice, without fainting from fear, but I did.

Drew looks no less furious than before, but he lets go of me. His eyes shuffle between mine as though he's unsure who I am all of a sudden.

Without moving, I remain up against the door, uncertain and terrified of what will happen next.

Reaching forward again, Drew locks the door to his office. Before I even have a chance to blink, the back of Drew's hand connects with the corner of my mouth.

I haven't been hit since I was fifteen years old. The last time produced the black eye that changed my entire life.

Stars burst in my vision as memories I've tried to keep buried resurface, one right after the other.

All of them starring my father.

He's hitting me.

Touching me.

Pinning me under the full burden of his weight.

Pushing inside of me.

Choking me.

Spreading me.

Pinching me.

The memories are too much to bear, and I fall to the floor, tucking myself into the fetal position at Drew's feet. Left questioning everything he's ever said to me.

Everything he's ever done or made me do.

Every time he's ever told me he's loved me.

The first time was when he was trying to convince me to move in with him. He followed his words with the most earth-shattering love making. He's been using his touch as a means to make me more agreeable to his every whim since the very beginning.

After that, I only recall him rewarding me with the three little words I craved hearing *after* I'd performed for him.

After he begged me to strip privately for him.

After giving the stranger the lap dance.

After getting naked on stage for a roomful of strangers all for the sake of restoring his happiness in me.

When his glee over my actions, regardless of whether I wanted to perform the task or not, was at its pinnacle.

Because he knows how fucking hard up I am for it.

*For love.*

It's become an obsession the more my mind tries to convince me I'll never be worthy of it.

I won't pretend I know the first thing about love, but this can't be how you treat someone you care that much for. It doesn't make sense.

But it's how my father treated me... He told me he loved me all the time.

If this *is* love, I'm not sure I want it.

If this is love, then why does everyone else seem so happy?

Is it different for everyone?



Why do some get epic tales of devotion while others get shit on?

Royce never told me he loved me, and maybe I should be thankful for it. He hurt me, but never like this. Never like my father.

I should have kept my mouth shut and done what Drew asked until I was able to get as far away from him as possible. Realizing exactly how deep into his clutches I am, I don't know that I'll ever get the chance now.

My body trembles and shudders as I shed large, sloppy tears and mutter unintelligibly. Even I have no idea what I'm trying to say.

Am I begging Drew for forgiveness?

Am I begging him to let me go?

Am I begging him to kill me and put me out of my misery?

I feel something tug on my hair, and my watery gaze is forced on Drew again. He's on his haunches next to me. His boots in front of my face.

"Delilah... I've been telling you almost since the moment we met. You. Are. Mine. I decide what you will and won't do."

That's not what I thought he meant when he said it in the past. Clearly, I've been mistaken by his words and their meaning several times over the past few months.

He lets go of my hair and stands up.

"Get yourself together and up on the sofa. What I tell you next is going to be *very* important. I don't want you missing any part of it."

He walks back to his desk, turning off the loud fan as he goes, and I contemplate never moving from this spot. But I know he'll force me onto that sofa if I don't go on my own. The last thing I want is for him to put his hands on me again.

Wiping my tears, I sit up and pull myself onto the sofa. Sniffling, I keep my face toward the wall so I don't have to look at him while I wait.

For several agonizing minutes, I listen to him open and close his desk drawers and shuffle through papers, wondering what other bombs he could possibly have to drop on me.

# CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

## DELILAH

The wood from Drew's desk drawer slams shut, startling my already quivering form.

"You know, Delilah, I didn't want to have to resort to this."

I don't turn in his direction. I couldn't possibly meet his eyes.

"Things were going so well. Since the beginning, I would steer you in the direction I needed you to go. When your stubbornness got in my way, all I'd have to do was show you an ounce of affection to make you pliable."

Hearing my own revelation on his tongue causes my self-hatred to spread through me like wildfire.

My tears have slowed, but there's no stopping them at this point. His betrayal sinks into the pit of my soul and desiccates me from the inside out.

And I don't know if I'm more disgusted with Drew or with myself for being so fucking stupid.

"A passionate kiss. A perfectly timed compliment. A lover's touch. Anything like that and you'd cater to my every demand. You should be thanking me for cracking the hardened shell you were locked inside of when I first met you. Look at how you've flourished since then."

He's delusional, but he really has made me feel as though I've been empowering myself ever since he got his claws in me. It's hard not to be thankful to him for making me *feel* that way, even after learning those feelings are false.

*Think about what you just said... And you think he's delusional?*

I hear Drew's footsteps come to a halt in front of the sofa, but I still can't look at him. I can't allow him to see how badly I'm hurting.

Physically.

Emotionally.

I can't stand the thought of showing him the pain he's caused me.

"But I'm growing tired of the process. I'm ready for results."

His hand comes into my view, and I loathe how my body begins to melt into the gentle way he caresses my chin with his index finger.

Taking a deep breath, I give in and finally meet his stare. The Drew I've come to know and ... love ... isn't the one who's looking back at me.

He grabs one of the chairs sitting in front of his desk, turns it around, then takes a seat. My eyes leave his and land on the manilla folder in his hands.

Before I can ask what's in it, he speaks again. "You're my pretty girl, Delilah. And you're going to make me a lot of money. Do you know why?"

For the first time, hearing Drew call me his *pretty girl* makes me want to throw up rather than bring me any amount of joy. My face droops, and I turn my gaze to the floor.

"Hmm?" Drew leans forward and drags his finger through the curtain of hair hanging in front of my face. Tucking it behind my ear, he traces his finger down my cheek, stopping at the corner of my mouth.

The same corner that burns from the pain of his backhand.

I grimace, and when he pulls his hand away, I notice a tiny red spot on his fingertip. My tongue instinctively licks along

my lips, cringing at the metallic taste of blood in the crevasse where they meet.

“I shouldn’t have done that...” Drew sighs, and my head lifts in surprise. I never expected an apology from him. “Not many people get a hard-on watching a girl dance with a busted lip.”

He exhales, giving his head a slight shake as though he’s disappointed in me for bleeding. I close my eyes, and another tear rolls down my face when I realize he’s not sorry for hitting me. Not in the way I thought he was.

My father never apologized either. The similarities between him and Drew that I realized a couple days ago, but denied profusely, are resurfacing now.

I’d give anything to go back and listen to Maggie the day I moved out. To go back to when Royce came here to check on me and asked me to come home. He wouldn’t have to ask. This time, I would beg him to take me.

Thinking back to our conversation, I recall how worried he was about me. At the time, I thought it was all related to the attack at the store, but now... It feels like there’s more he wasn’t telling me.

Why?

If he knew something about Drew, why didn’t he mention it?

Briefly, I wonder where he is and what he’s doing.

Does he still want me to return?

Is he glad I stayed behind that night?

God, what I said to him ... and how I said it. I remember the hurt in his eyes as I turned away from him for the last time.

Drew fists my hair unexpectedly and forces my attention back on him. Apparently, he’d been talking, but I’d let thoughts of Royce consume me deeply the way they once did and tuned Drew out.

“Earth to Delilah... Do I have your attention now?” He squeezes harder, ripping a painful gasp from me.

“Yes!” I cry out, hands flying to my head. My fingers trying desperately—and failing—to dig beneath his to loosen his grasp.

“You may want to fucking pay attention considering your entire life is about to change.” He lets go of my hair with a violent push against my head. My arms fly out, catching myself before I faceplant into the back of the sofa.

“I’m sorry,” I cry.

*Why am I apologizing?*

It’s all I know how to do. For weeks, I’ve felt myself retreating into old habits, all while fighting to remember who I am and all the hell I’ve fought through to get to the place I’m in today.

But right now?

It’s as though that part of me never existed.

I may as well be the helpless little girl I used to be all over again. Scared out of my mind and willing to do and say anything just to survive until tomorrow.

The only difference is, I don’t know if I want to fight to survive any longer.

“In here,” Drew lifts the folder, “are all the details I could come up with surrounding the death of your father.”

Ice freezes my blood, and my eyes widen at the mention of my father’s death.

*Fuck.*

*Shit.*

I remember letting it slip to Drew that he was dead. Since learning his true fate, I’ve never uttered those words to anyone. I knew I fucked up then, but I never pictured it coming back to bite me in the ass. Drew had just saved me from my attackers. He’d brought me back to his house and taken such sweet care of me.

How did we get here from there?

*It was never real.*

The truth aids the venom rolling through my veins, adding its own bitter sting to the poison.

He opens the folder and begins rifling through the pages inside of it as more tears fall.

“The police report that was filed was for a missing person. Not a death. It states there was no trace of foul play in your trailer. No mention of a search for a body, and obviously, one was never recovered. Yet you assume he’s dead? I mean, that’s what you told me, at least.”

*Oh, fuck.*

“I don’t know if he’s dead for real, but he’s dead to me.” I lie. “What’s the difference?”

I grew up being able to produce any lie or excuse I needed to end suspicious lines of questioning that came my way. Whether it be from a teacher, classmate, doctor, Maggie, or otherwise. I always had an answer in my back pocket, ready to dowse whatever scruples someone had regarding my wellbeing. The most important rule of my father’s was deny, deny, deny. Even more important than pleasing him. Though some could argue that my success at evading questioning brought him a different kind of pleasure.

Royce was the only one who saw through my lies.

Until now.

Drew clicks his tongue and rolls his eyes. “Delilah... Unless you want me to chain you up in the basement of this club for the rest of your life, you’re going to need to realize that I’m not stupid.”

I peer into his eyes, trying to decipher whether or not he’s telling the truth.

Lock me in the basement?

Where?

How?



Wouldn't someone find me down there?

Oh. Right.

It's interesting that I learned he's the only one with a key to the basement just this morning. Did he want me to find out then?

My question goes both unasked and unanswered. And Drew continues.

"You told me your father died when you were fifteen. There's no way you would have been smart enough or capable enough at that age to kill him without leaving some kind of trace behind."

*No. Please don't go where I think you're going.*

"Which means your Royal Bastards friends likely had a hand in it. It was Royce, right? Your *boyfriend*? Your *knight-in shining armor*?"

He laughs humorlessly as my brows furrow in question.

"I've heard you moan his name in your sleep before. I know exactly how you feel about him, especially after seeing the two of you together that night. It's pathetic that you'd pine after someone who fucked you then tossed you aside like a whore. But I guess it makes sense. Your daddy didn't set a good example of what it takes to be a man. Figures you'd fall for someone just like him."

With each dig, Drew's words carve further into the scars of my past until the pain steals my breath away.

If only he was capable of realizing how much like my father *he* is.

"Actually, I know it was him. I was going to wait and watch you squirm. See what other kinds of lies you'd try to feed me, but I can't. Really, it's the best part."

An evil smile spreads on Drew's face as he pulls a few photos from the back of the folder.

"A key piece of evidence the cops failed to seize during their search. But a little sweet talking and a few eight balls of

coke and your former next-door neighbor gave me the smoking gun.”

He throws the pictures on my lap. As much as I don't want to look, I can't not. I grab them, one by one, and study each of them. Between my shaky hands and my tears, I can't comprehend what I'm seeing. Swiping the moisture from my eyes once more and taking a deep breath, I'm finally able to hold them steady enough for the images to become clear.

The pictures are very dark, but there's no mistaking the patch-covered vests in the image. To an outsider, the two men in the photo may be indiscernible. But I'd recognize them anywhere. Especially Royce.

It's him and Draven through what appear to be thick, horizontal stripes across the image. They're standing at the corner of my old trailer. Royce looks almost directly into the lens of the camera that took this photo.

*How is it possible he didn't see someone taking his picture?*

The stripes must be blinds that the person who shot this picture was hiding behind. If they hadn't been taken at night, I'm sure Royce would have spotted the photographer.

In the next two pictures, they're retreating from the trailer, but this time they're carrying something—my father's dead body.

Had his head been angled the other way, there's no way these pictures would be quite as damning as they are. But I can see my father's face, clear as day.

I haven't laid eyes on him in five years. Seeing him again, even only in a picture, rips a sob from my chest. It's not sorrow for his fate or his absence but a crushing reminder of nearly a decade's worth of pain he caused by his own hand.

Pain that never left.

Pain that will haunt me for the rest of my life.

“So here's the deal...” Once again, Drew brings me back to the present. “You're going to do what I tell you, when I tell

you, and without complaint, or else I'm going to take this folder to Gettysburg's finest and tell them they need to look into the *murder* of one Clint Stewart."

I flinch at the mention of my father's name.

"Wh-why didn't this person turn the pictures in to the police five years ago?"

"Something about hating cops. She also said she somehow knew your dad hurt you and thought she was helping by staying quiet."

It's sad, but I don't even know the name of the woman I used to live next to. Unless I was going to Maggie's house or school, I never left the trailer. I never spoke to any of my neighbors.

"I ran into her as I was snooping around your old stomping ground. I knew someone had to have seen something. She described what she saw that night and told me she'd exchange the evidence for the right price. I got her the drugs she wanted ... she coughed up the photos. Here we are."

"I don't understand... Did you plan all of this? For what? Why?"

I immediately regret asking any questions when the smug grin materializes on his face.

"Delilah, I've had you pegged since the moment I first met you. The air around you was clouded with vulnerability. Other people may have seen you as closed off or distant. But I focused on the way your eyes barely met mine, your tentative movements. It was more than being shy or socially awkward. I made you uncomfortable—the way all men do. It was in the way you silently begged for approval, both from others and from me. And I was happy to oblige in order to mold you further into the person I needed you to be."

I hate myself even more now.

I've always felt like an easy target.

I'd thought Drew cared for me *in spite of* my insecurities. But listening to him describe how easy it was to target me

*because of them* pushes me further down the spiral I'm quickly descending.

“Every decision you've made since we met has been meticulously curated by me based on how I needed that situation to end up. At times with the help of some friends.”

A knock on the door brings me relief. I sit up a little taller, hopeful whoever it is will be able to help me get out of this situation.

Until Drew speaks again.

“Ah, perfect timing.”

# CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

## DELILAH

A renewed disquiet fills me as Drew unlocks the door, and I watch as Ethan and Josie walk through it.

He must have texted them at some point.

The lack of surprise or concern on their faces as they regard my appearance blankets me in a new wave of grief. They're not going to help me. They've been in Drew's back pocket this entire time.

Josie props herself up on the barstool Drew fucked me over last night, and Ethan looms menacingly behind Drew's chair.

"I was just telling Delilah," Drew takes his seat again. "About the decisions we've helped her make these past couple months."

I lower my gaze, unable to look at any of them. Unwilling to let them see me like this.

"In order for my plan to work, I needed you close to me at all times. I talked you into moving out, but stubbornly, you wanted to try to make it on your own. I understood, but that really would have hindered my timetable."

My head snaps back to his when I pick up on where this is heading.

"I also needed you to quit your job, but I knew convincing you of that wasn't going to be easy. So I had to resort to drastic measures."

Ethan chooses that moment to crack his neck, the sound ricocheting around the room. When my attention snaps to him, I see the same sinister gleam I remember seeing the night of my attack.

And that's when it clicks.

Why something about him has always felt ... off.

Why he's always made me feel uneasy.

Ice settles in my veins, chilling my entire body to its core. Teeth clattering, my eyes shoot from Drew to Ethan to Josie on a loop. Each of them proudly wearing their own fucked-up version of an evil smile on their face.

"I never thought you'd make it past an introduction with Ethan. Thought for sure you'd place him immediately, and we'd have to take our plan in a different direction. Perhaps you blocked his recognizable form from your memory. He's been waiting patiently to finish what he started that night at Mathieu."

Frozen in shock, I don't move a muscle as Drew leans in and whispers, "Remain on your best behavior, pretty girl, or I'll give him the green light."

As he scoots back, memories of the attack at Mathieu flash in my mind, unbidden. When my eyes meet Ethan's again, the unmistakable hunger I saw in them that night is back.

Mocking me.

Terrorizing me.

Wrenching a new level of agony from me I never knew existed.

"It was a brilliant plan, if I do say so. It killed three birds with one stone. It got you to move in with me. It pushed you to quit your job. And it made me the hero in your story. Perfection."

Pulling my legs up onto the sofa, I wrap my arms around them.

“I can’t listen to any more. *Please stop,*” I mutter my plea into my knees.

Drew’s tongue clicks. “Can’t do that. I’m afraid we have a little more information to impart on you first.”

I keep my head down, doing my best to tune him out, but as he continues laying out his diabolical plan, I realize my situation is about to go from bad to worse.

“In the past several years, I’ve revitalized this place from the run-down club it used to be. But there’s only so much I can do in-house to grow my business. To expand my wealth and status. I took my ideas to Josie and Ethan, and they agreed with the direction I wanted to take the club. Once we dealt with the previous owner, there was nothing else standing in our way. Except finding the perfect girl.”

I swallow, knowing I’m not ready to hear more.

“For the past month, I’ve been advertising your services online. I’m not surprised that the response has been incredible so far.”

