

NO

Redemption

ALEXIS WINTER

NO REDEMPTION

A DARK & TWISTED ROMANCE

ALEXIS WINTER



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Dear reader,

This story is a complete work of fiction that deals with content that might be triggering and too emotionally heavy for some readers. This book deals with topics of: suicide, gun violence, cheating and betrayal.

If you are not comfortable with these topics skip this book. I have plenty of other amazing stories that don't contain triggering topics.

Xoxo,

Alexis Winter

THANK YOU!

A wonderful thank you to my amazing readers for continuing to support my dream of bringing sexy, naughty, delicious little morsels of fun in the form of romance novels.

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XoXo,

Alexis

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EMERY

“*Y*ou look breathtaking.” My husband Dane’s hands rest on my exposed shoulders, his fingers dancing lightly across my skin.

“Thank you. You look handsome as ever.” I smile. “Hard to believe it’s already our five-year anniversary.”

I’m not sure I ever saw myself as the housewife type, yet here I am. And even stranger, I’m happy with how my life has turned out. When I was growing up, I was immersed in a world where women were trophies, my mother included. She didn’t do the cooking or cleaning; that was left to the hired help. She didn’t even do the child-rearing half the time; that was left to the nannies. I loved my mother, but it was clear to me from an early age that she was miserable and depressed, even if she tried masking it with pills and wine. As I got older, she would share little things with me that made me realize why she felt the way she did. She graduated top of her class at Yale, even had a PhD in bioengineering, but my father wouldn’t allow her to use her degree. She was the lady of the house, meant to attend events with him and give him children. I swore to myself I would never end up like her. I longed for freedom, an exciting life of adventure, and fiery, passionate romance that left me breathless.

“Mmm, yes.” He leans down, his soft lips running down the length of my neck. “And it’s been the best years of my life.”

Sometimes, I have to remind myself that my life is real, that it's not a dream or fantasy. I was born into wealth and when my parents died unexpectedly, they left me with a trust fund that keeps me among the elites of society. Something so many would die to experience yet have no idea what it's really like. So, I already understood luck in this life from a young age, but I never expected that I would go on to marry my actual soulmate. In this world, you marry someone else rich with status and legacy, and you're really fortunate if they're good-looking too, but the odds that they're faithful and actually in love with you—well, you'd have a better chance at winning the lottery.

But not me. I'm one of the lucky ones.

I am one of the few that has a faithful husband who not only loves me, but spends every second away from work with me. And to say that he's handsome is like saying the *Mona Lisa* is *just* a painting. Dane takes a lot of pride in his appearance, how he handles himself, how he dresses. I don't think I've ever seen him lose his temper or overindulge in anything. He's the perfect example of temperance. For not growing up with wealth, he knows exactly how to pretend that he did.

"I have a surprise for you," he whispers against my ear, his breath tickling me. He reaches into his lapel, pulling out a signature navy-blue Harry Winston box.

"Dane," I gasp as he opens the box, revealing a stunning diamond necklace of flowers. I spin around to look at it, the light in our dressing room dancing across the flawless diamonds. "You shouldn't have."

"Nonsense." He smiles, pulling the necklace from the box and draping it gingerly around my neck. Instinctively, I lift my hand, dragging my fingertips over the two strands of diamonds that crisscross one another and hang down. "I remembered you mentioned how beautiful this necklace was when we were in Geneva last year and I just couldn't allow you to not have it. It was made for you," he says, pulling back to look at my reflection in the mirror. The necklace accents my diamond

flower studs that I always wear—another gift he gave me from last year’s anniversary.

“Thank you.” I lift my gaze from the necklace, our eyes meeting in the mirror. I move my hand over his that’s still resting on my shoulder and wrap my fingers around his. It’s not about the money, it never is. In our world, spending six figures on a necklace is normal, but the fact that he remembered me casually mentioning something almost a year ago is what means so much. Like I said, in my world, most men aren’t exactly attentive to their wife’s needs. The wife merely fills a void; she’s eye candy and someone to give them an heir. A beautiful prop that is pulled off the shelf and put on display when needed. Meanwhile, they spend their evenings and work trips with a string of women, never even thinking to call home.

But not Dane. He’s different.

He calls me no matter what time his flight lands or dinner ends. He talks to me until I fall asleep when he’s traveling and always brings me home trinkets and treats that remind him of me. I am beyond blessed or lucky, whatever you want to call it. The only thing missing from our perfect little world is a baby... something I’m not sure I’m ready for yet.

Every once in a while, seemingly out of nowhere, doubt rears its ugly head and sends me into a spiral of guilt. Doubt about if I’m cut out for this world I was born into. Doubt about if the trophy wife and doting mother is what I truly want.

How could you ever want more when you have it all? A husband who would do anything for you, a name that will get you through any door... a bank account that rivals God.

But then, just as quickly, I remind myself that I’m blessed beyond measure and I’m just being selfish.

“You deserve it darling. Besides”—he adjusts his cuff link in the mirror, then reaches for his bow tie—“I can’t have you not dripping in diamonds at our anniversary party. What kind of husband would I be if I didn’t lavish you with gifts?” He winks at me before checking his watch. As much as I know the gifts he gives me are from the heart and clearly thought out, I

can't help but wonder if it's him trying to prove something to the world, something to the people he surrounds himself with. Unlike them and me, Dane wasn't born into wealth. He's had to claw and work for every dime he has. "Speaking of the party, Andy will be here in a few minutes with the car. Are you almost ready?"

"I am." I smile, snapping out of my overthinking before it spirals. I grab my red lipstick and slick on another layer before sliding it into my clutch. My auburn hair is pulled back in a half updo, the strapless sweetheart neckline of my dark-green velvet dress accentuating my cleavage.

"Mmm, you're going to break necks in that dress."

His eyes linger on my breasts for a moment, the attention from him still making me blush as a giddy feeling pools in my stomach. I knew Dane would love this dress, I chose it for him, just like I do all my clothing choices. Green isn't my favorite color; it's not even a color I like at all really, but he's always insisted with my fair skin and hair color, I should always wear green. And who am I to question a man with impeccable taste?

"Thank you." I clear my throat nervously before trying to sound nonchalant. "Is Mads going to be at the party?"

I hate using the word perfect to describe a relationship but ours is, apart from one small constant... Dane's best friend, Madden 'Mads' Bishop. A man who is the exact opposite of Dane in every way.

A man who like me, grew up with unimaginable wealth and privilege. Oddly, before Dane, our paths never crossed even though the circle of billionaires in Chicago is very small. Or maybe it had and I never noticed. Being that he's a decade or more older than me, it would make sense.

"Of course he'll be there; he was the best man at our wedding." He walks over to me and kisses my cheek. "I really wish you two would try to get along." I stand up and smile at my husband, his pale-blue eyes pleading. "He's not that bad, sweetheart. Just give him a chance."

I've given him multiple chances over the last five years and every time he crushes any hope of another.

Mads was the first person I met in Dane's world. From that first meeting, he was cold and dismissive toward me. At first I had assumed it was because of my age. I'm sure he thought that his friend was just having a good time with a twenty-year-old before he found someone his own age and settled down. But when our three-month romance turned into an engagement and wedding by month five, it was pretty clear that I wasn't going anywhere.

We eloped to Vegas. Our wedding photos are some of my favorite memories to look back on. Our faces are filled with such genuine joy our eyes are practically shut from how wide we were smiling. The rest of our friends looked the same, mouths wide open as they cheered us on, arms in the air in excitement... but not Mads. His cold, dead eyes were hollow, his lips in a thin line, his hands crossed one over the other at his waist.

He's never been a joyous person to be around. I think I've seen him genuinely smile maybe twice in the years I've known him. Unlike Dane with his classic all-American boy-next-door charm and his floppy blond hair and blue eyes, Mads is dark and moody, with black hair and even blacker eyes. His olive skin is peppered with tattoos that peek over his shirt collar and beneath the cuffs of his sleeves. I used to joke with Dane that he was the preppy country club kid who befriended the goth, emo kid.

"I'll try." I smile.

"He likes you, ya know. He just does a poor job of showing it." Dane pecks my lips gently, not wanting to smear my lipstick, before taking my arm and leading me down the stairs of our stately home on the north shore of Chicago's Lake Michigan.

"A really poor job," I reiterate as we exit the house.

"Evening, Andy." Dane nods to Andy who smiles broadly at us.

“Evening, Mr. and Mrs. Ashford. Happy anniversary. You both look positively stunning.”

“Thank you, Andy.” I smile as I slide into the back seat of our Rolls Royce.

“It’s all Emery, she’s the star. I’m merely the luckiest man on the planet who gets to stand next to her.” Dane winks at me as he smacks Andy’s shoulder, both men laughing. Yet another thing that is genuine and real about Dane that you don’t see in our world very often, he’s nice. He cares about people, no matter their job or status. He’s always treated any of the staff at our home or his company with such respect.

“Hey, I meant to ask you earlier, how did the merger talks go this week?” I rest my hand on Dane’s thigh, his muscles twitching beneath my fingers. He wraps his fingers around mine, bringing my hand to his lips.

“No work talk tonight, sweetheart. Tonight is a celebration of you”—he kisses my fingertip—“and me”—he kisses another, a spark shooting through my lower belly, between my thighs—“and our love.” He tugs my hand so that I fall halfway into his lap, his lips on mine. “Have I mentioned how much I love red lipstick on you?”

“A few times.” I smile as he runs his thumb over my bottom lip.

“Maybe we should skip the party,” he whispers, “and spend the evening in bed.” His tongue flicks my earlobe, his other hand traveling over my lap toward the thigh-high slit that runs up my gown.

The one area of our life I might not describe as perfect, would be our love life. It’s satisfying, more than adequate, and at least half the time I’m able to climax, but the other half, I fake it. I learned early on that if Dane knows he can’t bring me to orgasm, he takes it personally, often doubting himself and feeling inadequate. I was a virgin when I met him. It was exciting and fun being with an older man, but the secret desires I slowly tried to share with him were not reciprocated. He only wanted to make love and be gentle, something I’ve come to really appreciate over the years.

“As lovely as that sounds,” I say, placing my hand on his to stop his movements, “I think everyone at the aquarium might wonder where we are.”

“They’ll be so drunk and full of shrimp cocktail they won’t even notice us missing.” He laughs.

Every year Dane does something bigger than the year before to celebrate our anniversary and every year I tell him it’s completely unnecessary. I would be content to stay home and cuddle in pajamas, but in his words, “*Our anniversary is something that needs to be celebrated lavishly because nothing about our love is ordinary.*”

This year he rented out the great hall at the Shedd Aquarium. Sometimes I think he feels guilty that we had a Vegas wedding with an Elvis impersonator as our officiant so he wants to make up for it. But I loved it. Coming from a buttoned-up world of socialite status where everything was planned down to a T, it felt good to just let loose and have fun with our wedding. Truthfully, I was still reeling from the tragic and sudden loss of my parents in a plane crash that I think I just wanted to feel anything that wasn’t pain and sadness.

When we arrive, the place is decorated like something out of a fairy tale. Floral arches adorn the entrance, and more flowers hang from the ceiling with twinkle lights. A jazz band is playing in the corner. People are milling about with cocktails and hors d’oeuvres. I’m immediately swept up in the celebration and excitement, and any unease I had about seeing Mads disappears.

“Honestly, Emery, how is it that every time we see you, you’re more beautiful?”

“Oh, Mrs. Diaz, you’re so sweet.” I squeeze her hand, her daughter Laila smiling broadly beside her.

“Seriously, Mother is right. You always seem to be glowing. Is there something special you’re going to announce tonight?”

My hand instinctively settles on my lower belly. “Uh, no.” I try to smile through the awkwardness, now very much aware

of my figure in this dress I'm wearing. "I guess it's just happiness and being in love."

"You two really are the picture-perfect couple," she says with big round eyes. "I just hope and pray my Laila will find a man half as good as Dane." Both ladies look over at my husband who is laughing loudly at something one of his friends said. He catches us watching him and winks at me, causing the two women to audibly swoon.

"If you'll excuse me." I nod as I step away from the ladies, making my way through the crowds of people until I reach the bar on the far side of the room.

"Vodka martini, please, extra dirty." I smile at the bartender, glancing over my shoulder, hoping that nobody tries to approach me. After two solid hours of mingling and talking, I'm already exhausted. "Thank you," I say, taking my glass and climbing a set of stairs to a small door that leads to a private balcony overlooking Lake Michigan.

I close my eyes, the cool evening breeze washing over my skin as I take in several deep breaths. Sometimes I feel like I'm drowning or like I'm lost. The guilt I feel for wondering if I'm meant for this life consumes me at times. I wish more than anything I could talk to my mom in times like this.

"I knew you'd be out here."

My spine stiffens the second I hear his deep, syrupy voice behind me. I keep my gaze forward, taking a long sip of my martini. "How'd you know that, Mads?"

"Because every year about this time into the celebration, I watch you slink away to some quiet place where you can think..." The sleeve of his tux bumps my bare shoulder as he steps next to me. "Where you can convince yourself that you're happy like the rest of these rich fucks."

My brow furrows. "Last time I checked, your family is in the billionaire club just like mine and half of the people in there."

"Exactly. We both know the kind of people they are"—he looks over at me but my gaze stays forward—"and you're

nothing like them.”

“Or maybe that’s just what you want to believe.” I square my shoulders, goosebumps breaking out across my skin as a shiver runs over my body. I can feel Mads’ eyes lingering on me. He reaches his hand out slowly, running it over my collarbone until he reaches my necklace. “It’s beautiful,” he murmurs. “Almost as beautiful as you.”

I brush his hand away, taking a step away from him. “Doesn’t it ever get tiring?” I look back at him when he doesn’t answer. “Every year you say the same thing to me about whatever piece of jewelry Dane bought me and every year I tell you not to fucking touch me.”

He shrugs. “Maybe I get off on the rejection.”

“You’re disgusting,” I murmur half under my breath but loud enough that he can still hear me. He doesn’t say anything and after a few minutes, I think he might have gone back inside when his voice, deeper than before, startles me.

“Does Dane know why you hate me?” He’s so close I can feel the warmth from his chest radiating against my back. I clutch my drink tighter as he reaches his hand out, one finger touching my neck before he slowly drags it down my spine. “Does he know that you think about me when he’s fucking you?”

I spin around so fast I almost fall over. I reach my hand back and bring it square across Mads’ jaw, his face jerking violently to the side. He brings his hand up to rub his jaw, a smirk pulling at his lips.

“Does Dane know that his best friend is a disgusting pig who tries to seduce his wife?” I narrow my eyes, my jaw clenched so tight I can already feel the headache forming.

“I think the better question is, why have you never told him?”

I ball my hand into a fist at my side as I grip the stem of my martini glass. The truth is, I don’t know why I’ve never told Dane. Partly because I’ve heard his sob story about when he was the poor kid at Yale with no friends and Mads

befriended him with zero questions. He didn't care about his family or lack of connections. But I also know there's another reason, a deeper one that I'm scared to unravel.

I step around him, walking back to the door when I turn back to face him. "Why are you still pretending to be friends with him? You don't owe him anything. Just leave us alone. Go slither back into whatever damp pit you came from and let us live our life in peace."

I half expect him to laugh or say something even worse to get a rise out of me like he usually does. It's the game he always plays, saying just enough to get me angry and get a reaction out of me. I try to remain calm. I try to tell myself to just shrug it off and move on, but I never succeed. It's a thread I don't want to pull at because deep down, somewhere messed up inside of me, I know it's because I am attracted to him. And maybe that's the reason I don't tell Dane what his best friend is really like.

I noticed him the moment I met him. At first I convinced myself it was the allure of the forbidden—the troubled, bad-boy best friend. And who wouldn't be attracted to him? He has all the traits to lure you in—dark eyes, dark hair, tall, a perfectly chiseled jawline and physique that leaves your jaw on the floor. He's like sin packaged in lust, dripping with temptation... created to draw you in.

"Trust me, sweetheart, nothing would make me happier than to move on with my life, but you might want to ask your husband why I haven't left you alone."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

His hand slides deep into his pocket as he takes a few steps toward me, his other hand still on his jaw. "Don't you ever want to be bad, Emery?" A shiver runs through me at the sound of his voice saying my name. "Don't you want to stop denying yourself?"

I know he's just trying to get another reaction out of me and instead of running away, I tilt my chin upward defiantly. "Don't you ever get tired of trying to get something you can't

have?” I level my eyes on his. “Don’t you ever get tired of being the big bad wolf?”

His eyes darken at my last statement, and his arm shoots up to press against the door so I can’t open it as he leans in, his lips an inch from mine.

“It’s not the wolf you need to be afraid of kitten; it’s the devil in disguise that you sleep next to.”

MADS

I watch as she walks away, looking back at me for a brief second before disappearing down the staircase. My eyes linger longer than they should on her; they always do. She's my kryptonite. A siren that I know will only lure me to danger. Call me a masochist because I love the pain of denial.

I know she wants to know more about the things I've said, but she's afraid. Afraid of the illusion she's living shattering all around her.

She thinks she found the perfect man, the one in a million who isn't like the rest.

He wouldn't hurt her.

He wouldn't lie or cheat on her.

He loves her.

I look back out over the lake, the moon reflecting off the black expanse that reaches farther than I can see, the image of her in that green dress burned into my brain. Just one taste is all I need. I close my eyes, imagining my lips on her silken skin, the smell of her exotic perfume lingering. I dig my nails into my palms, the pain reminding myself that the only way I'll ever experience her, is if Dane is dead.

The door opens again, and I look over my shoulder to see Dane. "Why are you upsetting my wife on our anniversary?" He walks over and stands next to me.

"She tattled on me?"

“She didn’t have to; it was written all over her face. Why can’t you just act indifferent and stick to the goddamn plan?” He grits out the words.

“The plan? Because this wasn’t the fucking plan, Dane.” I turn to face him. “The plan was she falls in love with you and you get access to her money, name, and reputation to build an empire which you’ve fucking done. So why can’t you just be happy with that?”

“You want me to settle?” he scoffs. “Rich coming from someone born into billions.”

“No, I want you to live your life and stop being a piece of shit. Last week was the last time you’ll ever call me to come bail you out of a pile of cocaine and hookers that you can’t pay for at my own club.”

“Oh no,” he says, his tone mocking, “did the poor little rich boy suddenly grow a conscience after being a heartless asshole his entire life?”

He’s not wrong. I have a reputation for being cold and heartless; my entire family does. We aren’t the altruistic, do-good billionaires who pulled ourselves up by our bootstraps. We’re the ruthless ones, the cutthroat, step on everyone to get ahead billionaires with ties to organized crime. In fact, my father’s nickname was *Satan’s right-hand man*, a nickname he took great pride in.

“Forbes just named you as one of the most successful entrepreneurs of our generation with a projected net worth of one billion by the age of forty-five. That isn’t good enough?”

“Good enough? Is that good enough?” He spits the words at me, his face red with rage almost instantly. This is Dane. This is the real Dane that nobody ever sees but me. He’s a master of disguise, a true psychopath if I’ve ever seen one. “No, it’s not fucking good enough. I deserve the same wealth as you and Emery. My father would be CEO at Piedmont Financial right now had that lying sack of shit old man not fired him. It’s not good enough to make a billion, Mads. I want control of the company. I want the shares and her trust fund.”

A leap if I ever heard one. It's the same narrative that Dane has clung to since I met him in college. He told all of us how his father had been one of the first hires at the now multibillion-dollar financial powerhouse Piedmont. And that Niles Piedmont Sr., who founded it, was a lying, money-hungry piece of shit who fired his dad without cause when he was just starting to rise within the company. It seemed unfair and we fell victim to his stories until we found out through others that his father was stealing from the company and risked their entire reputation when he was caught conducting fraud.

He was poor then, at Yale on a scholarship, but he was driven, more driven than anyone I'd ever met. He hung out with all the elites, rubbing elbows to learn tricks of the trade. He hung on to our every word, trying to fit in, to look like he belonged. He even spent summers with my family in the Hamptons and the South of France. He came into college looking every part the poor young man from Iowa and left looking like he was born and bred into generational wealth.

"And then," he says around a cigar in his mouth as he lights it, "I'll be richer than any of you." He laughs, inhaling the sickly sweet smoke and smacking me on the back. "Isn't that the American dream? To squash every person you can to rise to the top, taking every fucking cent and opportunity even if it was never yours to begin with?" He curls his hand into a fist as he speaks, like he's a politician convincing a crowd. "I think your father would be proud of me."

That's what this has always been about for him. It wasn't that he wanted to better himself and secure a future for his children... It was domination. He never felt like he fit in with us, even under all the designer clothes and high-end cars, partying in the hottest places, and staying in the most luxurious of accommodations, he was still that kid from Iowa. In his mind, the only way to become one of us, was to beat us. And there's only one family that has more money than mine... Emery Wagner's.

"So," I say, my stomach churning, "what's the new plan, then? Since you clearly don't plan to stop fucking around and

being a piece of shit to Emery behind her back... How are you going to gain control of her father's empire and her trust? Knock her up?" Even saying that sentence makes me want to puke.

He doesn't respond immediately. He takes a few more long puffs of the cigar before putting it out on the railing and turning to face me.

"Simple." He smiles, his eyes void of any emotion. "I'm going to kill her."

"That seems like a stretch, even for you."

"It's the perfect solution. The prenup I was forced to sign when I married her stated I would only receive her trust and her shares of the company if she died."

I try to tell myself that Dane was a different person when I met him, but I don't think he was. I think he fooled me, just like he's fooled Emery. By the time I realized who he really was, it was too late. She was head over heels in love and I couldn't leave her alone with him. Yeah, it was fucking selfish—it still is that I haven't told her what kind of man he really is, but I know if I do, I'll lose her. I'll lose any tie or contact I have with her.

"Why now?" I ask, not really sure he even has the balls to go through with murder.

"The prenup states I only get access if we make it until our fifth anniversary." I feel my eyes widen. He notices and laughs. "You didn't believe me, did you?" He reaches over and squeezes my shoulder. "Don't worry, I've taken care of it already, but if you think for one second that you're going to warn her, to tell her about my plan, I'll make sure she knows that this was all your idea."

I jerk my shoulder away. "My idea? I guess I missed that version of our history."

"I didn't. In fact, I remember you being the one who pointed her out to me. You're the one who told me her father had just died and she was vulnerable, that I should get her to fall in love with me so I could use her."

“Yeah, which is what you’ve done, but I never said to fucking kill her.”

“Well, yeah, I had to pivot, add my own demands on the deal. What kind of businessman would I be if I didn’t renegotiate the terms?” He smiles again, all his teeth showing like I’m supposed to be impressed.

“You’re a psycho, Dane, you know that?”

“Nah, I’m just highly motivated. And don’t think I don’t know why you’ve stuck around all these years, getting me out of tough spots and covering for me so Emery doesn’t know what I’ve been up to. If you think for one second that she’s going to run to you if you tell her, you’re a fucking moron. She’ll want even less to do with you, if that’s possible, when she realizes you’ve been cleaning up my messes all these years.”

“You’ve already taken care of it?” I ask, ignoring his comments.

“You think I’m going to tell you when it’s going to happen?” He laughs. “So you can save her?” He laughs again as he walks toward the door. “I know you’re in love with her, Mads; I’ve always known, but Emery will never be yours.” He walks through the door and closes it softly behind him.

He’s not wrong. I know I’m fighting a losing battle. There’s only one way this ends. Dane Ashford has to die.

EMERY

“*I*’m exhausted.” I squeeze Dane’s hand. “If you don’t mind, I think I might head home a little early.”

My headache from earlier has turned into a full-blown migraine at this point. The dull aching pain is now a throbbing pulse behind my eyes.

“Of course, darling.” He tips my chin upward and kisses me. “I want you to go home and soak in a delicious bubble bath so that when I get home later and crawl into bed, I can devour your body from head to toe.”

“Thank you and I’m sorry I’m not staying the entire evening.”

“Don’t you dare apologize.” He nuzzles my nose. “What my wife wants is the only thing that matters. I do hope you’ve had a nice evening otherwise?”

“I did, very much so. Everything was perfect and amazing, as always.” I know people are watching us, but it never seems to faze Dane. In a room full of people, he only has eyes for me.

“Let me text Andy and have him pull the car up. I’ll walk you outside.”

“No, baby. I’ll be fine walking myself out. You stay and mingle.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. I love you.” I reach up to kiss his cheek. “Have fun.”

“I love you too, darling.”

I say a few goodbyes before walking down the long hallway toward the lobby. I’m sure Andy will be pulling up any second. I’m just to the stairs, making my way down, when I see the Rolls Royce in the distance, turning a corner and making its way toward me.

Just as my foot hits the pavement and the car pulls to a stop in front of me, I feel a strong hand grabbing my elbow. “Dane told me to give you a ride home.”

I attempt to pull my arm out of Mads’ grip, but he’s holding me too tight. “What are you doing?”

“Evening, Andy.” Mads nods toward him as he steps out of the car and walks around to open my door. “Dane told me to give her a ride home. You can relax until he needs to head home.”

“Are you sure about that?” Andy reaches for his phone and checks his messages. “I didn’t get a text from him with a change of plans.”

“Yeah, he sent me out here to tell you. Have a good night.” He waves toward Andy as he tugs my arm, practically dragging me behind him as we head toward his waiting car.

“Good night,” I say over my shoulder toward Andy who watches us walk away in confusion. Finally, he shrugs and closes the door, climbing back in behind the wheel and pulling away.

“Get in,” Mads commands, pulling open the passenger door to his Aston Martin and practically shoving me inside.

“What is going on?” I watch him walk around the car in a rush. “Did Dane really tell you to drive me home?” I stare at him, but he’s focused on putting the car into gear and pulling away from the aquarium. “Let me guess. This is one of his attempts to make us get along?” I roll my eyes, pulling my seat belt into place so the car stops beeping.

“Something like that,” he mutters, pulling the car into traffic and gunning it so hard my back hits the seat.

Nervousness bubbles in my stomach; something doesn't feel right. I open my clutch and produce my phone. "I'm going to call hi—" Before I can finish the sentence, he rips the phone from my hand and tosses it out his window. "Hey!" My head whips around to watch it hit the pavement and shatter into a hundred pieces. "What is going on?" The frantic tone of my voice scares even me.

"I'm taking you to my place," he says stoically.

"Why? I thought Dane told you to take me home."

"I lied. He told me to take you to my place." He shifts gears, the engine revving as he whips through traffic at breakneck speed.

"Why are w—"

"Enough with the fucking questions, Emery. Just sit back."

My mouth snaps shut and I look out the front window, my pulse skyrocketing. *Maybe this is one of the kidnap pranks I've seen on YouTube. Like a funny way to celebrate our wedding anniversary.* The idea is ludicrous, I know that, but I can't think of any other way to rationalize what's happening right now. I don't even know what's happening right now.

Dane knew I was exhausted. He encouraged me to take a bubble bath when I got home. My pulse quickens, my heartbeat rushing in my ears as I clench my jaw and try to breathe through my nose as the car accelerates faster and faster down Lake Shore Drive. I glance over at Mads' expression. His jaw is clenched. His hands grip the wheel so tight like he's nervous.

"What is going on?" I ask one more time as he pulls the car into his private underground garage. He doesn't answer. He doesn't say another word as he tugs me out of the car, dragging me to the elevator as he looks over his shoulder.

The second the doors open to his penthouse, he's grabbing me around the waist, tossing me up over his shoulder as I scream in defiance.

"Put me down!" I demand, pounding my hands against his back as he makes his way through the living room to a set of

stairs. He takes them two at a time, like having my dead weight over his shoulder is nothing for him.

“Evening, sir.” I look up to see a large bald-headed man with tattoos covering his neck standing behind us. He’s tall, probably well over three hundred pounds, with a double holster hanging from his shoulders.

“I said put me down!” I shout again and this time he obliges, tossing me straight down onto his bed in one motion. The air huffs out of my lungs audibly as I scurry to get off the bed and regain my footing just as Mads adjusts his tux and walks out of the bedroom.

Before I can get through the doorway after him, two large doors are slammed in my face, just as I hear him tell Baldy, “Whatever you do, don’t let her out of here.”

“What the hell!” I yank on the door handles as hard as I can, but they don’t budge. The doors are massive. I pound on them with both fists, fiery pain shooting up my arms, but I’m too angry to let it stop me.

“Mads!” I shout, waiting to hear him, to hear anything, but it’s deathly silent. “Mads, please!” I say again, this time my throat so thick with emotion I can’t fight the tears that begin to fall. Panic grips my chest as I scramble around the room, looking for anything to pick the lock even though I know it’s impossible.

I scream louder, pounding, kicking, crying, but it’s no use. Finally, I slide down onto the floor, resting my head on my knees as I sob.

MADS

“Everything okay, boss?”

“Does it look like it’s okay?” I give Tony, my personal security guard, a look and he raises his hands.

“What do you need done, besides guarding the girl?”

I scan my thumb over my safe, grabbing my gun and sliding it into my holster. “Don’t let anyone in the building. I don’t care who it is. And call Mitch. Have him and Damon get over here for backup.”

“Done.” Tony’s phone is already in his hand, making the call before I finish the sentence.

“I might be awhile. Don’t worry if you don’t hear from me. If for some reason Dane shows up here, whatever you do, do not let him take her.”

By the time I’m pulling into the gated driveway of the Ashford residence, my adrenaline has settled into a burning anger. I flip my headlights off, typing in the code to the gate that slowly slides open. I keep my eyes out for Dane’s signature Rolls Royce, praying I made it back here before him. When I don’t spot it, I pull my car back behind the garage and out of view.

I know this place is crawling with security cameras and a state-of-the-art alarm system that I insisted he have installed. I’ve already been spotted by probably a dozen cameras, but that’s the least of my concerns right now. I reach for the handle on the back door of the attached garage, producing the key

I've had since Dane insisted I keep a copy years ago, and unlock it. Next, I disarm the alarm with the code Dane also insisted I have.

After locking the door and rearming the alarm, I make my way cautiously through the house. My eyes scan the photos that line the walls, stopping on their wedding photo. Emery's face is so full of pure joy. She was beyond happy that day. My eyes close. I can still remember the scent of her overly sweet perfume when she drunkenly wrapped her arms around my neck.

"Dance with me!" She laughed as she attempted to spin around in my arms.

That was the beginning of it all for me. That was the first time I felt guilt for what I'd done... what we'd done. She was so young and innocent; she didn't deserve to meet Dane. She doesn't deserve to die.

I move on past the photos, walking quietly up the stairs to their bedroom. I pause, my hand on the door as I slowly push it open. I haven't stepped foot in here since I came to the showing with Dane years ago.

"Look at this," he said, his arms open wide as he walked around the bedroom with a huge grin on his face. "If this doesn't say I've fucking made it, I don't know what does. You know the owner of the Cubs lives just a few houses down."

At the time, I thought he was trying. I thought he'd truly fallen in love with her and this was his attempt to make a life for them, to have kids and make it all legitimate. But it was just a long con, a plan to make it all look real so that when he killed her, nobody would ever suspect him.

I don't have the luxury of time in this situation. I scan the room, coming up with a plan. After doing a quick check around the room for weapons, I take a seat in one of the oversized chairs in the corner of the room and I wait.

The sound of footsteps registers in the distance. I double-check that my phone is recording and slip it just inside my

jacket so that the sound won't be too distorted. As the footsteps draw closer, it's accompanied by whistling.

Dane walks through the bedroom door, removing his tuxedo jacket as he hums to himself. The clouds cast shadows over the moon, making the bedroom dark enough that he most likely doesn't even see me. But I know he knows I'm here.

"I knew your dick would get in the way of any rational thinking." He smiles, turning around to look right at me, laughing maniacally. "You didn't actually think I was going to be surprised to see you in my house tonight, did you?"

"I wasn't too sure." I smile back at him, my fingers resting on my knees.

"Now I knew"—he slowly removes his bow tie as he talks—"that you wouldn't be able to resist playing the savior and running off to go tell Emery my plan." He folds the bow tie neatly, laying it on the bed right next to his suit coat. "And here I thought you were supposed to be my best friend. *Tsk-tsk.*" He shakes his head.

I know this tactic. It's the same one my father used to do when me or my older brother Foster were in trouble. He would casually go about his business like what we did wasn't a big deal, like it amused him actually, but then he'd flip just as quickly and turn into a deranged animal when he punished us. Threatening to write us out of his will or to publicly humiliate us in one fashion or another. It was his signature weapon, psychological warfare. Something that Dane has taken great pride in learning himself.

"But it's no worry; the plan is still perfectly in motion."

"I didn't tell her."

"No?" he says, a touch amused.

I shake my head. "I just took her to my place." A look of something flashes across his face. Jealousy maybe? "Where she will be safe."

"Safe?" Dane laughs again. "You took her right into the devil's den, Mads." His eyes have that look in them, the same one they had tonight when he told me he was going to kill her.

“Like I said, the plan is working perfectly because you, Mads, are going to kill her.”

“Yeah? And how is that going to work?”

He pulls open his bedside table, reaching inside and producing a handgun that he points directly at me. The tip of the barrel presses against my forehead. “Because if you don’t, you’ll die too.”

“And when is this supposed to happen?” I keep my cool.

“Right now, actually. Call your men. Tell them to bring her home.”

“And what? I just kill her and we come up with a story later?”

“Always two steps behind.” He shakes his head at me. “You’re going to make it look like a robbery. She was home before I was tonight, someone broke in, tossed the place, and shot her in the process.”

“And the fact that the security cameras will show me coming over tonight doesn’t play into your plan at all?”

He smiles. “I guess you are thinking things through. It just so happens, we’ve been having issues with the cameras the last few months. They’ve been glitchy, not recording and sometimes even erasing footage. The company already has a complaint in from me. So the fact that there won’t be any footage of her coming home or the robbery won’t be questioned. That being said, if you think after tonight you’re going to snitch or grow a conscience and tell someone, I do have you on video entering my home tonight.”

“Ah, the cameras just happened to be working perfectly for that. Got it.”

“Enough small talk. Call your men now.” He pushes the end of the gun harder against my forehead. “And don’t even think about doing something stupid.”

I lift my hands slowly, showing him they’re empty as I reach into my front lapel. Slowly, my hand emerges from my pocket. His eyes squint as he looks at my hand, then before I

can even say anything, the click of his gun echoes through the room. Shock registers on his face as I hold up the clip.

“I got the one in the chamber too.” I grab for my gun, pulling it out and aiming it at him as I show him the single bullet I pulled from the chamber of his gun. “Now, Dane”—I smile, reaching for his empty gun—“have a seat. Don’t do anything stupid.”

“So now what? You thi—”

“Shut the fuck up, Dane,” I interrupt him and his always open jaw snaps shut. “That’s your problem, you know that? You never shut up. You’re always fucking talking, running your mouth. You’re always talking too much to stop and listen and realize that everyone around you thinks you’re full of shit. You’re so goddamn arrogant that you walked in here tonight knowing I was here yet thinking I wouldn’t have a loaded weapon? That I didn’t do a sweep of the room? Me? After knowing my family, you still think I’m the fool in this?” I can’t help but laugh. “You always think you’re the smartest person in the room and you miss what’s happening right under your nose.”

“Fooled Emery, didn’t I?”

“You mean a woman who’s in love with you and trusts you? That’s your big brag? You’re a pathetic human being, a void, a stain on society.” I crouch down in front of him, placing the gun right beneath his chin. “I’ve done my due diligence, Dane. I know that you send Andy home on Friday nights so you’re all alone here. I also know that with your merger falling through, you’re ruined financially unless you get Emery’s money. You’re desperate and ashamed. Sounds like the perfect solution to all of this... is suicide.”

He tries to remain stoic, but he knows it’s over. His eyes search for any shred of hope. Any shred of humanity. But there’s nothing left for him.

“You know I have to do this, right?” I smile. “And let me tell you, it feels fucking good.”

Before he can reply, I pull the trigger, sending a bullet straight through his brain and out the back of his head.

I watch Emery sleep. I doubt it's restful.

When I came back home, I could see her eyes were swollen, her face still red from probably hours of crying. I sink deeper into the chair in my bedroom, watching her. My original plan was to play the recording for her, at least up until the point where he openly admitted that his plan was to kill her.

It would hurt to hear the truth, to know it was all a lie, but then she could move on... and so could I, maybe even together. She would finally understand why I wasn't happy at her wedding. Why I was miserable around her... because I'm in love with her.

But this isn't my story and that's not how it's going to play out. This isn't some redemption plan where my hands will now be washed clean because I killed the man who was going to kill her. I'm just as culpable in this story.

I played along for years. I allowed her to fall in love with him when I knew it wasn't real. Instead, I took the coward's way out, staying involved in her life just enough that it satisfied my fucked-up need for her.

But it wasn't enough. It will never be enough.

EMERY

*M*y eyes burn, and I blink rapidly, the sun hitting me right in the face and blinding me. I feel hungover even though I know I didn't drink that much last night. My head pounds, and my ears ring.

Did I sleep with my makeup on?

My fingers touch my eyes and I feel the fake eyelashes from last night. I look down my body and see I'm still wearing my gown. Then it all comes rushing back. I sit up, tossing the covers from my body when I realize it wasn't a nightmare and I'm still in Mads' bedroom.

"Good morning." The tenor of his voice is even deeper than normal, gravelly.

"What happened? Where's Dane?" I stand up quickly, my head spinning, making me stumble. He half stands, darting his arm out to catch me when I see it. Blood. All over Mads' shirt. "Is that—?" I can't even finish the sentence; my stomach rolls and I dry heave.

"Emery. Emery, I need you to sit down and listen to me." His hands are on my shoulders. "Look at me." I try to focus on him, but my stomach is flipping upside down. I already know that whatever he's going to tell me is going to end in tragedy.

"Where's Dane?" I shout again, shrugging his hands off me. "Take me to him right now!" My attempt to keep my voice steady is useless.

"I tried—" he says softly. "I tried to stop him, but Dane—"

“No.” My voice doesn’t even sound like my own. “No,” I repeat again as the tears overflow my eyes. My ears fill with the sound of rushing water as my chest heaves violently. The room begins to spin before he can finish his sentence.

“He—he’s gone Emery.”

An animalistic scream rips from my body as I go limp on the bed. Everything inside me feels foreign. I can’t understand the words Mads is saying to me. I watch his mouth move but there’s no sound, only my own sobs. I’m hyperventilating, my body shaking as I repeat the same chant over and over again. “This isn’t real.”

“Breathe, Emery. You’re going to make yourself sick.” Mads words do nothing to calm me down. I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to make sense of what is happening right now but it’s no use.

“What happened?” I ask finally as I turn to look at him.

He stares at me, hesitating like it’s too awful to say the words out loud.

“He took his own life.”

I don’t know how long I sit in total silence. I can’t believe it. I refuse to believe it. “No, no,” I say, shaking my head. “There’s no way. You’re wrong. He would never.” I hear myself, realizing that this is what everyone says in this kind of a situation. But Dane, I know he wouldn’t do this. I know I’m right. Mads sits silently beside me, his face stoic, almost emotionless.

“Why?” I scream at the top of my lungs, lunging toward him, pounding my hands against his chest. “Take me to him,” I plead. “I need to see him.”

“You can’t, Emery!” His fingers dig into my flesh. “You can’t see him right now.”

I fall into Mads’ arms, my body going limp as tears pour from my body harder than I knew was possible. His shirt is soaked from my tears, the moisture mixing with the blood in some spots, turning it pink. When I lift my head again, the throbbing at my temples blurs my vision.

“Why? Why did he do it?” There’s nothing Mads can say that will make me understand why the man I thought I knew, the man I thought I was going to grow old with, took his own life. But it’s human nature to want to try and make sense of things.

“The merger, it went south. The partners at the other firm rejected it and he had leveraged himself way too much to take that kind of loss. He was going to be financially ruined.”

“Ruined?” I ask in disbelief. “I’m worth more than him ten times over; he isn’t ruined.”

“He was ashamed. He didn’t want to ask you for money. You know Dane was too proud for that. He was self-made.” Mads shakes his head and for the first time I realize how hard this must be on him too. “He didn’t want to be seen as a failure who was just using his wife’s money.”

My shoulders fall. He was hurting, desperate, and I had no idea. My lip begins to quiver again as a few more tears fall. “How’d I not know? I feel like I failed him.” I hang my head, Mads’ arm wrapping around me.

“You can’t think like that. It wasn’t your job to know that. He hid it so well, nobody knew.”

“He seemed so happy.” Another sob overtakes me. “I can’t believe I’m speaking about him in the past tense. This isn’t real; this can’t be real.” I squeeze my eyes shut, shaking my head like if I say it enough times this will all go away.

“I wish there was something I could say to make it better.”

I never thought it would take something like this for Mads to show an ounce of empathy. I glance up at him. His eyes are dry. I know he has to save face, but he must be hurting too. “Were you—were you there?”

“Emery.” He hangs his head. “This conversation won’t help you.”

“Did *you* know?” I stand up from the bed, a cold chill settling over me. “You knew,” I say slowly when I see the look on his face. “You knew he was going to do it and that’s why

you brought me here?" I lunge at him to push him, but he grabs my hands and spins me around to pin me to the bed.

"I did it to protect you, Emery! You didn't need to see that. Nobody needs to see that or live through it."

"Get off me, you asshole!" I try to knee him, but he spreads his thighs, pushing my legs apart.

"Stop it!" he shouts, his grip tightening on my arms. "I did it to protect you! There was nothing I could do or say to talk him out of taking his own life, but I tried. He didn't want you there. That's why he told me to take you to my place, but I couldn't fucking tell you that last night."

I still my movements, both of us breathing hard as we look at each other. Finally, he moves himself off me and takes a seat back on the bed.

"I tried to fix it so it wouldn't end this way, Em. I really did, but I failed."

"I just don't understand," I say again, staring up at the ceiling. "I'll never understand."

"Nobody will."

"Are the police at my house?"

He nods. "I called my contact at the precinct after. I told him what happened, and they sent a car. I spoke to them briefly, but I told them I needed to be the one to tell you, that you were back here."

I crook my head. "They didn't wonder why I wasn't home? Or where Andy was?"

"No." He shakes his head. "I told them that Dane sends Andy home on Friday nights and that he had told me to take you to my place. He had told me that there was a surprise for you at the house that he didn't want you seeing without him—something for your anniversary. I told them that I believed it at first, so I took you to my place, but something in my gut felt it was off. That's why I went back to your house after dropping you here."

"Is that true?"

He looks over at me. “Yes.”

“Why’d you suspect something?”

“Because we’re best friends. I know him.”

“I know him, Mads,” I say angrily as I point to my chest. “I should have noticed something.” My voice quivers as guilt racks my body.

“Stop it, Em. I wasn’t insinuating that. He seemed off and he had been off since the merger started falling apart which you didn’t know anything about. He told me Wednesday when it happened. He was distraught. I’d never seen him like that before. He said he was a fraud and a failure, that he’d spent his entire life trying to be like us, like the rich and powerful, and while he got a taste of it, he couldn’t make it work. He said he was nothing. He kept it from you so that you wouldn’t suspect something.”

My heart feels like it’s physically shattering. I clutch at my chest, gasping for air as the room begins to spin. My body can’t produce any more tears. Something I remember my mother telling me comes back to me in this moment. I had asked her if she ever felt robbed of falling in love and marrying her soulmate after she told me that her marriage to my father was arranged. She held my hand and smiled at me, always trying to make the best of any situation.

“I won’t lie, I have felt like that before and while I do love your father because he gave me you, I don’t love him in the soulmate kind of way. So,” she said with a big smile like it was a happy thing, “I guess the good news is I’ll never experience the loss of that kind of love or the sorrow that accompanies that loss. Silver lining.”

She had tapped the end of my nose, winking at me. At the time I remember thinking it made sense, but now that I’m older, I realize just how sad that outlook really is. She did the best with what she was handed in life... even if it came wrapped in a billion-dollar bow.

The next few days are a complete blur. I've heard people say that phrase. I've even said that phrase before, but I never understood it until now.

I stare at my hollow eyes in the mirror. My skin has lost its youthful glow, replaced with a gray pallor that makes me look ill. The lack of makeup is only making it worse, but I refuse to go into our bedroom. After asking him several times where it happened, Mads finally told me. I would have known anyway by the smell of bleach and other strong cleaning agents that permeated the room. Not to mention, the missing chair and large chunk of carpet.

"Do you need me to get something, Mrs. Ashford?" I stare down the hallway into my bedroom. "Mrs. Ashford?"

"Hmm?" I turn around to see Tilly, my housekeeper, smiling.

"Did you need me to get you more clothes from the bedroom?"

"Oh, um, yes, please. And if it's not too much trouble, can you grab my makeup and toiletries, please?"

"Of course, ma'am."

I turn and walk back to one of our guest rooms on the opposite end of the hallway where I've been staying. I almost asked Mads if I could stay with him for a few more days, but it was clear my presence made him very uncomfortable. Can't say I blame him, having a constant reminder around of your dead best friend.