Bile once again rises in my throat as I consider his statement.

*Advertising my services?*

Suddenly, I remember overhearing part of his conversation with Keith this morning. About something he’d uploaded.

My heart plummets into the pits of my stomach as the realization hits me.

“How long have you been recording me?” I can barely whisper, my voice overtaken by anguish.

Drew looks at Josie before smiling proudly. It was always one of my favorite expressions of his. Now it strangles me, threatening to steal my life away.

“You’re so smart when you try, Delilah. I got an audio recording from the first time we made love. Do you remember that night? In your room... You tried so hard to be quiet, despite my best efforts to let everyone in that house know exactly who you belonged to.”



Of course, I remember that night. God, I wish I could forget it now. And I cringe further when I see Ethan rearrange himself. It's worse, being reminded of that night with him and Josie here.

“That was my experiment. It's what this whole production was based off of. ‘The Destruction of Delilah.’ From innocent girl to high-priced harlot. I uploaded it, giving everyone their first taste of you for free. You wouldn't believe the number of requests I got for video footage after that. People wanted more of you, of your innocence.”

Knowing that our first time together, and how special it was to me at one time, has been perverted in such a manner, steals away another part of my soul. If I had the means, I would end my life here and now without so much as a second thought.

“Since the time you moved in with me, I've been recording your every move. At home... In the bedroom... The bathroom... The main level... Here at the club, I've recorded you as you completed mundane tasks such as waiting tables as well as each of your performances.”

It has to be shock that's keeping me still and silent at this point. Disbelief. I'm waiting for Drew to end this and tell me it was all a joke.

A mindfuck.

My father got off on doing that to me too.

“Giving your viewers the chance to observe as I molded you. As I unraveled you bit by bit, breaking you down for them. So by the time they get their hands on you, you'll be pliable and subservient and ready to feed their every craving.

“You wouldn't believe how many people enjoy simply watching you do everyday tasks. Brushing your teeth, folding laundry, going to the bathroom... But a great deal more of them enjoy the good stuff. Your bestselling video is, by far, the night we had after that fucker had his hands on you outside the club.”

*Royce.*

“The manic anticipation written on your face as you apologized to me, begging me for my forgiveness like a good little girl who knew she’d fucked up. And the brutal punishment that followed. There are some fucked people out there, you know that? There were so many comments on that video from people begging me for a snuff film next.”

Finally, I snap. That’s all I can take before I can’t hear anymore. Covering my ears, I hum to myself, refusing to listen to him any longer.

I just want this to end.

“Delilah, just this morning you told me I always know exactly what you need. And right now, you need to listen.” Drew orders, pulling my hands away from my ears. “I don’t trust that you fully comprehend what’s ahead of you. I need to make sure you’re prepared, because if you fuck up again... If you try to say no... Disobey me... Try to run... Anything stupid like that, it could be a matter of life-and-death. For you, not for me.”

My body gives out, and I slump onto my side on the sofa. I curl into the fetal position, needing comfort and knowing the only person I’ll get any from is me. I can’t hear anymore. I can’t handle saying goodbye to the life I’ve gained, even if it was a lie.

I’d rather give in to the fabrication and be blissfully unaware than have to face the bitter truth.

“Please cut the theatrics so we can get through this, Delilah. You have to be on stage in thirty minutes.”

*Don’t forget who you are.*

My conscience manages to break through my anguish. I need to take this one step at a time. Listen to Drew. Make him think I’m submitting. Get through tonight. And starting tomorrow, fight like hell to find a way out of this.

Finally sitting up, my tearful gaze meets his.

“Thank you,” he nods. “Now, there will be a strict set of ground rules to this new arrangement we have.”

I continue staring at him, unable to respond, awaiting my new fate.

“There will *never* be a time when you leave either mine or Ethan’s side. You will go from home to work and back. I have eyes and ears all over this club, Delilah. Not just Ethan’s and Josie’s. People who I pay very well to watch over anything ... and *anyone* who needs it.”

Who else could he have working for him in this capacity? I’ll need to pay closer attention, and from this moment on, I can’t trust anyone.

“You’ll be moved to full-time dancer, effective immediately. Any requests I get from patrons for additional services will be fulfilled before your shift ends.”

He doesn’t wait for me to request an explanation before he elaborates.

“You’ll be performing for them privately. Anything they desire. Requests such as fully nude strip shows and lap dances will occur here after business hours. For requests of a different nature, we will meet the client off property at the location of their choosing.”

*It won’t come to that, Delilah. You’ll find a way out before then. Don’t let him see you falter again.*

“You’ll be expected to acquiesce to their every desire, no matter what it is. That’s what they’re paying me for. You’ll be on your best behavior. No screaming. No trying to run. If I find out you’re less than pleasant to them in any way, there will be dire consequences. Do you understand?”

I close my eyes and steady myself, refusing to break down again.

“What if I don’t agree to this?” I challenge as though I actually have a choice.

“Come on, Delilah. I know there’s nothing in the world you wouldn’t do to protect *them*. Maggie... Royce...”

He leans forward with his eyebrow cocked—knowingly, threateningly—and places his elbows on his knees.

“If you refuse or do something else just as stupid, you’ll disappear as swiftly and quietly as your piece of shit father. And then I’ll have two deaths to pin on the Royal Bastards.”

# CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

## DELILAH

I haven't voluntarily uttered a word to anyone for the past week.

The other girls have begun to question me, asking me what's wrong. They're wondering what could have possibly happened to make me want to end the friendships we've formed.

I want to open up, but I can't trust them. I can't trust anyone. So I stay in the bubble I've formed around myself.

I have no one.

Drew took my phone away shortly after I left his office that night. The first thing I did before getting dressed for the evening was send an emoji to Maggie. The one we've always sent one another when we're in trouble.

The one I considered sending her the night Drew was at my house for the bonfire. The night this farce began.

I told myself it seemed silly at the time, overkill.

Now I wish I had.

That didn't go over well. He knew it meant something, but I refused to tell him what. He looked like he wanted to hit me all over again, but he didn't. Something about not wanting to bruise the merchandise.

A lot of good it did anyway. Days have gone by without the Bastards storming the club or Drew's house to rescue me. I knew I fucked up, speaking to Royce the way I did that night.

*He's done with me. I made sure of it.*

Maggie too, if her radio silence following that night is anything to go by.

Drew already had a long list of *clients* waiting for me that first evening. Whether I had disobeyed him in his office that day or not, forcing him to drop the bomb on me that followed, I would have started performing my new duties that night.

*Maybe I should feel glad I had a bit of a heads up?*

A humorless laugh forces itself from my lungs.

Each night, when my regular shift ends and after the other girls have left for the evening, I meet with guys in the champagne room. Drew, Ethan, or sometimes both of them stand guard to make sure the clients aren't trying to get away with more than what they've paid for.

And to ensure that I'm playing the dutiful whore.

I've cringed my way through each session, plastic smile in place while fighting to ignore vile and debasing commentary from the men. Some of which have been regular customers of mine since I first started.

Men who I'd had to warm up to because of my past but who had never made me feel disgusting and unsafe until they were finally able to take off their delicately balanced mask and let their true nature run free.

A few have wanted to take me home with them, but Drew informed them they need to make an appointment if they're interested in additional services. A couple nights ago, I overheard him explain to one of them that the site is currently down for maintenance. I thought I may be getting a reprieve, until Drew told the guy he has a list of available dates in his office, and he'd be happy to let him pick from those.

I know it's coming, and I dread the moment I have to have sex with someone. It's bad enough enduring Drew's demanding hunger every night.

*"Let's get you upstairs and in the shower,"* Drew instructed when we got home that first night. *"I can't fuck you*

*while you still reek of other men.”*

*“I wouldn’t reek of other men if you hadn’t made me do it. I don’t have to reek of other men, Drew. You can put an end to this, and I can be yours. Only yours. Just like you’ve always told me.”*

One last-ditch, worthless effort to get him to reconsider.

*“You are only mine, pretty girl. My life. My future. My everything.”*

What I once believed to be an oath born of love was really a stake claimed and laced with greed.

Sometimes he fucks me. Other times he makes *love* to me. It’s worse on those nights.

He calls me his pretty girl and tells me how proud he is of me. He whispers things a lover would while slowly taking his time, being gentle. The way he used to in the beginning of our relationship, long before he condemned me to this purgatory.

When he’s finished and he wraps me in his arms—an act that once brought me heartwarming comfort—it’s as though he’s tightening my shackles, binding me further to this new life of servitude.

He tells me he loves me, but he doesn’t know what love is any more than I do.

He only loves the money I’m bringing in.

“Rise and shine, Delilah.” An overly cheery Drew waltzes into the bedroom, flicking the light on, and a dark sense of foreboding angst seizes my body.

*This can’t be good.*

It’s my night off, and I was content to lay here in darkened silence until I’m forced back to work again.

I feel the bed sink as he sits next to me, placing a hand on my shoulder. He tugs, rolling me onto my back. I refuse to open my eyes and look at him, but he continues talking anyway.



“You have an appointment tonight that we need to get you ready for.”

That forces my eyes open.

“It’s my night off,” I attempt to roll back over, but he pins me to the mattress.

I fight against his hold, determined to loosen his grip. Lowering his head to mine, I come face-to-face with an evil smirk, dripping with satisfaction.

“You don’t get nights off. Not anymore. The nights you’re not scheduled at the club will be filled with off-site appointments. And some rich fuck just paid a small fortune to spend tonight with you.”

Fear stops my struggle.

*No.*

“Please don’t make me do this...” I beg, but no tears fall.

Not anymore.

I’m all cried out.

“You don’t have a choice, pretty girl. Not that the choice would be yours to make anyway. The wire transfer finished processing about thirty minutes ago. You just made me \$150K richer.”

I’d give anything to wipe the smile from his face. But the nauseous dread I feel over the entire situation, and the disgusting amount of money exchanged, paralyzes me.

“You know, I was advised to start out pricing you much lower. To make a name for myself before shooting too high... Like I don’t know what my pretty little asset is worth. I made the right choice. I knew people would pay top dollar for you. Just like I know you’re going to make tonight the best night of my client’s life. Right?”

As my neck muscles give out and my head lulls to the side, Drew grabs my chin and forces my gaze back to his.

“Right, Delilah? You’re not going to fuck this up for me, are you?”

When I remain silent, he thrusts his thumb through my lips, forcing my mouth open.

“*Right?!*” his evil bark demands.

“Right,” I cry out.

Half from the pain of his force, half from terror.

“Get up, and get in the shower. You have fifteen minutes. Don’t keep me waiting.”



When I get out of the shower, there’s a team of people waiting for me, including Ethan and Haven. Some of them are in the guest room, others in the bedroom. I hesitate when my foot hits the hallway, unsure what’s going on.

My eyes meet Haven’s, and she flashes me her bright smile, as though this is just another night at the club. My stare falls, unable to look at her traitorous face. Of all of the girls at Spotlight, Haven seemed the most genuine.

Despite the strong family dynamic, there were still issues from time to time. But Haven never got involved. She never picked sides. She was always the mediator between two people.

Her presence here tonight hurts almost more than anything.

“Good, you’re done.” Drew climbs the stairs then escorts me into the bedroom, motioning for Ethan to follow us. There are two women I’ve never seen before in here, but Drew doesn’t waste time making introductions. He unwraps my towel from around me, not asking if I’m okay with it.

*Why would he?*

My eyes quickly flicker to Ethan before shooting to the floor. I just make out the licentious sparkle in his eye that I’ve

seen before, and it disgusts me.

“Ladies,” Drew addresses the other women in the room. “Dress her to the nines, please. Lingerie, garters, stockings... The works. Nothing is too good for my girl.”

The women dress me as though I’m a doll, telling me how lucky I am to have a man who treats me like a princess. They tell me how much they wish they had someone in their life to take care of them as well as Drew takes care of me.

I bite my tongue to keep myself from calling them fucking idiots. To keep the real reason they’re here hidden. Though the desire to blurt out the truth is strong, with Drew and Ethan in the room, there’s no point trying to get them to help me.

When I’m fully draped in clothing more expensive and finer than anything I’ve ever worn before, Drew dismisses the women. Then he leads me and Ethan into the guestroom where Haven has set up a makeup table.

“Hey, girlie,” she greets me, but I don’t look at her. “Drew told me all about the fancy date night he has planned for you. How exciting! Come have a seat.”

*Date night?*

If the other women believed Drew was spoiling me, it’s conceivable to think he lied to Haven about what we’re doing this evening too.

For the first time in days, a glimmer of hope blooms in me. I need to figure out how I can communicate secretly with her.

But do I dare a maneuver so dangerous?

What if she’s testing me, and I get myself into trouble by confiding in her?

What if she truly believes she’s here to help me get ready for a date with Drew?

Once I’m seated, Haven drapes me in a smock so she won’t get any makeup on my dress. I meet Drew’s stare in the mirror. He narrows his eyes in a dangerous look of warning.

As though he’s reminding me to keep my mouth shut.

*Haven doesn't know.*

“We have to leave in thirty minutes,” Drew explains. “Light, natural makeup please. Not like you’d do for Spotlight. I don’t want her looking like a whore.”

At Drew’s words, I scoff gently.

*He doesn't want me looking like the exact thing he's treating me as.*

Haven winces, probably never having heard him speak like that before. Not to mention, Drew not-so-directly just referred to her as a whore too. It further convinces me she has no clue why she’s actually here.

My decision is made.

I have to try to tell Haven that I’m in trouble. But I need to be very careful. If Drew or Ethan find out, I’ll be putting her in harm’s way. I can’t have that fallout on my conscience, on top of everything else currently weighing it down.

For the first fifteen minutes, Drew stands in the doorway, silent but threatening. Quietly, I will him to go. To find something else to get ready or pay attention to for a few minutes so I may get the chance to speak to Haven.

Five minutes later, my wish comes true.

Drew pulls a phone I’ve never seen him use before from his pocket then curses. Ethan speaks from somewhere in the hallway, out of view from the mirror’s reflection, and I hear Drew mumble something about a location change.

The second he steps out of the reflection, my stomach flip-flops.

*Do I chance it? Do I pull Haven into this nightmare, endangering her life as well as mine?*

I can’t not.

“Haven.” Her name comes out in a sharp whisper.

Luckily, she’s in front of me, getting ready to dust a layer of blush on my cheeks. She stops working and looks at me, question in her stare.

“Don’t stop but listen carefully.” My eyes dart to the empty doorway as I begin to tremble. “I’m in trouble. Drew isn’t who you think he is.”

I stop talking long enough to make sure Drew’s attention is still occupied. Then I look her dead in the eyes, my expression as serious as a heart attack.

“This isn’t a date. Someone paid to sleep with me, and he’s delivering me to him tonight. He’s been trafficking me, pimping me out through the club.”

As concern swims in her eyes, I hear someone clear their throat behind us. When I look in the mirror again, I see Ethan has taken Drew’s place.

“Everything okay?” his eyebrow lifts.

As I struggle to say anything, Haven answers, “Yes, I was just trying to decide which shade of eye shadow to use.”

Good cover... Hopefully.

But Ethan leaves it at that, and Haven gets back to work, moving a little slower than she was previously. We shoot one another knowing glances occasionally.

Mine in warning.

Hers in support.

I don’t know if she’ll be able to help, or how. But just the fact that someone else knows sets me a little more at ease. Perhaps she’ll go to the police after she leaves here and report what I told her?

“Wrap it up, Haven.” Drew is back in the doorway, and my eyes shoot to his. I watch Ethan lean in and whisper something to him, and my anxiety spikes. His eyes narrow, and he nods, not taking his eyes from me.

“Just about done,” she answers as she coats my eyelashes in mascara.

When she’s finished, she looks to Drew for approval.

“Very nice,” he commends her. “Let’s go, Delilah.”

I stand on shaky legs, and Haven wraps me in one of her arms.

“Take these,” she whispers before saying, “have so much fun,” a little louder so Drew and Ethan can hear her.

I feel something cold and hard hit the palm of my right hand, so I close my fist around it, concealing whatever it is as best as I can.

If Drew finds out she’s helping me, there’s no doubt in my mind her life will be in danger.

I silently thank her as I pull away.

And hope I didn’t make a huge mistake.

# CHAPTER FORTY

## DELILAH

If Drew has any idea that I let Haven in on what she was actually doing at his house tonight, he isn't voicing it.

I excused myself to the bathroom before we left and hid the pair of tweezers she secretly slipped me into my cleavage. I know I won't be able to do any real damage with them, but hope warms my chest against where they hide.

If nothing else, they serve as a symbol of rebellion.

Drew and I departed, leaving Ethan behind, alone with Haven. It made me nervous for her, but there was nothing I could do about it. If I would have protested, Drew would've known something was amiss.

Before we left, he told Ethan he would meet him at the club after he *made the drop*.

The entire drive to the hotel, I fought to keep my growing panic attack at bay. I kept telling myself I was doing this to protect those I loved, regardless of their lack of response to my plea for help by texting Maggie our secret emoji.

It doesn't change how I feel about them.

Right before Drew pulls up in front of the hotel's valet, he speaks for the first time since we left the house.

"I don't need to remind you what's at stake here, Delilah." He places his hand on my thigh, bare from the long slit in my dress, and I pull my leg out of his grasp.

His touch disgusts me. He grabs it once more and squeezes painfully this time before grinding out another threat from



between gritted teeth. “Be on your best behavior.”

When we pull up to the curb, he lets go. Getting out of the car, he beats the valet to my door and opens it. Playing the part of a gentleman, he extends his hand to me, but I refuse him.

Once my foot hits the sidewalk, he forces my arm into his so he can lock me in place next to him as we enter the hotel. The closer we get to the elevator, to the man who bought me for the evening, the less I’m able to keep the panic away.

As we climb to the twenty-seventh-floor penthouse, Drew takes out the same unfamiliar phone I saw him on earlier and fires off a message to someone.

While he’s distracted, I have just enough wits about me to pull the tweezers from between my cleavage. I scream as I drive them toward Drew’s face, but he’s too quick.

Catching my forearm in his hand, he presses his thumb into the tendons at my wrist with force painful enough to cause me to drop my pitiful weapon.

“Nice try, Delilah... Did your friend Haven give you those?”

My only answer is the fear in my eyes as he pins me to the wall of the elevator.

“Ethan told me the two of you were up to something. Guess I made the right call when I instructed him to stay behind to take care of her. What did you tell her, huh?”

Drew’s stone-cold expression turns deadly. His hand wraps around my throat as he pulls me off the wall before quickly pushing me back against it again.

“It’s a shame you had to drag her into this. She was my second favorite. After you, of course.”

It turns out my tears haven’t dried up. They fall swiftly once Drew informs me of the crucial error in judgment I made this evening, resulting in the sure death of an innocent girl. And whatever other sick punishment Ethan has planned before he kills her.

“No! Call him off. She doesn’t deserve that,” I implore him. “It was my fault, not hers!”

But Drew remains unmoved, unaffected by my plea.

As soon as the doors open, he pulls me out into the hallway.

“Please don’t make me do this...” I beg loudly, praying someone exits their hotel room and saves me.

But as I look down the hall, I realize there is only one room on this floor. The only person around who could possibly help me is the same degenerate who paid for my company this evening.

Drew presses me up against the wall, his thumbs swiping under my eyes. I watch as my blackened tears stain his skin before he pulls away from me.

“Don’t you fucking dare ruin this, Delilah. It’s too late to back out, not that you have the option to anyway. So take a deep breath, and pull yourself together.”

But I can’t.

I stand before him, panting and unable to fill my lungs with oxygen. He backs me into the wall, getting in my face. His voice is low but dangerous.

“There is a filthy rich and dangerously powerful man in the penthouse at the end of this hallway who’s expecting you.”

At that moment, two large and dangerous looking men step out into the hallway. One of them straightens his suit jacket before buttoning it, and a flash of metal hanging in front of his chest reflects off of the soft hallway lighting.

A gun.

I shiver, this situation getting more real and more severely dire as each second passes.

“Move your feet before you get us both killed.” Drew grips my arm so hard, I can’t speak.

I fight against his hold the entire length of the long hallway as he drags me toward the awaiting men. My vision dots as I fight to stay conscious. Terrifying memories of being forced to do things I didn't want to do plague every millisecond of time that passes the closer we get to my doom until I'm on the verge of passing out. I wish I would so I won't be awake for what comes next.

The two tall, statuesque men standing on either side of the open penthouse doors grow ever closer. I know I can't turn back, even if Drew allowed me to.

"I said get it together," he whispers menacingly, coming to a stop just yards before the men.

He looks me over one last time, picking imaginary lint off of my dress here and there. Straightening my hair, pretending like he knows what he's doing.

"You're going to go into that room and let this man stick his dick wherever the fuck he wants to. And you're going to ride it like your fucking life depends on it ... because it does. And make it believable. If you don't and he's not happy, *I* won't be happy. And that won't be good for either of us."

Leaning in, he places a kiss on the side of my head.

"Now be a good girl and do as you're told."

The moment Drew shoves me past the gargoyles standing guard at the door and over the penthouse's threshold, chaos erupts around me, and everything moves in slow motion.

Shouting bellows loudly, seeming to echo from every direction. The sound of knuckles hitting bone crackles off the walls. A series of grunts and groans are followed by a thud of something heavy hitting the floor behind me.

I start to turn, to search for a reason behind the distressing noises, trying to make sense of the situation. But I catch sight of someone standing in the middle of the room, causing me to do a double take.

Forcing my eyes to focus through my fear, my mind struggles to understand why the one man I never expected to

be on the other side of this sordid arrangement is suddenly standing in front of me.

When my eyes lock with his, everything I thought I knew about my life crumbles. The feeling of falling overtakes me, but I don't feel the floor as my body flops down onto it.

My vision tunnels, minimizing the full view of the room to the size of a pinhole.

The last thing I see before I lose consciousness is a thick head of silver and black hair and a familiar pair of soft, dark-brown eyes standing over me.

# **PART THREE**

# CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

## ROYCE

It's been a little over two weeks since the last time I saw Delilah.

Since I started digging for dirt on Drew so I can take him down and bring Delilah home.

It's been one week since I got everything I needed in order to do so. The hardest week of my life, spent in debilitating agony, waiting for tonight.

Around this time last week, Maggie came to me more upset than I've ever seen her.

She showed me a text she'd gotten from Delilah. It was an emoji that meant nothing to me, but she explained that they've sent it to one another in the past if they were ever in any trouble.

It was the catalyst for every detail that has fallen into place since then. Within an hour, I heard from Cyber who told me he found out why Drew's history only went back to the age of eighteen.

He was born Henry Andrew James, Jr. in Orange County, California to rich parents: Henry Andrew James, Sr. and Beverly Sullivan-James. The kid has a rap sheet a mile long, ending with a brief stay at a juvenile detention center outside of Newport.

Nothing else could be found on him until after he showed up in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania as Drew Sullivan. The only thing linking the two lives is a wire transfer from an Orange

County bank to a brand-new account established at a Dauphin County bank in the sum of \$500K.

It made me wonder if his well-off parents paid him to disappear. To get their troublemaking son off their backs.

The second piece of information that Cyber was able to unearth for me knocked me on my fucking ass.

He found a video of Delilah on the dark web. It led him to an underground site titled, *The Destruction of Delilah*, which hosts hundreds of video and audio clips of her. Cyber got me set up with a VPN and everything else I needed to be able to access it.

There's a credit card I use from time to time that's connected to an alias. I used it to purchase a membership to the site without my name getting flagged. I didn't want to make any move that could possibly alert Drew that we were onto him.

Once I obtained full access, what I saw on that site with my own eyes sickened me to no end. It's one of the most disgusting things I've ever seen in my entire life.

And I've seen some shit.

The audio clips and videos were posted almost like a day-in-the-life diary and detailed how the owner of the page is breaking her down little by little to mold her into the perfect submissive whore.

I immediately recognized the very first audio clip listed.

### *Popping Delilah's Cherry*

I'd heard it before, only I was the one recording it at the time.

Though this clip had been edited, taking out the part where she mentioned the last guy she'd had sex with—*me*—to make it appear as though she was a virgin.

Hearing it again and knowing I was no better than Drew at that time, knocked the wind out of me.



There were countless videos of her doing various things from menial chores around the house, using the bathroom, and showering, to stripping and giving lap dances at Spotlight. He must have hidden cameras catching every fucking angle inside both the club and his house.

The caption of one video in particular caught my eye. As horrific as it was, even now, I can't erase the memory of it from my mind.



## One Week Earlier

### *Delilah's Punishment*

The caption pulls me in as my stomach sours.

The video is dated the day after I went to see her at the club, and my heart drops immediately. Without thinking, I click on it. I can't bring myself to stop it once it begins.

I watch her, terrified anxiety written all over her face as she pleads with that sick fuck to forgive her for lying to him—*about me*, the thought of which fucking kills me—as she tells him she'll do anything to make it right.

The way he makes her pay for it is horrific. The manipulation and grooming in just this video alone are alarming, and I fucking kick myself all over again for not throwing her over my shoulder and bringing her back here the moment she stepped foot out of that club last week.

It reinforces my thirst for vengeance against him. When the video ends, there is a message letting the viewer know they can experience Delilah for themselves by making an appointment.

I see red.

Following the instructions, I open the site's menu and click on "Appointments" as my rage morphs into molten lava.

**See Delilah in Person at:**

**Spotlight Nightclub**

709 Senator Way

Harrisburg, PA.

To schedule a private show, ask for James.

Code word: Pretty Girl

*James?*

*Henry James. Drew is using a pseudonym. For himself but not for Delilah. That fucker.*

**Coming September 1<sup>st</sup>:**

**Want to Experience a Night of Fantasy with Delilah?**

For \$150,000, Delilah can be yours for the entire night.

Request an appointment [here](#).

Devoid of all coherent thought, I click the link then enter the number of my burner phone when prompted. Digging the phone out from my bottom desk drawer, I plug it in before powering it on.

Almost immediately, I receive a response.

Thank you for your interest in Delilah. We're now booking appointments for September and October.

The relief I feel when I realize these *appointments* haven't started yet doesn't outweigh my fury at the situation. It doesn't alleviate the disgust I feel, knowing what he's trying to do to her. What he's *been* doing to her.

Our first available appointment for a Night of Fantasy with Delilah is September 1. What date would you like to book your appointment?

I type, "September 1" then hit send, thankful the first date that these services begin is open so I can swoop in and pluck her out of Drew's clutches. I can't wait to fucking get my hands on him either.

Another incoming text chimes almost immediately.

Your appointment is scheduled for September 1. Please contact us with a time and location as soon as possible.

I shoot off the name of a hotel I remember passing when we were in Harrisburg for our meeting with the Krymson Destroyers and tell him to meet me there at 8 PM.

A 50% deposit is required to secure your appointment. The remainder is due at least one hour prior to your appointment time. Do you agree to these terms?

I don't hesitate.

I don't stop to think about the amount of money this fucker is about to make off of me.

I don't consider whether or not this is just a scam Drew is running to get money.

None of it matters to me as much as Delilah.

I reply, "Yes," desperate to be one step closer to getting her back.

With the next text comes instructions for initiating the bank transfer. I follow them step-by-step and link my offshore account to the transaction.

It was one of the easiest decisions I've ever had to make. I don't care if I never see the money again as long as everything works out, and I have Delilah back in my arms.



Present

“Everyone is set and ready to go,” Draven informs me.

JD and some of my guys are set up at different places surrounding and throughout the hotel, keeping watch for signs of Drew and Delilah and anyone else they may be bringing with them.

I got the notification thirty minutes ago that my wire transfer was finally complete. It's been keeping me awake all week, waiting for its status to change. I thought tonight was going to be fucked, and I'd lose this chance at getting Delilah back.

“Okay, I'll send the text.”

Pulling out my burner phone, I shoot off a text to Drew to let him know I've changed the location for tonight.

New location. Meet at the PH of The Jones Webster Hotel. Same time.

Seeing as they're due to meet us in an hour, I'm hoping it will shake him up a little. Knock him off his game. And if he had anyone combing the previous meeting location—like *I* would have—there won't be anyone there for them to find.

JD works as a sous-chef here. It's one of the most expensive hotels in the city. Draven contacted him earlier in the week to see if he'd be able to help us with our plan. Not

only did he agree, but he said the owner of the hotel owed him.

He didn't go into details, but apparently, he caught the owner in a bit of a sticky situation last year and helped him out of it. Once he heard that Delilah was involved in all of this, he was happy to cash in on the favor.

As I wait for a response, I look up to see Reaper and Crusher of the Krymson Destroyers enter the living room of the suite. I needed two large men to place outside of the penthouse but couldn't use any of the Bastards as Delilah would recognize them. Drew too, possibly.

These two most certainly fit the bill. They're threatening enough in their leather and denim, but the terror they command makes even the expensive suits I purchased for them to wear look menacing.

I nod, once again showing them my appreciation for their assistance. There's a long list of favors we'll owe their club when this nightmare is over, but it will be worth it.

It was agonizing, having to wait all week, knowing what Delilah could be going through while we put my plan into action. But I couldn't risk going to the club or to his house, guns blazing, unsure of the kind of man- and firepower Drew had with them.

I couldn't chance Delilah getting fatally injured. I wouldn't survive it.

When I told Draven what I'd done, how I'd spent the club's money, he assured me every penny was worth getting her back, then he immediately jumped into action to help me carry our plan out. He also kept a tight fucking leash on my ass to make sure I didn't jump the gun and ruin everything.

Maggie got wind of what was happening and was dead set on helping us. Not wanting her anywhere near the action, I tasked her with going out to buy Delilah some new bedroom furniture, a new wardrobe, and any other essentials girls need—that I'm sure I never would have thought of—so she wouldn't want for anything once I got her home.

I had Ronin and Rocco with her, all week long, to help.

*And to keep an eye on her.*

She feels just as guilty as I do that Delilah ended up in this predicament. But it's not her fault. She wanted to push harder to get Delilah to stay. She tried to get me to do the same, but I refused.

She's been mad at me ever since, but that's nothing new. However, I'm not looking forward to the fallout that will occur once she finds out how Delilah and I feel about one another.

That is, if Delilah still feels the same for me when all of this is over. I damn well could have ruined it all.

My phone vibrates in my hand, and I look to find a curt response from Drew awaiting me.

Fine.

I can't fucking wait to get my hands on this motherfucker.

"All set?" Draven checks in when he sees me read the message.

I nod to him.

"Now we wait," he responds.

Yes, now we wait.

*And then we fucking strike.*

# CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

## ROYCE

At 7:54, I get a text from Saxon, who is stationed inside of the bar across the street from the hotel.

They just pulled up.

Two minutes later, I get back-to-back texts from both Saxon and Toga, who is at the hotel bar. Both messages informing me that Drew and Delilah just entered the lobby. The next text comes in from Toga at 7:58.

They're in the elevator.

A minute later, a text comes through from Drew on my burner phone.

On our way up.

The instant I read it, my cell rings. It's Chubbs, which means something hasn't gone according to plan.

*Fuck.*

"What's wrong?" I answer.

He's in the security office, watching the camera footage from inside the elevator.

"She just tried attacking him... He disarmed her."

"Is he hurting her?" I'm worried for her safety now more than ever.



“Um, no.” I’m not satisfied with Chubbs’s answer, but if it were anything serious, he would have told me.

“Do I need to intercept them when they get out of there?”

“No. Send the guys out, they just got out of the elevator. No sign of anyone else following them either. You’re clear.”

“10-4.” I hang up the phone then nod to Reaper and Crusher.

“You’re up. Let them come to you. Do not engage unless something doesn’t feel right. We need this to work.”

They nod in understanding before holstering their guns and taking their places at the entrance to the suite. Draven stands next to me, no doubt to keep me in check and make sure I don’t move a goddamn muscle until Drew is properly incapacitated.

“You’ll get your turn as soon as we get back to the clubhouse,” he says under his breath as though he’s able to read my mind.

I flex my hands, my knuckles cracking as I try to relieve some of my pent-up anger and frustration.

Suddenly, I hear Delilah’s voice cry out. I take a step, but Draven holds my arm tightly, his words barely above a whisper.

“Reaper and Crusher will shoot, no questions asked, if they need to. You have to trust them.”

“There is no one I trust with the woman I love more than myself,” I spit.

“I understand that, but your plan is a good one. It will work. Be patient just a little longer.”

I hear whispered talking float through the open doorway and into the living room of the penthouse. A moment later, a visibly panicked and shaky Delilah is launched over the threshold, stumbling into the room.

I catch her eyes for a brief second before her attention is stolen by the fight that’s ensued in the hallway. But then she

does a double take. This time, as her eyes meet mine, I call out to her, but it's as though she's lost all sense of hearing. I'm not even sure she can see straight.

*Did he fucking drug her to make her comply?*

I remember that she attacked him in the elevator, so that can't be right.

She's just deliriously frightened.

The struggle in the hallway continues, and Draven runs out of the room to help contain it.

My sole focus right now is on Delilah.

She begins to fall, so I run to her, catching her in my arms. She looks up at me with a distant stare before her eyes close.

Picking her up, I walk into the bedroom and place her safely on the bed before rushing out of the penthouse to ensure Drew has been handled properly.

Reaper and Crusher pant over Drew's still form. He's got a bloody nose and black eye. Judging by all the noise I heard, I'm sure he's got a bruised or broken rib or two as well.

Knowing it was an easy takedown puts the first hint of a smile on my face in weeks.

Crouching down, I rifle through his pockets until I locate the valet ticket I'm looking for.

"Call JD. He'll lead you down the service elevator to the loading dock. Atticus and Zephyr are there waiting to take this motherfucker back to our clubhouse." I hand the valet ticket to Reaper. "Give this to Chubbs so he can claim Drew's car and it's not left behind as evidence."