My emotions have continued to flip from sorrow and agony to anger and hatred toward Dane. How could he be ashamed to ask me for money or that people might judge him for a failed business, but decide it is okay to leave me saddled with his suicide?

I've called him a coward in my bitter tirades in the shower and yet in the same breath I'm apologizing to him as if he's still here. Begging him to come back, to give us a second chance.

I pick up my phone and call Mads. He's the only person I have to help me plan the funeral. With my parents gone, I have no more family, and living in this world of the superficial, I have no real friends. None that I can trust to help me in a time like this.

It goes to voicemail, so I call him again. Still no answer. I listen to the voicemail from the funeral director again.

"Hello, Mrs. Ashford, this is Reginald Steen again." I can hear the frustration in his voice. "I need you to sign off on a few things before we move forward with the arrangements. If you could, please give me a call back at your earliest convenience so that we can schedule a time for you to come in or just stop by when you can. Thank you and condolences."

"Your makeup and toiletries, ma'am." I let the phone slowly fall from my ear as I smile at Tilly.

"Thank you."

"Are you sure you don't want any tea? I can make you a sandwich." I reassure her that I'm okay and turn my attention back to my phone.

Clearly, Mads has no interest in helping me. I apply my makeup, doing my best to hide the dark circles under my eyes, but it does little to help. Not that the funeral home is a place to judge people on their appearances. I finish my minimal makeup, pulling my hair back into a low bun and slipping into a pair of oversized black slacks and a matching black blouse and mules.

"Hi, Andy." I attempt to smile, but it's like my lips don't even register the movement anymore. "Sorry to interrupt you, but any chance I can get a ride?"

"Absolutely." He wipes the crumbs from his face after finishing his last bite of lunch. "Let me just grab the keys and pull the car around."

I wait patiently out front for him to pull the car around, my large black sunglasses in place to hide my less-than-favorable appearance.

“Where are we heading, Mrs. Ashford?” He looks up at me in the rearview mirror. I realize that I never told him.

“The funeral home, Andy.”

Neither of us speak the entire ride. While my phone has been ringing and buzzing with generic voicemails and texts of condolences and *if you need anything, just let me know* messages, not a single person has shown up to hold my hand. To tell me that it’s going to be okay. I remember my mom telling me that even surrounded by all of her friends at the country club or a gala or on someone’s yacht, she felt so lonely, and I couldn’t understand at the time. I didn’t realize that she was telling me back then that she didn’t trust the people who were in her circle. She would always say, *“Besides, I don’t need a best friend; I have a daughter.”*

Somehow, after watching my mother become the loneliest woman I’ve ever seen and swearing I’d never end up like her, I’ve gone and done exactly that.

MADS

THREE WEEKS LATER...

I can't say that I wasn't relieved when Emery opted to have Dane's body cremated. No body, no camera evidence since I took care of that... no murder.

"Sir, if you're going to make it to the memorial service on time, you need to leave now." Corina, my assistant, pokes her head into my office. "Tony is already downstairs with the car."

"Right, be right down," I say, tossing the service program onto my desk. A smiling photo of Dane is on the cover with a quote in fancy script.

Loving husband, beloved son, loyal friend.

It made me actually laugh out loud when I first saw it. I'm sure that Emery chose that quote and feels that it truly describes her beloved late husband.

How is that two people can know the same person in different ways but still not know them at all?

To Emery, that's exactly who Dane Ashford was and will remain. The man she knew, not the man that I knew, because I've decided that I will take his secret to the grave.

I've ignored her calls, texts, any attempt to reach out because the only thing she and I had in common, the only reason I needed to be involved in her life at all, is now gone. There is no justification for me to be involved with her. That's one thing Dane was right about; she'll never choose to be with me and I'll never put myself in a position to where I have to

continue to lie to her about what I did. If I'm gone too, then all of her problems disappear.

I keep my head down as I walk through the lobby of my building, sliding into the back of my waiting car and head toward the cemetery. I'm not attending the actual service, but according to the service program, there will be a short prayer vigil at the mausoleum.

"She know you're coming?" Tony looks over his shoulder at me as we lean against my car.

"What the fuck do you think, Tony?" I ask, motioning around us. "We're just hanging back this far for shits and giggles?"

He just laughs and shakes his head. "Smart-ass."

The funeral procession winds its way through the cemetery until it stops by the mausoleum. "Back in a bit," I say, patting Tony on the shoulder as I walk the short distance to the very back of the crowd. I make sure to still keep a few yards between me and the others and bow my head as the priest leads us in prayer.

I've never been a religious man. I guess that makes sense with my life choices. There's no denying I'd be first in line at the gates of hell when I died if I believed in it. Still, to make my mother happy, I attend service a few times a year, usually holidays with her, and I still honor the traditions of the church when I'm in the presence of a priest.

The vigil is short. A few prayers are said, a few dedications made, and then slowly, the crowd begins to disperse. Several people hang back to offer hugs and I assume condolences to Emery.

She looks stunning. It's fucked up to notice it at her husband's funeral, or should I say the man I murdered. Her hair looks more vibrant, the sun radiating off it as it falls in thick waves over her shoulders. Her figure is hugged by a black dress that hits just above her knee. I'm lost in admiring her when she reaches up to slowly remove her glasses. Her eyes meet mine and I take a step back.

“Mads.” I hear my name in her voice, but I keep walking. “Mads!” She says it louder, anger now present.

“Let’s go.” I motion toward Tony as I approach my car. I get in and shut the door just as Tony hits the gas.

“You running from a woman?” He laughs.

“You’ve seen her pissed off. I’m not about to be on the business end of that.” He says something else that makes himself laugh, but I don’t catch it. My mind is already back on Emery. I hated seeing the sadness in her face at the vigil; that’s why I skipped the service and have made myself nonexistent to her since I last saw her the morning after Dane’s death.

Selfish, considering I created this mess, but it had to be done. I’ve replayed the conversation in my head where I tell her that I did it, but that I did it to save her and she would have to understand, but the fact is, I’m not sure a sane person would understand. Besides, I can’t be the person to tell her that her husband was not only a liar and a fraud, but a psychotic narcissist who wasn’t capable of love. That not only was her entire marriage and life with him a lie, but he also wanted her dead.

I don’t need her to know that he deserved to die. I don’t need people to see him as the bad guy instead of me. I just want her to be happy and safe.

That’s what I keep telling myself as I walk through my house and head straight to the bar in the corner of my living room.

“Five o’clock somewhere,” I mutter, a heavy pour of scotch in my tumbler. My phone buzzes in my pocket. It’s my older brother, Foster.

“Hey, how you holding up?”

“Great.”

“Figured as much. I wanted to let you know Tokyo is a go. I fly out there tomorrow. If all goes according to plan, they’ll fly out here to finalize the deal in a few months.”

“Sounds good. Let’s keep this as private as possible.”

I hang up the phone, finishing my first tumbler of scotch already. My fingers dance around the rim of the glass as I think about the next steps for our deal with Tokyo. I never understood when people say, *it isn't personal, it's just business*. To me, it's very personal. To Dane, it was very personal. He died having no idea I was the reason his reverse takeover of a public company failed. He didn't want to put in the time or work to go through the IPO process so his answer was having his private company become public by buying an already public company. It's a process that works but I've seen more issues than success with it. I tried warning him, but he didn't want to listen, or rather, he was running out of time. He had investors knocking on his door for months and his answer was to go public.

It was a good plan for the shitstorm he got himself into and it probably would have worked... had I not intervened. Just a simple call to Tokyo to let them know that small tidbit of information about his financials and poof, the deal walked off the fucking table.

Sure, you're supposed to keep factual records, but I had proof that Dane didn't. The books and records he gave to Tokyo were a fucking joke. He was a grifter, a soulless scam artist who would have taken Emery down with him. So yeah, it wasn't just business for me; it was goddamn personal.

"Sir, Emery is here."

"Here? As in downstairs?" I stand and walk toward Tony. "Or here as in on her way up?" He doesn't have to give me an answer. I hear the gentle tapping of high heels across the marble foyer of my penthouse. "What the fuck do I pay you for?" I mouth to Tony who shrugs and scurries away to avoid the hell storm coming our way. "Coward," I say after him.

"Mads, I know you're here." I hear her voice echo in the foyer. My eyes drift toward the scotch, questioning if I should just drink from the bottle to ease the sting but decide against it.

"I am here." I walk through the entrance of the foyer toward her. "What can I do for you, Emery?"

She's changed out of the figure-hugging black dress from earlier and into a silky white dress that hangs seductively over her body. Her long waves are pulled up into a ponytail that accentuates her almost severe jawline. Her shoulders look more delicate than normal; she's probably lost some weight from the stress of losing Dane.

"You know what you can do for me." She crosses her arms over her chest, pushing her tits together, making my focus even worse.

"Afraid I don't." I lean against the doorway casually, letting my eyes take in her body as I slowly drag them upward from her fuck-me heels.

"Seriously, cut the shit, Mads. Where have you been? Your best friend dies and you disappear? You barely show up to the vigil. You refuse to answer any of my texts or calls. When he was—" She stumbles over her words. "Alive, I couldn't seem to get rid of you, and now when I'm at my lowest, you're nowhere to be found?"

My gaze is now fully focused on her tits that bounce with her gesturing movements.

"Nice dress. Your tits look fucking unreal." Her expression falters, her eyes narrowing. "We all grieve differently, Em. I don't know what you want me to say." I'm half telling the truth, just leaving out the part about how I already grieved the loss of Dane years ago when he turned into someone I didn't recognize.

Hell, maybe I never even knew him.

"Really? You expect me to believe you when you said all of that in the same breath as complimenting my tits?"

"What can I say? The heart has a funny way of showing pain sometimes." I push off from the doorway. Her gold sandal heels have a delicate strap that runs a few inches up her calf and it's caught my attention.

Your shoes would look fucking fantastic up by your ears. I could have said that.

“We both know you don’t have a heart and don’t call me Em; that was Dane’s nickname for me.”

“I came up with it.” My response is out of my mouth before I even register it.

“What?”

“I—nothing.”

“It isn’t nothing. Tell me.”

“I called you that first, to him, and then he started calling you that. It was just how I referred to you over the years.”

“Oh. I didn’t know that,” she says softly.

“Scotch?” I motion over my shoulder to the living room. She looks off to the side for a second like she’s telling herself not to, but she gives in.

“Yeah, I could use it.”

My heavy pour streak continues as I make sure to make mine a double. I’m going to need it if I keep thinking about fucking her.

“Why do you have so many tattoos?” Her eyes fall to the one on my hand as she takes the glass from me.

“Like you said, I don’t have a heart, so I have to do something to feel and I just so happen to like pain.”

The glass pauses halfway to her lips like she’s going to say something in response to my comment, but she hesitates before changing the subject. “Why did you disappear?”

“What makes you think I did? The reality is Dane was my best friend and he’s not here anymore so why would I keep showing up?”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning he was what you and I had in common.” I slide one hand into my pocket, bringing my scotch to my lips and taking a generous drink. “We aren’t friends, Emery; we never have been. Now that Dane is gone, why pretend like we are now?”

She swallows, her eyes brimming with tears already. I imagine her feelings are hurt. I know they are actually, but it's the truth.

"Wow," she huffs.

"Oh, come on. Don't act like there's something there. We both know you've hated me since the second you met me."

She lifts a perfectly arched brow. "You brought it on yourself."

"Maybe so, but then why the hell are you here? If you're looking to cry together and share stories about Dane, I'm not your guy." I wink at her.

"Don't you feel guilty? Don't you regret the things you said to me over the years now that he's gone?"

"Stop trying to find the redemption arc for me; there isn't one, sweetheart. We both know I'm not the kind of man you run to. I'm the type you run from, so do us both a favor and move the fuck on with your life and leave me alone."

"How do you sleep? How do you look at yourself in the mirror?" She pushes against my chest. "How do you feel nothing?" She spits the words at me.

She wants to fight. Okay.

"I don't," I say as I take a step closer to her. "I don't feel a single ounce of regret or guilt for the things I've said to you." I take another step. "In fact, if I could do it all over again, I'd say the exact same things to you, some probably even worse."

I'm right in front of her now. I watch her pulse flutter at the base of her throat, her tongue darting out to wet her lips. "Oh," I say, a grin sliding across my lips. "You feel guilt for the things I said to you because you liked it, didn't you?"

"No." She swallows. "It was disgusting and rude."

I chuckle, running my hand through my hair as I move closer to her. "No need to pretend with me anymore, Em; he's not here. You can admit it made your pussy wet when I mentioned fucking you."

Before I can take a step back to put some distance between us, her hand is landing square across my jaw again. Apparently, this is something she's grown to enjoy doing to me, but I'll make sure it doesn't happen again.

I grab a fistful of her ponytail, wrapping it around my fist in one swift move. My tumbler has fallen to floor at my feet, but I don't care. I tug on her hair, pulling her head backward so that she has no choice but to look at me.

"You do that one more time and I swear to God, I will make sure it's the last thing you do." Her eyes are defiant as she stares back at me. I tug her hair harder. "Understand?"

Instead of an answer, I'm met with her saliva as she spits into my face. I close my eyes, wiping it off with the sleeve of my shirt, slowly bringing my other hand to her throat before she realizes it. I walk her backward till she slams against the wall.

"I am not in the mood for your attitude." I grit the words out slowly, my fingers tightening against the side of her throat. "You show up to my home and pull this shit?" I tug her hair again. "This is your last chance to walk out of my house right now."

"Or what?" Her defiance has reached a new level. I don't think I've ever seen her this angry. She's crossed the threshold of fear and is now goading me, teasing me even.

I lean in, my lips hovering over hers as I press my erection against her belly.

"I will fuck the disobedience out of you."

This time, I'm fully prepared to catch her hand when she brings it up to slap me, but it never comes. Her eyes narrow as her hand moves between us till she finds my cock. I look down, watching her delicate fingers wrap around me through my pants. My eyes flutter at her touch, then quickly dart back up to hers.

"Prove it."

"Don't fucking tease me, Emery." The words are so strangled I'm surprised they even make sense. "You have no

idea.” I don’t finish the sentence. I can’t. Her touch is driving me wild.

A coy grin I’ve never seen before settles over her full lips.

“Make it hurt.”

EMERY

I don't know what I'm doing; I just know I need to feel something besides anger and hurt. I need to get out my frustration and I've tried damn near everything else. Guilt creeps in the second the words leave my mouth, but it's not enough to make me want to stop.

I won't lie, I've wondered over the years if I were to call Mads on his bullshit if he'd actually deliver. I always thought he'd say no, that he wouldn't actually cheat with his best friend's wife, and maybe he wouldn't have if Dane were still here... but he's not.

"You don't know what you're asking for, Emery." His breath is warm against my lips, and I want to lean forward and close the distance, but he has me pinned against the wall by my throat.

"Yes, I do." I squeeze his cock harder.

"Fuck," he hisses. "You really fucking don't." He lifts his head, releasing my throat and sliding his hand up behind my head, his thumb along my jaw. "If I take you upstairs, there's no coming back from it. I will rip this dress from your body and show you zero mercy."

My body trembles. From fear? A little, but mostly excitement... anticipation. When Madden Bishop makes a threat, it's a promise. One thing I do know about him is he not only means it, but he will follow through on it. I know that if I'm not serious about this, if there's any ounce of doubt, I need to walk out now. I square my shoulders, that coiled up ribbon

of excitement slowly uncurling into a burning desire in my lower belly.

“Take me.”

I barely finish the statement before he’s dragging me through the living room toward the main staircase. My heels catch on the rug as I struggle to keep up. I half expect him to grab me and toss me over his shoulder again, but he doesn’t. When we get to the top of the stairs, he holds out his hand toward me. I slide my hand into his slowly, looking up at him.

His eyes darken to an impossible shade of black. I can feel my breathing accelerate as he tugs me toward him again, his hand sliding up my side to my neck. He tilts my head to the side, his lips coming so close to mine.

Kiss me.

The thought comes as a shock to me. I *want* him to kiss me. I want to taste his lips. But he turns just enough that he misses my lips and instead settles his mouth against my neck.

“One last chance, baby girl.” The words are barely a whisper. I turn my head just enough to catch his eyes that stare into mine. I can’t form a word; instead, I slowly shake my head to let him know that I’m not turning back.

He releases me, maneuvering me down the hallway to walk in front of him as we approach his bedroom. I look back over my shoulder. He’s a few steps behind me, watching me like a predator stalks his prey. His eyes drag slowly up my body. Once we cross the threshold, he reaches for the door, closing it behind us, the latch making me jump a little.

“So—”

His finger hovers over his lips as he slowly shakes his head no.

“Come here.” His command is clipped. I take a few steps closer to him, his hand darting out to grab me and pull me flush against him. He spins me around so that my back is to his chest. “What’s your safe word?”

“S-safe word?” I stutter.

“You wanted it to hurt, didn’t you? You need a safe word in case I push you past the point you can endure.”

My throat constricts, making it near impossible to swallow. “Flower.”

“Flower.” His breath is warm against my cheek. “I like that. Delicate, like you.”

Goosebumps pepper my skin, his fingers leisurely dragging up my arms. My eyes close, and my head tilts to the side as he runs his tongue up my neck. I can feel my brain wanting to rationalize this, wanting to talk myself out of the fact that I’m about to have sex with my dead husband’s best friend, but I shut it down.

Mads’ hands travel up my body, one hand reaching up to release my hair from my clip while the other tugs at the strap on my shoulder, yanking it down my arm. He grunts as he pulls the other strap down, yanking the dress over my ass, letting it pool on the floor at my feet. “Step,” he commands, moving me out of the dress. He repeats the process of removing my bra and panties, then steps back to look at me.

I feel awkward. I’ve never been self-conscious about my body before, but I’ve also never stood fully nude in high heels while a man circled me, his eyes taking in every single inch of me. Even when Dane and I were intimate, the lights were usually off or if they were on, we weren’t standing there staring at each other.

“Look at me.” My eyes dart up, my arms instinctively attempting to hide part of my body. “You’re going to follow my rules in here.” He continues to circle me until he’s behind me, his one hand traveling up between my breasts. “I don’t want to hear a fucking word out of your mouth unless...” His other hand travels down slowly over my lower belly till he reaches my pubic bone. “You’re using your safe word or you’re saying my name. You understand me?”

I nod, his fingers sliding down between my folds. “Yes.” I finally manage to squeak out the word as his other hand finds my throat again.

“Attagirl,” he praises me. “Now let me use you.” His fingers continue to toy with me, circling my clit, sliding inside me. “Let me show you how good pain can feel.” My pleasure begins to build rapidly but before I can climax, he releases me, stepping back a little before dropping to his knees behind me. I glance over my shoulder, but I feel the pain before I can see what he’s doing.

“Ow!” I can’t help but yelp when he sinks his teeth into the fleshy cheek of my ass.

“What did I tell you about speaking?” he says before pulling his hand back and bringing it down against my flesh, the sound echoing through the room. I close my eyes, the sting bringing tears to my eyes. I clench my teeth so I don’t speak again.

“Hands and knees, on the bed. Now.”

I obey and this time I keep my eyes forward. I fully expect another slap across my ass but instead I feel his hands grip me, then pull me apart as his tongue slides deep between my cheeks. He repeats the process, sliding his tongue between my folds, inside me and straight up to my asshole.

The tension in my body begins to release, and my fingers dig into his comforter as pleasure overtakes me. I’ve never had a man’s tongue so deeply inside me and I’ve certainly never had a man lick my ass before. I moan loudly, trying my best to stay quiet but I can’t.

“Say my name.” Mads voice is gruff, the jangle of his belt buckle echoing through the room followed by the sound of his zipper. His hands are on my ass again, spreading me apart when I hear him spit, warmth slowly spreading between my cheeks as he rubs his spit between my folds.

“Ohhhh.” I can’t stop the groan that tumbles from my lips as I feel him replace his fingers with the tip of his cock.

“That’s not my name now is it, Emery?” He removes himself from me.

“N—no,” I say, expecting him to push into me but he doesn’t.

“Say”—smack—“my”—another smack—“name!” Smack. This time the smack is so hard it physically moves me up the bed.

“Mads!” I scream his name. “Oh God, Mads!”

His erection presses against my slit, his fingers digging into my hips. “That’s right, baby girl. I’m your god,” he says before slamming himself deep inside me. My hands are in fists, my face smashed into the bed as I bite down on the comforter.

“Oh fuck, you’re tight.” He pulls out, then slides back in on a groan. “Like an innocent virgin.” He groans. “Did Dane ever even fuck you, baby girl?” His questions are rhetorical, I remind myself as he begins to move in and out of me, the pain slowly giving way to pleasure, inch by inch.

“Down.” He spits the word at me, his hand pressing firmly against my upper back as he drives in deeper over and over again. His belt jangles with every thrust, his grunts filling the room. I tilt my head to the side, looking back at him. He’s still fully clothed, the hem of his shirt in his mouth, holding it up as he looks up toward the ceiling. One foot is on the floor, the other on the edge of the bed as he pounds into me.

My vision starts to blur, my pleasure on the verge of climax when he stops his movements. I’m tempted to protest but his warning from earlier comes back to me. He flips me onto my back, crawling up me and pushing me up the bed until my hands are pressed firmly against the headboard.

“Mads.” This time, his name sounds different coming from my lips, like it’s a plea. I want him to kiss me; I want him to hold me after and tell me everything is going to be okay, but I know he won’t. That’s not what this is about. I reach my hand out and press it against his chest, but he grabs it and puts it back on the headboard.

“Keep your hands there,” he commands before sitting back on his heels and pushing my thighs wide apart.

“You have a beautiful cunt, Emery. Has anyone ever told you that?” He looks up from my most intimate parts, his eyes

meeting mine as I'm spread-eagle on his bed. The brashness of his verbiage shouldn't surprise me, but it still does. I shake my head no, unsure if I'm allowed to answer.

"No," I say softly.

"If Dane didn't spend every night worshipping your sweet pussy, he was a fucking fool." A flush of shame rushes through me at the mention of Dane and I instinctually start to close my legs, but he pushes against me, his eyes darkening. "Don't."

He leans forward, his lips pressing against me softly before he begins to kiss me like he does my mouth. My back arches immediately at the feeling of his tongue swirling around my clit before he sucks it into his mouth. But just as quickly, he breaks contact.

"So beautiful. Pink and glistening, pulsing for me," he whispers, his head falling to the side as he slides his hand up my thigh. "Just like a flower."

My eyes drop to his cock that's standing fully erect and I realize why it hurt so bad when he was inside me. Not only is he thicker than anyone I've seen, but it looks almost twice as long as Dane's.

"I want to see your beautiful flower squirt. I want to taste it."

"What?"

His eyes dart up to mine as he lines himself up to me and slides deep inside me once again with one long stroke. He hovers over me, his hand on my throat. "I'm going to make you squirt."

"I don't—I can't," I manage to get out as his pace picks up.

"You can and you will, trust me." He squeezes my throat tighter. "And stop disobeying the rules or I'll come right now and not let you fucking finish."

His strokes are punishing. He's hitting my cervix and my G-spot at the same time. White-hot pain shoots through me,

mixing with pleasure. He presses on my lower abdomen, the pleasure skyrocketing as my abs clench involuntarily.

“That’s it, baby girl. Let it happen.” My moans are coming out rapidly and loudly like I’m a porn star. “Keep your hands on the headboard!” he shouts the second they start to slip. I use the leverage to push myself down onto his cock further as my thighs begin to convulse.

“Say my name,” he commands me again, his eyes looking down into mine.

“Mads.” I barely get it out.

“Again,” he barks.

“Mads, please,” I beg. I repeat it over and over, my eyes rolling back in my head as he pounds into me over and over again.

A sensation I’ve never experienced shoots through my body, starting from my toes and intensifying as it travels to my head, exploding behind my eyes. The pressure, the orgasm, the pain, it all ignites as I arch my back, a release of warm, wet liquid spraying from my body as I shout his name over and over.

“Oh fuck, oh fuck!” His fingers tighten. I gasp for breath just as he releases me, making the orgasm even more intense. I blink rapidly, my vision slowly coming back as Mads pulls himself from me, diving down to lap up the liquid from my body.

His tongue devours me, his fingers bruising my skin as he bites my inner thigh so hard I’m sure there has to be blood.

“You taste so fucking good,” he groans, fisting his cock and pumping his hand up and down his shaft feverishly. “Open your mouth,” he barks, his neck red and thick with veins as he climbs over the top of me.

I obey, opening my mouth as he tilts my head back and spills his seed down my throat. “Swallow.” He comes, spurts of his release filling my mouth and running over my lips, down my neck where he grips me tightly. “You are an obedient little thing for being such a bitch sometimes.”

I don't have it in me to reply with a comeback. I'm still trying to come down from the most intense orgasm of my life.

"Maybe this is what we needed all along, a good old-fashioned hate fuck."

I wince at his word choice. I guess he's right in that I didn't come here to feel butterflies, but I wouldn't have been against a kiss or maybe holding me even for a minute after. He didn't even take his clothes off.

He wipes his cock against my bare breast, leaving a trail of his cum over my skin before getting up off the bed. He tucks himself back into his pants before reaching down and grabbing my clothes, tossing them toward me.

"Take your time getting cleaned up. The bathroom is in there as you already know." He points over his shoulder toward the en suite, running his hand through his hair. "You can let yourself out whenever."

MADS

The way I just treated her is abhorrent, I know that. But I saw the way she looked at me when I flipped her onto her back. Those eyes were pleading for something more, something I can't offer her.

I don't know what this was about for her, and I don't want to know. Maybe some fucked-up way to feel something but whatever the reason, it can't happen again. And the surest way to let her know that is to make her not want it to happen again.

"Hey, make sure Emery gets home safe." I nod at Tony as I head toward my home office where I plan to lock myself away for the night and drink till I pass out. "And whatever you do, don't let her come find me."

"Tokyo went well?"

Foster leans back in his chair across from my desk. "Tokyo went fantastic. They're very on board with the acquisition. We just need to dot a few i's, cross a few t's, and entertain the hell out of them when they're here next month."

"I'll be sure to give them a night they won't forget." I'll take them to the same club I take all of our special clients to: The Scarlett Letter. I own the club, bought it the second I turned twenty-one. It was just a lounge at that point, but I added the VIP basement within two years of buying it, and to say it's been a success is an understatement.

Because of the nature of the VIP level, our membership qualifications and due diligence are unwaveringly rigid. It's not just a party for the rich and famous; you have to sign NDAs with blood, show financial statements, and sign over collateral worth one hundred million on top of the annual fee of one million.

“What about Emery?”

“What about her?”

“Is she going to be an issue for us when the news goes public that we bought the company that was supposed to be bought by Ashford?”

“I doubt it.” Honestly, I fully expect it to be a problem. Emery isn't an idiot; she watches the news, keeps up on business, and has a pretty good finger on the pulse considering she's the majority share owner in one of the largest companies in the world.

“Doubt it?” Foster lifts an eyebrow at me.

“I'll handle it if it does become an issue.”

“You know there's one surefire way to keep any of this bullshit from becoming an issue, right?”

“I'm not going to tell her.” Foster has asked me half a dozen times now why I don't just come clean to Emery about what kind of piece of shit Dane was.

“I get that you want to be noble and no—”

“I don't give a fuck about being noble. I just don't need more people knowing our goddamn business. I trust Emery but there's no reason to be telling anyone else the truth about what went down outside of you and me.”

“Just saying that it might make life easier. I get you don't want to hurt her more than necessary, but at some point, she's going to start digging. I guarantee it.” Foster stands up and buttons his suit coat before exiting my office.

I push my chair back harder than necessary when I stand up, frustration making me antsy. I pace, then stare out the window of my office. The sun dances across the lake, my eyes

watching it sparkle like diamonds. Foster is right. I know it's only a matter of time before Em starts digging. Why wouldn't she? Her husband randomly kills himself with zero signs of depression? Thankfully, the saving grace in the situation is, she didn't know her husband was too much of an egocentric asshole to ever kill himself.

My mind drifts back to Emery. The image of her beneath me in my bed has been running through my brain on a loop for the last two days. I was shocked when I didn't hear her pounding on my office door or calling my phone after the way I left her. Maybe it says more about my fragile ego than it does about my actions. I'm ashamed of the way I left her. My attempt to not hurt her further by shielding her from the truth about her husband has somehow turned into me now actively trying to hurt her to make her run away... far away.

I meant it when I told her I'm not the kind of man you run to. I'm not her saving grace or her knight in shining armor. I'm the devil in disguise in her bed. My stomach pits when I think about the irony of the situation I've put myself in.

"Mr. Bishop? There's an Emery Ashford here to see you."

You gotta be fucking kidding me.

"Right now?"

"Yes, sir. Should I send her in?"

I nod toward my admin before nervously running my hands through my hair. I button my jacket and square my shoulders.

"I figure there's no use calling you or trying to get an appointment. If I want to see you, I'm going to have to show up and demand your time." She looks like a young Rita Hayworth, her red hair swept off to one side, an Hermes scarf wrapped delicately around her neck that matches her pale-pink dress.

A curious thought pops into my head. *Did Dane realize what he had with her? Her beauty, her grace, that body, that fucking pussy.* I clear my throat, pushing the thought aside.

“And what do you need with my time?” I steady my gaze on her, searching for a trace of anger or perhaps a small pistol hidden in her handbag. Neither of which seem to be present.

“I have some questions I wanted to ask you regarding Dane’s business deals.”

“Afraid I can’t help you with that.” I shrug. “We were friends, not business partners.”

“Yes, I’m aware of that, but being friends, I also know you guys talked a lot about business and spent a lot of time together. I know you had to have discussed some things. You even said he confided in you about the deal going south and how depressed he felt.”

“Close the door.” I motion with my head and she obliges. “What exactly are you looking for, Emery?” I walk toward her and she places a folder on my desk.

“I’ve been doing some digging and I keep seeing this charge on his credit card. It looks like a quarterly installment of \$250,000, but I can’t find where it’s going to or why. It isn’t coded in his books as a business expense and it’s not any sort of tax that I can find.”

I pick up one of the statements, already knowing exactly what this payment is for. I pick up another statement and another; they all show the same charge.

“What is MXB Ent?” She points to the statement where she’s highlighted every single charge.

“I don’t know.” I shrug, tossing the papers back onto my desk. What I really want to know is why she isn’t ripping my head off for the other day. Why she isn’t calling me a disgusting pig and slapping me across the face right now. It certainly isn’t just because she needs information from me she thinks I have. She furrows her brow, chewing her bottom lip as she digs through the rest of the pile of papers.

“Oh, and there’s another thing. The Japanese company that was supposed to be purchased by Ashford Enterprises, I think they—”

I reach my hand up and tug ever so gently on her scarf, pulling it slightly away from her neck. “May I?”

Her attention immediately falls from the papers in her hands to where my fingers are resting against her neck. I watch her throat constrict as she swallows, a completely different demeanor taking over her body. A slight blush flourishes from her chest, traveling up her neck.

“I guess.” I pull the scarf and it slowly falls from her skin, exposing the marks from my fingers.

“Just want to admire my handiwork.” My cock twitches when I see the marks against her milky skin. “Mmmm, looks nice,” I whisper, dragging my fingertips gingerly over them. “Does it hurt?”

“No,” she says softly, her eyes falling to my lips.

It’s not exactly a lie; I did want to see the marks I left on her. I’ve beat off furiously to the thought of it so many times I’m afraid my dick might fall off, but it’s also working to distract her from her paperwork. My eyes shift to the clock. I have a meeting that my admin will be reminding me of in exactly four minutes.

This is a dangerous fucking game I’m playing with myself. I want to make it clear to her that we aren’t friends, I’m not going to help her dig for answers, and I sure as shit can’t have her showing up at my home and office. Sooner or later, the paps or a newspaper will snap a picture of her leaving my place at an odd hour, and then the rumors will start that she and I were having an affair, thus prompting a very unwanted investigation into things. But standing here in this moment, so close to her, seeing the marks on her body from me, I’m completely enraptured.

I rotate her around with my other hand, guiding her so her back is against my desk before pushing her to sit atop my desk. “Sit.” I move the papers she brought in.

“What?” I give her a look that tells her I’m not going to ask again, and she slowly maneuvers herself onto the edge of my desk.

I step forward, spreading her knees apart in the process as I slowly drag her dress up her legs.

“Mads.” Her hand darts out to stop my movement.

“You have a safe word. Use it if you must.” She doesn’t. Her hand stays pressed against me so I continue to pull her dress up just enough to expose her inner thigh. I run my thumb over the raised outline of my teeth marks. A perfect pink bite mark. Saliva pools in my mouth at the thought of leaning down and running my tongue over it. I know if I do, though, I’ll have her panties off and my tongue inside her pussy before I realize it. My thumb shifts slightly, touching the edge of her panties. She sucks in a sharp breath, her fingers curling into my shirt as her eyes flutter.

Before she can stop me, I pull out my phone and snap a photo of the mark, making sure her panties are in the shot.

“What the hell?” She shoves me away, tugging her dress down. “Delete it,” she demands, reaching for my phone as she lunges off the desk.

“*Tsk-tsk.*” I jerk my hand out of her reach. “So rude.”

“I know it’s probably impossible for you, but if you could stop being an asshole and please delete that, I would appreciate it.” She reaches for it again when I bring my hand down, but I grab her wrist, pulling her back toward me.

“I’m not going to delete it so stop asking.”

“That’s illegal.” She lifts an eyebrow like I’m supposed to be scared.

“And? Do you think that’s ever stopped me before?”

“What are you going to do with it? Keep it in a file with the hundreds of other women you’ve seduced?”

That makes me laugh. “Hundreds? I’m flattered.” She crosses her arms over her chest, jutting her hip out, completely unamused. “I want to look at it when I jerk off,” I say matter-of-factly, her mouth falling open.

“You are such a pig.”

There it is.

“You think Dane didn’t jerk off to porn?”

“No, he didn’t. He said that he didn’t like it, that it was demeaning to women.”

I stare at her, expecting her to laugh and say it’s a joke, but she’s completely serious.

Jesus Christ, this woman really did believe everything that moron told her.

“Right,” I say, stepping closer to her and reaching up to touch the bruises on her neck. She flinches, making me pause. “I’m not going to hit you, Emery.” I’m almost offended by her reaction.

“You did the other night.”

“I spanked you during sex. I didn’t hit your face. That’s completely different.” I tip her chin so she’s looking at me.

“Well, you threatened me when I slapped you.”

“I meant it in a punishment kind of way. I would never hit you like that. I thought you”—I glance down at my shoes, my cock screaming at me for where our conversation has ended up—“enjoyed everything else?” I offer her a questioning look.

“I did,” she says softly. Our eyes lock and the tension grows thick. I feel my body instinctively sway toward her. I blink, pulling my attention back to what she came here for.

“What exactly is it you’re looking for, Em?” I keep my hand on her throat, my fingers moving slightly back and forth over the bruises.

“Anything, I don’t know.” Her lip trembles. “Answers.”

A feeling of guilt pulls at me, and I step back, breaking our contact. “I’m afraid I don’t have any for you. Look.” I take a second, choosing my words. “I know you and I haven’t always been... friendly.” That makes her laugh. “But I’m going to be honest with you right now... I don’t have answers for you. Nobody does, and the answers you do end up finding probably

won't make you feel any better. In fact, they'll probably make you feel worse."

"Worse?" Her eyes dart back and forth.

"Or not. I'm just saying that oftentimes, if we go looking for something, we're going to find it. So unless you're prepared for that, I'd stop."

"Mr. Bishop, your two o'clock is here."

"Thanks, Corina." I nod toward her, then turn back to Emery. "I'm sorry, Emery, but I don't have the answers you're looking for." I hesitate, choosing my words carefully with my next statement. "I don't have anything to offer you, Ems. I think your life would be better off if you moved on without me in it." I stare at her, hoping she understands what I'm insinuating so I don't have to come out and say get the hell out of my life. Her eyes drop away from mine and she nods her head once.

"I understand. Sorry to interrupt you." She turns and leaves my office.

Once she's out of earshot, I turn back to Corina. "Next time she stops by, make sure you tell her I'm out of the office or in a meeting. I don't want to see her in here again."

EMERY

I don't understand—at all.

I don't understand why Mads is lying about knowing more and I certainly don't understand why he's doing his damndest to get rid of me.

The only reason I can think of is, he doesn't want me digging... but that's exactly what I'm going to do.

The only other person who spent more time with Dane besides Mads and me, was Andy.

"Thanks, Andy." I smile at him, giving his hand that's resting on the door he's holding open for me a quick squeeze before sliding into the back seat.

"Of course, ma'am." He smiles and nods.

"Andy, how have you been doing?" I see his eyes shift from the road to the rearview mirror for a second before he answers.

"Oh, I'm okay, ma'am. How are you doing?"

"I'm okay too, I guess. Just taking it a day at a time." I sigh, looking out the window for a moment as we leave the city.

"That's understandable. In times like these, that's all you really can do."

"Andy?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

“Was there—” My eyes meet his in the mirror. “Was there anything that I should know about Dane?”

His brow furrows. “What do you mean, Mrs. Ashford?”

“Oh, just anything. Was there something I missed? Maybe something he was hiding from me?” I swallow the nervous lump in my throat, watching him in the mirror. I focus on his expression, trying to determine if I perceive a flash of concern or nervousness, but there’s nothing.

“I don’t think so, ma’am. Nothing that I was aware of. You know Mr. Ashford, he was always just so joyful and talkative. I’m sure that whatever he was struggling with, he didn’t want anyone to know.”

I smile at him. “Yeah, that’s what everyone keeps saying.”

“I can’t imagine what you’re going through, but I can promise you that none of it was your fault. All Mr. Ashford cared about was you; you’re all he ever talked about.”

I don’t respond as my gaze drifts out the window. I let my forehead rest against the cool glass as I close my eyes and replay every conversation and second of our final few hours together.

No matter how many times I replay that night, no matter how many times I try to make it make sense, it just doesn’t. Dane lived for our anniversary parties. It felt like he was more excited about our fifth than any other and to kill himself on the same night? I shake my head slowly. There’s just no way he would do that.

When I get back home, I head straight to Dane’s office. I close the door, locking it behind me although I know nobody else would be coming in here. I sink down into his desk chair, dragging my fingers slowly over the papers left behind by him. Dane was extremely organized; very little was ever left out of place in his space. I close my eyes and lean back in his oversized leather chair. The scent of his cedar cologne still lingers in the space. A single tear gathers at the corner of my eye and I squeeze my eyes tighter, willing myself not to cry again.

For the past few weeks, it feels like my life has been drowning in tears. I've moved through phases of sadness mixed with hopelessness, only to find myself back at anger and needing answers. My eyes pop open and I wipe away the stray tear before pulling open one of the drawers and leafing through the papers inside.

"Nothing," I mutter to myself as I close the drawer and reach for the next. This is the third time I've looked through these drawers. Apart from the credit card statements I found for a credit card I didn't even know existed, I haven't found anything that's giving me answers. I slam the drawer shut, but this time when it closes, I hear a faint jingle sound.

"What the—?" I pull the drawer back open and pull out the papers but there's nothing inside that would make that sound. I slam the drawer again, and again I hear a faint jingle. I reach inside the drawer, feeling around; maybe there's a false bottom. I tap on the bottom of the drawer but it doesn't sound hollow. I yank it harder when I open it, trying to release it from the track but it won't release. I drop down to my knees on the floor, reaching back behind the drawer and running my fingers along the back. That's when I feel it, a tiny little hook with a single key. I fumble with the key, struggling to pull it off the hook, but I end up getting it.

I stare at the small gold key, trying to figure out what it could go to. I can tell just by looking at it that it doesn't go with this desk. None of the drawers are locked anyway. I stand up, turning to look through the bookshelves to see if there's a small box or compartment. I check the cabinets in the corner of the room, the door to the closet, even the door to his office, but the key doesn't go with anything.

Finally, I give up for now. I turn my attention back to the \$250,000 charge required quarterly from MXB.

"MXB... MXB." I say the initials to myself a few times. "Why do those sound familiar?" I type them into Google for probably the fifth time since I first saw them, but it doesn't shed any light on what they might be. I scroll through the search results of mostly motocross and bike parts before giving up again. I reach into my pocket and pull out the key

again. Maybe it has something to do with that payment. Maybe it's a private storage company and this is the key to access it.

I slide the key back into my pocket, turning back to my phone and typing in Private Investigator Services. The results populate more than a dozen agencies close by, all with varying reviews. I click on them, reading through a few reviews before picking a smaller agency located just two miles from my house.

“Hey, Andy.” I pop my head into the kitchen where Andy is having a cup of coffee with Tilly. “I’m going to go out for a drive.” He begins to stand up, but I hold out my hand. “No, enjoy your coffee. I just wanted to let you know in case you needed me for anything.”

“Are you sure, Mrs. Ashford? I can grab the keys right now.”

“No, no, no. I’ve missed driving my little sports car, and I just want to take it out for a quick spin.” I smile at both of them, offering a quick wave before heading to the garage.

It’s been at least a year since I’ve driven, but I’m sure I can manage. I find the keys labeled red Mercedes and click them. The lights blink as the small two-door sports car unlocks. I climb in, starting it up and immediately dropping the convertible top.

The sun and breeze feel amazing on my skin as I cruise along the road toward the private investigator agency. I’m half tempted to close my eyes and let the sun lull me to sleep when I stop at the stoplight, but the horn sounding behind me reminds me I’m the one driving.

The agency is small, just a glass-front office on the main street of one of the small towns next to where I live. I didn’t call ahead and now I’m wondering if I should have. There’s no open sign, but the door opens when I push on it, a small bell signaling overhead.

“Afternoon, ma’am.” A small older man shuffles out from behind a wall in the back right corner. “What can I do for

you?”

“Hi, I’m Emery.” I hesitate in saying my last name, realizing he will know exactly who I am once I do. “Emery Ashford,” I say, realizing that if I hire this man, he’s probably going to know a lot more about me than I could ever tell him. If he does know my name, it doesn’t show.

“Paul Pearfort. And how can I help you?”

“Well...” I reach into my purse and pull out a copy of the financial statements. “I am trying to find out what these charges are on my husband’s credit card statements. There are several of them and I’ve tried researching what MXB Ent is, but I’m not sure I know how to find out more information than what Google shows me.”

The man takes the papers from me and looks through them at the highlighted charges. His eyes dart up toward me, then back down toward the paper. He probably thinks I’m a scorned wife trying to find out if my husband is cheating.

“These are some pretty hefty charges,” he says, flipping through the papers. “Is this all of them?”

I shake my head. “They went back further, but I just chose to print out the ones from the last year.” He looks back at the papers. “Can you find out what it is just from that?” I don’t hold my breath. I’m ashamed to say it, but with a man his age, I’m concerned about his technological skill set. Maybe he’s one of those old-school PIs that brings a long lens camera and parks outside seedy motels to catch cheaters.

“Yeah, shouldn’t be a problem,” he says confidently. “Is that the only piece of information you’re looking for?”

“Yeah, I think so.” I smile awkwardly. “Oh, actually, any chance you would know what kind of key this is?” I dig it out of my pocket and hold it out toward him. He takes it from me, perching his glasses on the tip of his nose as he holds the key up.

“Looks like the key to a safe,” he says before handing it back to me.

“A safe?” I feel my nose scrunch. I’m not aware of a safe in our home. I know we have several security deposit boxes at the bank but not a safe.

“Yes, most likely that’s a dial lock key. It locks the dial on a safe so that you can’t enter the code or turn the dial.”

“Oh, okay,” I say, now even more confused than before. “Thank you.”

“Next steps would be an NDA. I understand the value of complete privacy and will always keep my client’s information safe. I also have a contract along with an invoice that I do require to be prepaid before service.”

“That all sounds great. Credit card okay?” I ask, reaching for my wallet.

By the time I leave the agency and get back into my car, I have no desire to go back home to that huge empty house. I never wanted to buy the house in the first place. Even if Dane and I had four children, it was three times the amount of house we would ever use or need. But he insisted we needed something big and grand, something that told people how important we were. It wasn’t worth the argument or explaining to him how unnecessary it was so I went along with the purchase since it made him so happy.

I pull my car into a small parking lot for a local park and shut it off. I close my eyes, leaning my seat back and letting the sun envelop me. The breeze rustling through the leaves, the birds chirping, it’s the kind of peace I’ve needed during all this chaos.

Every time I close my eyes since Dane died, I see him. I see him smiling, laughing, kissing me. I see the way his face lit up when I walked in the room. But when I close my eyes this time, I see Mads. His eyes dark and lustful as he gripped my throat. The sounds he emitted when he came in my mouth. Like an animalistic growl, a low guttural groan that sounded so erotic. I’ve never seen Mads like that, so vulnerable and expressive. The way that man handled my body made it clear to me that he knew exactly what he was doing.