Not much for talking, they nod in response to my instructions.

"Thank you for your help. The Royal Bastards are in your debt."

I return to the penthouse, Draven on my heels, closing the doors behind us.

“Send a text to everyone,” I order Draven. “Tell them we got what we came for, and we’ll meet them back at home base shortly.”

“You got it,” he answers as I walk back into the bedroom.

The room already smells like her, the scent filling my nose and breathing life into me. She’s still out cold, and I worry she will be for a while. I’m reminded of the days following the *disappearance* of her father and how fucked-up she was.

I make a mental note to contact Dr. Caraway in the morning and get Delilah back on her schedule immediately.

Laying beside her, I curl her body against mine. We have to get her out of here and back home, but I need this. Just for a little while, I need to hold her close to me.

My hand glides along her side, over the silky dress he put on her. She looks beautiful, but I hate it. I look down the length of her body, at her stockings, her shoes.

That dirtbag trussed her up like a fucking whore.

I run my hand down her arm, trying to calm her even though she can’t feel it. Maybe it’s like being in a coma, where the person can still feel your touch and hear your words.

“You’re safe, kitten. I’ll never let anything happen to you ever again. I love you. I’m going to take you home, where you belong, and care for you until my dying day.

“But first, I’m going to kill the worthless son of a bitch who did this to you. Only this time, I’m going to be patient, making sure he gets exactly what he deserves. No shortcuts. No easy way out, like with your father.”

I kiss the back of her head, inhaling her scent once more. I spend the next few minutes declaring one oath after another to her. And I’m going to spend the rest of my days, ensuring I never break another promise I make to her ever again.



Thirty minutes later, I have Delilah in my arms in the hotel's service elevator. Draven and JD flank my sides. When we get to the loading dock, I'm happy to see all of the cars that we parked back here are gone except for my truck.

Hopefully, that means everyone is doing everything they're supposed to be doing so when I get home, I can get started on the next phase of the plan.

Drew's punishment.

"This is where I leave you," JD calls out from behind us. "Good luck from here."

I turn to face him. "Thank you again. We owe you, big time. Please let Draven or I know if there is ever anything you need, and we'll be there. No questions asked."

"You got it," JD calls back.

"See ya, man." He and Draven clap hands and say their goodbyes before Draven meets me at the truck.

"I need to drive," I tell him. "I need to keep my mind focused or else I'll go crazy. Will you sit in the back with her?"

"Whatever you need," Draven agrees, opening the back driver's side door so I can place Delilah in the truck.

He runs around to the other side and helps me get her situated before he lays her head on his lap. I wrap the seat belt around her as best as I can before climbing into the front seat and starting my engine.

The silent forty-five-minute drive goes quickly, and before I know it, we're pulling down the dirt driveway that leads to our compound.

I stop at the main house and hop out. Maggie is already outside, waiting on the porch, drinking a beer. She puts the bottle down and runs to my truck.

“Where is everyone?” I need confirmation that the plan is still on track.

“I’m assuming out there,” she nods to the rear of our property. “No one stopped when they got home. I saw Toga’s truck and Atticus’s Trans Am roll through here about forty-five minutes ago or so. Rocco and Ronin left me to join them,” Maggie explains.

I nod, glad that they all made it here with no issue.

“Is she okay?” she asks, her breath shaky.

“Physically, yes,” I assure her. “She fainted, though. I haven’t had a chance to speak with her yet. But judging by the way she looked right before she went down, I’m going to assume her mental state isn’t the best. We’ll see how she is the next couple of days, but we may need to hire another nurse to come look after her.”

Draven opens the door of the truck, giving me access to Delilah again. I gently pull her from the back seat and cradle her in my arms as I carry her into the house and up into her bedroom.

“Can you please get her changed out of this ridiculous outfit and into something comfortable?” I request, laying her on her new bed.

“Yeah,” Maggie answers.

“Throw all of it in the garbage when you’re done.”

Maggie nods her head in understanding.

“Thanks. I’ll be back in a little while to check on you both.”

“Okay,” Maggie says, a light smile in her voice.

Forcing myself to leave Delilah’s side so soon after getting her back here, I train my brain on the task at hand. When I get

back outside, Draven is already sitting shotgun. He's as ready as I am to deal with that fuckface.

Climbing into the driver's seat again, I close my door then rev my engine before gunning it toward the building at the rear of our property.

One of the greatest things about living out in the country, especially as far off the beaten path as we are, is that we get to make as much noise as we want.

There's no one around for miles to complain about our late-night parties...

Our bikes being too loud...

Or about the terrifying, pain-filled screams that echo through the dark night.

# CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

## ROYCE

The dilapidated building located at the rear of my property served as a cannery in the early 1900s.

Presently, however, it's where our enemies go to die. Your death warrant is signed the moment your feet are dragged over the building's threshold.

I enter tonight with only one thing on my mind.

*Mayhem.*

In here, I'm The Judge.

This is *my* courthouse.

My verdict is law, and your sentence will be delivered by my own hand.

The click of the door as it closes into place sounds like a gunshot, a roaring echo resounding throughout the vast, empty, concrete room surrounding us.

The other Bastards have formed a semi-circle in the center of the room facing my target, my prize, leaving space directly in front of him.

Draven's stride matches mine, and the two of us fill the gap, casting an ominous shadow over an unconscious Drew.

Where to start? That is the question. The sadistic possibilities are endless. The only thing I know for sure is this worthless, no good, waste of space motherfucker will be mangled past the point of recognition before I'm done with him.



The bulky, wooden chair on which he sits is large. The seat cushion has been removed, leaving only a small wooden block screwed into the back of the chair for those tied to it to balance their ass on. The ropes he's bound by hold him in place, his arms tied around the chair's back, his legs spread and secured to the legs of the chair.

The original wood finish has long since faded, now stained with the blood of everyone who has died here before him.

On this throne of blood.

"Has he woken up at all yet?" I question the room, not taking my eyes off Drew.

"No, he's been out since we left Harrisburg," Atticus informs me.

"Good."

My eyes narrow on the crown of Drew's head as I give my orders.

"We'll take shifts in here until the deed is done. I don't know when that will be, but I don't plan on letting this asshole die any time soon."

Like I told Delilah, her father's death was too swift.

The same won't be true with Drew. I'm going to take my time with him, killing him slowly, dragging out his pain until he's begging for death to claim him.

Looking from Drew to the men surrounding me, I meet each of their eyes as I talk.

"However, Delilah also needs me right now. Her health and wellbeing are my number one priority. She's far more important than this sack of shit, so I'll be bouncing back and forth between the main house and here. Whoever is on duty when I'm gone will need to step into my shoes. You have full creative license over this fucker's pain, but I get the final blow. Understood?"

Some of them nod while others bark out their comprehension of my given instructions. Anything else that

was to be said is forgotten as Drew slowly begins to rouse, drawing our attention back to him.

His head bobs as he tries to lift it. A painful groan escapes his throat, and it's like music to my ears. But I don't want just one note. I want to compose a whole fucking symphony with the misery I'll inflict on him.

Finally able to hold his head steady, he looks around, and I know the moment the ten grim expressions staring him down come into focus.

Now that he's awake, will he bitch out and beg for his life? Or play it tough while knowing it's over? People who prey on the weak do so because they fear their own weakness.

And that's all he is.

A fucking weak son of a bitch.

"Is this the part where you kill me?" His gravelly voice is thick with drowsiness.

None of us speak, preferring quiet intimidation over threatening chatter. Though when I do utter my first words to him, it won't be threats spilling from my tongue.

It will be promises.

"What, are you going to ignore me to death?" Drew jokes humorlessly. "Just fucking get it over with already."

"You'd like that—a quick death—wouldn't you?"

He rolls his eyes, and his disrespect stokes the fire he ignited when he entered Delilah's life.

Stepping into my swing, my fist connects with his cheek with such force, the crack of his bones shattering is louder than the sound of my knuckles on his flesh.

With a pained grunt, his head flies to the side, the chair careening on one leg before it topples over. Amongst the cacophony of hard wood hitting concrete, I hear his skull thud against the ground. The sound crackling off the surrounding walls.

My satisfaction is dimmed by the threat of his head splitting open and him dying too soon.

I nod toward him, signaling for someone to right his chair, and Saxon steps forward. There's a lump on Drew's forehead, but thankfully, no blood.

Not yet anyway.

"Is that all you got?" Drew spits, his blood-tinged saliva smacking against the ground at my feet. A tooth clatters across the floor.

With a swift kick, the toe of my boot meets his junk, and I crush it against the wooden block he's balanced on. Drew's scream is silent, his breath stolen away by agony. Leaning into the chair, I add overwhelming pressure to the pain I'm already inflicting until the chair scoots backward, and my foot falls to the ground.

Grabbing it by the legs, I right it again so it's facing the center of the room. Then I crouch down so my face is directly in front of Drew's, just inches away. I revel in the sight of him, panting in agony, before opening my mouth.

"I haven't even gotten started yet. I have big plans for you, but I'm willing to take my time to ensure you get exactly what you deserve." Standing to my full height, I flash him an evil grin. "You hurt someone very dear to me. If you think I'm anywhere remotely close to finished with you, you're sorely mistaken."

I turn to leave, needing distance before I snap and give him the quick death he wants. But his voice croaks, husky from the pain he just endured, stopping me.

"Take a good, hard look at yourself in the mirror, old man. You're no better than me. You treated her like a whore long before I did."

In a flash, I'm on him again. Punching, kicking... A palm to his Adam's apple ought to shut him up.

But it doesn't. Through his pain, he's laughing at me, spurring me on. Finally, I feel two pairs of hands dragging me away from him.

Shrugging out of their hold, I turn and burn a hole through my men with a vicious stare. But one look at Draven and I back down. He and Crew were right to stop me.

I wouldn't have been able to keep myself from killing him. He knew just what to say to trigger me and force me into action.

He is a master manipulator, after all.

Draven pulls me outside, and I drink in the cool night air.

“You good, man?”

No. I'm so fucking far from good, and he knows it. I glare at him.

“I know this situation is more personal than you've ever dealt with before. I'm happy to let you go back in there and fucking end him right now if that's what you want. But I don't think it is.”

“It's not.” I spit, taking a seat on the edge of the picnic table outside of the building.

“You're not the same as him.” Draven motions toward the warehouse before digging his cigarettes out of his pocket and lighting one up. “You can't let him get in your head like that. You were trying to do right by Delilah.”

“Yeah, and by doing so threw her right into his fucking web!”

“But you didn't do it knowingly. As hard as it is, forget about that.”

“Fuck, Draven... I fucked her... Treated her like shit... I fucking recorded them having sex, just like he did. I'm no fucking better than he is.”

“Yes, you did all of those things, just like he did, but for fucking good reasons.”

When I narrow my eyes at him, letting him know he's grasping at straws, he adds, “Okay, maybe you didn't record them having sex for a *good* reason, but you didn't do it maliciously like he did. You were worried about her. Maybe a

little jealous... Okay, a lot jealous. A little unhinged. So fucking what? Focus on what you need to do now to make it right.”

This is why he’s my VP. He’s the only one of the guys who knows me inside and out. The only one who’s capable of getting me out of my own head.

I turn, involuntarily, in the direction of the main house.

Toward Delilah.

The terrified look in her eyes when she was thrown through the doors of the penthouse earlier will haunt me forever.

My chest aches to go to her, to be there when she wakes up. I need to tell her how sorry I am, that I fucked up big time, and she suffered because of it. That for as long as I live, I’ll spend each day making it up to her.

But knowing Maggie is with her helps. It keeps me here to focus on the piece of shit back inside the warehouse.

Draven’s right. I need to concentrate my energy on Drew without letting him infiltrate my thoughts. There can be no mistakes made where he’s concerned. No chance for error.

And we need to stay on our toes in the event someone comes here looking for him. There’s no doubt in my mind that there are others working with him who may stupidly attempt a rescue mission. Which means this whole compound is compromised.

But we’re the Royal fucking Bastards.

You don’t fuck with us and live to see another day.

With a clear head, renewed determination, and my creativity sparked, I hop down from the table.

“I’m good,” I assure Draven when his eyes meet mine. “Let’s go back in there and get started.”

It’s time to make him pay for what he did to Delilah.

I promised her I would make him suffer, and that’s exactly what I’m going to do.

# CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

## ROYCE

Tugging at the chain fixed to the pulley high above us, the same one that's linked to the shackles around Drew's ankles, I raise him off the ground and upside down into the air.

Saxon just had a go at him, giving Drew a couple new contusions courtesy of his brass knuckles. Blood flows from his broken nose again—not for the first, second, or third time in the past couple days. With a satisfied grin, I listen as it funnels through his nostrils and into his throat, choking him.

I laugh at the sound of his sputtering as he tries to lift his upper body enough to turn his head and reroute the blood to drain from his nose.

As he does this, I let go of the chain, and his body crashes onto the concrete beneath him. I hear a snap followed by a bellowing scream as I approach him to investigate which new injury is causing him pain this time. When I get closer to him, I see his clavicle bone peeking out of the skin just beneath his shoulder.

“Oof,” I cringe, a shit-eating grin on my face. “That looks like it hurts.”

It's been two days since we dragged this piece of shit in here. Giving him just enough water to keep him alive, we've been working around the clock, tormenting him every minute of the day.

Finally home, where she belongs, Delilah has awoken for only a few minutes at a time. Just long enough for Maggie to

give her some water and take her to the bathroom before she goes comatose again. Despite my best efforts to rouse her at other times throughout the day to see if I can keep her awake longer. Maggie yells at me whenever I go near her room, afraid if I don't let her fully wake up on her own timeline I could fuck her up even more.

I'll do it if necessary, but I'd rather not hire another nurse to administer an IV and catheter like we did before. Both Maggie and I remember how painful it was the last time we brought her here when she was like this. Nights were long, and anxiety ran high as we worried whether or not she would ever wake up.

And it didn't get much better once she did either. She spent months as a goddamn mute. She barely ate, barely moved. Had it not been for Maggie and Doc Caraway, I don't think she would have made it.

The only reason I've listened to Maggie and stayed away is because I'm scared of making another wrong decision where Delilah is concerned. I've made too many already.

I've kissed her, fucked her, rejected her, went against my better judgment and left her behind when I should have fucking dragged her back here...

But I don't know how much more of this I can take. I know she's strong enough to make it past this phase and onto the next, but she can't do that if she doesn't try.

The doors to the cannery open behind me as Drew continues to writhe in pain, buck-ass naked on the ground. I turn around, and a vicious smile curves at the corners of my lips when I see who it is.

I watch as Stella, one of our harlots, struts toward me with a gym bag over her shoulder.

"Good to see you," I greet her.

"Excited to be here. It's not every day I'm invited to partake in the torment of a club enemy."

"Well, given the nature of his crimes and your distinctive proclivities, I thought you could help us diversify our methods



of punishment.”

Stella is a sadist by nature. She gets off on both the pain she doles out as well as her victim’s reaction to that pain—whether they’re a willing party or not. I gave her no orders other than to make it hurt.

I can’t wait to see what she has in store for Drew tonight. Placing her bag down on the ground, she crouches next to it and looks at me.

“Anything goes?” She seeks clarification from me.

“Anything your black heart desires,” I confirm with a nod.

Now, I’ve seen my fair share of fucked-up shit in this lifetime. And until I witness what she brought with her as she pulls each item out of her bag, I would have dared to say I’d seen it all.

*But I would have been wrong.*

I like to think I have a larger than average sized dick. It’s received several compliments over the years. Most of them I disregarded because I didn’t care what the girl I was fucking thought of it. I was only trying to get off, not to get my ego inflated—though I didn’t miss the twinkle in Delilah’s eye the first time she saw it.

But compared to the gigantic dildo Stella pulls from her bag, my dick may as well be the size of a toothpick.

My eyebrows shoot into my hairline, my eyes surely the size of saucers at the sight of it, and I can’t begin to fathom that something so large could feel ... pleasant in any way. As Stella’s head swivels toward Drew’s naked, groaning form on the ground ahead of us, my own asshole clenches, knowing exactly what she has planned for his.

Mine and Saxon’s eyes meet for the briefest of seconds before looking anywhere but at each other.

“Got anything we can bend and secure his body over? This will be much more effective if he’s not squirming all over the place.”

“Yeah, we can make that happen,” I tell her. “Saxon, help me get him up and over to that old conveyor belt over there.”

At this point, Drew has passed out, likely from the pain of his broken collarbone. It’s only one of the many injuries he’s received since he arrived. Broken nose, broken jaw, broken fingers, crushed ribs, two black eyes, two fat lips.

It’s still not enough. We haven’t even begun to use all the tools we have at our disposal.

I grab a length of rope from the corner, then Saxon and I lift him by the shoulders, waking him up painfully.

“J-j-just kill me already.”

His sobs are fucking music to my ears.

“But we’re not finished playing with you yet, you fuckin’ arsehole,” Saxon quips with a smile on his face. There’s rarely a time when he’s not jolly. Unless his favorite football club is losing. Then you can’t even walk into the room without him shouting obscenities at you to leave.

Dragging Drew to one of the old conveyors, we toss his body against the side, his chest thumping down onto the surface of the old belt. He twists at the waist, feebly, as he attempts to fight us. Saxon holds his upper body steady while I crouch down and wrap the rope around his ankle and the foot of the conveyor belt at the same time.

When he doesn’t stop moving his waist, I land a hard uppercut, right to his fucking dick.

“Fucking stay still already,” I demand.

Not only does his body still, but his moans quiet, my punch having taken his breath away.

I wrap the rope around his other ankle, securing it to the next closest foot of the conveyor belt. Then I feed the remaining length underneath to Saxon who’s waiting on the other side.

Once he’s got it firm in his grasp, I stand and reluctantly lay my body over Drew’s to hold him in place. I don’t want him to be able to budge once the rope is in place. He howls in

pain as I hold his arms out straight in front of him. Saxon quickly wraps the rope around his wrists then pulls it tight, knotting it to a nearby lever so Drew is no longer able to move them.

While Saxon tests the strength of the rope, I watch Stella insert the large dildo into a harness then step into it.

*Oh, this is going to be good.*

“He’s all yours, love.” Saxon nods to Stella.

“Thanks, darlin’.” Fisting Drew’s hair, she forces his head to the side so he’s looking directly at her.

“I hear you’ve been a little shit to one of our own. That’s not nice. Why’d you do that?”

Hearing Stella refer to Delilah as “one of our own” causes my chest to swell with emotion.

Drew’s only response is a whine.

“I asked you a question. What’s wrong? Cat got your tongue?”

With a devilish smile on her face, she casts a playful sideways glance at me before squaring herself up behind Drew’s body.

“We’re going to play a little game, okay, muffin’?” She runs her hand over his ass cheeks, spreading them slightly before pulling away again. “I’m gonna ask you a question. If you can’t answer, or if the answer is incorrect, I’m gonna to fuck this cute, little asshole of yours until you get it right.”

With no warning, Stella lunges forward, pushing the dry dildo through muscles I imagine Drew is clenching as though his life depends on it.

As he’s hit with a new kind of pain, his screams commence once again.

“Oh, settle down... It doesn’t hurt that much, does it?” Stella taunts him as her thrusting continues. “I’ll stop as soon as you quit screaming. Then we can get back to our game.”

I listen as Drew attempts to quiet his screams, but Stella grabs him by the hips for leverage as she holds the dildo steady, deep inside of him. Then she reaches around the front of him, between his legs, and slaps his dick a few times.

“Damn, I thought for sure I’d have gotten you hard by now.” Shrugging her shoulders, she backs away from him.

When she pulls the dildo free from his ass, it’s tinged with blood. The sight of it curls the corners of my lips into an evil smile.

“Now, I’m going to ask you again,” Stella begins. “Why were you mean to our friend?”

“I-I...” Drew’s heavy pants aren’t the only thing keeping him from answering. It’s also part pain and part he knows there’s no good fucking answer to that question.

“I-I...? What are you, a fucking pirate?” Stella rags on him before lining herself up behind him again.

“No... Please...” Drew pants. “I-I w... I was wrong.”

Stella’s eyes meet mine with an eye roll.

“You were wrong? she repeats. “Did you hear that, Judge? He admitted he was wrong. Should we let him go now?”

I purse my lips, pretending to think about it before giving my head a shake.

“Aw, hell. Sorry, muffin’, the boss says that’s not good enough. And actually, I’ve got a better game.”

Stella grips Drew’s hair in her fist again. Bringing his ear to her lips, she speaks in a low, evil pitch just loud enough that I can still hear her.

“We all have little things that get our motors running. I think we’re a little more alike than I’d care to admit. We both get off on pain. But the difference between us in this case is I’m going to enjoy the pain that this causes... And you’re not.”

Stella lets Drew’s head drop onto the surface of the workbench before returning to her spot behind him and getting

into place.

“Here’s the deal, muffin’. I’m going to fuck your asshole again while you list everything you’ve done wrong to our friend, Delilah. And I’m not going to stop until you blow your load out of that tiny pinprick dick of yours. And when you come, I want you to shout ‘I’m sorry, Delilah,’ so fucking loud, she’ll be able to hear it at the main house on the other side of this property. If I don’t think she heard you, we’re going to do it again and again and again until you fucking get it right. Got it?”

Stella doesn’t wait for Drew to answer before she thrusts back inside of him. His screams resume as she reminds him he needs to start confessing his wrongdoings.

My attention is pulled away from Drew’s punishment when my phone starts to vibrate in my pocket. Pulling it free, I see a call coming in from Maggie. I motion to Saxon that I’m stepping out, letting him know he’s now in charge until I get back.

“Is everything okay?”

“Delilah woke up thirty minutes ago. She’s been awake ever since,” Maggie informs me.

Hope, anticipation, and nerves cause a painful shift in my chest. “I’m on my way.”

Disconnecting the call, I jump onto my bike and hightail it to the main house as quickly as I can.

# CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

## DELILAH

I can feel Maggie's presence looming over me.

Every minute... Of every day.

She's been a constant fixture by my bedside for the past week. So even though my eyelids are closed, I know she's there.

Watching. Waiting. Hovering.

A week ago, when my body was finally beginning to fight the weighted fatigue of shock it fell under the moment I entered that hotel suite, Royce pushed his way into this room.

I had a panic attack the second my eyes locked on him.

Connecting with his gaze after Drew pushed me through the doorway fucked me up. It left me with so many questions. All of which have been plaguing my warped mind since the moment Maggie was able to contain my panic.

Why was he at the hotel?

Were he and Drew working together?

Has he been planning this all along?

Is that why he rescued me from my father?

Because he saw how easy it was to get me to do whatever he wanted?

So he could manipulate me into falling in love with him before pulling the rug out from underneath me?

Is this why my SOS text to Maggie went unanswered?

Is she watching over me to make sure I don't try to escape?

It's a waste of her time and energy. I've barely moved on my own since coming down from my panic attack. I can't, even though there's a part of me that wants to. I don't sleep, though half the time Maggie thinks I am. I try to keep my eyes closed as much as possible when she's awake. I can't bring myself to look her, or anyone else, in the eye.

Nor can I face my own reflection.

At night, I take in my surroundings.

I'm back at the clubhouse. At least, that's where I think I am. I can't know for sure. It looks like my old bedroom, even though this isn't my furniture. The bed sheets smell like the fabric softener Maggie buys, but smells can be fabricated as easily as lies.

How do I know they're telling me the truth? That I'm safe now... Free of Drew.

How can I be sure this isn't another manipulation?

How do I know Drew isn't going to walk through the door any second and tell me it's time for my next appointment?

Part of me knows that's ridiculous. That Maggie and Royce are my family and always have been—even before he got rid of my father. They'll protect me at all costs.

But there's a greater part of me that's terrified I no longer have a strong grip on reality. What if the shock of being flung into that hotel room terrorized me so severely, my mind concocted a scenario in which I've been saved? To preserve itself and keep me from free-falling into an endless abyss.

I've never felt so lost before.

I can't think. Can't eat. Can't sleep.

I haven't uttered a single word since waking up.

I'm scared to do or say anything, uncertain of my ability to respond appropriately. I got myself into too much trouble with



Drew by saying the wrong things. By refusing to submit to his requests.

So I make no attempt to decide my own fate.

I simply listen and wait for Maggie to tell me what to do. That way, hopefully, I won't dig myself into a much larger hole than the one I'm already in.

Maggie brings me food. She "wakes me up" and forces me to eat it even though it makes my stomach turn. She gets me out of bed when she feels I need to move around. I hate leaving this room, but thankfully, I haven't run into anyone else.

She washes me in the bathtub. I don't like that because it reminds me too much of Drew. But I don't fight her. I sit still, like a good girl should, and allow her to wash me as I stare at the wall.

I want to be sad.

I want to be angry.

I want to cry.

I want to feel relief.

I want clarity.

I want to disappear.

But I'm convinced we only get one thing we want in life. I wanted to get away from my father, and that wish was granted. I tried to cheat the system by sleeping with Royce and daring to desire a happy future with him.

The universe punished me because of it.

Using Royce to rip my heart out, it then placed me in Drew's path instead. Now? I'm paralyzed. Left in a conscious yet vegetative state I don't know that I'll ever be able to break free of.

Royce calls Maggie's name from downstairs, and she lets out a loud huff, closing the door behind her when she leaves. I open my eyes and listen as her feet hit the wooden stairs outside my room.

Immediately, they start arguing... *Again.*

They argue about me a lot. About what each of them think I need in order to get better.

Royce keeps mentioning Dr. Caraway's name. He thinks she can help me like she did a few years ago. Maggie doesn't necessarily disagree, but I'm sure she remembers how much I hated my weekly therapy sessions. So she believes that letting me ease my way back into a healthy routine, healing in my own time, will do the trick just as effectively.

They're both wrong, but there's no sense in telling them that—not that I could even if I wanted to. A normal life is no longer in the cards for me.

Their arguing grows more heated, each of them getting louder as they try to talk over the other. I hear additional voices cutting in now, but I can't make out who it is playing referee.

*"Enough!"* Royce snaps, barking at Maggie and whoever else is around. *"This is my fucking house. My decision, and no one is going to keep me from doing what needs to be done."*

His voice gets louder the closer to the stairs he gets.

*"Goddamn it, Royce, she needs time. I can take care of her until she's ready to take care of herself,"* Maggie's loud voice bellows after him.

*"I'm not letting her waste away for months like last time, Maggie."* This time, I don't hear anger in Royce's voice but pain. *"Not again."*

The sound of feet beating against wood as Royce closes in on my room keeps the hurt in his voice from confusing me.

I wait for terror to propel me into action.

For panic to rocket through me like it did the last time I laid eyes on him.

For *anything* to rouse me from my bed, to brace myself for evil to enter my room.

But as the door flies open, I feel...

*Nothing.*

“Look at her, Maggie. She’s fucking catatonic,” Royce gestures toward my still form as I stare, unfocused, at the open door. “*That* is not healthy. *That’s* going to get her nowhere.”

Maggie opens her mouth to deliver a rebuttal, but Royce turns his back on her, effectively shutting her up.

“Delilah,” he orders my attention to him, “come on. Let’s go.”

My mind tells me to obey. To do as I’m told so there won’t be any consequences. I will my legs to move. To put one foot on the floor and then the other. To sit up and follow him out of the room.

But I can’t. Unlike when Maggie tells me to do something, I’m paralyzed when it comes to Royce.

Not until I feel his strong hand clamp around my bicep does my body react.

Terror seizes my muscles.

Emotion finally roars through me, wild and unrestrained, leaving my head in a dizzy blur.

“Get the hell out of that bed, *now*.” He pulls me from beneath the comforter.

I gasp as he rips me out of the bed. Frightened tears fall from my cheeks, but I don’t fight him. Maggie shouts at him, but he’s deaf to her worries and anger. My feet work quickly to keep up with him as he pulls me from the room, down the stairs, and out onto the porch.

“Where are you going?” Maggie shouts again, right on our heels.

“I’m taking her to the shack to deal with this,” Royce rounds on her, screaming back. “I gave you time to resolve it, and it hasn’t worked. Now it’s my turn. Do *not* follow us, Maggie, or so help me God.”

I don’t turn to see if Maggie intends to listen to him, but I no longer hear her footsteps behind me.

He continues pulling me down the steps of the porch and across the gravel driveway. The river rock bites into the bottoms of my feet, but I don't cry out. Somehow ever aware of my feelings, Royce stops, picks me up, and throws me over his shoulder.

He stomps to the driver's side of his truck and opens the door. I yelp as he tosses me onto the seat. Getting in after me, he's practically sitting on my lap as he closes the door behind him.

My breath hitches as his fiery stare claims mine. Digging his fingers into my skin, he picks me up and pitches me, with ease, over the center console and into the passenger seat. Then he cranks the ignition and peels out.

"You want to play this game?" he mutters softly, a maniacal gleam in his eyes as he barrels down the gravel road toward the shack. I'm not sure if he meant to say it out loud or in his head. Regardless, his calculated voice instills a new fear in me. "Let's fucking play."

I panic, my back pressed against the passenger side window, panting as both adrenaline and apprehension rush through me. Royce's truck kicks up dust and pebbles the faster we roar toward the small house at the far end of his property. The surrounding trees and landscape whiz by in a blur, too quickly for my stunned stare to take in.

I've been to this house a couple times in the past, but not since Maggie's mom split. Royce is the only one with a key to it. It's spooky looking, with its chipped paint and half hung shutters. I can't imagine what state the inside is in.

Probably some sort of derelict dungeon. I've heard whispers of a building on the property where the Bastards conduct their torture. Is this it?

The truck comes to a sliding halt a few feet away from the house, and I reach for my door handle the second it does. With a new wave of fear, I've broken through the crippling paralysis I faced in the clubhouse. Now I'm ready to run.

“Oh, now you move? I don’t fucking think so...” Royce’s voice stops me as if it were his iron fist around my arm again.

I remain frozen, except for my heaving lungs and trembling muscles, as he exits the car. He doesn’t take his wicked eyes off me as he rounds the front of the truck. Opening my door, he grips my bicep again and tugs me out of the cab.

In seconds, the front door is unlocked, and he shoves me inside the house, not bothering to close the door behind us.

*There’s no one around to hear me scream, but who on this compound would stop him anyway?*

“You want to be ordered around? Told what you can do and when?” He pulls me through the small, one-story shack with anger in his tone.

When we reach the bedroom in the rear of the house. I try desperately to pull air in through my lungs.

I knew this wasn’t real. This isn’t him. This isn’t the Royce I know. He’s gone, and an evil being has taken over his body.

I’m still in hell.

“You want to be confined in your room all day, unable to move around freely?” He throws me down onto the mattress before pulling a length of rope out from the closet.

Who the fuck just keeps rope lying around in their bedroom? But God only knows what he’s used this house for over the years. I thought I knew him, but now I know I was wrong. I don’t know anything about this man in front of me, other than that he has a mean, violent streak when he wants to.

I back up across the bed, but he reaches for my ankles and pulls me back toward him, forcing a scream from my lungs.

With his legs between mine, his towering body shadowing me from the light above, his rampage continues.

“You want someone to tell you what to do every day? Lie there and take it? Be miserable for the rest of your life? Fine. I

can inflict more misery on you than you've ever experienced before.”

# CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

## ROYCE

What the fuck am I doing?

I feel like I've lost my goddamn mind. This is why I was trying to keep my distance from Delilah ... so I wouldn't make a rash decision that would drastically derail her healing process.

But I fucking snapped.

It's been a week since she woke up. Other than the shrill scream I received when I came to see her that first night, she hasn't uttered a single sound. Maggie's been taking care of her, seeing to it that she's eating and bathing on a schedule. Other than that, she doesn't fucking move.

*Well, that fucking ends now.*

Does she expect to live out the rest of her days with someone else running her life? We didn't just rescue her from that psycho, only for her to give up and fall back into the same toxic routine. The sooner she realizes her nightmare is over, the sooner she can get back to her life.

*Back to me.*

It's abhorrently selfish of me to terrify her out of her suffering like this.

But I don't give a flying fuck—*not a single one.*

Desperate times call for desperate measures, and I refuse to allow her to wallow in pity and self-loathing for months on end like she did when she was fifteen. She's not a kid anymore.



She screams as I pull her to the end of the bed. I lean over her so there's no chance she can miss the severity in my stare.

“You want someone to tell you what to do every day? Lie there and take it? Be miserable for the rest of your life? Fine. I can inflict more misery on you than you've ever felt.”

Until my eyes landed on it, I had no idea this rope was in the closet. Actually, I didn't know what I was going to do with her until I saw it. Then it hit me.

One of my dumbest ideas yet.

“No!” Delilah screams, as I begin to wrap her ankle in the rope. Begging as tears flood her delicious, chocolate eyes. “Stop, please!”

She kicks her ankle out of my grip, and I cup her flying limb in my hand before it connects with my face.

“I won't stop, Delilah!” I shout. “Where you're concerned, I'll never fucking stop.”

“Please let me go!” She sobs as she pulls her legs away from me again, curling them underneath her as she rises off the bed and onto her elbows.

Her plea causes something inside of me to break.

The barrier that's been deflecting other's emotions my entire life—the same one keeping my emotions from escaping—incinerates the moment she begs me to let her go.

“No, Delilah. I'll do anything you ask of me ... *fucking anything...*” I grip my aching chest involuntarily, my breathing feverish, pledging my oath to her with a raspy croak. “I'll walk through fire for you. I'll kill for you. I'll fucking die for you. But the one thing I'll never be able to do—*ever again*—is let you go.”