I jump, my eyes flying open when I realize I'm aroused. Guilt creeps in, marring Dane's smiling face, turning into disgust. I squeeze my eyes shut, as if that will somehow scrub the memories from my brain, but it does little to help. If I thought the guilt I felt for finding Mads attractive while Dane was alive was bad, this is a million times worse. But somewhere deep in my brain, there's a devil on my shoulder telling me I deserve to feel good too. That nothing happened while he was alive so it's not technically wrong... is it?

I don't need to deliberate on the question long to know the answer. If I were to ask a room full of people who didn't even know me if it's wrong to not only fantasize about your dead husband's best friend but also act on it, it would be a resounding yes.

"Hate fuck." I say the words aloud that Mads used and it makes me smile. I guess that's exactly what it was. With the way he looked at me in his office earlier, I wouldn't have guessed that he hated me, but then again, I don't pretend to know anything about Mads Bishop. I let my eyes flutter closed again, imagining what I would have done today if he had taken things further. I hadn't intended on things going as far as they did when I went to his house. I went there for answers, to find out why he's been avoiding me, but when the opportunity presented itself, it's like I couldn't say no.

Just like today, his eyes went from cold and distant to fiery and passionate in an instant. I wanted him to take me today. The way his fingers felt against my pulse, his touch against my inner thigh. A moan slips past my lips when I recall the way his warm breath touched my neck. But in an instant, a cold realization seeps in and my eyes fly open, my stomach sinking.

Maybe the reason Mads is trying to get rid of me, the reason he's been avoiding me and clearly lying to me today in his office about knowing more, is because he blames me for Dane's death. Perhaps there's more to the story that he knows if he told me, would destroy me. Maybe that's where his hate and disdain for me lies. He sees me as the person who took his best friend from him and destroyed him.

“Mrs. Ashford? This is Paul, Paul Pearfort.”

“Hello, Paul,” I say into my phone, my heart beating rapidly.

“Apologies if I’m catching you at a bad time but I wanted to run by you what I found out about those charges. Is now a good time for you to stop by the office?”

“Oh yeah, absolutely.” I glance over my shoulder to make sure I’m alone in the room. “I’ll be right over.” I hang up and grab the keys for the Mercedes. I never put them back in the garage after taking the car out last week. I ended up loving the drive so much that I’ve gone on several others since. Tilly is busy somewhere else in the house, and I saw Andy sitting on the back porch having lunch.

I fly out of the house, driving the two miles over to Mr. Pearfort’s office in a flash.

“That was quick,” Paul says, standing up from his desk. He wipes his mouth with a napkin, pushing his sandwich and chips to the side of his desk as he reaches for some paperwork.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt your lunch. I was just anxious to get over here.”

“Not at all,” he says, shaking his head as he holds the papers out toward me. “That is what I was able to find out. I’ll apologize now, it’s not a lot of information, but it’s enough to go off of. MXB Ent is just a parent company that owns only one other company: The Scarlett Letter.”

“The Scarlett Letter?” I stare at him blankly.

“It’s a club in the city. Apparently an extremely exclusive one at that. I couldn’t find anything about them other than that they are privately owned and they offer memberships; you can’t just apply.”

“What kind of club?” When I ask, his face falls.

“I can’t say for certain, Mrs. Ashford, but based on my research and talking to one of my colleagues, it’s most likely a gentleman’s club.”

“With \$250,000 membership fees?” My hand falls from where I was holding it up with the papers. Paul shrugs and sits back down in his chair.

“That’s quarterly so we’re looking at a million dollar membership fee. Rich people,” he says around a bite of sandwich, “play by very different rules, Mrs. Ashford.”

“You have no idea,” I mutter as I look at the paper again. “Thanks, Mr. Pearfort. I’ll be in touch if I have any other questions.”

He nods. “Sorry there isn’t more information, but that paper does have the address on it.”

“Address?” My ears perk up.

“To the club or at least their office.”

“Thanks,” I say again, smiling before heading back outside to my car.

I stare at the address on the piece of paper, typing it in my GPS. It pulls up the street view and from the outside, it’s just a very plain brick building downtown. I look around the area. There are a few restaurants and bars and several offices. Nothing seems out of place. It certainly doesn’t look like a high-end gentleman’s club... not that I would really have any clue what one looked like.

I just can’t imagine Dane going to one. I never told him not to, never told him not to look at porn either; it was just something he offered up to me. He told me that he not only found it offensive and degrading, but that the only way he could get off was to thoughts of me. I was flattered at the time, but Mads’ comment earlier comes back to me. Maybe I was just being naive, or maybe I wanted to believe that Dane was so different from all the other men I’d met.

Would I be angry if Dane had told me he was going to a gentleman’s club? I try to think it through, but it feels impossible to now. Maybe it’s not just naked women dancing

on poles for tips; maybe it's a secret society like he was a member of in college.

I put my car into gear and make the short trip back to the house. I walk upstairs to our shared bedroom, pausing outside the doorway briefly. I still can't bring myself to sleep in this room after what happened in here. My fingers linger on the doorway as I take a step inside and let out a shaky breath.

"You can do it," I say to myself softly as I take another few steps inside and head toward the closet. I run my fingers over Dane's clothes slowly, bringing the sleeve of one of his jackets to my nose and inhaling. It still smells like him.

Before I can spiral into a ball of tears on the floor in a pile of his clothes again, something I've only done a handful of times in the last few weeks which is why I stay out of here, I walk to my side of the closet. I look through my dresses, pulling several out and tossing them aside until I find the one I'm looking for. It's a thin material of tiny little silver metal pieces. The straps are barely there. The neckline swoops down low and the back even lower. It sits just above the small of my back and hangs down to about mid-thigh. It's beyond sexy. I had bought it to wear on a birthday trip Dane and I had planned for his thirty-fifth a few years back, but the trip ended up getting canceled at the last minute and the dress was pushed to the back of my closet.

I pull it out, holding it up to my body. I haven't worn anything this revealing in years. Dane preferred a more subtle sexy look on me and I agreed with him. This dress was something I would have worn when I was nineteen and heading out to a club in the city. But considering that's exactly what I plan on doing tonight, it's the perfect dress.

MADS

“Declan, why don’t you show our very esteemed guests around, give them the private VIP tour.” I nod at Declan, my director of operations, as I introduce him to the Tokyo team.

“Absolutely, Mr. Bishop. Gentlemen, pleasure to have you joining us tonight. Right this way.” Declan gestures with his arm as he flashes a grin at the guests.

“Gentlemen, I’ll catch up with you a little later once our VIP table is ready.”

I excuse myself and walk back toward my office. My brother Foster already did his due diligence with our new business partners from Tokyo in the boardroom. Now it’s my turn to give them a night they’ll never forget at my private club.

I bought The Scarlett Letter when I was barely old enough to drink and within two years, I turned it into one of the most exclusive clubs in Chicago. By the time I’d owned it for five years, not only was it ten times more profitable than when I bought it, but we have the most exclusive membership list that is more secure than Fort Knox. We’re talking every high-end billionaire, politician, sports figure, or celebrity you can think of wants to be on this list, but we are very selective in whom we allow to join. We value privacy and discretion above all else. Just because you can afford to pay the million-dollar annual membership fee doesn’t mean you will be automatically accepted.

I pull my private stash of scotch from the shelf in my office and pour myself a finger. I welcome the burn as I sit back in my chair. I close my eyes, trying to savor the taste, but every time I try to focus on the flavor or anything else, my mind instantly takes me back to the way Emery tastes. My cock grows firm against my thigh as I remember the way her body convulsed in my bed. The way her pussy soaked my face. I kick myself, thinking about how quickly I allowed our encounter to end. I should have made her stay the night, had my fill of her, and then sent her on her way in the morning, but I couldn't trust myself being in close proximity for that amount of time. I was already so drunk with lust I was ready to tell her everything, to demand she stay forever. Her scent lingered on my bedsheets, leaving me intoxicated all over again even after she left.

My phone buzzes on my desk, interrupting my fantasy, and my eyes fly open.

"Hey, Rick, what's up?"

"Got a little situation out here, boss." Ricky, my head of security at the club, says into the phone.

"What kind of problem?" I sit up in my chair, Ricky's deep voice telling someone outside that he's speaking with me now.

"I've got someone up here claiming they know you, but they aren't on the membership list."

"Who?" This isn't the first time someone has tried getting in by pretending to know me. Usually, it's just some up-and-coming new money who heard a rumor about the club.

"Her name is Emery Ashford."

"I'm coming up there," I say, hanging up the phone and exiting my office in a flash.

What the absolute fuck is she doing here and how did she find out about this place?

I knew when she discovered those \$250,000 membership fees on the credit card statement she'd keep digging. I just didn't expect her to find the place.

Matter of fact, how the hell did she find it?

I straighten my suit coat and run my hands through my hair as I approach the entrance. When I step outside, Ricky has Emery off to the side. There's a slight chill in the air tonight and the only thing she has on her body is shiny fucking scrap of material.

Jesus Christ, she looks like she's just begging to be fucked in that thing.

I take in her outfit, her tits practically falling out of the dress that shows off her long, slender legs and delicate shoulders. I have the sudden urge to drag her inside, away from prying eyes.

"I'll handle it, Ricky." I give him a nod as I approach Emery. She crosses her arms over her chest, her hip jutted out to the side. Her attitude is in full effect tonight, I can already tell.

"What can I do for you, Em?" I slide my hands into my pockets as I step closer to her.

"Let me in."

"Afraid I can't do that." I shake my head, trying to remain calm. "Is Andy around here with the car? Tell him to pick you up."

"I took an Uber."

"What are you doing here?"

"I'm supposed to meet my date here." She flips her hair over her shoulder.

"Your date?" I give her a questioning look. "You're dating already?"

"Maybe." Her lips curl into a delicious little grin.

"Seems a bit rushed for a grieving widow, don't you think?" I don't attempt to hide the anger in my eyes even though I know she's lying about having a date.

"You didn't seem concerned about it when you took me into your bed."

“Mmm, that’s because that wasn’t a date, sweetheart.” I chuckle. “And from what I remember”—I step a foot closer to her, reaching my hand out to tilt her chin upward—“you begged me to take you to bed.”

“You wish,” she mutters, smacking my hand away.

“Who is your date?” I know she’s full of shit, but my chest still tightens at the thought of her on a date. If she were on one, I’m not sure that we’d actually be having a conversation about it. Most likely I’d be dragging the man out by his throat and kicking the shit out of him for even looking twice at her, then revoking his membership.

“Nobody you know.” She shrugs.

“Now that is interesting because I know every single person who walks through that door by name.”

Her smile fades. “You know I could ask you the same questions. What are you doing here, Mr. Bishop?”

“We both know I own the place, Em. Don’t act like you don’t. So I’m going to ask you one more time, what the fuck are you doing here?”

“You’re a liar,” she says matter-of-factly.

“I am?” I try to play coy.

“MXB.” She says the initials slowly. “Madden Xavier Bishop. Took me longer than it should have, but I eventually figured it out. Thought you had no idea what it was?”

I don’t respond right away. I stare at her, contemplating my next move. “How?”

She shrugs. “I hired a private investigator.” I lift my eyebrows at her. “You weren’t giving me any answers and neither was the internet so I showed him the charges and asked him if he could find out where they were coming from. It led me here. You can find out anything if you throw enough money at it, and we both know I have an endless supply of it. So now,” she says, poking her finger into my chest as she squares her shoulders, “I want answers.”

“No, you don’t,” I say, grabbing her elbow and turning her away from the entrance. “Go home and be a good girl, Emery. You don’t belong here.” I try to walk her down the sidewalk toward my car, but she jerks her arm away from me.

“No.” She turns toward me. “I deserve answers, Mads, and stop bossing me around. You aren’t in charge of me now that Dane is gone and I’m certainly not your responsibility.”

“Enough!” I snap, grabbing both of her arms and walking her till her back is against the wall of the club. “I’m not bossing you around. I’m the one thinking logically in all this. You’re reacting on emotion. Do us both a fucking favor and get your ass into the back seat of my car before I fucking put you there myself.” I expect her to give up, but her eyes tell me a different story. She’s determined and she’s not leaving. “And for fuck’s sake, cover up.” With my last statement, she giggles... actually fucking giggles.

“Why? Is it distracting you, Mads?” Her lips curl seductively. “I’m not leaving until I get inside your club with or without you. Besides...” She steps closer, tilting her chin to look up at me. “Maybe I want to go inside and let my hair down. I’m not the good girl you always think I am, you know.”

Something inside me snaps. I should throw her over my shoulder and take her home myself, but I don’t. I grab her wrist and turn, dragging her toward the entrance. “Fine, you want to see what kind of club it is? Let’s go.”

I nod toward Ricky as we step inside. The dimly lit entrance has a desk where members check in and a coatroom to the right. It has the timeless elegance of a speakeasy, deep reds and gold with dark wood accents. Soft music plays over the speakers. I watch as she takes in the sights and colors.

“Right this way, Mr. Bishop.” The hostess, adorned with a black and gold mask that covers her eyes, pulls back the red velvet curtain, ushering us inside.

My hand rests gently at the base of Emery’s back, her warm skin feeling like it’s going to burn through my fingertips at any second. Her head turns from right to left as she scans

the room. Small tables and booths are scattered throughout the dimly lit room. A jazz band plays on a small stage and a bar lines either side of the space. It's not too loud as small murmurs of conversations echo through the room while cocktail waitresses dressed in tasteful lingerie linger between tables, taking orders and offering cigars. Tessa, one of the club's more popular waitresses, sits on a patron's lap. Her head falls back as she giggles, one of her mile-long legs extending outwardly. I fully expect Emery to turn back and look at me with a dramatic eye roll or a judging look, but she doesn't.

"Doesn't seem so scary," she says toward me over her shoulder when we approach the bar. I drag my fingers slowly up her back, leaning in to smell her hair. It smells fresh and sweet, like vanilla and vetiver.

"That's the point," I murmur into her ear, letting my body press slightly against hers. "Just a jazz lounge with high-end cigars and beautiful women to take your order."

She spins around, her back now against the bar as she rests her elbows atop the bar. I don't put any space between us with her change in position so her clearly braless tits press against my chest.

"So, why all the secrecy? Dane enjoyed expensive scotch and he loved a good cigar even more. Why would I care that he was waited on by sexy, half-dressed women?" Her eyes glance over toward Tessa again who has her hands in the patron's hair, talking to him like she's in love with him. She swallows, shrugging nonchalantly like she's trying to pretend it wouldn't bother her if I told her Dane let Tessa sit on his lap.

"Do you really think I'm charging a million dollars a year for membership at a speakeasy?"

"I don't pretend to understand men." She shrugs with a smile. "I know how you all love your man caves and time away from your wives. Not to mention how much rich men love privacy and exclusivity."

"But not Dane, right? You always said he wasn't like the rest of us degenerates." She looks at me anxiously and I gesture back toward the room of people. "There are wives here

too, Emery. This might be a gentleman's club, but the men are allowed to bring their wives if they're also a paying member."

"I wasn't a member." She says it matter-of-factly, like it absolves Dane for not telling her about his dalliances here, but she knows it's much more than that. Frankly, it's starting to piss me off how obtuse she is to everything right in front of her.

"So that's it? You find out your husband was hiding something from you, something that cost a million dollars a year, and you just shrug it off?"

"The money is inconsequential."

"Right." I run my hand over my jaw. "But I was the evil one? The... what did you call me at your anniversary party? Oh, that's right, the big bad wolf."

"Couples have secrets, that's nothing new, Mads. Just because he's dead and I made the mistake of sleeping with you doesn't mean anything. He was twice the man you are." She says the last part with disdain, practically spitting the words at me to try and hurt me or maybe she's lashing out due to grief or guilt.

I take a step closer to her, our bodies pressed against each other as I reach up to brush her hair away from her face. It's stupid to let people see us like this, even at a club where everyone knows what happens here, stays here. I lean in, my lips lingering over hers for a second. Her pupils are dilated, her breath growing more shallow. Desire is written all over her face. I know that if I leaned in and kissed her, she'd melt at my feet.

"Mistake or not, Em, we both know Dane never made you scream like that."

Her mouth falls open and I just know her hand is itching to slap me, but I step back, putting space between us before she can make that mistake again.

"Come here." I grab her hand. "I think you need to see the rest of the club. It was Dane's favorite part." I lead her through the room, down the hall toward my office. "Stay here." I step

inside, grabbing a mask from my desk. “Turn around.” She obeys and I slide the mask over her face and tie the silk ribbon.

“What is this?”

“You wanted to see the club, didn’t you? Well, the rules state that everyone has to wear a mask in the VIP section.” I grab her hand and lead her back through the room again. This time one of the curtains on the far end of the room pulls back and another woman in a mask greets us. She opens a door, revealing a set of stairs that lead down. I turn around and look at Emery. “Don’t let go of my hand.”

She nods, swallowing nervously as she tightens her grip. We descend the stairs slowly, the music shifting from jazz to a heavy thump of bass. The dim lights fade to red as we reach the bottom of the stairs. I look back at her once more as we exit the stairway and a long row of glass rooms appears in front of us.

I pull Emery in front of me, placing my hands on her waist as her eyes take in the scene in front of her. There are others down here with us, all wearing masks, but their attention is fully focused on whatever glass box they’re in front of.

“Is this what you wanted to see, Emery?” I run my nose up her neck, my fingers gripping her waist tighter as I hear her gasp and her mouth falls open. “Is this what you thought Dane was doing when he wasn’t home?”

EMERY

The beat of the music reverberates in my chest as I take another step farther into the room, the red lights casting a sensual glow through the long hallway.

I blink rapidly, my eyes adjusting to the light and sights before me. I take a few steps down the hallway, Mads' hands resting on my waist. The warmth of his breath comes out in short puffs against my cheek as he says something to me.

“I-I—” I don't know what I was going to say but my brain can't form words at the moment. My eyes finally adjust to the lights and movement as we approach the first room. My mouth falls open when I realize what the other people around us are watching.

A fully nude man leans back in a large throne-like chair, his black mask concealing his identity as a woman in a matching mask kneels in front of him. Her heels poke out from behind her, her head bobbing up and down as she swallows his cock. Her hands are cuffed behind her back, a leather collar around her throat. She's wearing a matching lingerie set made up of leather straps alone. Her breasts are bare as well as the rest of her most intimate parts.

“Do you like what you see?” Mads leans in closer, his deep voice murmuring in my ear as he tightens his grip on my waist.

The man grabs the woman's head, guiding her deeper down his shaft as his head falls back. I can't hear anything

coming from the room but from the way his mouth is open, he's saying something.

“What is this?”

“This is The Scarlett Letter. A private and consensual experience for members.”

I glance to my right, another couple near us. The man is kissing the woman's neck as she reaches behind her to stroke him through his pants.

“Shall we continue?” Mads guides me around the couple to another window. This time the couple is two women. One is on her back, toying with her breast as the other buries her face between the other woman's thighs. They look completely lost in what they're doing, consumed by each other as if they have no idea that people are watching them.

“Can they see us?” I turn to look at Mads.

“No. It's a two-way mirror. We can see them, but they can't see us.”

“Why not?”

“Makes it more authentic. It allows the participants to fully focus on their partner, on enjoying themselves and not feeling like they have to put on a show. For the most part, people completely forget that they're being watched, making it that much more exciting for the viewer.”

I reach my hand out and slowly press it against the glass. The woman on her back sits up, reaching for a toy before turning back to the other woman who is now lying down. She teases her, kissing her breast as she drags a vibrator through her folds.

“What are the rules?” I ask as we step toward another window.

“Both couples have to be willing participants. If pain is involved or torture, it has to be mutually agreed upon beforehand.”

“Torture?” The word barely squeaks out of my throat. A low, throaty chuckle echoes through Mads' chest,

reverberating down my spine that's pressed against him.

"Mmm, yes." His mouth is at my ear. "I thought you enjoyed a little pain mixed with your pleasure." His hand moves from my waist to my lower belly where it rests gently. The tone of his voice and his words cause my stomach to flip. I can feel heat building already. "Sometimes there are dominants or sadists that participate down here; they actually tend to draw the largest crowds."

The window we stop in front of this time is a shirtless man. He's tall and built with short, curly black hair. He's still wearing his suit pants. His feet are bare as he brings a whip-type object up above his head and brings it down against a woman's bare ass. I can't hear her, but I see her head jerk back as her mouth falls open.

"Like this?"

"Yes, like this."

Mads' hand snakes its way around my waist fully as he presses me against him. His other hand slowly glides up my bare arm, causing a shiver to run through my body.

The woman's mask isn't like mine; it's a complete blindfold. Her hands and feet are cuffed, a bar running between the cuffs on her feet and she's strapped down to a leather-covered bench.

"What's he doing to her?"

"He's flogging her."

"Does it hurt?"

"Yes, depending on the force with which you do it."

His hand pushes my hair aside and instinctively, my head falls to the side, exposing my neck to him. I close my eyes, expecting him to press his lips against me, but he doesn't.

"Have you done it to someone?"

"I have." His fingers continue to dance across my skin.

"Here?"

“No. I don’t participate here.”

“No? Why not?” I spin around to face him, my hands resting flat against his chest.

“Because I’m the boss and the owner. Feels a bit unethical or maybe just unprofessional.”

I cock my head slightly. “I didn’t think you had ethics, Mr. Bishop.” I smile at him, but he doesn’t return the gesture. His eyes are dark, but there’s something else about his expression that I can’t put my finger on. Something that makes my stomach feel uneasy. I swallow down the lump in my throat, wanting to ask him the question I’ve been avoiding since we stepped foot down here, but I know I can’t avoid it forever... I have to know. I need to know. “Did—did Dane participate down here or just watch?”

“Yes,” he replies quickly, no emotion in his voice.

“That’s it?” I blink rapidly, attempting to keep my tears at bay. “No explanation?”

“What do you want me to say, Em? Tell you the details? That won’t help anything.”

I pull away from Mads, turning my attention back to the man and woman in front of us. He’s sliding a large silver cone-shaped item into the woman’s ass, making her back arch and her mouth fall open. He reaches for a long flat paddle, running his hand over it thoughtfully before bringing it down on one side of her ass, then the other. He repeats the process, her skin beginning to glow red with the force of the spanking. His cock is at full mast beneath his pants. He reaches for his belt, undoing it as he tosses the paddle onto the floor.

“Do you enjoy watching them?” Mads slides his arm back around me. I attempt to push him away, but he pulls me tightly against his body.

I don’t answer. I just watch the man as he teases the woman’s entrance with the tip of his cock. He does this several times before sliding inside her. He grips her waist as he pulls her back onto himself over and over again.

“I asked you a question, Emery.” His hand snakes its way up around the front of me, his fingers wrapping around my neck.

“Yes.” I don’t lie. I don’t know what I’m feeling right now... anger, pain, betrayal... hatred. I feel like a complete fool that I had no idea Dane was participating in this life without me.

Would I have joined him if he asked?

“Maybe you aren’t as good of a girl as I thought,” he says against my neck. His lips are warm, pressing a kiss against my skin, sending a bolt of lightning and desire straight to my core. I squeeze my eyes shut, fighting back the tears of anger as I reach for Mads’ hand.

“How do you participate? You just ask someone to join you down here?”

“Yes. Not all members do, but those who do participate either invite others to join them, ask them one on one, or some even participate solo.”

“Solo?”

“Yes. They want others to watch them get off, but maybe they don’t want to engage with another person or maybe their partner doesn’t want to engage.”

I place Mads’ hand at the hem of my dress as the man behind the glass removes himself from the woman. He undoes her shackles and stands her up, turning her and placing her on a round bed in the corner. He places another set of cuffs on her bare wrists, connecting them to hooks in the wall near the bed. She’s splayed out, her ankles spread far apart by the bar between them.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I drag his hand up my thigh, beneath my dress toward my panties. “Why didn’t you stop him?”

“It’s not my job to stop him and it certainly wasn’t my business to tell you what he was doing. For all I knew, you already knew.”

“Bullshit. You knew I had no idea.” I try to slide his finger beneath my panties, but he stops me, pulling his hand out from under my dress and turning me back around to face him.

“And what would that have done, Emery? Hmm? Would you have left him? Would you have been happy to know the truth?” He reaches his hand up and grips my chin when I attempt to turn away from him. “Look at me when I fucking speak to you.” His fingers grip me roughly. “You wouldn’t have believed me; you would have spit in my face and called me a liar because you wanted to believe that he was the good guy and I was the bad guy... didn’t you?”

If I didn’t know him, I would be afraid he was going to seriously hurt me or maybe even kill me right here. But behind that anger, that hatred that I know he also feels for me sometimes is desire, just waiting to boil over and blur the lines.

“I don’t know,” I say truthfully around my tears that I can no longer hold back. This is something that nobody can prepare for. It’s one thing to know your husband cheated on you or hid something, but this... this is a whole other level of deception. “How the hell am I supposed to just pretend like it doesn’t bother me to know I wasn’t good enough for him? To know my entire life was a lie. He made me feel safe.”

Mads’ eyes soften as he grips my chin. He releases it, bringing his other hand up to cup my face. My eyes fall from his to his mouth and for a brief second, I think he’s going to kiss me. He leans in. I can feel his breath against my lips, but instead, he squeezes his eyes shut, pressing his forehead against mine briefly.

“I wish I knew what to say or do, Emery. I really do. I know you think I’m only a selfish asshole and while I mostly am, I do feel for you, for your pain. But there’s nothing I can do or say that’s going to make it better. You just have to face it.”

I grip his shirt with my hands, stepping forward to kiss him, but he steps back.

“Kiss me.” I step closer to him again.

“No.”

“Fine. Fuck me.”

“No.” I feel my face flame with embarrassment from the rejection. “I won’t let you make that mistake with me again.”

“Fine.” I glance back, looking over my shoulder. “I’ll find someone else to do it.” I go to take a step away from him and head upstairs when his hand darts out and grabs me.

“What the fuck did you just say?” He tugs me toward him, spinning me around so that my back is against the wall, his hand at my throat.

“I said let me go so I can find someone else to fulfill my needs since you clearly can’t do it for me.” His grip tightens, restricting my airway as he grits his teeth.

“Don’t think for one second I don’t know what you’re doing. You think you can manipulate me?”

I reach my hand out, pressing against his cock that’s already rock hard. “Seems like it’s working.” His eyes drop down to where my hand is gripping him. “Or do you prefer to take it against my will?” I reach for his belt, but he swats my fingers away and shakes his head.

“That’s against the rules, young lady.”

“I thought that you were the boss.” I drag my teeth over my lip. I can see his resolve slipping. “Please,” I say softly, “I just want to feel anything right now besides anger and hatred.” I stroke him, his eyes fluttering as he releases my throat. “Please make me feel good, Mads.” I reach for his hand again, bringing it back beneath my dress. This time he doesn’t pull it away when I guide him to my panties. “Please let me come.”

His fingers rub me through my silk panties, his eyes boring into mine. “You’re soaked,” he says under his breath as slips his fingers past my panties. He spins me around, his lips on my neck as my hands press against the glass in front of me.

“Watch them,” he commands as he plunges a single finger deep inside me. His other hand rests gently at the base of my throat as he begins to fuck me with his fingers.

I watch the man behind the glass hold the bar in his hands, bending the woman on her back almost in half as he plunges into her. I imagine what it would be like to be her, to be fully on display as Mads fucked me relentlessly for hours.

Since that one encounter we've had, every time I close my eyes, I relive every touch, every word he said to me while he was inside me. I wanted to stay. I had hoped he would keep me all night, but it ended far too soon. The guilt I've been feeling for wanting him, for allowing him to touch me so soon after Dane's death, is all but gone after learning what he was doing behind my back.

I know it's only in this moment. That once I'm alone later it will come crumbling down around me and I'll be buried all over again in grief and sadness. But for now, right now, all I can focus on is Mads' fingers pumping in and out of me as he whispers filthy things in my ear.

"I never thought you'd enjoy watching others fuck. You're always so proper, so uptight," he says as he slams his fingers deeper into me. "Who would have known you're a naughty little voyeur."

"Oh, don't stop," I beg. "Please don't stop, Mads."

"Fuck." He pulls his fingers almost all the way out, then slides them deep inside me, making me moan. "I love hearing you say my name."

I press harder against the glass, trying to stay focused on the couple in front of me. The man has flipped the woman to her stomach. He reaches for the toy in her ass and pulls it out, tossing it on the bed before replacing it with his cock.

But all I can think about is what Mads just said. *He loves hearing me say his name.* I want to ask why. I want to ask if he just means me or anyone woman he's being intimate with, but I don't want to ruin the moment.

"Be a good little slut and come on my fingers so I can taste you for the rest of the night." He presses his palm against my clit hard as he moves his fingers back and forth rapidly against my G-spot, sending an explosion of stars behind my eyes.

A sharp pain shoots through my shoulder and down my arm at the same moment I climax as he sinks his teeth into my neck, my orgasm tearing through my body as I flood his fingers.

“Mmm, turns out you are a good girl, aren’t you? So obedient.” His words send an aftershock through my body as he slowly removes his fingers from me and brings them to his mouth to lick clean.

My head falls back against his shoulder as I try to catch my breath and gain my composure. “I want—more.” The words slip out, but I’m not ashamed. I grab his hand and bring it to my neckline, sliding it beneath the material to cup my breast.

“I have to get back upstairs and entertain some VIP guests.” He circles my nipple, squeezing it while he runs his tongue up my neck to my ear.

“Can I stay down here?”

“No,” he says as he removes his hand and readjusts my dress, turning me around to face him.

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t trust you,” he says, grabbing my hand and leading me back down the long hallway. When we get back upstairs, we head straight toward the front entrance. He stops me, removing my mask and handing it to the hostess before we step outside. The air is crisp and normally I’d be cold, but heat is still radiating off me after my orgasm.

“Tony is going to take you home.” He reaches around me, pulling open the door to the back seat of a large SUV.

“Okay.” I hesitate before getting into the back seat. “Thank you.” I smile but it’s hiding a lot. Mads’ cold facade is back in place. He gives me a nod, about to shut the door, then he stops. He steps closer, reaching up to slide his hand behind my neck and pull me toward him.

“The next time you think you want to go exploring some place you have no business being, call me. Understand?” I nod. “And the next time you think about wanting to feel

something, you better not go looking anywhere besides me. If you are angry at me, I get it, but you can hate fuck me and me alone. You can call it a mistake again; it won't hurt my feelings. But if I find out that you show back up here without me, I will lock you in my penthouse for the rest of your fucking life. Do you understand me?"

"Yes."

"Good," he says with that devilish smirk. I expect him to shut the door, but he continues to look at me, his eyes dropping down to my lap, then slowly back up to me. "In case nobody has ever told you, you have the sweetest-tasting pussy I have ever had. The kind of pussy men would kill for." He reaches his thumb over my jaw, dragging it slowly over my lips. "Good night, Emery."

MADS

Tasting her again was a fucking mistake. My obsession with Emery Ashford is only growing stronger by the second and if I'm not careful, it's going to consume me.

For the last week, I've thought of little but her. I'm either lost in thoughts of fucking her or worrying she's still digging into things. The reality is, if she finds out I killed Dane, I don't give a fuck that she knows... What I worry about is her conscience, who she'd tell. But my biggest fear is destroying her. She's already in pieces after finding out that Dane was lying to her about so much of his life. If she finds out that I too am lying to her about everything, I'm not sure she'd survive it.

I stare down at my phone. The last communication from her was the night she showed up at The Scarlett Letter. I try to distract myself with work, staring at my computer, then pacing my office.

"Fuck it." I grab my keys, heading out of my office. "I'll be out the rest of the day, Corina." I head downstairs to the parking garage. I don't know where Emery would be at this time of day, but I take the drive out to her house in the suburbs. I'm at the stop sign, waiting to turn onto her road, when I see a little red Mercedes convertible fly past me. I recognize that car. I was with Dane when he bought the car for her. I actually picked it out and bought it... like I did almost everything he bought her over the years, including her anniversary jewelry. He always insisted it was for the con, that he'd pay me back, but I knew I'd never see a dime of that

money. And I'm glad he never paid me back. I like knowing she's wearing jewelry I chose and paid for, that she's driving the car I know she loves that I picked out for her.

Instead of taking a right to the Ashford house, I follow her car. I stay far enough back she won't notice me, even allowing a car or two to come between us. She drives through the suburbs, entering the highway and heading for downtown. She parks on a street, stepping out and heading toward a small coffee shop with full plateglass windows that allow me to see her inside.

I park a few spots away on the opposite side of the street, watching her as she steps to the counter and places her order. She looks down at her phone as she waits for her order when a man with long blond hair pulled up into a knot on the top of his head approaches her. I see him touch her arm softly, her face lifting from her phone as a grin spreads across her lips. Clearly, she knows the man. Her smile turns into a laugh as she reaches her arms up and wraps them around his neck, hugging him.

The leather of my steering wheel squeaks beneath the grip of my hands, my knuckles turning white as my chest burns.

Was she lying? Is she dating already?

"He's not her fucking type," I try to tell myself as the man's hands linger on her waist far longer than necessary after they hug. "What the fuck?" I grab for the door handle, ready to walk into the coffee shop and rip that guy out by his fucking man bun when I see him reach his hand up and run it through her hair. I stop myself, remembering that I'm not only following her without her knowledge, but I can't be drawing any more attention to myself from authorities right now.

I can't do anything but sit in my misery as I watch her laugh and flirt with a man whom I've never seen before. A moment later, she's reaching for her coffee from the barista and hugging the strange man again before offering him a sweet wave and heading out to her car.

I'm torn. Do I follow her or do I follow this guy and set him fucking straight? I turn my car on, deciding to follow

Emery. She pulls back into traffic, heading three blocks up and turning into the parking garage of Ashford Enterprises.

“What are you doing, Emery?”

In the years that I’ve known her, not once has she been interested in Dane’s business. At least, according to Dane. She was happy to listen to him complain. He always said she was the best listener about work, but other than an office holiday party, she never went to his office. He didn’t think she had the capability to actually understand business like he did.

“It’s not like she has any idea what I’m actually talking about when I vent about work. She’s a woman, nice to look at it, but it’s best her mouth is only open when she’s on her knees.” He laughs, elbowing my side as if I would agree with him.

“I think she has a pretty good grasp on it; she’s wise beyond her years.”

His hand pauses halfway to his mouth with a lit cigar. “Since when? You guys braid each other’s hair and talk about the quarterly numbers?” He shakes his head, taking a long pull from the cigar, the tip glowing bright orange. “Call me old school, but I think women need to stay out of the boardroom and in the bedroom... or kitchen.”

I never argued with Dane. When he said sexist bullshit like that, I would tell him he was wrong and that old school wasn’t the term he was looking for—it was misogynist—but he’d always shrug it off, calling me a pussy.

Frustrated that following her has only confused me further, I decide to go to the gym and get out some of my frustration. Not even twenty minutes into my boxing warmup, my phone rings.

“Jesus fucking Christ, what is it?” I say to Tony when I pick up. “Can’t I even get an hour of peace around here?”

“Sorry, boss. Got a slight issue you might want to be made aware of.”

“Yeah? The kind we can discuss on the phone?”

“Where are you? I’ll come meet you.”

“My boxing gym. Give me thirty.” I hang up, turning back to my coach to finish running drills before we get into sparring.

I slam my locker shut just as Tony texts me to let me know he’s outside. “Thanks, Mike.” I nod toward my coach, grab my duffel bag, and head outside to meet Tony.

“Sorry, boss,” he says, nodding toward the gym. “Didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“All good. What’s up?”

“We’ve got a detective snooping around.”

“Snooping around? Where?”

“Apparently, he’s been asking around about Dane, about that night, about your relationship with Dane and with…” His eyes shift away for a second. “Mrs. Ashford.”

I nod. “He come by the office or the club?”

“The office. He left me his card,” he says, handing it to me, “when I told him you weren’t there.”

“Thanks, Tony. You say anything else to him?” I know he didn’t, but I have to ask.

“Not a word. One more thing. He asked about Andy, if I had his contact information. I told him no, and then he asked me if he still lived at the Ashford residence during the week.”

“Got it.” I shove the card into my pocket and reach for the door handle of my car. “I’ll take care of it, Tony. Thanks for the heads-up.”

I hit the highway, heading back up to Emery’s house to see if she’s home or if the detective has made his way up there yet. When I reach the house, I park a ways down the long driveway, still concealed by the large hedges that border the property. I stop in my tracks when I see a late-model beige sedan parked up near the entrance of the house. A middle-aged man with a mustache and a fedora walks casually along the driveway, stopping to make notes as he looks up at the house.

My guess, he's noting where he sees cameras. He looks like he's trying too hard to look like a character out of an episode of *Perry Mason*.

I stay out of sight, watching when I see the front door slowly open and Andy steps out onto the front porch. I can't hear what they're saying, but a moment later, Andy steps aside and ushers the man into the house.

I pull out my phone and send a text to Emery.

Me: *Where are you?*

I continue watching the house for several more minutes when my phone alerts with her response.

Emery: *At my lawyer's office. Why?*

Me: *Come by the club tonight at 8. We need to talk.*

She responds, asking me what's going on, but I don't reply. Instead, I call my contact at the police station.

"Why are you calling me when I'm at work?" Captain Davis whispers into his phone.

"What the fuck is a detective doing at the Ashford house, Davis?"

"It's just protocol, Mads. Don't worry about it."

"That doesn't sound very reassuring, Davis. I thought when we last spoke that you said there wouldn't be an investigation. Are we going to need to reevaluate our deal?"

I don't have to see his face to know he's panicking right now. Several years ago, back when he was just a detective himself, Cornelius Davis got himself into a bit of trouble when he drunkenly rear-ended my car, resulting in his passenger, a prostitute he used a lot more than just as an informant, lost her life. He cried like a baby that night, groveling, begging me to protect him and not call the cops. It was like kismet, him landing in my lap on a silver platter. I made his little problem go away in exchange for a working agreement between the two of us.

“What? No, no, everything is fine. I promise, Mr. Bishop. The detective won’t be an issue.”

“That’s good to hear, Davis, because I’d really hate to get my guys involved here and take care of the detective myself. I think we both know with my connections, it won’t just be a *case reassignment*.”

“Understood. Consider it taken care of.”

I stand outside the club, checking my watch for the third time. It’s 8:07 and Emery still isn’t here. I can’t stand tardiness. I had considered sending Tony to pick her up, but with the detective snooping around, I didn’t want to take the risk. I realize that I’m even taking a big risk tonight having her come to the club when she could be tailed.

A moment later, her red Mercedes is pulling up and she’s handing her keys to the valet.

“I said not to be late.” I place my hand on her lower back, her long auburn hair blowing in the evening wind. She’s in a more conservative black dress tonight that hugs her hips and falls just below her knees. She’s paired it with elegant black stilettos and a simple gold necklace that hangs delicately above her décolletage. She is the epitome of classic beauty and tonight she looks every square inch the billionaire widower.

“And I recall telling you that I don’t answer to you.”

“So that’s how it’s going to be tonight?” I smile and nod at the hostess as I guide us through the entryway, heading toward my office.

“You don’t seem to care what I want so why should I care what you want?”

I nod to a few guests as we navigate through the main room and down the long hallway to my office.

“Out with it,” I say, unamused by her mood as I shut the door behind us.

“I want answers and you won’t give me any. When you told me to meet you here, I asked why and you just ignored me. I’m not okay with that, Mads. This is my fucking life we’re talking about.” She gestures with the clutch in her hand.

“Watch your language when you speak to me, Emery.”

She lets out a huff of laughter. “Are you serious? You are the most arrogant bastard I have ever met. I can’t believe I was —” She catches herself and piques my curiosity.

“Can believe you were what?” I say, taking a step closer to her. “Attracted to me?” I grin as her face grows red. “Don’t be embarrassed, Em. It’s normal to be attracted to someone else when you’re married, as long as you don’t act on it. Unless, of course, you’re Dane.”

Her eyes narrow. “Don’t,” she says emphatically.

“You can’t still be making excuses for him, can you? I can give you the details if it helps.” I don’t know why I’m going out of my way to be an exceptional dick to her tonight. Actually, I do know. I need to put an end to our—whatever the fuck we’re doing.

“Is that why you brought me here?” Her eyes fill with tears. “To tease me about it? That is so messed up, even for you.” Her voice quivers. “Poor me, I was the oblivious wife who had no idea her entire life was a complete lie.”

“No, I’m sorry. I’m just—” I take in a breath. “There’s a detective snooping around, asking questions.”

“A detective? Why?”

“I had the same question.” I pour myself a glass of scotch and lift the bottle toward her.

“No, thank you.”

“I called my contact at the station. He said it was all just procedural red tape stuff, but still, we need to make sure our story is straight.”

“Our story? I don’t understand. I thought you already told the officer who came to the house why I wasn’t there.”

“I did but apparently it seems like maybe they doubt my recollection of events.” I sip the liquor.

“I’m sorry.” She shakes her head, pressing her fingers against the center of her forehead. “I’m confused. I don’t understand why you can’t just tell them that you took me to your place because you suspected he was going to—do something stupid.”

“I think they would think that sounds suspicious. Like if I knew he was going to”—I pause, using her same phrase—“do something stupid, I should have called the police first and got them involved instead of trying to handle it.”

“But why would they think it’s suspicious?”

“They probably assume you and I were having an affair and that’s why he did it.”

“What?” She laughs. “You can’t be serious?”

I shrug, hoping she buys it, but I can’t ignore the sharp pang of annoyance when she laughs at my suggestion that she and I could be having an affair. “It’s no secret that you and I have been spending more time around each other since Dane’s death. Maybe I’m out on a limb here but that’s my only guess as to why a detective would be asking questions. Is it so unbelievable?”

“That you and I were having an affair?” She laughs again and this time it really pisses me off. “Yes, it’s unbelievable. We can’t stand each other.”

“Funny.” I swirl the last mouthful of scotch in my glass before swallowing it down. “I don’t recall you laughing when I had my cock deep inside you or when you were panting my name, begging me to make you come.”

Her smile fades, her cheeks growing red again. “And I recall you telling me we were just hate fucking.”

That’s the second time she’s used that word in my presence just now and it sends a shock straight to my cock. “Don’t use that word with me.”

“What word?”

“Fuck.”

“You can’t be serious.” She rolls her eyes. “You are so— whatever.”

“You’re a lady, Emery, so unless you’re on your knees in front of me, begging me to fuck you, I don’t want to hear it come from your mouth.”

“What’s the point?” She shrugs. “Pretty sure I did ask you in the basement of the club to fuck me and you said no.”

“Maybe if you had been on your knees asking me nicely, I’d have obliged.” The air grows thick between us. I told myself I’d behave when she was here tonight, but it’s like I have zero control when she’s in front of me. I stand up, placing the glass on the desk, and step toward a drawer. I pull it open, retrieving a burner phone, and hand it to her.

“What’s this?”

“A burner phone. If you have to contact me, use that. I don’t want any traces of our communication on our regular phones.”

“Are you serious?”

“Does it look like I’m fucking joking?”

“What about me being here right now? Or the other night, downstairs?”

“I told you before, this place is tighter than Fort Knox. Nobody will talk about what they witness here.”

“What am I supposed to do about the detective if he contacts me?”

“Don’t speak to him. Don’t let him in your house, Dane’s offices, or your father’s company.”

She nods. “And what about you?”

“I’ll take care of it; don’t worry about it.”

“What does that mean, Mads?” Her expression grows serious.

“Don’t concern yourself with it, Em. You don’t want to know.”

Her eyes are big, studying me as she clutches the phone in her hand. Her lips part and I can tell she wants to ask more questions. I reach out and grab her hand, intertwining our fingers together.

“Come on. Tony is in the alley with your car. I’ll walk you out.” Her fingers feel so delicate in my hand but so right. I’ve never felt the kind of burning desire or connection with anyone that I have with Emery. From the outside, it probably would seem toxic and fucked up, but she and I have been through things in life nobody else can understand. She doesn’t realize it yet, but this is goodbye. Maybe not forever but I have to put some space between us, for the sake of the investigation and the sake of my heart.

I nod toward Tony and he steps inside as I usher Emery out into the alley. I open her door and guide her down to her seat. I’m about to close the door when she juts her hand out.

“Wait,” she says, looking up at me. “What am I supposed to do?”

“About the detective? I told you.”

“No, about everything. Life, Ashford Enterprises, my house. I—I don’t know what to do anymore, Mads.”

I stare down at her, so tempted to tell her to run away with me. To choose me. But it’s all one big fucking lie. And for as much as I don’t really have a heart or conscience about the rest of the world, Emery is the one thing in this life that I care about more than anything. The one reason I’d turn my back on all of it and walk away. The one reason I believe in love.

“Whatever you want to do. Sell it. The business, the house, everything. Move away. Leave Chicago and start over. You’re so young, you have your entire life ahead of you yet.”

There are tears on the brim of her eyes, but she’s fighting like mad to not let them fall. I don’t know what she expected me to say. Part of me thinks she wanted me to tell her to move in with me, to stay with me, to be mine, but I know I’m just a

distraction from the fact that her entire world just imploded. She's drowning in a world of uncertainty right now, and I'm the only anchor she has to the world she once knew.