My words put an end to her fight, and I drop the rope to the ground. Gripping her waist, I pull her into a sitting position as I fall to my knees at the foot of the bed. Her tears have slowed, and I no longer see fear in her eyes. Only pain.

“I don't want to keep you here as my prisoner. I want you out in the world, kitten. Living. Blossoming. Thriving. I want

you to fight like hell to take your life back. And I want to be the one by your side while you do it. I want to wash away the pain in your eyes. The darkness in your soul. I want to cleanse you of every wrong I, and anyone else, have ever done to you.”

As I prepare to state the words I’ve never said to anyone else, I put my own worries aside and squash my fear. This girl... This *woman* I’ve craved, wanted, and needed for so long, deserves to hear them.

“Delilah, I—”

“No...” she cuts me off, placing her hand at my lips before I can tell her I love her. “Please don’t finish that sentence...”

I swallow, preparing to deny her insistence to walk out of my life, when she drops her hand and continues.

“My father told me he *loved* me. But he also beat me. Raped me.” She rises to her knees, disgust blazing in her stare. “Drew told me he *loved* me. He also assaulted me. He groomed and manipulated me. Attempted to traffick me.”

She licks her lips, and when she speaks again, her voice is thick with a renewed conviction.

“Those three words mean something to me, Royce. But it’s not anything good. They’re tainted. Evil. And I can’t bear to hear them on your tongue.”

With a whimper, she reaches for me, and I exhale a deep breath I didn’t realize I was holding in.

I pull her close to me, and our lips touch for the first time in far too long. I let the moment overtake me. For the first time, instead of fighting them, I appreciate every single emotion running through my body at the sight of her. The feel of her. The taste of her.

A part of me was scared I’d never experience this again. That both she and the thrill she rouses would be lost to me forever, taking my soul with her into the darkness.

I cup her cheeks, deepening the kiss. I memorize her skin as I run my thumbs tenderly along her jaw. As my hands glide

down her neck, over her shoulders, and down to her hips. I finger the hem of her T-shirt, but before I'm able to pull it off her, she stops me.

She shoves at my chest, her strong palms pushing me backward. But I hold onto her shoulders, not ready to give her the space she's requesting.

"Royce?" A fresh wave of tears cause her eyes to shine.

"Yes, kitten?" I pant.

"Is this real?" Her eyes flit quickly between mine. "Tell me I'm not imagining this... I couldn't bear it."

Burying the anger I'm harboring toward that motherfucker for putting her through the shit she's endured, I vow to punch him right in the fucking dick the second I get back to the warehouse.

"Delilah, look at me." Placing my hands on her cheeks again, I train my eyes directly on hers. "There has never been anything more real in my entire life than this moment right here, right now, with you."

With the slightest nod and a sigh of relief, she lunges herself off the bed and into my arms. Spinning around, I take a seat on the mattress, and Delilah straddles my legs. Fuck, I would have loved to have been naked first, but I'm not breaking this kiss for anyfuckingthing right now.

Delilah fists my hair, and my dick hardens at the bite of pain she causes. I palm her tits over her T-shirt, feeling her hardened nipples through the thin fabric. I'm antsy for a chance to feel my skin rubbing against hers. She whimpers as I tweak her nipple.

"I need to feel you, Royce." Delilah breaks the kiss, answering my prayers like the fucking angel she is.

Finding the hem of her shirt once more, I pull it over her head quicker than I've ever moved before. Immediately, she arches her back, jutting her tits toward me, and my mouth opens on instinct.

Latching onto one of her perfect, rosy nipples, I suck at it like it's the only thing giving me life right now.

*Because it is.*

*She is.*

Lightly, I pinch her other nipple in a rhythmic pattern, helping to rile her passion, excited to edge her closer toward orgasm. With my free hand, I find her clit through the thin pair of pajama shorts Maggie dressed her in. Rubbing her tender nerves, I work her into a frenzy until she's bucking against my thumb, crying out in pleasure.

"Oh god, Royce. Thank you, thank you." Her loud moans of ecstasy make me happier than ever that even though my mind was clouded with fury, I was smart enough to remove her from the main house.

Here she can be as loud as she fucking wants. As loud as I can make her scream.

*Challenge accepted.*

My thumb slows as she comes down from her orgasm, and I finally let go of her nipple. My eyes meet hers, and she looks exhausted. Poor girl. She's already worn out, but I'm just getting started.

Standing, I place her on her back on the bed before stripping out of my clothing. She stares at me dreamily as her legs open, her knees falling to the sides. My dick twitches as I make out the giant wet spot on her shorts as well as the front of my pants.

"My kitten is wet for me."

My hunger rises, but my fear threatens to ruin this moment as it recalls a memory from the last time we were together. When we fucked and I freaked out afterward like a weak, little bitch. But as my eyes scan the masterpiece before me, I thank God she's offering herself to me again.

I won't repeat the mistakes of my past. There will be no apprehension circling me at the end of this reconciliation.

The second the rest of my clothing is on the ground, I tug her shorts and panties down her legs. Kneeling before her, I brush kisses along her inner thighs before feasting on her deliciously wet pussy.

I was wrong before. It wasn't her nipple I needed to taste. It was this. Her intoxicating arousal. It's like the fucking elixir of life.

And it's all mine.

*She's all mine.*

Finally.

# CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

## DELILAH

*“There has never been anything more real in my entire life than this moment right here, right now, with you.”*

Royce’s words were the final key to unlocking the debilitating hold my entire ordeal with Drew had over me. And as he licks away the remnants of the orgasm he just gave me, I writhe beneath him, content in knowing it’s the truth.

Royce promised he won’t let me go ever again.

And I believe him.

He loves me.

And I believe him.

I couldn’t bear to hear him say the words aloud, but the sentiment is there. The fact that he was driven to say it is enough for me.

We still have work to do. I’m smart enough to know this relationship isn’t going to be easy, but he renews his oath to me with each lick of his tongue, bringing me closer to the edge again.

My eyelids flutter closed as sparks fly beneath them. Blood rushes through me, pins and needles pricking my flesh as another strong orgasm begins to take hold of my body. Royce can feel it, and impatient as always, he hurries it along by inserting two fingers into my pussy. Rubbing them against that secret spot inside me that no one else has ever been able to find, he lures it out.

Bucking against his mouth, I fuck his tongue as his fingers dance inside of me, and I let myself go. Royce's eyes darken with devious pleasure as my orgasm rips a scream from my mouth. A sound I've never made before bellows out of me, filling the room around us.

Removing his mouth from my clit, he rapidly rubs me back and forth with his other hand, extending my orgasm and forcing more cum to drip from my throbbing pussy.

*"Oh, fuuuuuck!"*

"That's it, Delilah. Give it to me. Give me everything you have, kitten." Royce's encouragement refuels my already insatiable hunger.

As if that were even possible.

"St-stop..." I pant when I can't take anymore, and his movements cease immediately. "It's too ... much."

Royce stands, towering over me as I fight to catch my breath. His chest is covered in moisture—my moisture. Running his hand over his hard, defined pecs, he rubs it into his skin before inserting the fingers he just fucked me with into his mouth.

"Are you ready for more, Delilah?" he asks after he's sucked his fingers dry. Fisting his already rock-hard dick, he strokes it a few times. "Or have you had enough?"

My eyes flare, and excitement dances through me. It's been too long since I've had him inside of me. I thwart away thoughts of the recent sorrow I felt thinking I would never get this chance again.

"I'll never get enough of you, Royce," I admit, and it's as true now as it's always been.

He looks at me as though I've just uttered the magic words.

Laying his body over mine, he lines himself up with my entrance then slowly pushes forward. Easing his cock in and out carefully, I sense a reluctance within him, even as his eyes flash with barely restrained hunger.



“All good, kitten?” He searches for any sign of distress before proceeding, bathing me in his warm love.

Swallowing, I nod. “I want this, Royce. I need you. And not just right now. I need you today, tomorrow, and for the rest of my life.”

I only meant to say yes, but as his eyes coaxed me into a state of calm I’ve seldom felt before, I lost all control of myself. I put myself out there, like I did the last time we were together.

I can choose to worry that he’ll clam up at the end of this. That he’ll get scared off like he did before and walk away.

Or I can put my trust and faith in progress and growth.

In Royce.

In myself.

The last time we were together was a lifetime ago. Everything is different than it once was. We’re different than we once were.

This bed is fortified with freehearted confessions and everlasting promises. And with four words—words that are small and simple until you string them together—he strengthens my belief in *us*.

“You have me. Forever.”

With my face held delicately in his hands, he sinks into me. I wait for him to unleash his hunger and fuck me into next week. Instead, he takes his time as though he’s getting reacquainted with my body. As though he’s taking it slow so he doesn’t miss one heart-stopping hitch of my breath, one prurient twinkle in my eye, one beseeching squeeze from my pussy.

We’re silent except for our moans. Words aren’t needed to feel the wild beating of our hearts vibrating through both of our chests. To feel the flaring heat in our eyes as we engulf one another in the flames of our passion.

There are over seven thousand languages spoken on Earth, but you won’t find one word among them more enchanting,

more transfixing, or more devastating than the way our bodies move against one another.

“Does that feel good, Delilah?”

“*God, yes.*” My eyes roll back into my head as another orgasm flirts with my senses.

Royce increases the speed of his movements at exactly the right time. His sweet lovemaking quickening into a desperate need for delicious release.

I moan as the hard ridges of his cock massage my inner walls, his tip rubbing over the sweet spot housed within them.

“Yes, Royce, right there.” My eyes stay locked on his as his satisfying friction pushes me closer to another orgasm.

“Kitten... *Fuck...* You feel so fucking good around my cock.”

He’s close, if the weakening of his neck muscles are any indication. He rests his head on my chest, taking my nipple into his mouth as his hips continue to buck into me.

I fist his hair as my pleasure strengthens and draws another moan from my lips. The longer I hold the note, the harder Royce thrusts into me.

My pussy clenches as I’m launched from the cliff Royce led me to, the pressure milking his dick until his own orgasm hits.

“Fuck, I’m gonna come, kitten.” He lets my nipple go to deliver his warning... Or is it a promise?

Before I can open my mouth to give him permission, I feel his hot seed spill deep inside of me.

Royce’s arms give out, and he lays his hard, sweaty body on top of mine. I wrap my arms around him as he continues to shudder with every aftershock from his orgasm. He buries his face in the crook of my neck with his cock still nestled in my pussy.

We lay still for a few minutes, and I’m content to stay like this forever. Too soon, Royce lifts himself off me, and I think

he's going to get dressed. Instead, he pulls the blankets out from beneath me then climbs back into bed. Wrapping his arms around me, he curls me to him, my back to his front.

Tears form as quickly as the smile on my lips. When he feels my body trembling, he grips my chin and turns my face toward him. With furrowed brows, his concerned stare washes over me.

“Did I hurt you, kitten?”

I shake my head. “No. I'm sorry. I'm just ... feeling a lot of different emotions that my mind can't deal with right now.”

“Do *not* apologize. It's understandable after everything you've been through.” Royce kisses my lips sweetly, gently. “I'm sorry I was such a dick to you back at the house. And when we first got here.”

“You don't have to be sorry.” I place a hand on his cheek. “I needed a kick in the ass, and you're the only one who would have been able to give it to me.”

With a smile, he once again tugs me tightly against his body. We stay like that for a long time, not moving. Not speaking. My body fully relaxed in the arms of the only man who has ever made me feel safe, I begin to drift off for the first time in days.

Until finally...

“Kitten?”

I swivel my head and meet his eyes, my body following with a slow turn in his arms.

Gently, he encircles my wrist, then he brings my hand to his lips. I watch as he presses a kiss to my palm before flattening it against his chest. I feel the strong, rhythmic beat of his heart beneath it.

“My heart belongs to you.”

Quickly, my eyes find his again. I immediately recognize the meaning behind his words. The skin between my eyes creases as emotion threatens to drown me once more. But I refuse to let it.

Repeating the motions he made, I pull his hand from where it rests over mine then place a kiss to his palm. Pressing it over my left breast, I gaze through his eyes, all the way to his soul.

“And you have my heart.”

# CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

## DELILAH

**I** 've been walking down the same hallway for hours.

*Or has it been days?*

*I can't tell. Time melts together here.*

*What I do know is I'll never be free from him. The faceless man chases me toward a lone room at the end of the hallway. When I reach the door, it opens, and the faceless man jumps out and tackles me to the ground.*

“Delilah.” Royce’s voice breaks through my consciousness, tearing me out of my nightmare. A warm touch caresses my cheek. “Kitten, I’m here. It’s just a dream.”

The second my eyes open and meet his, my panic melts away.

“Hey.” Royce smiles, his thumb gingerly feathers along my lower lip. “Are you okay?”

I nod, letting him know I’ll be fine. I can’t help but wonder if nightmares of Drew will haunt me in place of nightmares of my father from now on.

Or worse, tormented dreams where they pursue me together.

Ice forms in my veins, and a chill runs up my spine at the thought of them double-teaming me. Royce tucks me tighter to his chest, and I breathe him in, letting his scent calm me as it once did.

“Delilah, I...” Royce tugs on his ear, and I can’t remember a time when I’ve seen him act so nervous. “Can I ask you something?”

I nod quietly.

He doesn’t speak right away, and his eyes never leave mine as I witness him struggle to find the words he’s looking for.

“Why...? Why’d you wait so long to reach out for help?”

My eyes shift away from his immediately, finding a spot on the ceiling to focus on instead. I don’t know what question I was expecting him to ask, but that wasn’t it.

“I...” I consider my answer before opting to tell him the truth. “I was scared.”

He tugs at my chin, bringing my attention back to him.

“Scared of what?” The skin on his forehead wrinkles in confusion.

“Scared that after the night I yelled at you in front of the club, you’d washed your hands of me. Scared if I decided I wanted to come home, that I’d have to face you, knowing I could never have you the way I craved most. That my feelings would never be returned.”

At my admission, Royce mounts my body, taking both of my wrists in his large, strong hand and pinning them above my head.

“And now, kitten? Do you see that I thirst for you at least as much as you thirst for me?”

He runs the fingers of his free hand over my bare chest, down my stomach, then burrows his thumb between my slit. He seeks my throbbing clit between my legs, clenched tightly together between his own.

“Yes,” I pant, ready for another thorough ravishing.

He leans over and captures my lips with his. Gifting me a moan of ecstasy, our tongues entangle in a lovers’ waltz until I’m panting heavily again.

Too quickly, the kiss ends, pulling a whimper from me. And as he slides back onto the bed next to me again, I realize this serious conversation is far from over.

“All in good time, kitten,” Royce promises me with a low, gravelly laugh. “But first, there’s more I need to know”.

I turn toward him and take a deep breath when his grave expression returns.

“What else?” I just want to get this over with. When he’s done interrogating me, I have a few inquiries of my own.

Royce fires off question after question, and I walk him through each sordid detail that occurred after he left Spotlight on the night that became the beginning of the end for me.

He wasn’t able to stay still in bed the entire time. He got up, paced the room, and by the time I got to the part about the pictures of him and Draven carrying my father’s dead body away from our trailer, he’d already punched two separate holes in the wall of the bedroom.

As I finish my recollection, he’s sitting on the edge of the bed, his red face in his hands, looking lost and despondent—two more emotions I’ve never seen him express before today.

As the minutes tick by and he still hasn’t moved, I get out of bed and go to him. Kneeling between his legs, I place my forehead on his.

“Royce...” I try to get him to open his eyes.

When he doesn’t, I press my lips into a thin line and break out the big guns. Using his distraction to my advantage, I lean forward and close my mouth around him, sucking him in deep until my lips connect with the base of his cock.

“Fuck.” His shocked curse comes out with a twitch of his dick. “Delilah, stop. You don’t have to do that, kitten.”

He takes my head gently in his hands and removes himself from my mouth. His eyes on mine the whole time.

“I know I don’t.” I cock an eyebrow, letting him know I wanted to.



With a hand still cupping my cheek, he closes his eyes and shakes his head. When he speaks again, his voice cracks, breaking my heart.

“I saw the video—the *videos*...” My entire body goes cold, knowing Royce watched some of the worst moments of my life unfold. I didn’t realize he was aware of exactly how severe my time with Drew was when I recounted my saga for him earlier. “Watching how he punished you that night... If I would have known, Delilah, I swear to God, I would have killed him on that sidewalk.”

Noticing a change in my demeanor, Royce picks me up from the ground and situates me on his lap. I can’t look at him. The shame I feel, knowing he witnessed the punishment that occurred as a result of that night ... and who knows what else.

Unable to hold in my tears, they break free of my eyes as a sob racks my whole body.

“Kitten... I’m so fucking sorry.”

Royce stands then lays me back down on the bed. The mattress dips as he curls in beside me before wrapping me tightly in his arms and letting me cry.

“It’s ... not your ... fault.” I need to assuage his guilt. He truly did nothing wrong, and I won’t have him thinking otherwise.

“Delilah, I’m sorry I couldn’t get to you sooner. I had to make a plan to ensure your safety. I didn’t know what kind of people he had at his disposal or exactly how unhinged he was. I couldn’t chance you getting hurt because I fucked up.”

A little calmer than before, I sit up and look at him.

“Royce, you saved me. It doesn’t matter when or how. All that matters is that you came for me.”

He sits up and stretches his legs out, one on each side of me. I place my legs over his, and Royce pulls me closer to him. As my core draws closer to his cock again, I have to fight every instinct I have to impale myself with it and ride him hard.

“Oceans couldn’t keep me from you, kitten.”

“I have a question for you, if that’s all right?” I look at my hands, playing with an imaginary hangnail.

“Anything,” he answers.

“How did you end up in that hotel room? I was scared out of my mind. And when I realized it was you, I ... I think I was in shock, going from intense fear to intense relief.”

I listen intently as Royce fills in all the blanks from his end. The only time I interrupt is when I gasp at the amount of money he lost. I remember Drew telling me how much, but I wasn’t sure that I believed him at the time.

Without missing a beat, he told me he would pay that ten times over to get me back. Then he added that he’s never going to let me out of his sight again.

“I’m so mad that I didn’t see the warning signs until it was too late.” I run my hands over his muscular biceps. “I could have saved everyone so much worry—and money.”

Royce caresses my face.

“Don’t you worry, kitten. He’s not done paying for his sins yet.”

When he got to the part of his story where they apprehended Drew at the hotel, I assumed he’d been killed and disposed of by now.

“You...? You...?” With wide eyes, I attempt to form a coherent thought. “He’s...?”

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. Opening them again, I find Royce patiently waiting for me to gather my thoughts.

“You have Drew?” My words barely make it out due to my shaky breath. “Here?”

“I do.” His matter-of-fact confession comes as easily as if he were telling me the sky is blue. “At the hotel, while you were unconscious, I promised you I was going to make him

suffer, kitten. He's barely hanging on by a thread, but I'm not even close to being done with him."

"Good," I nod, Royce going in and out of focus as relief settles in me.

"I have another confession to make, Delilah."

I refocus my sight on Royce, swallowing at the trepidation in his soft eyes.

"What is it?" I press my palm to his cheek, trying to ease him.

"I've done horrible things in my lifetime. Made decisions that have ended lives... Changed lives... And I never batted an eye making them. But when it comes to you, kitten... I feel I've made the wrong move at every turn. I'm scared, and I don't want to make the wrong decision with you again."

His display of raw honesty latches itself around my heart, locking my lifeforce to him forever. I don't have much in this world, but I would bet it all on the fact that he's never been this open with anyone else before.

Pressing my palm to his heart, I take his hand and place it over my own. "As long as we make any decisions that affect both of us together, we can never go wrong again."

# CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

## ROYCE

**S**tealing Delilah away to the shack was the first decision I've made, recently, that hasn't bitten me in the fucking ass.

After I confessed my worst fear to her then laid my heart at her feet we made love.

And then we did it again.

I don't use the shack often anymore, only when I need to get away from everyone. Mostly when the need to distance myself from her hits. When my cravings become too much to bear. But when I'm there, I don't like to leave until I'm forced to, so I keep a few things on hand.

Coffee, pasta, shampoo. The staples.

I held her in my arms until the sky darkened outside, then I made us some dinner. After that, we showered, then I tucked her back into my bed and waited until she was fast asleep before calling my brothers to church and telling them what needs to happen next.

As Delilah described the hell she'd been through to me earlier, I discovered Drew isn't the only problem that needs to be dealt with.

I already knew that bouncer of his would need to be punished for his role in the attack at Mathieu, but another of Drew's employee's, a woman named Josie, will have to be taken out as well.

I asked Rocco and Zephyr to stay behind and continue Drew's punishment. We've been giving him just enough water

to keep him alive, despite his constant requests to let him die. Ronin was tasked to stay behind to keep an eye on Maggie. And specifically, to make sure she doesn't go snooping around at the shack.

Not that she'll be able to get in.

I double bolted the front door when I left—to keep others from getting in rather than Delilah from getting out. The only way to unlock it is with a key. I left her a note to explain my absence should she happen to wake up before I get back.

If she does awaken, she'll likely be mad when she realizes she can't go anywhere. But I'm trusting that after our discussions today, she'll understand I only did it to keep her safe.

The rest of us are waiting in the shadows, surrounding Spotlight on all sides as the last patrons leave for the evening. Delilah mentioned earlier that the employees usually leave before the closing manager, and I'm hoping the same is true tonight.

I don't want to have to take out anyone who doesn't deserve to die, but I won't let that get in the way of what must be done. I saw Ethan and another woman who fits the description of Josie in a heated discussion on the sidewalk earlier. I'm hoping they're both still inside when we get in there so we can take them both out, now, and be done with this.

Finally, much later than I was anticipating, the lights from the purple and yellow signs on the front and side of the building turn off, and I type out a text to Cyber.

After I made my appointment for a night with Delilah, I had him hack the site and take it down. He was also able to get into Drew's computer at the club as well as at home. He planted a virus that multiplied every time Drew or any other user tried to access the dark site or any of his hidden cameras. There's one final task I need him to complete for me now.

Kill the cameras.

He's taking out both Spotlight's interior and exterior cameras as well as looping the nearby CCTV cameras so they won't catch any new activity until I send word that we've successfully completed our mission. Within five minutes, I get a response from him.

Done. Your move.

Firing off another text—this time to my brothers surrounding the building—I tell them to get into place.

Stick to the shadows, but move quickly.

Leaving my own cover, I cross the darkened street, stopping in the shadow beneath the awning over the front door of the club. Atticus, Toga, and Chubbs join me. Draven, Saxon, and Crew should be approaching the rear door now too.

I pull my crowbar from inside my cut then place the curved end at the seam between the front doors of Spotlight. It takes a couple pulls, but I'm able to get the metal to bend just enough that the door falls open with ease.

Atticus and Toga pull their guns, and Atticus enters the club first, clearing the room for Toga and me. Gripping the crowbar tightly in one fist, with the other, I pull my gun from the waistband of my jeans. Stepping through the doorway, I take sight of the club. I recognize every square inch of it from the videos that motherfucker took of Delilah.

They replay in my head, torturing me.

I look at the stage, and all I see is him fucking her at the end of it. I see her stripping night after night, her face devoid of any emotion, like a zombie.

As I scan the space, I catch sight of the door to the champagne room. The same room where he made her hump her body for those men when she didn't want to. Forcing her to relive feelings she hasn't felt in years. Feelings she never should have been subjected to at all.

My eyes land on Draven's at the other end of the hallway that connects the front of the house with the back. At the same time, I hear heightened voices arguing from a room on the left side of the hallway. Nodding to it, the two groups of us slowly converge on the open door.

*"...just feel like we should be looking for him."* The woman's concerned voice becomes clear the closer I get.

*"He's fucking gone, Josie. We move forward like we discussed."*

*"How do we do that, Ethan? We don't need any more heat on us. Did you forget what it was like after Paul? We're lucky Drew had dirt on the police commissioner or we never would have gotten away with killing him."*

I knew Drew had something to do with the death of the previous owner.

*"The motorcycle club is behind this... I'm certain of it. I say we go to the cops with the information we have. Tell them Drew found out they're responsible for the disappearance of that guy, and that's why they killed him. Get the attention off of Spotlight—off of us—and onto the Royal Bastards before they figure any of this out."*

"I'm afraid it's too late for that." I step into the office, pointing my gun at the bouncer.

Draven joins me, his gun drawn on Josie.

She stands, backing up until she's next to Ethan, both of them on the other side of the office. Ethan rises from the chair behind the desk, and I watch his movements like a hawk.

"Walk to me with your hands behind your head." I cock my gun in the direction I want them to go, taking my eyes off of Ethan for a second.

It gives him the opportunity to reach behind him, but before he can pull out what I'm assuming is a gun, I fire, blasting a hole into the wall next to his head.

"The next one won't miss. Hands. Behind. Your. Head."



With a snarl, he does as he's told. I can't wait to wipe the look off his face.

"I'm only going to say this one more time. Over here, now."

Josie moves quickly, her frightened eyes wide.

"Draven, Atticus, escort this worthless cunt into the other room."

Draven grabs the back of her neck and presses the barrel of the gun to her head as they leave.

"Slowly, walk toward me." Ethan obeys my order this time, placing one foot carefully in front of the other.

I walk backward out of the office with my eyes trained on the bouncer very carefully. When we're in the hallway, I order Chubbs to remove the gun from Ethan's waistband and check him for any other weapons.

When he comes up clean, I nod my head toward the main floor. "Get out there."

Saxon leads the bouncer out into the club, stopping when he gets to Draven, Atticus, and the woman.

"Both of you on your knees, now."

Ethan shows no sign of emotion, his angry snarl now gone. The woman has the audacity to cry as she lowers herself to the ground.

Her tears ignite my fury, and I lash out at her. Fisting her hair, I lower my face to hers and press my gun to her temple.

"When Delilah cried because she was scared of what you sick fucks were making her do, what did you do?"

She doesn't answer, she only trembles as she sobs.

"*Did you fucking help her?*" Letting my demon take over, I scream in her face, scaring more tears from her. "No. You didn't. You sat in that office, getting off on the idea of all the money she was going to make the three of you. Delilah told me all about it. Delilah, who is now safe once again, and far away from the two of you."

She whimpers when I tighten my grip on her hair before finally letting her go.

“And you...” I stand to my full height over the beast of a man at my feet. A vicious growl I’ve never heard before rumbles in my chest. “You scared her. You *touched* her.”

His eyes move to mine, and he knows I’m talking about the attack at Mathieu.

“You watched as she was forced to ingratiate the vile, disgusting men who paid for her. Money that you greedily lusted after. Money you’re *never* going to get to enjoy.”

Lowering my gun, I fire a shot directly at his dick. Josie screams as he lowers his hands, cupping his ruined appendage. His body flops to the side as he groans in pain.

Josie hyperventilates next to him, dropping her arms and watching him as he jerks in pain on the ground.

“Saxon, Crew, go get the gas canisters from the alley out back. Someone will have heard the shots. We need to move quickly.”

When they leave, I give Josie my next command.

“On your stomach, hands behind your head.”

Shakily, she listens to me. When she’s flat on the ground, I shoot her twice, once in the back of each knee, ensuring she won’t be able to walk out of here after we’ve completed the next part of our plan.

Walking to Ethan, I kick his body over so he’s flat on his back. His weight shifts, but he doesn’t loosen his grip on his dick. I fire two more shots, shattering his kneecaps and rendering his escape impossible as well.

Saxon enters the room again from the hallway, a canister of gasoline in his hand. I watch as Crew follows him, walking backward and pouring the accelerant on the floor as he goes.

“Get everywhere you can, making sure you save plenty for these two.” I nod to the two fucks screaming in pain on the ground.

I don't have enough time to kill them the way I would like. But there's no way in hell I'm giving them a slow death. Crew and Saxon work to spread the gas over the expanse of the club.

My goal isn't a cover-up. It's not to try to hide the fact that this was murder or arson. I don't care that their bodies will be found. I don't care if they're able to be identified or anything else like that. My only goal is to completely annihilate every dark spot in Delilah's life, arming her with the knowledge that she never has to worry about it closing in on her again.

The sounds of Josie and Ethan choking on the gas as it splashes into their eyes and mouths becomes part of the symphony I'm composing in Delilah's honor.

When I light the match, throwing it on them as they cling to one another, their screams of terror and agony tickle my eardrums, joining all the other notes I've added to this composition.

I let the smoke surround me, waiting until the fire has pulled every dying sound from them before I back out of the club and walk down the street to my awaiting truck.

# CHAPTER FIFTY

## DELILAH

When I wake up, the early light of dawn is beginning to warm the sky.

But the bed is cold next to me.

Sitting up, my chest aches when I see Royce is gone. I listen for any sounds that may tell me if he's in another room, but I hear nothing. Wrapping myself in the bed sheet, I breathe in Royce's calming scent mixed with the alluring stench of yesterday's numerous liaisons. I let it calm me as I tiptoe silently from the bedroom and down the short hallway into the kitchen.

No sign of Royce.

A light panic settles in my chest as I wonder if I imagined everything that happened yesterday. All that we did. Everything we said.

But with Royce's spicy aroma still lingering in my nose, I know what I remember of our emotional reunion is true.

My eyes scan the room. I wasn't able to take it in yesterday as Royce pulled me through the door and straight into the bedroom. Royce grew up in this house. He lived here from the time he was born until the time they found out Penny was pregnant with Maggie.

Maggie told me Royce let Penny stay here after that, and he moved into the old MC clubhouse—wherever that used to be. Eventually, he bought the land surrounding this house. When he took over as president, he built the clubhouse and the

barracks where they are today because it's easier to maintain privacy and secrecy out here.

Maggie had two bedrooms. One here and one there so Royce could keep an eye on her when Penny had to work or wanted to go out.

The house looks the same as I remember. I'm surprised Royce never gutted and remodeled it. That he didn't swap the pink, floral curtains for something else, at the very least.

As I continue scanning my surroundings, my eyes land on a piece of paper on the counter. Picking it up, my body relaxes again, relieved when I realize it's from Royce.

**KITTEN -**

**I HAD TO RUN AN ERRAND. I'M HOPING TO BE  
BACK BEFORE YOU WAKE UP. IF NOT, PLEASE  
MAKE YOURSELF AT HOME, AND I'LL SEE YOU  
SOON.**

**YOURS,**

**ROYCE**

His sign-off brings a smile to my face. Recalling how he expressed himself to me yesterday causes my heart to swell. I feel like I'm dreaming, but as I'm usually plagued by nightmares, I smile knowing this has to be real.

Placing the note back on the counter, I search through his cabinets, looking for coffee. When I find it, I get a pot brewing then sit down on the sofa to wait. Eyeing the remote control, I turn on the television to drown out the deafening silence more than anything. Surfing aimlessly through the channels, I have no intention of watching anything specific.

Until a breaking news announcement pulls me in, keeping me from hopping to the next channel. More than the emergency she's reporting on, the intersection behind the woman on the screen catches my attention.

"I'm standing in front of Harrisburg nightclub Spotlight—or what's left of it—where a fire began a little over an hour ago. What's being described as a tremendously quick blaze by witnesses was put out quickly by fast-acting firefighters. They're currently sifting through the ashes, ensuring that every flame has been extinguished."

My jaw drops when the camera pans out, and I see the smoking rubble of what once was Spotlight.

"I'm getting word..." The reporter begins again, "Apparently, firefighters found signs of an accelerant that was used—a sign of arson—which caused the place to burn as quickly as it did."

My head turns toward the note that Royce left me, and in my bones, I know he was the one behind it.

Turning back to the newscast, I can't peel my eyes from it for the next few minutes as the reporter goes through the alleged timeline of events and the destruction the fire has caused. She speaks with the anchorman in the news studio, answering questions as he fires them off.

"It looks... Sorry, Jim. I don't mean to cut you off. They're pulling what looks to be a body from the ashes. No... Oh goodness. Two bodies, Jim. The fire chief just confirmed they've found the remains of two people among the ruins."

If the shock of the fire wasn't enough, learning that two people were killed gets my adrenaline going. I need to know who, and I hope it wasn't any of the girls. It's bad enough what happened to Haven. I don't need any more innocent blood staining the trail of destruction Drew's devious actions have caused.

When I hear the sound of keys in a lock behind me, I stand. Spinning around, my eyes zero in on the doorknob.

Spooked by the newscast, fear settles in my veins, suddenly unsure who is at the door.

I release a relieved breath when I see Royce's face as he walks in. The stench of smoke fills the air immediately, confirming my suspicion that he set the fire.

The news report pulls his attention from me, and I note a hint of panic in his eyes.

"Shit, that was fast." A hint of a smile twitches at the corner of his lips.

Perhaps I mistook panic for thrill.

"Kitten..." He breathes my nickname with a sigh, taking in the sight of me draped in our love-soaked sheets.

I run to him, and he wraps me in his arms, the strong stench of smoke causing me to cough.

"Let me shower first. I don't want to touch you while I smell like a damn chimney."

"Wait," I stop him. "As soon as I saw the news I... I knew it was you. You did that for me?"

His words from yesterday ring loudly in my ears, as if he's just spoken them out loud, again.

*"I'll do anything you ask of me... Fucking anything... I'll walk through fire for you. I'll kill for you. I'll fucking die for you."*

He did everything he said he would... Thank God he didn't die in that fire.

His eyes answer me before his lips do. "And I'd do it again, in a heartbeat."

"Who...?" I don't finish my question before he puts me out of my misery.

"Ethan and Josie."

I squeeze Royce in appreciation, releasing a deep sigh of relief. And coughing from the stench of smoke again.



“There’s no way you didn’t get too close to the fire smelling like this, Royce.” I look at him with concern. “I’ll never try to stop you from righting a wrong, but please promise me you won’t be careless.”

He cradles my face in his palms, and I melt into his touch.