“You deserve better than all this, Em. You always have.” I close the door and she drives away.

EMERY

THREE MONTHS LATER...

*T*ighten the knot on my Hermes scarf beneath my chin as I look in the rearview mirror of the 1960 Ferrari 250GT Cabriolet I rented in Positano, Italy, my cat eye sunglasses and pink lips pulling the entire look together.

“*Signora molto bella!*” An older Italian gentleman blows me a kiss at the stoplight I’m at.

“*Grazie!*” I shout back before the light changes and I speed down the Amalfi Coast.

After spending a solid month in bed watching old Audrey Hepburn and Grace Kelly movies, I decided that I was done moping. I gave myself time to wallow in pity and momentarily drown my sorrows in a few expensive bottles of wine I dug out of our wine cellar and some cheap chocolate I loaded up on at the convenience store in town. But now, I’m ready to discover myself.

Mads was right. I have my entire life ahead of me. And for the first time, I have no expectations from others on how I’m supposed to live it. So I packed my bags and decided to spend a month in Europe between my family’s houses in Paris and Positano.

One realization that has been hard to accept was that I was young and naive when I met Dane and he most likely used that to his advantage. I don’t blame him for it; I had no idea who I was when I met him. I was still fresh off the pain of losing my parents, the two people who had told me exactly how to live my life every day for nineteen years.

I have spent several, if not most, nights over the last three months crying myself to sleep. Each week becomes a little easier, marginally. I still feel so lost, so out of control of my own life. I know that trying to make “sense” of why Dane chose to keep things from me, betray our trust and love, and cheat on me is pointless. There will never be a *why* that justifies his actions. I know he loved me, I felt it, but I also know there’s so much more to our story that I don’t know about. Something inside me gnaws at me continuously, telling me that he didn’t kill himself because of a bad business deal. I knew him. I know he wouldn’t kill himself because of that... There has to be something I’m missing.

Something more.

Something deeper.

Something darker.

“*Buon pomeriggio, Piero.*” I smile and wave to the groundskeeper once I pull the car into the driveway of the house.

“*Buon pomeriggio, bellissima!*” He smiles, his eyes almost disappearing as he waves enthusiastically.

I’ve known Piero my entire life. He’s been our groundskeeper here since my parents bought this house when I was a little girl.

I was originally scared to travel alone. I thought that it would make me feel even more isolated and lonely, that I would just fixate on all of the good times that I have had with Dane or my parents, but it’s actually been quite cathartic. For the first time, I’ve felt close to my parents since their passing. Being back here, I’ve felt a kind of warmth that I felt when they were alive. And as for Dane, it’s been a step toward closure for me, allowing the memories we had at these places to drift away.

I pull the scarf from my head, letting my hair down and taking the stairs up to my bedroom. I stop in front of a large floor-length mirror, my reflection catching my attention. I run my hands over my floral summer dress, spinning slightly to

take in my entire silhouette. I picked up this dress on a whim; the bright flowers and large green leaves called to me like I simply had to have it. Just six months ago I never would have considered buying a dress like this. It looks exactly like something Grace Kelly would have worn in *Rear Window*. I even purchased a pair of bright-pink flats that perfectly match the dress.

I run my hand through my long hair, contemplating if I should follow in Audrey Hepburn's steps in *Sabrina* and *Roman Holiday* and chop it all off but deciding that instead, a much more fun and liberating approach will be donating everything in my closet and starting fresh. Choosing clothes that make me happy, not someone else.

When Dane and I first met, his gentle suggestions at what I should wear were welcome. I was still a teenager and I had no style of my own. Wearing what he liked made me feel like I was being a good girlfriend and good wife. I told myself I liked the styles he chose, and I did for the most part, but if you were to tell me to pick whatever I wanted to wear, I wouldn't have a clue. I would have stuck with the muted gem tones and simple basics that all the socialites around me wore. They love to call it the "old money look," but I always referred to it as "sad and beige."

My eyes drift down to my wedding set, something I haven't yet stopped wearing. My chest feels tight when I look down at my hand. What once brought me so much joy and happiness now only brings me pain.

"Don't cry." I close my eyes tight. I'm so tired of crying, of not knowing how I should feel. I'm torn between grief from losing my husband, my best friend, and anger toward him for abandoning me and breaking my heart along the way.

I don't have any best friends anymore. Once the funeral was over, it was like all those people in our life that attended all our anniversary parties and holiday events ceased to exist. One by one, they slowly stopped reaching out and even when I did, most of the time my texts or calls have been left unanswered. Part of me feels relief, that I can cut ties without feeling bad, and find people that I truly connect with and trust.

An image of Mads pops into my head. He's the only person I think I can trust and even then, I'm not too sure. The night he put me in my car outside his club and told me to move on and start over was the last time I saw him. Even through my anger at him for not telling me what Dane was doing at his club, he has been a constant thought this entire trip. When I close my eyes, I see his looking back at me. When I touch my lips, I imagine what it would be like to feel his against mine.

My cheeks flush in the mirror at the thought of Mads' hands on my body. Of finally tasting his lips against mine. And mixed with all the desire and lust I feel for him, the ever present guilt of betraying Dane simmers just beneath the surface. I know he cheated on me. I know he lied to me, but I'm not a vengeful person. The love I felt for Dane was real. Every emotion, every effort I put into our marriage was genuine. That doesn't go away just because you find out the other person betrayed you.

I walk back downstairs, pouring myself a flute of champagne and walking out to the veranda that overlooks the Mediterranean Sea. This has been my routine each evening. Before dinner, I enjoy a glass of champagne, watching the boats on the water.

My thoughts drift back to Mads. I've kept the burner phone he gave me charged, but I haven't used it. I've been tempted a few times after one too many cocktails, but I've managed to restrain myself. I can feel myself holding back when it comes to him. I want to explore the attraction I've always had toward him, but I'm not sure it's reciprocated. I noticed pain in his eyes the last night I saw him, and I can only assume it's from the guilt he feels for betraying the memory of his best friend and sleeping with his wife. The same guilt that has taken up residence in my own feelings.

I used to only see him as an annoyance, someone who managed to say the worst things at the worst times... but now, I've realized that he might have been one of the only people who truly saw me. It never failed, every anniversary party, I would sneak off once I got overwhelmed with the talking and

the pleasantries and he would find me. Sure, we usually threw a few jabs at each other and he would say something wildly inappropriate, but he would also let me vent. I felt bad for being salty about a ridiculously gorgeous and expensive party thrown in my honor every year but at the same time, I longed for an intimate celebration with my husband. Just us, dinner at home or out at our favorite restaurant followed by drinks and dancing in our living room. But every year, I celebrated the most joyous moment of my life with dozens of other people. When I would slip and rant about it to him, he would agree and while he couldn't fully understand, he tried to. He never made me feel bad for wanting something different than Dane.

I let out a long sigh, sad I only have two more nights in Italy before I head home, but at the same time, I'm excited to go home with my newfound confidence. I have plans to work with the board at Ashford Enterprises and make sure that the business is in good standing. I plan to liquidate what I must to pay his debts and then sell my shares and walk away from the business. I have no interest in running it, but I do have an interest in my father's company. Something I want to pitch to Mads once I'm back home... along with another idea that I cannot get out of my head.

"Piero! Join me!" I wave toward him, and he walks up the hill, smiling.

"Aw, *signora*, too beautiful to drink alone," he says in his thick accent.

"Well, that's why I need a handsome Italian man to drink with me." He tosses his head back and laughs, slapping his knee as he takes a seat in the chair across from me.

I grab a bottle of red wine and some cheese and grapes with bread, and we sit together, talking and enjoying our aperitif before he heads home for the evening.

*W*hat are you going to do with all these clothes, Mrs. Ashford?" Tilly walks into my closet with a

concerned look on her face as she eyes a large pile of clothes that's still growing in the middle of the room.

"I'm going to donate them."

"All of them?" She pulls a sweater from the pile, running her hands over the warm cashmere before looking up at me in disbelief.

"All of them," I reassure her. "You are more than welcome to take anything you'd like."

"Oh, these are all so expensive. I don't think I'd ever need a reason to wear cashmere." She runs the fabric against her cheek.

"You don't *need* a reason to wear cashmere, Tilly. Just wear it if it makes you happy."

"Okay," she says with a smile. "I'll keep this sweater, but just this one." She stares down at the navy-blue material, holding it tight against her body before looking back up at me. "Are you okay, Mrs. Ashford?"

I pause, a silk blouse in my hands. "I'm not sure yet, Tilly. Honestly, I'm probably not okay, but I know that eventually I will be. How are you doing? You holding up okay?"

While Andy and Tilly weren't here when Dane died, still to have your boss unexpectedly end his life in his own home where you work every day has to be extremely hard to deal with.

"I'm okay, Mrs. Ashford. I'm sad but mostly for you." I reach my hands out and squeeze hers, but she pulls me in for a hug. "I know I'm not your mother, dear, but I hate seeing you so sad. Make sure you're taking care of yourself."

"I am." I rub her back, letting the hug linger. It feels so nice. "I promise."

The next morning, I wake early. I have two things on my agenda today. To go shopping and to meet with the board of directors at Ashford Enterprises. And then tonight, I'm going to *The Scarlett Letter* to tell Mads my proposition.

I run my fingers over the silk material of the dress I picked out today. The bright Barbie pink material shimmers under my closet lights. It's bold, the sweetheart neckline cutting low between my breasts and a slit that runs almost all the way up my thigh. I never wore pink when I was with Dane. He mentioned to me once that red clashed with pink and I took that as a mental note to never wear it.

The rest of the clothes are still in bags strewn around my room; some are still being shipped to my house from the store. It felt like a total *Pretty Woman* moment as I went from boutique to boutique, picking out my new wardrobe.

I pick out a pair of heels to go with my dress before walking over to my jewelry cabinet. I stare down at the pieces; many were heirlooms handed down to me from my mother and grandmother, but the pieces front and center are the ones that Dane bought me over the years for our anniversary.

My fingers dance across the delicate diamonds of the daisy necklace he bought me this year. Something about these pieces made me not want to get rid of them. I contemplated it when I was donating my clothes, but these pieces are so... me. I guess that's one thing about Dane that wasn't a lie; he knew me well enough to choose pieces he knew I would love. I opt for only the earrings tonight since I plan to wear my hair down.

I look at myself nervously in the mirror, butterflies dancing through my stomach. I'm nervous and excited, but mostly nervous. I let out a shaky breath, turning slowly to give myself one last look before making my way to The Scarlett Letter.

After parking my car, I contemplate calling Mads first. I left the burner phone at home, but I can still call to see if he's here on my regular phone. I decide against it, realizing he very well could talk me out of coming inside. I slip my phone into my clutch and exit my car, making my way across the street to the entrance.

“Is Mads here?” I smile at Ricky who’s already approaching me with his hand outstretched.

“You’re not supposed to be here, Mrs. Ashford.”

“It’s Emery and you didn’t answer my question.”

“He’s not here, no.”

I cock my head to the side. “Is that what he told you to say?”

“No, he’s actually not here tonight.”

“Where is he?”

He shrugs. “Are you going to make my night difficult or are you going to walk back across the street and get in your car and be on your merry little way?”

I tap my chin. “I think I’m going to choose difficult.” I smile at his condescending tone.

“Fine,” he mutters, reaching for his cell phone. “Have it your way.” He hits a few buttons, then holds it up to his ear. “Yeah, got a problem again, boss.” He nods. “Same problem as before. It’s Emery.”

“That didn’t seem too difficult.”

He motions toward the other security guard to come to him before turning back to me. “Boss is on his way, said to have you wait in his office.” He walks me inside, straight toward Mads’ office. “I’ll be right outside this door so don’t try anything funny, okay?”

I raise my hands in surrender. “I’ll be right here.” I smile, pointing to where I slowly sink down into Mads’ office chair.

Not even ten minutes later, the door to his office swings open and in steps Mads in his usual outfit of head-to-toe black. I don’t know what it is, maybe because I haven’t seen him for three months or maybe because I’m allowing myself to actually look at him now, but he looks sexier than ever. His dark hair is a little messy, a lock of it falling over his forehead, his shirt unbuttoned more than usual.

“What the hell are you doing here, Em?”

“Nice to see you too, Mads.” I stand up slowly, his eyes dropping down as he takes in my dress when I step around the desk.

“You look different.” He drags his hand over his five o’clock shadow. Clearly, he was home for the evening when I showed up here and interrupted his night.

“Good different?” I reach my hand out, pressing it against his chest. His hand darts out to grab mine, but he doesn’t move it away.

“Very good different.” His voice lowers when his eyes scan my cleavage. “What’s going on, Emery?” His expression turns serious as his hand falls from covering mine to settling against my waist.

“I did what you said.” I step back, breaking our contact. “I left Chicago for a while. I spent time traveling, trying to find myself.”

“Yeah? And did you find yourself?” His eyes are dark, but the light in his office cast a sparkle across them.

“Somewhat, yes, but I think I realized a few things along the way.”

He nods. “And what does that have to do with me?” He remains stoic.

“Well, it involves you in a few ways and answers your question about why I look different. One being that I didn’t have my own personal style so I did a little shopping.” I swish side to side, the dress moving with me. I see a slight smile tug at his lips. “I was young when I met Dane. I think I just fell into the mode of doing what made him happy instead of discovering who I was and what made me happy.”

“You’re still young, Emery, very young.” I try to determine if this is a subtle way of him saying *too young for him*.

“Let me guess, too young to be here?” He slides his hand into the pocket of his pants as he eyes me. “Too young to be in your bed?”

He smirks. “Don’t think I’ve ever said those words.”

“But you’ve thought them?” He doesn’t respond. “I thought for sure that’s why you never liked me from the beginning. I was far too young for your best friend. The annoying young woman who came into your lives and messed everything up.”

His eyes darken again, his brow furrowing as if he doesn’t like what I’m saying. “Am I just here so you can rehash the past or does all of this have a point?”

“I also wanted to talk with you at some point, not tonight, about my father’s company. I don’t want to be just a socialite. I want to understand the business and I want to be involved, but I need help, your help.”

“Why me?”

“Because whether you want to be or not, you’re the only person I even halfway trust.”

He chuckles. “You probably shouldn’t.”

“Trust you? Oh, I’m well aware of that,” I say, walking back toward him. “In fact, I should probably hate you for the role you played in Dane lying to me, breaking my trust and my heart along the way.” He opens his mouth to say something, but I continue on before I lose my nerve. “But the real reason I came by tonight.” I drag my hand along the edge of his desk. His eyes drop down, then quickly back to me.

“Where’s your ring?” he says, interrupting me.

I was curious if he’d notice. “I decided not to wear it anymore. Actually, I donated it today, along with my entire wardrobe.” His eyebrows shoot upward.

“Donated it?”

“I donated it to a place that auctions high-end jewelry and items and donates the proceeds to charity.”

“What about the rest of the jewelry? The items Dane bought you for your anniversary?”

“I kept them. I know it’s probably silly since I got rid of my wedding bands, but something about those pieces just speak to me. It makes me feel like some part of what we had

was real, that he truly knew me to be able to pick out pieces that spoke to me like they do.”

He doesn't say anything at first. He steps forward, brushing my hair back to look at my ears where the daisy studs glimmer.

“Good.”

“Good?”

“They look good on you; they suit you.” He slides his hands back into his pockets. “I'm happy to talk to you about your dad's company, Em, but I think you should call Corina and set up a meeting at my office.”

“What about us being seen together?”

“Not a problem anymore.”

“You mean the detective has been—taken care of?” I repeat his own words back to him from before. He nods, not elaborating, and I'm not about to ask what that means.

“Why are you really here?” His gaze hardens as he stares me down. I swallow down the nervous lump in my throat.

“I-I want to find out more about what I like and don't like.” I reach my hand back out and slowly run it down his chest, his eyes following my hand movements. “I want to explore myself—with you.”

His eyes dart upward. “Elaborate.”

“I don't want to always be a good girl anymore, Mads. I want to know what it feels like to indulge in the forbidden, to experience what turns me on and intrigues me. I'm tired of fighting it. I'm tired of ignoring my cravings.”

I watch as the internal battle he's fighting plays out on his face.

“Cravings?”

I nod. “Watching others.” I feel myself blush. “I didn't expect to be so turned on when you took me downstairs.”

His eyes study me, his hands slowly coming out of his pockets as he places one against my waist, the other coming up to slide up my spine and into my hair.

“Have you been thinking about that night?”

“Yes. Often.”

“And do you touch yourself when you think about it?” I nod. “What do you think about?”

“You.” I hear him inhale a sharp breath. “The way you touched me. The things you said to me when you made me come.” I can’t tell from his expression if I’ve said too much, if he thought this was only about engaging in what takes place downstairs or if he realizes that it’s him... He’s what I want, what I crave.

“Who was the man in the coffee shop?”

My eyes fly open, the abrupt change in topic confusing me. I furrow my brows. “Man in the coffee shop?”

His expression grows more serious. “A few months ago, before you went to the Ashford offices, you stopped and got coffee and you were hugging and flirting with a man there. Who was he?”

“You followed me?”

“Answer the question.”

“Wow, why am I not surprised?” I half mutter to myself as he tugs on my hair. “He’s a friend—my hair stylist actually. I hadn’t been into the salon in a few months, and he heard about Dane’s passing.”

He narrows his gaze at me. “Friends?”

“Yes,” I reiterate. “He’s very much gay and happily married with a little daughter. There’s nothing there.” I feel a little annoyed by his line of questioning. “Not that it’s any of your business.”

“It is my fucking business when you’re at my club asking me to indulge you in your fantasies. I don’t fucking share, Emery. There’s one rule between us and if you break it, I will

make sure that you never see me again.” I nod as he tightens his grip on my neck, tugging me closer until my body is pressed against his fully. “I am the only person you can explore yourself with, you understand me?” I nod and he continues. “I am the only man who will taste you. The only cock that you will ride or suck. The only hands to touch you. Tell me you understand.”

“I understand.”

His lips slowly curl into a sinister grin as he tilts my head back. “Good girl. Now, let’s go unleash your naughty side.”

MADS

I push every screaming thought from my brain telling me not to give in as I place the mask over Emery's face and tie the ribbon.

I run my fingers down her arm, her skin like silk beneath my touch. I lean in, burying my nose in her hair as I inhale her scent. Everything about her calls to me, luring me in like she was designed just for me.

“Are you ready?” She nods and I slide my hand into hers, leading her out of my office and back toward the stairwell to the basement.

I walk behind her as we descend the stairs one by one, my hands gripping her body as I will myself not to stop right here and take her up against the wall. The music thumps as we enter the hallway, the glass rooms coming into view.

“What do you want to see tonight?” I pull her hair back, dragging my teeth over her neck. “What turned you on the most last time?”

“All of it.”

Her eyes are round, focused on the first scene in front of us. A woman with large breasts is pressed against the glass as a man pounds into her from behind. Before she can finish, he spins her around, picking her up and pinning her against another wall as he impales her with his cock over and over.

She watches intently before turning to another scene on our left. This one is a man strapped to a large X as a woman

drags a riding crop over his skin before pulling it back and snapping it across his flesh, leaving a red welt. The man's mouth falls open, his silent scream evident, but it doesn't stop the dominatrix. She continues to torture him, reaching down to grab his cock roughly as she strokes him.

“Does that excite you?”

She shakes her head. “I don't think I'd like to be in charge like that.” She turns around to look up at me. “Do you like that? Do you want that done to you?”

The thought almost makes me laugh. “No, I thought you would have figured out by now that I like to be the one in control.” I slide my hand over the silky material of her dress, up to her neckline where I slip my hand inside to cup her breast. “I like the thought of you being completely at my mercy like that though, chained to a bed where your only option is to let me do whatever I want to your body.”

Her body melts against mine as I toy with her pert nipples. I kiss her neck, an audible sigh falling from her lips. “More.” The word comes out in a breathy plea.

“Would you let me stuff every hole in your body, Emery? I would love to watch my cum slowly drip out of your cunt, down to your ass that's also filled with my release. Have you ever had a man's cock in your ass?” I squeeze her throat.

“No.” Her answer surprises me. With Dane's proclivities down here, I figured she's experienced a lot more than most, but maybe he didn't do those things with her.

I walk us farther down. This time the scene is the exact opposite as before. A woman straddles a man, his hands sliding up her back as they kiss. You can see their tongues intertwining as she slowly swivels her hips back and forth while riding him. It's gentle but deeply erotic and intimate. The man looks up at the woman like he wants to consume her, and I know the feeling.

“What excites you, Emery? What makes you wet?” I slide my hand beneath the hem of her dress, my fingers dipping beneath the material of her panties as I begin to tease her clit.

“What makes you so fucking insatiable you feel like you’re going to go insane if you don’t have it?”

Her head falls back against my shoulder as I dip a finger inside her, my other hand moving over to her other breast. Her eyes flutter closed as she presses her weight against me.

“You, Mads.” Her voice is needy as she lifts a hand to reach up and tangle her fingers into my hair. “You.”

My chest tightens, my cock throbs with need, but alarm bells ring through my head. This isn’t just about her desire to be down here. This is more.

“Tell me what you want.” I deepen the stroke of my finger inside her, adding a second as she moans. Her other hand reaches between us, grabbing my cock. “Don’t hold back. Tell me.” I know I have her at a disadvantage; she’s completely gone with lust. I know I’m playing with fire, pushing her to tell me more when I have her under my spell.

“I want more, Mads. I need more.” Her movements grow frantic. She turns her head, tilting it upward, pulling at my neck. I know what she wants; she wants me to kiss her. Something I’ve been able to resist this entire time, but I’m not sure how much longer I can stand it. “Take me in one of the rooms.”

I still my movements. She wants me to fuck her in public? Is that what this is about? My stomach falls at the thought, rage tearing through my chest.

“No.”

“What?” Her eyes fly open and she looks up at me. “That one is empty.” She nods toward a room with no people in it. She takes a step toward it, but I hold her in place.

“I said no, Emery.”

“I know but I don’t have to obey you.”

She gives me a coy smirk, finally stepping out of my grasp toward the room. She reaches for the door, opening it slowly before walking inside. I watch from outside the glass as she runs her fingers over the bed. She pulls open a drawer of sex

toys, then closes it again. She looks up where she knows I'm standing on the other side of the glass and crooks her finger toward me. Her body begins to sway to the music that's playing through the speakers, her hands running over her curves.

I watch, captivated by her, but a man slowly walks up beside me, watching her intently. I clench my jaw, expecting her to step out of the room, but instead, she crawls onto the bed, lying on her back as she begins to pull her dress up her thighs. The man next to me steps closer to the glass, stepping around it toward the open door when I reach out and grab his arm.

"I think she needs some company." He laughs.

"She doesn't," I say calmly, giving him time to reevaluate what he's about to do. "Keep walking."

"Fuck off, man," he mutters, jerking his arm from me as he steps closer to the open door.

I pull my arm back and land a punch right across his jaw, sending him tumbling backward. The noise startles Emery as I step over the man and walk angrily into the room. "What's going on?"

I grab her arm. "We're done. You're going home." I grab my phone and send Ricky a text to get down here and toss the man I just punched.

"What the hell, Mads?" She jerks her arm away. "No. I said I wanted to try one of the rooms. I thought we agreed we were exploring things down here?"

"And I said no." I grab her arm tighter this time. "There won't be a second warning, Emery. We're leaving." I pull her through the room, the man still groaning on the floor.

I don't bother taking her mask off. I drag her outside, shoving her into the back of my car, and sliding in behind her as I instruct Tony to drive us back to my place.

"I'm sorry," she says, reaching her hand over into my lap, her fingers slowly climbing upward toward my cock. "Let me make it up to you."

“I’m not in the mood.” I shove her hand off me, her seductive grin falling from her face as embarrassment takes over. She pulls the mask from her eyes, fiddling with the ribbon as she stares out the window.

We ride in silence the rest of the way home. I can feel the tension building with each second, the anger radiating off her so heavy it’s palpable.

“Take me home. I want to go home,” she demands once we’re inside the penthouse. I ignore her request and step toward her, but she pushes against my chest. “No! You didn’t want me at the club or in the car so fuck off.”

“Stop it,” I command, grabbing her hands and looking down at her.

“I thought you agreed, Mads. You said we could explore downstairs, then you turned back into a raging asshole!”

My teeth are clenched so tight a headache is already gathering at my temples. I release her hands, grabbing her around the throat instead. “No man will ever fucking see your body as long as I’m there.” I tighten my grip, just enough that I can see the anger in her eyes slowly start to turn into desire. I press her against the wall of my living room, my cock now digging into her hip. “No man will ever watch me fuck you. That is for my eyes only, Emery. You can watch others, but nobody will ever get to see the faces you make, hear the sounds you make when my cock is inside you.”

She’s fighting it, and her eyes narrow. “I’m not yours to control.”

“As long as you’re in my club, in my life... you are. And if you don’t like it—” I release her, stepping back. “Take it out on me. Hate fuck me.”

Her chest rises and falls as her breathing grows heavy. She steps toward me and I step back. We repeat the process until I’m in front of the couch and she pushes against my chest. I fall back, sitting down on the couch while I look up at her.

“I don’t want to take it out on you.” Confused, I look at her as she reaches around behind her and unzips her dress, letting

it fall to the ground in a pool at her feet. She reaches down, removing her heels one at a time before hooking her fingers into her panties and sliding them down her thighs. My mouth waters, looking at her bare pussy. “Why does it always have to be hate with us?”

She lifts one leg, and my eyes fall to her bare breasts as she places a knee on the couch beside me so she can lower herself down so she’s straddling me. My hands instinctively reach out for her, grabbing her ass, sliding up her backside as she settles into my lap.

“I thought you enjoyed hating me.” Something between us shifts and she leans in closer, her lips hovering over mine, but I slowly shake my head.

“I don’t hate you.” She whispers the words against me, the air tickling my lips as she moves an inch closer, closing the distance between us. She moves her lips against mine slowly, but I don’t reciprocate. Her hands slide my up chest as she stares into my eyes. Her fingers shift into my hair as she tilts her head and kisses me again.

This time, I can’t resist.

I move my lips against hers, the very tip of her tongue coming out and touching mine. It’s like a spark that sets off a powder keg. My hands are in her hair, my tongue diving into her mouth as I tilt her head to deepen the kiss. I moan into her mouth, my cock straining against my zipper so hard I’m afraid it will tear through at any second.

I’ve never responded to a kiss like this. I’ve never felt my entire body come alive with excitement at the taste of someone’s lips, of the feel of their tongue dancing with mine. But this changes everything. I grab at her frantically, standing up with her wrapped around my body to walk us to my bedroom.

I’m desperate to be inside her. I lay her on the bed, crawling over her as I continue to kiss her. Her hands are in my hair, down my chest, clawing at my shirt.

“Off,” she says into my mouth.

Finally, I break our kiss, sitting back to undo my shirt as she reaches for my belt. I don't bother with the buttons. I rip it open, buttons scattering to the floor as she reaches her hands out to drag them down my bare chest.

By the time I remove my clothes and climb back over her, sweat has gathered at my temples with the amount of restraint I'm showing. My mouth is back on hers, my body screaming for release when she reaches down to pause my frantic movements.

"Wa-wait," she pants. "Go slow."

"Baby, if I'm not inside you in two seconds, I'm going to tear this bed in half." I curl my fingers into the comforter beneath her as I grit out the words.

She reaches down between us, grabbing my cock and making me groan as she lines me up at her entrance. I press against her tight opening, her warmth engulfing my tip as I inch my way inside her slowly.

"Ohhhh, yesss." Her eyelids flutter, closing briefly as her nails dig into my shoulders.

"Look at me." I hover over her, our eyes locking as I lean in to kiss her again. Everything between us is shifting. The way she's looking at me, the way she's making me feel, the way our bodies are communicating without words.

I pump inside her, our eyes still locked on each other as our climax builds. "Tell me you hate me." I say the words against her lips, hoping that in some way it will break this spell she's cast over me.

"You make me feel so good, Mads." The words are soft and intimate. She kisses me and it's like the first time all over again. My head is swimming. This isn't how it was supposed to be. "I want more."

"More how, baby? Tell me. Tell me what you need." I don't know where baby came from, but I can't stop. I don't want to stop.

"You," she moans into my mouth as her back arches off the bed, her walls clenching my cock. "Just you, Mads."

I quicken my pace a little, sliding so deep inside her I know I have to be hurting her, but she claws at me frantically. “That’s how you like it, isn’t it? You like when my cock is so deep inside you it hurts, don’t you?” I feel her begin to spasm, making me lose control.

“Yes! Yes!” she pants over and over, her thighs shaking as she comes. I pump into her two more times, stilling my movements when I spill my release inside her.

I don’t pull out as I collapse on top of her, both of us panting, trying to catch our breath.

“Don’t leave,” she says quickly, her hand darting out to rest on my hip.

I kiss her temple softly. “I’m not going anywhere.”

I roll to the side, taking her with me, both of us still connected. I run my lips over her shoulder and up her neck, unsure what to say. It feels like words can’t express what I feel right now anyway. I want to kiss her again. I want to spend the rest of the night kissing her while I’m buried inside her.

She turns her head to look at me, her hand back in my hair as her lips find mine. She kisses me once, her eyes looking up into mine.

“Why wouldn’t you kiss me?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” My cock pulses inside of her as I bite down on her lip. “Tasting your pussy has already destroyed me, Emery. But tasting your lips”—I sweep my tongue inside her mouth, making her moan—“you’re never going to be able to get my cock out of you now.”

Before either of us realize it, I’m pumping inside her again as we lie on our sides. I grip her waist, my tongue fucking her mouth while my cock slides in and out of her tight pussy.

I get up to my knees, pulling her ass up in the air so I can take her from behind. “You’re fucking kryptonite.”

I spin her around so her legs are around my waist and I’m on my knees facing her so I can kiss her again. I slam her back against the headboard as I fuck her relentlessly, our tongues

and lips frantically kissing like we can't get enough because we can't. We're starved for one another.

We spend hours wrapped around each other. I've lost count of the number of orgasms I've given her, but her body grows limp in my arms as sleep begins to overtake her.

"What time is it?" She lifts her head slightly to look up at me where she's lying on my chest.

"Just after three." I run my hand over her hair. "Go to sleep, sweetheart," I mumble, halfway there myself already.

I close my eyes, ignoring the feeling of dread that fills my body. I don't know what tonight meant to Emery, but I do know that I'm not her knight in shining armor. I'm merely someone she can cling to in this time of uncertainty. I'm the only constant in her life, the only person that is her connection to Dane.

EMERY

I open my eyes, blinking as I take in Mads' bedroom. It wasn't a dream. I sit up, stretching as I look over at the clock.

Mads isn't in bed. Seeing that it's past eight, I expect he's already at work. I kick the covers off, walking to the bathroom to wash my face and brush my teeth before pulling on his Oxford. I button the few buttons that weren't torn off last night, then make my way downstairs toward the kitchen where I smell fresh coffee.

"Morning." His voice startles me as I step into the kitchen. I turn around to see him leaning against the counter, a mug of coffee in his hand.

"Good morning." I smile a little shyly, my eyes jumping away from him.

"I didn't think you'd be up this early."

"I think the smell of coffee woke me." I hug my arms around my body, unsure how I'm supposed to act. Should I walk over and kiss him? Do I thank him for last night? Suddenly, I'm very aware of the situation we're in and I'm way overthinking it.

"You can relax, Em." He turns his attention back to his coffee, taking a drink before reaching into the cabinet for another mug and pouring me a cup. "Drip coffee okay?"

"Perfect," I say, taking it from his hands, our fingers gliding over each other's. He pulls it back just as I'm about to

bring it to my mouth and places it on the counter beside him before tugging me into his arms.

His lips are on mine in an instant, his tongue demanding entrance to my mouth as his hands wander beneath his shirt I'm wearing.

"Fuck," he mutters, reaching down to undo his pants and release his cock. "On the counter," he demands, lifting me and placing me on the marble that's cold against my bare ass. His hands are in my hair, his mouth devouring mine as he enters me. It's quick and rough, his hand migrating down to my thigh where he grips me tightly as he slams into me.

"Fuck, your pussy is tight," he grunts the words. He tears the shirt from my body, grabbing my breast roughly as he leans down to clamp his teeth around my nipple.

"Ahhh!" I cry out in pain as the ecstasy builds in my body.

"Goddamn!" he shouts, his fingers digging into my thigh so hard I'm sure he'll leave bruises. "You milk my cock so good." He looks down at me, angling my head so that I'm staring up at him. "You know that? You grip me so fucking tight, I'm going to be thinking about this all day." His movements grow more frantic as I reach between us to touch my clit, but I'm already there. "That's right, baby. Come on my cock like a good girl. Make me come." Seconds later, I feel his release fill me.

"Oh." I wince when he pulls out of me.

"Did I hurt you? I'm sorry, I didn't intend for that to happen. I just—"

"I'm okay," I reassure him, sliding off the counter with his help.

He catches his breath as he does up his pants, running his hands through his hair. "Shit, I'm not going to get any fucking work done today after that."

I giggle. "Oh." He looks at me. "It's, um, leaking out of me," I say, a little embarrassed.

He tips up my chin. “That’s a fucking sexy thought, my cum dripping out of you all day.” He leans in to run his lips over mine. “Go take a shower before I put you on your knees and fill your belly with my cum too.”

He kisses me deeply. It’s passionate and quick, and then just as quickly he breaks it. “I have to go to work. Feel free to stay as long as you like.” He places his mug in the sink. “In fact, feel free to still be naked in my bed when I get home.” He winks at me. “Call me if you need anything. I had Tony bring your car here last night so if you do have to leave, your keys are on the counter.”

I catch myself sighing as I watch him leave, sinking against the kitchen island. I straighten my back.

What the hell was that?

I ignore it, pushing it aside and taking the stairs two at a time to head back upstairs to his bedroom. I take my time, showering, enjoying the slow and delicious start to the morning. I wrap a towel around my body, walking into his massive closet. I run my hands over his shirts, bringing the cuff of one to my nose and inhaling his familiar scent.

Everything about Mads is controlled and organized. His closet is color-coordinated, although there’s not much color besides black, white, or gray. There isn’t an item out of place. That’s another big difference between him and Dane. Dane was clean but he didn’t have that attention to detail like Mads does, the complete control he exhibits over his life.

Although it feels like when it comes to sex between us, that’s where he loses control. He tries to remain stoic, calm, but I see the fire in his eyes when he’s inside me. I watched it slip last night when I kissed him. That cold exterior that’s always in place cracked and a glimmer of something different shone through. A side of Mads I didn’t know existed. It was gentle, intimate. The kind of intimacy I’ve craved for so long.

I notice something on the far wall behind his suit coats. I push them aside and see a safe in the wall. That’s when I notice a keyhole in the center of the dial, Mr. Pearfort’s comment about that key I found being a lock on the turn style

of a safe coming back to me. In the excitement and panic of everything going on at the time, I had completely forgotten about that. I try to recall where I left the key, realizing it must still be in my purse that I used that day.

I pull open a few drawers, finding a pair of black sweats and a matching hoodie, and throw them on. I look like a kid wearing their parents' clothes, but I don't have anything else to wear besides my dress from last night. I find it still on the floor along with my panties and shoes and gather them up before driving home barefoot with wet hair.

When I get home, I find the purse I used the day I took the key to the PI's office. I run my hands along the bottom and in the pockets, finding it in the small pouch on the front.

"But where is the safe?" I sit back on my heels on my closet floor, thinking where a hidden safe that I didn't even know existed would be. I know we have a safe. I've been in it many times, but it uses our thumbprint or a code. There's no spot for a keyhole. I've checked half a dozen times already.

I walk over to Dane's closet, thinking that maybe like Mads, he has one hidden in here. I search everywhere, but I don't find it.

"His office," I say as I gesture, smacking my forehead. I run down the stairs and into his office, closing the door and locking it behind me so I'm not interrupted by Tilly. I pull books from the shelves, thinking that maybe there's a hidden compartment somewhere, but I find nothing. I check the closet, even using my flashlight on my phone to look under his desk and the couch on the far right side but again... nothing.

I sink down onto the couch, looking around the room, and my eyes settle on the massive picture hanging behind his desk.

"That's too cliché," I mutter as I stand up and walk over to it. I turn on my phone flashlight again, gingerly peering behind the picture when I see the dark outline of a perfect square. "You've got to be kidding me." I look up at the massive picture, unsure how I'm ever going to get this thing off the wall. I run my hand along the frame when I feel something. I jiggle it and it feels like a hook. I angle the light and look at it.

Sure enough, it's a small hook that anchors the picture to the wall. I lift it slowly and when I do, I realize the picture is mounted on a hinge on one side like in an old haunted mansion. I slowly swing it open like a door, revealing the hidden safe.

I place the key in the keyhole and it turns. "What would the number sequence be?"

I try our anniversary, but that doesn't work. I try my birthday, then his birthday, but again, nothing. I pace the floor, thinking through any other dates that come to mind, but I'm drawing a blank. I glance over at one of the bookcases and see a framed photo of me and Dane. I pick it up, looking at the huge smile on our faces. It was the first day we met. We were at the All White Party in the Hamptons and he had come in on a helicopter. I remember being stricken by his looks immediately, and then he turned on the charm and I was done for.

I run my fingers over the photo. We looked genuinely happy. I can't imagine that we weren't, that it wasn't real. My heart squeezes again, thinking about all the unanswered questions that still haunt me. The complete lack of closure when it comes to losing someone and finding out their secrets after they're gone is a pain I wouldn't wish on anyone. I place the photo down, turning my attention back to the dial on the safe.

I take a chance, turning the dial to fall on the date of our first meeting. When I round to the last number, I hear a loud click and tug on the handle. It slowly opens, revealing a stack of folders inside.

Grabbing the folders, I place them on Dane's desk in front of me and take a seat in his chair. Slowly, I open the first one. It's a copy of our marriage certificate. A pang runs through my chest, but I don't allow myself to start wallowing again. I set it aside, seeing a copy of our prenuptial agreement. I close the folder and set it aside, opening another.

A knot forms in my stomach when I see what's in it. A detailed breakdown of my entire financial portfolio. "Why

would he have this hidden from me?" I look it over. There's a picture of me, an older picture. I must have been barely nineteen in the picture. There are several other photos, ones where I'm clearly out shopping or at dinner with friends, like I was being followed.

There are newspaper clippings about my parents' deaths, my father's estate, and how everything went to me. I continue searching through the files when I stumble upon a life insurance policy in my name for ten million dollars. I look further and there's another for five million, then a few for one million. I count them. In total, there are over a dozen policies in my name, all of which have my signature, but I don't remember signing them.

About a year into our marriage, Dane and I discussed life insurance. He randomly brought it up one night and I had confessed that I didn't know much about it. I was only twenty-one at the time, and considering how wealthy both of my parents were, life insurance wasn't something I really thought was necessary. He had convinced me that it still was, so we both agreed to doing individual policies, but they're in the safe I knew about.

I get up and run upstairs to where our large safe is, opening it and double-checking that the policies are still inside. I bring them downstairs, comparing my signatures and they're the same. I sink back down into Dane's chair, looking through the rest of the papers in the safe.

There are dozens of NDAs all signed by different women. My stomach curdles and I fall to my knees, grabbing the waste basket and emptying the contents of my stomach. My head spins. I feel like a fool. I don't know what any of this means, but I know it is part of this puzzle I've been trying to solve for months.

I crawl to the bathroom in his office, splashing my face with cold water and taking several deep breaths. I want to fall apart. I want to crumple to the floor and cry my eyes out, but I won't allow myself. Instead, I grab the insurance policies and decide to call each company to verify that they're real.

Then I take another shower, get dressed, and decide that the only person who can give me answers is Mads. This time, I'm not going to let him talk me out of asking for details. I need to know every single detail about the life he hid from me, and I'm not leaving his house until I do.

“*I* didn't actually think you'd still be here when I got home.” Mads smirks, reaching for a tumbler and scotch as he eyes me sitting on his couch in the living room. “Pleasant surprise.”

“I'm not so sure it is pleasant,” I say calmly. He gives me a puzzled look as I reach for the stack of folders I placed on the coffee table in front of me.

“What's that?”

“That's what I want to know,” I say as I flip them open.

He pours himself a drink, leaning forward to grab one of the folders. I watch as his eyes scan the paper, his expression immediately changing from curiosity to annoyed.

“Jesus fucking Christ, Emery. Why can't you let it go?”

“Let it go?” My voice pitches and I grab the life insurance policies. “How would you feel if you found a hidden safe in your house and inside were a dozen life insurance policies your husband took out on you that you have no memory of signing?” I slap them back down. “Why did Dane have these? I know you know more than you're letting on.”

“What is this? You fuck me and then corner me and demand answers? I'm getting pretty fucking tired of this song and dance. I'm not your human dildo that you can seduce to get answers to your fucked-up life.” He slams the scotch tumbler down after finishing it. I jump at his harsh words and the loud smack of the glass hitting the table. “Move on, Emery. Either move on from all of this or move on from me. I'm tired of you dragging me into this. I don't have the fucking

answers that you want and even if I did, I wouldn't give them to you."

"I'm not using you or seducing you for answers. I found the safe hidden in Dane's office after finding the hidden key and guessing the combination. If anyone knew what he was doing, it was you, and we both know it. I don't care if you think I'm grasping at straws or only digging a deeper hole for myself. I want answers and I'm not leaving here until I have them!" I slam my hand down onto the folders, tears pricking my eyes as my chin quivers.

"What good will it do? Hmm?" He sinks down in the chair across from me, his elbows on his knees as he leans toward me. "Even if I had all the answers, what good would it do to know? He's gone, Em, and that's all that matters."

"Closure!" I practically wail, beyond frustrated that he cannot seem to grasp the pain and turmoil I'm in. "You have no idea," I say through a shaky voice, "how hard it is to lose your partner, the love of your life, the person you thought was your soulmate and have no explanation other than some generic business deal that went bad which makes zero sense—"

"Jesus Christ, it was fake!" he shouts as he shoots upward out of his chair. "It was all fucking fake, Emery!"

I jerk back, shaking my head. "Fake? What was fake? What does that mean?"

"Nothing, just... Nothing," he says, shaking his head as he begins to pace.

"The life insurance policies are fake?" He shakes his head, stopping with his back to me. He stares out the window, his hands on his waist as he hangs his head.

"Your life, the relationship. It wasn't real, Em."

"It wasn't fake, Mads. It wasn't." He refuses to look at me as rage begins to boil my blood. "Just because he had his demons and hid stuff doesn't mean he didn't love me. He loved me," I say through tears as I smack my chest, unsure who I'm trying to convince at this point.

“No, he didn’t, Emery. He didn’t love you. He couldn’t love anyone but himself.” He shakes his head as he finally turns around to face me, his eyes full of pity as he looks down at me, and deep inside, for some unexplainable reason that I want to ignore but can’t, I know he’s right. I try to take in a deep breath, but it feels like there’s a semi on my chest. “You’re going to hate me.”

“Just tell me, please,” I beg.

“I’ve never seen someone snort more cocaine off a hooker’s ass than Dane. I had to revoke his membership and kick him out of The Scarlett Letter because he kept sneaking hookers in and then refusing to pay them. I’ve never seen someone manipulate and use people with zero regard for anything but what he wanted. I know you think I’m heartless and yeah, to most, I probably am, but Dane... He was a textbook psychopath, only driven by his own desires.”

“NDAs?” I ask, the room feeling like it’s starting to spin. My brain can’t comprehend all of the things he’s saying to me. “Did he make the women sign NDAs?”

“Yes,” he says.

It feels like my world is falling down all around me... what’s left of it anyway. I’m in shock; I have to be. The tears suddenly stop and I’m left completely numb. I sit in silence for several minutes that feel like hours.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I know it’s pointless to ask him, but I want him to explain why.

“Because I’m a coward. Because it’s my fault all this happened.”

“Your fault?”

“I’m the one who pointed you out to him. I’m the one who told him to go after you when your parents died. I told him how rich you were, that he could get you to fall in love with him, and then he could ride your name and money to whatever success he could imagine.”

I’m hearing the words and understanding them, but they’re not sinking in. It’s like my emotions are completely shut off as

he continues to talk. He grabs the bottle of scotch and brings it to his lips, drinking straight from the bottle as he sinks down into the chair.

“I didn’t think he would do this. I thought he would fall in love with you, and everything would work out. That you’d have kids and the white picket fence and all that shit.” His words flow out of him like he’s been waiting to say all of this, like a wave of relief is settling over him. “I thought he’d be happy with everything he had, the business he managed to build, but I was naive too. He held it over my head that it was my idea for him to use you, to trick you so even if I told you the truth about him, he’d lie and either convince you I made it up out of jealousy or you wouldn’t even believe me in the first place.”

“That’s a pathetic excuse,” I spit at him.

“It’s not an excuse. I tried warning you. I told you the man you slept next to was dangerous, but you chose not to believe me. So keeping his secret and staying by his side was the only way I could keep you safe.”

“Keep me safe?” The words disgust me. How can he think this was keeping me safe? “You ruined my life. You’re a liar and a coward!” I stand up, the tears coming back as I point my finger at him. “You’re just as bad as him!”

He takes a long drink from the bottle again, leaning back in the chair, his legs extended out in front of him as he stares up at the ceiling.

“You think you were keeping me safe by keeping me from the truth? That’s a pathetic way to ease your conscience.”

“No,” he says softly, silence settling between us for a few seconds. “I didn’t keep you safe by keeping his secrets,” he says as he slowly sits up. He places the bottle on the table and then stands up, looking down at me with an icy stare. “I kept you safe by killing your husband before he could kill you.”

MADS

I expect her to burst out into hysteria or lunge at me, but she just stares at me blankly. A single giant tear falls from her right eye and tumbles down her cheek where it splashes on the floor.

“Emery?” She sits perfectly still; the only sign of movement is her trembling chin.

“Y—you ki—killed him?” she finally manages to choke out.

“I’m sorry that this is how everything played out, Emery. If I could have changed things, I would have, but I’m not—I’m not sorry I killed him. I’d do it over again in a heartbeat if it meant keeping you alive.”

“You killed him.” She repeats the words in a hushed tone, like she can’t actually comprehend what she’s saying. “You killed him? Why?” She lifts her head slowly to look up at me, her eyes now filled with tears, her face ashen.

“He was going to kill you. It was my only option.”

“No.” She shakes her head. “No, he wouldn’t do that. He wouldn’t!” Her voice gets louder as she stands up. “You were his best friend; he trusted you! How could you do this to him? To me?”

“I told you,” I say, keeping my voice calm and level. “He was going to kill you. What was I supposed to do? You saw the life insurance policies, Em. You know the parameters of your prenup. Your time was up.” I know I sound cold and

heartless, but I don't feel any pity for her mourning him. She's naive if she thinks he wouldn't have killed her without a second thought. I know she can't comprehend that right now. She's still holding on to the character he played, the person he pretended to be to her, but she has to see it with all this evidence she's holding.

“Prenup? What does this have to do with the prenup? My parents had that drawn up before I was even born. I never read it.”

My eyebrows shoot upward. “You signed a prenup and didn't read it? Jesus Christ, Em.” I reach for the pile of papers and sort through them until I find it. I flip it to the clause about inheritance and point to a paragraph. “Right there. It says that Dane gets nothing if you divorce, but if you die, he gets everything after five years of marriage.”

She reaches her hand out slowly, taking it from me and reading over it. “No,” she says, shaking her head furiously. “He wouldn't kill me, Mads. You're wrong.” I roll my eyes. “I know he hid things from me. He was a liar and a cheater. I can see that now, but I know that when he looked at me, he loved me. I'm not excusing his behavior, but he wouldn't kill me. That's bullshit and we both know that!”

She's in denial. I didn't want to do this, but I know it's the only way she's going to truly believe me. I reach into my pocket and pull out my phone. I search through my recordings and find the one from the night of Dane's death. “I'm sorry, Emery. I really am. But just remember that you came to me, asking for closure. If that's what you want, then you need to listen to this.” I hit play, placing the phone on the table in front of her.

Dane's voice breaks the silence. “*I knew your dick would get in the way of any rational thinking.*” Emery's eyes widen, looking at the phone, then up at me.

She listens intently as Dane details how he's going to force me to kill her, and if I don't, he'll kill me. I let it play until the end, Emery jumping when the gunshot rings out, then the recording stops.

Her entire body goes still. She falls forward onto her hands and knees as she begins to hyperventilate.

“Just breathe,” I say, crouching down beside her as I rub her back. “Breathe, Emery.”

Her breathing sounds labored, an animalistic groan of pain erupting from her chest as she crumples into my arms, sobs tearing through her. I wrap my arms around her, letting her cry. Finally, I pick her up and carry her upstairs to my bedroom. I grab a glass of water and a valium and take them up to her.

“Take this.” I hand it to her, and she does without resistance. She drinks the water, falling back onto the pillows. I brush her hair away from her face. She looks so broken, so dissociated as she curls into the fetal position. “I’ll come check on you later.” I close the bedroom door behind me and head downstairs to my office.

I try to focus on work, but I keep glancing at the clock, the seconds ticking by like hours. The sun has set and it’s pushing nine. I head to the kitchen to make a sandwich and head upstairs to my bedroom. I knock on the door softly, pushing it open. Emery is sitting up, her back toward me as she hugs her knees to her chest, facing the window.

“Are you hungry?” I ask, placing the sandwich on the bed next to her. She doesn’t respond. I walk over to the chair in the far corner of the room, grabbing it and walking it over to sit next to her.

“I’m done hiding things from you, Em. Whatever questions you have, I’ll answer them. It’s the least of what you deserve.”

Her head slowly turns to face me, her eyes swollen from hours of crying. Her cheeks are red and splotchy, her eyes hollow. She looks at me, then slowly turns away again, back toward the window. We sit like this in silence for several minutes.

“Why did you tell Dane to go after me? Why me?” she finally asks, her eyes still forward.

“You were young and beautiful and since your parents had just died, you were set to become the youngest, most eligible billionaire. It was merely a decision of convenience.” Her head turns and she looks at me.

“Convenience? Good to know. Being that I was young and dealing with unimaginable grief, I’m sure you just assumed a charming man like Dane could manipulate me without me even realizing it.” I nod my head in shame. “Well, it worked.”

“Dane’s charm worked on everyone. All throughout Yale, he had our friend group wrapped around his finger. You’d think being the outsider he’d fall to the wayside, but something about him captivated everyone, including me.”

“So what was the plan then? You both kill me after five years? How did it benefit you—you don’t need my money.”

“To get you to fall in love with him so he would have access to your name and money so that he could build his own empire. There was never a plan to kill you, Emery. Not from me. As far as I knew, Dane only wanted to use you for money, and I went along with it.”

“He couldn’t manage it on his own?”

I shake my head. “Not with his goals and aspirations. I mean, I guess he could, but it would take way more time and he would have to pitch to investors. He felt like he was too good for that even though he would have excelled at it. I told him that so many times over the years, that if he went about it the right way, raised capital and built connections, he would have been unstoppable, but he didn’t want to do that. He felt owed. He wanted everything we had now.”

“Why would he be owed anything?” I can hear the bitterness in her tone.

“He wasn’t but it was a narrative he preached and one he believed. His dad was one of the original right-hand men of Niles Piedmont, but he fucked around behind his back, defrauded the company and some investors, and got fired. Not only fired but Niles destroyed his reputation, made sure he’d never work in finance again. That’s why Dane’s father wasn’t

in the picture. He became an alcoholic and abandoned the family when he was young.”

She nods. “I knew he left. I didn’t know why. Dane always made it seem like it was just a sad tale of his dad becoming an alcoholic.” She picks at the comforter. “Why didn’t you let him work for your company?”

“Wasn’t good enough for him. My father offered him an internship which he did take but refused to come on board. He laughed at the salary offered. He thought he’d come in and immediately be running a department. He also knew there was only so far he could go with my father and brother around. He’d never be able to take over and be a billionaire by working his way up.”

“I don’t understand.” She shakes her head. “I gave him everything. He built his company up; he was on *Forbes*.”

“That’s the same conversation I had with him at your party that night. He said it wasn’t good enough. He didn’t want just access to your money; he wanted your father’s company, and he knew that he’d get your majority shares if you died, along with your money. All of the extra life insurance policies show his greed. Why the fuck would you need an additional thirty million or whatever it totals to when you’re set to inherit billions?”

“All of this for money.” She wipes at her eyes. “What about his business deal that went bad?”

“It existed, yes, but he wouldn’t have killed himself over it. His deal with Tokyo fell through. They backed out.”

“And you stuck around now to what—ease your conscience for hiding all of this and killing him? Or was it to keep me quiet? Make sure I didn’t talk if I found out?”

“No,” I say confidently, although I’m sure she won’t believe me. “It was never about easing my conscience.”

“You didn’t answer how this benefited you? You could have stopped this, stopped him, but you didn’t.” She stares at me coldly. “What did he have on you?”

“Nothing.”

“I know you, Mads. You wouldn’t just volunteer to be someone’s little lapdog and do their bidding unless they had you by the balls, so what was it? What did he have on you if you weren’t acting out of guilt?”

I’m nobody’s fucking lapdog and the insinuation that I was Dane’s sends my blood pressure through the roof. I contemplate just telling her the reason and getting it over with, but now isn’t the time. I ignore her biting comments. “I meant what I said to you in the past about my actions and behavior. I don’t feel guilt for the things I said to you while he was alive, and I certainly don’t feel guilty for killing him. He deserved it.”

She huffs, “Because of you. This is all your fault, you know. You didn’t just ruin my life; you ruined his too. We had a good life,” she says through a broken sob, her hands clutching at her chest. “An amazing life and you took that from me!”

“I didn’t ruin your life, Em. I merely shattered the illusion that you were living in a dream, when in reality, it was a nightmare. You just didn’t perceive the danger.”

“No, you introduced him to me. You did this, Mads.” She points her finger at me.

Her words hit me like a bullet and I know she’s right. It’s the truth I’ve been running from, the sand I’ve been burying my head in has all but disappeared.

“I guess you’re right. I’m the bad guy after all.” I sink back into the chair, my legs outstretched before me. “For what it’s worth, I never thought it would come to this when it all started. I truly believed that he would fall in love with you along the way and this secret would die with him and me. I didn’t realize his greed consumed him.”

“Is that why you stayed in our lives? To try and atone for your actions?”

“No.”

“Then why? Why stay and torture me? Why stay when you clearly hated me? Because from the outside, it seems like you

resented me, like you were angry at Dane for marrying me. You can see it in your eyes in our wedding photos; you looked miserable. You went out of your way to make it clear that you hated me with him.”

I lean forward, leveling my eyes on her. “I never stayed because of guilt or atonement or whatever the fuck you want to call it and I never hated you. Part of the anger you saw from me was because I did feel guilty for setting you up with him. I was angry at myself and at him. I hated myself for doing that. I knew you deserved better, but that guilt I felt years ago didn’t keep me around.”

“And the other part?”

I stare at her for a moment. “The other part of me stayed because it was the only way I could keep you in my life. As fucked up as it all is—” I stand up, walking to the window. *Now isn’t the time for this confession, but fuck it.*

I take in a deep breath. I told her I won’t hold back so I don’t. “I stayed because I’m in love with you and selfishly, I couldn’t walk away from you. I didn’t want to.”

The room goes silent. I can hear her shaky breath, but I don’t turn around to look at her until she speaks again.

“Are you walking away now?”

“No. You’re mine.”

“What if I don’t want to be yours?”

I turn back around, steadying my gaze on her as I step closer, reaching my hand out to touch her chin softly. “You don’t have a choice, Emery. My job is to protect you, to keep you safe.”

“Ah.” She looks away. “An obligation you created. So now I’m trading one captor for another.”

“You’re not being held captive.”

“Aren’t I though? You keep me around because you’re in love with me and now my world and entire life has been completely destroyed by you. You created all of this and now I’m trapped. I can’t leave. You just said I didn’t have a choice

and you're not going to let me run away. You're afraid I'll tell everyone your secret."

"Look at me." My voice is gruff. "I don't give a fuck if you tell the world that I killed Dane. If I go away to prison forever, I'll go quietly knowing you're safe. That's all that matters to me." I square my shoulders toward her, leaning down. "But if you think you don't want to be mine, you're a fucking liar. We both know it's what you've always wanted. What you've always fought against when you knew you shouldn't want me." I run the pad of my thumb over her bottom lip. "We both know you're going to have my babies."

She swallows. "I thought you didn't want a life like that?"

"I didn't want it unless it was with you." Her hands rest on her knees as she stares up at me with big green eyes. "I know what you want, Emery. You want a man like me, one who will destroy the world if it means I can keep you safe. A man who won't hide who he is from you. A man who will explore your sexuality with you, encourage you to explore your body."

"We tried that, remember? You wouldn't let me at the club."

"No, you tried to get me to fuck you in public, and that will never happen. You understand me? You're mine and that means your body belongs to me." My chest burns with anger just thinking about it. "Is that what you wanted, Emery? For other men to see you like that? Hear you moaning as you ride my cock?" The thought makes my stomach lurch.

Defiance settles in her eyes. "So everything is on your terms? You love me and want me but only if it's what suits you? Should I call you Dane too?"

I pull my hand back from her chin, sliding my hands into my pockets. "If that's how you want to see this, then so be it, Emery. Make yourself miserable, but I guarantee you, I will break you. Until then, feel free to reevaluate how you see things while you're in here."

I walk out of the bedroom, slamming the door behind me and locking it.

EMERY

The sound of the bedroom lock clicking makes me jump. I walk to the door slowly, reaching out to grab the handle. I turn it but it doesn't budge. Once again, I'm a prisoner in Mads' bedroom.

I lie on the bed, curling into the fetal position. My head hurts from the pressure of crying, from trying to understand and comprehend everything I've just learned. I'd give anything to be able to talk to my mom right now. I know she wouldn't have an answer for me, at least not one that I want to hear. She'd tell me to run, to report Mads and move on with my life, but the thought of that has me paralyzed with fear.

Would Mads ever come after me?

I feel guilty even allowing the thought to cross my mind, but I'd be naive not to consider it. I think through the effort Dane put into deceiving me in our relationship. The way he went above and beyond to be someone completely different so that I would truly believe he loved me, that our life was picture-perfect.

A shiver runs through me when I think about what might have happened had I ever fell pregnant with him. Would he have killed me with our child in my belly? Instinctually, my hand settles over my stomach, Mads' comment only moments ago echoing in my head.

"You know you're going to have my babies."

Something gnaws at me—excitement maybe? The thought of carrying his child is something I've never entertained. Over

the years, the few times I let my mind wander about Mads, curious about his private life, I never let my fantasies get that far. In fact, I never let my thoughts get further than wondering what it would feel like for him to hold me, to kiss me. In the past, I shut it down immediately, guilt overtaking me when I looked at Dane later after letting those thoughts marinate.

But now, now I feel like a fool.

The lock clicks and the door slowly opens as Mads steps inside. I don't know how long I've been in here, but I'd guess a few hours. I sit up, turning to face him as he walks over to the edge of the bed and takes a seat.

"I'm sorry I locked you in here. I shouldn't have done that. I wanted to cool off for a while and I didn't want you running away."

"I'm not running away," I say evenly.

"Good." He offers me a half smile and rubs his hands together before dragging them over his face. "I need you to just listen to me for a minute, let me explain something and just hear me out." He looks at me questioningly and I nod. "I know that this is all my fault. I know I created this mess. I also admit that you were right; I did ruin your life, but I also know that I can offer you a life that will make you happier than you've ever been. Genuine happiness," he says when he sees my lips part. "Not some cock-and-bull lie fed to you. I have no reason, no motivation to lie to you about my intentions, Emery."

"Really? Fear of prison isn't a motive?"

"I meant what I said earlier. If you want me to rot in prison for the rest of my life, I will. Fuck, I'll walk into the police station and hand them my phone and admit to everything right now. You'll never see me again." His gaze is serious, his jaw set. "Is that what you want?"

I contemplate his offer for a moment. *Is that what I want?* My stomach drops when I think about never seeing Mads again. I shake my head slowly.

“Thank you,” he says softly, his hand coming out to brush against my cheek. “I really do love you and I know that it sounds cliché and impossible considering the pain I’ve caused you, but I will go to my grave loving you. You are the only thing that matters to me, the only reason for me to exist.”

Our eyes lock and I have the urge to crawl into his lap and kiss him. To tell him that secretly I think I’ve always wanted him, craved him, needed him. But I don’t trust my feelings anymore.

“I know that telling you I love you after murdering your husband seems manipulative, but I hope you know that it’s not. I didn’t create Dane; the monster he was as a person was there long before I knew him. I will spend the rest of my life regretting that I ever told him about you, but I won’t spend a single second regretting killing him. I created the problem so it was my duty to annihilate the problem.”

“Did you like it? Killing him?” I can’t unhear the last words he said to Dean on the recording before he shot him.

He looks up at me. “Yes, but only because I knew it meant you were safe now.”

“Did you kill that detective?”

“No. I have a connection in the police force, someone high up who owes me a favor so I called it in, got him reassigned.”

Relief washes through me. “Was Dane your first?”

He nods but his eyes darken. “Yes, but he won’t be my last if anyone tries to put you in danger again.”

“What do you want from me, Mads?”

He reaches his hand out, laying it over mine. “Just try,” he says barely above a whisper. “Just try to love me.”

“And if I can’t?”

He stares at me longingly, like he's trying to will me to love him. "Then I'll never bother you again." He stands. "I won't force myself on you, Emery. If you want me, I will let you come to me."

“Wear the necklace.”

I turn my head to see Mads leaning against the doorway of the bedroom as my fingers rest gently on the daisy diamond necklace that Dane bought me earlier this year. A lock of his dark hair hangs over his forehead. He looks devilishly handsome in his custom tuxedo. I pull my hand back, feeling guilt for wanting to wear it. "It's okay." I shrug. "I was just looking at it."

He walks up behind me, the scent of his woody cologne permeating the air. He reaches around me, picking up the necklace and placing it around my neck gently. "I want you to wear it." His breath tickles my neck as he leans forward to clasp it, his fingers lingering against my skin.

"Are you sure?" I reach up to touch the diamonds as I turn to look up at him. A memory from only a few short months ago plays in my head... the memory of Dane putting this same necklace around my neck before our anniversary party.

"Yes," he says, stepping back to look at me. I've never been looked at the way Mads looks at me, like he's staring into my soul. I think back to how I felt when Dane admired me wearing the necklace in the mirror. At the time it felt like he saw me, like I was his world, but now I realize it wasn't love or happiness I saw in his eyes; it was nothing.

Just emptiness.

It's been a month. A month of living in Mads' house, of sleeping in his bed, a month of trying. He has kept his word; he hasn't touched me at all until right now.

Part of me wonders if that was his plan in all this, to make me crave him. To tease me just enough with a hand hovering

behind me as he ushers me into his car or through a doorway. If that is his plan, it's working.

"Are you ready?" he asks, adjusting his cuff link. I take a few steps forward, reaching out to straighten his bow tie. His hands instinctively dart forward, resting on my waist. My hands drop slightly, pressed against his chest for a brief second before I break the contact and step away to grab my clutch.

"I am."

Tonight is our first outing in public together since Dane's death. I agreed to attend a corporate event with Mads for his family company. Tonight is their annual shareholders party and I'll be on Mads' arm in front of a room full of people who know very well who I am. Some people who last time they saw me, saw me on another man's arm... Dane's.

"You look stunning," he murmurs as he ushers me toward the car when we exit his building. "Pink suits you very much."

"Thank you." I smile nervously, brushing my hand over the dark-pink strapless gown I picked out for the event as I settle into the back seat. Another bold choice that would not have been Dane's first choice considering he told me more than once that pink on redheads was a no for him.

I watch Mads' fingers move across the screen of his phone as he sits next to me in the back of his car. I try to be discreet as I watch his movements, the way his hand runs through his hair while his brow furrows in thought.

I squeeze my thighs together beneath my dress as he brings his hand to rest on his thigh. *How does he manage to keep his hands to himself so easily?*

All I can think about is imagining those fingers wrapped around my throat as he pumps inside of me, his mouth whispering filthy things to me. I could have that right this second if I wanted, but I promised myself that I would focus on more than the physical between us. That's why I haven't allowed myself to give in this entire month. I need to know that these feelings I have for him aren't just lust cloaked in desire pretending to be love.

Love.

The word feels dangerous, more like betrayal considering what had to happen for me to arrive here. That's the other part of this situation that is driving me insane. The constant internal turmoil and guilt that eats at me for "betraying" Dane.

Mads slips his phone into the inside pocket of his suit, his gaze falling on me. "Everything okay?" he asks with a slight smirk and I wonder if he knows the thoughts in my head.

"Mm-hmm." I offer a small smile before turning my attention toward the window. My stomach feels like a swarm of bees have been let loose inside me. Anxiousness pulses through me violently.

"Don't be nervous," he says in that deep, seductive voice that rumbles through his chest as his hand comes to rest on my knee that's bouncing with nervous energy.

"Easy to say. I feel like I'm about to walk into a room full of starving lions."

He lifts his hand slowly, reaching forward to brush my hair behind my ear as his gaze falls to my lips. "Anything I can do to help?"

I feel my breath hitch, a warmth beginning to creep up my neck as I bite my bottom lip. I know exactly what he's offering and I'm seconds away from crawling into his lap and begging him to make me feel better by whatever means necessary. I have wanted to tell him from the second he asked me to try to love him that I already do. Every night in his bed I've wanted to crawl into his arms, to beg him to make me feel loved, desired, but I'm plagued by fear.

What will everyone think when they find out we're together? How do I explain that I'm in love with my late husband's best friend? That nothing was going on before? Will they believe me?

"I—" I open my mouth to speak but I don't know what to say. He reaches his hand over, gently cupping my cheek, causing a flood of emotions to break free. I lean into his touch, closing my eyes as my words fall from my lips in a rush. "I'm

scared, Mads. Scared of what people will say, scared of what this might mean for us. But I'm also scared of losing you. I don't want to lose you."

His other hand presses against my opposite cheek, his eyes burrowing into mine. "Hey, look at me." I lift my eyes toward his. "You won't lose me, Emery. I'll be here for you, no matter what. Let me show you the love and happiness we can have together. We'll face the world side by side, one step at a time. No matter what happens, I promise that I'm never leaving your side unless you tell me to."

I nod slowly, finally leaning forward to press my lips softly against his. I lean into his embrace, feeling conflicted but hopeful for the first time since Dane's passing. The kiss deepens, Mads' tongue slipping past my lips and finding mine. He holds me after breaking the kiss, pressing his forehead against mine. I close my eyes, my nerves settling a little as the car slows to a stop in front of the venue.

"Are you ready?"

I know that if I say no, he'll have Tony take me back to his house in a heartbeat, but something inside me wants to fight for him... for us. I nod, my heart already entwined in a complicated dance of love, guilt, and longing for Mads Bishop. I don't think I could walk away from him, even if I wanted to.

MADS

I wrap my arm around Emery's waist as I lead her up the stairs toward the entrance of the event. I'm fully prepared for the questioning stares as we step over the threshold and enter the party.

Her nervous energy is palpable. I want to tell her that I feel the same way, but I don't. After her admission in the car, her fear of losing me and the way she looked into my eyes after letting me kiss her again, I feel like I could conquer the world.

The fear of losing her has been eating at me every second of the last month. The agonizing temptation of sharing space with her and not touching her has driven me to new heights of desire.

"Every time you feel anxious tonight, just reach out and grab my hand, okay?"

"Better yet, don't let my hand go," she says through a smile as she waves toward someone who recognizes her.

"Madden Bishop, how are you, son?" Ken Pratt walks over to me with arms outstretched, his cheeks already glowing red from too much alcohol. "Every time I see you, you get more handsome." He smiles, slapping my back. Ken has been a member of the board since I was a teenager. He was close with my father, also a real prick just like my dad as well.

"Good to see you, Ken." I smile, shaking his hand. "This is Emery Ash—"

“Wagner,” she corrects, smiling sweetly as she extends her hand. “Emery Wagner.”

“Oh, Wagner?” he says, his eyes widening. “Sid Wagner’s daughter?”

“One and the same.”

“Oh, sweetheart.” He clasps her hand with both of his. “I was just broken, we all were, when your parents passed away in the plane crash.” He shakes his head. “And then your husband. If you ever need anything, my wife Patty and I are just a phone call away.”

“Thank you, that’s very kind of you.”

“Your parents were very special people, amazing people.” I notice he doesn’t say the same about Dane. That’s because everyone in the industry hated the piece of shit.

She slowly extracts her hand from his sausage fingers. “They really were and I miss them every day. Thankfully, I have Mads by my side.” She loops her arm through mine and it takes a second for the shock to wear off.

“He’s a good man too.” He smiles, patting my chest before excusing himself to talk to someone else.

I turn to look at Emery. “Already introducing me as the man in your life?”

“Hmm, did I say that?” She gives me a snarky grin. “I think I just mentioned that you were my eye candy, my current flavor of the month.”

“Is that right?” I nod toward another board member as I let my hand drift down her back to settle against her ass.

“Yeah.” She shrugs. “I’ve been thinking and since I married Dane so young, I never got the chance to sow my wild oats, you know? And since I’m only twenty-five, why not start now?”

I know she’s joking, but it churns my stomach. I press my nose against her hair as I squeeze her ass hard. “You are treading on very thin ice, young lady. I’d be very careful if I were you.”

“Is that a threat, Mr. Bishop?”

“Oh no, sweetheart, it’s a fucking promise.”

“And here I thought you’d turned over a new leaf. With your gentlemanly promise to not force me to be with you.”

“Gentleman?” I laugh. “If I made you think for one second that I’m a gentleman, I severely fucked up. Nothing about me is gentle, Emery, and if you plan to tease me like this all night, I’ll drag you out of here right now in front of everyone and fuck you in the car till you beg me for mercy.”

“Maybe that’s what I want you to do.” She says a quick hello to someone else as we walk toward the bar.

I grab her arm and pull her to the side. “You know you can ask me, right? That this doesn’t always have to be a game between us.”

“I like the game,” she whispers against my lips, both of us completely forgetting for a second where we are.

“I’ve been looking all over for you. So has mom,” Foster interrupts us. “We need you over here.” He gestures toward where my mother is, waving at me frantically.

“Are you going to be okay on your own for a little while?”

“Yes, I’ll be okay.” I squeeze her hand briefly before walking across the room to join my family.

I try to stay focused as I talk business with the family, but my eyes follow Emery as she grabs her cocktail and walks through the crowd. She smiles at a few people, hugging some and shaking hands with others.

“What do you think, Mads?” I turn my attention back to my mother to answer her question and when I look up again, Em is nowhere to be seen.

“Yeah, sounds like a good plan,” I say, nodding toward my mom and Foster.

“Good, let’s proceed then. On that note, I’m exhausted already. You boys can handle the evening. I’m calling my

driver.” My mother kisses us each on the cheek before excusing herself.

“How are things going?” Foster asks, a look on his face.

“She knows, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“You told her?” His eyes bug out.

“Yup.”

“And?”

“Well, she’s here, isn’t she?”

He shakes his head. “Jesus fuckin Christ, Mads. Your dick is going to kill you someday, you know that?”

“It’s not about my dick, you piece of shit. She deserved to know the truth; she needed the closure.”

“You mean *you* needed the closure.” He isn’t wrong.

“It’s not about what I need anymore, Foster. It’s about her. It’s always been about her.”

“You really love her, don’t you?”

I shrug. “Either that or I’m just a huge fucking moron who admitted to first-degree murder.”

“Well, you can certainly be both.” He chuckles, then grabs my shoulder. “Look, I hope it’s real and she isn’t playing you to get back at you. I’m not saying be suspicious but also, don’t be an idiot.”

“I think it’s a little late for that warning, brother. But I’m not worried about her turning me in or getting me back. Not because I don’t think she’s capable, but because a life without her is a death sentence in my mind anyway.”

I step away from my brother, working my way through the crowd to try and find Emery, but she’s nowhere to be found. For a brief second, I panic, wondering if she did see this as her chance to escape, but then I remember finding her hiding away at every other event we’ve attended together over the years.

My phone buzzes and I pull it out, her name flashing across my screen. I slide open the message from her.

Emery: *Come find me*

I smile, sliding the phone back into my pocket as I begin to ascend the stairs. I take them two at a time, the sound of the crowd slowly growing quieter as I walk down a hallway. My phone buzzes again with another message from her.

Emery: *Warmer*

I look up. She's clearly watching me. I scan the hallway, but I don't see her. I continue walking, another message popping up.

Emery: *Even warmer*

I poke my head around a corner, seeing an empty ballroom that has several large sets of glass doors that open out to balconies. I check the first one, but she's not there. My phone alerts again as I check the second set.

Emery: *Hot*

I smile, checking the third set of doors, opening them to see her standing by the railing.

"On fire." She smiles, lifting her martini glass.

"What do I win for finding you?" I slide my hands into my pockets to keep myself from grabbing her.

She taps her chin, her eyes shifting like she's thinking. "My freedom."

My stomach sinks. "Is that how you still feel—that I'm your captor?"

"No." She smiles. "I'm just teasing you."

I step closer, unconvinced. "I'm serious, Emery."

"So am I."

I remove my hand slowly, reaching up to touch her face. "You are so beautiful," I whisper as I drag my thumb over her lip. "Such a beautiful, sweet flower. I don't deserve to be in your presence."

She lifts her hand, placing mine in hers as she takes it away from her face and places it over her heart. "Yes, you do."

What you did for me—I can never repay you for that.”

“You never would have been in that position if it wasn’t for me, Em. You were right, I am the bad guy in all this. You saw through me from day one; you saw the evil festering inside me.”

“What would you have done if Dane had fallen in love with me?” Her hands encompass mine as she presses them against her chest.

I clench my jaw at the sickening thought. “I would have let you be happy. I wouldn’t have interfered.”

Her eyes search mine. “Sometimes—sometimes I wonder if I was happy. Like truly happy.”

“Why?” That wasn’t a response I was expecting to hear. From the outside looking in, had you not known the real Dane, you’d have thought they were the fucking couple of the year. One of those couples who never fight and have two perfect kids in the suburbs.

“Because you were right.” I stare at her questioningly. “When you used to tease me about thinking about you or wanting you.” I can’t hide the smile that tugs at my lips even if someone put a gun to my head. “How did you know?”

“I’d be lying if I said I did. I guess it was more of a hope, something I was projecting because I sure as fuck thought of you every single day. But there was a part of me that wondered because you never told him the things I said to you.”

“How do you know I didn’t?”

“Because he would have told me. He knew I was in love with you.”

“He knew?” Her voice goes up an octave.

I nod. “In fact, when he told me about his plan, he told me that if I thought about telling you, there was no point because you would never love me.” Before she can agree with that statement, I ask her why she never told Dane the things I said to her. I knew I was pushing the limits, playing with fire, but maybe I didn’t care at that point. I was willing to throw it all

away if it meant letting her know how I felt. “Why didn’t you tell him?”

She blushes, then something else takes over her face entirely.

“Guilt. I felt guilty. I felt like he gave me the world in terms of being a loving husband and partner and why would I ever even have a single thought about straying or wanting someone else when I had him? I truly believed he was the perfect man.”

My heart hurts for her, even if it would have meant I’d never have her in my arms were things different. I can’t stand seeing the pain in her eyes. “And now, I feel guilt because of something else.”

“Why now? You have zero reason to feel any guilt. You didn’t do anything wrong in all of this but have an open heart for a man who was using you.” I lower my voice as I add, “And for trusting me.”

“Because I know I would never give Dane a second chance, even for just lying to me about The Scarlett Letter, let alone all the other women. I certainly wouldn’t give him a second chance for meeting me under false pretenses and using me, even if he had developed real feelings for me. But for some reason, knowing that you were the one who introduced us, you were the one who kept his secrets from me whether it was other women or the club or all of it... here I am, in your arms.”

I bring my other hand to rest beneath her chin so that I can tilt it upward. “And how does that make you feel, Emery?”

“I know I should hate you. I know I should feel anger. But all I feel is love, Mads. It scares me. I’m confused, but I can’t deny what’s in my heart.”

It feels like time stands still. Like all the energy and sound has been sucked out of the atmosphere. “Say it again,” I tell her.

“I’m in love with you. I—I love you,” she says softly. By the time she finishes her last word, I’m pulling her to me, my

tongue in her mouth, my hands grabbing at her, pulling at her to get her closer to me.

“Again,” I say into her mouth through a kiss as I press her against the wall behind me.

“I love you.” She pants the words as I pick her up, her legs wrapping around my waist as I press my arousal into her. I pin her arms above her head. My tongue can’t get deeper, my lips can’t taste her enough. I’m drowning in her and I still crave her.

“Home, now,” I growl into her mouth as I finally peel her from the wall and put her back on her feet. I grab her hand, pulling her forcefully through the doors and across the floor, back out into the hallway. I look for a back exit, finally finding a stairwell that I pull her down.

She stops a few stairs down, grabbing me and kissing me again. We stumble, almost falling as we continue to explore each other’s mouths.

“Fuck, I need you.”

I claw at her clothes, kicking open the door at the bottom of the stairs when we finally reach it. I send Tony a text, telling him to meet us out back. I pull her through a back corridor, finally spotting an exit door and bringing her outside. Before she’s even through the doorway, I’m on her, backing her against the brick wall of the building.

Headlights pan across us as Tony pulls the car down the alleyway. I open the back door, climbing inside next to her. I’m pulling her into my lap before I even have the partition in place.

“I need you,” she mewls as she reaches for my belt buckle. Her hand is already inside my pants by the time Tony has the car in gear.

“I am going to fuck you within an inch of your life tonight.” I grab a handful of her hair, pulling her head back to expose her neck as I drag my tongue slowly up it till I reach her ear. “You are going to be my little play thing all night, Emery. I will taste”—I lick inside her mouth in one long, slow

stroke of my tongue—“kiss”—another stroke—“bite”—this time I bite her lip—“and touch every square inch of you, baby. Are you ready to be mine?” She nods her head. “I want to hear you tell me, baby. Tell me how much you want me to use you.”

“Please,” she begs, “use me, make me feel good, make it hurt, Mads.”

“You want it rough tonight, sweetheart? Is that what you’re telling me?”

“Yes.”

I grab her by the throat. “Do you remember your safe word?”

“Flower.”

EMERY

Mads' hands are in my hair and all over my body as we ascend to the penthouse in his private elevator. It's like it's our first time all over again, frenzied and wild. Then again, this is how it feels every time I'm with him. I can't get enough of him.

"Oh!" I yelp as the doors open and he picks me up, tossing me over his shoulder and marching through the entryway and down one of the hallways toward the stairs. He takes them two at a time, swinging me around and planting me back on my feet when we reach the top of the stairs.

"Look at me," he whispers, his hands back in my now mussed hair. His hair hangs wildly over his forehead. My hands must have been in it in the car on the way back home while I was kissing him. He rests his forehead against mine, his chest rising and falling with his labored breathing. "You are everything to me, Emery. Everything."

"I wish I'd met you first." I don't say the words to placate him; I mean them, from the depths of my soul. Not just because it would have saved me a lifetime of regret and heartache, but because of the connection that I've created with Mads, the way he makes me feel desired but also protected and loved like I'm so much more than a trophy for his arm or a status symbol.

He pauses his movements. "Do you mean that?"

"Yes. I can't explain it, but it just feels—right. Like I'm meant to be yours. I've never felt this before, Mads."

“Me too, baby, me too.” He leans forward, his lips covering mine as he walks me backward toward the bedroom. In a second our energy has changed, going from an animalistic need to feel each other to something so much deeper. “God, the way you taste, the way your body feels in my hands.” He drags his hands over my body, his tongue in my mouth as he reaches around to unzip my dress. “Had I known, I’d have killed him years earlier.”

His words should frighten me, scare me... but they don’t. Maybe I’m just as dark as Mads Bishop. Maybe loving Dane destroyed what good was in me, but I don’t care. I’m done denying myself. I’m done pretending I don’t want this man. A man who would shed blood for my safety, a man who is willing to destroy his life to keep mine safe.

“I love you.” I say the words again, unable to keep them inside of me.

“I love you more—till the day I die,” he whispers in my ear as my dress falls to the floor, leaving me in nothing but my heels, a silk G-string, and my diamond necklace. He steps back, running the back of his hand over my naked breast and making my nipples harden. “I just want to admire you,” he says as he sits on the edge of the bed and looks up at me. “Your beauty is unparalleled, Emery. Un-fucking-paralleled.”

His voice is strained, almost like it pains him to look at me. I’m not self-conscious but suddenly I feel vulnerable, standing here completely naked as he drags his fingers over my body.

“Don’t,” he whispers, his eyes pleading as my hands instinctively start to cover my body nervously. He leans forward, reaching his hands out to grab me and pull me forward until his forehead is resting against my belly. I lift my hands, bringing them to run through his hair as he wraps his arms around me and holds me tightly. “I never thought I would get to hold you like this,” he murmurs.

We stand like this for several minutes, my hands in his hair as he slowly begins to kiss my body. His lips are warm, his breath leaving a trail of goosebumps as he peppers my skin

with kisses. He reaches down, sliding my heels off my feet and spinning me around to sit on the bed.

“I’m going to take my time with you,” he says as he stands and reaches to undo his bow tie. Next are his cuff links before he unbuttons his shirt and slides it down his arms. I love the smattering of black hair that runs from his chest down the center of his stomach and disappears beneath his belt.

“It’s okay, I like the view.” I smile, letting my eyes linger as I lean back on my hands.

“Yeah? Wasn’t sure if I did it for you or not.” He smirks, knowing full well the way that women look at him. He reaches for his belt, but I stop him, my hand resting on his hand as I shake my head.

“Let me.”

He steps closer, his eyes darkening as I pull the leather end through the buckle. Next, I lower his zipper. I slide my fingers into the waistband of his underwear and pants, pulling them down until his cock springs free. The tip is at my lips, a bead of precum lingering, and I dart my tongue out, swiping it across the tip.

“Fuck, yesssss,” he hisses, his hands clenching into fists as I repeat the movement. He stares down at me, his hands coming to tangle in my hair as I wrap my lips around him and take him a little deeper this time. “Mmm, you look so good with my cock in your mouth—nothing like the good girl everyone thinks you are.”

I stare up at him as I begin to move my mouth down his shaft, then slowly back up. He tugs me deeper onto him, the tip of his cock hitting the back of my throat and making me gag.

“I like that sound; let’s do it again,” he mutters, pulling me down harder this time, his cock going even deeper. My hands settle on his hips as I try to adjust my jaw, breathing through my nose. Tears start to prick my eyes. “You like when I fuck your mouth like this?” His expression is dark, his hips

thrusting harder and faster as I try to accommodate him. “You do like it. You’re my little slut, aren’t you? My little toy.”

I can feel his balls tighten as I reach a hand up to cup them. His words are strained as he grunts, sweat beading across his forehead as he looks down at me with wild eyes. I want him to lose control with me tonight; I want to push him.

“You deserve my cock down your throat like this, baby girl.” I look up at him, completely at his mercy as he stretches my mouth to its limits with his girth. “After teasing me all these years, denying me. You deserve this, you deserve it harder. You deserve everything I’m going to give you.” His gaze lifts to the ceiling as the veins on his neck protrude through his skin. Before he can finish, I unwrap my lips from my teeth, allowing them to graze him for just a second.

“What the fuck!” He yanks my hair, pulling me off him. His cock falls from my mouth with a popping sound as my scalp stings. “Did you just—?” His chest heaves and he looks confused, but I offer up a sly grin.

“Maybe.”

I watch it register on his face, and then his free hand is around my throat in a flash. His eyes grow even darker as he leans forward, his face an inch from mine.

“Don’t you ever fucking use your teeth like that on me again,” he snarls.

“Or what?”

His eyes search mine, darting back and forth before he realizes. “Oh, you want me to punish you, don’t you? You want me to take it out on you, don’t you, kitten?” I nod my head slowly as an insidious grin spreads across his face. “In that case...” He releases me, reaching down to pull up his pants before walking into his closet. He reappears a minute later with a long piece of rope.

“What’s that for?”

“That’s for you to find out,” he says as he slowly unrolls it. He grabs my ankle, pulling me down to the edge of the bed

and tying one leg to one foot of the bed. He repeats the process with the other leg so I'm completely spread-eagle.

"I-I'm"—I fall back onto my hands—"on my period," I say, looking down between my thighs toward the small string of my tampon.

"I don't give a fuck," he says, running the last part of the rope behind me. He grabs my wrists, tying them behind me so that I'm completely immobile. He stands up, looking down at me on the bed where I'm sitting upright, legs spread, hands tied behind my back. His pants are still undone, the belt jangling with his movements as he steps back and admires me. My eyes drift to where I can see the base of his cock between the deep V of his abdomen. His gaze follows mine and he grabs his cock through his pants.

"You've lost those privileges, sweetheart."

He reaches forward, hooking his arms beneath my knees and tugging me forward while he crouches down at the end of the bed. He reaches down between my thighs, tugging the string of my tampon until he pulls it out of me. I feel embarrassment flush over my entire body as he walks to the bathroom to throw it away. He returns with a warm washcloth, running it between my thighs before tossing it on the floor and replacing it with his tongue.

His lips and tongue are on me, in me, exploring me. My body is already on edge, and feeling his tongue swirl around my clit over and over again is going to push me over any second.

"Nothing will stop me from eating your sweet, wet cunt, Emery," he says as he spreads my thighs farther apart. "When I die, your pussy better be my last meal or I swear to God I will spend eternity haunting you." He dives back in, teasing me, fucking me with his tongue over and over.

"Please," I pant, begging for a release that he keeps denying me.

"Oh, you want to come?" he says, sliding a finger inside me deeply in one long, smooth motion. "After what you did

earlier?” He shakes his head, clicking his tongue. “You need to learn a lesson, sweetheart.”

My body is on fire; the rope burns as it tugs on my skin. But it feels good mixing with the pleasure of his finger pumping in and out of me while he licks me.

“Yes, right there.” My legs begin to tremble, and my back arches as my orgasm is a second away from finally finding me. But he pauses his movements, once again prompting me to let out a growl of anguish.

He steps back, smiling, wiping his face as I tug against the ropes in frustration. “Are you ready to apologize, young lady?”

“Will you let me come?”

“Of course, but I want to really believe your apology. I want to believe that you’re sorry.”

I take a few breaths, softening my expression. “I’m sorry, baby,” I say with sincerity. “I’m sorry I teased you with my teeth on your cock. I promise I will never do it again.”

“I like that. Thank you. And?” He lifts an eyebrow.

“And?”

“And tell me that you’ll spend the rest of your life making it up to me.”

“Seems like a pretty steep price for a little nibble.”

He shrugs, sliding his hands into his pockets. “Maybe, but then again, I’m the one in control here so I get to decide the price for your punishment.”

“So if I promise to spend the rest of my life making it up to you, you’ll let me finish?”

“Yes.”

“Fine.” I smile. “I’ll spend the rest of my life making it up to you. In fact...” I let my legs fall open a little wider as I lean back on my bound hands. “I promise to suck your cock every single day for the rest of your life. I promise to swallow.” His eyes drop down to my pussy, his jaw clenching as I tease him.

“I promise to be your good little girl and let you use me any way you want to.”

His eyes shoot upward. He can barely get his cock out in time before he’s pressing it into me.

“You’re going to get yourself wrecked,” he grunts. My eyes squeeze shut for a second while I try to accommodate his girth. “This is my pussy, you understand me?” He slams into me, my mouth falling open. “I’m going to have you dripping with my cum, my name so burned on your brain that the only way you’ll ever be able to come is with my cock.”

He pulls out, flipping me onto my knees. The rope pulls taut on my ankles and my face is down in the blanket. He grabs my hips, tugging me backward and impaling me on his cock while he grabs my bound wrists for leverage.

All I can do is take it. The pain of the ropes, the pain of how deep he’s going inside me with the excitement and pleasure has me screaming.

“Come on my cock, baby.” He doesn’t even finish the sentence before I am. “Oh, fuck yes. Squeeze me.” He pulls back one more time, stilling when he pushes back inside me as an orgasm tears through his body. He stays like this for several jagged breaths before he leans forward and kisses my back, then slowly withdraws himself from me.

My body is limp as he removes the ropes, kissing my wrists and ankles. He drags his lips over my feet, sucking one of my toes and making my eyes shoot open.

“Foot fetish?” I laugh as he repeats the process on another toe.

“Before you? No, but I could get turned on kissing any part of you.” He swirls his tongue around my toe again, sucking it gently before biting down.

“Should we test that?”

“Absolutely,” he says, crawling up my body. He takes my hand, kissing the tip of each finger. His lips are warm as he drags them up my arm. “Everything about you turns me on. Your scent, your taste, your soft skin.” He murmurs the words

as he drags his tongue agonizingly slowly up my neck. “I could get lost consuming you.”

He spends the next hour doing exactly that. His tongue swirling around my nipples, kissing his way across each breast and over my collarbones to my shoulders. His fingers tighten around my neck as he holds me in place, dragging his tongue down my spine till he reaches the top of my ass.

I expect him to stop but he doesn't. Instead, he's spreading my cheeks apart, his tongue exploring me in places I've never imagined exploring sexually.

“Oh,” I groan in surprise, but it doesn't stop him. It only makes him slide his tongue into me deeper. My fingers curl toward my palms, gripping the blanket beneath me as he devours my tight hole.

I feel so free, so able to express my desires and not have them met with judgment or discouragement. I relax, letting myself enjoy the sensations that overtake my body as he slides a finger inside me, his mouth moving to my wet center as he fingers my ass.