“I can’t lose you...”

“I’m not going anywhere, kitten.” He leans in and kisses me softly. “Except the shower. I’ll be right back.”

Turning, I watch him walk away, stripping out of his clothes as he approaches the bathroom. A fire deep inside of me ignites, as strong as the one that burned Spotlight to the ground.

Cast from the hands of the man I love.

Following him, I drop the sheet I’m wrapped in along the trail of his strewn clothing. Steam is already filling the small bathroom when I enter it. Pulling the curtain back, his intense stare meets mine.

The desire in his gaze matches the feeling growing within me. I step into the shower, my hands joining Royce’s as he rubs his body wash from head to toe.

When he’s clean, he changes his focus to me, making sure my entire body is coated in suds before he washes them away. Turning from me to rinse a few remaining soap bubbles from his chest, I wrap my arms around his waist, one fist encircling his dick. The palm of my other hand falls to the weight hanging beneath it, and I cradle him gently. His head falls back, his arm reaching out, using the tiled wall to steady himself.

His dick hardens in my hand instantly, and I stroke him a few times before he pulls out of my grip and turns around again.

“You have no idea, kitten, how I’ve longed for a warm shower. But to have you in here with me...” I’m not sure what he means about a warm shower, but as he presses me into the wall at my back, rubbing his rigid cock along my stomach, the thought vanishes.

I look down, taking in the way he's thrusting his hips, begging for more friction, and I begin to shake with desire.

"Take me, Royce."

He lifts my body with ease. I wrap my legs around his waist as he holds his dick out straight, enabling my pussy to glide over it.

"Oh god." The feeling of him inside of me again pulls a loud whine from me. "I need you, Royce. Fuck me, please."

He thrusts into me, our wet skin smacking together loudly as he stirs up the quickest orgasm that's ever hit me. In seconds flat, my pleasure-filled moan echoes off the bathroom walls.

Throwing the shower curtain open, Royce steps out of the bathtub, not bothering to turn the water off. Still seated fully inside of me, his lips find mine, and I grow even weaker for the man whose strong arms I'm wrapped in.

I buck my hips, grinding harder against him as he exits the bathroom. He only gets one step into the bedroom when we're stopped by a loud voice, shouting at us from the hallway.

*"Oh, my God!"*

# CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

## DELILAH

The inferno Royce conjured within me turns to ice the second I lay eyes on Maggie over his shoulder.

I watch, my gaze frozen on hers, as shock rockets through her eyes.

Then pain.

Then fury.

*“What the fuck?”* When she shouts again, Royce springs into action, continuing his path into the bedroom and dropping me onto the bed before running back out and closing the door behind him.

I appreciate the fact that he’s likely trying to shield me—and my nakedness—from Maggie’s wrath, but she’s my best friend. I owe her my honesty.

I knew the time would come when we’d have to tell her how we felt about one another, but I didn’t think it would be now, not so soon. And certainly not like this.

As their scathing roars boom through the house, I grab the first article of clothing I can find—Royce’s shirt, discarded in the throes of passion yesterday.

Fuck. Seeing me in it isn’t going to help matters, but can they really get any worse? I need to get outside quickly, before they kill each other.

Throwing open the bedroom door, I follow their harsh screams through the house to the front yard.

“This is beyond fucked-up, Royce. Even for you,” Maggie spits as I step into the conversation. I stand next to Royce, whose bottom half is now wrapped in a towel.

I follow her eyes as they scan Royce’s body and then my own. Taking us in—half naked, next to one another—Maggie gets vivid confirmation that what she just saw really happened.

The sickening look she gives me steals my breath. Without speaking, I look from her to Royce, suddenly scared that Maggie’s condemnation could put an end to us before we truly get the chance to find out what we could have together.

“Watch your fucking tone, Maggie. I’m warning you.” Royce points his finger in her direction, but I capture it in my hand before he takes aim at her.

“Don’t.” I look at Royce, my teeth worrying the skin of my lower lip. “It’s okay for her to be upset.”

With Royce’s hand still in mine, I turn my attention to Maggie.

“We didn’t mean to hurt you—”

“I’m not hurt, I’m disgusted.” She squeezes painful tears from her eyes and seethes at us through clenched teeth, but I continue.

“And I wish you never would have found out like this. What Royce and I have is ... complicated but real.”

Sensing the shaking in my voice, Royce squeezes my hand, comforting me.

“What you have.” She scoffs, her upper lip curled in revulsion. “What you have is fucked-up.”

“You don’t understand.” Determined to explain how Royce and I got to this point, I step forward, prepared to divulge the part of myself I never let her see when we were growing up. “Royce saved my life.”

“And you thanked him by fucking him? You really need to get yourself deprogrammed from Drew’s brainwashing, Delilah.”

Her words sting. I know they come from a place of hurt, but I also didn't realize she knew the severity of what I experienced during my time with Drew.

"Maggie." Royce's tone is a warning for Maggie to lay off me.

"What?" Maggie's attention moves to Royce before her eyes land on mine again. "It's true. I overheard everything you told Draven about what he did to her."

"I didn't tell him everything, Delilah." I can hear the panic in Royce's voice.

"It's okay." I turn to him and shake my head as if to tell him to let it go.

If Royce gave up any information about what I endured the past couple months, I know it was for good reason. I return my attention to Maggie, determined to say what I was trying to a moment ago.

"This isn't the first time I needed saving." Maggie's features remain hardened, but she stays quiet, allowing me to continue.

"I don't know if you remember the day specifically, but it's one I'll never forget. We were fifteen. I came over here with a black eye."

Her eyes soften as she recalls details of our childhood.

"You had a lot of black eyes ... and bruises..." Her voice is free of the edge it held until now.

"I blamed it on being a klutz because that's what he forced me to say."

Her brows furrow as confusion sets in.

"My father." My clarification shocks her, and her eyes flare in surprise. "He abused me, raped and molested me, for eight years. Eight *long* years until Royce put an end to it."

Her eyes move wildly, as though she's putting together every piece of my puzzle she was never able to fit into place before.

“That day at the table...” Her eyes fly to Royce. “You gave her a steak...”

She looks down, fidgeting, her thumbs tracing the tips of her fingers.

“Your dad didn’t leave...” Her eyes shoot to mine again as clarity finds her.

“No.” Royce chimes back into the conversation, confirming her claim and stealing her attention.

He takes my hand once again, as though he knows I need to lean on his strength right now.

“You killed him.”

Her eyes shoot to our joined hands. She doesn’t let him respond before she retracts her attention on me again. There is a fight in her eyes, her emotions warring between confusion, anger, and repulsion.

Before I can continue explaining to her how we got from there to here and how my feelings have grown for Royce over the past two years, she speaks.

Her voice is calm, but her heart is far from peaceful.

“So you replaced your own father ... with mine.”

Royce’s hand squeezes mine as Maggie shoots her wounded, emotional bullets at us. Cupping my other hand over his, I urge him to keep his composure.

“No, Maggie. It’s not like that.” But my words fall on deaf ears.

“Have you been fucking him ever since? As a thank you? Or did you miss your daddy so much you found yourself a new one?”

“You don’t talk to her like that.” Royce practically lunges at Maggie, and though her biting words weaken me, I hold him back.

My heart splinters, hearing her make the same rationalization about my feelings for Royce that Drew once

did. Though Drew's hurt was fabricated, Maggie's is very, very real.

"And you..." She turns her ire to Royce again. "You practically fucking raised her. She's like a daughter to you."

A humorless laugh escapes her.

"Or maybe she's not. You don't resent her like you do me. You can actually stand to be around her. You don't treat her like she means nothing to you."

With a pained, bitter smirk, she stares at us, shaking her head.

"Maggie, please try to understand—" I make a final attempt to get her to listen, but she cuts me off.

"No. I will never fucking understand this." She points her finger back and forth between us. "You're both fucking dead to me. Stay out of my life."

Backing up, she turns and runs to the four-wheeler she arrived on. I try to hurry after her, but Royce tightens his grip around my fist and pulls me against him.

"No, kitten. Let her go."

Turning, I bury my head in his chest at the same time as a sob breaks free. I knew it wasn't going to be easy telling her about us, but I thought we'd have more time. I thought we could ease her into the idea rather than smack her in the face with it.

"This is all my fault. I forgot to lock the door when I came home earlier. If I had, this never would have happened."

He rubs my back, attempting to ease my sorrow.

"I'm sorry, Delilah. So fucking sorry."

Sniffling, I back away from him and wipe away the moisture from my cheeks.

"It's not your fault." I stare at my tear-soaked fingers as I speak. "God, I'm so fucking sick of crying."



With one arm under my knees and the other around my back, Royce lifts me and we return to the house. Balancing my ass on his knee, he removes one hand and locks the door this time. Then he continues his path to the bedroom.

“If I have my way, kitten...” he lays me down on the bed and covers me with his body. “You’ll never cry another tear as long as you live.”

Claiming my lips, he kisses me with all the promise behind his words. He reaches down and pulls the towel away from his dried body before bringing himself up onto his knees.

Gripping the T-shirt I’m wearing between his strong hands, he rips it in two then pulls it from my body.

“Now...” His eyes find mine and bore into the deepest pits of my soul. “Where were we?”

Sinking into me, Royce spends the next several hours distracting me from my sorrow.

Claiming me.

Worshiping me.

Completing me.

# CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

## ROYCE

I felt like shit for causing the scene that unfurled between Delilah, Maggie, and me earlier.

So much so that even after hours of showing Delilah how sorry I was, I still harbored anger and aggression at my stupidity for not locking the door behind me when I got home.

I should have known Maggie would be on high alert, waiting for us to get back from Harrisburg. She's been chomping at the bit, seeking a status update on Delilah. Especially after witnessing the manner in which I removed her from the clubhouse.

On the drive to Spotlight, Draven told me Maggie questioned him all day, wanting to know if he'd heard anything. But by the time I got home, I had one single thought on my mind and nothing else.

Sinking inside of Delilah again.

It stole away every ounce of brain power I normally possess.

My two-year long infatuation has turned into my new reality. Now that she's mine and I can have her any fucking time I want her—day or night—I plan to take full advantage of it.

But my distraction brought her pain. So tonight, I'm working through my anger as I bring Drew's stay here to an end. Delilah deserves my time, not this asshole, and I refuse to split it between the two.

With all my brothers surrounding me, I begin Drew's final round of torture.

"Hey, asshole." Slapping his bruised, blood-stained cheek, I startle him, but he's still not fully awake. "You've been begging me to kill you for a week. You finally ready to die?"

The promise of death opens his eyes, his unfocused gaze seeking mine. His head falls to the side, his neck muscles weak. We've got him restrained to the blood throne again, his limbs bending in ways that caused his broken bones to crack further.

"K-kill me. P-please..."

Pulling the trigger of my drill, it roars to life. Drew's eyes finally lock onto the hollow, round bit used to cut holes into wood and other materials, and he struggles weakly against his binds.

"N-no ... n-o!" A scream bellows from his lips when I place the circular bit against his upper leg.

Putting my full strength behind the drill, I press it farther into him, shredding his skin and the muscle beneath it. Blood sprays us both before he passes out from the pain. Slapping his cheek to reawaken him, I move the drill to his other leg.

Once I've torn two holes in each leg, I move to his arms. After drilling a hole in each bicep, I stand back and watch as Drew's blood spills from his body, further staining the wood he's sitting on.

He's the perfect addition to this throne, but of everyone who has died here before him, his blood will have meant the most.

I can't wait to be fully rid of him. His presence is no longer welcome here. No longer welcome in my mind or in Delilah's nightmares.

Pinching his cheeks between my fingers and thumb, I demand his rapt attention as I deliver my final words to him. His body trembles in pain beneath me, his face pale, almost gray from blood loss.

“I’m going to enjoy watching you take your last breath more than anything. Well, anything except waking up next to the woman I love for the rest of my life. The woman you tried to destroy? She’s fucking stronger than ever. So you can die knowing that in addition to being a worthless human being, you’re also the failure your parents know you to be.”

Pressing the drill over his heart, my finger flirts with the trigger when I hear the door open behind me. Letting go of Drew, my attention quickly snaps to the noise. All of my men are in this room which means whoever is at the door shouldn’t be here.

When my eyes land on Delilah’s small, innocent form, the drill falls from my hand. Her eyes meet mine before they rake down my blood-splattered clothing, causing panic to thrum through me.

I don’t want her to see me like this. I don’t want her to visualize the depths of my violence by seeing what I’ve done to Drew. It will only scare her away. Without thinking, I run to her, to keep her as far away from the throne as I can.

“Kitten, you shouldn’t be here. I-I don’t want you to see this.”

Closer to her now, she’s able to fully appreciate the horror of my appearance. When she doesn’t speak, I worry the damage is done. She may be able to handle hearing about my exploits, but *knowing* and *seeing* are two different things entirely.

“I… I had to see you.” Her eyes move to Drew behind me. “I can’t explain it, but it was like I could feel you pulling me here.”

I shake my head.

“No, this is no place for you. Horrific, terrifying things happen here. I don’t want you to see me like this. I don’t want you to fear me.”

“I’m not scared of you, Royce. I don’t fear you, and I don’t fear this.” She nods behind me toward the throne. “I think I had to come here to see for myself that he’s gone.”

I move to place my hand against her warm cheek but pull away just before touching her. I don't want his blood on her skin.

Acknowledging my intent, she smiles warmly.

"I'll let you finish. Come home to me when you're done?"

This is the moment, the one I've been waiting for, questioning whether or not I'll ever be worthy of it. The moment when I realize, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that this woman will love me, unconditionally, for the rest of my life.

"Always, kitten. I'll always come home to you."

I turn from her first, marching back to the chair in the center of the room. Resuming my place in front of Drew, I pull the trigger before the drill even touches his chest. I'm beyond ready to wash my hands of him and return to the woman I love.

I committed a great injustice when I pushed Delilah away.

Through her trials, I felt her pain.

Through her strength, I saw hope for our future together.

With this final act, I will gain my absolution.

And so will he.

# EPILOGUE

## DELILAH

I can't explain the pull that brought me to this building.

Whether it was a need to watch as Drew paid for what he did to me, or to witness the passion in Royce's vengeance, I didn't know what to expect when I walked through this door.

The bloody scene ahead should scare me. The jeering scowls of the men standing by, watching as Royce torments an evil man's final moments should frighten me. The serenity I feel as I scan the entire room should cause me to question my own sanity.

But I only feel at ease as I watch Royce march back to the front of the room. Weapon of choice already dripping with blood and thirsty for more. The moment the drill begins to whirr, I lock eyes with Drew for the final time.

And I feel nothing toward him.

No hate. No pain.

As I turn away, and the shrill agony of his screams reach my ears, I feel no mercy.

Exiting the building, I step out under a clear night sky. I take in its vast beauty as the dying howls of my tormentor cease, just before the door clicks shut.

I gaze at the stars as I walk back to the shack, and I realize I'm no longer jealous of them. They burn brightly, even among the chaos.

But now I do, too.



As does my love for Royce.

I know the path we're destined to travel will be rocky.

Maggie won't be the only one who disapproves of our relationship. Of that, I'm certain. I'm going to fight like hell to repair our damaged relationship, and I hope we can regain the closeness we once had.

Assimilating into club life and everything that comes with it—the dangers, the lifestyle, the rules—will be a struggle.

Not to mention the inevitability of both Royce and I fucking up from time to time because neither of us know the first thing about being in a relationship.

But none of that matters.

*Not one piece of it.*

Because I have his heart, and mine belongs to him.

Because I no longer have to wonder what it feels like to be cherished by the person who means the most to you in this world.

Because for the first time in my entire life, I don't feel trapped by those who abuse their power and exploit my weaknesses. I'm not suffocated by the overwhelming feeling of dread. I'm not questioning the safety and security of my future.

I feel weightless.

Invincible.

Unequivocally, undeniably, and unconditionally loved.

# WANT MORE?

If I wrote the book that I plotted when I started on this journey, it would have been about a million words long. Even the 112k words you just read is a much shorter version than I was planning for. Royce and Delilah's arduous journey is just a small piece of a much larger tale. One that will be told, all in good time.

What really happened to Penny? Do Maggie and Delilah ever work through their differences? Where does Maggie go from here? For answers to all of these questions, and more, sign up for my newsletter and/or follow me on your preferred social media platform(s): <https://msha.ke/authormurphywallace>

Catch up with the Gettysburg Bastards in [The Devil's Redemption](#), book two of my Devil's Skull MC series (Must read [The Devil's Weakness](#) first!)

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# ABOUT MURPHY WALLACE

Murphy Wallace is an International Bestselling Author with works in several different genres, but mostly in Dark Romantic Suspense.

When Murphy is not writing or getting in touch with her inner child at Disney World, she enjoys reading, coloring, and spending time with family.

She currently resides in a small Eastern Florida town with her husband, who doubles as her best friend, and their two boys.

She has a cat named Maisy who is her constant writing partner.