*M*ads runs his fingers lightly over my back, his fingertips swirling around my shoulder as I lie across his chest.

“Why did you want me to wear the necklace tonight?” I ask, lifting my head slightly to look up at him.

He doesn't answer right away. He stares off in the distance, his fingers still dancing featherlight across my skin.

“Because I bought it for you.”

My brow furrows and I lift myself off him. “What?” I laugh, expecting him to tell me the real reason, but when his eyes find mine, I can see that he's serious. “No, Dane bought it for me for our anniversary this year. I mentioned it to him when we were in Geneva.”

He smiles lazily, reaching out to brush my disheveled hair from my face. “No, sweetheart, you mentioned it to me in Geneva.” My head tilts as I recall the moment I said it. “The three of us were walking and Dane stepped away to take a call. You had been frustrated with him all day. You didn’t say you were, but I could see it on your face. You felt sad and lonely on that trip. When he stepped away to take yet another call, you stopped in front of the window display of Harry Winston. I was standing next to you and instead of our normal banter, you placed your fingers on the edge of the window and commented to me how stunning the necklace was. You even reached up to touch your matching earrings and mentioned that they were your favorite.”

My lips part slightly as I recall what he’s talking about. I remember now Dane stepping away. I was frustrated because he had promised me that not only would we be alone on the trip, but that his work wouldn’t interfere. He had told me that was our day to explore the city, but when we left the hotel, Mads joined us.

“But when he gave it to me, he mentioned remembering me saying something about it when we were in Geneva.”

He shakes his head slightly. “Of course he did. I went back and bought it that same day. I held on to it until about a month before your anniversary when I told him to give it to you. I mentioned that you had seen it in Geneva and wanted it. He didn’t even realize that it matched the earrings I’d bought you the year before.”

My hands reach up to finger the diamond daisy studs in my ears. “You bought these too?” He nods. “I don’t understand. Why?”

“Because he wouldn’t have remembered,” he says softly. “He didn’t remember that you insisted on a bouquet of daisies at your wedding. He didn’t remember that I went out and found some in Vegas for you, and he didn’t remember you sitting on the floor, tying them together to make a daisy crown to match your bouquet.”

Tears prick my eyes as I slowly realize that even the little things I had cherished so much between Dane and me, the things I clung to after his death, after I found out some of his secrets, weren't his doing at all.

“So it really was all fake?”

“No, Em. It wasn't fake. It just wasn't with the person you thought it was with.” He reaches both hands out to cup my face. “I wanted you to be happy, even if it wasn't with me. I wanted you to feel what it was like to be with someone who knew your favorite flower, knew the things that made you happy and would surprise you with them a year later. I knew you would love those earrings so I couldn't pass them up. You deserved them and this necklace.”

“Thank you.” My lip trembles as a tear falls down my cheek. “How did he know you were in love with me?”

“He never said specifically but probably because I didn't hide it at all when I looked at you. I think I was able to buy the jewelry under the guise that he needed to keep that dream alive between you two so that he could stay in the marriage. But when it came to pretending to actually not like you, I was shit at it. I couldn't not stare at you when you walked in the room. I couldn't pretend to be happy for the two of you at your anniversary parties.”

“Did he ever think you and I had—?”

He chuckles and shakes his head. “No, he was far too arrogant to think that I could lure you away from him. I also think the fact that you truly hated me made him realize you would never be with me.”

“He was frustrated a lot that we didn't get along. He'd beg me to try harder with you as his best friend, but knowing what I know now, it just feels so strange. Why would he want me to be friends with you if he knew you were in love with me?”

He shrugs. “I can't say for sure, but if I had to guess, he was building an alibi. I think he had planned a long time ago that I was going to be the one to carry out his fucked-up plan

to kill you. I think he wanted to spin a narrative that you and I were having an affair that went south.”

I close my eyes, more tears falling over the brim of my eyes as I try to push them away.

“Don’t fight it, Emery. Let them come.” He pulls me into his arms, wrapping himself around me as if he’s shielding me from something. “You’re safe with me, baby. Safe to let it all go.” He whispers the words against my hair as the sob I’ve been holding inside tears through my chest.

“I’m sorry,” I choke out, wiping the tears away frantically.

“Don’t apologize.” His cheek is against my head, his arms squeezing me tighter. “I’ll never be mad at you for mourning, for feeling the pain of everything he put you through—for everything I put you through.”

As the tears subside, I feel the weight of my past lessening. I know there will be questions that I’ll never have the answers to and things I’ll never understand, but knowing I have Mads on my side, to hold me and help me, it feels like I’ll be able to make it through.

“Is it all over?” I ask finally.

“What do you mean?” He lifts my chin so I’m looking up at him.

“Everything. The investigation, the questions, the sad looks from everyone.”

“I can’t say, baby.” He sighs. “I don’t think it will ever be over, but I can tell you that I’ll protect you and love you every step of the way. I can’t promise you that people won’t look at us or judge, but I can promise you that what we have is real. You will never have to question if my love for you is real.” He leans forward, kissing my swollen lips. “And as far as the investigation, you won’t need to worry about that. If anything ever comes up again, I’ll handle it.”

“How?”

His expression grows serious. “I meant what I said before, Emery. I will tear any person limb from limb who threatens

your safety or what we have. I've already lost too many years not having you and I'll be damned if another man tries to tear you from me again." He leans in, his forehead against mine. "I will destroy the fucking world, burn it to ashes if it means that it will keep you safe. You. Are. Mine."

MADS

“*G*ood afternoon, Mr. Bishop.”

I lift my head to see Emery standing in the doorway of my office. I smile, standing up to walk toward her.

“What a lovely surprise. What are you doing here?” I lean in to kiss her, letting my lips linger before I step back. “My three o’clock will probably be here any minute”—I glance at my watch—“but I’m happy to make them wait if it means I can indulge myself in you.” I nibble her ear, eliciting a soft giggle from her.

“I am your three o’clock.”

“Seriously?” I pull back to look at her as she nods. “Mmm, exciting. Is there something under this jacket for me?” I tug at the belt of her knee-length jacket, opening it and sliding my hand inside. but there’s just more material.

“No.” She laughs when I look down to see her wearing a full outfit beneath it. “I’m here for an actual meeting with you.”

“Damn, I thought you were here to surprise me with some lingerie and a quickie on my desk.”

“Well, that can certainly be arranged if we can get through everything I want to discuss.”

“In that case, yes. Whatever you want or need, you can have it. I’ll do it. Meeting over.” I reach for her again, but she pushes my hand away, shaking her head.

“Not so fast.” She walks past me, toward the chairs across from my desk, and takes a seat.

I follow, sitting behind my desk and leaning back in my chair. “What do you want to discuss?”

“Dane’s company. I want to either sell it or liquidate it.”

“Okay.” I nod. “If it were me, I would sell the company. That way nobody is losing their job.”

“That’s what I was thinking. I met with the board already and have made decisions to settle any outstanding debts. I half expected the company to be worth nothing with how he was running it, but shockingly, that’s not the case.”

“Are you wanting me to buy it? Is that the ask here?”

She shakes her head. “I considered that, but no. I also considered buying it through my father’s company but that’s not what I want either. I don’t want any ties to him.” She sighs, her shoulders dropping an inch. “I know it might sound silly because I can’t run away from the life I had with him, but I want to mitigate any connection or hold that he might still have on my life.”

“It’s not silly.”

“I also want you to help me figure out my father’s company. I don’t want to run the company; I think that Ken Figaro is doing a great job as CEO as does the board.” She reaches into her bag and pulls out a tablet, turning it on and handing it to me. “I know that I didn’t go to college and my experience with business is extremely limited, but I do understand graphs, numbers, and quarterly reports.” I take the tablet from her hand and flip through the slides she has for me. “The company continues to increase not only revenue but profits quarter over quarter and our stock prices are the highest they’ve ever been. Also, the reviews by employees are some of the highest in the industry.”

“You’re not wrong; these numbers speak for themselves.” I swipe through another slide. “Wagner has always been the market leader in their field. I doubt that will ever go away, but

what's your plan? What role do you want to play with this company?"

"I'm not sure exactly but I know that I want to be more involved. I want to establish more ways for the company to not only give back to its employees but the community and people in need. I looked at the budget and only one percent is allocated to charity each year which they didn't even reach. Last year alone Wagner made over five hundred billion dollars. I want to see our charity donations reach a minimum of three percent. I also want to make sure that the wage gap is fixed within the company. There's no reason why there are salespeople making thirty-five thousand a year and their managers are making three times that. Also, we need a better plan for reimbursing employees for continuing education."

I stare at the reports in my hand. "Did you do this analysis?" She nods and I place the tablet on my desk. "Emery, this isn't just a casual analysis; you drilled down on these reports showing breakdowns of salary, education, cost of living along with the gross and net revenue of not only the company but each department." She stares at me blankly. "You're good at this, baby. Are you sure you don't want to be running that company?" I laugh but I'm only half joking.

"I didn't even go to college, Mads; it's a little outside of my wheelhouse."

"Your father didn't go to college," I remind her. "Also, just remember that Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg both enrolled but didn't graduate. There's so much you can learn in school, sure, but all of the valuable experience I learned wasn't in a classroom."

"That's true." She chews her bottom lip as she fiddles with the belt on her jacket.

"Em." I stand up and walk over to her, taking a seat in the chair next to her. "Look at me, baby." She turns her gaze to meet mine. "I don't say this to pander to you and while I know I'm biased because I love you, I can say with absolute confidence that you have what it takes. You are incredibly smart and wise beyond your years. I have watched you grow

up from that scared nineteen-year-old to this confident woman before me today. But that being said”—I reach forward and place her hands in mine—“you’ve also been put on a shelf for most of your life. We both know this life of money and power that we were born into isn’t meant for women to rise to power. It’s designed for men, to keep women at home as trophies while the men are the ones who are raised to run this world. But that’s not you; we both know it. You have what it takes if that’s what you want to do and if you don’t want to, that’s okay, but don’t ever make that decision based on what you feel others might think about you.”

“Thank you,” she says through quivering lips as her chin begins to tremble.

“Ah, shit, I didn’t mean to upset you.” I wipe away a tear that tumbles down her cheek.

“You didn’t. It’s just that no one has ever said things like that to me. My mom was raised in this world just like me and she felt trapped. Sometimes I wish she would have at least told me that I didn’t have to just get married and have babies.”

“You can do both. Whatever you want to do, I’ll support you.” I stand and pull her out of her seat. “And when we get married and have babies, we’ll figure it out together.”

Her eyes grow wide. “We’re getting married and having babies?”

I’m not sure if she’s just playing coy, but I spin her around and push her against my desk. “Yes,” I say as I slide my hand up her neck into her hair. “You are going to be my wife and”—I drop my other hand to her belly—“you’re going to have my babies.”

“And what if I say no?”

“You won’t.” My voice drops, my pulse quickening as I press my growing erection against her belly.

“Oh yeah? And how do you know that, Mr. Bishop?” She gets that defiant look on her face, the one she gives me when she wants me to take control.

I tug her hair back, exposing her neck to my mouth as I lean in and drag my teeth over her skin. “Because you’re trembling in my arms right now at the mention of being my wife.” I bite down, pulling a hiss from her lips as I replace my teeth with my lips, kissing her gently. “And I know,” I say as I slide my hand from her belly down to the hem of her dress. I gather the material, pushing my hand up her thigh to her panties. “That if I slide my finger against your panties right now, they’ll already be soaked at the thought of me getting you pregnant.”

“Ohhh,” she moans so softly I almost miss it as I barely touch her through her panties. Her fingers dig into my arm through my suit jacket.

“You want to make me a daddy, sweetheart?” She nods her head, her teeth sinking into her bottom lip as I tease her. “Mmm, I wish I could lay you back on this desk and devour you.” I remove my hand, her dress falling back into place. “But I have another meeting that starts in less than two minutes.” I step back, leaving her panting and a little disheveled on the edge of my desk. “Now that’s a sexy little look.” I attempt to put her hair back into place after my hands were just tangled in it. “You look like you were just fucked on my desk.”

“A lot can happen in two minutes.” Her fingers are on my belt buckle, but I still her movements, shaking my head. “Are you denying me?”

“Only for right now.” I touch her chin softly as I walk around my desk, back toward my chair.

She pooches her lip out. “Seems like daddy is no fun today.”

I slowly turn my head to look at her, that impish little grin on her face. I lean forward, my hands flat on the desk in front of me as I level my gaze at her.

“Is that a game you want to play, sweetheart?” Her smile slowly fades when she sees my expression. “Because if you want me to play daddy, I will, but you will be bent over my knee with a pink ass while you choke on my cock.”

I half expect her to blush and run out of my office but instead she giggles. *Giggles*. “But I’ve been such a good girl.”

“Do you think I’m joking, Emery?” I slide my suit jacket down my arms, placing it on the back of my chair as I reach up to loosen my tie. “I will fuck you mercilessly on this desk while my four o’clock meeting sits right outside the door, hearing you get punished.” I point toward my office doors.

“I thought you didn’t want anyone to hear the sounds I make when you fuck me?” Her voice is breathy, filled with need as she slowly slides her jacket down her arms, letting it fall to the floor.

“You’re trying my patience, Emery.”

“Mr. Bishop, your four o’clock is here. They’re waiting in conference room B.” Corina’s voice interrupts us as I stare at Emery.

“Looks like your meeting is here.”

“Get the fuck out of my office, Emery.” I say the words slowly in my *I’m not playing around* tone.

“Make me.”

Before she can even finish the last word, I’m lunging around the desk toward her, but she darts toward the door. I grab her arm, spinning her around and slamming her against the door as our lips meet.

“You are not a good girl,” I say into her mouth as I spin her around and walk her back toward my desk. “You’re a very naughty girl and you need to be punished.” I squeeze her throat. “Don’t you?” She nods her head. “Are you sorry for being disobedient?”

“No.”

“Oh, Emery. *Tsk-tsk*.” I click my tongue as I squeeze her throat tighter. “That’s the wrong answer, sweetheart. I think it’s time daddy teaches you a lesson.”

I reach around her to hit the intercom button on my phone. “Tell my meeting I’ll be late.”

“Well, Mr. Bishop, what do you think?” I stare down at the custom diamond ring I had made at Harry Winston. The light reflects off it wildly, sending a shimmery pattern through the room.

“It’s perfect.” I hold it between my fingers, imagining it on Emery’s hand. Part of me can’t believe I’m sitting here right now about to buy an engagement ring for the woman I’ve secretly been in love with for over five years. The other part of me feels like I’ve been waiting a lifetime for this moment.

I pay for the ring and head out to my car. I need to stop by the club tonight and attend to some business before I head home, but there’s something else that’s nagging at me.

“Hey, Tony, let’s head to the club.” I nod toward him as he opens the back door on my car. I pause, my foot inside the door. I glance over my shoulder, an uneasy feeling that I’m being watched.

“Everything okay, boss?”

I look around, the flash of someone disappearing behind a far street corner catching my eye. While I haven’t heard anything more about the detective that was snooping around, something has me questioning if he really did back off the case. An uneasy feeling settles in my stomach. This whole situation with Dane almost feels too easy, like it was a trap.

I know that motherfucker is dead. I watched his brains explode out the back of his head and his life leave his eyes when I pulled the trigger.

I push the feeling away, telling myself I’m just paranoid.

“Yeah,” I say before sliding into the back seat. “Everything’s fine.”

try to focus on work, but I'm struggling with the uneasy feeling I felt earlier. Like someone was watching me. It isn't the first time I've felt it in the last week, but it's the first time I think I might have actually seen someone. I'm tempted to call Emery, ask her if she's noticed anyone, but I don't want to cause her concern. If someone is following either one of us, I'll handle it.

"Evening, Mr. Bishop." One of the club members nods toward me as he walks past me in the hallway.

"Evening, Tom." I nod before slipping through the door of my office.

I reach into my jacket pocket, pulling out the ring and staring at it again. My fingers squeeze the box. I don't care what it takes; nobody is ever going to separate me from Emery. I put the box back into my coat, turning my attention toward work for the next few hours before I head home.

By the time I get home, Emery is curled up in bed, her hair splayed across the pillow.

"Hey," she says softly, rolling over as I walk softly through the room.

"Hey, baby. Go back to sleep." She rolls all the way over, the sheets slipping away, revealing her naked body as she stretches her arms overhead. "On second thought." I walk over to the bed, leaning down to kiss her while my hands roam her breasts.

"Everything okay?" Her brow furrows.

"Yes," I reply, running my hand over her hair, "everything is okay." I stare down at her, my hand running through her hair as her eyes flutter closed again. "Marry me." Her eyes fly open and she stares up at me, trying to figure out if she heard me correctly.

"What?"

"Marry me, Emery." I reach into my coat and pull out the box, opening it toward her. She sits up, clutching at the sheets as she stares at the ring, then back at me. "I know I don't deserve you, I've never doubted that, but I do know that

nobody will love you like I do. I also know that I'm not a good man, Emery. I can guarantee that I won't reach heaven but you, you're the closest thing I'll ever get to heaven. You're my heaven, my everything."

Her lip quivers as she stares at me. I lean forward to kiss her and she throws her arms around my neck.

"Yes," she says in a hushed whisper before pulling away to look at me, her hands in my hair as she peppers my lips with kisses, saying 'yes' over and over again.

"You're mine, forever." I slide the ring onto her finger, both of us looking down at the diamond as it sparkles in the moonlight that's streaming in through the window.

"Forever," she repeats.

"I mean it, Emery. There's no getting out of this unless you or I die. No matter how angry we might be, we'll fight through it because when it comes to us, to our love, there's no escape. I will fight to the ends of the earth to keep you safe and if you ever decide to leave, I will search from the bottom of the ocean to the moon to find you. Do you understand me?"

"I understand." She smiles, her forehead pressed against mine.

"Tell me you're mine."

"I'm yours."

"Forever?"

"Forever."

EMERY

“Any dates in mind?” I stare down at the stunning engagement ring Mads slipped on my finger last night. It feels unreal. It also feels like the rest of Chicago will have something to say about it. I push those thoughts from my mind, reminding myself of the promise I made when I was in Italy, to live my life for me.

“I’m free tomorrow,” Mads says without looking up from his phone.

“Shoot,” I snap my fingers. “I have a hair appointment tomorrow.”

His gaze lifts from his phone. “With Mr. Man Bun?”

“With Ezekiel? Yes.”

He slides his phone into his pocket, placing his coffee on the counter before walking over to me. “And he’s not interested in you?”

“Last time I checked, I’m very much not his type. I think the vagina really throws him off. Oh, and not to mention his husband and daughter.” I roll my eyes. “You don’t have to be jealous, you know.”

He grabs me, yanking me toward him possessively. “I had to sit back and watch a man I fucking detested touch you, kiss you, claim you as his for five years. I have earned my jealousy. And if you think for one second that a ring is going to change that, you’re wrong.”

“Sounds toxic.” I run my hands up his chest.

“Very.” He leans in, his lips on mine briefly. “We can’t escape our past, sweetheart, but I promise you I will never lie to you and if I don’t tell you something right away, it’s not because I’m hiding it from you. It’s because I’m handling it before I tell you about it.”

“Is there something going on now?” I eye him suspiciously.

“I can’t say for sure, but I have a feeling.”

“Mads—”

“I will handle it, baby. I promise.” He kisses my forehead, his lips lingering for a second longer than usual. “More importantly, when are you going to sell that house and officially move in here?”

“That was my plan today actually. I am going to call my real estate agent later this week but before then, I’m going to head over there today and talk to Tilly and Andy.”

“Are you planning to have them continue to work for you?”

“Not Andy, he’s ready to retire. I’d like to keep Tilly on, if I can?”

“Anything you want, baby. I will be home at a decent hour tonight. I promise.”

“You better or I’ll just have to take things into my own hands.” I reach down, cupping him through his suit pants.

“You’re an insatiable little thing, you know that? How could you possibly need more cock after the way I fucked you last night and this morning?”

“I could ask you the same thing when you woke me up with your tongue inside me after spending over an hour with your face buried between my thighs last night.”

“Yes, well, we both know that I’m a greedy man when it comes to you, especially your pussy.” He runs his hand over his jaw. “Makes my mouth water just thinking about it.”

“On that note.” I smile. “I need to take a shower and you need to head to work.” I go to step around him, but he hangs on to me.

“Better idea. How about I empty my balls into your belly after I fuck you with my tongue.”

I pull up to the front of my house. It feels strange being back here, like it was never even home to me. I put the car in park and get out, heading inside.

“Andy?” I poke my head around a corner, but I don’t see him. “Andy?” I call his name a little louder when I hear the sound of quick steps coming down the hallway.

“Mrs. Ashford.” He smiles, his arms outstretched. “How are you?”

“Hi, Andy. Sorry, I know I’ve been a little out of touch lately.” I wrap my arms around him, sliding the ring off my finger and into my pocket before he notices it. That’s a conversation I’m not too ready to have at the moment. “Why don’t we grab coffee in the kitchen?”

“I understand, Mrs. Ashford, I wouldn’t want to live here either,” he says after I explain to him my plan to sell the house. “And it couldn’t come at a more perfect time for me personally. My wife and I were just talking about moving away, closer to our two sons and grandchildren.”

“I can’t tell you how relieved that makes me feel. I know that probably sounds selfish, but with everything that’s happened lately, I didn’t want to leave you hanging if you planned to continue working.”

“I think my wife might run off without me if I continued to work.” He laughs, then grabs my hands, giving them a squeeze as tears prick his eyes. “I’ve loved working here and I do hope that you can heal and find happiness, Mrs. Ashford. You deserve it.” I don’t know how much he knows or what he’s

heard about Dane, but the pity in his eyes tells me he's heard something.

"Thank you." My voice cracks and I swallow down my emotion. "Now, I need to find Tilly and speak with her before going through some things in the house."

"Oh, she's off today."

"That's right. I forgot she mentioned she would be on vacation this week. Why don't you head out too. I'm just going to be working in the house here."

"Are you sure you don't need any help?"

"None at all." I wave away his offer. "Go take your wife to lunch and start enjoying your retirement."

After Andy leaves, I walk through the house. It's eerily quiet, only the sound of my footsteps echoing throughout the oversized marble halls. I never cared for this house; it felt like I was living in a tomb. It's cold and oversized, nothing about it feeling warm or homey.

I walk up the main stairs and down one of the hallways toward my old bedroom. I feel my pulse quicken the closer I get to the room. I look to my right as I step over the threshold, a large patch of carpet still missing where it was removed due to blood spatter. I had the wall cleaned and repainted, but I never got around to having the carpet redone. I make a note on my phone that it will have to be done before the house is listed.

I stare at myself in the photos hanging on the walls; my face doesn't even look recognizable in most of them. I can't help but wonder if part of me knew something was wrong. I close my eyes, trying to remember the thoughts that I struggled with, the moments of weakness when I felt guilt for wanting more out of life. I remember feeling it the night of my fifth anniversary party.

I look over at the vanity that I was sitting in, when I felt a paralyzing feeling that this was as good as it was ever going to get. That this, going to parties, wearing designer clothes, and

parading around with a smile plastered on my face was going to be the highlight of my existence.

My eyes fall to our bed, the bed that we shared... the bed that he would have shared with someone else after he had me killed. I know now that he wouldn't have missed a single beat in his plan. He would have played the grieving widow with an Oscar-winning performance. The world would have been eating out of his hand, believing that he was beside himself.

Anger pulses through me. I spin on my heel, walking to Dane's closet as I begin to yank his clothes from the hangers and throw them into a large pile on the floor. It feels good. I grunt with each yank, picking up one of his beloved Rolexes that I bought him and throwing it as hard as I can against the custom walnut cabinets. It leaves a mark, bouncing off the wood and tumbling to the floor.

"That felt good." I laugh, picking up another watch and repeating the process. By the time I've yanked everything from his closet, I'm breathing heavily, a thin sheen of sweat across my forehead. My eyes land on the gun safe he kept in the far corner. I squat down, typing in the code to see if it's still the same as it was years ago when he told me about it. The motor whirs, the mechanism unlocking as the door pops open.

I look inside. Three handguns and ammunition are sitting neatly against the black velvet. I pick up one of the guns. It's heavier than I expect it to be. I have no idea if it's loaded but I hold it, pointing it toward the doorway, closing one eye to aim. My finger is on the trigger, but I don't squeeze it. Instead, I put it back in the safe and stand up to head back downstairs.

After several more hours of going room by room, trying to decide if there's anything I want to keep, I step into the kitchen to make myself some lunch and grab a glass of water. I see Andy hauling the few remaining items he had kept in the garage apartment. He waves at me through the window, and I wave back before he gets in his car and drives away.

I sigh. It feels like a huge chapter of my life is officially closing now. I glance down at my watch; it's just after two. I'll stay here another few hours, then head home so that I can

hopefully beat Mads. I haven't had a chance to cook him dinner yet and I want to tonight.

When Tilly gets back from vacation, I'll talk to her about coming to work for me at Mads' house. I'm sure she will be confused, considering she knew I hated him before, but I'm hopeful she'll understand. I know it will be easier for her considering she lives in the city with her mother so she'll no longer have to commute to the suburbs. I offered to let her move into the house and be live-in help before I knew she took care of her mother who has serious health complications.

I look down at the glass in my hand that I've been drinking out of and have the sudden urge to smash it against the wall of his office. I grip the glass so tight I'm sure I'll break it. Anger continues to pulse through my veins. I close my eyes, taking in several deep breaths. I pull out my phone and send a quick message to Mads, leaving my phone on the desk.

***Me:** Just finishing up here. Will leave shortly. Should be home around the same time as you. Xo.*

I haven't told Jeanie, the Realtor I've worked with previously, that I want to put the place on the market. My plan was to go through what I wanted and tell her to do an estate sale, then sell whatever remaining furniture is left in the house. But part of me doesn't want to pass on this house to another unsuspecting family. I'm sure that anyone interested in the house would find out about Dane's supposed suicide before they bought it, but they wouldn't know the real story. They wouldn't know the lies and deceit that took place in this house.

I feel tears start to build again. I close my eyes, trying to breathe through them when I hear what sounds like footsteps on the first floor. My eyes pop open and I tiptoe out of the office, toward the banister of the stairs.

The footsteps stop for a few seconds, then pick up again. I look over the banister, thinking Andy probably just came back because he forgot something, when I see a man I don't recognize walk down the hall toward the stairs. He's short with a full mustache. A khaki trench coat mostly hides his gray suit

that matches his fedora. He pauses on the stairs, then he looks straight up at me.

I gasp, my hand over my mouth as I drop to the ground and slowly crawl backward toward the office. I close the door, hoping the click doesn't give away where I am. Just as I'm locking it, the man kicks it, the door flying open as I fall backward with a scream.

"No, no, no!" I scramble to my feet, tripping as I try to crawl toward the desk where my phone is. But the man grabs my ankles, tugging me so that I'm on my back, looking up at him.

"Calm down. I'm not going to hurt you!" he shouts, his hand over my mouth as I shake my head from side to side. "Calm down, please!"

My movements still as I look up at him, black leather gloves covering his hands. I search for a gun but surprisingly I don't see one in his hands.

"If I let you go, you promise not to scream?" I nod my head slowly and he releases his hand from my mouth. I gasp, pushing him off me so I can stand up.

"Who are you and how the hell did you get in my house?"

"I'm Detective Crest, Leroy Crest." He says his name as if I should know who he is, but I don't. I assume this is the detective that Mads had previously told me was snooping around, but then again, he said that he'd taken care of him.

"What are you doing here?" I cross my arms over my chest, my eyes glancing over at my phone. I don't know if he has a weapon yet and making any sudden movements will make him lunge toward me again.

"Oh, I think you know why I'm here, Mrs. Ashford." He looks around the room, crossing one arm over the other as he narrows his gaze at me.

"I really don't. If you're here about Dane, I don't know what to tell you. I already told the police everything I know."

He nods, picking up a vintage Tiffany paperweight and rolling it around in his hand. “I am here about your husband, Dane, yes, but not about his death.” He looks up at me as if he’s waiting for me to understand what he means.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what you mean. Why else would you be here?”

“Mrs. Ashford, were you aware about your husband’s dalliances?” He steps closer to me and a sense of unease bubbles in my stomach.

“I—uh, I’m not sure what you’re referring to exactly?” I have no idea how much he knows, but I’m not about to say anything that will reveal what I know.

“Now, Mrs. Ashford, I’m a trained lie detector.” He forces a laugh. “So why don’t you do us both a favor and cut the shit.” He steps even closer, reaching his gloved hand out to touch my chin. “Or it’s going to make me very angry.”

“You need to leave,” I say, turning my head away, but he grabs a handful of my hair. “Ow!” I yelp, trying to free myself, but it’s no use.

“I have lost everything because of your piece of shit husband.” His spittle peppers my face he’s so close. “Everything! I lost my job because I was consumed with destroying him, but the fucker took the easy way out before I could get to him.” He hisses, his hot breath against my face. “But most importantly, I lost my wife because of him.”

“I-I’m sor-sorry,” I stutter, fear making my words stick in my throat as he pulls my hair even harder.

“Sorry won’t cut it!” he screams, his unhinged behavior only frightening me further. “Why did he have to go for her? Why? That asshole could have anyone. He had you and it wasn’t enough. He had to have Stella too.”

I have no idea what he’s talking about or if Dane actually did have an affair with his wife, but I wouldn’t put it past him.

“He hurt a lot of people, Leroy, not just you,” I say, hoping I can calm him down. “He hurt me too. He lied to me, hid things from me,” I say, pleading with my eyes. “He was an

awful person, I know that, but I don't know anything about your wife. I promise.”

He stares at me as if he hears me but isn't listening. His eyes drift away from mine. “I knew the day I walked into his office and questioned him about the disappearance of that prostitute that I'd sealed my fate. He was nice to my face, told me he understood I was just doing my job, but the way he looked at me, I just knew...” His words trail off and I stand in silence before he continues like he needs to get it off his chest. “He seduced her, convinced her to leave me, then he tossed her aside like she meant nothing. But instead of coming back to me, she found someone else. I told her I'd take her back.” He starts to cry, the grip he has on me loosening. “I told her I would forgive her, but she didn't want me anymore. So I did what any husband would do. I stalked her and her new boyfriend and made their life hell—until she reported me and I lost my job.”

“I'm sorry.” I tremble. “He left my life in shambles too.”

“Yeah, looks like you're having a real tough time in this mansion. Stella would have never reported me for stalking. She would have never left me if it wasn't for your lying, sack of shit husband. He deserved worse than he got but since he's not here any longer...” He reaches his other hand out and runs it along my face. I squeeze my eyes shut at the unwanted contact. “Maybe you should be the sacrificial lamb.”

His eye twitches, his sadness starting to turn back into rage. I glance over at my phone. It's too far out of reach, but the office door is open. I think if I can get past him, I can make a run for it to the gun safe in the bedroom closet. I don't have time to wait for another chance. I don't have time to try and think it through. I clench my fist, sucking in a deep breath before bringing my knee up as hard as I can right into his groin.

“Ohhh!” he groans, doubling over as I bolt past him toward the door. “You bitch!” he shouts again, but I don't look back. I run as fast as I can, slamming the door behind me as I dart down the hallway and into the bedroom. I close the door, locking it just before he reaches it.

“I’ll kill you!” he screams, pounding against the door as hard as he can. Tears blur my vision as I scramble to the closet. I hear the wood of the door splintering when he begins to kick it harder and harder. I open the safe again, grabbing a gun and spinning around just as the bedroom door flies open and he emerges in the doorway of the closet. His chest heaves, his eyes look empty.

“You’re gonna die, bitch.” He’s laughing now. “I’ve got nothing left to live for.” He lifts his hand, a pistol now visible, but before he realizes it, I’m pulling the trigger on mine, the sound of the bullet leaving the gun almost deafening me as his body crumples into a heap.

I crawl backward, dropping the gun. Tears are pouring down my cheeks, my lungs burning, my ears ringing. Seconds later, he stirs, a low moan sounding through the closet as he starts to sit up.

“Emery!” Mads’ voice echoes through the house, followed by footsteps.

“He has a gun!” I yell as the detective sits up, blood pouring from his left shoulder where the bullet hit him. I reach for my gun again, pointing it at him but it just clicks. I pull the trigger again, the clicking sound sending a chill through me as he smiles and points his gun toward me. I squeeze my eyes shut just as the sound of a single loud gunshot rings out.

MADS

I fire a single shot into the detective's arm, causing his pistol to fall from his hand as he grabs his arm with a strangled moan. I walk toward him, kicking the gun away from him as I keep my muzzle pointed at his head.

"You're safe now, sweetheart." Emery is cowered in the corner, her eyes squeezed shut with her hands over her ears. She slowly cracks one eye open, her hands falling away from her face as she realizes it's me. Her eyes fall down to where the detective is cradling both of his arms, groaning in pain.

"Look at me, you piece of shit." I kick him, causing him to groan louder. "I said *look at me!*" I scream the words at him, his eyes lifting up to me as his breath comes out in rapid hisses.

"I'm a detec—" he starts to tell me as if that's going to change my mind or make me give a shit.

"I don't give a fuck if you're God's chosen; you came after the woman I love." I crouch down, grabbing a handful of his hair and lifting his head so that he's looking at Emery. "Tell her you're sorry."

"Go to hell."

"Tell her!" I yank his hair harder, pressing the barrel of my gun into his open wound.

"Sorry, fuck, sorry!" he screams.

"Now," I stand back up, looking over at Emery. "Turn around, baby. Close your ears." She complies immediately, the

detective looking at her, then to me, and he lifts his hand.

“No wa—” But I don’t wait. I pull the trigger, sending a single shot right between his eyes. Then, for good measure, I unload the rest of the clip into his chest. His body bounces with each shot, blood pouring from his nose and ears.

“Emery.” I step over the body, crouching down in front of her. “Baby, look at me. Are you okay?” She throws her arms around my neck tightly, her body drenched in sweat as she begins to sob in my arms.

“I’m okay,” she says finally through broken tears. “I’m okay.”

I pick her up and take her out of the closet. I don’t put her down until we’re in another bathroom. I place her on the sink, looking her over for any bruises or wounds, but I don’t see any.

“What happened?”

She shakes her head. “He just showed up. I don’t know. He kept asking me about his wife and Dane and I didn’t know—I didn’t know.” Her body is shaking, and I pull her into my arms again.

“There’s nothing to be afraid of now, baby. You’re safe. I’m here.” I rub her back, letting her calm down.

“Did you know?”

“About?” I look at her questioningly.

“About Dane and the detective’s wife? He said that Dane was questioned in the disappearance of a prostitute?”

Surprisingly, this is something I didn’t know about. “No, I had no idea about any of that. What did the wife have to do with anything?”

She shakes her head, wiping away a stray tear. “I don’t know honestly. Apparently, Dane seduced her away from him because he showed up at his office to question him.”

“I’m not surprised by that. I didn’t know anything and had I known, I’d have taken you away from him a long time ago,

baby.”

“How’d you know to come here?”

“You said you were coming home hours ago and when you didn’t answer my texts or calls, I got worried so I came to find you.” I brush her hair back, holding her face in my hands. “I told you, Em, nothing, nothing will ever hurt you again. You’re mine to protect.”

“What are we going to do about the body?” She whispers the words as if someone will hear her.

“I’ll take care of it.”

“How?”

I stare at her for a moment. “I have a contact at the police department; he owes me. He gets rid of this body for me, and he and I are even.”

“Won’t the police be here? Somebody had to have heard.”

I shake my head. “We’re too far out; nobody heard those shots. Nobody heard the shot the night of Dane’s death.”

She covers her face with her hands. “Nobody will ever buy this house now. I’d feel too guilty selling it to someone anyway.”

“What do you want to do with it?”

She looks around the bathroom and chuckles. “Burn it.”

“That’s not a bad idea, actually.”

“I’m kidding,” she says with a half smile. I help her off the counter and we make our way back downstairs. We walk toward the front door, but she pauses, looking back over her shoulder toward a large painting of her and Dane. “On second thought...” She steps around me. “I’ll be right back.”

I wait by the door and she walks back a moment later, a lighter and candle in her hands. She lights the candle, placing it on a small table near a window with drapes, then she holds the lighter next to the drapes and clicks the button. The small orange flame dances before catching on to the material, a plume of dark smoke appearing. Once the flame has caught the

curtain on fire enough, she drops the lighter onto the table and walks toward me. She spins around and stares at the room as the flames begin to climb.

“I turned the oven on and left the burners going without a flame.” I look down at her, impressed. “This place isn’t a home anymore; it’s a tomb.”

I wrap my arm around her, ushering her outside and closing the door behind her. I reach into my pocket and grab my burner phone and dial a number.

“This is Davis.”

“Davis, it’s me. There’s something you need to take care of once it’s done burning.” I rattle off the address. “Consider us even,” I say before hanging up and turning back to Emery. “Let’s go home.”

*S*ix months later...

“Are you marrying her so she can’t testify against you?”

“Shut the hell up.” I laugh at my brother Foster as I adjust my linen shirt in the mirror.

“Seriously though, I’m happy for you. I know you’ve loved her for a long-ass time. Glad to see you’re finally doing something about it.” Foster smacks my arm, giving it a quick squeeze before heading out of my hotel room.

Had it been up to me, we’d have gotten married at the courthouse the day after I proposed to Emery, but I know that’s not what she wanted. She wanted a sunset wedding in Hawaii and that’s exactly what she’s getting. There’s no big ceremony, just us with my brother Foster and Tilly on a private beach.

After the house burned, there was no mention of a body being found in the wreckage. Just a headline about a mansion

that burned after a fire got out of control to the point where firefighters couldn't put it out.

It was the closure that Emery needed, knowing that all of the memories went up in smoke with the rest of the house. Since that day, it feels like things between her and I just fell into place.

A knock sounds at my door and I walk over to answer it.

“She’s ready.” Tilly smiles, her cherubic cheeks glowing. I follow her down the hall to Emery’s room. She insisted that we have some aspect of a tradition in our wedding so we opted not to see one another beforehand, until our first look. She wanted a private moment between both of us before the ceremony. What I didn’t realize when I agreed to it was that meant we also spent the night before our honeymoon apart. We haven’t spent a night apart since the detective almost killed her. The thought of her alone kept me up most of the night so I did what any rational man would do when it comes to protecting his wife—I sat in the hallway outside her room.

I take in a deep breath, then slowly push the door open. She’s standing on the large balcony that overlooks the ocean, the sound of the waves crashing mesmerizing her. The dress she chose has left her back completely bare. I clear my throat softly so I don’t startle her. She spins around, a huge grin on her face when she sees me.

“Holy fuck,” I mutter as I step toward her. The silk of her dress is draped over her body, clinging to her curves and accentuating her hourglass figure. I can’t stop my hands from running up her sides to her breasts where they are elegantly showcased with a dramatic swooping neckline. “You look absolutely breathtaking.”

“Yeah?” She smiles as I hold her at arm’s length so I can take her all in. “You like it?”

“Like it?” I chuckle, my mouth already watering at the thought of fucking her in it. “Fuck me, I could devour you.”

“Behave. I don’t want you messing it up before the ceremony.”

“Mmm, that doesn’t sound like very much fun,” I say, my fingertips drifting softly down her back. I pull her toward me, placing my lips on her neck. “I haven’t tasted you in over twenty-four hours. You know I don’t like going that long without you on my tongue.”

“You’re insatiable.” Her voice is breathy as her eyes flutter closed.

“You’re just too delectable, too tempting.” I slide one hand around the back of her neck, the other sliding up beneath her dress. “Just one taste.” I drop to my knees, lifting her dress to reveal her sheer lace panties that I pull to the side. I dip my tongue between her folds, grabbing her ass to press her against my tongue.

“Oh yes.” Her hands are in my hair, her thighs spreading farther apart for me as I devour her. She presses against my head, forcing my tongue deeper inside her as her legs shake and quiver. “Mads, baby, that feels so good. Don’t stop.” She’s panting, falling, tumbling over the edge as her orgasm takes over.

I reach for my pants, undoing my button and zipper just enough to fish my cock out. I need to feel her tight cunt milking me. I’m pulling her down on top of me when her arms dart outward to catch herself on my shoulders.

“You said a taste. You’re going to wrinkle my dress.”

“Are you denying me?” I hold my cock in my hand, stroking myself slowly.

“Are you forcing me?” She crooks her brow, a mischievous grin on her face.

“Yes.” I grab her waist, lining her entrance up to my cock before sliding her down my length in one rough, forceful motion. “I want my wife standing next to me with my cum dripping from her cunt.”

“Oh.” She grips my shoulders, her nails digging into my skin through the shirt.

“Does it hurt, baby?”

“Yes,” she moans as I lift her up and slide her back down.

“Good, I want you to feel where I’ve been the rest of the day.” I lift my hips up to meet her as I help her slide up and down my length. “I want you reminded every time you move, every time you breathe that I’ve been inside you, that you belong to me. Tell me you’re mine.”

“I’m yours.” The strap of her dress has fallen down her arm, revealing her bare breast. I lean forward, taking her nipple in my mouth and biting down hard before I suck. “Yes, oh yes, Mads.” Her head falls back and I pull her dress down, revealing the other breast to repeat the process.

“I want you marked by my teeth. I want my saliva and cum dripping from you. I want my fingerprints bruised into your flesh.”

“What will people say when they see me?” She winces.

I wrap my hand around her throat tightly, a slight gasp tumbling from her lips. “Tell them daddy likes it rough.”

I can barely grit the words out as my balls tighten, my load seconds away from exploding inside her. “Together.” I groan just as she lets go, coming on my cock while she milks every last drop from me.

A knock sounds on the hotel room door followed by Foster’s voice. “The entire hotel room can hear you freaks. It’s your wedding day, for fuck’s sake!”

“Shit.” I laugh, helping Emery to a standing position. She holds her dress away from her, her legs still spread.

“You better not have ruined my dress.” She giggles after I hop up, stuffing my cock back in my pants and grabbing a washcloth from the bathroom. I slide it between her thighs, pressing gently.

“I promise if I did, I’ll make it up to you.” I kiss the tip of her nose, helping her put her dress back in place before cleaning myself up.

We both pause when we reach the door. “Are you ready to be my wife?”

“Absolutely.” She smiles, wrapping her arms around my neck.

“Hurry the fuck up, we’re tired of waiting,” Foster says on the other side of the door.

“Okay, let’s go get married then.”

The ceremony is short and simple, just the way we wanted it. Afterward, she and I walk down to the water, the soft breeze of the evening air whipping around us. I pull her body toward me, wrapping my arms around her as we sway.

“Look at me, Emery.” She lifts her cheek from my shoulder, her eyes soft and warm as she stares up at me. “You are my world, baby, my everything. I know that nothing can make up for what I did, what I put you through in life, but I promise you right here, right now, I will spend every second of the rest of my life trying to make it up to you. Making you feel safe and loved and cherished.” I press our foreheads together.

“You are my other half, my soulmate. I never knew I could feel love like this. I truly understand what it means to be loved and to love unconditionally. Thank you,” she whispers softly, “for saving me.”

“Nothing but death will tear you from me, Emery, and even after death, I will find you. In this life and the next, you and I will always find our way back to each other. You are mine, forever.”

“Yours,” she repeats, her hand over my heart. “Forever.”

EMERY

“*L*et’s just move here.” I close my eyes, my body gently swaying in the hammock on the lanai that overlooks the beach down below. Our honeymoon has been magical. Day after day of endless sun and ocean breezes.

“We can stay for as long as you like.” Mads leans against a pillar, smiling at me. “I happen to know the owner of this house and he said that you can have it if you want.”

“I like the sound of that.” I crack one eye open, looking up at him. “Seems like he knew that we defiled every surface inside the house.” I giggle.

Spending two weeks in Mads’ Hawaii home in Kauai really has been a dream and for as much as I know he means it when he says we can stay, I know we can’t. He has businesses to run back home, and I want to dive in headfirst into my new position as the head of Philanthropy and Corporate Giving at my father’s company, Wagner Communications. I’m also working with Ashford Financial as Mads is helping me broker a deal with a company that wants to purchase the company and rebrand it, Tokyo Industries, the large company that Dane had previously tried to buy.

Mads eventually confided in me that he was the reason that the previous deal with Ashford fell through and he, in turn, made an offer to Tokyo and his company purchased them. Now, it comes full circle and I know that Mads takes a lot of pleasure in knowing that not only will Tokyo Industries own

Ashford, since Bishop Enterprises owns Tokyo, he essentially owns Dane's company, his *brain child* as he liked to call it.

“Oh, don't worry, we have many more surfaces to defile.” He winks at me. “You ready for me to draw you a bath and pour some champagne?”

I stretch my arms overhead, stifling a yawn as I nod my head. We've created a little routine here. Each night before the sun sets, Mads draws me a bath in the large primary bathroom that has a retractable wall. The tub is then completely open to the outside, overlooking the scenic mountains that touch the ocean. Then we sit and talk, while I soak and enjoy my champagne and he brushes my hair or rubs my feet. It's intimate in a way I never knew existed.

“Lavender, tea tree, or jasmine tonight?” He holds up the bottle of essential oils.

“Jasmine.”

He pours a generous amount into the tub as the water begins to fill it. I strip out of my bikini, wrapping myself in the luxurious silk robe he had embroidered with my name on it. He lights the candles strewn throughout the bathroom, putting on some easy listening jazz on his phone as he pulls the stool he sits on next to the tub.

I step toward him, sliding the robe down my body so it falls in a puddle at my feet. “I love you.” I whisper the words against his lips as I lean down to kiss him. He looks up at me, my hands in his hair as we stare at one another. We've had several of these moments during our honeymoon. Words don't do justice to how we feel in these moments so we don't speak at all. We simply exist in each other's presence.

Finally, I sink beneath the warm water, letting it relax my muscles. Mads' hands work on my shoulders, rubbing additional oil over my neck. He leans forward every so often, his lips tickling my skin before he plants a warm kiss against me.

“I have a surprise for you when we get home.” He kneads my head, his hands in my hair as he works shampoo over my

scalp.

“Surprise? What kind of surprise?”

“Something I am hoping will be enough to keep you satisfied.”

“Hmmm, that’s interesting. I thought I was already satisfied with you.”

His movements stop and he leans down, his mouth at my ear. “Are you satisfied, Mrs. Bishop?”

“Very.” I reach my hands back and grab his forearms for a moment. “Are you, Mr. Bishop? Can you handle only one woman for the rest of your life?”

“Can I handle only one woman? Yes. Can I *handle* you?” He chuckles. “I’m up for the challenge.”

I spin around to face him, my hair piled high on my head with suds. I hold the edge of the tub, looking up at him. “Who else have you loved, Mads?”

He stares at me for a second. “Only you, kitten.”

“Seriously, you had to have been in love before I came along. You didn’t have a high school or college sweetheart?”

He doesn’t hesitate this time. “I liked other women, but I didn’t love them. I don’t think I could even if I had tried at the time. Subconsciously, I think I always knew you were out there somewhere, waiting for me.”

I feel a tinge of guilt that I didn’t wait for him. I fell head over heels for someone else right in front of his eyes. He must know what I’m thinking because he reaches out to touch my face gently. “Don’t,” he whispers. “We have each other now and that’s all that matters.”

“Okay, so maybe you didn’t love them but”—I bite my bottom lip—“have you been with over a hundred women?”

“You really think I’ve been with that many women?”

I nod. “Apart from your looks, which are obviously otherworldly, you’re Mads Bishop. Every woman in this city knows who you are. I can remember being in a stall and

hearing other women gush about you at different events and parties we were both at. I would laugh to myself when I would hear them talk about how they were going to approach you or get your attention.”

He laughs. “Well, it never worked, I can promise you that.”

“So less than one hundred?”

He leans forward on the stool, placing his elbows on his knees so that he’s closer to me. “Let me put it this way. Since I’ve known you, there’s only been one woman in my bed.” I stare at him in disbelief, expecting him to laugh but he doesn’t.

“One?”

“One.”

“Who?”

“You, darling. You.”

“*A*re you ready for your first surprise?”

“First? There’s more than one?”

“There’s more than one,” he repeats, shifting gears with the paddles on his Ferrari. “This one is a complete gamble on my part though, so I hope you like it.”

We’ve been back in Chicago for two days after our lengthy honeymoon. For as much as I didn’t want it to end, I’m also glad to be back home.

We make our way out of the city, heading toward the north shore. It feels like a different world out here, the loud sounds and hustle and bustle of the city a distant memory.

“We’re here?” I ask when he pulls the car down a small road and puts it into park.

“We are.” He climbs out of the car, coming around to help me out. He takes my hand, walking me carefully around the

car and then stands behind me. “How would you feel about building your dream home on this property?”

I stare out over the large piece of property that seems to stretch endlessly. I immediately imagine my life here, a beautiful house with outdoor space where our children can run and play while we sit outside and watch them. I imagine thousands of Christmas lights twinkling against the snow as the windows glow with the light of love and happiness.

“Sweetheart?” Mads tilts his head to look down at me, tears streaming down my face. “Oh, baby, it’s okay. We don’t have to live here. I just thought—”

“I love it,” I interrupt him. “I love it. I want to live here.” I spin around in his arms. “I want to build our home here, watch our children grow up here, and I want to grow old with you here.”

“Are you sure?” I nod my head. “I know that your first choice isn’t to live downtown in my penthouse. We can keep it since it’s closer to our offices, but I want a place that you love, a place that makes you want to nest and make a home. A place where you know you’ll always be safe.”

“Thank you.” I place my hands over his heart. “My first home is here where I already know that I will always be safe and loved.”

MADS

“That one,” I say to the lady who’s holding up two different dresses in front of me. I chose the black dress that I know will cling to Emery’s body. There’s a sheer panel that runs down one side, stopping when it meets a thigh-high slit. The slim cut of the dress and the low neckline will accentuate her delicate shoulders and ample cleavage.

“And did you want me to find anything else?” She smiles as she places it on the rack.

“Lingerie, preferably black lace, barely there.”

“Of course, sir. Right this way.” She blushes slightly, ushering for me to follow her through the store. “I must say, we were very excited to get your call. I don’t think we’ve had the pleasure of having you in the store, Mr. Bishop.”

“Yes, well, I never had an occasion until now.”

“Oh, celebrating anything particular?”

I smile, tempted to tell her that I had a secret sex den built specifically for my wife to experiment with all her kinkiest desires and tonight I’m surprising her with it. “Newly married,” I say instead.

“Wonderful, congratulations.” We round a corner, the room transforming into a sexy department dripping with silk and pearls. “This is our lingerie department. Let me pull a few pieces for you to look at.”

I run my fingers over the material of the items she brings out, sifting them through my fingertips, imagining them

against Emery's soft skin. "All of them," I say, unwilling to decide.

"Perfect," she purrs. "Now will you want these items gift wrapped?"

"Yes, and please have them delivered here." I slide across a business card. "Address them to Tilly; she'll be expecting them. Also, can you please have this note delivered with it?"

Once I pay and head out of the store, I give Tilly a call.

"Hey, Tilly, it's Mads. The store clerk said the items will be delivered within the hour. Could you arrange them on the bed along with the note that will be accompanying them?" Emery has no idea what's going to happen tonight. I just told her in the note to wear the dress, one of the lingerie sets, and to be ready by seven p.m. when I'll pick her up.

"Absolutely, sir."

I hang up and make my way back to the office, counting down the seconds till I can leave and head to pick her up.

I take a shower in my office bathroom, putting on a fresh suit but leaving my five o'clock shadow. I know Emery likes it when I have a day or two's growth of stubble on my face. I think she likes the way I drag it against her thighs when I'm devouring her.

I tug my sleeves, fastening my cuff links and straightening my tie before heading out of the office and down to my car. Before heading to the penthouse to pick her up, I stop by the club, double-checking everything is in place.

"I'm shocked you aren't going to leave me waiting," I say against her temple as I place my hand at the small of her back. "I've started to grow fond of it."

"I know how much you love delayed gratification." She smiles, pecking my lips gently so she doesn't smear her lipstick.

"You look stunning, my love." I inhale her scent, the warmth of her perfume hitting me right in the balls. Every time I smell her scent, it drives me wild.

“You look very handsome.” She drags her eyes down me as I reach to open the passenger door for her. “Too handsome actually. Maybe we could skip dinner?”

“Delayed gratification, remember?” I swat her ass playfully before closing the door behind her. That’s exactly what I plan to put her through during dinner.

We arrive at Oriole, a favorite restaurant of ours in the city. We say hello to the host who takes us to our private table away from the rest of the crowd where a bottle of champagne and wine are already waiting for us.

“What’s the occasion?” Emery asks, lifting her glass to clink it against mine. “Are you proposing again?”

“Something like that,” I wink, not wanting to give the surprise away. “Tell me how your first day at the office went.”

“It was great.” Her eyes light up when she talks about work. It’s still brand new to her but the passion she has for furthering the good her father’s company has and will do is infectious. I want to see her succeed. I know she will, and I can’t wait to see what she accomplishes. “It felt strange being back in those offices. I remember when my dad used to take me once in a great while when I was a kid. It felt the same but completely different at the same time. I had a few people come up to me, introducing themselves and telling me how they remembered me stopping by as a child.”

“I’m so happy for you, sweetheart. I still think that someday, I’ll see you sitting behind that same CEO chair your father sat behind.”

“We’ll see about that.” She smiles. “For now, I’m just so happy with this role and I can’t thank you enough for helping me along the way, for believing in me.”

I reach across the table and take her hands. “I will always support you and believe in you, even if you doubt yourself.”

“This is why I love you.” She grabs a napkin and dabs it at the corner of her eyes. “Hard to believe you’re the same man who tossed a rag on me the first time we hooked up and told me to clean myself up.”

“Ah.” I shake my head in embarrassment. “Yes, well, that was a very different version of me. One I’m not very proud of.”

“I kind of like that version of you too; that’s the version that I—um, that I wanted.” She blushes.

“You did, didn’t you?” It makes me chuckle to think of miss proper and sweet Emery Wagner wanting a man to degrade her, to use her. I lean back in my chair, reaching down to obviously adjust my rigid cock. “I can’t say that it doesn’t turn me on to know you like when I’m a little rough with you.”

“Yeah, it’s exciting.” She sips her champagne, reaching for the bottle to refill her glass. I grab the bottle, filling it up. “Are you sure we can’t skip dinner?” She giggles, the champagne clearly going straight to her head.

“Now where is your patience, Mrs. Bishop?” I lean forward and take her glass from her. “I need you aware of your surroundings a bit later, darling.”

“Is there something after dinner?”

“Surprise number two.” I hold up my fingers.

“Do I get a hint this time?”

I level my eyes at her, lowering my voice. “Do you remember your safe word?”

“Flower,” she says softly.

“Good girl. You might need it.”

*T*he ride to the club is quick but long enough that I can sense the tension building between us. I move my finger slightly across the exposed skin of Emery’s thigh.

“Anything on your mind?”

“Hmm?” She turns to look at me, her face flush, her eyes already heavy. “Oh, no, nothing.”

I press the inside of my hand against her opposite cheek, my mouth at her ear. “Liar,” I whisper before nipping her earlobe. I see her hands squeeze her clutch tightly in her lap. “Don’t be shy on me now, baby girl. I’m going to have you quivering”—I lick her earlobe, sucking it into my mouth—“shaking, begging for me to finish you.”

“Mads.” My name falls from her lips like a plea, my cock twitching at the thought of her begging me.

“That’s right, baby. Say my name. You’re going to be screaming it all night.”

When we arrive at the club, Emery’s legs are like a baby deer. She’s already soaked with anticipation, her scent on my fingers from when I slipped them inside her just before exiting the car.

“Evening, Mr. Bishop.” Kent, our valet, shakes my hand.

“Evening, Kent.” I slip him a hundred, letting him know to keep up the good work.

I lead Emery through the main floor, back to my office where I close the door behind us. I pull open a drawer, reaching inside to pull out the black and pink mask I had made for her. She looks nervous as she stands in the middle of my office, her eyes watching my every move. I pull out my chair, taking a seat and patting my thigh.

“Come here, sweetheart.” She walks toward me, sitting down with her back toward me. “Tonight is all about you.” I reach around her, placing the mask on her face and tying the ribbon. “I want you to trust me with your pleasure. Can you do that?”

“Yes.” She looks over her shoulder at me, her plump lips begging to be tasted.

“Are you ready?” She nods and we stand, making our way out of the office and down the stairs to the lower level.

There are several couples walking through the booths, stopping to watch other couples. The music pounds around us, the glow of the red lights enhancing the erotic tension. I hold Emery’s hand, walking her slowly from booth to booth.

She pauses in front of one, the couple fully naked. The man is taking the woman from behind, her body pressed against the glass, her mouth open. Her breasts are smashed against the glass as the man fucks her roughly, his hands digging into her hips as he gets lost in pleasure.

“Wait,” she whispers, standing in place when I tug her hand to move on.

“Do you like that, sweetheart?” I run my fingers up her arm. She nods her head, her teeth dragging over her lower lip as the woman in front of her begins to tremble. The man grabs her by the throat, tugging her backward so that his lips can find hers, his hands grabbing her breast roughly.

“Oh.” Emery pauses at the next booth. A woman is spread-eagle on a wooden cross, ropes pulled taut across her breast, her skin red from the tension. A toy is stuffed inside her as the man sits across from her in a chair with a remote in one hand, his cock in the other. “What is that?” she asks softly, nodding toward the remote.

“That is a remote-controlled vibrator.” I nod to where the toy is hanging out of her between her thighs. “If I had to guess, orgasm denial.”

“Denial?” Her eyes grow wide. “As in she can’t come?” I nod. “Why?”

“Delayed gratification.” I pull her hair to the side, exposing her neck to my lips. “He’s edging her, bringing her close over and over so that when he finally lets her come, it will be explosive. It’s a form of punishment or maybe even torture.”

“Do you enjoy that?”

“I do.”

“Do you want to do that with me?”

“Only if you wanted to explore it. I wouldn’t push you past your limits but seeing you begging me for release is a turn-on for me. Is that something you’re interested in?”

“Maybe...yes.” Her eyes are fixated on the woman as the man finally places the remote down, the woman’s body hanging limp after she finally finds release.

I move her along until we’ve reached a new booth right in the center of the room. This one, though, has reflective mirrors so when we stop in front of it, it’s our own reflection looking back at us.

“What’s this one?” She reaches her hand out to touch it.

“This one,” I murmur as I lean in to run my lips up her neck, “is for us.”

“Us?” she asks, surprised. I grab her hand, leading her around to the door.

“I had this built for us while we were away. This one,” I say, closing the door behind us and locking it, “has the mirrors inverted. So we can see out, see all of the couples walking around, but they won’t be able to see us.”

She walks to the edge of the room, looking through the glass to the couples outside. “You did this for us?”

“For you, baby. I want you to be able to express yourself, to explore your sexuality without sharing you.” I walk up behind her again, turning her to face me. “I’m a very jealous man, Emery, possessive, especially when it comes to you, and while I can concede on some things, I will never allow another man to see your body the way I get to.”

“I understand.” She nods. “I’m sorry I upset you before when I tried to push it.”

“Don’t apologize. I realize it’s controlling and probably toxic. It’s not a boundary. It’s a demand that I’m putting on us, but this is my solution to it.”

She looks around again, a slow smile spreading across her face. “It’s exciting.” The room has been outfitted with a large king-sized bed, silk sheets adorning it. I’ve also had a chest filled with new toys placed on a table at the end of the bed next to my third surprise for her.

“What’s that?” She points to it, looking from me to the saddle that’s next to the bed.

“This is surprise number three.” I run my hand over the black leather. “It’s a sex saddle.” Her eyes follow my hands as I gesture toward the dildo that’s mounted in the center. “You sit on it, this going inside you. You can control the movements and vibrations with this,” I say, reaching for the control panel.

“Movements?”

“It can thrust inside you while this part”—I point toward the smaller piece in front of the dildo—“stimulates your clit with vibration.”

She steps forward, curiosity mixing with excitement as she runs her hand over the toy. “Do I get to control it?” I shake my head. “Ah, delayed gratification?”

“Something like that.” I step closer to her. “If you want me to tease you on it like that couple we just watched, I will happily oblige. I bought it for you because I want to watch you get fucked.” I take her hand, wrapping it around the thick dildo. “I want to see your pussy stuffed with this toy while your clit is stimulated to the point where you have no choice but to surrender to orgasm while you soak yourself.”

“Right now?” Her eyes stay focused on the toy as she runs her hand up and down the length of it.

“Not yet.” I chuckle at her excitement. “Delayed gratification, remember?”

“Besides, I’ve been dying to find out which lingerie you chose.” I nip at her ear, making her sigh. “You look absolutely stunning in this dress, baby.” I stand behind her as I run my hands over her body. “But I’m dying to take it off you.”

“I love the dress; you have amazing taste.” She spins in my arms, wrapping hers around my neck and kissing me. Before things escalate, I pull her arms from me, stepping back.

“Tonight,” I say as I maneuver a chair I had placed in the room, “I want you to trust me fully.” I remove my suit jacket, placing it on the chair before taking a seat. “Can you do that?”

“Yes.”

“Good girl. Now, stay right there and slowly take off your dress for me.” I lean back, my legs outstretched slightly as I watch her. She reaches behind, slowly unzipping the dress. She removes the straps one at a time, sliding the garment down her body to the floor.

I take in her body wrapped in barely there black lace. The bra is sheer, the cups barely covering her nipples. The G-string is tiny, the slit of her pussy visible through the material, making my mouth water.

“Turn for me.” I motion with my fingers and she obeys. “Stop,” I say when her back is toward me. “Bend forward and place your hands on the glass.” She hesitates for a second before complying. “Fuck me,” I mutter when she bends, her ass on display with the silk string disappearing between her cheeks. I reach down and undo my belt and zipper, reaching inside to squeeze my cock.

“Are you going to touch me?” she asks, breaking the silence.

“Eventually. Take your panties off, then sit on the stool next to you, facing me.” She stands back up, pulling off her panties and taking a seat facing me. “Bra too.” She obeys, pulling it off and tossing it to the side. “Spread your thighs for me, baby. Show me your pussy.” She spreads her legs. “Wider,” I command and she obliges.

I clench my jaw while I squeeze my cock at the sight of her pink pussy glistening. “You’re already wet, aren’t you, baby?”

“Yes.”

“Put your finger inside your pussy, baby.”

She slides her hand slowly over her breasts, her nipples growing hard, before dropping down to her lower belly. She reaches her pussy, toying with her clit before slipping her finger inside an inch.

“All the way for me.” She slides it in deeper, her lips falling open. “Good girl. Now, bring your finger to your lips

and lick it clean.” She stares at me for a second. “Don’t make me repeat myself in here, Emery, or you will be punished and it won’t be for your benefit.” She pulls her finger out, wrapping her lips around it and licking it. I stare at her for several more seconds, watching her pulse in excitement.

“You’re throbbing for me, aren’t you? You want me to make you feel good?” She nods. “You want me to stuff you so full it hurts, don’t you?”

“Yes, please.”

“Keep your eyes on me and get on your hands and knees.” She slides off the stool, dropping down to her hands and knees while keeping her gaze on me. “Now, crawl to me, kitten.” When she reaches me, she sits back on her knees, looking up at me. I put my thumb against her lips, pushing it inside her mouth. “Suck.” She obeys, the feeling of her tongue on my thumb sending a bolt of desire straight to my cock that’s already ready to blow. My resolve is hanging by a thread, my chest burning as I try to keep my composure.

“Mmm,” she moans as she closes her eyes, sucking my thumb harder.

“You know exactly what you do to me, don’t you?” I stare down at her, her eyes big and innocent looking up at me. I remove my thumb from her mouth, reaching down to slide two fingers deep inside her.

“Ohhhh,” she moans, her belly clenching at the intrusion.

“That’s right, sweetheart. Get those fingers nice and wet for me.” I pump them in her hard. “Fuck, I love the sound of your pussy, so wet for me.” I take her to the edge, but I don’t let her come. “Sorry, baby,” I say as I pull my fingers from her. “Daddy needs a taste.” I lift my fingers to my lips, licking every ounce of her juices from my fingers.

She reaches for my hand, wanting me to finish her off, but I pull back, lifting her by her waist instead to walk her to the edge of the bed.

“Trust me, I’m going to make you come more times than you can imagine tonight, but I want to savor you.” I lean

forward, burying my face in her pussy. I can't get my tongue deep enough; I can't get enough of her taste on my tongue. "I could eat you for hours." I spread her thighs apart, probably to the point of pain for her, but I'm too lost in her scent to stop. I lick her, fucking her with my tongue till she's crying out from her climax.

"Oh, yes! Yes!" Her back arches off the bed, her hands in my hair as she forces my tongue deeper inside her.

Before I can fully stand back up, she's sitting up, reaching for me. She tugs at my shirt in a frenzy, her hands desperate to undo the buttons. I reach down, tearing my shirt from my body.

"What do you want, baby?" I grab her hands, forcing her to look up at me.

"I want to be in control."

"How so?"

She pulls her hands from mine, reaching up to slide my shirt down my arms. "I want to fuck you, to use you."

"I'm all yours," I whisper against her lips.

She pulls the chair toward the edge of the room. The people standing outside and walking by are so close, but they have no idea.

"Take off your pants," she says, stepping away from my body to walk over to the chest of toys. I watch as she opens it. "What's this?" she asks, holding up a chrome bullet-shaped item with a diamond on the end.

"That's a butt plug."

"Sit." She points to the chair beside me. She places the butt plug back into the box and produces two silk ribbons. She walks over to me, placing my hand on the armrest and tying the ribbon around my wrist. She repeats the process on my other hand. I'm now tied to the chair, my cock bobbing upward in my lap.

"Looks like I'm at your mercy. What are you going to do to me?"

She walks toward me, placing her knee on the chair between my thighs as she looks down at me. She slides her tongue in my mouth, her hand reaching down to stroke my cock as her tongue flicks inside my mouth.

“Tease,” I murmur when she pulls away.

“Now, Mr. Bishop, you’re going to be my toy.” She turns away from me, straddling me. Her hands are flat on my thighs as she reaches between us to place the tip of my cock at her entrance.

“Oh, fuck yes,” I groan when I feel the warmth of her pussy on my cock.

“Yessss,” she hisses, inching her way down on me. She pulls herself back up, her nails digging into the flesh of my thighs as she repeats this process over and over. It’s agonizing but it feels so good.

“That’s right, baby. Take my cock.” I grip the armrest, the wood beneath my fingers creaking as she quickens her pace, each stroke going deeper. “Fuck, your pussy looks so good from this angle, watching your tight little hole stretch and take me so deep. Goddamn!” I groan, my release building as she bounces harder on my cock.

“Oh yes, Mads, oh yes!” she shouts, her hands pressing against the glass in front of her as she pushes back into me. I plant my feet so the chair doesn’t move with her momentum.

“Look at those people out there, baby. They have no idea you’re getting your cunt stuffed with my cock like a good little slut. They have no idea you like to be fucked like an animal.”

“Mads, oh baby.” She lets out the longest, sexiest moan I’ve ever heard in my life. Her toes and fingers both curl, her body falling forward as she explodes on my cock. When her pussy contracts on me, it’s the final straw.

“Fuuuuuuck,” I groan, spilling myself inside her.

We both sit in silence, catching our breath until she finally looks back at me, a smile on her face.

“I like being in charge.”

“Don’t get used to it.” She giggles and it makes my cock twitch. “Stay bent over just like that and slide forward. I want to see my cum dripping from you.” She keeps her hands on the glass, planting her feet and sliding off my lap.

“Like that?” she asks, looking back at me with her big eyes, her swollen lips, and my cum sliding out of her pussy and down her thighs.

In one swift motion, I tug my hands free from the ribbons, grabbing her throat from behind as I reach my hand around to kiss her. I pick her up, walking her over to where the saddle is sitting on the bed.

“Now that you’ve had your fun, Emery, I think it’s time I show you exactly what your body was made for—my pleasure.” I grab a handful of her hair, maneuvering her face toward the toy. “Spit, baby.” She complies and I help her swing her leg over it, the dildo pressing into her as her hands grip the edge of the saddle.

“Ohhh,” she groans, her eyes fluttering closed as her pussy grips it.

“Now...” I take the controls, sitting down in the chair as I flip it to the lowest level. “You’re going to be at my mercy, kitten.”

“Ahh...” She flinches when I turn on the clit stimulator, the vibrations shooting through her body as her fingers curl into the leather.

“Does that feel good, sweetheart? You like having a big cock inside?” She nods, her eyes struggling to stay focused on me as I turn it up another level. “Let go of the edge.” She struggles to release but she sits back, her hands coming up to toy with her nipples as the dildo thrusts inside her over and over. “Up on your knees a little more. I want to see your cum dripping down your thighs.”

“Mads,” she pants, her eyes fluttering closed as they roll back in her head. “Mads, please,” she begs. I stroke myself slowly as I back the toy down a few notches.

“Not yet, baby. I want you desperate.”

I turn it back up, this time to new heights. Her ab muscles contract, her cries growing louder as her pussy grows more swollen by the second.

“I’m— I— I—” She can’t even form sentences, let alone a word. Her mouth hangs open, her body trembling.

“You what? What do you need, sweetheart? Tell me.” She continues to stumble over her words, a sound of frustration tumbling from her lips. “Tsk, tsk, I need to hear it, Emery. I need you to tell me you want me to make you come.”

“Please,” she finally gets the word out, “please let me come.”

I stand, walking toward her. I run my hand up her neck, tilting her head back so I can kiss her, my tongue sliding deep into her mouth.

“Good girl. I want you to soak yourself, baby.” I turn the dial up one more, the instant jolt of added pleasure sending her over the edge. My fingers press against her clit as her hand darts out, her fingers digging into my arm as her release sprays out of her like a sprinkler.

“Ohhhhh,” she moans loudly, her body convulsing as I turn the dial back down, and she collapses against me.

“Such an obedient young lady,” I say into her mouth as her lips move against mine. “Now lie back so that I can savor every last drop of you.”

EMERY

*M*y body aches in all the right places. Each pang is a delicious memory of the things that Mads did to me last night.

He had me stretched, twisted, and stuffed with toys, his fingers, his tongue, his cock... I blush, remembering the way he spoke to me. The way my release took over my body when I rode the saddle. The way he encouraged me when he fucked me over and over again after I didn't think I could take any more.

"That's my girl. You can handle it. Breathe through it, sweetheart. Relax and take my cock like a good girl. You are such a good girl, the way you stretch open for daddy."

"Mrs. Bishop?"

I spin around. "Oh, good morning, Tilly. I didn't hear you walk in." I stretch my arms overhead and sit up in my bed. It still feels strange to hear myself being referred to as Mrs. Bishop, but I like it.

"Good morning. I'm sorry if I startled you." She smiles.

"Not at all, Tilly. What are you up to today?" I straighten out the duvet and toss the pillows on the bed. While Tilly works as the house manager, we certainly don't leave her to handle everything. For the most part, Mads and I are very self-sufficient people. She tends to the grocery shopping and cooks meals on the days that I work.

“Well, I was making the grocery list and was taking inventory of the household items when I noticed—” Her face grows red and her eyes shift to the side.

“Noticed?”

“It’s probably not my position to say anything, but when I did the shopping before, at your household, I bought tampons pretty regularly, but I noticed you haven’t been using them for several weeks.”

My mouth falls open. “Oh, I didn’t even notice,” I say, thinking through the last time I had my period.

“I’m sorry if I overstepped.”

“No, no, not at all,” I say, walking toward her. “I wonder —” I look at her and she smiles. “I can’t be already though, right?”

“Should you take a test to be sure?”

I nod. “Yes, I guess I should. I think I have one somewhere actually.” I scurry to the bathroom, dropping to my knees to sort through the items I haven’t really sorted since I moved. I find a few tampons, tossing them aside, seeing a single pregnancy test at the bottom of the basket. I pick it up, remembering when I had taken the other one. I was late with Dane and at the time I remember hoping and praying it would be positive, but now, I couldn’t be more grateful that it was negative.

“Found it!” I say, holding it up as I pop back up to my feet. She stares at it, then looks up at me. “Well, I guess I should take it then, huh?”

“Yes.” She nods enthusiastically, a huge grin already on her face that tells me she hopes that it’s positive.

“Okay, be right out.” I close the door, pulling down my underwear and pajamas and sit on the toilet. I hold the test in place, peeing on the stick and placing the cap back on. I don’t open the door right away once I’ve finished. Instead, I sit and stare at the floor, thinking through if this is a good thing or not.

I want to be a mother, I always have, and Mads has made it clear he wants to be a father. My leg bounces as I think through how this might impact my new job and our life. I know it's possible to have it all, a career, a loving husband, and a family, but I also don't want someone else raising my child.

"Are you okay?" Tilly knocks on the door, bringing me back to the present.

I turn back to the door, opening it. "Yes, sorry. Just a little lost in thought."

She reaches out and grabs my hand in hers. "Miss Emery, I know this might be scary, but I've known you for several years. You're like a daughter to me. I know you're going to be an amazing mother. And I'll be right here to help you with whatever you need."

I fight back the tears but it's no use. She wraps her arms around me. "Thank you, Tilly." I didn't realize how much I've missed having a mother figure in my life. "You're so wonderful. I'm so lucky to have you in my life."

She squeezes my hands, tears in her eyes as well. "I think it's time to look at the test."

I nod, my hands falling to my side as I step away and walk to the sink where I placed it. I take in a shaking breath, closing my eyes briefly before picking up the test and looking down at it.

Positive.

*M*y heart feels like it's going to pound out of my chest, my hands fidgeting nervously.

"There's my beautiful wife." Mads walks up behind me, his hands on my arms as he leans in and kisses my neck. His arms wrap around me. "How are you feeling today? I hope I wasn't too rough with you last night."

I look down to where his hand is pressed against my lower belly, and I instinctively cover it with my own, the soft glow from the setting sun enveloping us.

“I feel sore but in all the right ways.” I turn my face so that our lips meet. “I missed you,” I whisper against his lips.

“I miss you every second I’m not with you, baby.” His lips cover mine, the passion between us something we can never seem to ignore.

I turn in his arms, my hands on his chest as he deepens the kiss. Finally, I break the kiss, resting my forehead against his chest.

“There’s something I need to tell you.”

His movements still. “There is?” I nod my head. His hands press against my upper arms so that he can look me in the eyes. “Emery, is everything okay?”

Apprehension and excitement pull at me so I just blurt the words out.

“I’m pregnant.” My voice is already trembling with emotion.

“Pregnant?” He repeats the word back to me as if it’s foreign to him.

“Yes.” His expression morphs from shock to excitement in a matter of seconds. He picks me up, twirling me around.

“You’re pregnant? This isn’t a joke?”

“Not a joke.” I laugh, my anxiety melting away.

“Oh, sweetheart.” He cups my face with his hands. “Oh, baby, that makes me so happy.” He kisses me over and over again, tears starting to fall down my cheeks.

“I’m sorry.” I cover my face. “I swear they’re happy tears. I’m just so—shocked and scared but happy.”

“Hey,” he says, wiping away the tears with his thumbs, “it’s okay to be scared. It’s normal, right? This is huge, this is a baby. This is our baby.”

“I know.” I smack his chest. “Don’t make me cry more.”

“We’ll figure it out together. Neither of us has done this before.”

“But we just got married and I just started my job... I don’t know how to make it all work.”

“We don’t have to know how, baby. I know that’s easy for me to say since I won’t be carrying our baby or going through the birth, but I will be right here beside you, every single step of the way. You want ice cream at one a.m., I’m your guy. You need someone to punch because you’re hormonal and uncomfortable and overheated? I’m your guy.” He searches my face and I know he means every word he’s saying.

“Thank you.”

“You are going to be an incredible mother, an amazing one, and I can’t wait to see you grow with our baby.” He places his hands back on my belly. “We can handle anything and we’re going to create a beautiful life for our child.”

“I love you,” I say softly, a mix of emotions rushing through me.

“I love you so much, Emery.” He presses a tender kiss to my forehead.

In this moment, I feel like we both know that no matter what challenges come our way, our love and excitement for this new chapter will guide us. Our love will carry us every step of the way.

MADS

NINE MONTHS LATER...

“*A*re you ready, mama?”

A mixture of excitement and nerves course through me as I look down at Emery. I know she can do this; she was built to bring life into this world, but the thought still terrifies me.

“You’ve got this baby. I’m right here.”

“Okay,” she says nervously. “I’m ready.”

Thirty-two minutes later, I’m holding my baby girl in my arms.

“Can you believe she’s finally here?” Emery asks beside me.

I shake my head in amazement. “No, it still feels like a dream. Our little girl is here and she’s perfect. She’s perfect.” I just keep saying that phrase over and over again as my eyes blur with tears. Emery lays her head on my shoulder as we both stare down at our beautiful Fiona.

From the moment we found out she was expecting, Emery wanted to name our baby after her mother if it was a girl. I told her I thought that was a perfect idea. We never even got around to officially deciding on a boy’s name.

“Ten perfect fingers. Ten perfect toes.” Emery smiles, holding our daughter’s hand in hers.

“How are you feeling, love?”

“Exhausted.” She laughs. “But too excited to sleep now that she’s here. Can you believe we made this?”

“You did all the work. She is one hundred percent you. Look at her.” I rub my hand over her head that’s sprinkled with auburn hair already. Her bright-blue eyes stare up at me as her tongue protrudes from her mouth.

It felt like time had been stretched to its limits over the last few months, each day the anticipation building as we waited to meet our baby. Emery was the picture of strength and beauty as she brought our daughter into this world. A fearless woman so capable. And now, holding my daughter for the first time, a wave of emotion crashes over me. She’s delicate and innocent, utterly captivating. I can’t help but marvel at the miracle of life that we created together.

We spend the next day in the hospital, but Emery is already ready to get home.

“You had one of the smoothest deliveries and healthiest pregnancies I’ve seen in a long time.” The doctor smiles at her before she’s discharged.

“Well, you can thank him for that,” she says, thumbing toward me. “He made sure I was well taken care of during my entire pregnancy.”

“Sounds like he’s already ready to be a good father.” He grabs my arm, shaking both our hands before sending us home.

We carefully buckle our daughter into the car seat, Emery sitting in back with her while I drive us home. The ride is filled with Emery’s commentary to Fiona, telling her all about our house that is almost complete.

“And in just a few short months, you’re going to have a brand-new nursery right next to mommy and daddy’s room, yes.” Emery laughs, followed by a gargle and coo from Fiona.

“We don’t have to move in right away, baby. You’ve been through so much already. I don’t want you feeling overwhelmed or stressed.”

“I know, but I want to. I want to nest and figure out our new routine. I won’t be back in the office for at least sixteen weeks so that gives me time to have a month at the new house before I’m back at work.”

“Whatever you want, darling.” I smile at her in the rearview mirror.

“It’ll be our haven, Mads. A place where we’ll build our family’s future and make memories that will last a lifetime.”

As the next several weeks pass, we find ourselves anxiously visiting the homesite, watching as everything falls into place.

“And over here,” I say, pointing toward an elevated patch of ground. “I’m having them put in a garden. I thought it would be great for Fiona to learn about nature.”

Emery’s eyes water and she fans her face. “I’m sorry these damn pregnancy hormones are still hanging around. But um”—she sniffs, more tears falling—“that sounds like such an amazing idea.” She falls into my arms and I can’t hide my laughter at her emotions.

The rest of the progress on the house flies by over the next few weeks and the day finally arrives when we officially move in. With Fiona in our arms, we step into our new home, feeling an overwhelming sense of belonging.

Once we put Fiona to bed and the sun has begun to set, I hold Em in my arms. As I gaze into her eyes, I can’t contain the emotions that flood my heart.

“I promise you that I will move mountains, cross oceans, and give up the world just to ensure you and Fiona’s safety and happiness. This newfound responsibility has changed me, making me realize what truly matters in life, Em. I’ve loved you from afar for so long; I never thought that I would be holding you in my arms like this. That I would be putting our daughter to bed in the home that we built. You are my purpose, Em; you are my everything. There is nothing I won’t do for you.”

Emery's presence in my life is like a guiding light, and Fiona has made that light even brighter. They are the center of my universe, and I am determined to give them the life they deserve—a life filled with love, laughter, and endless possibilities.

“I know, baby. I love you more than I ever thought was possible. Thank you for trusting in me, in us.”

“I love you both,” I tell Emery, my voice filled with sincerity. “You have completed me, and I promise to be the best partner and father I can be. You and Fiona are my redemption, and I'll forever be grateful for the love you've brought into my life.”

As the days turn into weeks and months, we settle into our new roles as parents and homeowners. Emery is a natural mother, and seeing her care for Fiona fills me with immense joy. We share the responsibilities, making sure that we support and uplift each other every step of the way.

Life has transformed in ways I never thought possible. The love between us has deepened, and our bond as a family is unbreakable. Each night, as I watch Emery cradle Fiona in her arms, I am reminded of how fortunate I am to have these two incredible souls by my side.

With our hearts full of love and hope, we embrace the future together. As the years unfold, I am eager to witness Fiona grow and discover the wonders of life. And as for Emery and me, we will continue to write our story—one of love, growth, and redemption through the beautiful journey of building a family together.

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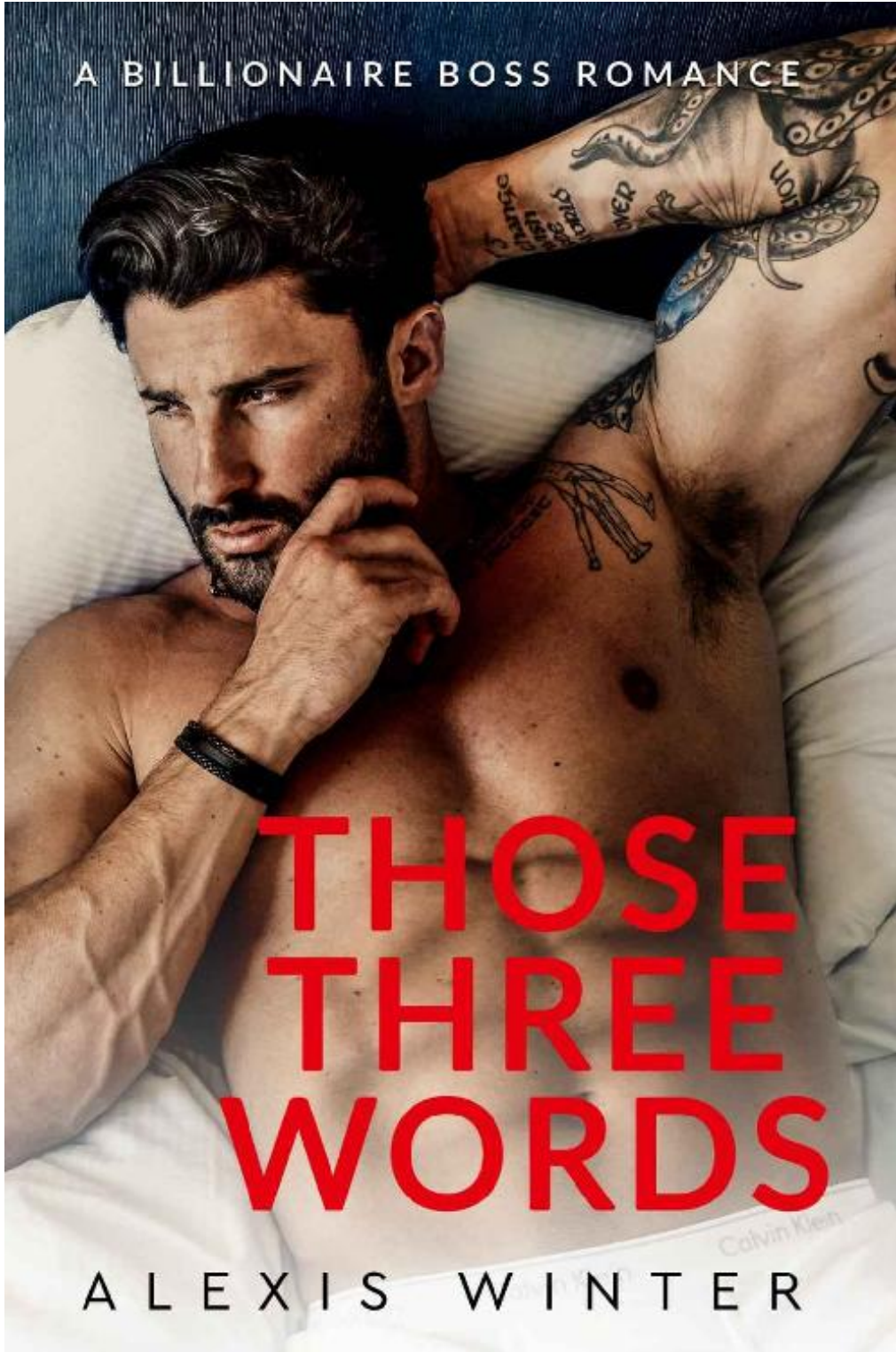
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A BILLIONAIRE BOSS ROMANCE

**THOSE
THREE
WORDS**

ALEXIS WINTER



CHAPTER 1

MARGOT

“*I*’m *fired*?”

The words feel so foreign rolling off my tongue. I’ve never been fired. I’m only twenty-six, but it still feels like a kick to the stomach.

“Not technically *fired*. It’s not because of your performance, if that makes it any better. It’s simply a matter of budget cuts.” Mr. Diaz says the words with a sympathetic look on his face as if that will soften the blow of the situation.

It does not.

“I just don’t understand. The music education program has grown so much in the last three years with me managing it. The ki—” My words hitch in my throat that is thick with emotion. “The kids. What about the kids? They love my class.”

“Like I said, Miss Silver, regrettably, we just don’t have the funding anymore to keep the program going. I’m sure you understand how all this bureaucratic red tape messes things up. Unfortunately, it’s out of my hands.”

I stare at the ground, my vision blurring through my tears.

“We can offer you two weeks’ pay.” He holds out an envelope to me, but I don’t take it. “I’m sorry, Miss Silver. Truly, I am.” Mr. Diaz places the envelope on the small table next to me before standing up and exiting the room.

Two weeks? That’s it? I bounce my legs nervously, trying to divert my anxiousness into movement instead of having a

full emotional breakdown in the teacher's lounge.

I've loved every second of being a music teacher. It was my dream job, what I went to school for. Both my parents were musicians. My mom taught me to read music and my dad taught me to feel it.

I pick up the envelope. Between this paycheck and my small savings, I'd say I have about enough money to live in my current Chicago studio for another month and a half before I'm evicted.

I let out a breath and gather my bag, then head back to my classroom. It's the end of the semester so it won't look strange that I'm carrying a box of items to my car. Most teachers clean out their classrooms for the summer.

"Bye, Miss Silver. See you next year!" Two of my students, Bryant and Adam, wave to me as I step into my classroom.

"Have a good summer, boys," I say as they both dart past me down the hallway and out the door.

I shut the door behind me and lean against it briefly. Already the pain of realizing I won't see Bryant and Adam next school year is threatening to break through. I push the thoughts aside, still probably a little numb from being fired.

I'll miss the smell of my classroom. That probably sounds weird but every classroom still has that same smell of pencil shavings and Lysol wipes from our childhood. Even though I'm pretty sure none of these kids have ever seen or used a number two pencil in their life.

I smile to myself, thinking about my favorite elementary teacher, Miss Nyguard. She was always so kind and sweet. Her wardrobe of pastel cardigans and floral skirts looked as though she'd borrowed them from someone twice her age. I wish I could tell her the impact she had on me. It was because of her that I wanted to be an educator.

Memories of her calm me as I pack up my final item, a small succulent that my students bought me at the beginning

of the year. I gather the box in my arms and walk to the door, not stopping to look around for a final time.

“Hey, Margot, I was looking for you.”

I turn to see Hank Byers, the PE teacher, jogging toward me as he waves.

“Some of us are going to that karaoke bar over off Wabash tonight. Nothing crazy, just celebrating the end of another school year. You should come by.”

I smile. Hank has been friendly to everyone here from day one. He’s a big guy, tall and burly with a big mop of blond curls and cherubic cheeks with perfect dimples. He’s the local man candy that all the single teachers have taken a shot at, but as far as I know, none have been successful.

“I dunno,” I say, chewing on my bottom lip. I wasn’t planning on telling anyone that my position was eliminated, and if I go out to a bar, odds are I’ll wallow, have a few too many, and probably cry desperately to anyone who will listen to me.

“Come on. Just come out for one drink. I’ll buy.” He smiles and holds out his hands.

“Okay, one drink.”

“Nice!” He claps his hands together. “I gotta get back in there.” He points both thumbs over one shoulder. “Need to do some inventory on the sports equipment and see what I need to buy for next year.”

“Sounds good and thanks for the invite.”

“See you tonight,” he says, turning to jog back toward the gymnasium. “And don’t even think about bailing!” he shouts through cupped hands before disappearing inside.

I toss the box of items into my back seat and look around the mostly empty parking lot one last time before driving home.

“So what do you plan to do with your summer?”

Ah, the dreaded teacher question we all ask each other.

“I’ll probably do private music lessons like I do every summer.”

I swallow down my beer, my stomach uneasy at the thought that I should have reached out to parents weeks ago. Between end-of-year stuff and counting on the fact I’d still have a job next school year, I’d let it slip. I usually have about six or seven private students each summer, but that’s nowhere near enough to cover even half my rent.

“What about you? Still coaching little league?”

“Yup. I’ll be coaching again. Also do some umping for adult teams and playing in the over-thirty league. My uncle Roy needs some help with his painting business too so that’ll be some nice extra cash.” He spins his beer bottle on the bar in front of him.

Hank really is an attractive guy and he’s clearly a man with drive, but I’ve never felt any sort of attraction to him. I’m not sure why. Maybe because we are coworkers I’ve never let myself even consider it.

“It’s funny how everyone thinks being a teacher is this walk in the park because we get summers off. Nobody realizes we all pretty much have summer jobs to keep the lights on, especially in Chicago.”

I nod in agreement, both of us chuckling.

“I, uh, I got fired today.” The words are out of my mouth before I can stop myself from saying them.

“What?” Hank’s head whips toward me, his expression shocked. “Why?”

“Budget cuts,” I say, picking at the label on my beer bottle.

“Fuck, man, I’m so sorry.” He shakes his head. I can feel pity radiating off him and I instantly regret saying anything.

“It’s fine. I’ll find something else.” I’m trying to convince myself.

“No, it’s not fine. You are an amazing teacher and those kids love you. It’s more than a job, Margot; this is your life.”

I purse my lips and nod my head, his words conveying exactly why it hurts so bad. I hang my head as the tears start to fall. No point in trying to fight them.

“I know that, Hank,” I whisper as he stands up, reaching for my arm to pull me in for a hug.

“Let it out,” he says, his large hands wrapping halfway around my back as my shoulders start to bob up and down.

I don’t have the luxury of caring if I look pathetic right now. Maybe everyone will just think I’ve had too much to drink and can’t keep it together. Anything is better than the humiliation of being fired, even if it’s not my fault.

We stand there for several more moments before I excuse myself to freshen up in the restroom. By the time I’ve returned to my seat, Hank has ordered us another round.

“Thank you.” I gesture toward the drink with my head as I reach into my purse for my wallet. “But I need to go home. It’s been an emotional day.”

His countenance falls a little as he nods. “I understand. This is on me,” he says as I pull my wallet out.

“Thanks, Hank.” I reach out and grab his hand, giving it a quick squeeze.

“Don’t be a stranger, okay? You have my number. If you need someone to vent to or a job reference or anything, call me?” He raises his eyebrows with the question.

“Of course.” I offer a polite nod before heading back home.

I’m almost to my apartment building when my phone vibrates in my pocket. I reach down and pull it out, looking at the screen to see who would be calling me at this time of night.

It's a name and number I haven't seen in the better part of four years. In fact, the last time I saw Warren Dorsey's name on my phone was right after my mother passed away.

I don't answer it. Instead, I hit the ignore button and shove the phone back in my pocket. The last thing I need right now is whatever the hell my biological deadbeat dad has brewing.

I spend the entire weekend combing through job postings. I apply to every job that is even remotely related to music first, then start in on the local cafés and stores.

I've checked my account balance a record forty-two times over a few days, staring at it like it's going to magically morph into enough money to save me from being evicted.

I also check my email at least a hundred times over the next week, hoping, praying for any kind of reply from my applications. A few are immediately returned with, *position has been filled* or *we regret to inform you...* I don't even bother reading past that point.

Exasperated, I open my last bottle of wine. It's not even one I bought. It's a dusty old table blend that was given out by our school administration during the holidays a few years back.

"Desperate times, desperate measures," I mutter as I pour myself a generous glass and open my laptop.

I scroll through Craigslist on the off chance anyone might need private music lessons. Over half the emails I sent out to parents about lessons over the summer were returned with explanations about traveling or not in the budget. Another blow to my nonexistent savings.

A listing catches my eye and I click the link to open it.

Needed: Live-in nanny. Full-time 5-6 days per week. All expenses covered. Dental, vision, and medical insurance.

Competitive salary. Immediate hire.

“*W*hoa, what?” I pull the laptop screen closer to me as I read the salary. “That can’t be right.” I squint, reading it again.

How the hell can someone pay more than twice what I make as a teacher for a nanny and offer living expenses covered and health insurance?

My excitement builds as I read over the qualifications. Okay, now I see why they pay so well. They want someone with a preferred degree in childcare or related field, CPR certified, 5+ years’ experience with children, no pets, can teach music.

“Holy shit!” I yelp as I hop up off the couch. I can’t hold back the smile as my heart thuds wildly in my chest. I am literally a perfect candidate for this job, and they want someone who can start ASAP.

I open my email and copy the address. I attach my resume and spend the next thirty minutes crafting a perfectly worded cover letter and link to my LinkedIn profile. I hold my breath, hit send, and flop back against the couch.

Finally, a glimmer of hope.

“*A*nd you have a degree in education?” Miss Perry, a willowy woman with a perfectly tight bun and beige skirt suit, reads over my resume. Her short-clipped nails are the softest shade of pink and her skin is smooth and shiny, like she’s been freshly Botoxed.

“Yes, a double degree actually in music education as well as early childhood education.”

I squeeze my fingers together in my lap, trying to calm my nerves.

“I see and your last job ended because?” She peers precariously over the glasses that are perched on her nose.

“Budget cuts unfortunately. I was there for three years but the funding for the music program wasn’t renewed so... here I am.” I plaster a nervous smile on my face as she returns her gaze back to the paper in her hands.

“Oh, and I brought a letter of recommendation from the school I just taught at.” I reach into my bag and produce the document, handing it to her.

I resist the urge to recite my resume for her. I want to explain why I’m perfect for this position, but something about how uptight she is makes me lose my nerve. Not to mention the sheer monstrosity of a house that I drove up to, complete with a massive wrought iron gate. I had no idea places even existed like this in the Chicago suburbs.

“Great.” She gives a tight-lipped smile and places the resume on the desk in front of her, along with the letter. “We’ll call you.” She stands and juts her hand out to me.

“Okay.” I shake her hand. “Thanks again so much for taking the time to interview me. I’ll be anxiously waiting to hear from you.”

She walks me to the front door in silence, only the clicking of her heels on the marble floor echoing around us.

“Oh, and just so you know, my schedule is completely open. I have no obligations so if I got the job, I’d be fully committed.” She stares at me blankly, her hand resting on the front door handle. “What I mean is no husband or kids or pets or anything. Not even a boyfriend,” I say around a chuckle.

“Bye now,” she says and I take the hint, stepping through the front door, and it closes behind me.

One full week and nothing.

No callback.

No email.

I pull my phone out of my pocket and double-check the ringer is on. I also make sure I don't have any missed calls or texts. I've left two voicemails and a follow-up email. I know I sound desperate, but I *am* desperate. I'm on my last month's rent and I have a total of \$122 to my name.

A fleeting thought pops through my head. *Maybe now is the time to reach out to Warren Dorsey. He's a billionaire several times over.* I push the thought from my head as quickly as it enters.

"Still nothing?" Shelly, my coworker at the local café I managed to snag a barista job at, asks.

"Nope." I sigh, putting my phone back into my apron.

"Dammit, that sucks," she says as she hops off the counter and removes her apron.

I'm grateful for the cash tips we split each day at this place but it's still minimum wage and I won't get my first paycheck for another week.

I walk over to the neon open sign in the window and turn it off before locking the door. Because we're a café, we open early so I've been able to work a twelve-hour shift every day this week—four a.m. to four p.m.

"Have a great night, Shelly." I wave as we both walk our separate ways.

My phone rings and I jump, then dig my hand into my pocket and pull it out. I don't recognize the number but as someone who has just applied to dozens of jobs, I know it could be a possible employer.

"Hello, this is Margot."

"Miss Silver?" A deep, syrupy voice says my name on the other end.

"Yes, this is Margot Silver." I try to sound chipper and upbeat, as if that will help them determine if they want to hire me.

“This is Graham Hayes,” the man’s voice says. “The nanny position.”

“Oh!” I say, surprised. Who is this calling me? It’s certainly not Miss Uptight Perry. “Yes, how can I help you, Mr. Hayes?”

He clears his throat before speaking again, his voice doing weird things to my insides.

“I realize this is very unorthodox, but I’m kind of in a bind here. My housekeeper, Fiona Perry, who you interviewed with, is on vacation and didn’t hire anyone yet. I found your resume in a pile and thought maybe you could help me?”

“Yeah, absolutely. What can I do for you?”

“I need a nanny to start right away.”

“Okay, like how soon?”

“Tonight. Right now, actually. I’ll pay cash.”

I don’t think twice. I accept the job, jump in my car, and rush to the Hayes’ residence. I’m once again reminded just how imposing his residence is when I ring the buzzer at the front gate that is adorned with a massive *H*, for Hayes I assume.

“A little pretentious for my taste,” I say as the gate opens and I zip up the driveway.

The moment I pull up to the house, I realize that if he’s needing me to stay the night, I didn’t bring anything other than the clothes I’m wearing and my wallet. I walk to the front porch and raise my hand to ring the bell when the door swings open and a tall, raven-haired man greets me. I jump back, startled.

Holy shit. Is this him?

I feel my mouth fall open and I instinctively bring my fingers to my lips to make sure I haven’t actually just drooled on myself.

If James Bond and Henry Cavill had a baby, it would be Graham Hayes. His long, lean body is wrapped perfectly in

what I can only assume is a custom-made tuxedo. He adjusts the cuff link on one of his wrists, his tanned fingers long enough they could probably encircle my waist if he put his hands together.

Suddenly my mouth feels dry and I'm very aware of my scuffed-up Converse and torn jeans, remembering that I just worked a twelve-hour shift and I look every bit the part. I tuck a piece of hair behind my ear that has fallen loose from my braid and try to stand up a little taller, like that's going to cover anything up.

"Miss Silver? Graham Hayes," he says curtly as he extends his hand toward me.

"I thought for sure you were gonna say Bruce Wayne." I laugh but his expression stays stoic. I reach my hand out to shake his and it's completely engulfed.

"Like Batman—never mind. Pleasure to meet you, sir."

"Please, come inside."

He gestures with his right hand, his left still holding the door. I step inside. The woodsy scent of his very expensive cologne envelops me and I have to remind myself to breathe.

But just as I'm almost clear of the doorway, my toe catches the lip and I catapult myself forward. I throw my hands out dramatically to catch myself, somehow making it worse and ending up doing a half somersault while falling into a crumpled pile of embarrassment at his feet.

In all those books and movies I've seen and read, this is the meet cute. This is the part where the handsome stranger gallantly thrusts his arms out and catches the heroine before she falls, their eyes drawn to each other's as her breasts smash against his body and he suddenly realizes she's everything he's been looking for.

But not in my case. Instead, Mr. Hayes makes zero effort to catch me and instead, he shoves his hands in his pockets and looks at me with exasperation, like I'm a bug that he's considering squishing.

CHAPTER 2

I catch myself staring a little too long at the small, impish woman standing on my front porch.

Is this the nanny?

She looks like she's barely bigger than a child herself.

Her strawberry-blond hair is swept up haphazardly in some sort of braid that has fallen, a few stray tendrils clinging to her slender neck. She thrusts her small hand into mine, a smile stretching across her face to her eyes. I feel the warmth of her fingers against the inside of my palm and instantly release it when my mind questions if the rest of her body is this soft and inviting.

I hold back a smile at her Bruce Wayne comment. It was certainly not the first time someone called me that.

I'm completely distracted by the smattering of freckles across her nose and cheeks that come into view once she steps over the threshold and into the entryway. Then suddenly she tumbles forward, landing in a heap at my feet.

"Are you alright, Miss Silver?"

I keep my hands in my pockets, too scared to reach out and touch her again.

"Yup." She stands, adjusting her shirt. "Only my pride is hurt."

I close the door behind her. "Please." I gesture for her to step into the parlor to the right of the entrance. I pick up her

resume from the table where I placed it and we both take a seat opposite one another.

She looks nervous, her fingers knotting together in her lap as she sits up board straight.

“You can relax,” I say, but she just offers a tight-lipped smile.

“I apologize for the out-of-the-blue call and fire drill request to have you work this evening, but my housekeeper, Miss Perry, is unfortunately on vacation and she failed to procure a new nanny before she left.”

“I had assumed that the position had been filled when I didn’t hear back from her.”

I give her a questioning look and she continues. “Well, after I interviewed a week or so ago, I followed up with two phone calls and left her a voicemail, but I didn’t hear anything back.” She shrugs.

“Hmm.” That is strange considering Miss Silver’s impeccable background in education and her relevant work experience with young children. I’m not sure what Miss Perry’s angle is recently; it’s been like pulling teeth to get her to hire a new nanny ever since my last one had to return home to attend to some family business. I don’t express any of this out loud; instead, I read over her resume again.

“Is there a reason you’re not returning to teach music education at Jefferson Elementary? Or are you only looking for a summer position since you’re a teacher?”

“I, uh, the position was downsized unfortunately. I was told that our funding wasn’t renewed so they had to cut the program. Which is such a shame because I don’t think people truly realize how important introducing music and teaching children to read music and play instruments really is. Such a transferable life skill if you ask me.”

I didn’t. I think it myself, but I can appreciate someone who is passionate about their career.

“Have you ever been a nanny or live-in caretaker before?” I lean back in my chair and watch as she shakes her head

vigorously. She's young. Based on her graduation date, I'd guess she's barely over twenty-five.

"I haven't but I have spent my entire professional career wrangling children of all ages for several hours a day." She lets out another nervous laugh that wrinkles her nose and it's fucking adorable.

Nope. Get that thought out of your head.

"I love kids. I'm such a believer in enriching not only their lives with skills but also their day-to-day experiences, ya know? They're like little sponges; they just soak everything up so it's a waste to just stick them in front of a screen all day."

Her nervousness seems to have subsided. She's speaking animatedly, gesturing with her hands and laughing and smiling.

"Eleanor is five. It's just me and her. Her mother is not in the picture any longer. I need someone extremely reliable and the live-in portion is non-negotiable. I travel a lot for work. I'm gone early and often not home till late so I need someone that can really take the reins. I'm not looking for someone who needs babysitting themselves. Miss Perry is always around during the work hours to assist with anything, but to be clear, childcare and anything that goes along with it is not her job."

She nods her head vigorously as she pulls out her phone and taps around before holding it in front of her face and typing vigorously.

"Am I boring you, Miss Silver?" I can't hide the annoyance in my voice. Maybe it's a generational thing, but these damn phones are always in people's faces to the point it's exhausting.

"Oh, no. Sorry. I'm just taking notes on everything."

I nod and continue.

"As I was saying, all childcare-related responsibilities fall to you, including food preparation, meal times, laundry, classes, and schooling, etc. This position is six days a week. Sundays are yours and sometimes even Saturdays. There is an extensive outlined book detailing any and all preferences,

allergies, likes and dislikes, contact information for doctors and teachers. Do you have any questions?”

She looks through her phone notes for a moment before her eyes dart upward to find mine.

“So, did you just want me for the night, or do I have the job?”

The words did you want me for the night shoot straight to my dick.

“The job is yours if you want it, Miss Silver.” I toss her resume on the table next to me.

“Oh my God. Absolutely! Thank you so much, Mr. Hayes. I promise I won’t let you down.”

“Great. I’ll sort out everything with Miss Perry when she’s back. I assume she shared the compensation details. She’ll have you fill out the proper tax documents and insurance information. As for tonight”—I glance at my watch and see that I need to leave in the next twenty minutes—“I have a work event that I cannot miss so I’ll need you to watch Eleanor. I don’t need you to spend the night. You can start work on Monday. That way you can move into your room this weekend. I’ll have Miss Perry show you that on Saturday or Sunday. She’ll call you.”

I stand and she does as well, her big green eyes staring at me as she nods her head at what I’m saying.

“I’ll introduce you to Eleanor.”

I walk up the main staircase and down the hallway to Eleanor’s room, Miss Silver on my heels. I raise my hand to knock when she shoots her hand out to grab my wrist. I stop and slowly turn my head to face her.

“Sorry, but, um, really quick question. Is she okay with a new nanny? I mean, is she onboard with this or is it going to be one of those situations where she’s angry at me?” The nervousness is back as she grips my wrist.

I slowly maneuver myself out of her grip just as the bedroom door opens and Eleanor stands there, hip cocked.

“What’s going on?” she says with her best suspicious look on her face. I squat down till I’m eye level with her.

“Eleanor, this is Miss Silver, your new nanny. She is a music teacher that loves kids and she’s very excited to meet you and get to know you.”

I turn to look back at Miss Silver. Her hands are knotted together as she smiles and then robotically waves at Eleanor.

“Hi, so lovely to meet you, Miss Eleanor. I’m Margot and I have to say your princess dress is by far the prettiest and most pink dress I’ve ever seen!”

I watch as Eleanor’s eyes light up at the compliment and the way Miss Silver naturally charms her way into my little girl’s heart instantly.

“It is?” Eleanor’s big blue eyes almost bug out of her face as she twirls around. “I think so too!” she squeals.

Eleanor reaches for Miss Silver’s hand, grabbing it and pulling her through the doorway and past me.

“Wanna see my matching shoes? They have a high heel!” She drags her toward her closet.

“Oh my goodness, those are prettier than anything I could have ever imagined. You look like you should be in a Disney movie with little birdies singing all around you and chipmunks and bunnies sitting at your feet.”

“An, an, and cats? I love cats.” Eleanor is instantly entranced.

I give Miss Silver a slight nod. “Eleanor, Daddy has to go to a work event. Please be on your best behavior.”

“Bye, Daddy.” She waves dismissively, her attention fully on showing Miss Silver her animal collection.

I close the door behind me and start back downstairs. It warms my heart that Eleanor is such a receptive little girl and that someone like Miss Silver can bring her the warmth and connection she needs.

Ever since her mom died when she was only six months old, I've struggled. I want to be engaged with her, to give her the kind of love and life she deserves and needs, but every time I look in her big, blue eyes, all I see is her mother, Meredith, and all the pain of that loss comes rushing back.

Some days it feels like just yesterday I was happy and fun-loving. I was ecstatic to be a father. I loved every second of Meredith's pregnancy cravings and mood swings. I know that sounds crazy, but nothing made me happier than running to three stores at eleven at night to find the very specific brand of cracker she was craving.

We met when the telecommunications company I had founded, landed a contract with the hospital she was a director at. I was instantly drawn to her, moth to the flame and all that, but she wasn't interested. She was focused on her career, had just gotten out of a toxic marriage, and was ready to dominate her thirties and travel the world. But I'm nothing if not persistent and after begging her for a first date that lasted a full twenty-six hours of just talking and sharing a bottle of wine, we both realized we were meant to be.

We were inseparable after that.

Nine months later we were married.

We enjoyed our time as newlyweds but after five years, we decided that our family of two was ready to be a family of three. Meredith got pregnant pretty easily, had no major complications, and was an instant natural at being a mother. She radiated pure joy and contentment.

Some of my favorite memories were those two and three a.m. feedings. She'd get Eleanor and come back to our bed and lean against me. We'd both sit there and just stare at our baby girl, gushing over how beautiful she was, who she looked like, how we both never thought love like this existed.

It was bliss... until two months later when Meredith's postpartum symptoms became strange and unbearable. After several tests, a CT scan revealed a large tumor on one of her ovaries. The biopsy came back as cancerous and unfortunately, it had already spread to her uterus and her other ovary. They

did an emergency hysterectomy but it was too late. Within three months she had wasted away to nothing and the doctors had said there was nothing they could do.

One month later, she took her final breath as I held her hand and sobbed.

I grab my phone and wallet and head outside to meet my driver Phil and head to my work event.

“Good evening, Mr. Hayes.”

“Evening, Phil,” I say, ducking into the car as Phil closes the door behind me.

I glance up at the house, seeing the light in Eleanor’s room still on, that image of Miss Silver at my feet dancing in my head, accompanied by her words, *Did you only want me for the night?* I shake the thoughts away just as quickly as they appear and attempt to make small talk with Phil to distract me.

“How are the kids, Phil? Gerald still pursuing biology at Northwestern?”

I stare out the window on the drive as Phil tells me about Gerald’s first year in college. I do my best to push any filthy ideas about seeing Miss Silver on her knees in front of me out of my head.

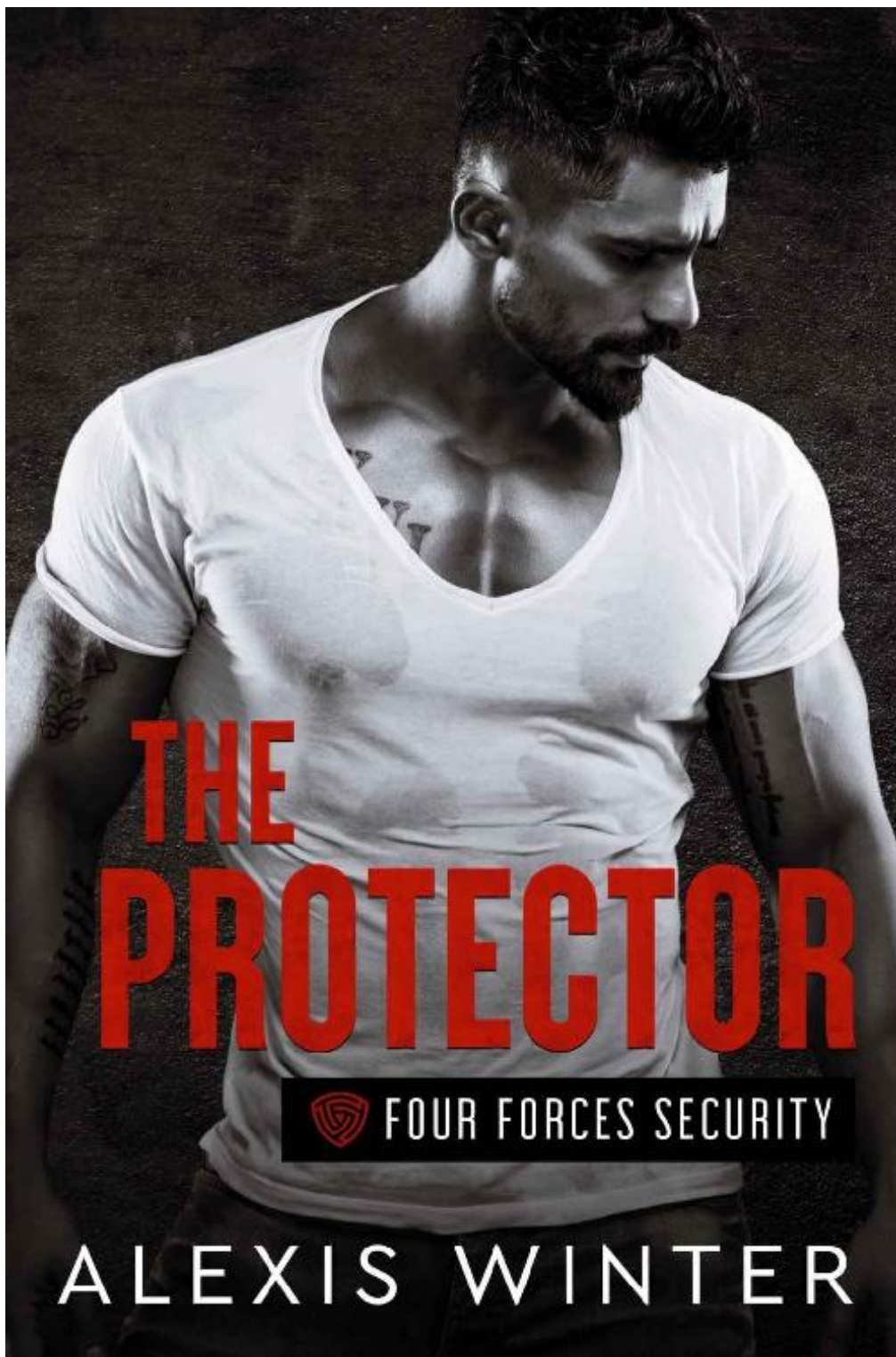
I’m forty-two; the last thing I need to do is get involved with a twenty-something-year-old, especially since she’s my nanny.

Even if it’s torturous to have her living in my house.

Even if she stirs a desire in me that’s been dormant for so long.

I refuse to be that cliché.

Keep Reading *Those Three Words*



THE PROTECTOR



FOUR FORCES SECURITY

ALEXIS WINTER

CHAPTER 1

JIMMY

“*H*ave a seat, Jameson.”

I silently huff at the sound of Mr. Hanson’s insistence on my full name instead of my nickname, Jimmy. Of course, I’m not going to fight Charles on that matter; nobody fights Charles Hanson on anything.

I do as he instructs and take a seat in one of the black leather chairs in front of his glass desk. Charles Hanson, owner of Hanson Enterprises, has called me in for some help. He’s not just a whale in the financial world; he’s the giant fucking kahuna. We’ve rubbed elbows at a few events, me being the one to organize the security for several of his friends in the business world. He’s a big client for the security firm several of my Army brothers and I have started, and I’m anxious to get the ball rolling.

“How can I help you, Mr. Hanson?” I ask.

The old man smiles at me, leaning back in his chair. “Please. Call me Charles. I’ve called you in because I need your help.”

“How so?”

Charles shifts in his chair to lean on the desk with his elbows. His hands clasp together tight enough to turn his knuckles white, and his mouth presses into a hard line.

“Someone is after me,” he says in a low whisper.

My eyebrows narrow together. “Do you know who?”

He shakes his head. “No. Unfortunately.”

I try to show consideration and sympathy for this situation even though it's not uncommon. Billionaire sought after for money or revenge... I see it all the time.

“Where do I come in at?” I press.

For a moment, I think I see some sadness in Charles' eyes. They shift from me to a picture on his desk. He stares at it a moment before picking it up in his hands and showing me the picture.

“You see this girl?” he asks, the sadness now in his voice.

I nod my head, looking at the face of the familiar blond woman staring back at me. I know who's in this picture. “Yes,” I say.

It's a picture of his well-known daughter, Blaire. Blaire Hanson, total bitch and spoiled brat, has been on the cover of *Forbes* and *Vogue* several times for her achievements while working for her father... and she's been in my bed... once. But that's a story for another time.

Who knew months later, I'd end up taking on a job for her father.

“This is my pride and joy. My only reason to live. My *soul*. My daughter means more to me than all the money in the world.”

“Is someone after your daughter, sir?”

Charles places the picture of Blaire back down on his desk with a sigh. He rubs his face with both hands before settling his eyes back on me. “I'm not sure,” he says, “but I want her protected in case there is.”

“What exactly is going on?” I lean forward, resting my elbows on my knees. While I appreciate Charles' love for his daughter, I need to know the breach here.

“Someone—not sure who—has been making threats lately toward the company. I've had my men on it day and night trying to track down the son of a bitch, but so far, no luck. I need you to watch over Blaire. Keep her protected at all costs.

Every second of every day. She's all I have left, Jameson. She's the only one left."

Now I shift in my chair. Is this man asking me what I think he's asking me? To babysit his god-awful daughter that I thought I got rid of months ago? Fuck me.

"Let me get this straight," I start. "You want *me* to be your daughter's bodyguard? Follow her everywhere she goes day and night?"

Charles nods his head. "That's exactly what I'm saying, Jameson."

I suppress the need to sigh. I'll definitely be needing a stiff drink when this meeting is over. When I first started this company, yeah, I'd jump at these opportunities but now—now I organize security for high-ranking political officials and billionaires, *not* their spoiled kids.

"She's my angel," he adds. "She's—"

The door to the office bursts open. My head jerks to see who's walking in and—

Fuck. Me.

Speak of the devil. In she walks—Blair Hanson.

Her platinum-blond-topped head is tucked down as she looks at the stacks of papers in her hands and walks farther into the room, her heels clacking on the tile. The sleeveless cream dress she's wearing hugs every slight curve of her lean body. Her nails are perfectly manicured an icy white, just like her cold exterior.

"Daddy, I've gone over these reports dozens of times now. I don't see the—"

Her voice stops the second her eyes land on me. Her whole body freezes, and I watch as the memory of the one dreadful night we shared flashes through her mind. It almost makes me laugh to know what she's thinking this very second. I nonchalantly cover my mouth with my fingers to keep from laughing.

"You," she whispers, narrowing her eyes.

Charles appears to be oblivious to the situation by the way he cheerily says, “Blaire, darling, excellent timing! Meet Jameson Maxwell. He’s going to be watching out for you for the next little bit.”

I smile at Blaire as she shoots daggers at me, obviously not looking forward to her new reality. My, my, my, how funny is this.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” she says, turning her attention to her father. She crosses her arms over her chest and shifts her weight onto her left hip.

“Sweetheart, we’ve already discussed this.”

“I can take care of myself,” she protests, now looking back at me. “I don’t need some wannabe undercover spy attached to my hip.”

Oh, I’ve been attached to a lot more of you, sweetheart.

“Blaire, this decision is final whether you like it or not.” Charles’ voice is more stern and forceful.

Blaire gives her dad a look that could kill. The room is silent for a moment as the two of them have a stare down with me sitting in between them until Blaire interrupts it. “What about when I travel?”

“He’ll be right with you.”

“And when I go to the store?”

“He’ll push your cart.”

“What about when I’m at home cooking or sleeping?”

“He’ll wash the dishes and tuck you in.”

Charles folds his arms across his chest as if he’s sizing up Blaire. His mouth is pressed into a hard line, and the two hold each other’s gaze for a few more silent seconds. Something tells me this man has seen a lifetime of her behaving this way. I love seeing this woman being put in her place.

Without another word, Blaire’s heels clack loudly on the floor as she walks to Charles’ desk and slaps the papers in front of him.

“Read ’em yourself,” she says, storming out of the room.

The door slams with a loud *thump*, and it’s all I can do to keep from laughing.

Aw, the princess doesn’t get what she wants. How unfortunate.

Charles gives me an apologetic look. “She just needs some time to get used to it. She’ll come around.”

I give him a large genuine smile. Something tells me I might actually enjoy this job.

“I’ve got all the time in the world.”

CHAPTER 2

BLAIRE

I immediately hit the gym the second I'm done with work. I need something to release my anger and the boxing bag is *screaming* my name.

By the time I'm done with my workout, I'm drenched in sweat. The hour I spent punching the life out of that hanging bag should have left me exhausted, but instead I feel refreshed. The whole time, I pictured the bag to be Jimmy, his face the center of it. With every punch I threw, I pretended like I was aiming for that pathetic, sleazy smile of his. I even threw in a kick to his imaginary groin.

How could my father treat me like this? Like I'm some child who needs babysitting or chaperoning? I've heard the whispers from my father about the threats he's been receiving; I know he's in some sort of trouble. But still, attaching some man to me at all hours of the day? And it's somehow *Jimmy Maxwell*? How fucked up can this world be?

I chug some water as I push open the door to the gym. The cool autumn New York air greets my skin with a refreshing breeze as a contrast to my hot, sweaty body. As I start to walk to my apartment, my mind drifts off to dinner options. I have stuff at home for a grilled chicken salad, or I could stop by the Chinese place just down the—

My phone begins to ring, breaking up my dinner thoughts. I pause on the sidewalk as I fish it out of my bag.

“Hello?” I say into the receiver.

“Hey, girl!” my best friend Juliette squeals. “Where are you? Harper and I are at Murphy’s, if you want to join us for drinks. She’s having another one of her mope sessions, and I need you here to get me through it and cheer her up.”

The sound of Harper’s name makes my stomach churn. She’s the last person I want to see right now, given that her older brother is now going to be by my side twenty-four seven starting who knows when and I can’t tell her why I hate him.

“I can’t, Jules. I just left the gym, and I’m sweating like a pig.”

“So? Get your ass over here now. You can shower when you get home. Just for an hour? Please?”

I pause once more on the sidewalk to ponder over my options. I was really looking forward to Chinese once I thought of it, but I haven’t seen my girls in over two weeks. I can push aside my anger at my best friend’s brother for an hour or so.

“Okay, fine. *One* hour,” I say when my mind is made up.

Juliette squeals again. “I’ll have a cosmo waiting on you when you get here.”

I hang up the phone and start walking back in the direction I came from. When I get to Murphy’s, sure enough, there’s a cosmo waiting for me at our table.

Juliette stands to greet me with a hug as I approach the table. To avoid rubbing my sweat on her, I lean into her for one of those awkward butt-out hugs.

“Sorry. I don’t think you want my sweat on you,” I say, sliding into my seat.

Juliette swats the air at my comment. “Please. I already have Harper’s tears on me. What’s a little bit of sweat going to hurt?”

“Where *is* Harper?” I ask, noting her lack of presence at the table.

Juliette rolls her eyes. “In the bathroom fixing her makeup.”

“What happened this time?”

“Some guy she met off Bumble. I keep telling her Plenty of Fish is where the real ones are at.”

“So, another bad date?”

Juliette shakes her head. “Another *stood up* date.”

The problem with our friend Harper is her lack of social cues when it comes to dating. Harper Sinclaire Maxwell, voted Most Beautiful for our senior superlative, has never had a clue on how to date successfully. She’s too naive and too... *much*. Always smothering the guys right away, talking marriage and babies and white picket fences. She makes herself too vulnerable, believing the cut and paste lies they tell every woman to get her into bed. I know part of her problem is she’s too trusting but she needs to guard her heart and stop trusting every penis that tells her she’s amazing. We’ve tried to tell her this gently before, but it didn’t work. It just resulted in tears like it always does.

But out of the four of us—Juliette, me, Harper, and Aspen—she has the purest heart.

“So, how’s your love life going? It’s been a while since we’ve talked about it,” I ask her.

Juliette shrugs her shoulders. “Same old, same old. Josh is great. Can’t complain. Anything new with you?”

I give her the *I had a shit day and it’s because of a boy* look.

Juliette’s mouth drops. “Spill.”

I take a long sip of my cosmo, savoring the slight burn as it travels down my throat. My, oh, my, I can’t wait to see how she takes this news.

“You remember that night I went out with that guy Jimmy?”

Juliette narrows her eyes as she tries to recollect. Seconds later, she loudly gasps and her eyes widen. “Harper’s *brother?*”

“Yes. That one.” My voice is flat.

“Oh my God, is he hot?” She smiles.

“Yeah, well, I’m stuck with him now.”

“You’re what?”

“It’s a long story. Basically, he’s my protection now.”

“I’m so fucking confused,” she says. “You need to spell this out for me.”

I feel hunger and annoyance beginning to build in me. I briefly wish I would have just gone home after the gym and fueled up on lo mein and egg rolls instead of rehashing today’s unfortunate events.

I take a deep breath and reposition in my seat as I start to explain my situation, double-checking Harper isn’t returning to the table. “My dad has apparently gotten himself in deep shit and, for some reason, thinks that I need a bodyguard at *all hours of the day*. So, who’s the lucky man? Jimmy fucking Maxwell.”

I chug the rest of my cosmo and set it down hard on the table. I glance around again. Where is Harper?

“Oh my God,” Juliette says in a low voice. “Does your dad know about you two? Does Harper?”

I shrug my shoulders. “No, and I don’t know. I don’t think so or she probably would have said something to me. After the way things ended between him and I the first time we met, I’m sure Harper would be blowing my phone up if she knew he was hired to babysit me. It’s all purely coincidental, which is the crazy part about it.”

“But... what if it’s not? What if this is fate?”

I roll my eyes. Typical Juliette being her hopeless romantic self. She knows I don’t believe in that fate, love at first sight, romance bullshit. None of it’s real. Even Jimmy proved that to me.

“I doubt that’s what it is,” I mumble.

“So, like, when you say he’s your *bodyguard* at all hours of the day... does that mean...”

I nod my head. “Yeah. He *literally* has to be with me everywhere I go every second of every day.”

A faint trace of a smile tries to spread itself on Juliette’s lips. I shoot her daggers and she calms down. “This is crazy,” she says. “Where is he now?”

“Who fucking cares. I need another cosmo,” I say, looking at my empty glass.

I feel the need to drink now that I’ve refreshed myself on what’s about to happen to me.

The conversation dies when a recovering Harper makes her way back to the table, sniffing and all. I look to Juliette to give a *keep this on the down-low for now* look.

“Hey, Blaire,” Harper says with a weary tone.

I fight the urge to roll my eyes at her woe-is-me face.

“Hey, Harps. Juliette told me what happened. I’m really sorry. It’s his loss, you know?”

Harper sniffles again and wipes under her smeared off eyeliner. Her lips begin to quiver as if she’s going to break again, and I inwardly kick myself for opening back up the floodgates.

“I just don’t understand why guys aren’t into me. Like, what am I doing wrong?” she says through tears, putting her face in her hands.

We’ve heard these questions time and time again, and by now, all Juliette and I do is *shh* her and gently stroke Harp’s back. It’s not that we don’t care about her getting her heart broken; it’s that every guy she meets was going to be *the one*.

“It’s going to be okay. You’ll find your Prince Charming,” I tell her, looking across the table to Juliette.

A waitress at the bar approaches our table and sets a new full cosmo in front of me. I look at it questioningly and then back to the waitress. “I didn’t order this,” I tell her.

She turns to look back at me. “The gentleman over there did. He said to tell you to watch your limit this time.” With that, she turns to walk away.

I look at the cosmo and then glance around the rest of the bar to figure out who sent over this drink. My eyes scan the stools at the bar until they stop at the very end. My stomach sinks. I feel my blood beginning to boil, and I narrow my eyes at the smirk belonging to Jimmy Maxwell.

Great. This is all just fucking great.

“Holy shit,” I hear Juliette say once her eyes find Jimmy.

Jimmy waves a hand at me with a boyish grin that tells me he’s doing this out of spite.

Keeping my eyes locked with his, I pick up the cosmo and chug the whole thing, setting it back down with more force than necessary. Thankfully, Harper is too busy consoling herself to notice.

“I guess it’s starting now,” Juliette whispers.

I ignore her as I keep my eyes on Jimmy. I guess now is when it really does start.

I feel the urge to get away from him. I turn back to my friends and tell them goodbye before grabbing my wallet and heading out of the bar. It’s now nighttime in New York City, and goosebumps form on my skin. I knew I should have brought a jacket. My teeth begin to chatter as I walk briskly through the wind to my apartment and away from Jimmy fucking Maxwell.

How did he know I was at Murphy’s?

It’s not a question I ponder over long as the thought to distance myself as far away from him as possible floods my mind. If Jimmy was going to be next to me twenty-four seven now, I was going to have to find a way to get in some alone time. It’s what I do best. I enjoy my personal space, and it’s what I love about living on my own. I’ve never been one to crave the company of a companion. I’m completely fine on my own. I *can* take care of myself, which is something I really

wish my father would have realized before hiring me some hitman or whatever it is Jimmy does.

I continue to speed walk down the streets of New York City toward my apartment before Jimmy can catch up to me. *If* he followed me. My eyes want to look back to see if he's right there, following me to my apartment, but my mind keeps telling me to not look. Just keep going.

So, it's what I do.

I make the fifteen-minute walk in seven minutes, lightly jogging the last three to shorten the time and warm myself up. When I'm in my building and riding the elevator to my floor, I peek my head out of the elevator door to see if he's in the hall waiting on me. Relief washes over me when my hall is empty.

I open my door and quickly step into my apartment, closing the door and locking it like Michael Myers is chasing me. I double-check the dead bolt and slide the lock in the hole for extra protection from Jimmy and whoever is out there trying to get me in my father's mind. My apartment was dark from when I left earlier, so I turn on the lights and step into the kitchen. My stomach rumbles, and I'm instantly reminded just how hungry I am.

I could cook something, but I don't feel like washing the dishes... I'll just order takeout and make them deliver it.

I pull open the drawer that contains the take-out menu to the Chinese restaurant and scan the items. Once I've decided on the chicken lo mein and egg rolls, I start to dial their number when, out of nowhere, I hear a deep voice from across the room.

"I'll take the beef and broccoli with a side of steamed carrots, please."

I scream and jump in place at the suddenness of the voice. My heart begins to quicken and nearly beat out of my chest, and my knees buckle at the fear. *Who the fuck is that?*

As if he's in a movie, Jimmy Maxwell steps out of the darkness of my living room and into the light of the kitchen.

“What the hell, Jimmy? You scared the living shit out of me!”

He chuckles and takes a seat at my counter.

“Sorry, love. It was either now or let you turn on the light to see me. Either way, you were going to be startled.”

“How the fuck did you get in here?” I yell, trying to calm down.

My knees feel like Jell-O, and my breathing is still ragged.

“The key.” He holds up a brass key that looks like a safety pin in his massive hands. “Your father had one made for me.” He smiles.

“My *father* shouldn’t have a key to my apartment to begin with.”

“How he made the key is none of my concern. I have the right copy, and that’s all that matters.”

I close my eyes and take a deep breath, partly to calm down my breathing, but also to try and not lose my shit at the man whom I hate more than my annual gynecological exam.

“I’m going to say this as nicely as I can, and I’m only going to say it once,” I say in the best calm and collected manner I can muster right now. “Get out of my apartment and stay at least a thousand yards away from me.”

Jimmy pretends to think this over. He taps his chin with his finger and looks up at the ceiling before shrugging his shoulders. “Can’t do that, princess. I’m under strict orders.”

“Ugh!” I fist my hair and begin to pace back and forth in the kitchen. “Why does my father treat me like such a child!”

“Maybe because you act like one?” Jimmy says sarcastically.

I turn on my heel to face him and point a finger in his face. “You don’t know a *thing* about me, so don’t pretend like you do.”

Jimmy lightly grabs my finger and pushes it out of his face. “Hate to break it to you, kitten, but I know you better

than you think. And you can't tell me what to do. I hate this just as much, if not more than you do. I've got better things to do than follow your spoiled ass all day."

"Then don't do it." I'm so angry, I overlook his insult.

He shakes his head once. "Can't. I've got a job to do."

"Why don't you lie and pretend to do your job? I won't tell if you don't."

Jimmy chuckles and leans back in the stool, crossing his arms over his broad chest. My eyes skim over his body in his white T-shirt. His muscles completely fill out the sleeves, making it look like they're about to bust through the seams. I remember his body and how attracted to it I was the first time I met him and, honestly, still am. Jimmy is built like a romance novel guy—cut abs, bulging muscles, rock-hard body, and a pretty face. But all of that means nothing with the shit personality that he has.

I had to learn that the hard way.

"See something you like, princess?"

His words draw me back to reality, and I'm forced to look at the smirk he's giving me. He caught me looking at him in the way I didn't want him to see.

"Or better yet, see something you *want* again?"

I narrow my eyes and bite my lip, trying to suppress the anger. How in the world am I going to survive this? I don't even know how long I have to put up with him.

"How long will this be going on?" I ask, hoping he knows so I can have a date on the calendar to look forward to.

"Until your father gives me the all clear."

I whimper and place my face in my hands. I hate thinking that Jimmy holds some kind of power over me with information that I don't know. It's like he enjoys seeing me miserable. It's almost like it fuels him.

I sigh and try to mentally come to terms with my present situation. There's no way around this. Jimmy will be with me

every second of every damn day until he is told not to be. My life now includes Jimmy, whether I like it or not. The only way to get through this is to not play into his games and to act like he isn't there.

But with a face and body like his... that's going to be hard to do.

"Why don't we set up some boundaries?" I suggest, looking up at him.

"What kind of boundaries?"

"I get that you have a job to do, I really do, but you *are* invading my life and personal space now, so out of respect for me, there are a few terms we need to go over."

Jimmy quietly holds my gaze for a few seconds. "Shoot."

"First off, you have to text me when you are at the apartment before me, okay? I don't like coming home and being scared like I was today."

He chuckles and smiles. "What's next?"

"You *have* to give me my space. I cannot be smothered by you, understood?"

"Define 'smothered.'"

"I don't want you to be closer than fifty feet away from me at all times. I don't want to feel you breathing down my neck. I need to breathe and be alone every now and then."

"Fine. I'll do my best. Just know I have to obey your father's orders. Whatever he asks of me, I have to do."

I nod my head. I know he's right. He does have a job to do, and I know he doesn't want to be here with me, just like I don't want to be here with him. But at the end of the day, I am still a person who needs to be free and have their own space. I'm thirty-one. I'm an adult who doesn't need a bodyguard, whether there's a hitman after my father or not.

"One last thing," I say. "*We* are on our own. Don't talk to me unless you absolutely have to, and do not get in my way. Pretend as if you're living your life without me in it."

Jimmy nods his head and runs his hands through his dark hair, which matches the scruff on his face. “I thought you’d never ask.”

I roll my eyes at him.

“Are you going to call in that order?” he asks, nodding his head toward the take-out menu on the counter in front of me. “Oh, and why was my sister crying earlier tonight?”

“Nope, we aren’t friends, and my loyalty lies with her,” I say as I roll my eyes at him and disappear into my room. I do end up calling in the order, and I even order his broccoli and beef with a side of steamed carrots.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alexis Winter is a contemporary romance author who loves to share her steamy stories with the world. She specializes in billionaires, alpha males and the women they love.

If you love to curl up with a good romance book you will certainly enjoy her work. Whether it's a story about an innocent young woman learning about the world or a sassy and fierce heroine who knows what she wants you, 're sure to enjoy the happily ever afters she provides.

When Alexis isn't writing away furiously, you can find her exploring the Rocky Mountains, traveling, enjoying a glass of wine or petting a cat.

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